



LOS ANGELES, THE ULTIMATE CITY. By Christopher Rand. Oxford University Press. 205 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by Richard Elman

WHILE I'M WRITING from the 12th floor of a 15-story "rent-controlled" apartment building on New York's upper West Side, a considerable mountain of garbage is accumulating on the street below my windows; and a fire has just broken out in one of the welfare lodging houses around the corner. For the past week and a half, three Consolidated Edison men have been

perfunctorily hollowing out a grave in that same street with a pneumatic drill. The trench they made is now filling up with garbage.

It's the sixth day of a strike of porters, janitors, elevator men, and building superintendents—those ignoble heroes of New York who are there to make sure that the rats attracted by my swill will be chased north to bite the toes of the children of Harlem. It's a system which may be rapidly breaking down. The building service employees, many of whom happen to be black, stand outside our buildings with picket signs tied to their yeasty chests and great smiles across their faces, as if in recognition of the fact that the middle class West Side, deprived of their services, has become as levantinized as Norman Podhoretz once thought Harlem was.

Because the landlords won't ratify any new contracts until such time as the city allows them to raise the rents in buildings like this, the garbage heaps continue to mount and the sanitation men refuse to cross the picket lines. Yesterday some of my neighbors chose direct action and spread their garbage across the streets so that they were impenetrable to cross-

town bus traffic. But, when the police threatened summonses, the garbage was swept back onto the sidewalk below our windows. I went to cool off in the park by the side of the Hudson River—a waterway in which copious effusions of gasoline, excrement and rancid baby formula have depopulated the once-bounteous shad spawning grounds.

Obviously, therefore, if one is living

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bike-riding; and when I was in Los Angeles last summer, I was struck by the number of high rise apartment buildings which were going up in the most unlikely places, as well as by the amount of garbage on the streets of the central city.

Nevertheless, Los Angeles does seem to bring out the worst in writers. Faced with such an enormous Beckettesque sprawl, they turn vicious and condescending in the manner of the late Nathaniel West or Evelyn Waugh, or they openly celebrate its hills, its crimes, its nihilism in the manner of the late Raymond Chandler, or else they simply become puerile in the manner of Christopher Rand. Seeking to avoid the former styles when he set out to report on Los Angeles for the *New Yorker*, Rand obviously tried to be empirical, informative and tactful through his casually expansive discussions of the physical size of the "megapolis," its mechanical functions and organization, its occupational and racial composition, its cultural institutions, and its politics, but he never got around to telling what it was like to live in the place. It's as if Rand had composed a sexology manual to be read only by eunuchs. After a while, one gets bored with all that "tech-writing" and begins to wonder what the act feels like, just as one wonders—after reading Rand's assertion that the poverty-stricken Mexican turf in East Los Angeles is "a relief to visit" with its "little houses and rich front porch life"—whether the Mexicans take as much solace in their charming poverty as Mr. Rand and his *New Yorker* readers.

"L.A. may be a dual city," Rand points out in discussing problems of race and poverty, "but there is a great mutual indifference between its halves." How I wish that he had been able to describe that indifference which is the dominant ambience of the city—not only for Negroes and Mexicans, but for just about everybody. But, to do so, Rand would have had to stop talking to aerospace officials, planners, architects, and functionaries, and begin talking to people. Or he might have just sat back and allowed the city to happen to him, asking himself the question which good journalists must always ask on behalf of themselves and their readers: How would you like to live in this place?

I think one of the problems was that Rand felt overwhelmed by the enormous size and complexity of the "megapolis."

He thought he was examining something new ("the ultimate city"), when he was merely pouring over the same old garbage heap of speculation and greed, stretched out on a larger scale. "It's the only place in America," a friend who is a journalist insists, "where I can never get laid. Sometimes it seems like everybody else is, but I never can." And, from a Time cover story of the place, my favorite line is: "It is a tribute to the efficiency of the [L.A.] police, whose numbers have remained steady for ten years while the population has nearly doubled, that they have been able to keep up with the rising crime rate."

L.A. is presently using its garbage as land-fill for its once virgin canyons, and Rand deplors these unbeautiful man-made alterations to the mountainsides. In general, however, Rand fails as a credible witness. He describes the size of Los Angeles as "special," its shape as "hard to define," the color as "gaudy," the texture as "rich," the odor as "frontier individualist," and the atmosphere surrounding it as a "vanguard," and then neglects to mention that he is, after all, talking about a garbage heap. When Rand reports on Los Angeles the results are almost as unfortunate as if he had told some deliberate untruths.

