

Tim Luke

Review

*The End of Politics: Corporate Power
and the Decline of the Public Sphere* by Carl Boggs

Reviewed by
Tim W. Luke

During an era in which the President of the United States piously pronounces his support of a “compassionate conservatism,” while keeping a personal scorecard in his desk of all the fundamentalist Islamic terrorists that the CIA either successfully apprehends or eradicates, a book like Carl Boggs’s *The End of Politics* is sorely needed. Rather than rehashing strange claims about the falling levels of social capital as the source of today’s political malaise like in Robert Putnam’s highly feted *Bowling Alone*, Boggs documents the rise of a corporate capitalist culture and economy in the U.S. that rests on exploiting almost everyone together. While Putnam hides these forces in more nebulous factors, like “the media” or “the Internet,” Boggs comes straight at the problem in his pointed critique of today’s corporate culture. The election of George W. Bush to the presidency in 2000 simply underscores “the spreading national ethos” of anti-politics (pp.311-319) in early twenty-first century America that began in the 1970s with the gradual closure of the public sphere, a drop in popular political participation, and the erosion of traditional partisan alignments. For Boggs, all of these highly anti-political developments point toward “the end of politics.”

Boggs finds little to celebrate in Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thinking in the 1990s, and his critique also undercuts Daniel Bell’s “end of ideology” analysis from the 1950s. These earlier apologetic assessments of business civilization in the United States imagined much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’ political projects fulfilled in America’s cultural, geopolitical, and technoscientific success during the Cold War. Boggs, however, disputes these celebratory dismissals of many Americans’ collective struggle. Instead, his engagé scholarship suggests that the overwhelming dominance of corporate power in today’s era of neoliberal globalization makes the revitalization of broadly-based, deeply-committed, and fully-

educated citizens' movements even more imperative, even though this will be much more difficult. Some might see his faith in a broadly-based popular sovereignty being borne out by everyday people rather than corporate political action committees, Astroturf movements, and not-for-profit think tanks as a downright romantic reading of both America's past and future. This cynical understanding, however, is superficial.

Boggs is a clear, careful, and consistent proponent of a genuine public sphere. Bringing a Gramscian "pessimism of the spirit, optimism of the will" to his treatment of contemporary American life, he argues that only real political revitalization can save the republic from its accelerating slide into economic stagnation and political fragmentation. As he traces out the logic of anti-politics through the depoliticization of society, the disarray of liberalism, the new corporate order, and economic globalization, Boggs also shows how the mass politics of the 1960s set the stage for today's depoliticization. His analysis worries openly about the anti-political qualities of economic globalization, the information revolution, and suburban sprawl, on the one hand, while, questioning, on the other hand, how localist resistances, radical ecologists, and postmodern critiques all have failed to gel into significant oppositional forces against the corporate order now underpinning the contemporary United States.

Boggs believes in the material possibilities for American revitalization. While things overall do not seem encouraging, his faith in positive developments (pp. 258-260) at the country's grassroots tied to new battles over healthcare, the environment, and foreign policy issues lead him to support new third-party alternatives to reopen public debate and redirect popular action in the immediate future. Of course, the questionable election in 2000 of President Bush is not encouraging; but, in many ways, it is another "morbid symptom" (p. 274) of the collapse of contemporary liberal/conservative politics and another sign of the need for change. September 11, 2001 roused some Americans out of their anti-political frame of mind, and Boggs's vision of an independent, antiliberal/cosmopolitan citizens' movements pressing for greater justice here and abroad is one that can stand as a guidepost for many during the present moment. In a social science discipline where other discussions about the "the end of politics" often become mired in obscure methodological feuds, and conservative stability-seeking remains by and large the order of the day, Boggs's book is a marvelous example of how intellectual craftsmanship and political critique can be effectively blended to do both

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“political science” and contribute to “real politics” at the same time. This book is a significant contribution to our understanding of how neoliberal corporate power had led to mass depoliticization, and it deserves to be widely read.