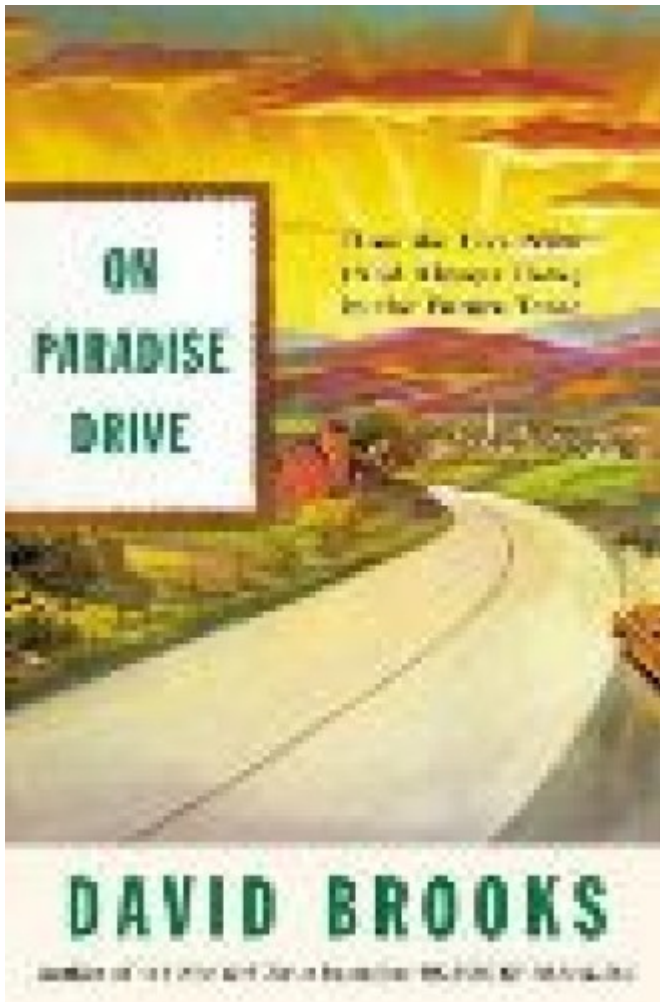


On Paradise Drive

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

In Review



On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (and Always Have) in the Future Tense

David Brooks

Simon & Schuster

David Brooks has been described as the “house conservative” among regular columnists for the *New York Times*. Since he is witty, usually good-natured, and fair, it’s a good bet that if Americans of more liberal persuasions can stomach a conservative commentator, he’s the one. Some conservatives mistrust him as having “gone over to the other side” in writing for the *Times*, while some of those on the opposite end of the political spectrum view him as a “plant” from his former employer, the *Weekly Standard*. Others consider Brooks a dilettante rather than a genuine sociologist.

Brooks’s objective in this sequel to *Bobos in Paradise* is to describe what life is really like in today’s middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs, to explain what motivates the inhabitants of these suburbs, and to determine whether Americans are as shallow as they sometimes appear to be. Brooks asks, “If middle America is so stupid, vulgar, self-absorbed, and materialistic, which it often is, then how can America itself be so great?”

He illustrates how the inhabitants of America’s suburbs shop, learn, spend and otherwise conduct their lives. There is a whimsical charm in how Brooks turns over the detritus of suburban life—magazines, French fries, résumés, coin sorters—in order to perceive the essence of America. However, one must be willing to accept his method and have a taste for one-liners to find *Paradise Drive* enjoyable or compelling.

From colonial times Americans have been accustomed to abundance. Brooks’s conclusion is that, even today, Americans are possessed of an “everyday utopianism.” What unites Americans is their orientation toward the possibilities and opportunities that lie in the future. Citing sources as different as Jürgen Moltmann, Perry Miller and Walt Whitman, Brooks suggests that Americans feel responsible to make good on America’s unparalleled opportunities: “America is not a perfect country. It is often an embarrassing country. But it is a great country, and it is greatly different from other countries. It is infused with a utopian fire that redeems its people, despite the crass and cynical realities.”

Competing analyses of what makes America “a great country” (or something other than great) are to be expected and welcomed during a time of debate and considerable polarization. And it’s a safe bet that far more people will read and be influenced by the work of popularizers like Brooks and Michael Moore than by sociologists or social philosophers. Books like this make one wonder whether most

Americans look to the work of pop- sociologists to challenge or simply to reinforce the views they already hold. More important still is the question the book raises: What counts for national greatness?