Introduction

The University is an institution of the people, an institution born of the democratic spirit. —William Rainey Harper, 1899

Universities . . . like other refuges of truth, have remained exposed to all the dangers arising from social and political power. Yet the chances for truth to prevail in public are, of course, greatly improved by the mere existence of such places. —Hannah Arendt, 1967

Just a few blocks east of the Danube River on Arany János Street in Budapest sits the Goldberger House. This magnificent premodern building, with its ornamented façade of towering pillars and delicate rosettes, was built in 1911 to serve as the warehouse and administrative offices for Samuel Goldberger and Sons, one of Hungary’s oldest textile companies as well as one of its most storied Jewish-owned businesses. Although the company collapsed after Hungary nationalized its textile industry in the late 1940s, the building has survived, withstanding nearly a century’s worth of wars and political upheaval. Today, it is a monument to historical memory, housing one of the world’s most vital archives on
the history of post–World War II human rights. And these archives are controlled by an institution that has for three decades been a vital actor in that history: Central European University (CEU), an international American research university founded by Hungarian American philanthropist George Soros after the fall of the Berlin Wall to assist former Soviet states in their transition to liberal democracy.

The person responsible for overseeing these archives is István Rév, a historian, native Hungarian, and one of CEU’s first faculty members. In January 2019, I spoke to Rév in his modest, spare office on the uppermost floor of the Goldberger House. I was in Budapest as part of a review of CEU’s accreditation, a typically uneventful and routine process. The circumstances this time, however, were anything but routine.

CEU was in the final throes of a long-underway political face-off with Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán. Almost two years earlier, in April 2017, Orbán’s government had passed a law prohibiting any foreign university without a physical campus in its home nation from operating in Budapest.1 CEU was the only university without such a campus, and the law quickly became known as “Lex CEU.”2 The university made every effort to comply with the government’s demands, including a last-minute run at negotiations between New York State and Hungary to establish a home campus in the United States. By the end of 2018, Orbán had prevailed, and the school was forced to prepare plans to decamp 150 miles west, in Vienna. CEU became only the second university to be expelled from a country’s borders on political grounds since World War II.3

In my conversation with Rév, the soulful and soft-spoken historian was unflinching in his assessment of what was happening to his university under Orbán. “President Orbán has murdered
my institution,” he told me. “He has ripped it from its historical and geographic context, and stripped it of its identity.” Rév’s reaction was reflective of a growing sense among fellow scholars, students, and citizens across the world that something foundational was at stake.

From its earliest days, CEU proved instrumental in restoring the social sciences and humanities—gutted during Communist rule—to a place of prominence in central Europe. It cultivated a new corps of diplomats and civil servants who were advancing the aims of a stable democratic Europe through sound public policy, and it investigated and propagated the values of liberalism, democracy, and open societies. CEU’s students have gone on to become presidents, cabinet officials, and members of parliament across Europe. To be at CEU was (and still is) to be part of an endeavor in democratic institution-building in a region still reeling from an autocratic past. But in the early days of 2019, this university, which had come to symbolize the loftiest promises of higher education within Hungary, within central and Eastern Europe, and within the liberal democratic world writ large, was under attack—and, through no fault of its own, sadly succumbing to the campaign orchestrated against it.

When I left Hungary that winter to return to my home in Baltimore, Maryland, where I serve as the president of Johns Hopkins University, the writing was on the wall. Nothing CEU or its rector at the time, the former Canadian politician and academic Michael Ignatieff, could do would ever be enough to satisfy the Hungarian government. The following November, the university traversed the border between Hungary and Austria—which only two years before CEU’s founding had been separated by hundreds of miles of barbed wire—to open its doors officially in Vienna. But the school has not been intimidated. As Ignatieff has said, it
is committed to “winnow[ing] the grain of knowledge from the chaff of ideology, partisanship, rhetoric and lies.”

Nevertheless, the saga of CEU underscores how unnerved autocrats are by the presence of vibrant, independent universities and how readily these institutions become early and attractive targets for harassment, restriction, or closure by the authoritarian state. Universities are not the only institutional targets for the autocrat’s antipathy, of course: the courts, media, competitive political parties, and independent professionalized bureaucracies all share the distinction of being bulwarks of liberal democracy. That universities so swiftly draw the ire of autocrats, however, offers strong circumstantial evidence that these institutions are more intimately implicated in the enterprise of building and fostering liberal democracy than is typically acknowledged.

Born of the Democratic Spirit

Attacking universities is a time-worn page in the authoritarian’s playbook, from Benito Mussolini’s extraction of loyalty oaths from university faculty and expulsion of Jews from campuses in the 1930s, to Adolf Hitler’s shuttering of Czechoslovakian universities and his execution of nine students, to the Communist government of Poland’s crackdown on academic freedom in the 1970s that gave rise to a nomadic, underground “flying university” whose faculty and students held clandestine classes in private homes to escape arrest by the secret police.

