

Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London and New York: Verso 2020)

Bryan D. Palmer

Volume 86, Fall 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074489ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0053>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Palmer, B. (2020). Review of [Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London and New York: Verso 2020)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 205–208. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltr.2020.0053>

While the “household factory” produced a remarkably secure and stable political-economic entity that connected the Hudson Bay watershed fur trade economy to the larger British Atlantic World, Stephen also points to where the household factory stressed and strained, particularly under the pressures of illicit private trade and relationships with Indigenous women, both of which challenged the model of household governance at the Bay.

In sum, this is an important publication that will be of interest to labour historians, as well as scholars of the North American fur trade and early modern Britain.

SCOTT BERTHELETTE
Queen's University

Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London and New York: Verso 2020)

“1966 WAS A GRIM year for social justice, but it had one bright spot,” writes Mike Davis in the conclusion to a chapter addressing the whitewashing of police repression in his recent co-authored book on Los Angeles in the 1960s. “At a testimonial dinner in July and in front of hundreds of guests, Chief Parker keeled over dead.” (242) That was as close to police reform as LA was going to get fifty some years ago.

Police Chief Parker was the Warden of the Ghettos, an unreconstructed ‘law and order’ reactionary who winked at those under his command sporting Barry Goldwater badges and distributing John Birch Society literature. He referred to suppressing the Watts Rebellion in 1965 as similar to “fighting the Viet Cong.” (220) It was Parker’s mission to keep LA’s disparate dissident demographic constituencies somewhat in line. Like Malcolm

X, but with so much more in the way of weaponry and license at his disposal, Parker was a believer in “by any means necessary.”

As their Chief amassed “intelligence” (known in the racist lingo of Parker’s inner circle as the “scalp collection”) on subversives and mobsters, civic officials and political opponents, his storm-troopers perfected the chokehold and the no-knock/no-warrant, sledgehammer-driven home invasion. Parker’s death occasioned no mourning among those he had long terrorized.

Histories of the 1960s are never far removed from the kind of surveillance and police brutality associated with Parker, but LA in the decade is undoubtedly a case study in the use of violence and deadly force in the service of an apartheid-like racial order. The conservative carnage revealed in *Set the Night on Fire* is but the tip of an iceberg, yet it melts the heart. Black lives didn’t matter much in LA in these years, especially if they were known to castigate authority and demand “black power.” Police attacks on African Americans punctuate the histories of social movements that Davis and Jon Weiner outline in these pages, although black LA was merely first among many constituencies given a taste of Parker’s equal opportunity repression. A particularly vicious and deadly program of profiling begins with the 1962 murder of Ronald Stokes (hands in the air, pleading, “Don’t shoot any more”) and the serious wounding—including permanent paralysis—of seven other Black Muslims, as a temple was ransacked by cops. (70) Of the 34 killed during the Watts explosion of August 1965, all but two were black, and well over 1,000 suffered injuries.

It was the Black Panther Party that really irked law enforcement (from Parker’s LAPD to J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI), getting under its pale blue skin with armed defence

of African American neighbourhoods. Landmarks in the war of extermination against the Panthers included the killing of seventeen-year old Bobby Hutton in a 1968 Oakland shoot-out that may well have been started by Eldridge Cleaver firing on police in an adventurist attempt to spark an insurrection. A concerted campaign of disinformation and provocateur-induced mayhem lead to the deaths of two Black Panthers, Alprentice 'Bunchy' Carter and John Huggins, on the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) campus in 1969, and an acute and acrimonious fracturing of any unity that might have been constructed among those aligned with oppositional black nationalist camps. These were led by Huey Newton and Ron Karenga, both of whom Davis and Weiner show to be charismatic and insightful, as well as mercurial megalomaniacs capable of almost unimaginable acts of viciousness and abuse. The culmination of what constituted nothing less than a concerted cop campaign to kill off the Black Panthers, was a December 1969 SWAT attack on Party headquarters. Thirteen mostly teen-aged African American youth had the temerity to shoot back in what was a losing battle with the proverbial bull-in-the china-shop police, who broke in on sleeping Panthers guns blazing. They fired 5,000 rounds of ammunition at the two-story building, lobbed massive amounts of tear gas into the fusillade-fissured edifice, and dropped dynamite from the roof to blow several holes through the second floor. Eventually the Panther defenders, six of whom were bleeding and wounded, almost all having run out of bullets, surrendered, a nineteen-year old young woman, 'Peaches' Moore, the first to give herself up, walking out of what remained of the front door waving a white flag. Raids on other Panther offices netted further arrests and, all-told, eighteen militants were brought to trial on a battery of

