

Democracy as Creative Practice

WEAVING A CULTURE OF CIVIC LIFE

Edited by
TOM BORRUP and ANDREW ZITCER



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE SERIES



DEMOCRACY AS CREATIVE PRACTICE

Democracy as Creative Practice: Weaving a Culture of Civic Life offers arts-based solutions to the threats to democracies around the world, practices that can foster more just and equitable societies. Chapter authors are artists, activists, curators, and teachers applying creative and cultural practices in deliberate efforts to build democratic ways of working and interacting in their communities in a range of countries including the United States, Australia, Portugal, Nepal, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The book demonstrates how creativity is integrated in place-based actions, aesthetic strategies, learning environments, and civic processes. As long-time champions and observers of community-based creative and cultural practices, editors Tom Borrup and Andrew Zitcer elucidate work that not only responds to sociopolitical conditions but advances practice. They call on artists, funders, cultural organizations, community groups, educational institutions, government, and others to engage in and support this work that fosters a culture of democracy.

This book is intended for undergraduate and graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, activists, funders, and artists who seek to understand and effect change on local and global scales to preserve, extend, and improve practices of democracy.

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Weaving a Culture of Civic Life

Edited by Tom Borrup and Andrew Zitcer

First published 2025
by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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ISBN: 978-1-032-75873-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-75872-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-47599-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003475996

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, EDITORS' NOTES, AND POSITIONALITY

The editors would first like to acknowledge that, as cisgender white men and citizens of the United States, we have benefited from the theft of lands from Indigenous peoples and the genocidal and exploitative policies of colonial and US governments and other actors. Further, we acknowledge the taking of people from Africa by these same actors; people forced into brutal slavery for over 200 years to build the economy and infrastructure of the United States upon which our comfortable lives, livelihoods, and communities now stand. Extraction and misuse of natural resources from these lands and others around the world – from which we have also benefited – have led to untold natural disasters and human strife still unfolding across the globe in new and devastating ways.

Motivated by the higher ideals of democracy and human rights, and by a multitude of threats against those ideals, this book turns to hopeful progressive practices that we argue can improve and sustain daily lives and build more just and inclusive institutions of democracy.

We'd like to thank those most responsible for this book: the authors of the chapters, foreword, and section introductions. Not only have they shared intelligent and compelling reflections, but in their careers have devised, championed, studied, and participated in creative cultural practices that address social and community healing and contribute to practices of democracy in daily life as well as in explicitly political arenas. Without their generous contributions of time and experience, this book would not exist. We also acknowledge their work is built on decades and more of similar practices that have been under-recognized. This is partly because they challenge institutions of white privilege, hierarchical structures, and extractive economies and cultural practices. We celebrate enduring contributions to the advancement of this work, not only by artists, but by colleagues including Don Adams, Caron Atlas, Dudley Cocks, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Arlene Goldbard, Pam Korza, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, and others.

A special note of remembrance for Diane Ragsdale, whose elegant words grace these pages. She died suddenly and unexpectedly in her home at age 57 during the final preparation of this manuscript. Her long and enduring contributions to the field are valued.

The book contains the voices of 37 individual writers and, while diverse and from multiple countries, many voices are not included. Limitations of space and, in some cases, lack of compensation available for artists and independent writers made it impossible for some potential authors to devote the time. We regret these limitations while taking pride in the voices and ideas we are able to bring forward.

As you will read in our individual discussions of our backgrounds and motivations, the ideas in this book come from decades of experiences working with, observing, and valuing the work of artist-activists, artist-teachers, artist-leaders, artist-thinkers, artist-scholars, and other artists who not only generate light from darkness but do so together with others to illuminate and spread joy, honesty, beauty, understanding, empathy, and action.

