

*directly and necessarily* lead to this behavior that shocks the conscience of polite society.

Rothman's answer to the timeless question "What is to be done?" (asked by Lenin over a century ago as he contemplated his own society on the cusp of violent convulsion) is multilateral disarmament. Race-blind, individualist meritocrats on both the center-left and center-right must ostracize and expel the identitarians in their ranks, a process for which he cites hopeful precedent in Buckley's banishment of the Birchers and the American Federation of Labor's lustration of its Stalinists.

Indeed, if I could select just one book to hand to a complacent centrist on either side of the aisle—a book that will wake them up to the wolf at the door—it would be *Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America*.

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### **Democracy and Truth: A Short History**

Sophia Rosenfeld

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When news organizations focus on eyeballs and clicks, presidents scream "fake news," and "pay-for-play" think tanks generate seemingly disinterested policy papers, can citizens possibly know the truth? And if not, is democracy still possible?

These are the questions University of Pennsylvania intellectual historian Sophia Rosenfeld asks in *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*. Professor Rosenfeld anchors her arguments in her area of academic expertise, the French Enlightenment and its later variant, Scottish "common sense" theory. Her understanding of the Enlightenment's *philosophes* becomes the foil against which she measures contemporary liberal democratic practice. As one might expect, current practice falls desperately short. Over the course of the book, Rosenfeld becomes more the contemporary political theorist and less the intellectual historian, and it is in this light that her book should be read.

Our ideas of both democracy and the democratic citizen, Rosenfeld suggests, rests on the *philosophes'* attempt to root out "the deceptive institutions, social norms, and language games" that kept

all nations and peoples in “superstitious ignorance.” The *philosophes*’ answer was to confront all failed orthodoxies with reason and thereby slay the false gods (and power) of absolutist monarchy, inherited aristocracies, and the Catholic Church. In their newly liberated world, Rosenfeld argues, the *philosophes* predicted “liberty and equality would go hand and hand with a commitment to demonstrable evidence and accuracy.” Access to truth would emerge from transparent institutions and open debate. Citizens would increase their civic competency, and more competent citizens would strengthen representative democracy. While not fail proof, this virtuous cycle was the attainable end of the Enlightenment project.

Despite the attractiveness of this vision, Rosenfeld concludes that the Enlightenment model contained the seeds of its own opposition and, in our current stage of capitalism, is no longer a plausible theoretical grounding for democracy.

First, Rosenfeld suggests that the marriage of empirical reason and “common sense” will inevitably create a problem for democratic equality. As knowledge becomes more cumulative and complex, experts will become “epistemic authorities” and over time become embedded in bureaucracies, universities, and other distant institutions. Distance and expertise itself must remove these elites from the fabric of everyday life and invite populist backlash and political manipulation. Whenever there are social and economic problems, a popular sense of betrayal will separate reason (experts) from “common sense” (the populace), undercutting both and opening up the probability of anti-liberal and anti-democratic populism. Over time, the loss of trusted arbiters will create a vacuum in which fake news and real news become mere matters of choice or identity.

Here the reader will feel Donald Trump looming in the background, but Rosenfeld is quick to point out that we can apply this understanding to earlier periods of modernity and also to many other polities in the contemporary world.

Second, Rosenfeld seems to believe what we call truth is a manufactured narrative created by the contending interests and very unequal relationships that comprise what she calls “late capitalism.” For anyone who has watched even a few nights of TV news, it’s difficult to argue with her critique of cable news, talk radio, and the business models of contemporary “news entertainment.” So corrupted and corrupting are these institutions that Rosenfeld concludes they can only be solved by changing both democracy and capitalism “in tandem.”

