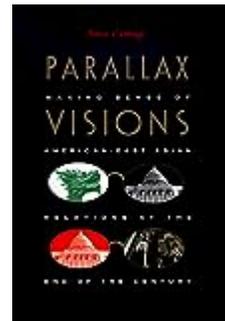


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bruce Cumings. *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. 304 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2276-4.



Reviewed by Jon Thares Davidann (Assistant Professor, Hawaii Pacific University)

Published on H-US-Japan (July, 1999)

Bruce Cumings' *Parallax Visions* is a puzzling book. Arguing both for and against American influence in East Asia and the world, writing a book that is really not a book, and using post-modernist theory while relying upon old-fashioned historical narrative for strength, Cumings confounds the reader. However, the author also stretches himself and the history of United States-East Asian relations in positive directions. And while at times his intellectual pushing and pulling distorts the picture, the overall effect is innovative. As a result, the book is full of fresh ideas.

The paradoxical nature of the work becomes apparent only after one gains the central message of the book—America's enduring hegemony in East Asia. This message is very useful, especially at a time when once again we in the United States perceive a threat in East Asia upon our very survival. It comes from the Chinese this time, who seem to have closed the nuclear missile gap in a decade worth of stolen secrets. Cumings' perspective, which he calls "parallax vision," suggests we should be willing to see this event through East Asian eyes, and if we can, we would see that China is trying to find a formula to counteract the immense and on-going threats that American dominance in East Asia poses.

While the central ideas of the book are welcome, the paradoxes begin to mount up as one journeys through

the book. *Parallax Visions* reads more like several separate thought-provoking essays than a book, in spite of its strong and clear central thesis. It never becomes a book, although Cumings makes several attempts to pull the material together. It also presents a certain slickness—from the sleek black jacket cover to the sharp, post-modernist argumentation. But the reader learns the most from Cumings when he reverts to old-fashioned narrative and analysis. His chapters on American-North Korean nuclear relations and the American academy studying East Asia are so interesting precisely because of the vast store of information Cumings brings to light in them, not because of a post-structuralist theory of emergence or descent (although I do agree with Cumings that Foucault's theory of archeology and excavation make an attractive metaphor for what we do in history). And finally, in the midst of pointing up the dangers of American hegemony in East Asia, in his concluding chapter Cumings blithely points to the relative stability of the post-cold war world, a world shaped by American liberal ideas. Apparently the United States wears both a black and a white hat.

Cumings' conclusion about the state of the world at the end of this American-shaped century raises several problematic issues. The first comes from attempting to link his radically-minded skepticism to the realities of the 1990s. Any positive effect of the United States'

power in the world presents a problem for the American left, which feels most at home critiquing American dominance, as in the analysis of William Appleman Williams. And at a deeper level, American success in the world stands as a barrier between the radical scholar and a more substantial critique of the Enlightenment. There is also a hint of admiration at the efficacy of American influence in the conclusion. Cumings seems unable to escape completely the idealism which is an enduring American trademark in its relations with the outside world. One does not have to be a realist,“ as Cumings calls his opponents, to recognize American idealism as a foundation myth of American nationalism, an idea around which is needed critical space. Consequently, Cumings’ attempt to stretch his argument to square American ambitions in East Asia with American success in the world does not work.

The second issue which is both a strength and weakness of the book is Cumings’ reading of history in parts of the world outside of East Asia. He stretches the book into the literature of both American exceptionalism and world history approaches. His argument is informed substantially by his vast knowledge of East Asian history but unfortunately also informed by a more superficial reading of American and world history.

For instance, his discussion of the possibilities of reading the history of American exceptionalism (Toqueville, Hartz) as the history of the influence of the American middle class suffers from a weak grounding in the literature of American history. American historians have been doing battle over class and exceptionalism for some time, and it is clearer than ever now that Americans have had a class structure, not just a dominant middle class as Cumings suggests.

Even more importantly, American arguments for uniqueness were made possible by that most invisible of Americans, the African slave. Edmund S. Morgan argued in *American Slavery American Freedom* that a commitment to freedom was animated by the assurance of a captive underclass which would not be permitted under any circumstance to participate in politics. Consequently, while some can argue that the predominance of small landholders allowed Americans to bypass the worst European aspects of class inequality and pursue liberalism to a greater extent, race took the place of class as the most powerful dividing line in American history. Cumings misses all of this and ends up endorsing rather than critiquing the exceptionalist arguments of Toqueville and Hartz. And since the study of American exceptional-

ism can now be linked to a rapidly growing literature on world-wide nationalism, both American and Japanese arguments for uniqueness can be seen within the framework of modern nationalism, in which arguments for exceptionalism are simply the demand of the modern nation for uniqueness in a world of nations. See Prasenjit Duara’s work for the most sophisticated analysis of the complex forms nationalism has taken.

Cumings also uses a world system critique of American hegemony in East Asia which works well as a general framework (although one wonders how well the core/periphery concept fits the situation today when the United States has such a large trade deficit with East Asia). But, the wider field of world history would have eroded Cumings’ comfort with the world at the end of this century. Africa, for instance, does not correspond to Cumings’ judgment about the liberality and stability of the world today. A wider knowledge of both American and world history would have tempered some of his conclusions.

Since the various chapters of *Parallax Visions* are diverse and can stand alone, they warrant discussion. The book begins slowly with Cumings’ methodological musings and includes two pages of quotes which I thought an indulgence and not a terribly useful one. But by Chapter Two which concerns World War II between the United States and Japan, *Parallax Visions* comes into clearer focus. Cumings writes with grace and power, raising serious questions about the morality of both Japanese and American approaches to warfare in World War II. Chapter Three concerns the colonial experience of Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. It is novel in its analysis, and showcases Cumings’ central argument very well. Chapter Four on civil democracy in the United States and East Asia seems out of place but is still very engaging. At various points in the chapter, Cumings convincingly argues against our stereotype of East Asian authoritarianism, although I wished for more here. For example, Andrew Gordon’s book on imperial democracy in prewar Japan, which consists of forms of protest which were non-Western in their origin, could have buttressed Cumings’ argument.

But his thinking in this chapter is very complex and perhaps cannot be reduced so easily. He is also attempting to broaden our insights about the nature of American political participation. He comes to the provocative conclusion that civil democracy in both the United States and East Asia is limited by the dominance of the middle class and the market. The ensuing chapters are

also impressive, covering the contemporary American-North Korean nuclear conflict, post-Mao China coming within the American orbit, and the patterns apparent in the emergence of East Asian area studies in academia during and after World War II. I did not realize the debt we owe to defense and security agencies for the promotion and acquisition of knowledge about East Asia. Cumings tells a chilling tale of the cooptation of academic concerns by political agendas.

Perhaps Cumings exaggerates American influence in East Asia in *Parallax Visions*. One could point to several instances where East Asians have successfully resisted American influence. The victory of communists in China in 1949, the authenticity of South Korean democracy more recently, and the resistance of Japanese Chris-

tians to American missionary imperialism earlier in the century all seem to map a different terrain. But these are instances, not patterns, and Cumings is on the mark in emphasizing the broad pattern of American hegemony in East Asia in the last century. Thus, *Parallax Visions*, even with all of its shortcomings, has a powerful impact. The bright light of Cumings' intellect shines throughout. Even though the book does not come together, the pieces are themselves valuable contributions. So read this book, but read it with paradox in mind.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-us-japan>

Citation: Jon Thares Davidann. Review of Cumings, Bruce, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations at the End of the Century*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3207>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.