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Review of Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk's 'Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism'

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Book Review

Mike Davis and Daniel Bertrand Monk (eds) (2007) *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism*. New York: The New Press. ISBN: 978-1595583925

REVIEWED BY *Jacklyn Cock, University of the Witwatersrand*

In much of the world the behavior of the political elite would seem to indicate an agreement with the words of Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping: 'To get rich is glorious'. The current economic system – what author Mike Davis calls 'savage, fanatical capitalism' – allows them to do so, but his new book *Evil Paradises* exposes the unsustainable future they are leading us to.

It does so through a series of case studies describing how all over the world the rich are retreating into 'bright archipelagos of utopian luxury', 'dreamworlds' of infinite consumption, elaborate security and social exclusion. This 'unprecedented spatial and moral secession of the wealthy from the rest of humanity' in places as different as Medellin, Kabul, Hong Kong and Cairo, takes a variety of forms ranging from Ted Turner's 2 million acres of ranchland (ostensibly to 'save Nature'), to the creation of new luxury cities (as in Arg-e Jalid in Iran) to 'the vast gated community' of Dubai.

With only 1.5 million people Dubai is 'an emerging dreamworld of conspicuous consumption and what the locals boast as "supreme lifestyles"'. The 'dozens of outlandish-mega projects' include an artificial island world, (where Rod Stewart reportedly spent $33 million to buy the island called 'Britain'), the planet's tallest building, a ski resort, a hyper mall and an underwater luxury hotel. This is sixty-six feet under the sea and 'each of its 220 luxury suites has clear plexiglass walls that provide spectacular views of passing mermaids and of the famed "underwater fireworks": a hallucinatory exhibition of 'water bubbles, swirled sand and carefully deployed lighting' (49). According to Mike Davis, 'Dubai has already surpassed that other desert arcade of capitalist desire, Las Vegas, both in sheer scale of spectacle and the profligate consumption of water and power' (50). All of this depends upon a large international immigrant working class that is poorly paid, badly housed, without rights and subject to racist and sexist abuse.

Dubai is described as a 'vast, gated community and several of these themes – especially the 'profligate consumption of water' and the exploitation of migrant labour – are illustrated in many of South Africa's gated communities, 'the spaces of global neoliberalism par excellence' (145). Pecanwood, near Hartebeespoort Dam, for example, uses over a million litres of water daily to maintain its lush and manicured grass, but many of its workers lack access to water and electricity. The Pecanwood workers who live in an informal settlement known as 'Jan place' have to walk 5 km to buy water at R3 for 20 litres. Many of these worker are illegal migrants employed as casualized labour lacking security, regulation, a living wage or benefits.

Pecanwood and other gated communities such as golf estates are 'evil paradises', fortified enclaves of wealth demonstrating what Steven Gill has called 'a new medievalism that separates and segregates rich and poor communities' (Gill 2003: 201). Recently a house at Zimbali Golf estate

which describes itself as 'one part golf, two part paradise' sold for R19 million and six new houses are priced at R30 million each. South Africa's 500 golf courses use on average 1.2 million litres of water a day, equivalent to the basic amount 30 million people should receive daily.

A focus on water is central to Patrick Bond's superb chapter 'Johannesburg: Of Gold and Gangsters' because access to water remains, 'a fundamental, existential dividing line: on one hand, the pleasing bright green quilt of well-watered English style gardens and thick alien trees that shade traditionally white – now slightly desegregated suburbs; on the other, the dusty, often toxic deserts of the townships and new slums' (120).

Bond demonstrates the hardship that the privatization of water has imposed on poor communities. This is part of a broader trend: corporate capitalism involves the increasing commodification of natural resources such as water. At the same time *Evil Paradises* shows how corporate capitalism requires authoritarian regulation to survive. There is a 'symbiosis between the free market and tyranny.' In 'Delirious Beijing' for example, we are told hundreds of thousands of residents have suffered evictions and demolition of their homes as Beijing destroys itself to be remade with a neoliberal happy face in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. There are warnings here for us in South Africa, with the talk of building a 'world-class African city' for 2010.

The deeper warning is that capitalism 'survives parasitically, like the malaria protist, drawing its energies from the chemistry of others, its force from other fields, its momentum from others' desires' (33). The elite worlds of overconsumption, fear, alienation and injustice the book describes in compelling detail are 'clearly incompatible with the ecological and moral survival of humanity.'

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