Readers who glance at a book about “entrenchment” may expect it only to be about the perpetuation of unjust power. One acquaintance, on first hearing this book’s title, said what a discouraging subject this must be. But in the following pages I use “entrenchment” in a general sense, applying to foundational rules of all kinds, and am concerned not only with unjust regimes but also with the entrenchment of rights and democracy and institutions promoting equality. Anyone hoping to defend those values when they are threatened, as they are now, should be interested in the means of entrenching them. Instead of being discouraging, the subject of entrenchment ought to awaken us to what is at stake when foundational rules and systems of power, just or unjust, hang in the balance.

I began working on this project and giving talks about it in 2013, so I did not cook up the ideas especially for today’s political situation, though the political turns of our time have influenced how the book developed. I originally began writing about entrenchment in regard to race and other social categories for a 1992 volume, How Classification Works, edited by the anthropologist Mary Douglas and philosopher David Hull. It was only after using the concept in several different contexts that I decided to give it more systematic attention. I am much indebted to Stanford’s Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and to Princeton University for affording me the 2014–15 academic year to begin that work.
I also owe a debt to colleagues and students at several universities, including my own, for criticism of an early paper (“Three Degrees of Entrenchment”), which was thankfully never published but nonetheless continues to float around the internet. When the manuscript for this book was complete, I had the benefit of criticism from Stephen Holmes, Robert Keohane, Andreas Wimmer, and Sean Wilentz. I am also grateful to two Princeton students: Jeremy Cohen, for his close reading of Chapter 5, and Julu Katticaran, who did excellent research on the legacies of slavery and colonialism for a chapter that I decided in the end not to pursue.

Lucky is the writer who can count on a partner for love and support through the years of working on a book. I am among the lucky ones, and I thank my wife, Ann, for that.