



2007

Culture, Capitalism and Democracy in the New America. Richard Harvey Brown. Reviewed by Shanti S. Khinduka.

Shanti K. Khinduka
Washington University, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Khinduka, Shanti K. (2007) "*Culture, Capitalism and Democracy in the New America.* Richard Harvey Brown. Reviewed by Shanti S. Khinduka.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 34 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol34/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Book Reviews

Richard Harvey Brown, *Culture, Capitalism, and Democracy in the New America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005. \$37.50 hardcover.

In the eight chapters of this ambitious, posthumously published book, the late Richard Harvey Brown, a former professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, provides an erudite commentary on many of the major shifts occurring in American society and culture. These chapters explore such themes as American exceptionalism; race, class, and corporate power in the United States; the sources of legitimacy and its crisis in the American society; politics, religion, social movements, and individualism and identity in our post-liberal era; the strains in the American family as reflected in the changing relations between genders and generations; and the transformation in the realm of art and aesthetics which too have been contaminated by the pervasive cult of consumption and commercialization.

The book focuses on the central tendencies in American life along with a number of their countervailing social movements. There are trenchant observations on the trends and tensions in contemporary America throughout the book. For example, the world is being Americanized even as America itself is being globalized. The U.S. may be the world's lone superpower, but it is experiencing a relative decline in its position vis-à-vis other nations. Globalization is being promoted and championed by the United States all over the world, but it is encountering resistance from a majority of Americans who are concerned about losing their jobs as a consequence. Similarly, while racial boundaries are getting somewhat blurred, structural racism is alive and well, and identity politics is receiving a new momentum. At times it appears that racial equality is more of a dream than destiny. America has made more

progress in "racial civility than in racial equality," writes Brown pointedly and accurately. He sees the U.S. as a kaleidoscope rather than a melting pot or a mosaic.

There are other tensions in American society and culture—tension between the principle of rational calculation and the principle of subjective individualism; between American nativism and cultural pluralism; between modernity based on utilitarianism and the "postmaterialistic" pieties that have given rise to feminist, anti-war, environmental, and pro-animal rights movements; and tensions between the pervasive American creed of individualism and a civilized society's need to address community concerns.

The author is incisive in his discussion of the rise and growing role of the corporate state, the wide acceptance of the semi-militarization of the American economy, the replacement of a civic culture by market ethos in American institutional life, the consolidation of neo-liberal capitalism, with its attendant challenge to democracy, citizenship, and civil society, and the increasingly manifest inadequacy of the "Third Way" to redress economic injustice.

Brown offers a persuasive critique of advanced capitalism. The dominance of the culture of consumption in the advanced capitalist society, he asserts, undermines authority and legitimacy in society. He shows how the mighty institutions of state operate in coordination with mega-corporations. He highlights the paradoxes and ambiguities, even contradictions, in American politics, economics, and culture. He notes, for example, the strange coexistence of rampant racism and the sincerely held vision of civic inclusion, the American bias for decentralization and the enormous power of a corporate and interventionist state, and the weakening of class-based politics in spite of mounting inequality of wealth and income in America.

Brown is not the first to examine the process or consequences of America's transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society, from a modern to a postmodern culture, and from a continental to a global economy, nor is he alone in depicting the trend from a future-oriented pursuit of production to a present-oriented preoccupation with consumption, from an other-directed communal to an individualistic and even

narcissistic mindset, with its emphasis on lifestyles rather than life chances, but he does it with considerable flair for building upon and synthesizing a vast body of knowledge from American history, literature, and classical and extant social science theories, and through an acute eye and ear for current events and controversies in religion, politics, the arts, and the corporate world.

This is a book of analysis and interpretation, not a manual or manifesto for action or intervention. It has the perspective and, for the most part, the circumspection of a widely read social scientist, not the passion or the commitment of an agent of social change. The book essays a commentary on the narrative of consumption, but has a disappointing omission of the narrative of religious fundamentalism and its byproducts. For a book so audacious in scope, it has surprisingly little discussion of extremism and terrorism for, like it or not, terrorism, whatever its sources, and the muscular and militaristic response to it, rooted in a queer mix of paranoia and real politic, is already beginning to have a more than passing impact on America. An understanding of this relatively new phenomenon is necessary in order to make sense of the changing American society and culture.

Shanti K. Khinduka
Washington University in St. Louis

Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *The Logic of Social Research*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005. \$ 20.00 papercover.

The Logic of Social Research provides a very different and fascinating perspective for understanding social research. Most of social research addresses its conduct covering topics such as the various steps and procedures one needs to include in research design, the specifics of the independent, dependent, and intervening variable, and so forth. This text examines how best to understand the research components. The author's intention is to orient students to a set of logical problems that the four major research methods (quantitative, historical, ethnographic, and experiential) must address to study social