

Contemporary Affairs

CLOSING:

The Life and Death of an American Factory.

By Bill Bamberger and Cathy N. Davidson. Center for Documentary Studies/Norton. 224 pp. \$27.50

A Library of Congress subject heading on the copyright page places this book in a sadly familiar genre: "Downsizing—United States—Case Studies." In 1993, a hundred-year-old plant, the White Furniture Company of Mebane, North Carolina, went out of business, leaving many of more than 200 employees jobless. For five years the photographer Bill Bamberger had been documenting the life of the factory, and he continued to follow the lives of the former workers. A text by the writer and literary scholar Cathy N. Davidson rounds out a moving, unsettling view of a region in transition.



In 1985, a slim majority of the family-dominated shareholders approved the sale of the company to Hickory Manufacturing Corporation, a larger firm that was in turn controlled by a holding company under a Chicago venture capitalist named Clyde Engle. Steve White, the CEO who had fought the deal, had to resign under its terms. With no access to the books of these closely held companies, it is hard to prove either the employees' conviction that an absentee speculator gutted a viable if not vibrant enterprise, or the managers' avowals that years of underinvestment by the patriarchal, conservative Whites had made the plant's position untenable.

Whatever the case, White Furniture was a middle-sized organization in a middle-sized

industry at a time when technological trends favor the big (with the resources for ever-costlier electronic enhancements) and the small (with the flexibility to find niches that complement the big). It hurts to be located in between, whether making furniture, practicing law, publishing books, or selling software.

It was this very size that gave White Furniture, especially before its merger with Hickory, a human scale. If the alienated cubicle-dwellers of Scott Adams's *Dilbert* form a dysfunctional clan, Bamberger and Davidson offer a counterimage of workplace as family. The production line at White's was closer to artisanal teamwork than to regimented machine tending. Workers and supervisors came from similar rural backgrounds, black as well as white. Steve White hunted ducks with men from the plant. And

the mirror frames and bedsteads and dressers photographed by Bamberger reflect not only craftsmanship but teamwork. For the employees interviewed, the industrial family had made it possible to raise their real families with dignity and modest comfort. The plant's closing appears as a chapter in the destruction of an industrial yeomanry.

Reading interview-based history critically is like working from a kit of semifinished parts, not all of which fit neatly together. Was Hickory-White's an honest experiment in bringing long-needed managerial controls and capital investment into a declining paternalist enterprise? Workers acknowledge that wages and equipment initially improved under the new regime, even if ancient perquisites were reduced. But the merger might have been doomed from the outset by the folly of cost cutting (practices such as using plastic bands in lieu of veneer for concealed buffet shelves) in a demanding luxury market in which a dining room set had to sell for the price of a mid-sized automobile. And how could the last president agree to keep the plant's final liquidation a secret for three months, knowing that line workers were counting on continued employment?

Davidson's prose, like Bamberger's photography, is forthright and lucid. The book insistently directs our attention to the human costs of the new economy, yet it never conceals the problems of the old ways. The gentle natural light of the factory interior captures workers, products, and machinery in an elegiac yet unsentimental memorial. This is documentary work of a high order, a corrective to triumphalist cybercratic boosterism, and above all a reminder of the ambiguities and ironies of family values.

—Edward Tenner

**CARTELS OF THE MIND:
*Japan's Intellectual Closed Shop.***

By Ivan Hall. Norton. 208 pp. \$25

During the mid-1600s, Japan's Tokugawa shogunate took the fateful step of expelling almost all Westerners from the nation and confining the rest to a small artificial island in Nagasaki harbor. In the era of *sakoku* (seclusion) that followed, the shoguns banned overseas travel, monitored foreigners' movements, and used a handful of mostly Dutch traders as their conduit to Western teaching and technology. Today, despite recurrent tensions between Japan and its trading partners, a visitor to Tokyo, with its Hermes boutiques and McDonald's restaurants, could be forgiven for thinking that those exclusionary days are over. Yet as Japan scholar Hall shows in this disturbing and important work, the xenophobic mindset of the Tokugawa era still holds powerful sway.

Unlike critics of Japanese economic policies who have focused on cars, computer chips, and the *keiretsu* (corporate networks) that produce them, Hall sets his sights on what the political scientist Chalmers Johnson has called Japan's "cartels of the mind": the formal and informal networks and rules that make it difficult, if not impossible, for foreign professionals to find work.

The restrictions that Hall painstakingly details would seem merely absurd if they did not apply to the world's second-largest economy. So stringent are the rules governing the activities of foreign lawyers that a Japanese attorney who goes to the United States and joins a U.S. firm can no longer argue cases in his home country. Foreign journalists must work extra hard: although their lot has improved since 1964, when American reporters were kept out of a police press conference on the stabbing of U.S. ambassador

Edwin Reischauer, they remain effectively barred from the cozy *kisha* (reporters) clubs that monopolize news from most government ministries, industrial associations, and private companies. Those foreign professors lucky enough to be hired in Japan are denied chances at tenure and generally endure a second-class status that Hall calls "academic apartheid." In one of his book's more powerful chapters, the author draws on his years as a professor in Japan to show how and why foreign scholars are generally treated like "temporary transmitters of knowledge, to be celebrated, sucked dry, and sacked."

Hall is by no means the first scholar to scrutinize Japan's highly resistant strain of cultural isolationism. As the Japanese social critic Takeo Kuwabara observed more than a decade ago, "Japanese respect the principle of cultural interchange . . . but in reality they tolerate one-way traffic only." As more than a few Japanologists have learned, Japanese often react to a foreigner who speaks their language and knows their ways much as one might respond to a talking dog: initially charmed but increasingly suspicious—especially if the dog begins to criticize.

Perhaps understandably, Hall's account is colored a shade too purple by the slights and injuries he has witnessed or experienced in nearly three decades as a journalist, diplomat, and academic in Japan. His prediction that Japan's closed system will spread to its neighbors seems misguided, especially given the push for democratization and greater openness in many Asian countries suffering from a regional financial crisis.

But the flaws in some of Hall's conclusions do not detract from his valuable mapping of Japan's barriers to intellectual exchange. Cutting through the disingenuous blather of Japan's intellectual establishment about its commitment to *kokusaika* (internationalization), Hall shows that as technology and trade turn much of the world into the equivalent of a global village, Japan will increasingly stand out as one of its more provincial neighborhoods.

—James Gibney

ONE NATION AFTER ALL.

By Alan Wolfe. Viking.

384 pp. \$24.95

Elites commonly declare that the American public has become extremely contentious, even angry, about religious and