

# H-Net Reviews

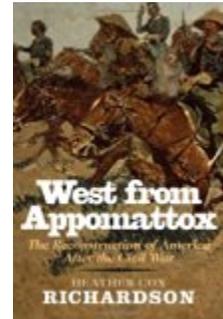
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



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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## America's Mainstream Middle: A Loose Baggy Monster?

Surely any historian writing on a period already studied, described, and analyzed at enormous length will seek to cast it in a new and original (up to a point) light. Heather Cox Richardson is no exception in her history of the United States in the last third of the nineteenth century, a span from Reconstruction through the Gilded Age to the beginning of the Progressive Era. Her main theme in *West from Appomattox* stresses that this period was one of struggle by a “mainstream” in American society to protect its fundamental vision of a “shared harmony of interest”—protect it, that is, against perceived threats from special interests that tried to capture government (p. 77). She believes that the mainstream triumphed by the end of the century and has a considerable legacy today.

Richardson often identifies that mainstream with a middle class, an identification I think may be too easy. She describes how the mainstream middle reacted to threats from above, when industrial interests pursued special favors like protective tariffs, resisted attempts at regulation, and used political corruption “to carve up the economy for their own benefit, destroying competition and stealing from other men their chance to rise” (p. 146).

The mainstream also pushed back against threats from below, where workers organized into groups that often rejected the notion of harmony and instead saw class conflict, and, whatever their ideology, pressed government to help them get higher wages and better work-

ing conditions. The mainstream also rejected claims from below by newly freed African Americans, who the mainstream saw as seeking more government assistance than was justified, even with the legacy of slavery, and who in the early part of the period dominated southern Reconstruction governments that “seemed to them to be controlled by the lazy poor who wanted wealth distribution” (p. 146).

The book has eleven chapters, including an introduction and epilogue. The nine main chapters have titles consisting of dates and a pithy phrase, e.g., “1873-1880: Years of Unrest” and “1893-1897: The Final Conquest.” Richardson relies heavily on the personal histories and memoirs of prominent individuals, including Wade Hampton, Julia Ward Howe, Jane Addams, Carl Schurz, Buffalo Bill, Quanah, Samuel Gompers, Booker T. Washington, and Theodore Roosevelt. She also introduces some people who are unfamiliar to most of us. Certainly, Richardson’s approach of focusing on the personal and including these persons’ own words to convey their history is useful. However, I would have preferred less personal history and more statistical information about aggregates and averages, along with more inclusion of the writings of social theorists of the period. By page 200, I began to tire of a few of the folks. Many other readers, undoubtedly, will prefer Richardson’s package.

Richardson repeatedly states her main argument in various passages throughout the book. One of the best

examples is from a chapter on the year 1872 (“A New Middle Ground”): “Those who adhered to the idea of a harmonious economy based on all working their way up together worried about the destruction of that system not only at the hands of labor agitators and southern reconstruction governments, but also at the hands of big businessmen” (p. 128). Richardson uses the same sort of language over and over again, and frankly it does sometimes get tiresome. As early as 1867, “Starting a trend that would continue throughout the rest of the century, in the 1867 elections, voters endorsed the free labor vision of economic harmony and rejected the idea of government aid to specific groups” (p. 67). In the 1870s, “The idea of structural economic or racial or gender inequalities made little sense to people who still thought of the world in small town terms” (p. 164). In the 1880s, “Mainstream Americans could not accept that poor wages, dangerous working conditions, racism, lack of capital, or environmental disasters could keep hardworking individuals from success. Instead, they tried to force organized workers, agitating African Americans, Indians, and disaffected farmers to adopt an individualist vision. But even more troublesome for those insisting on economic harmony in America were business interests” (p. 207). In the 1890s, there was a “widening gulf between mainstream workers and those who believed that the government had to broker class conflict,” and the silver controversy showed the division between “those who wanted a government responsive to the needs of different groups ... and those who wanted the government to stay aloof from special interests” (pp. 283-284).

Eventually, however, the mainstream began to accept and even strive for a more activist government to protect its own individualist values. The mainstream focused on antitrust, pensions for veterans and dependents, food and drug regulation, child labor laws, limits on working hours for women, increased regulation, and, in general, the legislation that we identify as “Progressive.” The vision that won out was one in which “hardworking individualists could rise together, protected by an activist government that curbed business and organized labor—as well as any other group trying to harness government—and also protected the individualist family.... [M]ainstream Americans had come to believe that many [individuals] would fail, that this was their own fault, and that they should be isolated from power before they destroyed society. At the same time, rich businessmen who would buy the government and turn the nation into their own fiefdom must be curbed” (pp. 300-301).

