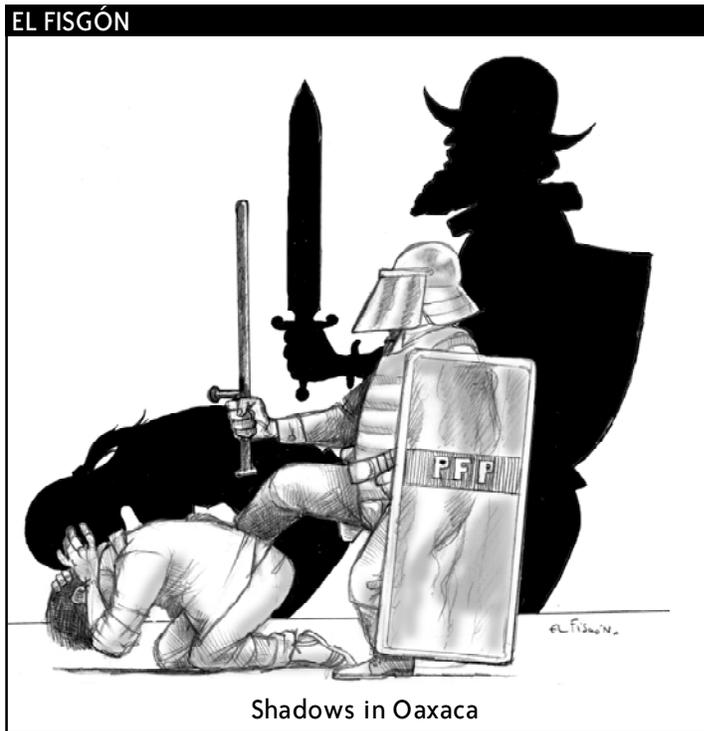


REVIEWS



Shadows in Oaxaca

*Coming next time...*  
 March/April 2007 Vol. 40 No. 2

**The Pink Response to the "Pink Wave": Feminist Movements Under Left Governments**

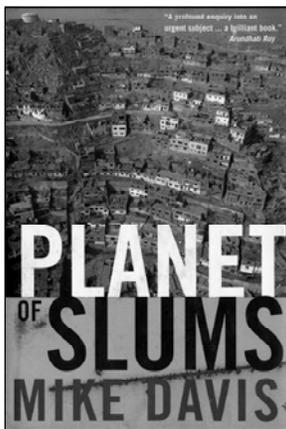
What will recent elections of left and center-left leaders mean for women's lives throughout the Americas?

with

Gioconda Espina • Marcela Rios-Tobar • Alejandra Sardá • Karin Monasterios • Vilma Reis  
 and more...

## Reviews: Books & More

**Planet of Slums** by Mike Davis, 2005, Verso, 228 pages, \$24.00 paperback.



LATIN AMERICA IS THE MOST urbanized region of the world. Its urban population increased from 108 million in 1960 to 389 million in 2000. During this same period, the reduction or elimination of agri-

cultural subsidies created a labor surplus in the countryside, funneling many rural poor into cities, many of which already were experiencing decreasing job opportunities due to deindustrialization. Additionally, the conditions of debt restructuring imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), such as the privatization of public-sector jobs and education, diminished employment opportunities and increased the ranks of the poor. Housing markets, moreover, have also been targeted by privatization efforts, thereby reducing poor people's access to state-subsidized housing. The result has been an explosion of slums around the globe. In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis offers a comprehensive study of the present urban conjuncture and shows that favelas, inquilinatos, callejones, and *barriadas* have become the essential feature of the

global crisis of urban overpopulation and underemployment.

In 2005, the United Nations estimated that over one billion people reside in slums worldwide and that 94 percent of these are found in the developing world. Of the world's 30 largest megaslums—defined as continuous belts of peripheral shantytowns and squatted land—15, including the largest five, are in Latin American cities, comprising a total population of over 14 million inhabitants. As Davis points out, some Latin American slums date to the late 1800s, but the megaslum represents a wholly new turn. Today, life in a slum requires a tenuous balance. Security and safety compete with affordability and proximity to employment opportunities. The peripheral megaslums are the cheapest places to live and may offer the hope of land ownership as well as

opportunities for squatting. These, however, typically require long and expensive commutes to and from workplaces, and are often situated near dangerous floodplains, hillsides or brownfields.

