



Murphy, P. (1998). Review of *Ecology of Fear*. *Workplace*, 2, 106-107.

PAUL MURPHY

Review of
Ecology of Fear
by Mike Davis

As I write this, just after Thanksgiving, the United States is in the middle of one of Nature's displays of sustained whimsy. In Northern California, where I live, we are suffering high winds and arctic cold. In the Northeast, Indian Summer looks as if it may stretch into the new year, and folks are buying Christmas trees while they frantically reopen their swimming pools. A perfect pataphysical climate for Mike Davis' new *Ecology of Fear*. Just when everyone outside of the Wall Street Journal's sumptuous offices and the U.S. Government's dilapidated ones realizes that global warming (the vagueness of "climate change" is probably more accurate) is for real, the author of *City of Quartz*, that *White Album* of Cultural Studies, incarnates the noblest traditions of the left with a beautifully written, elegantly reasoned volume which proves that the situation is far, far worse than we had suspected.

Davis' previous book, *City of Quartz*, is a magisterial overview of how the built environment of Los Angeles incarnates the will of its ruling class, and how that ruling class has led the tireless effort to make this country into the world's tackiest and most violent banana republic. What gives that book a sort of wretched poignancy is Davis' sardonic near-admiration for the cleverness and diligence of the forces of evil, how thoroughly they have colonized not only the physical city, but even those ideas and movements which ought to be providing alternatives to the existing order. It's a bleak piece of work, but surely nothing else written before Rodney King and the riots (actually, the proper term is "insurrections") displayed anything like the same prescience about the post-Reagan years. *Ecology of Fear* takes as its starting point the possibility that the environment itself may be exacting a kind of vengeance for what has been done to it in the course of creating the L.A. that so repels and fascinates Davis.

3. This book is about disasters - fires, floods, earthquakes, even wild animal attacks. Davis makes two dialectically related points about the recent cluster of catastrophes in Southern California. First, our previous notions of normal climactic and seismic activity in the region were entirely too sanguine, based on extrapolations from a recent history which has been anything but "average:"

As science over the past decade has laid the foundations for a true environmental history of the Los Angeles region, the modern era has come to look increasingly anomalous. Recent research on past climate change and seismic activity has transformed the question 'Why so many recent disasters?' into the truly unnerving question 'Why so few?' (37-8)

Or to put it another way, what if the 1994 Northridge quake, with its \$42 billion damage, can't even be considered particularly bad? Davis does a fine job laying out the scientific case for this ghastly prospect in layman's terms; his ability to organize recondite materials in clear and convincing fashion is a lesson to anyone who aspires to analyze current events or lead an apocalyptic religious cult.

6. The second part of the argument is, thank goodness, just as troubling. While deluding themselves with false projections of the likelihood of disaster, the city's leaders have, for decades, monomanacally pursued development schemes and zoning strategies which have made increases in the frequency and

severity of natural disasters inevitable:

Paranoia about nature, of course, distracts attention from the obvious fact that Los Angeles has deliberately put itself in harm's way. For generations, market-driven urbanization has transgressed environmental common sense. Historic wildfire corridors have been turned into view-lot suburbs, wetland liquefaction zones into marinas, and floodplains into industrial districts and housing tracts. Monolithic public works have been substituted for regional planning and a responsible land ethic. As a result, Southern California has reaped flood, fire, and earthquake tragedies that were as avoidable, as unnatural as the beating of Rodney King and the subsequent explosion in the streets. (9)

Here, in the description of how his hometown's natural beauty and sense of human possibility were sacrificed in the name of plutocracy, Davis returns to the mode of *City of Quartz*, but with an even darker hue. He is masterful when laying out the class warfare of home fires - when the rich are repeatedly burned out of their magnificent homes, which burn like clockwork as a result of being built in firebelt regions where Smokey the Bear's policy of total fire suppression rather than periodic controlled burning makes catastrophe unavoidable, they receive massive federal subsidies that allow the build-and-burn cycle to continue. The money is taken from programs for the poor and working class, who are regularly burned out of their shabby tenements for a much less natural reason: the state declines to enforce even the pitifully weak fire-safety regulations that are on the books, for fear of troubling the sleep of slumlords. In the words of James Baldwin, "what a monumental achievement on the part of those heroes who conquered the North American wilderness!"

To lighten the mood after this catalogue of misery, Davis digresses into an entertaining and nigh-exhaustive survey of the literature about L.A.'s many possible extinctions. The reader is favored with a chart listing twenty-three different ways the city has been fictionally destroyed, from nuclear war to runaway Bermuda grass, further organized by frequency. Davis' command of the irrelevant detail here would slacken the jaw of Robbe-Grillet.

Fortunately, nonfictional misery returns for the final chapter, which is a superb sixty page updating of the themes of *City of Quartz*, specifically the omnipresence of high-tech security in L.A.'s built environment, and that security's human face, the brutal and unchecked police force which has become the only social program for which the city's bourgeoisie is willing to pay taxes. Those who believe that our nation's problems stem from its insufficient resemblance to Brazil or Guatemala will find signs of progress here and throughout the book. Everybody else will be driven to the edge of despair. But one does leave *Ecology of Fear* with a truly dialectical sense of our future: If we don't address our environmental problems, extinction may be inevitable. But if we fail to repair our tattered civil society, that extinction may become not just inevitable, but preferable.

Paul Murphy, University of California, Berkeley