A similar pattern is playing out today. In Hungary, the assault on CEU was just the tip of the iceberg. Since ascending to power in 2010, Orbán has steadily chipped away at the autonomy of the nation’s universities and scholars by installing overseers to manage all financial decisions at public universities, aggressively
censoring academic conferences, placing the historically independent Hungarian Academy of Sciences under strict government control, and even launching a shadow network of research centers to prop up what one Hungarian political scientist called “the ideological façade” of the Orbán regime. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has used executive decrees to arrest or fire thousands of academics, and he has granted himself complete power to appoint the heads of public and private universities.

In Russia, the state-sponsored watchdog agency, Rosobrnadzor, has exploited minute rules and regulations—including everything from improperly formatted course syllabi to having the wrong kind of windows installed in a building—to revoke universities’ authority to operate. And in Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro has slashed university budgets and threatened to demolish programs deemed too leftist.

In the United States during the tumultuous four years of Donald J. Trump’s presidency, there were doubtless many moments when universities felt as though they were in the crosshairs of the president and his surrogates. Trump’s son, Donald Jr., in 2017 summed up the administration’s public-facing attitude toward universities: “[They’ll] take $200,000 of your money; in exchange [they’ll] train your children to hate our country.” Echoing this sentiment was The 1776 Report, a lightly sourced call for patriotic education released in the waning days of the Trump presidency in which universities were described as “hotbeds of anti-Americanism, libel, and censorship that combine to generate in students and in the broader culture at the very least disdain and at worst outright hatred for this country.”

More than rhetorical contempt, universities during the Trump era were subject to specific actions that seemed gratuitous and vindictive, like the ill-fated effort to terminate the F1 visas of more
than one million international students, or the initiation of a civil rights investigation against Princeton University in 2020 for its president’s acknowledgment of the persistence of racism throughout our society in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.\textsuperscript{16} In truth, though, the actions taken by the Trump administration that universities found most injurious were not those targeted specifically at universities, but those that cut across the country as a whole. Here I think, in particular, of the administration’s crude efforts to impose a ban on Muslim immigration and to terminate, without any meaningful alternative, the Obama administration’s DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program. These decisions arguably had a disparate impact on our faculty and students, but we were by no means the only institution in America diminished by these actions.

This is an important point: insofar as universities are concerned, the Trump administration’s policies and actions were never as extreme as those taken by overt authoritarians like Orbán and Erdoğan. Indeed, despite the broadsides leveled against universities, President Trump signed spending bills that increased the level of federal research support and secured more permanent funding for historically Black colleges and universities.\textsuperscript{17} And to the extent that other actions taken by the Trump administration—like the sweeping reformulation of the Department of Education’s sexual assault guidelines under Title IX or the Justice Department’s support for constitutional challenges aimed at abrogating affirmative action preferences in university admissions—provoked intense controversy and criticism, it is hard to characterize them as being squarely outside of the boundaries of what have, for many years, been long-standing conservative policy positions.

Nevertheless, the Trump years did see a widening rift in partisan perceptions of the value of higher education. In 2015, Pew
reported that 54 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats viewed universities and colleges as having a positive impact on the country. Four years later, in 2019, the portion of Democrats who believed the same remained almost unchanged, while Republicans who viewed universities positively had collapsed to 33 percent.\textsuperscript{18} The yawning gap between Republicans and Democrats in their views on universities and the national interest is just one of many divisions that mark and define our highly polarized country today. It is probably too soon to ascribe to former President Trump—despite his gleeful disdain for universities—the lion’s share of responsibility for the shift in public sentiment. More likely, his success was in attracting non-college-educated voters to the Republican Party, many of whom are hostile to the significant economic and status benefits (real and perceived) that inure to those possessing university education over those who do not.\textsuperscript{19} Of course, the American university is no stranger to controversy or calumny, and it has weathered periods of fierce attack in the past. But with liberal democracies flagging around the world, and hostility to institutions rising at home, this moment feels perilous, maybe singularly so. We can no longer pretend that the United States is immune from the gale winds of illiberalism, or its universities from the suppression that often follows.

Trump may have given voice to, and perhaps reinforced, the critical sentiments that his base had toward higher education, but those sentiments were already well established before he famously descended the escalator in Trump Tower in 2015 to announce his campaign for national office. His genius was in understanding and then exploiting the resentments, the anxieties, and the vulnerabilities of these voters, many of whom have been on the losing side of globalization’s steady march over the past several decades. The forces of toxic populism and unabashed anti-intellectualism
that he and so many other leaders around the globe have channeled and amplified will continue to persist. From sad experience, we know that sooner or later, such forces will not be able to bear the presence of an unfettered university.

