

Are slums another planet?

The article below is mainly a critique of Mike Davis' book *Planet of Slums* (2006), devoted to the question of slums around the world. Mike Davis and his likes are in despair because they don't find in slums a proletariat conforming to the image they seek: a mass of formal wage earners, conscious and organized in trade unions and parties. This is the way I understand their moaning over the disappearance of formal labor as it predominated during the post-WWII era, as well as the disappearance of Marx, replaced by Mohamed! My intention is on the contrary to show that, far from being victims of social exclusion who have to be raised out of their shit, slum-dwellers are fully part of the class that will communize society.

1 - Definition issues

1.1 - Words and figures

By slum-dwellers, we mean an urban population living in very poor, precarious conditions. This is a broader definition than one based on housing built by the inhabitants themselves using salvaged materials, on a more or less salubrious piece of land without water or electricity at the limits of the town.

Population living in slums

| Millions, 2001 | Total Population | of which urban | of which slum-dwellers | Slums as % of urban popu |
|---------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Europe | 726 | 534 | 33 | 6,2 |
| Other developed countries | 467 | 367 | 21 | 5,7 |
| North Africa | 146 | 76 | 21 | 27,6 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 667 | 231 | 166 | 71,9 |
| Latin America | 527 | 399 | 128 | 32,1 |
| East Asia (excl. China) | 79 | 61 | 16 | 26,2 |
| China | 1285 | 472 | 178 | 37,7 |
| Central Asia (South) | 1507 | 452 | 262 | 58,0 |
| South East Asia | 530 | 203 | 57 | 28,1 |
| West Asia | 192 | 125 | 41 | 32,8 |
| Oceania | 8 | 2 | 0,5 | 25,0 |
| CIS | 283 | 181 | 19 | 10,5 |
| Other Europe | 128 | 77 | 6 | 7,8 |
| Total | 6545 | 3180 | 948,5 | 29,8 |

source: UN-Habitat, 2003 - NB : the country classification is from UN-Habitat

The figures above are for 2001. They have necessarily increased since then and must therefore be taken as a minimum. According to these figures, 30% of the urban population is made up of slum-dwellers. However, that average masks significant differences, for example, between Sub-Saharan Africa (72%) and Europe (6%).

Again according to the figures, slum-dwellers make up 38% of the Chinese urban population. However, the latter probably live in very poor but not self-made housing, either in old town centers or in 'urban-villages' where migrant workers often live. Overall, as of 2001, one billion proletarians lived in slums, i.e. about a third of the world's urban population. The latter comprises about half the total population. Slums grow by about 25 million people every year.

1.2 History and geography

Are slums another planet?

Another way of approaching a definition of slums is to look at its variations in time and space.

Mike Davis puts great stress on the IMF's and the World Bank's responsibility for the explosion of the number of slums in the 1980's. He admits that slums existed before, but doesn't really look at the question historically. Most of the authors I have read agree to distinguish at least two phases in the slums phenomenon. The divide isn't always situated at the same point in time, but there is always a difference between, on the one hand, today's slums, massive, growing rapidly and distantly related to the labor market and, on the other, the earlier slums (before decolonisation, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), etc.) when the relationship of slum-dwellers to the labor market was more direct. For example:

For the United States, Loic Wacquant² distinguishes between the « community ghetto of the immediate post-war era, compact, with clear limits and grouping together all black social classes » (my translation) and the hyperghetto. The latter replaced the community ghetto beginning in the 80's due to an « exacerbation of the excluding logic of ghettos » (idem), meaning the withdrawal of private and public services, the departure of the middle classes and those of the working class who still had a steady job. We should note that the ghettos, old or new, are not slums proper, but are probably included in the above slum statistics.

Janice Perlman, who studied the favelas, makes the distinction between an « ancient exclusion » based on **the** illiteracy, very low income and rural origin of the favelados, and a « new exclusion », from the 80's on, involving new generations of better educated, more consuming people who nonetheless experienced « problematic integration into the labor market ». The favelas she observes today have improved significantly from the point of view of housing quality and services such as water and electricity. They constitute an active real estate market. She nonetheless considers that the residents' lives are worse than before, especially due to drug-trade related violence.

Authors also indicate that the change in the modalities of capital accumulation during the 80's brought about a change in the slum-dwellers' origins. From that decade on, an influx of people from the wage-earning classes in town centers moved to the slums because of a combination of employment and housing crises. During that phase of globalisation, agriculture in developing countries faced a crisis due to farm subsidies in developed countries. This crisis was compounded by the SAP-induced industrial crisis which destroyed the import-substitution industries that had been painfully set up during the decolonization era. As wage workers in the formal sector lost their jobs, they could no longer keep their housing, all the more in that real estate speculation became a massive outlet for the local capitalists' investment.

