

TWO GREAT LOSSES

SINCE THE COMPOSITION of the last issue of the journal, NLR has lost the two most gifted political writers to have ignited its pages over the years, Tom Nairn and Mike Davis. Both were magnitudes whose life and work extended far beyond this journal, requiring consideration by others on another scale. Only that portion of what they achieved which is connected with NLR, not to be exaggerated, and some of the differences between them, are in place here. Death claimed them close together. Did they touch in any other respect? Each was a mind so entirely original that, virtually by definition, it would seem they had little in common. Generation, class, nationality, formation, temperament—all set them quite radically apart. Tom was fourteen years older, born in a small Scottish village, his father headmaster of a nearby school. A natural polymath, he won a privileged education, first in an art college, then studying philosophy at two universities in Britain—Edinburgh and Oxford—thereafter spending time at the apex of higher education in Italy, the Scuola Normale in Pisa, where he acquired fluent Italian.

Returning to England in the early sixties, he earned post-graduate awards and lectured in an art college in London. There he supported the student revolt of 1968, and was dismissed for doing so. For a quarter of a century he never had a teaching job again, and for the rest of his life was always in difficult straits, often in poverty, scraping a nomadic living in places as remote from each other as Amsterdam, Washington, Prague, and finally Melbourne—where, in his seventies, he found employment for a decade in a university ten thousand miles away from where he lived in West Lothian. A Scot to whom conventional English forms of conviviality were foreign in ways that could be mistaken for shyness, he was generally quiet and reserved, and avoided publicity. He could be fierce in print, his mockery scalding; yet he was warm and gentle as a person. Italian released the high spirits in him.

In background, character and career, Mike was his antithesis. Bryan Palmer's splendid portrait of him points up the contrast. A working-class boy who grew up in two industrial towns of Southern California, surrounded by a teenage culture of 'drag-racing, beer-guzzling, car-stealing alienation', radicalized by black protests and swiftly expelled from the liberal arts college in Oregon that accepted him, he became a political activist in the civil-rights movement of the sixties. Subsequently a full-time organizer for SDS, he briefly joined the Communist Party, keeping himself alive driving trucks and buses. A voracious reader, steeping himself in left publications and local history, by the early seventies he was at UCLA, where he graduated in 1977. After some years working with NLR in London, he published his first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, in 1986, when he was forty. Fame came with his second in 1990, *City of Quartz*, and with it funds; but it was another decade before he got a university job, at SUNY Stony Brook in Long Island in 2000. By then, however, he was in such demand that he could soon return to Southern California, with posts at UC Irvine and then Riverside. It was a cursus the reverse of Tom's, from lower depths of redneck aliteracy to heights of canonical acclaim in his homeland. So too, in many ways his temperament was the opposite. Under stress he could be volcanic. But mostly he was genial, someone who loved talking, and who mellowed with age and security. Without animus on the left, even for those with whom he most categorically disagreed, he lacked any sectarian strain. As a person he was generous to a fault. A famously good friend, he enjoyed company and was open-handed with interviews.

Tom joined the new editorial committee of NLR at its inception, in the spring of 1962, and was from the outset the source of the ideas about Britain with which it came to be identified. He had recently arrived from Italy, where he had studied the full range of Gramsci's political and cultural thought, as edited by the PCI and produced in six volumes by Einaudi after the war. In London he started to apply it to the specificities of English society and history, and in the autumn of 1963 published an essay in Italian, 'La nemesi borghese', that was to form the cornerstone of NLR's subsequent theses about Britain. When the journal was relaunched in a new format in 1964, he published successive articles on the British political elite, the English working class, Hugh Gaitskell, the nature of Labourism, and its imperialism, which remain as mordant and relevant today as they were then: a lasting contribution to an understanding of the country. This star-burst of wonderful essays continued exploding across