The authoritarian allergy to universities is no mystery. Everything that universities embody is inimical to the autocrat’s interest in the untrammeled exercise of arbitrary public power. They are institutions committed to freedom of inquiry, to the contestation of ideas through conversation and debate, to the formation of communities that gather and celebrate a diverse array of experiences and thought, and to individual flourishing achieved through diligent study. They rest upon a foundation of reliable knowledge and facts, which are antidotes to the uncertainty and dissimulation peddled by authoritarian regimes. They are, to quote William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, an “institution born of the democratic spirit.”

No truly great university can flourish in a society where the specter of autocratic power sows fear and distrust among its members. One country putting this proposition to the test is China, which has expanded its investments into higher education at an extraordinary pace in recent years. According to the BBC, China’s higher education sector is growing at a rate equivalent to adding a new university each week. The nation’s universities have begun to ascend global university rankings, too, and they have managed to do so with minimal protections for academic freedom. In many cases, the government has limited researchers’ access to archives, foreign scholars, and other sources of information that are essential to pioneering scholarly production; in others, faculty and students are intimidated, censored, or punished for their ideas. These crackdowns on academic freedom are a central part of China’s vision for its higher education system: President Xi Jinping
has explicitly called for China to “build universities into strongholds that adhere to Party leadership.”\textsuperscript{23} As the Chinese state has further narrowed the space for free inquiry, though, scientists report that Internet restrictions have made working in China “a total disaster,” and one study showed that while Chinese students outpace American students in critical thinking skills, when they get to college, Chinese students fall significantly behind their American counterparts.\textsuperscript{24} The question looming before Chinese higher education, then, is whether, in the words of one report, it can “continue to build and maintain world-class institutions while relying on academic freedom practiced elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{25}

The Chinese case exemplifies the axiom that autocratic regimes extinguish the expressive freedom and organic flourishing of students and scholars. For those who love and believe in the university, we cannot be agnostic about, or indifferent to, the vibrancy of liberal democracy.

But this book is about more than the self-interest of universities; it also makes a broader claim about the role of universities in advancing the public good. Liberal democracy is the system of government best equipped to mediate among the different, competing, and often irreconcilable conceptions of the good and to ensure appropriate care for individual autonomy and dignity. The values of the university, in particular, are aligned with this system, given the premium each places on freedom of speech and thought, tolerance for dissent and heterodoxy, the free flow of information and ideas, and shared and distributed authority. Universities are places of such influence that they will, either through action or inaction, shape the society around them, and it would be a scandal for them to sit passively by as the political structures aligned with their mission degrade around them. They cannot be complacent: they must look hard at who they admit, how they
teach, how they explore and share knowledge, and how they connect their discoveries with the teeming, diverse world beyond their walls. In this light, the relevant question is not, How do we shape society to nourish the university? but rather, How does the university best foster democracy in our society?

Answering this question calls for an explicit interrogation of the ways in which the university can serve and enrich liberal democracy. To the extent that the university is found to be significant—or, even more dramatically, indispensable—for liberal democracy, then it is necessary to evaluate, with rigor and courage, how well it is discharging that role and to consider reforms that make it a better steward. The university should brook no difference in obligation from that which is borne by other key institutions—the elected branches of government, the courts, media, and the vast political bureaucracy—at a time when liberal democracy is under profound stress.

This is, I believe, what the university owes democracy.

A Necessary Tension

One of the first times the term liberal democracy was printed in English to refer to a distinctive form of popular government was in an expansive 1867 essay on the meaning of the American Civil War. Although published in an American periodical, its author was the French Catholic aristocrat Charles de Montalembert, who had followed the war from Paris with close interest and who believed the Union’s victory signaled something truly exhilarating—it had made democracy a historical inevitability. Every nation stood at a crossroads to decide what sort of democracy it would be.

For Montalembert, the choices were stark. On the one side was Caesarean democracy, in which political authority was concentrated
“in one all powerful.” Montalembert and his contemporaries—who had experienced the revolutions of 1848 in France and watched with horror as the democratically elected president Louis Napoléon swiftly consolidated power and established the Second French Empire—knew such regimes intimately. The alternative was liberal democracy, a form of popular rule that maintained a precarious balance between “unlimited public opinion,” or popular sovereignty, and “individual liberty.” Montalembert believed that the United States, which had managed to abolish slavery and had evaded dictatorship even in the throes of a political emergency, was the country with the greatest chance to realize this balance. It could truly be, as Abraham Lincoln had described it in the Gettysburg Address, “a nation conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” From its earliest articulation, then, liberal democracy was defined by what political philosopher Gordon Graham has described as a “necessary tension” between two very different political and philosophical traditions: democracy and liberalism.

