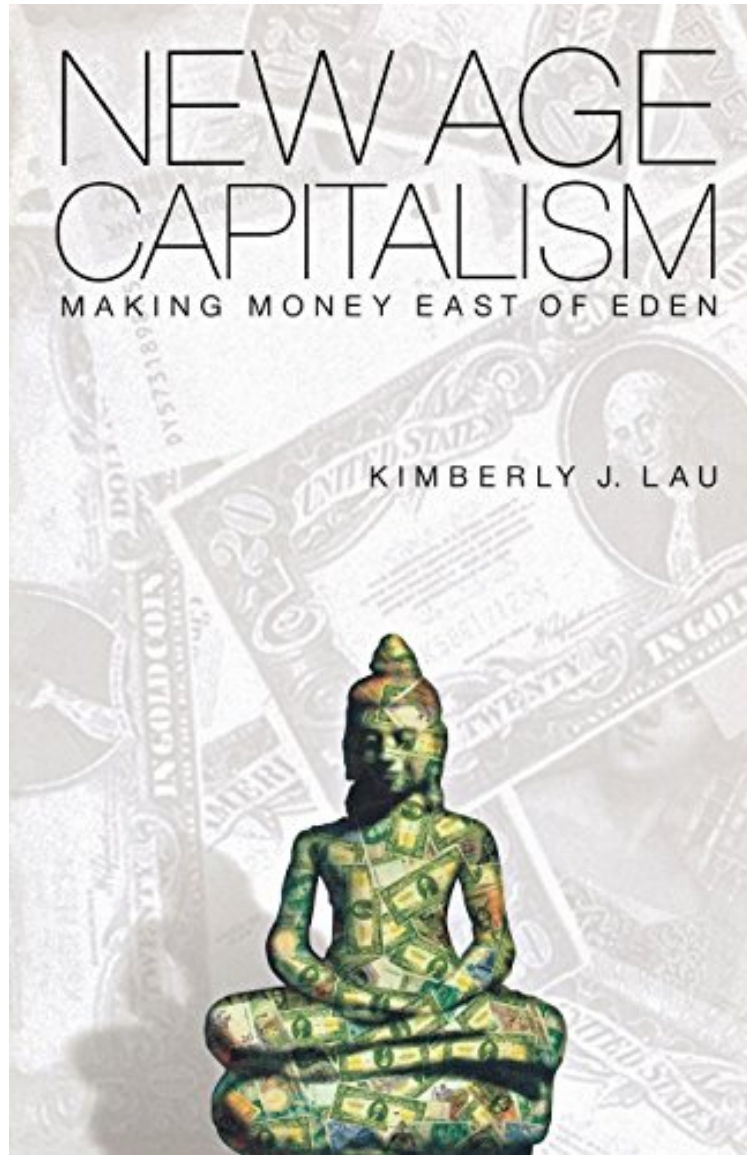


(Download free pdf) New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden

## New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden

*Kimberly J. Lau*

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**Kimberly J. Lau : New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden:

5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. An Interesting and Entertaining Read  
By A Customer "New Age Capitalism" is an insightful look at a burgeoning part of the economy that has gone overlooked for too long. Lau grabs our attention early on by showing that this cottage industry of Eastern culture is actually hundreds of millions of dollars a year and growing fast. From there she takes us on a fascinating look at not only the historical origins of the most well-known manifestations of Eastern culture (e.g. yoga), but also the particular ways in which they have been

adapted and marketed to Western cultures. The juxtaposition between the two (the purportedly ancient and mystical roots vs. the hard-nosed Western marketing) is stark at first, but the two slowly start to blend together as Lau shows that even the most non-traditional elements of other cultures can be packaged to enforce our existing social norms. The analysis will at times make you laugh, as when Lau highlights the yoga tag line, "Less Inner Thigh, More Inner Piece." At other times it will make you shake your head in frustration, as Lau illustrates how the bastardization of ancient customs is used to promulgate dangerous stereotypes and images. The common thread throughout her analysis is that we are taught that these products are not only good for us, but good for society and the environment as well. Whether or not this is true is debatable and largely beside the point (I found myself sharing Lau's cynicism). But what is important is the perception that these products are good for society and the environment. Lau concludes with the worrisome thought that if this perception becomes prevalent, then individuals will replace political action and personal responsibility with consumerism. Why do I have to worry about global warming, I only use aromatherapy products. Perhaps best of all, Lau presents this all in an academically rigorous fashion that is still digestible for the casual reader....or casual macrobiotic consumer.