Old slums have often been erected on squatted land in a militant way and defended against the police. A wave of such occupations occurred in the 70's. Since then, even pieces of 'slumable' quality land have become a target for speculation. They are taken over more or less legally by investors, who then rent them out after having installed services on them, or just built shacks, or done nothing at all. Shack rental comes in many informal ways, but is more and more the rule in slums. Free occupation is the exception. Squats are only tolerated on land nobody is interested in (too humid, too sloping, too polluted...). The only rent indication I found concerns a slum in Nairobi: a shack was rented for \$6 per month.

These few historical indications relate directly to geography. Most of the slums are located in developing countries. As the slum population increased, the older slums in or near town centers proved insufficient. The pieces of land they were on often fell prey to speculators, so that slums were centrifuged to a more and more distant urban periphery where access to services and the labor market is extremely difficult. This is the « exacerbation of the excluding logic of slums ». However, there are major exceptions to this trend. It is estimated that 1.5 million people live on the roofs of

Are slums another planet?

downtown Cairo. Also in Cairo, several hundred thousand people live in the central cemetery. In Hong Kong, 250,000 people live in flat extensions built on balconies. More brutally, one million people live in the streets of Mumbai. In the same city, 650,000 people live in the centrally located Dharavi slum, which is subject to a « redevelopment » program.

In short, by the end of the 20th century, slums had increased greatly in the developing countries. Their occupation is rarely free. The combined effects of their own demography and real estate speculation pushed them farther and farther out, to the periphery of towns, in what could be called relegation zones.

2 - How do slum-dwellers survive? Work, trafficking, unemployment?

Mike Davis hardly asks the question. He asserts (in a *New Left Review* article of the same title as the 2006 book, NLR #26, March-April 2004, London) that « the labor power of a billion people has been excluded from the world system. » This is also the predominant point of view in his book, although he simultaneously gives indications to the contrary. In his book, Mike Davis examines successively many important issues, but without treating them systematically. He prefers to surf on sensational situations. He should have taken more time to synthesize the hundreds of particular studies and monographs which he quotes from. As a result, questions such as:

- Who owns slums? How does the housing market work in slums?
- What are the economic mechanisms of slum reproduction? Who works for whom? Where are the workplaces located that employ slum-dwellers?
- Which NGOs intervene in the slums? What do they do?

receive disparate bits of answers in various chapters, but without a clear overview. His answers are always drawn from particular studies concerning only one region, one town, one slum in a given period.

Concerning the issue of work, the book's key message is that slum-dwellers live in pure exclusion, a false idea for which Davis is frequently quoted. How do they survive? Mike Davis often says that people manage by exploiting micro-niches in the informal trade, or that they have casual jobs, etc. He underlines the importance of women and children for immediate survival. They are « piece workers, liquor sellers, street vendors, lottery ticket sellers, sewing operators, cleaners, washers, ragpickers, nannies and prostitutes » (p. 159). The list is drawn up by Davis. For two reasons at least, it cannot be considered a satisfying answer to the question of how slums survive and grow if they are totally excluded from the labor market.

First, Davis doesn't take the time for even a superficial look into the relationship between slums and emigrants. Many emigrants leave their families behind in the slums. The fact that emigrants send a substantial share of their wages back home is well-known. One might have hoped that Davis would consider the question. Slum-dwellers emigrate, work and send money home. This shows that, to a certain degree at least, slums reproduce themselves by functioning under normal (be it informal) capitalist exploitation. This is all the more interesting in that emigrants don't leave the Planet of Slums when they come to work in the North. Their housing conditions are scarcely better than in their home country.

Are slums another planet?

Second, for those who stay at home, the list of odd jobs and trafficking includes very different things. Some designate proper jobs, which may even be located outside of the slum. The earnings hairdressers or washerwomen who work for their neighbors inside the slum are only a redistribution of income within the slum. This resource cannot be generalized as a means of reproduction for so-called wholly excluded slum-dwellers. However, there is also work outside the slum, in which case the wage is a resource coming in from the outside to sustain the slum economy. The many small transactions taking place within the slum are simply a redistribution of funds that enter the slum, having been earned in an outside activity. This aspect doesn't interest Davis. He absolutely insists that we adhere to his view of pure and fatal exclusion.

Of course, he doesn't put it that way. He jumps from one continent to another and buries us under an avalanche of examples showing absolute unemployment, abyssal misery, as well as exploitation of poor by poor. And at the same time, he keeps supplying us with bits of information going the other way, but without making any effort to explain them. For example, when looking at Bangalore, he writes that there are a « thousand fetid slums » which are the « the dumping ground for those urban residents whose labor is wanted in the urban economy but whose visual presence should be reduced as much as possible » (p. 172). What counts here are the words « fetid » and « dumping ground ». But Davis also informs us incidentally that there is work for slum-dwellers in town. What kind of work? For what wage? This doesn't interest Davis, who immediately dives back into Bangalore's « ocean of misery ».