In addition to the writers, we also acknowledge the contributions of many who gave support, ideas, and encouragement, including: Kiley Arroyo, Caron Atlas, Barbara Schaffer Bacon, Melissa Bond, Anuja Bose, Aaron Javicas, Theresa Jordan, Pam Korza, David O'Fallon, Gyonggu Shin; with Routledge, Kate Schell, Francesca Ford, Adhilakshmi Parasuraman, and Selena Hostetler; and numerous anonymous reviewers who provided critical feedback and encouragement.

Throughout this book, the terms “citizen” and “citizenship” occasionally appear generally referring to the empowered and active roles people take in their communities. Given long histories of disenfranchisement in various countries, growing numbers of migrants – including those fleeing climate and political crises, searching for safe havens and new homes – lack the legal status of “citizen” in most countries where they seek refuge. The word “citizen” can thus exclude many people. That is certainly not the intent of the authors or editors.

Andrew's Positionality

A longtime resident of West Philadelphia, I take inspiration from the neighborhoods' unique geography, renowned for artistic and cultural expression, racial and economic diversity, and a progressive political orientation. The presence of wealthy residents also means ongoing gentrification and studentification. At the same time, West Philadelphia struggles with urban problems, including educational inequality, access to quality jobs, gun violence, housing instability, and income inequality.

My personal and intellectual history is inseparable from the story of these neighborhoods. As an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, I helped conceive of the Rotunda, a community arts center designed to bring together campus and community. Housed in a former church at the western edge of Penn's campus, the Rotunda hosts thousands of patrons per year and serves as a community gathering place for the promotion of arts and culture. The Rotunda hosts important community meetings, film festivals, folkloric performance series, free jazz

improvisation, hip-hop open mics, puppetry, and so much more. Penn subsidizes the Rotunda out of its real estate budget (it is the equivalent of a rounding error in a very large pot of money), so virtually all of the events are free to the public. For several years, I oversaw the work of the Rotunda from its first live events. Working for Penn after graduating with a bachelor's degree, I took on the title of Cultural Asset Manager, and in this capacity helped expand community cultural offerings along the 40th Street corridor, including an art gallery and an artist in residency program, through 2008. These programs have proven durable; all of them still exist in some form today.

In the early 2000s, I began to study urban planning, curious about the intersections between arts and community development. This academic trajectory ultimately led to a PhD in urban planning and public policy from Rutgers University, and a faculty position at West Philadelphia's own Drexel University, where I presently direct the Urban Strategy masters program, which I helped to found and for which I helped write the curriculum.

Over the years, I have benefited richly from my work with Philadelphia cultural institutions, including the Paul Robeson House (Robeson's last residence before his death), Headlong Dance Theater, the Calvary Center for Culture and Community, and Kol Tzedek Synagogue. These organizations and the other projects I have undertaken have taught me the value of cooperation, culture, community, and democracy, for which I am so grateful.

Tom's Positionality

Many threads throughout my life have led me to the ideas and the work described in this book. A distinct turn took place in 2017, when I was invited to give a keynote address at an Urban Design Forum in Gwangju, South Korea. The forum's theme was *Putting Culture and Humanity in Urban Design*. Prior to this time, I knew nothing of the tragic and powerful history of Gwangju in the movement for democracy in South Korea. As I learned more, it seemed fitting to integrate democracy into my talk. I had been working with ideas around *aesthetic justice* in urban design and thought I might incorporate ideas around *aesthetic democracy* as an approach to working toward aesthetic justice, leading me to think more about how practices of democracy manifest in many professional arenas.

Social activism and creative expression were intuitive for me from a young age. During political turbulence in the United States in the late 1960s, I rallied friends in high school to publish "underground newspapers." My 1970s college experiences involved social activist video, film, and radio at Goddard College, a small non-traditional school inspired by the ideas of John Dewey. Subsequently, I involved myself in public access television, food cooperatives, and experimenting as editor of a weekly small-town newspaper as a platform for community engagement. Beginning in 1980, and for 22 years, I led a nonprofit community arts center in Minneapolis focused initially on media arts. As it grew, Intermedia Arts took on a

wide range of cultural and creative forms. During this time ideas around *cultural democracy* caught my interest as I actively participated in national networks of media and social change artists and organizations, including the work of Animating Democracy. From the mid-1980s I was active in city politics and neighborhood organizing through asset-based community development practices.

