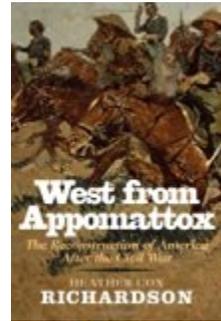


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Heather Cox Richardson. *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xi + 396 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11052-4.

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## All My Heroes Have Been Cowboys

While reading Heather Cox Richardson's book, I saw a bumper sticker featuring images of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, each in a ten-gallon hat, with the text "All My Heroes Have Been Cowboys." As it happens, Richardson's book explains and examines the origins and continuing resonance of such Western imagery in American political life.

*West from Appomattox* is geographical in its conception and framing. Richardson believes that historians have focused too heavily on the South and its racial problems in their efforts to understand the decades after the Civil War. Instead, she argues, her immersion in primary material from these years suggests that "the nation's strongest cultural images of the postwar years came from the West" (p. 4). The main conceit of the book is that the central ideological project of the post-Civil War decades (defining the proper relationship of the individual to the government) was closely interdependent with the central geographic project of the era (conquering the West). Richardson's book takes a fundamentally geographic approach to the spread of ideas. When the North won the war, its "free labor worldview" spread throughout the nation (p. 38). Though the South lost, its small government ideal similarly proved contagious. Ultimately, the reconciliation of the North and the South through the image of the West would produce a new American synthesis.

The West, Richardson argues, served a diversity of roles in the debate about the proper relationship between the individual and the government. It was, first and

foremost, a space on which northerners and southerners could project their different ideal societies and individuals. Its seemingly unlimited resources made it possible to imagine that the ideal was within reach for all worthy Americans. The West was also a "common ground" between North and South, which came to be imagined as the "spiritual heart of the nation," allowing for true reconciliation between the sections (p. 142). But if it was a common ground, the West was not a blank slate, and its own qualities shaped the type of individualism that could be projected upon it. Most important, it became apparent that this paradise of individualism could be achieved only through the robust application of the coercive power of the state, needed to suppress first the Indians and, quickly thereafter, the monopolies. The West became a model for what would be the specifically American version of individualism: the unfettered individual enabled and protected by a vigorous government.

The reunification of the nation around the image of the unfettered individual protected from dangerous special interests by a robust government was concurrent with the apotheosis of the West. Even as Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the end of the frontier, black cowboy Nat Love dismounted to become a Pullman porter, Comanche warrior Quanah turned his attention to winning government funds to build himself and his wives a "two-story ten-room house," and Americans scurried to build a national park system that would at least symbolically protect the West from exploitation, the idea of the West as the physical embodiment of a particularly

American version of individualism was at its strongest (p. 254). As northern and southern Americans developed a consensus that the worthy would prosper, as long as government protected them from the greedy and disaffected, they were inspired as much by Owen Wister's *The Virginian* as by Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*.

When nineteenth-century Americans referred to those worthy of prosperity, they increasingly meant the "middle class." Class, and particularly the consolidation of the middle class during these years, is a crucial theme in the book. The northern conviction that the interests of all classes were harmonious, already powerful in the antebellum years, became even stronger in the later nineteenth century. Drawing on the image of the Western individual, Richardson traces the process through which Americans increasingly rejected the political priorities of groups who did not subscribe to this consensus view, whether freedpeople, northern laborers, or western Populists. Lumping them together with monopolists as special interests trying to harness the government for their own selfish purposes, American voters and policymakers repeatedly denied their demands. At the same time, legislation that protected and benefited the emerging "middle class" came to be seen as for the common good and therefore desirable.

This book has many strengths, not least of which is that it is well written and well crafted. Richardson's scope is ambitious: she traces the circulation of an idea through all of the United States from the Civil War through the Spanish-American War, and it takes a good deal of structural discipline to hold such a large project together. She has structured her chapters with a strict chronology, devoting each to a span of one to seven years. Within each chapter, she generally devotes the first, and largest, part to exploring and developing the ways in which political and social problems in those years impacted ideas about the proper scope of government, and then the rest to exploring how events within or the idea of the West shaped the outcome of the debate. While this rigid chronology has its drawbacks, forcing her to split into segments processes that span several of her chapters, it does well in exposing relationships between concurrent subjects that have not usually been considered together, like how concerns about "radicalism" on the part of freedmen and northern workmen influenced support of women's rights (p. 111).