Davis' "slum typology" offers four categories: formal and informal residency in both urban-core and peripheral slums. All four types exist in Latin America. There are center-city slums of hand-me-down housing that were once occupied by middle-class residents who have since relocated to the suburbs, as well as tenements and public housing designed for the poor. Poor center-city residents may also be squatters or pavement-dwellers. In the periphery—which may be an inaccurate term when more people live in the

slums outside the city than in the city proper—there are private and public rentals, illegal subdivisions both owner-occupied and rented, and squatter communities, which may require informal rent payments to politicians, gangsters, or police. Finally, Davis describes internally displaced people (IDPs), who represent another large category of the poor as wars continue to force people from their homes. In Bogotá alone, over 400,000 IDPs reside in informal settlements. Over 600,000 of the city's residents are unemployed and under age 29. These young people are often recruited by gangs and paramilitaries, continuing the cycle of destitution and violence.

More alarming than Davis' descriptions of the conditions of

everyday life in slums is his analysis of the roots of this cycle of destitution and violence—and the failures of external interventions. In Asia and Africa, European colonialism and apartheid were formal barriers to urbanization, while in the Americas, the growth of slums was mostly contained until import-substitution industrialization after World War II caused waves of squatters to move to the edges of Latin American cities. This growth was generally resisted by the middle classes with forced evictions that were often justified by a racist logic, as the migrants tended to be of indigenous descent. Authoritarian regimes, bolstered by elites, have often viewed slums as sources of resistance, subversion, and crime, resulting in large-scale

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demolitions, evictions, and mass murder of residents. It is perhaps unsurprising that the fall of authoritarian regimes proved to be the initial catalyst for major growth in the urban population. Davis cites the case of Venezuela in the 1960s, for example, whose population went from being 30% urban to being 30% rural during that decade. Cuba, Peru, and Brazil were sites of progressive government-sponsored efforts to house the poor in the 1950s and 1960s, but these are nonexistent today. Across the globe, state housing programs, as small as they might have been, were squashed in the late 1970s and 1980s by the onset of structural adjustment. In Mexico, Peru, and Colombia, subsidized housing now exists for military personnel, civil servants, and some members of trade unions. Davis refers to many other examples of

state-assisted housing benefiting the middle class. The poor, of course, are forced to fend for themselves.

Though the World Bank and IMF may appear to be anonymous machines to those affected by their policies, one particularly notorious individual emerges in Planet of Slums as a representative—Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, President Alberto Fujimori’s adviser. After Fujimori’s election on “no-shock” campaign promises, de Soto recommended an orthodox neoliberal austerity program. Wages were frozen and subsidies for basic goods were cut without implementing any social programs for the poor. Under de Soto, the ranks of Peru’s poor grew by 5 million overnight.

De Soto is most famous for creating a touchstone of “humane” neoliberalism (President Clinton described him as “probably the world’s most important living economist”): micro-entrepreneurialism enabled by the equity that comes with formalization of land ownership. De Soto describes shantytowns as potential “acres of diamonds” if only the “dead capital” of the tiny pieces of property could be brought to life through formal ownership and deployed as collateral for loans, which would in turn create jobs. His critics note that titling, although of little cost to the government, can actually cost a great deal to those who must pay taxes on land they previously occupied informally. The expansion of the tax base certainly has its benefits to the state and for utilities providers, but it also has the effect, as Davis notes, of fragmenting solidarity and cooperation that might otherwise exist in slums by creating conflicting interests for squatters and owners.

In São Paulo, for example, such a program of regularization had the

negative effect of creating an underclass within the underclass. It forced the poorest residents to rent rooms from the newly titled owners. Davis notes one particularly offensive neologism coined by de Soto’s acolytes—slums defined as “Strategic Low-Income Urban Management Systems.” De Soto’s slum alchemy has often been stymied by corrupt government officials, speculators buying the plots before the program becomes active for the poor, and banks modifying lending criteria by suddenly requiring employment rather than land title for loans. De Soto’s defenders argue that failures of his program result from weak legal protections or venal local institutions and not from the theory behind the program itself. But when titling and micro-entrepreneurialism crumble under these conditions, de Soto offers no solution to the plight of the majority of slum dwellers, who by definition must eke out a path between misguided benevolence, persecution, and baleful neglect.