During the 20 years since leaving Intermedia Arts, I worked in community and cultural planning often with artists to facilitate dialogue and engage people in co-creation activities. While straddling the arts and community development worlds, I found an enormous gulf between these professions regardless of how much they shared similar values and goals. In response, and to try to build greater collaboration and synergy, in 2006 I published *The Creative Community Builder's Handbook: How to Transform Communities Using Local Assets, Arts, and Culture*. Seeing a lack of deep understanding and appreciation of the varieties and nuances of human cultures in city planning practices, I published *The Power of Culture in City Planning in 2021*. Similarly, as motivation for this book, it was clear that creative and cultural practices are not often aligned with other efforts to build more robust and equitable democracies, and I believe greater synergy can and must be built to benefit from the valuable contributions artists can bring.

FOREWORD: FAST FORWARD FROM 1914 – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

I'm writing this during my annual visit to Sauk City, Wisconsin, a community important to the book you're about to read. It's a village of some 3,500 people in the southwestern part of the state, politically "leaning conservative," the oldest incorporated village in the state, and home of a German Freethinkers Society founded in 1852. It looks like one of any number of small midwestern communities. You'd never guess that George Creel, a writer for *Harper's Weekly*, in 1914 proclaimed it to be "America's Foremost City."

Creel came from New York to attend a community pageant, and began his article thus:

On October 3rd, 1914, about four thousand men, women, and children in the town of Sauk City, Wisconsin, gave over the whole sunny day to a pageant interpretation of events as richly significant as the rifle shot at Concord or the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

(Creel, 1914, p. 495)

Perhaps I should back up a little. No doubt, in every era there is creative ferment, and I've had special interest in that ferment in the United States in the early part of the 20th century. Let's take a look at some of the things happening then, ideas that, to me, came together in the Sauk City pageant.

America was trying to figure out who it was. What democracy was all about. The Statue of Liberty was dedicated in 1886; its words, so stirring to many – "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" – were starkly contrasted with opinions such as that expressed in the *African American Cleveland Gazette*:

Liberty enlightening the world, indeed! The expression makes us sick. This government is a howling farce. It can not or rather does not protect its citizens within its own borders. Shove the Bartholdi statue, torch and all, into the ocean until the “liberty” of this country is such as to make it possible for an inoffensive and industrious colored man to earn a respectable living for himself and family, without being ku-kluxed, perhaps murdered, his daughter and wife outraged, and his property destroyed.

(Postponing Bertholdi's statue . . . , 1886)

As immigrants flooded into the United States, the Settlement House movement was a response, a way of helping immigrants gain a foothold and become active citizens. Initially articulated in Great Britain, the first Settlement House was in New York, though the most famous was Chicago's Hull House where its founder, Jane Addams, according to Jeffrey Scheuer, added democracy to its core functions,

extending democratic principles beyond the political sphere and into other aspects of society. Addams . . . saw that political democracy had failed to eliminate poverty and class distinctions; workers had no place to congregate, to organize, to enjoy cultural or social activities, or to learn. The settlement was conceived as such a place.

(Scheuer, 1985)

At the same time, at Harvard, George Pierce Baker was urging his students to inspire people locally to write and produce their own plays – a revolutionary idea at the time. One of his students was Frederick Koch, whose “folk plays” movement in North Carolina encouraged people to write the real story of community life: the result was plays about workers' strikes, life in African American communities, life in Mexican communities, and life in rural North Carolina, all written by people of these communities. Another student was dramatist Alexander Drummond of Cornell University, who believed that as an employee of a land grant institution, he had a responsibility to help rural people write and produce plays about their lives. Drummond, in turn, influenced his graduate student, Robert E. Gard, who took this idea to Wisconsin in 1945. Another student was Hallie Flanagan, head of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Federal Theatre Project, which included “living newspapers” about issues of the day, from housing to race, as well as new plays that challenged old ideas, and a host of plays in various languages that toured to rural areas.