As the century wore on, Richardson says, the op-

ponents of government action in favor of special interests “self-consciously coalesced into a middle class, setting aside the idea of opportunity for all in favor of the concept of individualism, personified by the mythologized ‘self-made man,’ who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps” (p. 345). The self-made man opposed the influence of both organized labor and big business on government, and also opposed “black rights activism” (p. 345). Unfortunately, as Richardson makes clear, the mainstream tolerated extreme inequality; the blatant violation of civil rights, including lynching, in the South; and limitations on suffrage in the North. And, of course, this group also tolerated imperialism, as America imposed its blend of individualism and muscular government on other parts of the world. Richardson puts a great deal of weight on the enthusiasm for the Spanish-American War and the continuing romantic image of the rugged West as vital ingredients of this vision. She notes that “Roosevelt and the Progressives came down hard on disaffected Americans” (p. 339).

Richardson and the publicists for her press point out that this book provides full coverage of the West, but frankly that puzzles me. Why *would not* a book on the period pay a lot of attention to the West? The influence of the West on Roosevelt, on which Richardson dwells, is well known. Actually, though the West plays its expected part in the book, the train there is slow; by page 147, the reader has reached only 1872 and has spent only about twenty-six pages in the West. Among other roles, a critical role was the region’s *image*. By 1900, the middle class “retained a vision of America as a land of individualism,” even as they demanded an activist national government working in their own interest, and “[t]his contradiction was possible because of the blinding postwar image of the American West” (p. 5).

There is a “once over lightly” flavor to many passages in Richardson’s study, and some quick generalizations that are problematic. Some of these generalizations are startling: “By 1883, corporations determined what people ate, what they wore, how they got to work, how they illuminated their homes” (p. 208). “In 1886, the illumination of the torch of the Statue of Liberty showed optimistic New Yorkers—and other Americans—that the nation could accomplish anything if only the government didn’t fall prey to special interests” (p. 231). At that very time, “Large corporations dominated most industries.... Trusts were the order of the day for industrialists....” (p. 232). By the way, the discussion of the Sherman Act ignores the Act’s important section 2, which outlaws monopolizing or attempts to monopolize but does not mention

the legal instrument of a “trust” (“trusts” are mentioned explicitly in section 1 of the Act). Section 2 provided an important basis for some of the famous early cases brought under the Act. The relatively brief treatment of the general state of the nation in 1901—that is, the nation that finally resulted from the processes Richardson has described—compared to the detail (minutiae, even) of earlier decades disappointed me. The reader’s biggest question after putting the book down (whether he or she puts it down after page 150, or after page 250, or at the very end) will be: Just how homogeneous was this mainstream middle? Is “coalesce” really the right verb to describe how this mainstream developed? A fuller description of the end result might have strengthened Richardson’s claims about the mainstream’s character and about the usefulness of the concept in the first place. Or, maybe it would have revealed such heterogeneity in the “mainstream” as to cast doubt. Perhaps the mainstream middle was really a “loose baggy monster,” to borrow Henry James’s description of big sprawling novels.

An attractive feature of the book and one of Richardson’s best contributions is the extensive discussion of women and their hopes, groups, and leaders. Again, her use of personal histories is appealing. In the early part of the period, the mainstream’s attitude was marked by suspicion of women’s movements as just more special interests. But over time, the most successful women leaders learned to pitch their appeal as one for government aid to women in their traditional domestic roles—for example, in fights for consumer protection, sanitation, and safe streets.

Richardson also provides detail on national politics—Republicans vs. Democrats, Republicans vs. Republicans, and Democrats vs. Democrats. The attention to Schurz, long a particular kind of Republican, contributes to the

detail. However, Richardson includes little on state and local governments as opposed to the federal government, except for material on Reconstruction governments in the South. She is much less detailed on economics, especially on the depressions of the 1870s and 1890s and the silver question. For example, the remark about the silver question that I quoted above seems on the face of it to ignore the heterogeneity of the “middle.” Other examples of a relative lack of attention to economic history are the many numbers without any comparison that make them meaningful to a reader in 2007—like a comparison to a per capita number of the time, the average wage of the time, or the corresponding amount in today’s dollars. Examples where these comparisons would have been valuable are numbers for prices, wages, aggregate tariff revenues, acres in various crops, value of real estate owned by African Americans, and others.

Despite my criticisms, I think Richardson’s book will be especially valuable to readers who already know—or think they know!—the basic outlines of the period. Richardson writes in an engaging, breezy style. The book is easy to read, either as “the whole thing,” as a conscientious reviewer reads, or in chunks with skips between, the latter strategy less risky than it might seem because Richardson repeats her main points many times. I think every scholar interested in the period should look at *West from Appomattox* carefully—at least some large chunks of it. I learned a lot from reading the book and enjoyed a good part of the time I spent doing it. Even when readers disagree with Richardson, or wish for a different balance, they should appreciate her particular take on the era as a valuable addition to the literature. Readers will benefit from being induced to evaluate her main theme, and from her attention to real people, including women, as they speak to us in their own voices.

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