

A READER'S RESPONSE TO  
THE CRISIS IN LIBERAL  
DEMOCRACY

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*Volume 5 · Number 2 · 2021 · Pages 270 - 281*

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to *Dewey Studies* call for papers addressing the crisis in liberal democracy resulting from the insurrection of January 6, 2021 and other factors. This essay discusses books and ways I have found helpful in thinking about the United States over the longer term that may be helpful to others, particularly to those versed in philosophy and the humanities.

As has often been observed, the crisis reflects a polarization of views and a long-standing divisiveness among Americans. Americans of all persuasions need to learn to appreciate and to love their country and to find a shared sense of purpose and significance in their country even while they may disagree over many particular things. This essay suggests a range of ways in which philosophers and humanists may help.

The first part of this essay discusses books I have found helpful in understanding the United States and the crisis. The second part of the essay focuses on a specific source, Walt Whitman's essay *Democratic Vistas*, that has

much to offer to Americans searching for an understanding and a sense of purpose for their country.

### **Thinking about America**

Americans would benefit from an immersion in their literature, which is remarkable in its depth and breadth. The best source I know to achieve this immersion is the series of books published by the Library of America. Beginning in 1979, the LOA has been making accessible the best of American thought from colonial days to the present, including history, fiction, poetry, philosophy, essay, journalism, and other writing. The many books in the series show how Americans have democratized their literature. It has room both for the difficult novels of Melville and Faulkner as well as, in novelists such as David Goodis and Elmore Leonard, for masters of popular genres such as noir, crime, and westerns. In the series, fascinating but obscure writers, such as the novelist Dawn Powell, share space with writers such as Emerson and the philosopher William James. The series shows the diversity of America. In 2020, the LOA published *African American Poetry: 250 years of*

*Struggle and Song*, an anthology edited by poet Kevin Brown which celebrates 250 African American poets beginning with Phillis Wheatley and concluding with Jamila Woods. Over the years, I have learned much about the United States, its ideals, and its realities from the LOA. I believe that other readers and students would learn as well and come to appreciate and understand our country more through exploring its literature.

I have also learned over the years from many volumes of the short local American histories published by Images of America and Arcadia Publishing. Images of America celebrates small, particularized American places through photographs, commentary, and text. The books are written by local authors with community ties. There are countless, unique places in the United States, each with its own history. Because my local public library has a strong African American collection, I have had the opportunity to explore books on many African American communities from throughout the country. The local histories in this series have helped me understand the nature and value of community, suggested philosophically in the work of Josiah

Royce. Each of the communities with a place in the series is individual, and each forms a part of a broader America.

I want to mention two recent books that have helped me understand our country as we go through the current crisis. The first book is Harvard historian Jill Lepore's *This America: The Case for the Nation* (2019). Lepore finds a uniqueness to the United States in its development from thirteen separate colonies through a loose confederation, to the formation of a united nation. She sees an America founded on Enlightenment ideals under which men and women of every race, creed, national background are individuals, endowed with inalienable rights. America was a beacon to those sharing and wanting to live by these ideals. From the beginning, however, America fell short in many ways, including its enslavement of African Americans, and its treatment of Native Americans and of prospective immigrants. Lepore encourages Americans to think patriotically of their country and to understand themselves as forming a nation even while understanding how we have fallen short in realizing the ideals we have professed.

The second book is *Reclaiming Patriotism* (2019) by Amitai Etzioni, director of the Institute of Communitarian Policy Studies at George Washington University. Etzioni has written extensively about communitarian philosophy and is the founder of the Patriotic Movement which seeks to end polarization in the United States through a shared commitment to ideals and through a politics of moderation. In *Reclaiming Patriotism*, Etzioni seeks to encourage a love of the United States. His key insight is that love and respect for the United States does not involve the hatred of others. *Reclaiming Patriotism* explores the need for moral dialogue to find commonalities among differences, the importance and limitations of communities, the nature of the common good, the relationship between rights and responsibilities, the need for self-restraint in advancing and pressing one's position in a public forum, ways of finding unity in diversity, and perhaps most importantly finding purpose and meaning in a culture and in one's life separate from sheer affluence once basic human needs have been met. Etzioni and Lepore have both taught me a great deal about American democracy.

### **Whitman's *Democratic Vistas***

Whitman's seminal 1871 essay *Democratic Vistas* is included in a 1982 LOA volume of Whitman's collected poetry and prose. *Democratic Vistas* is also available in a stand-alone facsimile edition published in the Iowa Whitman Series. The series and the volume are both edited by Whitman scholar Ed Folsom. The volume includes Folsom's introduction, "The Vistas of *Democratic Vistas*" which is invaluable in understanding Whitman's frequently obscure essay. Folsom properly emphasizes *Democratic Vistas*' failure to address the condition of the freed slaves following the Civil War, a failure which Folsom attributes to Whitman's racism. Folsom also develops the visionary character of Whitman's text and shows how Whitman seemed aware that his racism was undercut by the broader vision of his essay.

Philosopher Jacob Needleman's book, *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders* (2002) also is valuable in studying Whitman's essay. Through a reading of basic American texts, Needleman argues for a metaphysical,

spiritual foundation for American democracy rather than only a materialist foundation built on greed, racism, and violence. Needleman devotes a lengthy chapter “Walt Whitman and the Meaning of America” to *Democratic Vistas*, guiding the reader through the text and returning to give Whitman’s essay the last word in his Conclusion. Needleman finds that Whitman assumed the role of “mythmaker” for America in *Democratic Vistas*, a necessary role for a country in search of purpose and self-understanding.

In the current crisis, it is valuable to remember that the United States has faced crises before. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman explored the nature of American democracy in the years after the carnage of the Civil War during the Reconstruction Era. Whitman sharply criticizes Reconstruction America for its materialism, greed, corruption, and lack of interest in democracy and in understanding the meaning of the late War. Whitman explores what he finds precious in the American democratic experiment. As the word ‘vista’ indicates, he takes a long view.

Whitman sees the United States as unique in offering for the first time the opportunity for the development of an egalitarian society based upon individual freedom. He contrasts the promise of American democracy with the “feudal” stratified society of Europe that still persisted in Whitman’s day. Whitman tries to develop the basis for the American experiment in democracy by expanding upon the nature of both egalitarian community and of individual freedom, goals which frequently are regarded as conflicting. Whitman acknowledges that shared, fairly distributed material prosperity has an important role to play in the success of American democracy. Still, his aim is not to propose the policies that would bring this goal about. Instead, Whitman urges Americans to attend to democracy’s (and humanity’s) spiritual character, predicated on a strongly idealistically tinged metaphysics and on broad, non-sectarian religious teachings. Whitman sketches a philosophy he calls personalism which recognizes the inherent spiritual nature and worth of every individual regardless of station in life. The realization of individual personhood, for Whitman, depends upon the realization of

shared democratic community. Understanding these values requires, Whitman believes, the development of a democratic American literature that is yet to be written and which, at its best, will rival the feudal literary masterworks of Europe. Whitman's view of a spiritual democracy based upon an idealistic philosophy of personalism remains, in my view, a profound way of understanding the American experience and our current crisis of democracy.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have discussed responding to the crisis in democracy by revitalizing a spirit of patriotism and national purpose. We have suggested how the achievement of these goals might be assisted through various ways of understanding our country's thought as reflected in its literature. Other readers and teachers might indicate how this goal could be advanced, both in selection of works and in pedagogy.

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