By this time, Rosenfeld has moved beyond intellectual history and into the realm of contemporary political analysis, but I would argue a bit of additional intellectual history might help the reader in evaluating her case. Since it is the current American condition that seems to animate the book, it is worth remembering that the American Enlightenment was rooted in a different set of assumptions about human nature and thus a different set of appropriate institutions. The classic statement of the American Enlightenment's constitutional theory, the Federalist Papers—especially Federalist 10 and 51 (Madison)—recognized that interests, passions, and factions were sown into the nature of human beings and will always be part of any open society. Thus, Madison welcomed the multiplication of interests, religions, and ideologies in an extended national republic precisely because no one group could gain a permanent monopoly on power. Allow for a separate national government distinct from each of the state governments. Create within the national government separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches capable of checking and balancing each other. Finally, within the legislative branch itself, have one house elected by the people and one by the states. “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition,” Madison wrote, “a republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government.” Notice, there is not a word here about virtue or reason. Both are desirable over time but not always necessary for the republic to survive.

In slightly different forms, these arguments continued to inform American political thought. Walt Whitman (*Democratic Vistas*, 1871), one of our most fulsome egalitarian optimists, argued that democratic voters were largely “crude, superstitious, and rotten.” James Bryce (*American Commonwealth*, 1894) perhaps our first empirical political scientist, found “little solidity and substance to the average voter.” Mid-20th century American political scientists such as V.O. Key, E.E. Schattschneider, and Theodore Lowi all found interest groups embedded in parties and public bureaucracies to be the energy pushing public policy. Later behaviorists Paul Lazarsfeld, Philip Converse, and Angus Campbell concluded that the policy views and commitments of average voters were quite thin and often contradictory. And current election modelers often have ignored ideas and policy preferences altogether. Professor Alan Abramowitz, who has predicted correctly every presidential election since 1988, weights second quarter GDP growth, incumbent popularity during

that same month (whether or not he or she is on the November ballot), and the number of consecutive terms the incumbent party has held the presidency. He accurately predicts November's winner, all without even knowing the candidates, their messages, or their party platforms. Abramowitz's success suggests that our citizenry is more like Aristotle's *Demos* in Book III of the *Politics*, at best able to tell us if the shoe pinches rather than an informed electorate able to design a better fit.

All of this suggests an alternative, neither pessimistic nor optimistic, to Rosenfeld's Enlightenment ideal. Elites, elected or not, can make use of empirical knowledge to help make policy. Governing parties will have an incentive to create outcomes that are pleasant enough that most voters will not feel ignored, while the party out of power will have an incentive to offer plausible alternatives. Abuses of power can be exposed by competing media outlets and by competing political elites. Witness the recent mid-term election and the contemporary fight over the border wall. The democratic republic offered checks and balances, avenues for alternative policy choices, opportunity for citizen engagement, and openings for new elites to enter the fray with a different set of narratives. The performance might not have satisfied a French *philosophe* but an American Madisonian might feel a bit vindicated.

Given Rosenfeld's fear that truth necessarily has been abandoned in "late capitalist" institutions, it is worth noting that she does not see "post-modernist" philosophies currently dominant in universities as similar threats to either truth or democracy. This is not for want of understanding. Rosenfeld offers interesting discussions of Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Thomas Kuhn, and Peter L. Berger chipping away at the idea of objective truth in favor of a "social construction of reality"—a reality that almost always serves the needs of the society's most powerful. And indeed, the Madisonian arguments offered above might seem in this light as nothing but an apologia for existing ruling-class interests. Nonetheless, Rosenfeld accepts that post-modern theory, if it really mattered, might undercut the Enlightenment quest for unvarnished truth and leave in its stead only a "will to power." However, she seems to dismiss the entire activity as academic scribbling largely contained within the university walls and of no real concern.

I fear she underestimates academia's influence. Today's student cutting off a visiting campus speaker because his or her views hide a

“rigged system” is tomorrow’s activist at a New York city town hall shouting down Amazon, or a Trump supporter busting up a peaceful protest outside a campaign rally. Illiberal ideology leads to illiberal acts, and these are indeed a threat to democratic institutions outside of the ivy-covered walls.

Nonetheless, *Democracy and Truth* is a useful and challenging book offering serious critiques of contemporary news and information gathering. It could be profitably read with Christopher Achen and Larry Bartel’s *Democracy for Realists*, a text that grapples with many of the same questions but written from the perspectives of a political scientist and an economist rather than an Enlightenment intellectual historian. These are important questions, especially at a time when so many liberal democratic norms are being challenged.

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