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Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Social Issues [book review]

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Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Social Issues. Ed. by Michael Shally-Jensen. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011. 4 vols. acid free \$465 (ISBN 978-0-31339-204-7). EBook available (978-0-31339-205-4), call for pricing. Last accessed April 28, 2011.

This review pertains to the eBook edition.

Acknowledging that current information about social issues is often ingested in sound bites and snippets, the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Social Issues* seeks to bridge the gap between newsstand, newcomer, and expert knowledge. As stated in the preface, editor Michael Shally-Jensen and entry contributors encourage readers to “appreciate current issues for the complex matters that they are” and generally succeed in that regard. Most useful are the many entries that follow the encyclopedia’s guiding principle by tying in recent examples and news stories before getting into more theoretical discussions. All entries provide historical context for the topic at hand and most are presented in clear, accessible language that strives for objectivity. Of the 200 total entries, two dozen are entirely new contributions, while the remaining 180 consist of updated and revised entries from the Greenwood Press *Battleground* series (print). A few entries updated from that series continue to rely on outdated examples, but the majority acknowledge key recent events: the passage of Arizona SB 1070 in the entry on “Immigration Reform,” for example, or the arrest of scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the entry on “Racial, National Origin, and Religion Profiling.”

Entries range from 1,500 and 8,000 words, and many contain sidebars, tables, statistics, and other supporting material. At 8,000 words, the longer entries feel at odds with the encyclopedic format, especially those that do not provide a brief summary or definition of terms right away. Although most contributors are scholars who work in disciplines related to the issues they cover, the diversity of writing styles, levels of formality, and conceptual approaches can be confusing. While variation is inevitable given the range of issues covered—bank bailouts to deadbeat parents to oil economics—the end result is that some entries read like scholarly articles, others as overview essays, and still others as pro/con debates. In a few cases, especially in issues framed as pro-con, objectivity clearly wavers. In fact, some of the most outstanding entries are those that avoid a strict pro-con approach and focus more on defining buzzwords and broad issues such as “Sustainability” or “Aging Infrastructure.” To this extent the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Social Issues* also distinguishes itself from similar resources like *CQ Researcher* that also cover current and controversial issues in a pro-con format.

Many entries contain an extensive bibliography and most list suggestions for further reading and links to related entries. In addition to the four subject volumes--Business and Economy, Criminal Justice, Family and Society, and Environment, Science, and Technology--readers can also access entries via the table of contents (organized by volume), complete alphabetical listing of entries in all volumes, cumulative index, or the eBook’s site platform search. In addition to the search function, another major strength of the eBook format is that most comparable encyclopedias are still only in print: the 1997 *Encyclopedia of American Issues*, 2006 *Social Issues in America*, or 2008 *Encyclopedia of Social Problems*.

Of course, as with any attempt to describe social issues at a single moment in time, not everything can be included: the role of social media, for example, is mentioned in passing in articles on “Identity Theft” and “Advertising and the Invasion of Privacy,” but receives little mention in other places one might expect to see it, such as in connection to the 2008 presidential elections. Also missing is any discussion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in returning

military veterans, a topic often commented on by news media. However, despite these omissions and the stylistic variation between entries, the thoughtful approach the editor and contributors take to contextualizing current events makes the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Issues* a useful resource for school, college, and large public libraries.