If I am not mistaken, Mike Davis doesn't devote any development to Dharavi, a slum in Bombay. Yet its economy has certainly been studied many times. It is a town in a town, where everybody works – men, women and children. Wages average roughly 40 euros a month (2006). Total production is estimated \$1bn per year, mainly in leather goods, earthenware and jewelry. The products are sold in Bombay, India and abroad. Dharavi might be an extreme example. But many other slums in the world probably have workshops producing for the « real » economy in town centers and farther away.

Obviously, a portion of the slum-dwellers, including emigrants, work for capitalists. Their labor doesn't eliminate misery. It reproduces it. And the many little workshops located in slums don't offer any potential for future economic development and accumulation, because the capitalists who exploit them are at the end of the subcontracting chain. They transfer a major share of the surplus-value they extort to the higher links in the chain. This means their profits are low. Despite the apostles of microenterprise, the microentrepreneur is not a capitalist in the making³. Slum labor doesn't eliminate massive unemployment. It just maintains it. It doesn't exempt slum-dwellers from entering into all kinds of trafficking to complement wages which are objectively insufficient. As Loic Wacquant observes when looking at hyperghettos, work is so fragmented, precarious, occasional and poorly paid that it is part of the problem, not of the solution. In other words, the profits from this labor retained in the slums are so low that they cannot generate any local economic accumulation. They nonetheless form the basis of a slum's economy and explain how it becomes permanent and expands without relying exclusively on trafficking, begging and humanitarian aid. By capillary action from subcontracting and marginal trade, slum-dwellers participate in the global cycle of capital reproduction.

III - Class struggle in the slums.

Slum-dwellers are not as excluded as Mike Davis wants us to believe. Whatever the relative importance he gives to dump-slums and to beehive-slums, he ends up opting for pure and simple exclusion. And he concludes his book with apocalyptic visions of Kinshasa falling prey to children's witchcraft and Pentacostalism. He accumulates barbarous details « proving » that slum-dwellers have been reduced to sub-social conditions. Only in the last pages of the book does one learn that the « global slum ... is nonetheless a place with myriads of resistance acts » (p. 202). No further

Are slums another planet?

details on this, except the announcement of another book exploring the following « complex question »: « to what extent does the informal proletariat possess that most powerful of Marxist talismans, 'historical agency'? » (p. 201).

Richard Pithouse, an academic and leftist journalist close to the South African protest movements we are about to discuss, is not alone in critiquing Mike Davis. Though he acknowledges having found a mass of documentation in *Planet of Slums*, he accuses Davis of being imbued with the same neo-liberal and racist line as the people he claims to criticize⁴. Pithouse is right when he writes that Davis sometimes mentions « various riots and protests, but never enquires into what rioters and protesters were thinking. The riots appears as a natural phenomenon »⁵.

Whether « what rioters thought » of their riots could cast much light on the historical meaning of the event is debatable. Nevertheless, Pithouse is right when he insists that Mike Davis completely overlooks the fact that slums are places, not of passive exile, but of fully-fledged social life. Davis has accumulated hundreds of monographs to « prove » this exclusion and the destitution of those excluded. He could just as easily have found hundreds of articles referring to slum-dwellers' struggles and resistance. And report on them to us. We would have observed slum-dwellers struggling for land, water, electricity, schools, sewers, clinics, etc. We would have learned that slum-dwellers know how to organize when necessary, that they have political (and religious) opinions. We would have seen slum-dwellers resist the police and town planners. Thanks to his brilliant intelligence and his vast documentation, Mike Davis would have shown us that this resistance and these struggles are part of social relationships within the slums, that hierarchy and classes exist in the slums, with bosses and proletarians (maybe not always?), and that the slum-dwellers' resistance struggles sometimes have to be analyzed on a inter-classist basis. Contrary to any frontist tendency, we would have observed slum proletarian rising up in a multitude of riots. Neither Davis nor Wacquant studied riots in depth, though riots are frequent in the social categories they focus on. The reason is that these riots are silent for them. Almost by definition, riots do not convey any political messages, nor do they reject the political message that some try to impose on them. They are often self-destructive, which doesn't mean absurd. They seem repetitive and always the same, so much so that they appear to be a 'natural' attribute of slums and ghettos. But for those who care to listen, their message is meaningful, and it has evolved recently, as they begin leaving their slum base, as we shall see in Bangladesh.

Here are some examples compiled from a quick internet search on social life and struggles in and around slums, similar to what Pithouse suggests Mike Davis should have done.