Meanwhile, pageantry was being employed as an urban planning tool. Chapters in *American Historical Pageantry* (Glassberg, 1990) include “The Place Is the Hero,” “Community Development Is the Plot,” and “To Explain the City to Itself.” Percy MacKaye was a playwright who was also a passionate champion of the democratic ideal. In 1912 he said, “True democracy is vitally concerned with beauty, and true art is vitally concerned with citizenship” (MacKaye, 1909).

He was hired by several cities to produce pageants to help citizens look ahead. I'd thought that pageantry was an urban phenomenon; but one day I was browsing in the Sauk City public library, saw photos of their pageant, and realized it was a rural phenomenon, too.

Then there's the theme of Progressive politics in the upper Midwest. In Wisconsin, the "Wisconsin Idea" represented a collaboration between State and University, a path to helping make Governor "Fighting Bob" LaFollette's vision that Wisconsin should become the most democratic state in America. University Extension arts played a part early in the century. The Bureau of Community Drama was headed by Ethel Rockwell, director of the Sauk City pageant. The Bureau of Community Music was headed by "Pop" Gordon, who believed that bringing different groups together to form community singing societies would help bridge cultural and political differences. The "Insurgent Theater" was conceived by Professor Thomas Dickenson in the 1910s. Reflecting on his work decades later, he wrote, "there is absolutely no question of the organic association of the spirit of our work with LaFollette progressivism. My chief interest was in the outworking of democracy, of which I considered the theatre the workshop" (Gard, 1955). This work was so successful that in 1945 Robert E. Gard, playwright (and – full disclosure – my father) was hired to help people uncover their creativity through writing and drama; he called this work the Wisconsin Idea Theatre. All this work laid the foundation for Gard's groundbreaking view of the role of the arts in broader, values-based community development (Gard et al., 1969).

Edward J. Ward, active in the Social Center Movement, recorded the discussion of the Center idea at the National Municipal League's conference in Buffalo (Ward, 1915). My historian friend, Gwen Drury, wrote in a personal communication to me:

The motto of the Social Center Movement was "From the corners to the center." Proponents wanted people from opposite political views and social statuses, and even racial groups, to have a place where they could get to know each other face to face and use that diversity of viewpoints to discuss the issues and build the best self-governing democracy possible. Theirs was one of the first uses of the term "social capital."

Ward was brought to the University of Wisconsin in 1909 to create the Bureau of Civic and Social Development in the Extension division. In nearby Sauk City, a couple of years before the pageant, Ward led a four-day Community Institute to explore how people of all ages, backgrounds, and perspectives could together create a great community. One of the outcomes of this Institute was the decision to transform Sauk City's school building "into a headquarters of the Whole People where men, women, and children may come to talk, think, act, play, laugh, dance, and deliberate" (Creel, 1914). The village government conferred the title of Village Social Secretary on the principal of the school.

Which brings us back to the “Social Center Pageant” of 1914. The cover page of the script, written by Zona Gale (later a Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright) says:

A Social Center Pageant and Processional: Celebrating the Transfer of the Ballot Box from the Town Hall to the Public Schoolhouse

An Event which definitely Signalizes the Perception that Government is no longer merely the Selection of Agents for Repression But is the All-Inclusive and Living Fellowship of Citizens in a Creative Process of Self-Education.

(Gale, 1914)

The show began with a glimpse at how the Indigenous Sac and Fox tribal groups had found common ground to defuse conflict. Then scenes – taking place in various parts of town as the audience moved along with the show – traced the community’s history from tribal days to the appearance of French and then Germans who settled quickly into conflict based on culture and politics. The character of Nobody appeared:

Into the turmoil slunk a . . . gloomy figure who announced: “Nobody is to blame. I am Nobody. The town, you say, is dead; no welcome is there here; your lives, you say are bleak . . . the things that should be done are left undone. Why? Because what’s everybody’s business is mine. I am Nobody.”