charges, including "conspiracy to commit murder," a death-penalty offense.

A young African American revolutionary, Angela Davis, was caught in the fall-out of the tense climate pitting black rebels against law-and-order authority. A leader of the LA chapter of the collapsing Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1967-1968, Davis gravitated to the Communist Party under the tutelage of Dorothy Healey. She showcased fearless public criticism of power, marshalled an impressive oratorical skill-set, and was a brilliant student whose Brandeis PhD was supervised by the New Left guru, Herbert Marcuse. Recruited by Ivy League schools, Davis took up an appointment at UCLA in order to continue to play an activist role in Los Angeles, igniting a storm of controversy that Ronald Reagan, then Governor of California, exploited to fan the flames of the ever-present late 1960s race wars. Reagan and the University of California Board of Regents refused to honour Davis's hiring, citing her Communist Party affiliation and relentless rhetorical assault on racism, police brutality, and the Regents' complicity in brutal and lethal suppression of protesters. The UCLA faculty voted to defy their politico-economic masters, continue to schedule courses taught by Davis, and pay her salary out of their own pockets. Things went disastrously wrong, however, when Angela, leading a defence campaign for three inmates at Soledad Prison charged on dubious evidence with killing a guard, developed a particularly close relationship with one of the trio, George Jackson, author of the wildly popular prison letters, *Soledad Brother* (1970). Jackson's younger brother, Jonathan, served as Angela's bodyguard, and Davis purchased and licensed firearms that the seventeen year old would almost immediately take without her knowledge and use in a violent courtroom hostage taking that cost him his life, as

well as leaving a judge and two prisoners dead. Davis, knowing the state would hold her responsible, went underground. Eventually apprehended by the FBI, Davis faced charges of murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy. A two-year "Free Angela" campaign made her the most recognized political prisoner in the world, securing her a 1972 acquittal, but not before rifts developed within the Communist Party and among radicals over how to regard Jonathan Jackson's suicidal assault on the racist justice system.

All of this is relatively well-known. Davis and Weiner provide a coherent, critical, and compelling discussion that complements previous accounts. It draws together a multitude of related histories that encompass Black Muslims and Malcolm X; struggles to unite the Civil Rights movement's fractious components in the early 1960s; the Watts uprising and an African American cultural renaissance that arose, phoenix-like, from its ashes, leading to an unheralded 1972 celebration of black music at the Coliseum that drew 100,000 (and barred police, security being provided by an entirely black corps of unarmed festival marshals); mobilizations such as the Black Congress and the US Organization, initiated by figures like Stokely Carmichael and Karenga; Eldridge Cleaver's incongruous 1967-1968 run for the Presidency on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket; and, of course, the war on the Black Panthers and the inspirational Free Angela Davis Campaign that reached into 1972.

Where Davis and Weiner are at their most original, however, is uncovering heretofore largely unacknowledged dimensions of Sixties ferment in the City of Angels. It was a turbulent decade involving uprisings not only of African Americans, but of Asian Americans and Chicanos, gays and women, teeny boppers and teamsters, peaceniks and draft dodgers. Much of this brought the war

in Vietnam home, into the streets of America, but there were also domestic causes aplenty to animate radicalism and resistance.