35 of 39 people found the following review helpful. undertheorized and underanalyzed

By hester I was looking forward to reading this book, based on the review on .com, but was sorely disappointed. It's really nothing more than a cobbling together of a variety of already well-known theories of commoditization, globalization, and the diffusion of cultural meaning. Lau stitches together brief summaries of various stars, adding nothing of her own but merely parroting their views without critique, analysis, or qualification in any way that suggests that she has an original view to contribute. Then she declares that what all these thinkers have failed to consider is the significance of their theories for . . . the body! Not only is this ludicrously wrong, but in fact what she turns out to mean by "the body" is so vague and unconnected to the physical body as to make one wonder why she even uses this term to frame the project. In effect, she means something like "cultural discourse concerning products somehow related to the body." If she provided that definition, it would at least explain her decision to focus on such matters as aromatherapy. But in fact even that characterization gives her more credit than she deserves, since she completely ignores such topics as tattooing, which one would think is vital for the project as she frames it. Finally, even those phenomena she does discuss are subjected to an analysis so blunt, obvious, and thoughtless that again the point of the project is hard to identify. In essence, we are told that various cultural products designed for bodily use are often given mystical, "oriental" genealogies by marketers who hope to appeal to consumers' desire for the same. Hence the book consists in large part of readings of the packaging of such products, inevitably concluding with the news that these products are \*not\* from the East and are merely imperializing, ethnocentric gestures that condescend to the cultures they purport to preserve. This is news?

The one element that might save the project as an empirical study is also missing: Lau doesn't bother to notice that many people purchase loofahs and other such products without even bothering to look at the packaging. Thus Lau might, at least, have tried to determine what effect the marketers' discourse has on consumers, but instead she takes it for granted that these effects are overwhelming and determinative, rather than making any sort of argument about the subject at all. Anyone who had spent five minutes contemplating the issue on their own could have come up with the findings that Lau diligently and laboriously produces, and anyone who spent half an hour thinking about these issues could come up with a few insights that problematize the glib answers provided here. This book should not have been published, and I would urge you to read it at the library, if you must, rather than rewarding the publishers with your money.

11 of 15 people found the following review helpful. The Marketing of Spa Spirituality

By liz wilson Lau's analysis of the rhetoric used to sell aromatherapy products and other "new age" phenomena is masterful. It's a fantastic treatment of a timely topic, full of insights. The book has an ironic wit and a refreshing expose-style to it, e.g. the way Lau points out how Aveda products are marketed as ecofriendly commodities, thus assuaging the worries of consumers concerned about the adverse effects of consumerism... consume this and fight the evils of consumerism with every dollar you spend! But it is by no means a sloppy, hastily researched book. It's style is at times heavily academic, of the theory-head variety, but the theory section is one of the strongest, well worth careful perusal. It seems that equal-opportunity New Age capitalism is trickling down to the masses just about everywhere you look. I just learned that one can purchase "Chinese" meditation bracelets at a chain of local gas station/ice-cream parlors. They used to sell the WWJD bracelets but have decided to try something more multi-culti, I gather. In my initial reading of *New Age Capitalism*, I was often reminded of the work of sociologists like Robert Bellah (esp. in *Habits of the Heart*) on the privatized nature of much contemporary American religious experience. Bellah traces the roots of our predilection for pastiche, design-your-own 'spirituality' back to the founding fathers and, ultimately, the Enlightenment thinkers, but nonetheless thinks it's a phenomenon worth watching now more than ever. One question the book might have entertained is just how much sense of commonality or community spirit a group of consumers of 'spiritual' commodities might be said to have. I'm Durkheimian in my definition of religion as an emphatically social phenomenon, and wonder whether consumer groups can ever be anything more than virtual communities (given that one has to get oneself to a retail outlet to have face-to-face interactions with other consumers of 'spiritual' commodities).

The pursuit of health and wellness has become a fundamental and familiar part of everyday life in America. We are

surrounded by an enticing world of products, practices, and promotions assuring health and happiness—cereal boxes claim that their contents can reduce the risk of heart disease, bars of aromatherapy soap seek to wash away our stresses, newspapers celebrate the wonders of the latest superfoods and herbal remedies. No longer confined to the domain of Western medicine, suggestions for healthy living often turn to alternatives originating in distant times and places, in cultures very different from our own. Diets from ancient or remote groups are presented as cures for everything from colds to cancer; exercise regimens based on Eastern philosophies are heralded as paths to physical health and spiritual wellbeing. In *New Age Capitalism*, Kimberly Lau examines the ideological work that has created this billion-dollar business and allowed "Eastern" and other non-Western traditions to be coopted by Western capitalism. Extending the orientalist logic to the business of health and wellness, American companies have created a lucrative and competitive market for their products, encouraging consumers to believe that they are making the right choices for personal as well as planetary health. In reality, alternative health practices have been commodified for an American public longing not only for health and wellness but also for authenticity, tradition, and a connection to the cultures of an imagined Edenic past. Although consumers might prefer to buy into "authentic" non-Western therapies, *New Age Capitalism* argues that the market economy makes this goal unattainable.

"*New Age Capitalism* reveals the sometimes hilarious ironies and contradictions that come with using the capitalist marketplace as a place to critique capitalism."—Joseph Turow, author of *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* "*New Age Capitalism* represents a new, sophisticated—and in many ways daring—extension of folkloric concerns into the arena where ancient traditions, fads, popular culture, global economics, personal taste, and cultural worldview intersect. . . . Lau's compact book is a clever and helpful contribution to this enterprise."—*Western Folklore* About the Author Kimberly J. Lau is Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.