

## **NICOLAS RUIZ III, AMERICA IN ABSENTIA**

Reviewed by Felicia Browne

Ruiz III, Nicolas. America in Absentia. New York: Intertheory Press, 2008. 76pp. US\$22.00 (paper). ISBN: 9780978990213.

Many of us have wondered whether America ought to be blamed for the world's economic catastrophe. Many were devastated by it; losing their homes, families, source of income and livelihood. America in Absentia is a reflective text which immediately engages the reader in controversial ethical debates on American politics, race and culture. Through his brief chapters, Nicolas Ruiz III, a New Yorker, provides a sensible rebuttal of Bernard-Henri Levy's article "American Vertigo" which advocates that American society is self-destructive because of the moral values which are supported by its citizens. Ruiz strongly believes that Levy's argument should be given some further analysis and scrutiny because of his vague interpretation of American society. As a contribution to this, Ruiz seeks to assess the status of morality within post-modern societies like America.

For Ruiz, Levy's article remains incomplete as it fails to realize that what is happening and what has happened in America is not different from any other parts of the world. As such, Ruiz contends that using America as an example of philosophy's inability to provide solutions for modern social and political problems is in fact, fallacious and without merit. The American society like every other society, according to Ruiz, has its moral foundations in the values of the capitalist system whereby capital is the ultimate end of human life. He writes "The world can never be dry-cleaned; it never was clean to begin with. . . . We have to know that in the end, our own filth will do us in. But not before we make a little money out of it" (44).

The vertigo Levy speaks of, is, according to Ruiz, nothing more than our human biological code that seeks to flourish and survive within a competitive environment; an innate disposition that is found in every human being. And in order for human beings to continue to flourish, there must be a surplus of capital. Ruiz contends that this capital is the metaphysics of modern humanity, and many are driven towards it. This metaphysics he refers to as the area where value becomes utility. In his first few chapters, he develops his thesis on the filthy lessons of America society. This society, he claims is rigidly constructed within the confines of capitalism and aristocracy. These structures, though concrete, provide American society with a predilection for 'speculative' thought which is usually detached from the human element. He discusses the flooding in New Orleans and the destruction of La Conchita in California, as examples of the inadequacies of capitalism.

In the concluding chapters, "America in Absentia," "Fail-Safe Philanthropy" and "All Capital's Children," Ruiz dismantles and exposes the capitalist system which continues to flourish within the American society. The media and religious organizations provide a comforting blanket for America's capitalism and aristocracy. They are the collective ideals of modern humanities that seek to maintain law and order while doing so. Everyone in American society has a role to play, regardless of the social structure which one is locked into. Religion, democracy, capital and race have an essential function to accomplish in order for the society to flourish. As Ruiz observes, each of these elements has an important role to play in fulfilling the American dream. He adamantly criticizes Patrick Buchanan's The Death of the West and recognizes that "[a]ristocracies of capital reek of dynasty. We have learned nothing if not this of global political history: dynasties reify the upper classes, and generally at the expense of the lower classes" (63).

Ruiz outlines America's six "filthy lessons": our parents, our adolescence, university, companionship, old age, and yes, death. Ruiz believes that the lessons that they (Americans) have learned and showcased to the world are the re-creating of their realities, a reality which is overwhelmingly political, racial and economic in nature. The American

society, the American vertigo, is normal according to Ruiz. It is a symptom of American capitalist thought that is keen on demonstrating normalcy within a failing society. In sum, Ruiz's book is captivating and draws the reader into its poetic web of allusion. He vividly illustrates the role post-modernism and our moral self-conception play within globalised economies like America and France. Ruiz, though critical in his approach, believes that the American society has the capability to survive, and even on its own terms flourish, in the capitalist system as they have done in previous years. He is surely right in suggesting that an unbiased and dominant humanities/university community is unrealistic. Thought, he argues, in essence is about power. The power to control what is taught, who is teaching it and where it should be located. The American vertigo noted by Levy is indeed a universal trend that has the capability to flourish without the principles of the humanities. It is about capital, and the ethics of capital is power. America in Absentia provides stimulating reflections on American politics, race and culture. It is not clear that it tells us what it is to be done about overcoming them.