



Volume 35
Issue 2 June

Article 12

2008

Review of *Biomedicalization of Alcohol Studies: Ideological Shifts and Institutional Challenges*. Lorraine T. Midanik. Reviewed by E. Michael Gorman.

E. Michael Gorman
San Jose State University

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

 Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Gorman, E. Michael (2008) "Review of *Biomedicalization of Alcohol Studies: Ideological Shifts and Institutional Challenges*. Lorraine T. Midanik. Reviewed by E. Michael Gorman.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



most memorable for its illustration of the intellectual damage that this separation continues to inflict.

Joel Blau
Stony Brook University

Lorraine T. Midanik. *Biomedicalization of Alcohol Studies: Ideological Shifts and Institutional Challenges*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 2006. \$ 39.95 hardcover.

From the first pages of Lorraine Midanik's thoughtful and thought provoking book, one senses a commitment to coming to terms with some of the major policy and practice and educational challenges of our times, having to do with the role of science, the role of government and the role of money in understanding addiction generally, and the social context and the social construction of social problems, especially as they relate to alcohol studies. Underlying the thesis is a larger concern about the current state of social science research, not only in alcohol studies, but more generally the health sciences. At the outset Midanik tells the reader that the purpose of the book is "to describe, assess and critique biomedicalization and its influence as a larger social trend on the health field." The book is divided into seven chapters, five of which are concerned with various facets of biomedicalization, as she sees it: its definition; history; its relation to public health; and the carefully documented paradigm shift under the rubric of alcohol studies. Midanik, a scholar of repute in the alcohol studies arena, and a public health scientist at the University of California's School of Social Welfare, brings to the table considerable acumen with respect to her arguments. The remaining two chapters address two related topics. Chapter six offers a case study of alcohol related research in Sweden where Midanik undertook a Fulbright in 2004. Chapter seven is an essay reflecting the dilemma facing the social sciences more generally in terms of biomedicalization.

So what is *biomedicalization* and why is it problematic?

To begin with, Midanik tells the reader that biomedicalization is neither inherently good nor bad but is without question a major social trend in such fields as psychiatry, medicine, aging, women's health, and mental health, as well as alcohol and drug studies, broadly defined. She then argues that central to biomedicalization is an "increased reliance on new technology and medications," accompanied by a shift from taking into consideration social factors as significant components of health or disease to a more narrowly focused, individualized conception. The salient domains—technology, medicalization, control, individuation at the expense of a more ecological or environmental context of understanding health, in addition to the role of market forces—represent recurrent themes throughout the book which the author develops and elaborates. In short, while biomedicalization, *per se*, may be neither inherently good nor bad, the devil is in the details, and she warns us 'beware.' The book elaborates these themes and argues at the end of the day that biomedicalization, in fact, may not necessarily be a value neutral concept after all, particularly given the way it has become engaged and used by a convergence of political, social and economic interests who have much to gain by its hegemony. Midanik accompanies this story with many notable historical vignettes and scholarly references to the sociology of health and deviance.

In sum, the book is a good read and one that clearly merits attention from those concerned not only about alcohol or drug studies, public health, or social science, but from anyone in policy, education or a practice arena concerned about trends and the processes and dynamics which inform those trends. In addition, the book is replete with interesting and, at times, fascinating historical notes, such as the reference to the Washingtonian Movement of the 1840s as a precursor to the 12 Step Movement of a century later, among others. The chapter on alcohol research in Sweden was likewise very interesting and this reviewer would have liked to have seen a bit more detail with respect to epidemiology of alcohol use and abuse in that country and a bit more discussion of the Nordic model in cultural context. One cannot help but wonder about current changes, and whether they are being brought about not only by entrance to the European Union alone, but also

demographic and cultural changes, as Sweden in particular becomes less culturally homogeneous?

In conclusion, Midanik is to be commended for her effort; she has undertaken a daunting challenge here—one that she brings off with a considerable degree of success. The book is clearly written, well considered and well documented in addition to being timely and of great currency.

E. Michael Gorman
San Jose State University

Peter Schrag. *California: America's High Stakes Experiment*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006. \$24.95 hardcover, \$16.95 papercover.

The story of California is often related as the signal expression of post-World War II American optimism. Writers have depicted California as the bellwether that previews the American future. Peter Schrag tells us in *California: America's High Stakes Experiment*, that it is very difficult to predict California's future because it presently faces an array of profound difficulties in the context of a rapidly diversifying and disunited population and a dysfunctional political system. Moreover, Californians have saddled themselves with political and fiscal constraints that make the solution of large-scale problems seem nearly impossible.

Some time in 1999, just around the anniversary of the Gold Rush, California became the first State with a majority/minority population. By 2001 more than half of the babies born in California were Latino. It is projected that by 2010 Latinos will become the largest single ethnic group in the State. There is also growing and diverse population of Asians including Chinese, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodians and other groups.

The national fight over immigration arguably began in California, where some leaders contend that the presence of low-skilled, mostly undocumented migrants benefits the economy by providing a workforce willing to engage in menial