the next decade, in further studies of the imperial cast of the Great British state and its ongoing crisis, and in new directions: the fevers of English nationalism in the imaginary of Enoch Powell, the warping of Scottish nationalism in phantasms of Calvinism, Romanticism, decolonization, and the delusions of pan-Britannic resistance to entry into Europe. Two path-breaking books emerged out of this second set of detonations: *The Left against Europe?* in 1972, and *The Break-up of Britain* in 1977—crucially expanded in 1981. In the course of this sequence, he rallied to the national cause in Scotland, and opened out his range beyond Ukania, as he would later call it, to a worldwide theory of nationalism conceived in the image of a ‘Modern Janus’—an effigy looking both backwards and forwards, to the past and to the future—which it had been Marxism’s great failure never to understand. The turning-point of the twentieth century had been 1914, rather than 1917: not class but nationality was the motor of modern history.

Breaking with NLR in 1983, he had changed his mind about Marxism and about Scotland, but not about the nature of the Great British political and ideological system in which his country was held fast. His third book, the dazzling *Enchanted Glass*, demolished the cult of Ukanian monarchy as a schlock surrogate for the expression of national feeling of any normal modern kind. In Scotland, there was now less need to belabour the companion kitsch of tartanry, as a healthier mutation of the country’s sensibility took shape of which he would become its most eloquent and independent voice: a theorist and publicist, steadily, if never uncritically, supportive of the Scottish National Party which now dominates its political landscape and seeks reintegration with Europe. That new commitment spelt no retrenchment of horizons, rather the reverse, in a series of strikingly original reflections on globalization. During the nineties, in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet bloc, he came to the conclusion that nations were now—as they had seldom been so unambiguously and decisively in the past—the fundamental vectors of democratic emancipation. Globalization, properly understood, was the spread of this process around the world. The growth of a democratic nationalism, no longer ethnic but civic in outlook, was the deep underlying trend of world history since the Second World War, and offered the best hope for humanity.

A decade later, the caesura of 9/11 disconcerted this vision. Suddenly, the US empire with its wars in the Middle East and neo-liberalism with its

'economania' had hijacked globalization for their reactionary ends. But the Anglo-American attempt to 'cram the genie of democratic nationalism back into the neo-liberal bottle' had provoked 'a gathering storm of resentment and shame' against it, and would fail. The only site of collective agency capable of developing a credible alternative to neo-imperialism and neo-liberalism, wrenching the world free of their iron maidens, was the nation-state. In NLR, to which he had returned, Tom raked Blair's obstruction of democratization at home and plunge into war in Iraq, and refined his defence of the nation with arguments for an anthropology of human diversity beyond the nation-state. His penultimate book, *Pariah*, was a no-holds-barred attack on the rule of New Labour and a clear-eyed forecast of its ultimate ejection into the political wilderness; his last political brochure, a withering depiction of Gordon Brown as a 'bard of Britishness', completed a cycle that had begun with his etching of Gaitskell fifty years earlier.

Mike came to NLR, like Tom, as a fully formed Marxist, if of an altogether different sort, shaped by the experience of CORE and SDS, rather than the Scuola Normale. Asked—after a meeting with him in London in 1976—for an article on the American left, he sent the journal a set of theses so striking that we immediately urged him to expand them into a book, contracted in the spring of 1977. In 1978 he published his first major article, a sixty-page essay on Michel Aglietta's regulation theory of US capitalism, in Wallerstein's *Review* for the Braudel Center in upstate New York. In 1980 he joined NLR as an assistant editor, and over the next five years produced seven landmark essays for it on American society, economy and politics, from the epoch of Jackson to the triumph of Reagan, which were collected as *Prisoners of the American Dream* in 1986. By then he was back in Los Angeles, and mining a different lode. But he never abandoned the focus of those first articles, and twenty years later published in the journal another five major diagnoses, each of them remarkable, of the changing class configurations in the United States revealed by elections stretching from 2006 to 2020.

