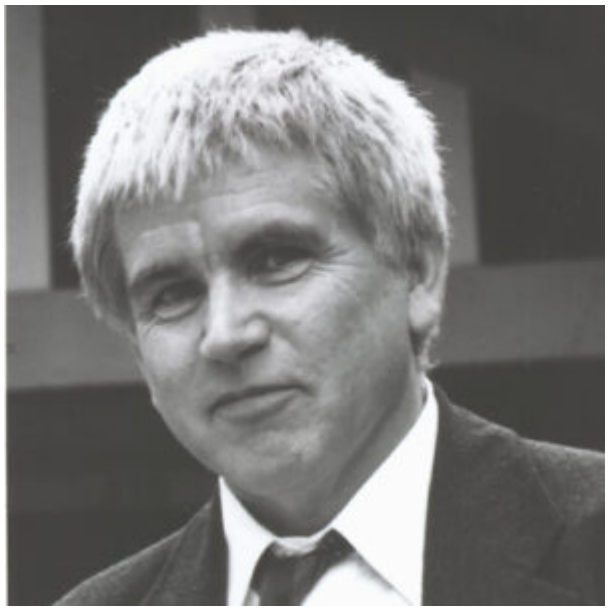
Mike Davis (1946-2022): Miscellaneous Encounters with “A Real Marxist”

written by Dan La Botz | October 26, 2022



Mike Davis when he worked for Verso publishers.

Mike Davis, the revolutionary socialist social and culture critic, has died. *The Los Angeles Times*, has written a comprehensive obituary about his very productive and complicated life.

I think it must have been 1967 when I first met Mike Davis. One day, studying with my friends Eric and Jeannie Baecht, fellow students at San Diego State, I told them that I was a Marxist. “Oh, you think you’re a Marxist,” said Jeannie. “We’ll introduce you to a real Marxist.”

She made a call and we drove to Mike’s house. Jeannie must have cued him as to why were coming, because when we arrived, he hollered to come in and we opened the door to find him sitting in front of a poster of Karl Marx, reading *Das Kapital,* as Bertolt Brecht’s “Three-Penny Opera” played in the background. “See,” said Jeannie, “He’s a real Marxist.”

Another time, we drove down to meet Mike who was working as a butcher or a driver for a meat market, I think it was down in San Ysidro, just on this side of the Mexican border. This seemed perfectly normal to me, since I had grown up in a family of bakers and grocers and my step-father for a while drove a truck for Safeway. And in those days, we all worked at something while going to school. I learned from reading the obituaries that Mike’s father had been a butcher, so perhaps that’s how he got into the job.

Perhaps it was the next year that Eric, Jeannie, and I drove up to L.A. to see Mike, who was then working at the Communist Party bookstore in Los Angeles. He had joined the party, but he was apparently not its most loyal member. As he walked us up and down the aisles of the store, he pointed at different sections and different shelves, pointing out sine books and giggling. “Look, I put Herbert Marcuse here.” And, “I put Leon Trotsky in here.” The idea of Trotsky infiltrating the Communist Party bookstore made us all laugh.

The next time I saw Mike was in 1988. Ken Paff, national organizer of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, and Mike who was then working for the leftwing publishing house Verso, had come up with the idea that I should write aa book about TDU. I was then living in L.A. and Mike came by my house in Echo Park to discuss the contract with me, telling me, "If you need anything while you're writing this, I'll be glad to help." When I did have some question and tried to call Mike, he was nowhere to be found. Someone told he was getting married or getting divorced, there was a wife and a girlfriend, it was complicated. He did that a lot, marrying five times. (I am not criticizing. I have married four times myself, finally getting it right.)

In 1991, my wife Sherry and I were visiting L.A. and friends there suggested we go with them to hear Mike Davis who was giving a talk on his new book, *City of Quartz*. As I remember it, the event was in a big bookstore and there must have been a hundred people in the audience. Mike talked for perhaps an hour, a talk riddled with post-modern language and allusions to things I had never heard of. I couldn't follow it. Later I read the book but was not moved by it, though it became a bestseller and catapulted Mike to fame and fortune as a winner of a McArthur "genius grant" of $500,000 in 1998.

Mike and I met too infrequently to ever become friends. I didn't know him really. But I do know that he spent his entire life as a socialist activist, generously supporting every social and labor movement on the left. Toward the end of his life, concerned about what capitalism was doing to the planet, he had taken up the issue of climate change. As I had learned back in the mid-1960s, Mike was "the real Marxist."