

Resources for Gender and Women’s Studies

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Mapping the Past and Present of American Democracy: Essential Reading for an Unprecedented Time

BY STEPHANIE R. RYTILAHTI

Heather Cox Richardson, *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*. Penguin Random House/Viking, 2023. 304 pp. notes. index. \$30.00, ISBN 978-0593652961.

Amid the chaos of the first Trump impeachment trial in 2019, historian Heather Cox Richardson offered some thoughts on Facebook to contextualize the freneticism of the moment. Working from a sharp command of U.S. constitutionalism and American history, she drew clear historical parallels to help Americans make sense of what felt like a shocking turn toward dysphoria. Then, in a daily newsletter she began calling “Letters from an American,” she continued to trace the long history of movement conservatism, the backlash to the liberal consensus (commonly understood as broad support of New Deal initiatives), and the undermining of democracy in an effort to help readers historicize and make sense of the current moment. Eager to anchor conversations and interpretations in reliable history, readers rapidly shared the Boston College historian’s thoughts until they were regularly reaching millions.

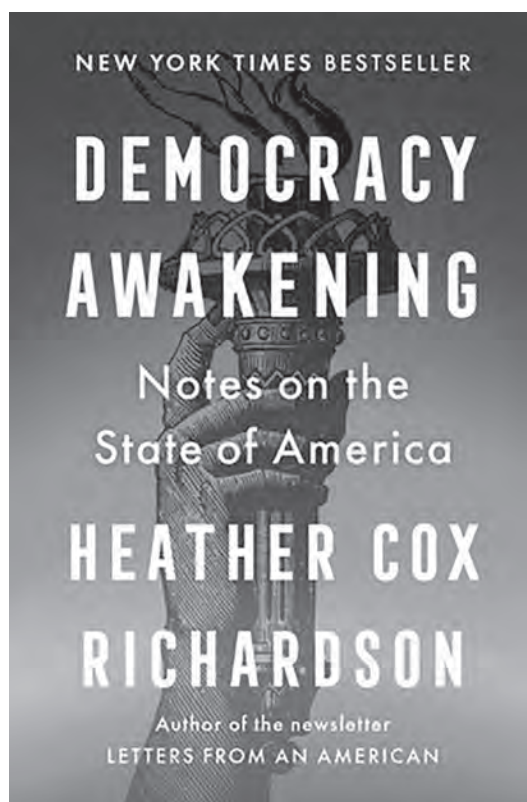
As a regular reader of “Letters,” I was eager to get an advance copy of Richardson’s newest book, *Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America*, in which she synthesizes many of the ideas laid out in her newsletter, in Twitter posts, and in online conversations with followers. I was impressed — but not surprised, given her writing in those online venues — by her ability to condense the span of U.S. history from the colonial era to the present into a seamless 253-page narrative. Relying on a keen ability to both highlight critical

historical junctures and explain them in a way that speaks to us today, Richardson delivers an incisive analysis of the legacy, challenges, and innovations of liberal democracy alongside increasing movement toward authoritarianism. It is important to note that although the roles played

by people of color, immigrants, labor unions, women, and queer and trans people are noted, the book focuses more on political actors and ideologies that have been prominent nationally. The downside of a synthesis narrative focused on the broad strokes of American history is that there isn’t time to detail the historical narratives of all players. Readers seeking a more comprehensive social movement history will nevertheless find essential the scaffolding offered here for understanding the historical forces shaping current politics, including attacks on civil rights, abortion access, voting equity, and infringements on academic freedom and on the content taught in K-12 classrooms.

Although this text is a broad synthesis narrative, it does not follow a strictly chronological outline. Instead, it is divided into three parts, the first of which, “Undermining Democracy,” sets

up one of Richardson’s core arguments: that although there is a clear historical genealogy to explain American democracy’s current crisis, the rise of Trumpism is not business as usual. As Richardson outlines the rise of American political conservatism alongside the increase in



popularity of the liberal consensus, she points out that social programs designed to expand civil rights and provide a social safety net had been widely embraced by many Americans and supported by both major political parties from 1946 to 1964. Although never perfect and always still exclusionary, the liberal consensus sought to strengthen the promise of equal access before the law and equal access to resources for expanding groups of Americans. But since the 1980s, Richardson argues, Republicans have slowly chipped away at the liberal consensus by shifting power to states, allowing wealth to accumulate upward, implementing voting restrictions, and weakening the power of voter representation through gerrymandering, voter suppression, the filibuster, and the Electoral College. These moves corresponded with political strategies, beginning with those of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon, designed to create a polarizing political environment in which disempowered citizens would embrace a hierarchical vision of the past that relies on demonizing the notion of equity (usually for women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community) as destructive and problematic for the body politic. Drawing on the work of authoritarian scholars, Richardson argues that Trumpism's rise has pushed these trends to their historical precipice, producing a leader who has been quick to engage in tactics of cronyism, deceit, and "othering" to undermine key tenets of American democracy in new and previously unthinkable ways.

