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Democracy in Theory

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Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public, Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.

Times Square Red, Times Square Blue, Samuel R. Delany. New York University Press, 1999.

Against the Romance of Community, Miranda Joseph. University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

For the Common Good?: American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity, Jason Kaufman. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Almost Home: America's Love-Hate Relationship with Community, David L. Kirp. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life, Theda Skocpol. Oklahoma University Press, 2003.

The term "democracy" has seen a solid upsurge in the titles of literary critical work over the last 20 years. According to the PMLA Bibliography, there were 26 articles or books with "democracy" in the title from 1960 to 1969; 61 from 1970 to 1979; 203 from 1980 to 1989; and 554 from 1990 to 1999. In the first four years on record in this new century, we are already at 345. Literary critics have a developing interest in the idea of democracy that began to expand dramatically in the mid-1980s, corresponding with the growing importance of multiculturalism, post-colonialism, feminism, and canon expansion. The bigger and more diverse our literary neighborhood, the more interested we have become in using literature to understand democracy: its accomplishments, formations, possibilities, and failures in US history.

Back in the 1980s, as this coalition of projects was gaining momentum, a world-changing optimism fueled our work. Most of us conducting work critical of US democratic status quos believed that our teaching and research were part of a project of fundamental change in US culture: ultimately it was an affirmative project aimed at the community of our democratic future. Our optimism may have been tempered by the "culture wars," but even then, what seemed a little intimidating was still exhilarating—"racism's/conservatism's/homophobia's/patriarchy's (fill in your term) last gasp," we would say knowingly to each other. The Olin Foundation and its support for conservative strategizing was just beginning to hit the academic radar, and I do not think any of us could really guess at the sea change it would help produce over the next generation. The culture wars faded in the 1990s, but so did our optimism about the influence our work could have on the world we live in. Many factors probably contributed to this deceleration of hope, a partial list of which might include: Desert

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Storm; ad-nauseum post-mortems on deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, and affirmative action; the backlash against gays in the military; the boom in tech stocks, the dismantling of welfare support, and the failure of universal health-care; the Sokal hoax; the Clinton impeachment hearings; the buildup in military defense and prisons; the crash in tech stocks and, with it, the slump of our TIAA-CREF accounts. Still (some good news), as my title search suggests, the notion of expanded community and self-governing agency continues to fuel enthusiasm for the subject of democracy that shows up in so much of our scholarship and continues to shape our pedagogy.

I cannot help wondering how much longer this will continue. Our scholarly and pedagogical commitments have a more vexed relation to our daily life now. These days, democratic community seems most frequently described in terms like “nuclear option”—a phrase that resonates with a range of political frustrations in contemporary US democracy. Our contemporary moment is far less hospitable professionally and politically than the one in which this project began flowering. I have been wondering if the current difficulties—the threat of students filing lawsuits against professors who “victimize” them by disagreeing with their politics, or the broader lack of support for humanities critique that shows up in university budgeting and dwindling grant support, or the hostility of increasingly powerful fundamentalist Christian interest groups to academia in general, and the breakdown of political civility in US political culture more generally—might lead many to abandon their investigations into what literature can tell us about the contingent relations of democracy and community in the US past, and turn to the study of something less controversial, something less vexed, something, well, *easier*.

Despite these disincentives—maybe because of them—now may be the best time for literary historians and cultural critics to pursue the question of what democracy can promise or deliver for political and social community in the US, or, to put it a little differently, about the terms by which community has delivered for democracy. This may be a project less animated by our sense that we will get to help deliver into being a world unified by tolerance and instead more driven by a need to figure out how to survive in a community fractured by intractable differences. What can we learn about staying in the democratic game when the going gets tough from the literary and historical records? And as part of that project, what can we learn from our colleagues in other disciplines, who have been trained, from various standpoints, in the study of democracy?

Much of the work done within literary studies on the subjects of democratic community and multiculturalism has

The Wisdom of Crowds: Why The Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations, James Surowiecki. Doubleday, 2004.

discovered an enduring tension between the practical forms of people living together and the political ideal of democracy. Most of the stories we uncover reveal narratives of a beleaguered individual's or group's democratic triumph over a recalcitrant, exclusionary, or hostile community. The multiculturalist ideal of the world where we all just get along seems severely tested by what we often represent as the perdurably antidemocratic desires and effects of unenlightened community. So our work tends to represent historical and fictional communities as a problem for democracy's freedoms while constructing an ideal community—a frictionless, accepting democratic community—for the multicultural future that our work aims to usher in. In the space between the dystopic and utopic notions of community, as I have argued elsewhere, a real misunderstanding of democracy resides. This misunderstanding posits democracy as something that emerges when political struggle has ended, rather than seeing it as the best strategy for the endless negotiation of political struggle. In this view, both community and democracy are forms that are shaped by discomfiting struggle. Literary studies has yet to take up this less idealistic perspective in any systematic way for its study of the interrelation of community and democracy. In other words, literary critics tend to exalt democracy (and properly democratic community) by severing it from the problems of community. Insulating democracy as an ideal cannot solve the complexities of navigating it and working for it in daily life.