The second great theme of his writing began with his study of LA, *City of Quartz*, followed in due course by two further books on the same metropolis. But it extended far beyond the confines of Southern California, as the future of cities in the world at large became one of the leitmotifs of his work. *Magical Urbanism* explored the economic, political and cultural dynamics of the growing Latino population in cities

across America. *Planet of Slums* considered the social consequences of mass urbanization without industrialization in Asia, Africa and Latin America—proliferating shanty-towns where for the first time in history the world's population had ceased to be predominantly rural, yet modernity was generating a pulverized misery. Not that every city in the South was a Kinshasa, Dhaka or Lima. Oil and a rotating foreign precariat could also yield a Dubai, dubbed—well before his rise to power—'Trump on acid'. Mike's third signature concern was vaster still, and completely original. Less easy to capture in a single phrase, it encompassed all those dimensions of human life potentially or actually affected by forces of the natural universe, whether socially mediated or beyond any range of human action. Fascinated as a child by geology, confronting demography in the race protests of his youth, as an adult he added climatology, epidemiology, astrophysics to his repertoire of interests, immersing himself in the scientific literature on each. The yield was a series of unforgettable interventions about the threats to life on the planet that they might pose: toxic desertification from nuclear testing, mass extinction from asteroid projectiles, Noachian inundation from global warming, deadly pestilence from viral mutations. He covered all of these in a succession of articles in the journal and produced out of his early engagement with the vicissitudes of climate his historical masterpiece, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, in which El Niño and Empire interact to cause millions of deaths from famine in India, China, Brazil and across the colonized world.

That conjunction came out of Mike's final, abiding commitment: the internationalism that separated him from much of the left in the United States with whom he grew up, one capable of instinctive solidarity with revolutionary struggles elsewhere, yet without the deep knowledge about the rest of the world that he possessed. What that meant for him was a grasp of the character of the American empire and of the resistances to it which was on display as soon as he arrived at the journal, in his contribution to *Exterminism and Cold War*, the symposium published by NLB in 1982 around Edward Thompson's coinage of the first of those terms. In the most telling if respectful critique of it, Mike analysed the logic of 'extended (nuclear) deterrence' as the Reagan administration's strategy to counter the threat of further revolutions in the Third World. Twenty years later, 'The Flames of New York' recounted the pre-history of paranoid fantasies of Wall St destruction before the 'societal exorcism in reverse' of 9/11 and revenge was visited on Kabul. In the same year *Buda's*

Wagon traced the history of the car-bomb, first exploded by an anarchist on Wall St in 1920, as historically ‘the poor man’s air-force’, now pitted against those ruling the skies of the Middle East, but employed by them too. His last, uncompleted project was a two-volume history of America’s procession of empire from colonial times to the present, *Star-spangled Leviathan*, and his final published text a savage denunciation of the inter-imperialist conflict in Ukraine, ‘Thanatos Triumphant’, in *Sidecar*.

In many ways, the contrasts between Tom Nairn and Mike Davis as sensibilities of the left were stark. Did they ever meet, or engage with each other’s work? What brought them together in the pages of *NLR*? First and foremost, their analytic ability—unique in their respective cohorts—to decipher the societies in which they were formed as intelligible totalities. Tom furnished this gift to the *Review*, and Mike learnt it from the *Review*. The writing they produced in these pages about Ukania and God’s Own Country was in each case only the inception of a much longer and wider body of work to come, in the course of which their relations with *NLR* were far from always harmonious. Yet each ended their career as they had begun it, a contributor central to the life of the journal. A connexion with *NLR* was not, however, the only thing they had in common. Two other qualities they shared were quite independent of it, and of a different order. One was sheer literary panache, a form of writing about politics so vivid and pugnacious it transcended political prose. Behind the style of each lay a hinterland of cherished writers. Tom—Gramsci, Musil, Mann, Svevo, Nigel Dennis, the poetry of Douglas Dunn, Saint-John Perse, Quasimodo, Harrison. Mike—Bloch, Melville, Twain, Wells, Babel, Dos Passos, Lorca. Both were masters of metaphor and of rhetoric, on occasion capable of excess in them—Tom taxed with (admittedly ‘good’) invective by Pocock, Mike at moments remote kin to Mailer in Cockburn’s epitome of American ‘rough-housers’ whose prose ‘at its most rapturous, its most outrageous, its most exultant, can let go and teach you to let go’. But however flamboyant, in different registers, the imagery of both, the thought of each was crystalline in its clarity.