One of Richardson's challenges was to write a book that is fundamentally about the emergence and consolidation of a hegemonic idea without suppressing indi-

vidual voices and experiences. Two features of her book seem designed to resist depicting history as composed of "abstract Forces" and "Big Issues" (p. 6). First, she introduces and periodically returns to several individuals who lived through the period. To discuss the strength of free labor ideas in the antebellum northeast, for instance, she evokes Carl Schurz as a wide-eyed young immigrant (p. 21). To explore how this ideal became amalgamated with southern ideas of small government, she returns to Schurz, as he bolts the Republican ticket in 1872 (p. 124). Schurz reappears at crucial moments in subsequent chapters, as do other individuals like Julia Ward Howe, Andrew Carnegie, Charles Goodnight, and Quanah.

Similarly, Richardson's practice of frequently interspersing colorful and familiar details and anecdotes constructively interrupts her larger arguments. She manages to integrate an impressive number of details familiar even to readers not expert in the late nineteenth-century United States. Levi Strauss, *Little Women*, Coca-Cola, the Monopoly board game, the origin of the term "skim milk," the Bowery Boys, Joseph Pulitzer, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," the *Wizard of Oz*, Geronimo, and the Chicago World's Fair all make cameo appearances in the text. One exhilarating two-page spread manages to touch on the growth of baseball, *Ben Hur*, the modern wedding, and the origins of the Christmas tree (pp. 190-191). Since each of these references is already embedded in its own narrative in readers' minds, they not only give readers a sense of familiarity, but also work against the tendency of a strong central argument like Richardson's to flatten the period.

Still, for all of these efforts, I find that Richardson's account overstates the hegemonic power of the image of western individualism. Richardson's America at the beginning of Reconstruction was full of competing voices: freedpeople, labor unionists, Southern Democrats, women's rights advocates, western Indians, and others all challenged the northern white Republican view that the political-economic status quo was equitable and desirable. By the end of the century, however, the "dominance of the mainstream vision of American life" centering on the image of the westerner was "settled" (p. 307). The discourse consolidated in this era would "define what the nation would stand for, for the next century and beyond" (p. 349).

Richardson does not claim, of course, that all competing ideas were silenced, but the often tragic tone of her writing underemphasizes the continuing power of alternative strains. So, for instance, she sees women's rights

reformers as being sucked into the hegemonic discourse, as they began to frame their demands in terms of protecting the middle-class individual's family. The resignation of Elizabeth Cady Stanton from the National American Woman Suffrage Association signaled the definitive defeat of universal arguments for suffrage. "Suffrage was no longer about individual self determination; it was now tied into mainstream concerns about good government" (p. 266). While it is certainly correct that suffragists adopted a more conciliatory posture during these years, it would be equally legitimate to focus on the ways in which suffragist voices like Stanton's continued to challenge and undermine the consensus. Richardson's geographic conceit, while in some ways quite appealing, tends to obscure the continued presence of dissent. The text conceives of the spread of ideas in imperialistic terms without, I think, sufficiently acknowledging the ways in which discursive imperialism was a much more difficult, and less totalizing, process than military imperialism.

The book also reproduces American exceptionalism. This is fundamental to the project, which is driven largely by the question of why the United States developed such a unique model of the relationship between the individual and government. Richardson does discuss how

foreign policy matters and events outside of the United States shaped the evolution of America's particular construction of individualism. However, she does not focus on how ideas, thinkers, and models from outside of the United States influenced the debate. Many of the individuals upon whose stories she focuses, such as Schurz, Carnegie, Quanah, and Sitting Bull, were raised outside of the United States. While she does sometimes mention how their native ideas of the individual and government differed from those emerging in the United States, she does not work the analysis the other way, exploring how these foreign strains influenced the emerging consensus. More of a discussion of how American ideas were shaped by European, or even Native American, ideas in these years would productively complicate the narrative.

I will confess that I found Richardson's book depressing, in that it argues for the inevitability of the bumper sticker. Yet, at the same time, the book was undeniably engaging and stimulating, as it put a number of familiar events and figures from the period in new contexts and a new light. Richardson's book is daring in its scope and in the strength of its thesis, and even when one might disagree with some of its conclusions and emphases, it richly rewards a thorough read.

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