A number of recent books from different disciplinary perspectives take up these questions about democracy's vexed relationship to community. They range from pessimistic assertions about how contemporary government and economic trends have "downsized" or "diminished" democratic culture in the US, to acerbic analyses that contend that democratic community fostered by those civic ideals was never very inclusive in the first place, to tougher assertions about our over-idealization of the notion of democratic community, and to counterintuitive revaluings of democracy and community. All of these books aim to shed light on our current historical moment; most of them analyze historical evidence (although none turn to literature) in their arguments about democratic association and community. Together, the conversation that develops among these books challenges and provokes our understanding of the value of the local for practices of democracy and suggests some interesting directions for our larger project that might involve seriously rethinking democracy's relationship to associational practices and community more generally.

1. A(nother) Rumble at Harvard

Two books by Harvard sociologists outline one important axis for these debates. Both interested in the value of voluntary association for democratic self-governing institutions, both historically focused on what Jason Kaufman defines as the “golden age of fraternity,” they differ diametrically in their conclusions about the legacy of civic association for US democracy. In *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civil Life* (2003), Theda Skocpol adds historical discovery and quantitative analysis to Robert Putnam’s thesis in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) about the decline of civic life and social capital. Her book begins with an anecdote describing her husband’s discovery of a Maine tombstone of a “backwoods farmer, lumberman and spoolmaker” (3), describing his service as one of Lincoln’s pallbearers, and, surprisingly for Skocpol, also listing his affiliation with three fraternal orders: the Grand Army of the Republic, the Grange, and the Odd Fellows. Skocpol’s curiosity about William Warren Durgin’s desire to list his memberships in voluntary organizations alongside his service to one of the nation’s most famous presidents propelled her into this study. In the course of her work, she discovered “more large, translocal voluntary membership associations active in America’s past than scholars and pundits” had presumed (xiii). Her careful documentation of these groups and her analysis of their rise and decline grounds a set of arguments about how the activity of association vitalizes US civic practice. These arguments contradict received wisdom on both sides of the liberal/conservative divide:

Contrary to conservative presumptions, I document that American civic voluntarism was never predominantly local and never flourished apart from national government and politics. Large-scale, translocal membership groups took shape from early in the history of the US republic and then spread into every part of the country and every sector of the population during the decades between 1820 and 1960. . . .

I . . . also challenge the liberal article of faith that American civil society has become steadily more democratic since the 1960s. Liberals tend to attribute virtually all healthy developments in contemporary US democracy to the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, which were followed by feminist agitations and a variety of other movements for minority rights and public interest causes. (12–13)

Skocpol idealizes the voluntary associations that Toqueville so famously described in his early nineteenth-century tour of the US. She posits her study of civic decline as a corrective that might help us “forge a future that more effectively rhymes with the civic symphonies of the American past” (18), and she faults contemporary analysts who work without bearing in mind this important past, “for they have forgotten that national community, active government and democratic mobilization are all vital to creating and sustaining a vibrant civil society” (12). Such claims stand in strong contrast to arguments posed about the *disharmony* of nineteenth-century political culture posed by historian Mary Ryan in her *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (1997), or by sociologist Michael Schudson, whose *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (1998) exposes how idealized depictions of the political involvement of our forebears are not borne out in historical evidence.

Skocpol presents a strong argument against such skeptics. In her treatment, local fraternal organizations provided a link to a larger national vision as well as organizational structure, where the associations were primarily civic in their aims, not social and economic as is so commonly assumed. Skocpol insists that they involved more cross-class membership than previously recognized and indeed that they *prevented* class fragmentation (66–7). Despite the apparent enclaving tendencies of these organizations by gender, race, and ethnicity and in their efforts to influence public policy, Skocpol contends, they worked cooperatively in the interest of nation in times of crisis, as when, for instance, the Red Cross, YMCA, Knights of Columbus, and Jewish Welfare Board worked cooperatively with the War Department during World War I, making “interdenominational cooperation . . . officially sanctioned and . . . nationally visible” (64). She highlights women’s, ethnic, and minority organizations as part of this trend, arguing that these organizations, which most frequently modeled their governance structure on that of the US government, taught members important civic skills.