In Tangier at the end of the 20th century, a small slum close to the city center called Haouma Nçara⁶ was the site of a 'rehousing' program designed to free space for developers. 'Rehousing' consisted in relocating the slum-dwellers to other areas where they would supposedly be more comfortable. The program was prepared far in advance and negotiated with the residents. This Tangier program was meant to be a model of democratic treatment of slums. Even before the announcement of the program, the residents had already an organization, with a chairman in charge of relations within and outside of the slum and with the authorities. The organization naturally served to prepare the rehousing. General assemblies discussed the complex modalities of the operation. In the end, due to bureaucratic inertia, hierarchy within the slum and politicians' intrigues, the rehousing was neither democratic nor complete (some inhabitants were not rehoused), and the rehoused peoples' lives were significantly worse than before. Of course, the leaders obtained the best places on the new tract of land. The details are not important. I only want to give an example of slum-dwellers not being a mere herd, a human surplus in pure exclusion, but a social group with its internal life and contradictions (and I certainly don't want to advocate slum self-management!).

In the preface to his book, Mike Davis writes about a friend of his who is fighting on the barricades

Are slums another planet?

of a slum in the Andes. He knows perfectly well that slums are places of constant struggles against capital. He surely knows the story of Lima's slums, of their very political creation when a leftist mayor was elected. He is necessarily aware that Huaycan was considered a founding experiment in slum self-management and that a small class of micro-entrepreneurs developed and was fought by the Shining Path, which didn't want any gentrification of the slums. Again, I don't want to engage in a critical study of this movement, but after reading Davis with his grandiloquent despair full of excrement and fetuses in plastic bags, I read with interest an article by Pedro Arevola⁷. Although Arevola's account is full of illusions on self-management, this is not the important point. What is, important is the way he describes the establishment and development of a slum (True, it is a model, and with political support), with its internal and external social relationships.

In South Africa, townships contain many types of housing and many categories of residents. There are two million people in Soweto, with not only shack settlements but also middle-class neighborhoods with their attendant malls and golf courses. In townships, some very poor areas were built with permanent structures, with water and electricity. These are (or were) working-class neighborhoods, sometimes dating back to apartheid. They may be classified just above a slum. In those areas, as well as in slums, social struggles never cease. There are campaigns against evictions, against cuts in services. Some workers at Eksom (the power company) decided to reconnect people who had been disconnected by the company for not paying their bills. Likewise for the water supply. Isn't that proof that slum-dwellers are not all that excluded from capitalist society? In the case of South Africa, it is worth noting that slum-dwellers' participation in politics often takes the form of denouncing the ANC's and Mandela's sham.

Recent example of a slum riot: Sihyathemba near Balfour (South Africa):

For several days in July 2009, rioting occurred in and around the slum to protest against the bad conditions there. Zuma (President of the Republic) soon came to show his concern. He promised to take measures. Since nothing happened, new riots exploded in February 2010. Same causes: no jobs and one of the rare local companies didn't keep its promise of hiring locally; no services (water, electricity, street lighting, asphalted roads); corrupt city hall politicians (ANC). Rioters attacked a city hall office, torched the library, fought the police and burnt tires. They also burnt a pile of electric poles that Eksom has prepared for coming works. They ransacked and looted shops owned by foreigners.

Those among the rioters who expressed demands asked either for jobs, services, the mayor's resignation or for Zuma to come again. They said that the shop looting was not xenophobia but gangsterism. They may be right, considering the surrounding misery. But xenophobia cannot be excluded. The politicians who usually control the slum-dwellers admitted that they couldn't calm down the rioters, that they had run out of arguments. The rioters didn't listen to anybody: they burnt the few services they had (the library, the electric poles for network extension). Maybe some rioters talked like the politicians. But in that case, the meaning of what they did was a different story from what they said: it was that no illusion was possible, that there was no other way out than looting and destroying the slum.

Recently, 150 contract workers in a printing factory went on strike near Durban⁸ to protest the reduction of their working hours. About 70% happen to live in slums, in particular slums where struggles against eviction have been successful. This case is probably not unique. It is yet another field of research that escaped Davis' attention. And an important one, because it is here that one can see slum-dwellers taking the struggle out of the slum, participating in society as a whole to the extent that they were engaging in class struggle against capital (the intensity of that struggle is irrelevant here; the fact that it exists is enough for my purpose).

Are slums another planet?

We would have liked for Mike Davis to use his formidable research and documentation capabilities to explore the links that surely exist between the slums around Dhaka (Bangladesh) and the series of riots which rocked the industrial areas of the town. Among the possible jobs for the slums' young women, the textile industry offers the best in town at \$30-\$40 per month. Yet strikes, highway blockades, riots, and factory or car arsons are common in the recent history of the Dhaka textile industry. From 2006 on, not a year passed without a social explosion which brought anti-work to a degree unknown in the West in the 70's. Though victims of massive, chronic unemployment, the women enlisted the help of men (rickshaw drivers, street peddlers) to burn the factories offering those precious jobs, thereby radically denying that the solution could lie in economic growth and job creation. This example shows not only that slum-dwellers are part of the global cycle of capital (80% of the textile output is exported), but also, and above all, that they take part in the most radical way in the critique of the present situation. Slums are not inward looking, nor are they longing for the return of the old working class movement. When there is work, slum-dwellers are only too happy to take it. But when they rise up, they may also say that they wouldn't want it for an empire. After all, isn't that very common?

