

## BOOK REVIEW

# Los Angeles: Globalization, Urbanization & Social Struggles (*Roger Keil*)

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“It is always important to explain where one comes from when talking about Los Angeles. The city has no end, no middle and no limits... Much writing on Los Angeles has an automatic starting point at LAX, the giant airport by the Pacific Ocean where pundits and philosophers of the *fin de siècle* tend to land before immersing themselves into Lalaland... Whereas Europeans and New Yorkers have still the upper hand in claiming Los Angeles as the ultimate exotic wonder of the world, Westsiders have put many local spins on a local historical geography from their class and often gender-specific (meaning white and male) points of view.” (Keil, 1998: xv)

### **Who writes Los Angeles? Who reads it? Who lives it?**

The “LA School,” an informal grouping of scholars working in and on Los Angeles, has produced good analyses of processes of restructuring. Nevertheless, a recent issue of *Antipode* featured a debate on this work. Similarly, the

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publication of Mike Davis' *Ecology of Fear* prompted a ridiculous controversy in and outside Los Angeles. What is it about Los Angeles that provokes so much fear, fascination, and struggles? Whether the city is considered an exception in the history of urbanism, or whether it is considered to be the new model for all cities, no one will ignore Los Angeles' central role in a globalized world. Roger Keil's new book is inscribed in this context of intellectual debates and efforts to understand the deep restructuring processes taking place in and through Los Angeles. It proposes a much-needed political outlook on the city. Keil's book is a laudable project offering a different narrative of the "sixty mile circle" city, a narrative that perhaps could help understand not only processes of restructuring, but also the motives behind the controversies surrounding recent literature on Los Angeles.

Keil grounds his work in three main theoretical discourses: the French Regulation School, the literature on urban regimes and growth machines, and the work of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey on the production of space. Within the tradition of the "LA School," Keil examines the processes by which Los Angeles evolves as a world city. His specific contribution to the wealth of literature on Los Angeles lies in his comprehensive effort to explain concretely the political maneuvers behind world city formation. "The simultaneity of congealed past local struggles and the realities of a constantly revolving, globalized urban world," he writes, "is the topic of this book" (1998: xxxvi). Keil unveils the processes by which the city's physical

landscape and symbolic images were built. The book convincingly articulates the impact of the city's growth machine, place entrepreneurs and boosters, with the actions of grassroots organizations as well as progressive middle-class activists.

The general argument of the book is that in a globalized world, world cities like Los Angeles take shape through local politics. Keil demonstrates that world city formation is "globally induced" and "locally contingent" by posing four premises: 1) globalization creates many contradictions which clash in the local political sphere; 2) the world city is an important site to shape globalization; 3) the positioning of a world city is dependent on local political struggles; and 4) given this position in the global urban hierarchy, local politics is place-specific (1998: 13). Thus, world city formation is not simply an inevitable historic-geographic process of restructuring. It is as well, the result of purposeful actions conducted in the local political sphere. The book's most important contribution is to document these political processes in Los Angeles.

In a dynamic writing style, Keil begins with a series of maps of Los Angeles. On decisively spatial grounds, he discusses the many representations of the city, its size, its jurisdictions, its economic radius, its population, and so on. With these "scalings" in mind, the reader is then transported from reel images, "Wannabe-Utopias," and theories into the urban reality of the city. Keil is quite successful in articulating these different images and discourses on Los Angeles with their impact on people's everyday lives. He continues with an analysis of the

“(un)making” of a Fordist city, with a particular emphasis on mayor Tom Bradley’s role. The remainder of the book explores the restructuring of Los Angeles through the lens of its different actors. From boosters, place-entrepreneurs, and transnational real estate agents, to local politicians, the Community Redevelopment Agency, and middle-class activism, Keil weaves a powerful account of the development of LA’s physical and political landscapes. The reader travels through Bunker Hill, Carson, West Hollywood, and Santa Monica to discover “how class hegemony is formed in and through space” (1998: 146).

From another perspective, Keil delves into the labor/community strategies to cope with desindustrialization and into the many “immigrant worlds” of the city-region. In the course of this journey, the reader is reminded that the formation of a world city is much more than the influx of foreign capital and the fulfillment of specific functions in the global economy. World city formation is also the internationalization of the population and the destruction and reconstruction of communities. Warning the reader against the pervasive tendency to equate Los Angeles’ sprawled and suburbanized urban form to a lack of urbanity and civil society, Keil digs into the many strategies deployed by Angelenos to cope with basic needs, police brutality,

and welfare. “In Los Angeles,” he argues, “progressive politics has been the attempt by displaced industrial workers, impoverished and marginalized citizens (and noncitizens) and radical activists to fight the wave of Republicanism and globalization that threatens to wipe them from the landscape of their city” (1998: 222).

Keil’s book is a charm to read, replete with photographs, maps, and behind the scene details about the making of a world city couched between the Santa Monica and San Gabriel Mountains, the Pacific coastline and the desert. It is a journey through city hall, passing by taco trucks, ethnic supermarkets, and minimalls; stopping by Compton, the center of world gangsta rap; climbing the corporate towers of Bunker Hill and the offices of Rebuild LA. Albeit at times perhaps a little too optimistic, it is a much-needed account of local politics to complement the work on economic restructuring and cultural studies offered by students of the City of Angels.

## References

- Antipode*. 1999. 31 (1).
- Davis, Mike. 1998. *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

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