Reading Rand's statement that "the big Los Angeles [Negro] ghetto is less unpleasant than those of our Northeastern cities," I kept wanting to know "unpleasant" for whom? Presumably, it is not *less unpleasant* to those black men who happen to reside in Watts because they, after all, have no such basis for comparison. Does Rand really think they should be grateful that they're not living in a place that's even worse? Is Watts, for that matter, as pleasant as Flint Ridge or Beverly Hills or even West Hollywood which, I presume, is what all the complaining is about. Reading such an unintentional endorsement of bungalow life in Watts by Rand, I was reminded of an unintentionally prophetic passage in the WPA guide to California (1939 edition). After reporting that L.A. had only 38,000 Negroes, "most of whom are employed as unskilled or semi-skilled workers," the anonymous writer perorated: "At night, along East 28th and East 53rd Streets, their night clubs and dance spots get 'hot,' as the young and not-so-young 'swing it.'"

Christopher Rand is never quite that ludicrous. But throughout his book he

insists that Los Angeles has pioneered in the development of many important technological and cultural phenomena over the last few decades with its aerospace industries, its freeways, its bulldozed and terraced tract homes, but that is like saying of a plug race horse that it is distinguished for the amount of dung it has managed to drop along the course, or the amount of turf it has managed to kick up. It doesn't mean that Los Angeles is necessarily farsighted. For, while it was constructing that marvelous freeway system, it was simultaneously destroying a first-class rapid transit system which, at one time, extended from Pasadena down through Long Beach. When the Watts insurrection broke out, Los Angeles discovered that one of the chief grievances of the rioters was that they had been left behind, stuck in Watts, without any means of getting to jobs—even if there were such jobs.

Similarly, it may well be that "one way to view Los Angeles is as a machine," but, then, doesn't one also have to ask—in the case of a machine whose function presumably is that people should live in it—what is the machine doing? To whom? And how? Rightfully, Mr. Rand points out that Los Angeles is "bound up with technology like no other city in history," but then he instantaneously deodorizes his own statement by adding, "and technology has a will of its own." I suggest that if ever there was a cop-out for the irritating discomforts of smog, the reactionary socialism of the tidelands oil and ballistics missiles industries, and the greed of generations of land speculators, developers and planners, this may well be it. For technology may have a will of its own; so do human beings; and it is the abject surrender of millions of human wills—out of ignorance, laziness, greed, and beaten stupidity—to the wills of a few with the technological means to exercise their ambition that has resulted in that "grotesque" formation known as Los Angeles—an affliction on the face of Southern California, spreading to over seven million souls who are so addicted to their own private lives that it is commonly regarded as social behavior when the citizenry gets up a movement to protest against building better schools. True enough; even in Gutenberg's time "technology had a will of its own," but Gutenberg's innovations resulted in the

printing of Bibles. What are they doing with technology in Los Angeles? Without the least trace of irony, Rand quotes an Angeleno: "Los Angeles is a trend center . . . The movies got their real start here. So did airplanes. So did the topless bathing suit. You name it. These things got going here and then they spread. Other places liked them, but not till L.A. had done the pioneering."

Ruled by the representatives of an elite of money, with the assistance of an elite of half-educated technicians and professionals, the Los Angeles which manages to pass before Mr. Rand's eyes is seen as some "ultimate" model for the wedding of social democracy and technology, but what it may actually be is the model for American fascism. By fascism I mean the establishment of a permanent corporate elite (aerospace, defense industry, think factories, the military) which maintains itself through the arbitrary application of force in places like Vietnam. Mr. Rand, like Mary McCarthy in recent issues of the New York Review of Books, notes the disproportionate number of Southern Californians who are making war in Vietnam, but he never bothers to visit their families in their homes in Los Angeles, merely likening their behavior in faith to the frontier spirit and the depredations of cowboys versus Indians. One reason why Rand doesn't ever seem to journey into lower-middle class Los Angeles, which is where the bulk of the population seems to reside, is because that's the very group of people that the upwardly mobile New Yorker audience would not care to be reminded of, but another reason may be that Rand has such a supreme faith in technology that he really doesn't care to check out the assertions of the technologists against the realities of life in L.A. If I am reading Rand correctly, Vietnam is the newest American frontier, the newest display of frustrated Manifest Destiny, but what it may also be is the best proof we have of what happens when "technology" is allowed to have "a will of its own." So, if I were Rand, I'd do my next New Yorker report about the moon. It's an even better example of that American compulsion which he calls "Manifest Destiny."

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