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Building American: The Democratic Promise of Public Work. Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari.

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Book Notes

Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1996. \$ 54.96 hardcover, \$ 18.95 papercover.

Despite corporate downsizing and the export of jobs to low income regions of the world, work remains central to the lives of most people. Most people engage in regular employment and most find fulfillment in their careers. Having a job is a key element of modern life.

Despite the importance of work, the authors of this book claim that countless people today are dissatisfied with their jobs. Work has become a means to an end rather than a fulfilling life experience. Employment is the way income is generated to pay bills and meet the many other mundane demands placed on the household economy. Frustrated with their jobs, many people are alienated and disengage from those communal activities which are the essence of a vibrant democracy. No wonder that more and more people fail to vote in elections and that they withdraw from civic affairs.

To reinvigorate American democracy, Boyte and Kari urge that public work again be given the emphasis that it once enjoyed in American society. When groups of citizens join together to improve their communities through communal labor, they become socially committed and responsive to the needs of others. Providing an interesting account of the history of public works in the United States, the authors claim that civic engagement and democratic institutions are improved and that society as a whole benefits. This claim is further supported by positive accounts of people's involvement in a wide variety of public work activities today.

In addition to its communitarian message, the book provides a useful account of the work programs of the New Deal era as well as many interesting examples of current public work projects. It would have benefited from a more extensive discussion of the role of public work in social welfare. The so-called welfare reforms of recent years have placed great emphasis on moving needy people

off government social programs and into productive work. In view of widespread skepticism about the ability of many welfare recipients to find remunerative employment, a discussion of this kind would have been welcomed. Nevertheless, this is a stimulating book which should provoke much debate.

George Farkas, *Human Capital or Cultural Capital?* New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996. \$ 42.95 hardcover, \$ 22.95 papercover.

Although the concept of human capital is now well-established in the social sciences, notions of social capital and cultural capital are still poorly defined. But, both are attracting increasing attention as the need to understand the linkages between economic and social phenomena becomes more urgent. Human capital theorists assert that education and skill acquisition should be regarded as productive investments in the economy. Proponents of social capital theory similarly believe that efforts to enhance social integration and promote effective interpersonal networks are investments which enhance economic growth. Cultural capital theorists are not as clear in asserting a direct link with economic development but, as this extremely interesting book reveals, their ideas do have relevance for economic progress.

Farkas defines cultural capital as the "toolkit of skills, habits and styles" which individuals use to construct strategies of action. Recognizing the class linkages which have been emphasized by cultural capital theorists, he contends that individuals from poor communities lack the skills, habits and styles they need to succeed in an increasingly competitive world. Traditional schooling, which focuses on human capital skills acquisition, has not addresses the need for children from deprived communities to enhance their cultural capital and to participate effectively in a dynamic economy.

The book traces the miserable failures of traditional educational approaches directed at children from poor communities. It points out that the vast majority of these children leave school hopelessly unprepared to cope with the demands of the modern economy. Unless attempts are made to enhance their cultural capital, they will be relegated to the margins of society. The author claims that the best mechanism for enhancing cultural capital is the inculcation of reading and writing skills at the primary school