Their way with words was not just a matter of style. The gift of metaphor spoke to another side of their work, its grandest. Mike captured this when, in writing of the possible futures before humanity, he altered Gramsci’s dictum to ‘pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the imagination’. That modification was the quality which in the last resort defined them. Each was a visionary—a thinker long-sighted about the

future as few who write on politics are. In Tom's case, it was that capacity which prompted him to the memorable final section of *Enchanted Glass* entitled 'Sooner than You Think', in which he criticized Marxists who thought they were living in late capitalism. Marx himself had been utterly and illogically premature in believing that before the nineteenth century was even half over Europe was ripe with communism, and his followers in the twentieth century no less deluded in thinking that socialism was round the corner, needing only a revolution to materialize. The reality was that capitalism still had a long way to go, generating as it went progress as well as reaction, and if unification of Europe was one form that dialectic took, the advent of democracy was another—a very recent arrival on the continent, where universal suffrage had come in its Western half only in the 1950s, in America in the 1960s. Such was the premise of the theory of globalization Tom would go on to develop as the true outcome of Marx's early intuitions along the Rhine, the liberating rapids of modernity carrying us beyond the marshlands of forced-march communism to 'whatever social forms the open ocean ahead may make possible'.

That was not a journey Mike envisaged. If he returned to Marx, as Tom had done, it was not to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, but to his *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire*—'best read as a single text'—to refute the notion that Marx had never come to terms with nationalism, producing on the contrary a materialist theory of it more sophisticated and relevant than latter-day discursive constructions. Nor did casual dismissals of the whole experience of the European—later also American—working class, from the time of Owen and Fourier to that of Luxemburg and Lenin, as the débris of a superseded past make any sense. The longest single essay Mike wrote during the years of his illness was an extraordinarily rich and detailed, book-length study of its struggles—economic, social, political and cultural—as still today the exemplary paradigm of revolutionary collective agency. If it ends abruptly, with the defeat of the so-called March Action, the proletarian rising of 1921 in central Germany, it begins with the question: given the passing of that class a century later, what would a collective force capable of actualizing the hopes which once inspired those workers look like today? His answer: 'the current period of globalization is defined by a trilogy of ideal-typical economies: super-industrial (coastal East Asia), financial/tertiary (North Atlantic), and hyper-urbanizing extractive (West Africa)', so 'contemporary Marxism must be able to scan the future from

the simultaneous perspectives of Shenzhen, Los Angeles and Lagos if it wants to solve the puzzle of how heterodox social categories might be fitted together in a single resistance to capitalism'. If such a trinity were achieved, what should the world at which it ought to aim look like? In Mike's imagined future, the waters that represented a vast uncharted main of promise for Tom figure its opposite, inundations threatening to end all life on the planet, from which only an ark capable of reaching the safety of land, where new kinds of city, shunning uncontrolled agglomeration for intercalating vegetation, could be built to save us.

In the sixties, when Tom and Mike started, few on the left doubted that the future would be better for socialism than the present. But it seemed unlikely that it would produce writers or thinkers of the calibre of the masters of the time—a Mills, a Thompson, an Adorno, a Sartre, a Lukács. It is always risky to judge contemporaries. But, each in their own fashion, were Mike Davis and Tom Nairn insignificant successors? It will take time to judge that. The political scene at large can look bleak enough today. But the potential reservoirs of talent and energy in the youngest levies of the left, as inequality between sexes and races lessens across the world, have perhaps never been so deep. There are reasons for confidence that the lines these two continued will not easily be broken.