

and vulnerability in the undocumented community. They also recommend acknowledging the humanitarian costs of deporting long-term residents and promoting intact families, as well as rewarding undocumented residents who are “good citizens” in the sense of working, paying taxes, and supporting their families and communities. These are no-nonsense strategies that should be welcomed in Congress and by the President.

This volume—the summary of broader research on immigration and their own contributions to the research agenda—is an important mechanism to inform the interested public and legislators at the federal, state, and local levels about the impact of our current interior enforcement system. Rather than calling for the abolition of ICE, they provide a more practical and realistic set of recommendations that would improve the lives and livelihoods of millions of undocumented immigrants, their families, and their communities. I hope it will be widely read and acted upon.

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Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy

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Carlson’s *Merchants of the Right* can be thought of as the third part of a trilogy that tackles distinct but interrelated loci in which ideas about gun ownership and its role in American society and politics are molded. Recent gun studies scholarship by political scientists have looked at the role of macro-historical forces (Filindra 2023), or institutional actors, such as the Supreme Court (Spitzer 2022) and the NRA (Lacombe 2021), in shaping gun culture. However, Carlson, a sociologist, has kept her gaze at a microlevel with immersive, ethnographic studies of concealed carriers (Carlson 2015), local police leaders (Carlson 2020), and now gun shop owners. As with her previous studies, the key motivating question is how people make sense of the world around them through their relationship with guns.

Merchants of the Right is situated in a unique time in recent American history: the COVID-19 pandemic which has had a profound impact on American life. Between March 2020 and May 2023, 1.13 million people died from the disease making COVID-19 the third leading cause of death for the period behind heart disease and cancer (Centers for Disease Control 2023). Yet, the pandemic is not simply

the “mise en scène”—the post-apocalyptic setting where citizens secure the last toilet paper roll at gunpoint or (in a far more racialized context) protect their lives and livelihoods from violent rioters. COVID-19 is a key player leveraged by proprietors to explain and justify the behavior of the self and others, citizens, and elites alike.

Carlson narrates and explains how gun shop owners created gun culture and politics amid the crisis by drawing on three core “civic tools” (p. 19): armed individualism, conspiracism, and right-wing partisanship. All three have deep roots in American political history and experience, and in modern times, they are closely linked in an intricate dance that produces a decidedly insular and increasingly anti-democratic political space.

The ideology of *armed individualism* prescribes individual solutions to collective problems of security and democracy—government *underreach* and *overreach*. In the context of a crisis, government becomes suspect in two opposing ways. First, local police and law enforcement cannot be everywhere to prevent criminality, and they can only respond to crime after it has claimed victims. As a result, armed citizens have the moral and substantive responsibility to protect themselves and others from “bad guys with guns.” This is the NRA’s and the gun movement’s long-standing position on the utility of guns. In the context of the pandemic, the implicit racial undertones of this narrative (Filindra and Kaplan 2016) became more clearly illuminated as gun sellers questioned the motives and grassroots origins of the racial justice protests that swept the nation in the summer of 2020.

Second, crises present an irresistible opportunity for anti-gunner elites to enact stricter gun laws. According to the NRA and its fellow travelers, such policy changes can have both individual and political implications. In a world where political power grows out of the barrel of a gun (a phrase coined by Mao but beloved by gun rights activists (see Dowlut 1997)), government elites stay in their lane because of the threat of armed citizens. This political dimension of armed citizenship is profoundly antithetical to modern democratic politics and can lead to deeply authoritarian actions such as the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

In the pandemic era, armed individualism was fueled by *conspiracism*. Anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism have a long history in American politics (Hofstadter 2012 [1962]). Its modern expression, however, is rooted in the reaction to the progressive movements of the post-WWII era, which led to the emergence of the white Christian backlash. Conspiracism is a form of knowledge-seeking and construction that rejects government and scientific sources of information in favor of first-hand experience and information provided by like-minded social and political elites. Steeped in a culture fueled by conspiracist ideologies, gun sellers questioned the severity, origins, and government response to the pandemic, often seeing partisan an antidemocratic motivation in masking, social distancing, and vaccine requirements.

Right-wing partisanship is the third component that shapes gun merchants’ worldview. According to Carlson, “contemporary American partisanship has saturated people’s political lives, shaping how they find and hold onto a sense of security, how they know what they know, and how they relate to the different people with whom they share society” (p. 104). Although gun owners have traditionally leaned to the Right, the gun rights movement became an integral part of the Republican party late in the 20th century. Today, gun rights, virulent anti-statism,

anti-intellectualism, and Christian nationalism are co-produced with Republican norms and institutions.

Gun shop owners are not only simply consumers and proponents of this worldview that mixes armed individualism, conspiracies, and virulent partisanship but also prophets and sellers of this identity and ideology. One of the unintended consequences of the pandemic was that for the first time, these prophets of political apocalypse encountered Liberals many of whom were drawn to the promise of safety that gun advertising offers. These interactions, however, did not produce any ideological rapprochement or empathy. According to Carlson, gun sellers approached these novices with caution. These interactions reinforced their partisan perceptions that Liberals are not “responsible” citizens who take safety training seriously and that makes them “unfit for Second Amendment rights” (p. 118). For gun merchants, a gun purchase is not a simple consumer transaction but a signal that the individual embraces a worldview or that they are willing to engage and learn about this culture. Those who approach guns transactionally are no more than potential “bad guys with guns.”

Social scientists tend to focus on an institutional and elite-centered definition of democracy which prioritizes free elections, freedom of speech, and protections for minority rights. However, Carlson’s book reminds us that there is another lay conceptualization of democracy which prioritizes the traits of the “demos”—the political community—over the institutions. This deeply partisan and exclusionary understanding of democracy is central to gun politics. What is more, at the core of this illiberal definition of democracy is the premise that armed individuals have the right and, indeed, the responsibility to use political violence against elected governments that they view as illegitimate. How America’s institutions and political elites handle these tendencies will have grave implications for the survival of American liberal democracy.

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