In Skocpol’s handling, the local is something that democracy must coordinate with federal aims, and there is no better vehicle for this than trans-local voluntary associations: in them, “national purpose could be coordinated with local variety” (93). This network of associations made vital what Skocpol describes as a “muscular representative democratic government” (73). However, this vitality has been seriously in decline since the 1960s and it is not, she contends, *contra* Putnam, because of the rise of television. Rather, the special interest groups that have popped up in the years following Civil Rights agitation have upended the model of civic

effectiveness built by the many voluntary associations that proliferated in the first 200 years of US civic democracy. Advocacy groups, non-profits, and PACs combine with the expansion of the professional and managerial middle classes to make us "still a nation of organizers but much less a nation of joiners" (220). While there are reasons to appreciate the extended participation and influence fostered by these more recent changes, Skocpol still insists that we account for the "downside of our recently reorganized civic life . . . more voices are not the same thing as increased democratic capacity" (222). This post-Civil-Rights-era civic world is top-down, paternalistic in its service-providing mentality. Public policymaking, because of the influence of big money, tends upward, while the public trust declines in tandem with participatory spirit and voter turn-out. Without the training offered by voluntary associations, citizens lost their civic skills. Local and faith-based organizations have turned away from cooperative federalism and toward privatized member services provision, reinforcing rather than countering the divisions that have always threatened US society. Skocpol concludes that the only way to revitalize US democracy is to renew "links between democratic governance and representatively governed civic associations capable of involving large numbers of citizens" (291).

Her colleague Jason Kaufman is not in such a hurry to return us to fraternal organizations in his *For the Common Good?: American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (2002). He is in fact very skeptical of the claims Skocpol makes about their democratizing influence, even as he admits owing the topic of his early scholarly career to a chance visit to a panel where Skocpol and Putnam were speaking on association. His choice of title, though appearing a year before Skocpol's, sounds like an interrogative rejoinder to her cheerleading for the benefits of fraternalism for civic democracy.

Kaufman begins by reminding his readers of an important and overlooked debate between rival intellectual traditions about civic democracy typified by Toqueville and James Madison. For very different reasons, both men viewed association as a structural impediment to tyranny. If Toqueville is famous for his argument that association would be central to the production of civility and political trust in democracy, Madison valued associations "because he saw them as powerful instruments of self-seeking" (5). Together, these two theoreticians of democracy pose a question that Kaufman wants to revive for his neo-Tocquevillian Harvard colleagues: "Do people form associations because they aspire to community and cooperation or because they accept the challenges of intrasocial competition?" (5).

Where Skocpol sees cooperation, Kaufman sees competition, tracing how “voluntarism, brotherhood and mutual aid became bywords for segregation, not integration” (6). Where Skocpol saw the “competitive emulation” as inspiring a competition “to see who could do a better and faster job of spreading the shared associational undertaking” (93), Kaufman argues that it contributes not to greater civic cooperation but an “increasing differentiation of society” (7), teaching recruits to “socialize in private, self-segregated groups” (8). In strong contrast to Skocpol’s argument that association works hand-in-glove with the federal coordination of democratic participation, Kaufman argues that “by encouraging Americans to bond together along gender, ethnonational and ethnoreligious lines, associationalism . . . disposed them to fear one another and thus to fear government itself—particularly any government program that might require the redistribution of income or the collectivization of risk. The result was a nation with a rather bizarre sense of self, one rooted not in the benefits of citizenry or in the value of inclusion but in libertarian paranoia and mutual distrust” (9). Thus the particular form associationalism took in the late nineteenth century conditioned democratic community toward suspicious surveillance and self-enclaving rather than supportive affirmation and community openness.

