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Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and The Imagination of Disaster

Michael Reilly

In *Ecology of Fear*, Mike Davis contends that Los Angeles is exceptional in the number of major natural and social disasters it experiences, and that both types of tragedy are intensified through similar types of human (in)action. The former argument largely fails because Davis does not control for the enormous size of LA. Nor does he compare the results of these disasters to other dangers threatening residents. He thus makes pointless an assessment of the overall importance of these avoidable tragedies. Unfortunately, his gloomy tone has led many critics to dismiss him as paranoid and to miss the importance of the latter argument. Here, Davis relates three historical accounts where social and political factors are at least as important as the truly natural in determining the understanding and attempted management of “natural disaster.” The unsupported argument that LA is exceptional and the narrative power of the case studies, combined with the rest of the nation’s latent contempt for LA, may leave readers fantasizing about the ruin of the City of Angels when, in fact, they ought to be bringing this insightful analysis to bear on their own disaster policy questions.

Throughout the book, Davis argues that LA is more prone to disaster than other regions of the US but fails to support this with any numbers normalized to take LA’s enormous size into account. He admits that “other metropolitan regions...face comparable risks of disaster,” however “none bear Los Angeles’s heavy burdens of mass poverty and racial violence” (p. 54). This insistence on the exceptional nature of LA is poorly supported by evidence mostly limited to absolute numbers of people killed or dollars lost. Any argument — especially one where risk figures so prominently — about such an enormous region should include relative measurements that account for the LA region having over 10 million residents and a larger economy than most nations.

The definition of “major” disaster employed by Davis is also weak, because he rarely discusses the impact of these events in relation to the impacts of the host of other problems humans face. The number of people dying from storms or fires each year means little unless it is compared to the number of people dying from

other major factors. This failure becomes especially clear when Davis criticizes community (over)reaction to crime without noting that — on a purely statistical basis — such fears are more reasonable than fear of natural disaster. The only time Davis does hint at a relative comparison, e.g., while assessing the danger posed by a potential large tornado, contradicts his preoccupation with natural disaster: “The dead and injured, in our secret Kansas, should not be much more than the average Friday night carnage on the freeways” (p. 194).

These two related failures along with the book’s pervading tone of gloom have led many critics to label Davis as paranoid. After all, if LA is really so bad, why do so many people keep coming? How important is it to worry about a theoretical hurricane ripping a 747 from the sky when actual bullets fired by angry residents have hit a number of helicopters over the last few decades? Unfortunately, these distractions have obfuscated Davis’ more important argument on the relationship between the natural and the social in determining the impacts of natural disasters.

The central part of the book sets up a framework for the interaction of social and political processes with natural disasters. Davis illustrates this with three historical case studies where human factors decidedly condition that which is generally supposed to be natural. “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 ensuing explosion in the streets” (p. 9). Each history supports this view by looking at one type of disaster: fire, wind, and wildlife. “The Case for Letting Malibu Burn” establishes a connection between the very expensive, high-tech efforts to protect Malibu from naturally-recurrent wildfire and the almost ignorance of policy directed at deadly tenement fires in central Los Angeles. “Our Secret Kansas” recounts LA’s twentieth-century tornado history and how the *Los Angeles Times* and civic boosterism successfully downgraded such occurrences to “freak winds.” Finally, “Maneaters of the Sierra Madre” compares policy reactions to the seldom-deadly but much feared mountain lion and the cute but sometimes plague-ridden squirrel. Together, these cases demonstrate Davis’ considerable skill in integrating complex scientific and social knowledge and provide support for his dialectic.

Davis concludes with an interesting but somewhat forced connection between natural and social disaster. He uncovers links between literary disaster and racism where the “invading hordes” or superhuman post-disaster societies are thinly veiled appeals to

subconscious racial fears or pride. The examination of Malibu residents' construction of an archetypal arsonist along race and class lines demonstrates a recursive relationship where fears of natural disaster are recast in demographic terms. However, most of the book is either about natural disaster or LA's "low-intensity race war" with little effort to weave the two together. LA is a large and complicated place: do all its problems really belong to a single, integrated ecology of fear?

Ecology of Fear makes an important contribution to the study of natural hazards with its insightful analysis into the social and political dimensions of natural disaster. However, to extract this argument, the reader must ground LA in a solid comparative context to counteract Davis' gloom and reliance on big numbers. Otherwise one may conclude that Davis aims to provide Americans with another reason to despise LA when he is actually promoting the city as a worst-case example of processes that are at work beneath the surface in large metropolises throughout the U.S.

References

Davis, Mike. 1998. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and The Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books.