(Gale, 1914)

In the final scene of the show, played in front of the village hall, the door of the hall burst open and the principal, carrying the village ballot box, led the children of the school in a procession – followed by the cast and audience – to the school building where the ballot box would be installed as a symbol that the school was to be the crucible of democracy, not only as a place for voting, but also a place where the next generation of voters would learn about democratic participation in both political and social life. The building would become a setting for community social gatherings, discussion, music, the public library, an employment bureau, and more – it would become the place of “Whole People,” a place where “The immigrant group can be tapped for its rich [culture] . . . so that not only the native-born be enriched and broadened, but the alien given that absolutely essential sense of belonging” (Creel, 1914).

While there’s no evidence of voter intimidation in Sauk City, the pageant took place during a time of threats against voters in the United States. Guards were posted at ballot boxes in some cities, as there were brawls at some polling places, and the invention of the voting machine around 1910 brought anxiety.

I see many ideas and ideals swirling around in the United States during the early part of the 20th century, as well as parallels to today. These came together in the Sauk City pageant. I see the struggle to articulate what democracy really means, what “liberty and justice for all” means. The struggle to create a meaningful life

for everyone – rich or poor; elderly or young; Indigenous, long-time families or newcomers. The struggle to create truly representative government in which participation by anyone was welcomed. The understanding of the purpose of education. The dawning recognition that everyone had important stories and creativity and yearned to have a voice. The wrestling with ways that divisiveness could be addressed. The need for physical spaces in which people could speak and listen, work and play together, and come to understand what fellowship in community can mean. The valuing of “whole people.” And the role the arts could play in all this.

These are questions facing communities and democratic institutions around the world today. There may be a different vocabulary and new questions raised by technology, immigration, globalization, family fragmentation, genetic modification, mobility, climate change, and personal identity. However, ongoing struggles around race, civil rights, justice, authoritarianism, and social inequity continue.

Artist-activist Judith Malina (1990) wrote that the role of the artist follows the needs of changing times:

- In time of social stasis: to activate
- In time of germination: to invent fertile new forms
- In time of revolution: to extend the possibilities of peace and liberty
- In time of violence: to make peace
- In time of despair: to give hope
- In time of silence: to sing out

In the pages that follow, you’ll explore the roles of creativity and big ideas and big ideals. You’ll read powerful stories.

Can we harness these in our communities? Of course we can. The artist-activists in the pages to follow challenge us to unleash creativity and access courage to make the promise of democracy real and meaningful for everyone.

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INTRODUCTION

The Unraveling of Democracy and Reweaving Civic Life

Modern liberal democracies around the globe are fragile, as many, including in the United States, are now learning firsthand. This prompts us to ask, what strategies and practices can help weave a stronger civic fabric – to build a *culture of democracy*? Observers over the past two centuries have articulated that this fabric must be much thicker than occasional visits to the ballot box; that democracy builds from daily individual and interpersonal actions. In other words, the strongest democracies grow from personal behaviors that are interwoven in community and organizational life and ways of working together.

Nearly a century ago, pragmatist social philosopher John Dewey warned that regardless of adherence to the ideals of democracy, without active participation and the practice of its norms, democratic systems and ways of life unravel. Dewey wrote, “for a long period we acted as if our democracy were something that perpetuated itself automatically; as if our ancestors had succeeded in setting up a machine that solved the problem of perpetual motion in politics” (1939, p. 1). Dewey was writing during the rise of Nazism in Europe and went on to warn of forces, “breeding hate, suspicion, intolerance in the minds of individual human beings” (p. 3) that mere guarantees of liberties will not protect. The political winds of that time are, sadly, resurfacing and resurging.