Davis notes he is working on a follow-up book with Forrest Hylton that will offer potential solutions to the problem of slums. Until then, he writes, think tanks “have yet to wrap their minds around the geopolitical implications of a ‘planet of slums.’ More successful—probably because they don’t have to reconcile neoliberal dogma to neoliberal reality—have been the strategists and tactical planners of...the Pentagon,” who foresee what Davis calls “a low-intensity world war of unlimited duration against criminalized segments of the urban poor.” As leftist leaders have been elected in Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela, in no small part due to their vocal opposition to the Washington Consensus, the economic carrot may be replaced by the

military stick. In this context, it will be the slum dwellers, especially those who mobilize around radical political solutions to their plight who face these military interventions. In Latin America, where decades of anti-communism and drug eradication have combined with structural adjustment to create a hell for the poor, the future of our planet of slums looks like a bright new version of more of the same, with the ranks of the poor continuing to swell. ■

—Stuart Schrader

Stuart Schrader is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn. He has written extensively on the intersection of underground art and music and radical politics. He is currently

developing a book about large urban development projects in New York City as they relate to global economic and political trends.

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**Land, Rain and Fire: Report from Oaxaca** a documentary by Tami Gold and Gerardo Renique, distributed by Third World Newsreel. DVD, 2006, 28:30 minutes, color. <http://www.twn.org>.

**WHILE THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA** continues to ignore the months-long struggle in Oaxaca, even after the deaths of 13 people, including American journalist and activist Brad Will, a growing network of activists, independent journalists,

and academics here in the U.S. have been working tirelessly to document the repression occurring in this southern Mexican state and to bring reports of the struggle to audiences here.

Add to the growing clamor a new documentary video that provides a concise and vivid narrative of events as they have unfolded in Oaxaca in recent months. Produced and directed by veteran documentarian Tami Gold and co-produced by City College professor Gerardo Renique, *Land, Rain and Fire* provides on-the-ground coverage of the conflict that has heretofore been found only in bits and pieces via the Internet.

Beginning with the May 2006 teachers' strike mobilized by Sección 22 of CNTE—the radical faction of the national teachers' union that has

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been organizing against the privatization of education and for better wages for teachers since 1979—the film chronicles the police repression of June 14th and subsequent mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people in the streets of Oaxaca City, in what were the largest marches in Oaxacan history. The filmmakers are there as the mobilized teachers, campesinos, neighborhood associations, trade unionists, women's groups, students, religious groups and activists come together to form the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), which now forms the basis of the ongoing movement. They also document numerous incidents of paramilitary and police repression against APPO-controlled media and encampments,

including the October 27th attack which left three dead—including Brad Will—and 23 injured.

But beyond the crucial and rare on-the-ground look at events in Oaxaca, *Land, Rain and Fire* analyzes the structural violence and poverty that motivates the ongoing struggle, and makes clear, with every Oaxaqueño interviewed, that the movement in Oaxaca is a struggle against neoliberalism and its tangible effects on the lives of the people, particularly since the passage of NAFTA. The devastation wrought by a leadership committed above all else to the neoliberal project is patently apparent in the film. What's more, it powerfully demonstrates the alternative pursued by the APPO and the other assemblies across the

Oaxacan state: a democracy that recognizes economic and social rights, one that is respectful of the traditions of Oaxaca's million indigenous people and that is governed by the *usos y costumbres* that organize the political lives of people across southern Mexico.

This moving, if short, documentary ends just before we go to press, though the Oaxacan people continue to struggle for justice, despite the violence. Asked why they continue to fight, in the face of such repression, one woman answers, "They can't kill all of us, I'm sure about that." ■

—Christy Thornton

Christy Thornton is the Executive Director of NACLA.

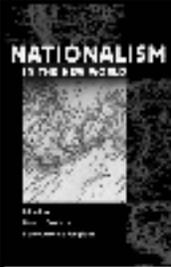
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