Our list of examples could go on and on. We have seen enough of them to understand that Davis is wrong when he speaks of a « vast excess of manpower » resulting from « the late-capitalism triage of humanity [that] has already taken place » (199). We agree that under-employment is rampant in that population. But the notion of pure exclusion is misleading.

With Mike Davis, this notion is not gratuitous. He asks innocently if slum-dwellers, the relegated, the excluded, the dumped out, the surplus population, can and will revolt. Though he says everything and its opposite, his basic answer is no⁹. In the book's conclusion, the issue of « historical agency » is quickly abandoned when Davis turns to a lengthy description of the sophisticated means of repression of a possible slum revolt. And the last pages of the NLR article are devoted to the issues of Islamism and Pentecostalism. Although he seems to be only asking a question, he denies that the slum proletariat has revolutionary potential (historical agency). Because, as he observes, « for the moment at least Marx left the historical scene to be replaced by Mohamed and the Holy Spirit » (from the *New Left Review* article). In the NLR article's conclusion, he asks with a feigned innocence (moreover quoting somebody else) if religion is really « more radical than participating in official politics and trade unions. » There we are. Since Davis doesn't see parties or unions, he sees no proletariat either, and *a fortiori* no revolution. Loic Wacquant is no different. By their horrific descriptions, they 'prove' that slums are unable to produce a revolutionary working class movement, with its organizations etc. They are right! No broad working class movement will come out of the slums, nor will it come out of any other place. The same movement of capital which engenders slums destroys stable jobs, trade unions and all the lefts our authors are dreaming of. Is it a reason for throwing the baby out with the bath water?

IV - Discussion

What drives Davis and consorts to despair is that they don't find in slums a proletariat conforming to the picture they want: a mass of formal wage workers, conscious and organized in parties and trade union. This is the reason for their moaning over the disappearance of formal labor as it predominated in the post WWII era, as well as over the disappearance of Marx, who is for them the condensed figure of the organized working class.

IV.1 Working class and proletariat

The slum issue thus offers an opportunity to examine the issue of the definition of the proletariat. This is mainly interesting in defining the subject of the revolution. Other points of view, like sociology or economics, which rely on profession, income, or even culture or politics, are useful only for politicians

Are slums another planet?

or advertisers who have to delimit their audience in order to find the right way of addressing them.

From the point of view of revolutionary subjectivity, the proletariat is the class facing the capitalists *without reserve* and as such compelled to sell its labor power in order to survive. And when capital enters into crisis and massively stops buying labor power, the proletariat manifests itself as those who are constrained to rise up in order to ensure their immediate reproduction. To say that leads straight to the question of those who do not work. Are the workers' companions at home proletarians? What about permanently unemployed proletarians? Etc. The answer is yes, because the exchange of labor power against capital must be considered as a single block. A capitalist buys a day's work from a slum-dweller and leaves twenty neighbors high and dry. Does that make one proletarian and twenty excluded dumped out of humankind? No, capital as a whole comprises a variable part which buys the totality of the have-nots, even those who may *never* work. In this totality, we find formal workers (with a contract and benefits) and informal workers, formal unemployed (with welfare) and informal unemployed (living on family solidarity, trafficking of various sorts, etc.), workers producing surplus-value and unproductive workers. Whether we are talking about Western unemployed proletarians with 1000 euros of benefits or about Chinese workers earning 100 euros is also irrelevant. What matters here is to define the class that is constrained to rise up when capital stops buying its labor power, because it is separated from all its living conditions, which are facing it in the form of capital's property.

Poverty per se doesn't define the proletariat. What does is its relationship to capital.

From that viewpoint, the vast majority of slum-dwellers may be defined as proletarians, despite the existence of a small class of employers within the slums. Due to their relationship to capital, the slum proletarians are possible subjects of the revolution just like Western formal industrial wage earners. Is this contradicted by the fact that the immediate conscience of slum-dwellers distances itself increasingly from the political and trade-unionist form?

IV.2 Revolutionaries by proxy?

Mike Davis looks for the slum-dwellers' talisman... in churches and mosques. He rightly doubts that he will find it there and concludes that slum-dwellers don't have the famous Marxist « historical agency, » at least « for the time being » - meaning until they organize as a proper working class movement. He is not alone in considering that slum-dwellers are not fully-fledged proletarians, that they cannot be expected to actively participate in the revolution on their own basis.