Describing a long-standing desire to understand how different types of organizations can facilitate cooperation among competitors in an individualistic society, Kaufman observes late in his study that “social capital theory tends to pay less attention to the effects of different forms of social organization than the need for more of them” (194). Without denying that there were some important democratic advances—like women’s suffrage and African-American civil rights—that can be correlated to associational efforts, Kaufman’s study—in strong contrast to Skocpol’s—links the boom in fraternal association with the simultaneous increase of ethnic and racial intolerance in the US, and attributes its decline to an increase in civic tolerance for social heterogeneity. What Skocpol sees as the counter-development to fraternal association, that is, the rise of citizen advocacy and lobbying, Kaufman indirectly frames as its direct descendant: “Consider the etymology of *lodge*, the base unit of most fraternal organizations. The medieval Latin root, *lobia*, denotes a ‘covered walk or cloister.’ In modern language, this most closely translates into the word *loge* or *lobby*, that is a covered space in which individuals can seek refuge or protection” (195). While he does not quite make the connection to modern-day lobbying (the transition of noun to verb) explicit in his conclusion, he asserts elsewhere in the study that the fraternal model “fostered the division of the polity into

numerous groups that represented narrowly defined special interests" (145), emphasizing how the structural logic of fraternal enclaving continues to influence US political development. Kaufman's arguments may not achieve the automatic visibility accorded to those of his more senior colleagues. That would be a shame because his conclusions pose an important challenge to their support for a renewal of voluntary association in the US as a corrective to civic disempowerment and anomie: "America's nineteenth-century experience with voluntarism is responsible in part for the very insufficiencies contemporary neo-Tocquevillians seek to address with volunteerism—poor schools, insufficient health care and social services, and a general lack of interest in the commonweal" (198). For Kaufman, a nostalgic turn to the past may be the worst strategy for revitalizing an inclusive civic sphere.

2. Who Needs Citizens? Or Community?

In *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined its Citizens and Privatized its Public* (2002), political scientists Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg share Skocpol's concern with the shrinking arena of the democratic public. As their title indicates, their account of twentieth-century US democracy parallels the rise of global capital and the downsizing of employee agency. While their argument corroborates Skocpol's concern over democratic decline, they indulge in no such nostalgia for a golden era of democratic participation. The opening of their study establishes a far different understanding of the negative entailments of citizen power in the US, one more in line with Kaufman's:

For more than two centuries, ordinary citizens were important political actors on the Western stage. Their vanguard entered political life with a bang in the eighteenth century. . . . Over the ensuing decades, tens of millions more served loyally as voters, citizen soldiers, taxpayers, jurors and the citizen administrators now disparaged as patronage employers. In these and other ways, citizens were the back-bone of the Western state, providing it with the administrative, coercive and extractive capabilities that allowed the West to conquer much of the world. (ix)

Rather than a triumphant voluntary construction of harmonious community from socio-economic and ethnic difference, Crenson and Ginsberg depict modern democratic government in the West as a "tacit exchange of service for benefit" that worked to draw

individuals "into political life" (ix). However, business-like Western governments increasingly are finding ways to do business without relying on the unpredictable involvement of ordinary citizens. In the US, the Democrats are as culpable for these shifts as the Republicans. For instance, the authors flag Al Gore's National Performance Review, endorsed by Republicans, where citizens are redefined as "customers." The redefinition of citizens as "individual purchasers seeking to meet their private needs in a market" contributes to a major shift in political demeanor (x). As the authors note, neither Gore nor Bush were particularly interested in popular support in the aftermath of election 2000. While commentators then pointed to the absence of mass political action as evidence of the "maturity of democracy" (xi) in the US, Crenson and Ginsberg suggest otherwise: "Perhaps, instead, Americans failed to become agitated because most knew the political struggle they were witnessing did not involve them" (xii).

This decline in democratic participation has come in the wake of generations of programs designed to foster democratic access, rationalization, and individual efficiency. Ironically, the cumulative effects of these reforms have turned against the power of citizenship and citizens. Crenson and Ginsberg's history of this decline begins in the Progressive era when in the name of eliminating waste and incompetence, reformers went after the link between political parties and patrons (15). Counter-reforms after World War II, which attacked the authority of Progressive-era regulatory agencies by opening them up to public at large, facilitated "individual access to policymaking" by "reduc[ing] the value of collective mobilization" (16). As public interest lawsuits became a means to influence regulation, power was effectively transferred away from the public and into the growing ranks of "advocates." Thus was born the era of the citizen as "faceless contributor," whose individual access to government services has operated as a powerful disincentive for the kinds of public organizations that lent power to citizenship in the first place.

Crenson and Ginsberg reject the utility of questions like "how can we make rulers take us seriously as citizens?" (239). The problem facing democracy is not that citizens have relinquished the habits of citizenship but that political elites of today have little reason to mobilize popular constituencies when they can accomplish their goals through courts and by "colonizing institutions in and around government" (242). Crenson and Ginsberg suggest "reducing leaders' opportunities to make public policy by litigation" by insisting on campaign finance reform "that would make the parties the principal institutions for campaign finance," thus reanimating political reliance on more publicly organized

modes of citizenship (240). They are not sanguine about these prospects though and conclude by predicting the obsolescence both of "the public and the citizens who make it up" (241) in what they anticipate as a "downward spiral" (242) of civic demobilization that will result in "politics without a public" (243). Their only hope, and it is a slim one, lies in the possibility that rather than continuing to deliver just enough personal access to individual democratic "consumers," the clashing aims of the political elite will result in a failure of service delivery, spurring a new cycle of public citizenship.

