

East of the risk society

New Age merchandisers are increasingly part of the high street shopping experience. How has this come about? **Kimberley Lau's** book gives an American slant on the story.

New Age Capitalism: Making Money East of Eden
by Kimberley J Lau, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

The serious business of selling the New Age and its kaleidoscope of products, is today, an established part of the commercial landscape. Not so long ago, it would have seemed foolish to have forecast the growth of a market space where numerous marginal alternative health practitioners would flourish. Times change though, and one sign of changing times in the West has been the mass acceptance of a shelf full of feel-good health products, all of which assumes purchasers are buying into alternative health worldviews along with having a patina of concern for other alternatives, including those of surviving tribal cultures.

Up there as the paradigmatic British high street example, is the phenomenally successful Body Shop. In this country, in Europe, and particularly in North America, the growth curve of this kind of company has opened up a whole new cultural sector; specifically devoted to marketing health in body and mind. If, unlike the 'cultural industries', there hasn't been high profile research on how much this sector contributes to the GNP – its prospective growth rate, and the number of people it engages in work – it has culled a recognisable and recognised title, that of 'New Age Capitalism'.

It ought to be no surprise, given that in this modern world all is product and everything is marketable, that the New Age would find itself with a market share. Something of these changes emerge from between the lines of Kimberley Lau's small essay-length book, *New Age Capitalism*, on the phenomenon. Looked at from the US perspective, Lau's study chooses three examples where this transformation has been occurring; Aromatherapy, Macrobiotics, and Tai Chi and Yoga. Common to all, is the remaking of practices and philosophies into packagable products for a mass culture apparently incapable of exploring such practice without it becoming a commercial experience. If this erstwhile alternative world didn't begin with the intention of getting into bed with the corporate world, it has always had many in its number who have seen the trans-



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formation of business, along New Age lines, as both an honourable goal, and as their part in saving the world.

Lau grounds her essay in the society of risk; the popular sociological interpretation of modern post-industrial societies, and people within those societies, who navigate a world of choices defined by incrementally increasing and competing risks – risks which have to be weighed and considered, continually, against each other. These could include issues around climate change, but they also include whether a couple decide to test the chromosomal integrity of their unborn child. As such, risk needs counterbalancing, and absorption in new age products can readily be seen as part of the delicate balancing act modernity has created, to counter the increasing awareness of these varied and different risks we live with from day to day. Originally developed by German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, the theory has influentially reinterpreted the post-affluent condition, and within its parameters it makes sense; the body being the closest home of safety, in a threatening world. This isn't unusual stuff though, and all very well, but it inadvertently invites a question the book leaves hanging in the air – whether any self-conscious consumer movement is ever effective in changing the groundrules of consumerism. The New Age movement is premised on this. The end is the