On the question of slums, Bruno Bachmann¹⁰ agrees generally with Mike Davis: « capitalism can no longer ... absorb the rural exodus it provokes, and can only send this human surplus to rot in ghettos far away from business » (p. 53). We are confronted with a population defined only by its exclusion. Actually, it seems that is not the case, because Bachmann tells us that in Sao Paulo for example there are one million people living in slums, of whom 60% work in industry. Here then are slum-dwellers who work. But Bachmann simply offers this example and, like Davis, keeps jumping from one case to the other before drawing a general conclusion supposed to convince us. In that case: « chaos is a flower growing naturally on the slums' putrescent bloody compost ». Are you sure?

Bachmann can be expected to conclude that nothing revolutionary will come out of that desocialized chaos. But no! Towards the end of his article, he changes tack. He discovers the social variety of slums, their struggles and their participation in the outside struggles of society at large. He now speaks of « the formidable Bolivian experience [which] shows us, if need be, that slums are heterogeneous socially, but that their working class basis, though fragile because many miners are out of work, remains the determining factor to ignite » the revolution (p. 110). After a imprecise passage on the Piqueteros, he concludes: « the Argentine and Bolivian examples show us that slum-

Are slums another planet?

dwellers form a 'dangerous' class if some parts of them are directly subjected to labor exploitation and draw the rest of the community into their fight for survival » (p. 114).

Here we are again. After having said that slum-dwellers are purely excluded, Bachmann modifies his assessment so that he can put them back into the proletariat/capital relationship. If the 'community' of slum-dwellers has a sufficient number of 'true' workers, one might think that they have the talisman of historical agency, with parties and unions. In other words, slum-dwellers are proletarians by proxy. Without a 'true' workers' mediation, they are only *lumpen*.

Leo Zeilig and Claire Cerruti¹¹ tell roughly the same story when, in answer to Davis' book, they endeavor to prove that a working class still exists in Africa and that one must not lose hope for the revolution: « where the working class exists, it plays a cohesive role relative to the 'myriads' fighting neoliberalism ». Those with a formal job are not separated by this 'privilege' from those with an informal job, and they don't live in formal housing separated from the mass of slum-dwellers.

Their idea is that the true working class is not cut off from slum-dwellers and precarious informal workers. They illustrate this with various examples out of Soweto. Their big worry is to know if « mass unemployment has created a new class of wageless poor excluded from the world of work, with the working class now a small and privileged group living outside of the townships/slums, whose interests are separated from the majority of urban poor. »

Be reassured: they answer « no », because there is no real solution of continuity from the formal wage worker to the miserable slum-dweller, as Z and C show on the basis of sociological studies. And also, paradoxically, because slum-dwellers work from time to time, so they have experience of what work is. « This contact with waged labor will influence their understanding of what solidarity and 'class struggle' are ». This is welcome, because otherwise, they would only be *lumpen*. Z and C let the word slip in when considering Egypt. Thus, as with Bachmann, the slum-dweller of *International Socialism* means nothing to the revolution if he has no relationship with the working class, its parties and trade unions.

IV.3 - Communisation and development gaps

No human group reproduces itself in pure desocialization. And in today's world, any mode of socialization is a relationship to capital. 'Socialization' is taken here in its strong meaning, the relationship of mankind to itself in its historical self-production. In that sense, human socialization everywhere has taken the form of a relationship between classes. Other forms of socialization, of lesser consequence, are subordinated to the fundamental class relationship¹². I have already said that, in my opinion, slum-dwellers are fully-fledged members of the proletariat. The fact that they only sell their labor power from time to time doesn't mean that their socialization occurs elsewhere than in a class relationship to capital. I will now develop this point by showing that slum-dwellers don't need to turn into formal wage workers to be admitted to the ranks of the revolution.

In his book, Mike Davis reports the curious encounter between John Turner¹³, an anarchist architect, and the World Bank. It was during the 70's, when the World Bank faced the failure of its first experiments in the field of housing migrants flocking into towns. As for Turner, he was discovering the inventiveness of slum builders, the miracles of doing things with one's own resources. He concluded that slums are a solution much more than a problem. For him, marginal help is sufficient as long as slum-dwellers are left free to do as they want. In their daily practice of self-construction, slum-dwellers are in the best position to adapt small resources to very varied needs. This results in housing forms which reconcile residents' needs with financial and technical constraints much better than an architectural firm can. To replace slums with high-rise public housing is uselessly expensive. Their inhabitants don't feel at ease, don't consider these flats theirs and let the buildings decay

Are slums another planet?

rapidly. Maintenance costs add to the high costs of construction. The conclusion is that slum-dwellers must be left free, with minimum aid (land servicing for example). No norm, no planning permission must be imposed. A micro-loan may be enough to help buy some materials. The World Bank drew on these ideas and saved itself money. But the loans the Bank offered to slum-dwellers were far too expensive. Such programs were finally used to house better-off social categories.