Democracy, of course, reflects a commitment to political equality and popular sovereignty. The idea of a society governed by an enlightened citizenry first took root in ancient Greece, when the Athenian leader Cleisthenes instituted reforms that redistributed political power from a concentrated group of aristocratic families to male citizens from every village (deme) in the city-state by involving them directly in the processes of law-making and legal judgment. In the more than twenty-five hundred years since, our idea of democracy has come to connote not the direct democracy of Cleisthenes’s Athens but electoral democracy, in which citizens choose their leaders in regular elections. Whatever specific form it takes, democracy has always privileged the will of the majority and the wisdom of crowds.
Liberalism, by contrast, is a moral and political philosophy grounded in the idea of individual human freedom. While its genealogy can be traced to critiques of religious orthodoxy and arbitrary rule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it truly began to take shape as a coherent philosophical paradigm in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{34} In the work of John Stuart Mill, Tocqueville, Montalembert, and others, liberalism evolved to champion personal autonomy and human dignity, freedom of thought and belief, and reasoned debate as a means of progress. In the political realm, these philosophical convictions have long led self-avowed liberals to cherish rule-based institutions, which, as Canadian Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella has said of the courts, “are not there to cater to the majority . . . [but] can be impartial, risk being unpopular, and be able to do things that protect minorities.”\textsuperscript{35}

Clearly, democracy and liberalism do not exist in easy alignment with one another. It is that collision of opposites that is a vital part of liberal democracy’s genius, however. The fusion of these two ideas binds the notion of a government responsive to popular will to the imperative to protect individual rights and preserve rule of law. In fact, the push and pull between these structures can be regarded as one of its unique sources of strength. After all, liberal democracies don’t have the dubious luxury of stagnation or complacency. They are dynamic and sometimes turbulent societies, always seeking and accommodating new generations of citizens to renew them.

These societies are worth protecting. Across its history, liberal democracy has ushered in historic advances in the vindication of popular needs and the protection of political rights, achievements against which other systems of governance pale. Beyond that, lib-
eral democracies have promoted the flourishing of human potential more broadly. They are more peaceful than authoritarian regimes, less corrupt, and less subject to terrorism, internal strife, and violent overthrows or instability. In the words of one scholar, the principle that democracies do not go to war against one another is “as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations.” Moreover, they experience lower levels of infant mortality, longer life spans, and have greater economic development and even higher standards of living. As Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen memorably put it, “no substantial famine has ever occurred in a democratic country.”

None of these facts is meant to paper over the reality that the promises of liberal democracy have been realized imperfectly. Indeed, for all that liberal democracy has given the world, its aspirations all too often have exceeded its realities. Now, the gulf between expectation and reality has become especially pronounced. The mass protests in 2020 over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many other Black Americans at the hands of police were tragic reminders of the history of racial injustice in the United States and the long road left to walk toward true equity. The #MeToo movement has called painful attention to the violence and inequities facing women and LGBTQ people. And disparities in access to quality health care, housing, and treatment have led to worse health outcomes and shortened life spans for far too many, especially Black and Native American populations. Meanwhile, the widening gaps between rich and poor across the liberal democratic world have made clear that our economic system too often privileges the few at the expense of the many. In so many instances, change has come far too slow and too late, and liberal democracies have too often been
complacent in the face of disparities. With the full recognition of its failings, however, I believe sincerely that the role that liberal democracy has played in the improvement of the human condition is profound and unmistakable.

Liberal democracy’s contributions are never permanent, and the balance between liberalism and democracy can be easily upset. When, for instance, the will of the majority becomes the author of its own demise by electing a tyrant willing to transgress democratic norms, to dismantle democratic institutions, to abandon the most basic tenets of political reciprocity, and to lock in electoral success by removing safeguards for long-term advantage, we see the emergence of what Fareed Zakaria called “illiberal democracy” (a close cousin of Montalembert’s notion of “Caesarean democracy”). Less urgent but no less real is the danger of a nominally democratic state that preserves the institutions of political liberalism—such as regulatory agencies to protect the rule of law and courts to safeguard rights—but does so with such a dense accumulation of rules that popular input is inhibited and politics becomes the sole dominion of elites who can navigate those rules to their advantage. Yascha Mounk has called this “undemocratic liberalism,” and Tocqueville called it “soft despotism,” a form of social control that “does not tyrannize, but . . . compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people.”