Set the Night on Fire is strikingly new in detailing the role, not just of youth, but of the truly *young*, in galvanizing the spirit of pugnacious Sixties protest. A centerpiece of this study is a three-chapter discussion of "the high school rebellion" that rocked LA in the 1966-1969 years. Parallel happenings brought a cross-section of white teenagers—the sons and daughters of movie stars mingling with autoworkers' and truckers' kids—challenging cop-imposed curfews on Hollywood's famed Sunset Strip into political (if not socio-economic) proximity with rebellious Chicano and Black students. The latter led a series of classroom walkouts protesting a failed, racist, educational system. Davis and Weiner are at their best in peeling back the obscurity in which the militant activism of teenage Mexican and African Americans is layered. Organized by students in grades 7 through 12, the secondary school strikes, known as Blowouts, are heralded as "arguably the most original and populist social movement of the entire decade in Southern California." (398) Supported by Students for a Democratic Society organizers and the Communist Party's Che-Lumumba cadre, LA's high school revolt was spearheaded by a multiethnic contingent of rebels like those at the dominantly black Manual Arts High, whose enrolment in an institution of vocational training earned them the proletarian sobriquet, "The Toilers." The Sunset Strip protests, publicized by 80,000 leaflets, were endorsed by a nascent gay liberation movement, then mobilizing against the cabaret raids of the cops. For both gays and white long-hairs, the enemy was "Blue Fascism."

This is a large book, its many pages outlining how social movements of gays

and lesbians resisted their oppression, predating New York's more famous Stonewall riot; how women campaigned for peace, opposed the war in Vietnam, and charted new paths of liberation; and how a fearless nun, Sister Corita, bucked the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to champion protest. Free health clinics, an alternative press, and Asian American radicalism are all discussed, as is the struggle to turn back the tide of gentrification in Venice Beach. This book is a kaleidoscope of movements, whose many moving parts and colours are orchestrated by Davis and Weiner in ways that reveal connections across a diverse human landscape. The particularities of 1960s Los Angeles are evident, as is the city's connectedness to wider struggles, national and international. Few books on the Sixties are as multi-dimensional, as riveting in their originality, or as insightful in their reconsiderations.

Davis and Weiner buck the academic trend, insisting that, while some of their story begins in earlier times and continues into the 1970s, as is of course entirely predictable, the 1960s were nonetheless unique years. New communist movements spawned by developments of the later years of the decade are not addressed, more properly situated in another era. Taking their title from The Doors "Light My Fire"—"The time to hesitate is through/No time to wallow in the mire/... Try to set the night on fire"—the authors, like the band's drummer, John Densmore, want no part of either commodifying the decade or selling it short. Interviewed for the book, Densmore provided a strong statement on the meaning of an influential moment, one that lit flames of resistance refusing to be extinguished: "The seeds of civil rights and the peace movement and feminism were planted in the sixties. And they are big seeds. Maybe they take fifty or a hundred

years to reach fruition. So stop complaining, and get out your watering cans." (vi)

BRYAN D. PALMER
Trent University

Benjamin J. Pauli, *Flint Fights Back: Environmental Justice and Democracy in the Flint Water Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2019)

DEPICTED IN FILMS such as *Roger and Me* (1989), Flint, Michigan has long been associated with the decline of American manufacturing. Yet, as Benjamin J. Pauli notes, the city has also been an inspiring site of social struggle for American workers dating back to the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1937. Cognizant of this legacy, Pauli's book explores the more recent struggles in Flint over the contamination of the city's water supply. Starting as early as 2014 when Flint's unelected Emergency Managers (EMs)—appointed by the state of Michigan to deal with Flint's budget deficit in wake of the 2011 Financial Crisis—switched from water provided by the city of Detroit to Flint river water processed locally as part of austerity measures, Flint residents began to experience an array of water quality issues. Water in many parts of the city smelled of foul odours and ran brown or murky out of the tap. Residents began to experience mysterious health problems including hair loss, rashes, and undiagnosable illnesses—all of which residents eventually linked to the contaminated water supply. While often framed in the media as a crisis stemming only from lead poisoning, Flint's water was also plagued by other contaminants including trihalomethanes (THMs) and harmful bacteria which likely contributed to outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease. Flint residents responded to being "poisoned by policy" (77) through collective