

Rich Man, Poor Man

In The Case for Letting Malibu Burn Mike Davis provides a comparative analysis of two sets of fires. His interdisciplinary approach includes historical, ecological, social, economical considerations and personal examples. In his analysis he points out the numerous, separate yet interrelated causes of the frequent and devastating fires of the forests of Malibu and a heavily populated downtown area of Los Angeles. Mr. Davis recounts how the beautiful Malibu coastline, which should have stayed accessible to the public as mandated by law, was owned by one person in the 19th century and through a relatively brief bohemian period it gradually became a suburb for the affluent wishing to 'escape' from the neighboring big city. At the same time he depicts another kind of private ownership that dominated the downtown area, where most of the property was in the hands of a few individuals and corporations whose primary motive was profit, thus they invested very little in their property, including being extremely negligent about fire prevention methods. From an ecological point of view it is clear that the longer the chaparral gathers in the forest the higher the risk for dangerous fires. This simple fact is deliberately overlooked by Malibu property owners because it may lower the value of their property. Instead of ecology the writer uses the term "disaster algorithm" for the other location, because everything there is covered with asphalt, there are no natural elements. The author points out the extreme economic disproportions: 3 times as much money is spent on the Malibu fires that are event driven and very limited resources are used for the city block, where proper prevention could prevent most of the tragedies. The text is interwoven with names and details of victims of fires from both areas, including details of the injuries they suffered. Davis offers a solution explicitly for half the problems and implicit one for the other half. In case of Malibu fires as the title suggests he recommends returning to the method the indigenous tribe, the Tongva people used: periodical controlled fire could prevent tragical and unexpected wildfires. Regarding the downtown fires I believe he would like to see more money and attention devoted to the issue. It is difficult to select just one theme from this rich source material but I decided to focus on the social aspects. I share Davis's belief that a long term solution would have a social element as well, where the limitations of the class system would need to be overcome.

One thread showing up throughout the essay is that the rich has more power, they are more active politically, better educated about their options therefore they gain more local and federal support, which in this case is often taken away from the impoverished. The choice of words describing the Malibu situation (Davis, 100) shows what kind of influence they had: "furious property owners [...] denounced local government [...] Elected officials, accurately sensitive to Malibu's national prominence". Compare this to the possibility for action of the "fathers and mothers working together in Downtown garment sweatshops, while grandparents and older children took care of toddlers and infants" (Davis, 120). Davis showed how consistently Malibu's residents used their power to get more attention from the appropriate authorities and protection from the fire departments. But the interests of the Westlake residents have rarely been represented effectively up till councilmember Mike Hernandez started to take actions in the 1980s. But his efforts to improve the living condition his constituents were met with strong resistance and with years of struggle he managed to get changed only very little. I believe that the author of the essay suggests that unless the underrepresented will have new methods, regulations (and ways to enforce them) and/or people to enforce at least the existing safety regulation then the chances for positive significant change is minimal. However to get these means in the current class and race based system is unlikely therefore a more fundamental change is needed.