Turner idealizes life in a slum (he describes happy families in their corrugated iron shacks *which they built themselves*), but this is not relevant here. What is important is that, by rejecting the cost and uniformity of normal social housing, by not respecting urban-planning and architectural norms, Turner in a way invented the commodity 'housing' suited to situations of deep crisis and devalorisation. He showed that, when exchange value ceases to presuppose use value, the products' usefulness derives more directly from the user's needs and activity. Turner constantly opposes the rigidity and inadequacy of (more comfortable) housing programs to the flexibility of slum housing, its adequacy for slum-dwellers' needs. His idea is that very modest aid may be enough to render slums decent and thus make slum-dwellers happy residents.

It is not surprising that Turner was an anarchist. This may have helped him to see more than misery in misery – the same cannot be said of Mike Davis. Turner didn't mean revolution (at least not in *Housing by People*). He only brought to the fore the proletarians' vast reserve of inventiveness when their activity is not directed at valorizing capital. Turner claims that it is by working *for themselves* that slum-dwellers become active, inventive, curious. I'd prefer saying that their freedom (in terms of time, materials, methods, norms) derives from the fact that slums are not 'normal' commodities produced by a capital to be valorized. Slum-dwellers themselves most probably don't feel free, happy and proud of their inventiveness. On the contrary, they must feel crushed by the weight of misery and want. That their lodgings are the fruit of their own efforts doesn't mean they are satisfied or proud of them.

Turner idealizes poverty to a point that is scandalous, but he rightly sees how much proletarians have the potential to imagine and invent when a crisis forces them to do so. They invent unsuspected social forms, and objects as well, or new uses for old objects. I am not saying that building shacks is a revolutionary activity. I am saying that because this fraction of proletarians is remote from the diktat of valorization (remote, but not exempt), it shows just as much, or maybe more, potential for inventing a new life than formal day-in, day-out routine workers holding party and union cards.

Everything that is produced under capital's conditions is a commodity. A commodity's usefulness – its capacity to satisfy a need – is expressed as its use value. Use value is different from simple usefulness: it is usefulness conforming to the commodity form, to the capitalist social relationship. Looking at it in a general way, there are a myriad of ways to satisfy hunger and thirst. But when we consider the proletarian's hunger and thirst, then the number of ways is drastically reduced. Firms such as McDonald or Coca Cola, or capital invested in industrial agriculture, offer and impose products which have the double virtue of being nutritious and cheap on the one hand, and profitable when exchanged for the proletarian's wage on the other. Because the product has a value form, it also has a general use value. McDonald invented a commodity which satisfies the hunger of a maximum of people without taking into account their particularities (region, age, taste, etc.). Who said that the usefulness of food is to feed, and only to feed? The same as those who think that proletarians are here to work, and only to work.

In a similar way, the millions of workers who migrated into town to work in Fordist industries after WWII were offered accommodations fulfilling the 'housing' need in a most universal and brutal way. Turner very clearly perceives the defects of this kind of housing. Their use value is strictly presupposed by their exchange value and the profitability of the capitals producing them. Time and money prohibit the production of anything else, of anything better adapted to the variety of

Are slums another planet?

individuals, to their particular situation, not to mention their imagination. Actually, consumers don't have much imagination. Most of them are short of time and money and crushed by the daily routine of work and family – when everything goes well. When everything goes wrong, like in slums, misery forces people to imagine and invent because capital, not offering them formal jobs, doesn't offer them public housing or the local Big Mac either. Inventiveness is possible. Insurrections prove it. Slums prove it. However, in both cases, it remains limited by the lack of means. But if one can imagine slum-dwellers leaving their slums and taking possession of the surrounding town, one gets an idea of what third world towns might become in a general uprising of the proletariat.

Urban agriculture is another example. The World Bank, as well as other institutions like FAO or UNDP, is also involved in urban agriculture programs. The idea is to cultivate empty spaces in towns such as parks, wastelands, or hospital gardens. Almost by definition, there is no empty space in slums. Nonetheless, slum agriculture did develop, interstitially. In Kinshasa, according to Mike Davis (p. 196), women cultivate highway median strips. In Dhaka, some slum-dwellers are able to cultivate very small plots of land, producing rice for two months of family consumption. In Kibera (one of Nairobi's large slums), vertical farming has been developed in bags of soil piled up in front of shacks. Farming in bags is not free: bags, soil, water, everything has to be bought. Nonetheless, this allows a household to raise its monthly income by \$5 (in that slum, the monthly rent for a shack is \$6). Without claiming that this is the end of the separation between town and country, we should recognize that this is a sign of the potential for it (though farming in bags wasn't invented by slum residents, at least according to the French NGO Solidarités which disseminates the method).