The stories and analysis in this book highlight creative and cultural practices that seed and foster norms and practices that promote a culture of democracy as well as action in support of its institutions at a critical time. *Democracy as Creative Practice: Weaving a Culture of Civic Life* showcases contributions made by artists and others to strengthen and forge more just, equitable, and sustainable democracies. The 16 stories that follow range from public artists in Australia and creative youth workers in Los Angeles, to teaching artists in Minnesota, to a public spectacle curator in Portugal, and many others. All point to the same conclusion: creative and

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cultural practices have taken, and *can* take, even more substantive roles to enhance civic life and critical practices of democracy. As Maryo Gard Ewell described in the Foreword, these efforts are not new but have been marginalized in favor of aesthetic and cultural practices that reinforce dominant economic and social interests. They have not been provided the attention and support they deserve, and they are now so desperately needed.

In this Introduction, we explore some of the broader threats to democracy, look at relationships between democracy and creative practices, elaborate on what we mean by practices of democracy, examine how democracies can be enhanced through creative artistic practices, and introduce the contents of the book. Questions we explore include: What is a *culture of democracy*, and how does it become part of daily life and routine activities? What contributions are culture bearers and artists making to build more robust and equitable democracies? How can the work of these artists and culture bearers be better recognized, understood, enhanced, and supported?

Social policy scholar Paul Spicker (2008) distills democracy into three major elements. The first is the *ideal* of democracy, “such as the sovereignty of the people, the popular will and individual consent” (p. 251). The second addresses *norms* or everyday social practices and approaches to decision-making, including practices of deliberative democracy, cooperation, equity, and inclusion. His third category includes *systems* of government, legal structures including electoral models, “in which people choose representatives who are accountable to them” (p. 252). Recognizing that these three elements are interconnected and cannot exist independently, political scientist Richard Kimber (1989) describes the importance of “a requirement to behave democratically” He goes on to write, “Of course, the only way of institutionalizing this [behavior] is through the legal system of the regime; but the legal system itself is not enough. There must also exist accepted norms” (pp. 210, 211). As Kimber points out, the *ideal* alone does not ensure rights, and *systems* without *norms* are not on solid ground. Reflecting on what has become known as the January 6 Insurrection in Washington, D.C. – an event that nearly toppled democracy in the United States – it is evident that the actions of, or norms adhered to by, a relatively small number of people held the system together.

Working in community settings the past few decades has led us to appreciate multiple ways creative practices contribute to community and civic life, fertilizing the soil in which robust local democracies take root and flourish. In fact, such work goes beyond preparing the soil to fully engaging people in meaningful activities that constitute daily practices of democracy. Some artists and culture bearers, through their individual or organizational work – as well as some community activists who employ creative and culturally based practices – articulate their work with the intention of strengthening democracy to make it more just and inclusive. Others do not describe their work as such, but know they are adding critical threads that build on participation in democratic community life and helping people become potent actors in civic arenas.

Threats to Democracy

That democracies around the world are under threat is not news. Recent events, however, are but a symptom of a longer-term assault by authoritarian movements and antidemocratic global capital. It is important to explore the contours of these threats to remain attuned to their ever-evolving character.

Democracies failed in Europe during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and there is evidence some may do so again, according to Timothy Snyder, Yale historian of German, Eastern European, and Russian histories. In his 2017 book, *On Tyranny*, Snyder warns, “the bad news is that the history of modern democracy is also one of decline and fall” (p. 10). He points out that fascism in Europe came about in the last century in response to real and perceived inequalities created by globalization, “and the apparent helplessness of the democracies in addressing them” (p. 12). Rising inequalities and fears of globalization are again afoot, and Snyder goes on to warn that Americans in the 21st century, “are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism” during the 20th century (p. 13). Until recently, many in the United States dismissed such concerns, believing that history moves only in one direction – towards liberal democracy. This opens the way, writes Snyder (2017), “for precisely the kinds of regimes we told ourselves could never return” (p. 118).