Of course, the unmaking of a liberal democracy rarely plays out along such clearly defined lines; these are combustible processes that react in fluid and unexpected ways. Nevertheless, the critical point is that both liberalism and democracy are essential, they each require constant and watchful nurturing, and this schematic offers a glimpse of what is at stake when the uneasy union of liberalism and democracy is disrupted, and perhaps irreversibly damaged.
A Democratic Recession

Several years ago, a vast multidisciplinary coalition of scholars from around the world formed the Varieties of Democracy Project to take a precise measure of the health of democracy. Now one of the largest social science enterprises of its kind, this global network of more than three thousand experts has assembled data that show, in grand empirical sweep, the emergence and the erosion of liberal democracy. Their data confirm in painstaking detail what scholars have been eyeing anxiously for years: while liberal democracy had steadily spread across the globe from World War II through the end of the twentieth century, it has since entered a period of decline. In 1996, more than a quarter of the world’s population lived in countries that were democratizing. By 2020, that number had plummeted to almost 5 percent, while nearly 30 percent—or 2.6 billion people—live in countries that are becoming more autocratic. The group reported that our world has now retreated “back to the global level of democracy recorded shortly after the end of the Soviet Union.” In the words of democracy scholar Larry Diamond, we are in the midst of a “democratic recession.”

Many of the forces driving this recession will be familiar to the reader. The economic fallout from the 2008 global financial crisis, rapid demographic changes, and massive transformations in media and communications technology have formed a toxic brew of ethno-nationalism, frustration at elites, and conspiratorial suspicion that have upended liberal democratic society.

For me, one of the defining traits of this retreat has been a stunning rise in anti-institutional sentiment. In the United States, trust in institutions ranging from Congress to the news media to organized religion—with the military as one notable exception—has
fallen in recent years to, in some surveys, fifty-year lows. A deep vein of suspicion around institutions has become an endemic source of frustration on all sides of the political divide. In many countries, authoritarian-leaning leaders are exploiting this weakness to accrue more power to themselves. Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland has turned state television networks into propaganda machines and has assumed control over the country’s court system. Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, has ruthlessly attacked the Catholic Church, even calling on the public to “kill those useless bishops.” And closest to home, Donald Trump routinely attacked every institution—from the legislature to the news media to the judiciary to agencies within the executive branch to the very electoral system that launched him to power in the first place—that challenged or checked him.

Despite the aspersions cast over our institutions in recent years, they remain critical to the health of our democracy—to maintaining that delicate balance of liberalism and democracy, of rule of law and majority will—and ought to be reformed rather than abandoned. This is a conviction I hold deeply. It is one borne out of personal and professional experience. When my father’s family fled Poland for Canada at the outset of the Second World War, they found a country that although not entirely hospitable was composed of institutions that made the opportunity to live a full and flourishing life available to them, their children, and, eventually, their grandchildren. I have also spent years not only leading academic institutions but also intensively studying how institutions evolve, change, and interface with the societies of which they are a part, which has led me to see in theory and practice the power of institutions to better lives and uphold the animating principles of democratic society. Our core democratic institutions are vital intermediaries between citizens and governments that pre-
serve both the popular will and rule of law, performing that consequential work of fusing democracy and liberalism together.

Many institutions perform this work. Some are political, like legislatures that channel the popular will into public law, courts that protect individual liberty against the overweening exercise of power, or even political parties that—in the ideal, of course—temper the excesses of public opinion by packaging diverse views into broad governing coalitions. Existing alongside these are institutions that sit outside of politics, such as the independent media that cultivate an informed electorate and serve as a watchdog over those in power, and voluntary associations like churches and community organizations through which citizens develop the customs and habits of coming together and acting toward a shared interest or enterprise. These entities hold a special relevance in promoting the common good and protecting individual liberty, and in cushioning the tensions between the many and the few. They are integral to the success or failure of liberal democracy.

The past several years have occasioned soul-searching within many of these institutions (the media, political parties, even religious organizations) as to whether they have fallen asleep at the wheel, whether they are culpable in some way for the decline of liberal democracy, and if so, how they might better acquit their roles. But one critical institution has been absent from these conversations.

**A Carrier of Democratic Values**

Our colleges and universities are indispensable to liberal democracy.

As I will develop in this book, this is a capacity into which universities have grown over time, but it was present from the very beginnings of our democracy, a point sometimes obscured or
minimized in histories of American higher education. Indeed, from the earliest days of the republic, universities were considered to be integral to the democratic project. At first, their role was seen to be limited to cultivating democratic citizens and to offering young people from a variety of backgrounds a chance at a liberal education and, perhaps, a better life. Yet the scale at which they executed these aims was vanishingly small. In 1851, there were fewer than five hundred colleges serving only about sixty thousand students (less than 1 percent of the population) throughout the entire United States. That fact didn’t prevent one contemporary observer from describing the United States as “a land of Colleges.”