These few examples are enough to prove that slum-dwellers aren't simply dregs of society as appears through Davis' descriptions. Like the most radicalized piqueteros in Argentina, they are forced to invent as a result of the crisis situation they live in permanently. True, this is only survival, not revolution. But these proletarians' capacity to participate in the communist transformation of society is forged in their living conditions, just like regular workers in a big firm. A general revolutionary situation will liberate them from the confinement in which permanent police repression keeps them, just as it will free their capacity to invent by multiplying the resources they will seize.

The question of development gaps.

Reintroducing slum-dwellers into the proletariat proper means that they are no longer simply considered poor, but that they are also bearers of the same revolutionary potential as other proletarians, all else being equal. Here we touch on the question of economic development gaps between regions. This question frequently pollutes the discussion of the conditions for world revolution. Generally speaking, third-world poverty is invoked by militants in the North as a reason to retain the development of productive forces as one aim of the revolution. The poor will have to be fed, they say. As if hunger resulted from a lack of productivity in agriculture and food industries, and not from the capitalist social relationship. This has nothing to do with anti-productivism. Nor does it in any way imply that today's forced frugality is a model for the future. Rather, it is the assertion that a world revolution starting in the developed countries wouldn't have to feed the third world, nor would it have to reproduce the aid relationship which harms the third world nowadays. Third-world proletarians will find in their own insurrection the means and resources to extricate themselves rapidly from their state of hunger and bad housing. This does not preclude expressions of solidarity between regions, but it certainly prevents reducing the revolution in third-world regions to a problem of economic development aimed at raising them to the level of the industrialized countries.

Another way of looking at the same question consists in considering the extent of needs. Should we say that unsatisfied needs are so vast in the third world that the revolution (i.e. a working-class revolution in the industrialized countries) will have to do something so that the third world can « catch up with us »? The scale of needs is undeniable. It can be measured in terms of calorie shortage, infant

Are slums another planet?

mortality, etc. But who says that these needs must be satisfied in the same way as in the North? Who says that hunger must be fought with imported frozen chicken and US wheat flour? Who says that hunger is due to a lack of resources in the countries suffering from famine? Who says that luxury hospitals are required for children to survive? Those who noisily stress the scale of needs to be satisfied rarely discuss their nature and the specific social form of their satisfaction. Concerning slum-dwellers, the insurrection they launch will give top priority to the issue of housing, without waiting for outside help. What we know of their present practice, of their ways of 'doing it themselves' augurs well for their taking possession of towns in a movement that will quickly become a feast, a unification of town and country, and above all a radical amelioration of their material situation. It won't be necessary to wait for leftist architects, urban planners and social developers. Rapidity and efficiency in satisfying such needs in an unconventional way will determine the expansion and success of the global revolutionary process.

B.A.

Feb. 2010

Notes

¹ Tom Angotti (quoted by Richard Pithouse, cf note 4) sees 'racialized connotations' in the word slum. The reader will hopefully admit that there is NO such innuendo on my part, and that I use the word for its simplicity.

² Loïc Wacquant: *Urban Outcasts: A comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, 2008.

³ Hernando de Soto is a well-known partisan of this idea. During the 80's and 90's, he elaborated the notion that it might be sufficient to grant slum-dwellers a tradable State-guaranteed property deed corresponding to their piece of land to transform them into active capitalists. Such titles would serve as security for loans for investment purposes. The kind of investment is not important: De Soto considers that slum-dwellers are so resourceful they can make a profit out of almost nothing.

⁴ <http://libcom.org/library/mike-daviss-planet-slums>

⁵ The same remark may apply equally to Loïc Wacquant's *Parias Urbains*. In spite of his knowledge of his subject from the inside (unlike Davis), Wacquant cannot do more than mention riots, without letting rioters express themselves.

⁶ Françoise Navez-Bouchanine: *Les chemins tortueux de la démocratisation des projets en bidonville*, in *Espace et Société*, 2003,1.

⁷ Pedro Arevala : *Huaycan self-managing community: may hope be realized*, in *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 9, n°1, p. 59sq.

⁸ <http://libcom.org/news/wildcat-strike-pinetown-south-africa-25012010>, January 25, 2010

⁹ But he also has a lyrical sentence announcing that « the future of human solidarity depends upon the militant refusal of the new urban poor to accept their terminal marginality within global capitalism » (p. 202)

¹⁰ Bruno Bachmann : *Les enfants de la même agonie*, Ab irato, 2005

Are slums another planet?

11 Leo Zeilig, Claire Cerruti : *Slums, resistance and the African working class*, in International Socialism n°117, Dec. 2007.

12 Bruno Astarian : *Le travail et son dépassement*, Senonevero 2001, pp. 74 sq.

13 John F.C. Turner : *Housing by people, towards autonomy in building environments*, Londres 1976