In Part 2, "The Authoritarian Experiment," Richardson takes the reader to what she views as the logical endpoint of this 40-year Republican project of undermining democracy: the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Highlighting Trump's alignment with and admiration for global dictators and his reliance on a paternalistic and hierarchical, mythologized American past, she marks his election as a distinct "sea-change in American history" (p. 93). Although Republicans had sought to chip away at the operations of the federal government since the

ly visible as voting laws changed to further restrict access, a conservative Supreme Court overturned abortion rights while expanding gun access, authoritarian global leaders directly intervened in a U.S. election, business regulations plummeted, and state-based legislation arose to restrict the content of K-12 and higher education. As Richardson notes, the U.S. was now on the brink of authoritarianism.

Part 3, "Reclaiming America," provides the historical rationale for another of Richardson's key arguments.

Conservative claims to return America to a weak federal government and a paternalistic, hierarchical society, she says, rest on "stunningly bad history" (p. 160). Taking the

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1980s, she maintains that there was always a limit to this project, leaving broad swaths of those operations intact. Yet in Trump's rise and his willingness to embrace authoritarianism in multiple ways — installing family members in positions of power, firing civil servants disloyal to his administration, trying to appropriate extreme power for the executive branch, rejecting election results through multiple avenues, and drawing on a base of supporters motivated by racism, anti-immigration, and a language of domination — she highlights an overt rejection of the theory of democracy that goes beyond previous moments of destabilization. Republicans fell in line with this abrupt shift as they supported Trump and his extremist views. The fallout was immediate—

reader back to colonial times as well as the antebellum South, she argues that the hierarchical vision set up by movement conservatives in the 1960s and carried out by MAGA Republicans in the present is more resonant with southern slaveholding society and an oligarchical industrial class than with the principles embedded in the nation's founding. Richardson outlines the promises of equality and self-government embedded in the Declaration of Independence and points out the founders' resistance to social hierarchies, state religion, tyranny, and interference from foreign governments. Although the founders' vision of equality was premised on exclusionary practices, the language of the Declaration, she points out, supported shifts in liberal democracy from the

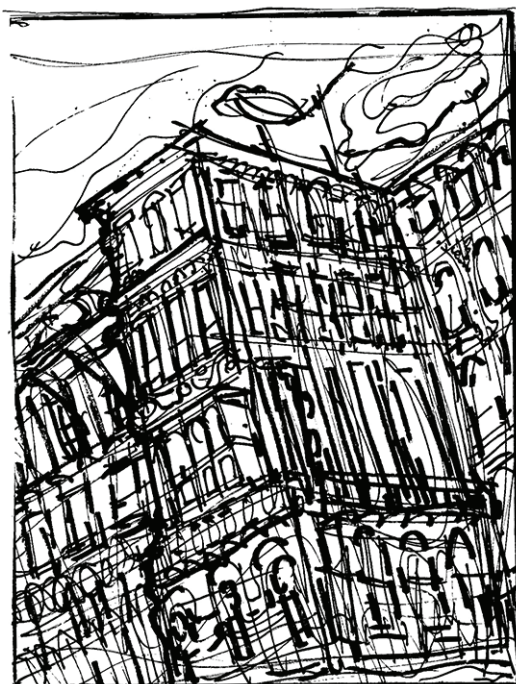
nation's founding to the present. She expands on this point as she argues that the U.S. Supreme Court's overturn of *Roe v. Wade* ignored a long history of abortion rights dating back to colonial times and tossed the regulation of individual rights back to the states, with serious implications for contraception use, gay marriage, interracial marriage, and other civil rights protected under the Fourteenth Amendment. Not only did the court misread a long history of abortion access, she argues, but its decision also reflects an imposition of extrem-

ist minority views over the rights of the majority — an authoritarian move that rests on erroneous renderings of history and tradition and is completely out of step with the ideals of the nation's founding.

Richardson contextualizes the seriousness of the current political crisis within the history of the long genealogy of "tests" American liberal democracy has faced since its inception. While clearly acknowledging that the balance has tipped further than ever before toward authoritarianism, Richardson reminds her readers that

this swing is not entirely unprecedented and that the ideas embedded in the Declaration of Independence were and still are truly revolutionary. Champions of liberal democracy have used the strength of the federal government to support and expand civil rights, regulate business, and adapt to changing social, economic, and political environments since America's founding. Richardson reminds readers that although the conditions for undoing American democracy are firmly in place, the tools for redeeming it have not been completely lost.

Stephanie R. Rytilahti became the director of the University of Wisconsin (UW) System Women's and Gender Studies Consortium (WGSC) in 2018; in this role she facilitates the collaboration of research, pedagogical initiatives, and strategic planning for all gender and women's studies programs and departments across the UW System. She currently serves as the co-chair of a systemwide task force on caregiving and co-chairs the annual WGSC conference with the Office of the Gender and Women's Studies Librarian.



Miriam Greenwald