One can only imagine what he would have said today. As of 2018, the United States boasted almost four thousand postsecondary institutions—from liberal arts colleges to sprawling private and public research universities to regional colleges to community colleges to institutions that exist entirely online—educating nearly 20 million students, employing 1.5 million faculty members, and receiving more than $40 billion in federal research funding.

As they have widened their reach, our colleges and universities have acquired additional capacities. They have come to be not only the educators of well-rounded citizens, but also certifiers of expertise, gateways to opportunity, and places of pluralistic inclusion that mirror the nation itself. Further, they produce research and knowledge that are integral to the formation of reasoned public policy and essential to checking the excesses of power. And they have harnessed their resources for the betterment of society through medicine, public health, the economic development of cities, and partnerships with communities. Truly, colleges and universities are among liberal democracy’s cornerstone institutions, and they play an indispensable role in the exercise of building, maintaining, and inspiring liberal democracy.
This immense potential has been brought into clearest relief during America’s most convulsive moments. When the democratic project felt most imperiled, the nation turned to its universities to enter the breach.

This was true at its founding, when George Washington called for the establishment of a national university to unite the fledgling nation under the banner of learning, and when colleges adapted their curricula and structures to the aims of forming what Thomas Jefferson called “the statesmen, legislators & judges, on whom public prosperity, & individual happiness are so much to depend.” It was true at the onset of the Civil War, when President Lincoln signed into law the first of the Morrill Land-Grant College Acts, setting into motion the creation of the sprawling system of land-grant universities that came to be known as “democracy’s colleges” and would eventually include historically Black colleges in the South, opening up opportunity for advancement for students in all parts of a fractured country and from all walks of life. It was true during the height of the Gilded Age, when rampant corruption and abject inequality threatened to sabotage the promise of democracy, and politicians enlisted academics to help them shape sweeping political and economic reforms. It was true after World War II, when—with the nation reeling from democracy’s near demise at the hands of fascism—President Harry S. Truman turned to the nation’s universities, convening a national commission on democracy and higher education that declared “the first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.”

We stand at another such point of vulnerability. Our institutions of higher education can be neither indifferent nor passive in the face of democratic backsliding.
I believe that universities should be recognized as standing firmly among the institutions critical to securing the full promise of liberal democracy and sharing in the responsibility to protect it when its legitimacy and its durability are at risk. In fact, I maintain that few other social institutions rival the university, at its best, in the sheer breadth of its vaunted contributions to liberal democracy’s twin promises of equality and liberty. Economists have even now demonstrated through empirical study that—historically, at least—higher levels of college education have made democracies more likely to endure and autocracies more likely to democratize. The fates of higher education and liberal democracy are deeply, inextricably intertwined. With strongmen either in power or waiting in the wings and democracy in question, now is a time at which universities must purposefully and self-consciously embrace their role as one of the stewards of the liberal democratic experiment.

The Plan of the Book

The core of my argument is as follows. First, colleges and universities are essential to the flourishing of liberal democracy. Second, these institutions have come to acquire this role over time, as they have gathered about them new functions and reimagined old ones. Third, over the past several decades, they too often have faltered in their role, becoming distracted and distended by the exigencies of the moment. And finally, they have a responsibility to act in defense of the liberal democratic experiment as institutions that enrich and are enriched by democracy, and are inextricably intertwined with democracy’s values and ends.

As the president of Johns Hopkins University—America’s first research university—for more than a decade and, before that, as
provost of one of its oldest universities, the University of Pennsylvania, I have had the privilege to witness time and again the immense and incredible contributions of the American university to democratic life. I have watched undergraduates from all backgrounds and all regions flourish on campuses and discover their potential as leaders and scholars. I have watched as discoveries made in laboratories and amidst library stacks are transformed into life-saving treatments for deadly diseases, or antidotes to the poison of our public discourse, or enduring policies that improve the equitable treatment of all. And I have watched people’s minds (including my own) be changed through impassioned but reasoned debate.

But I have also experienced many of the alarming trends of our democratic moment: the admissions policies we have allowed to accrue that stack the deck against talented low- and middle-income students; the ways in which our curricula have abdicated responsibility for teaching the habits of democracy; the incentives that have unintentionally hobbled the research enterprise and fostered distrust; and the hyperpolarization and self-segregation that have undercut our ability as educational institutions devoted to expressive freedom to speak to one another in a way that promotes compromise and mutual understanding.