Most commonly, democracy is thought of in the limited aspect of voting for representatives or ballot initiatives, and as functions of governmental institutions designed to enact laws, allocate resources, regulate activities, and dispense justice. “Because democracy is so commonly identified in procedural terms,” writes Spicker (2008), “Voting is a symbol, not the thing itself” (pp. 257–258). We do not, in the least, suggest diminishing critical functions of electoral choices through voting (see Chapter 5 by Andrea Assaf, Chapter 13 by Karen Mack with Elizabeth Cho, and Chapter 16 by Bronwyn Mauldin and Artists 4 Democracy in this volume). Rather, we hope to expand thinking on multiple ways in which democracy shows up in daily practices, and in doing so, to strengthen its institutional forms while simultaneously providing the essential fuel democracies need to evolve and function more equitably. It is through everyday lived experience that we encounter social and civic practices of democracy that build up communities – or, in the lack of such practices, that allow them to fall apart.

There are too many individual instances of threats to democracy to catalog here, so we examine some of the broader trends operating in service of a composite picture that help comprehend what is going wrong and what is at stake.

In the United States, recent public opinion speaks to the fragility of the democratic idea. According to the Pew Research Center, democracy is still a popular form of government that people generally favor. But some respondents lacked a full-throated commitment to democracy because of their frustrations with the way it functions in their particular context. These frustrations have been exploited by those who seek power in antidemocratic ways. Pew’s researchers found that the

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strongest predictor of dissatisfaction with democracy was unhappiness with the state of the economy (Wike & Fetterolf, 2021). This finding is not surprising given the alignment between economic and political life, particularly under neoliberal capitalism dominant in Western countries.

One of the most salient threats to democracy globally is the resurgence of populism. By populism, we mean a constellation of political behaviors with several features. First, populist leaders appeal to “the people,” posing them in opposition to intellectuals, scientists, public servants, journalists, and other experts, as well as established systems of laws and government. Second, populism responds to a sense of crisis for which political institutions and arrangements are deemed insufficient (Rivero et al., 2022). This may be caused by a number of factors, but the crisis is made to seem urgent and existential. Third, populists tinker with an outsider political style that disregards or engenders mistrust of traditional forms of evidence or facts, thus promoting ignorance of all that does not interest the populist actor (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). In this post-truth trap, common evidentiary standards cannot be reached, and the nature of what is real (or scientifically valid) is continually contested and mediated through political rhetoric (Rivero et al., 2022). As Snyder (2017) warns, “Post-truth is pre-fascism” (p. 71).

Populist thinking includes the re-articulation of “freedom” as the absence of civic or social responsibility, and even gives permission to abandon civil behaviors or to observe laws. Finally, the construction of a favored “people” depends on an imaginary of an “other” that is outside the bounds of the body politic, such as immigrants, the undeserving poor, and gender minorities (Rivero et al., 2022, p. 103). This “other” is often the target of scorn, harmful policies, and acts of hate and violence. These cultural divisions are fed by social and popular media that reinforce polarization through disagreements about collective shared history (think of Holocaust denial, rebranding slavery as a “controversial labor practice,” and more).

As a propellant of populism around the globe, economic inequality looms large. According to the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), income inequality in rich and poor countries is at its highest level in a century, with the richest 10% earning nearly 10 times the income of the bottom 10% across several nations (OECD, 2015). In the United States, the top 1% of the population control as much wealth as the bottom 90% (Smith et al., 2021). Economic inequality this severe has negative consequences for overall economic growth as well as immiserating the lives of the poor, who are left out of the benefits when economic times are good, while suffering the consequences when times are tough. But not all economic inequality or dislocation is real: some is perceived. Some economic anxiety is rooted in racial concerns tied to fears of white people losing their economic and dominant cultural status (Ehrenfreund & Clement, 2016).

A related and less visible global force threatening democracy is neoliberalism. Wendy Brown in *Undoing the Demos* (2015) describes neoliberalism as “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms [that] is