Pride comes with power, and the pride of the United States has long been its democratic institutions. Its power increased dramatically in the latter decades of the 19th century, and proud eyes can look at this period as an equally dramatic success for democracy. In his book *American Colossus*, H. W. Brands sees capitalism as the unifying—and driving—force in shaping the United States in this era. His main goal is to contrast capitalism against democracy in their respective effects on both large and small scales, and so to provide a comprehensive view of the means by which the nation grew so significantly. *American Colossus* appropriately emphasizes the dramatic effects of capitalism on the United States in the latter third of the 19th century, and tracks the scope of these effects broadly, although its approach to a detailed narrative impairs understanding of certain larger trends.

This book does not ignore numbers and statistics, but it certainly is sparing in their use. Brands is more focused on telling this story by relating microhistories that allow the reader to relate to people at a variety of levels of influence. And at each of these levels, Brands sees people pursuing wealth as they were best able. Capitalist instincts are most obvious and prominent in the wealthy and powerful industrialists and bankers of the era, but Brands also tells engrossing stories about the way that economics manifested in the lives of immigrants, ranchers, explorers, and industrial
laborers, among others.

A key theme here is that of the power and potency of speculative bubbles, which in these decades often took on a “gold-rush mentality” (180). Brands describes the working of several of these, and it is compelling—and rather surprising—to see how much of the economy of the time operated on easily excited speculation. Brands sees capitalist instincts pushing and pulling immigrants to areas of high labor demand, particularly for highly speculative capitalist projects such as the railroads. And these triggered other forms of speculation, such as in land, that drew a variety of people west to occupy available homesteads or to raise cattle on open public land—cattle which seemed to promise a staggering rate of return.

There is a strong geographic component to the narrative in this book, as it puts time and energy into making sure that it considers the effects of capitalism throughout the country, and beyond. In this way Brands effectively helps the reader to see the continuous progression of capital investment as it pushed into the multifaceted frontier. A sense of geography also provides space for Brands to incorporate recent work on environmental history. This opens up the possibility, for example, of perceiving the way in which the bison—and the hardy grasses that fed them—served as resources for capitalist exploitation to both the Sioux and the Americans who were binding and appropriating their land with rails and homesteads.

Brands spends a lot of time telling individual stories, but this rich
collection of microhistories comes at a cost. The relentless drive for profit can be seen in each of them, and they often intersect in stimulating ways, but emphasizing them reduces parts of the larger perspective on the effects of capitalism during this period to a sketch. This strategy deemphasizes certain important topics, such as the effects of capitalism in the post-war South and the conditions leading to compromise politics during these decades. Thus the book seems to provide a comprehensive view of this period, but at points this view is shallow and should be augmented by more focused works. Nevertheless, this book strongly reinforces the primary importance of economics in driving society, as well as many of the specific consequences of capitalism in a time and place of great abundance.
Reference