This book details many of those experiences (the successes as well as the failures), but it also takes a long and broad view of the history and sweep of higher education to offer achievable reforms for the future. It seeks to evaluate universities’ role and assess their ability to enhance our capacity to contribute to liberal democratic flourishing by tracing those argumentative strands through four of the key functions American higher education has acquired in the course of its history: (1) launching meritorious individuals up the social ladder (social mobility), (2) educating citizens for democracy (civic education), (3) creating and disseminating
knowledge (stewardship of facts), and (4) cultivating the meaningful exchange of ideas across difference (pluralism). These do not represent the extent of American higher education’s connections to liberal democracy, but they are critical capacities in which our colleges and universities both have particular purchase, and in which they have unfortunately regressed.

In taking this expansive approach, I seek to broaden our conversation about the place of the university in a democracy. For too long, this conversation has mostly arisen in the context of long debates over campus culture, without a full consideration of all the other capacities of the modern university that impact and shape liberal democracy. This narrow aperture dates back, at least, to books like William F. Buckley Jr.’s *God and Man at Yale* in 1951 or, later, Allan Bloom’s 1987 bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, which argued that colleges had “failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today’s students” by ousting the search for the good life from the undergraduate curriculum. Versions of this debate proliferate today in op-eds, reports, and books—including Anthony Kronman’s *The Assault on American Excellence* and even titles that explicitly invoke Bloom, like Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind*. The issues these works raise are important, but undergraduate education is just one part of a much larger story, and it is time we widened our purview beyond higher education’s responsibility to the American mind and to its responsibility to the liberal democratic project more broadly.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the nature and the consequences of the relationship between liberal democracy and universities through studies of each of the four functions I’ve identified above. Each chapter begins by considering the relationship between a given function of the university and liberal democracy.
I then sketch a history of how this function evolved and changed within American higher education, with the hope of capturing for readers the sweep, the texture, and the nuance of university contributions to American democracy. These histories lead naturally into expositions of how and why colleges and universities have lapsed in the execution of a given function. I conclude with one or more proposals for colleges and universities to recover from these lapses. The solutions I offer are informed by my experience of more than three decades as dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto, as provost of the University of Pennsylvania, and as president of Johns Hopkins University, alongside noteworthy developments occurring at other colleges and universities across our country. In some cases, they take the form of specific policy recommendations and, in others, of broader shifts in orientation.

The chapters adhere to a common structure, but the contours of each story I tell are unique and worthy of independent consideration. I have sought throughout this book to cull insights from disciplines and perspectives across the academic enterprise. My sincere hope for readers of this book is that in both its content and its form, it demonstrates how much the university has to offer to democratic society.

Chapter 1 focuses on social mobility. At this moment, the liberal democratic dream of equal opportunity is more elusive than ever for many in contemporary America. For most of their history, colleges and universities gradually expanded access to college for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, a feat achieved through the creation of public university systems and community colleges, through visionary legislation like the G.I. Bill and the Higher Education Act, and through massive investments in financial aid. But in the past thirty to forty years, states have scaled back financial support for higher education, federal funding has...
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... stagnated and lost focus, and universities have embraced admissions practices that too often advantage wealthy students and disadvantage poor ones. These trends have accelerated the stratification of higher education. The solution for addressing this dire problem will need to be far-ranging, including robust financial aid initiatives to mitigate the burdens of student debt. To start, I call for the reinvestment in financial aid by governments and for the elimination of legacy preferences in college admissions.

In chapter 2, I turn to civic education. Since the founding of the United States, leaders have called for higher education to play a role in the formation of democratic citizens. For most of the nineteenth century, colleges and universities sought to develop students’ moral faculties; throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they championed training in scientific reasoning as the cure for society’s ills; and after World War II, they created ambitious general education programs to instill in students the knowledge and values of the often fraught and contested notion of a common cultural inheritance. Since the 1980s, however, the dominant paradigm for civic education at colleges and universities has been community service. This movement has been truly important and has done much to strengthen connections between students and the communities of which they are a part. But as the source of a civic education, it is incomplete because it leaves untouched a knowledge of democratic history and political institutions, as well as many of the skills necessary to engage those institutions effectively to create lasting change. To ensure that students encounter an education in democracy during their college years, I call for the establishment of a Democracy Requirement.

Chapter 3 considers universities as fact-producing and fact-checking institutions. Liberal democracies need reliable knowledge and a shared sense of truth for citizens to make informed
decisions as voters and community members, for legislators to develop rational public policy, and for holding institutions like the free press, leaders, and governments to account. With the founding of our first research universities in the 1870s, American higher education has been among the most important institutions for credentialing expertise; for conducting advanced research; and for unearthing, preserving, and disseminating facts. In time, democratic societies came to embrace universities as beacons of factual truth, and government support of research across the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities has unleashed countless discoveries and strengthened the university’s role as an anchor for democratic life. Yet this relationship has frayed in recent years, as questions from within and without the university have accumulated about the objectivity, legitimacy, and accuracy of the academy as a locus of truth and facts. Among the most troubling causes of this is the reproducibility crisis (the growing evidence that much scientific research cannot be replicated) that is leaving no part of the academy unaffected. Looking at the recent experiences of universities and scientific expertise during the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider what lessons we can draw in harnessing technology to begin to address this crisis of trust.

In chapter 4, I turn toward the question of diversity and speech on campus. Colleges and universities are microcosms of pluralistic, multiethnic democracy that have the capacity to model for students how to interact with one another across a vast spectrum of experiences to forge democratic compromise, consensus, and will. Our campuses today are far more diverse than in past eras, yet we do not fully or adequately encourage the interactions and exchanges across differences that are foundational to a healthy democracy. In a multitude of ways, universities have essentially given students a pass to opt out of encounters with people dissimilar
from themselves. Higher education has rightly focused on promoting diversity in admissions, but it has neglected to foster pluralism once students arrive, which has given rise to an undercurrent of silencing and a dearth of substantive debate. The answer to this dilemma, I argue, lies in a move toward a more purposeful pluralism on our campuses, undergirded by policies that drive students to have more encounters with those unlike themselves, and that then help deepen and enrich these interactions.

Not all of these functions developed in concert with one another, and not all are operative in the same way—or to the same degree—for every single institution of higher education. At points this book will draw from the broad mosaic of institutions that comprise higher education, from the selective research universities that play a central role in knowledge creation, to the liberal arts colleges that have been the beating heart of social experimentation and curricular innovation, to the two-year community colleges that enroll millions of students each year and propel so many Americans up the social ladder. Framing this discussion, however, is the research university, which, besides being the place where I have spent most of my career, occupies a large role in the public conscience on issues of culture and politics, and weaves together the four connections to democracy—social mobility, civic education, stewardship of facts, and pluralism—discussed in this book.

It is not easy to change an institution. This is especially the case for colleges and universities, which are by design conservative, heterogeneous, decentralized, and often cumbersome. They are a perfect example of path-dependent institutions, those human organizations that, once established, accrue self-reinforcing mechanisms that make the exploration of alternative arrangements increasingly costly. Within such institutions, meaningful transformation becomes truly possible only during periods of change and
profound uncertainty. Economists call these “critical junctures.” The history of the university has seen such moments before, whether with the birth of the research university in the wake of Reconstruction or with the rise of the multiversity during the aftermath of World War II. What makes critical junctures tricky, however, is that—in the words of Canadian legal and economics scholar Michael Trebilcock—they are extraordinarily difficult “to identify with high levels of confidence while they are happening, without the benefit of hindsight.” In other words, we tend not to know whether we are at a critical juncture until it’s too late.

As I write this, the United States is facing a raging global pandemic, a fragile liberal international order, and an economic recession. These lead me to suspect that liberal democracy and our universities stand, once again, at a critical juncture. I am also convinced that there are actions we can take now in our admissions policies, housing policies, curricula, extracurricular programming, and faculty research that have the potential to direct our academic institutions more firmly along a democratic path and, in the process, buoy the democratic idea.

An American Experience

The last thing to mention is that this is a fundamentally American book. Of course, as this introduction reveals, the connection between universities and liberal democracy extends far beyond this country, and the discussion to come will occasionally take the reader to other countries. But the focus of the book will be on the American experience. This is in part for reasons of exposition—each nation’s system of higher education is at least slightly different, and to traverse each of the discussions to come in the depth that is needed, it is sensible to home in on a single country. It is
also an autobiographical decision. I am a Canadian by birth and previously served as a faculty member and dean at the University of Toronto. But for the past fifteen years of my career, I have had the privilege to serve as a leader in two great American universities. The American focus of this book allows me to bring my own experiences and insights from those positions to bear on the discussion where it is appropriate, and to reflect where necessary on how the university I now lead—the nation’s first research university, which opened its doors a century after the signing of the Declaration of Independence—is realizing its own democratic calling.

But there is something else—something singular about the American experience—and the questions I asked myself in preparing this book kept bringing that experience front and center. Although there are universities that predated America’s founding, and although that founding predated the birth of the modern university as we recognize it today, the two came of age alongside each other, guiding each other’s trajectories in a manner that connects them not only in impact or mission, but also as a matter of historical fact. It is in America where colleges and universities most indelibly imprinted themselves on the history of liberal democracy and where the values of liberal democracy most intimately shaped the evolution of higher education. By investigating this shared history, I aim to show anew what this institution and this form of governance still have to offer one another.

I believe the university must seize this moment to confront directly and courageously the challenges before it (and others still on the horizon) to requite its responsibility to liberal democracy. Such a project has never seemed more urgent.