Science fiction writer and social theorist Samuel Delany cites many of these influences in his own account of the gentrification of Times Square in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999). In his account too, public democracy is endangered. His interest is in how nongovernmental democratic interaction can open up a radically different realm for thinking about democratic community, interaction, and revitalization. For Delany, democracy does not just happen in interactions between citizens and government. It also happens between citizens, in how they shape both intentionally and unintentionally what kinds of community and communal interactions are possible. The arena that concerns Delany is mid-town Manhattan, and his history of how Times Square was "cleaned up" and redeveloped for tourism charts the elimination of what he characterizes as democratic contact zones. In part one, "Times Square Blue," Delany offers an ethnography of the sexual culture of the movie houses, challenging readers to rethink the easy commonplace that all that was happening there was cheap or tawdry commercial exchanges between people who have problems with intimacy. In the second half, "Times Square Red," Delany integrates his arguments about Times Square sex culture into a larger argument about how big business and city planners have endeavored to sanitize class relations in urban spaces over the past generation, offering his own assessment of the costs—for individuals and democratic community—of these efforts.

Delany is not nostalgic for the drug culture that devastated the area starting in the mid-1980s (the escalation of which he blames on the economic developers whose strategies for impoverishing the area were a prelude to their proposals for sanitization [159]), but he is forthrightly and even luminously nostalgic for the sexual culture sponsored in Times Square, because it exemplifies a mode of—and model for—democratic association he treasured then and theorizes here. "Contact" is his shorthand for a larger concept, *random interclass contact*. His study asserts that "life is at its most rewarding, productive and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact

and communication conducted in a spirit of good will" (111). Contact happens in public and is supported by institutions, laws, zoning, and architecture; for example in the availability of public restrooms that allow you to spend decent amounts of time in neighborhood parks. Contact is what happens in unplanned encounters that can change your way of seeing things and people, can increase your safety ("You don't want to go down *that* street buddy," says the stranger), and change even your life, in grocery store lines, in bookstore conversations with strangers, in parks, and yes, in pornographic theaters. The sexual culture of the movie houses on Times Square, both gay and straight, supported such intercultural contact, particularly among the urban insiders who frequented the area. For Delany, these primarily noncommercial exchanges epitomize the accidental possibilities for democratic social relation that we should endeavor to sustain through supportive institutions.

Two forces undo such possibilities: small town provincialism which Delany sees as rigidly forbidding "interclass contact, except in carefully controlled work situations" (155) and big business, which substitutes a more structured and privatized practice, what Delany calls "networking" for the haphazardness of contact: "Networking, is what people have to do when those with like interests live too far apart to be thrown together in public spaces through chance and propinquity. Networking is what people in small towns have to do to establish any complex cultural life today" (128). Opportunities for contact are being diminished even in urban settings as more and more public space is redesigned to keep "undesirables" away, making interclass contact less and less likely.

While networking looks glamorous and beneficial and seems to promise the quality of random encounter that contact offers, Delany insists that it actually structures *competition*, not egalitarian exchange, and he notes that "the *amount* of need present in the networking situation [think professional golf tournaments, cocktail parties, or conferences] is too high for the comparatively few individuals in a position to supply the much needed boons and favors to *distribute them in any equitable manner*" (136). The friendly social practices structured within networking contexts "work to stabilize, retard and mitigate the forces of the class war" between professional or social haves and have nots. They do not halt that war: "at best they allow that war to proceed in a more humane manner that keeps 'war' merely a metaphor" (137). It is worth noting that what Delany calls networking resonates with Kaufman's description of fraternal associational practices and their special-interest, enclaving effects.

If the wisdom of big business and small towns is "never speak to strangers," the wisdom of a democratic city is that it requires its residents to "speak to strangers, live next to them and learn how to relate to them on many levels, including the sexual." He urges that "[c]ity venues must be designed to allow these multiple interactions to occur easily, with a minimum of danger, comfortably and conveniently. This is what politics—the way of living in the polis, in the city—is about" (193). His proposed method for rescuing contact is educational and he is optimistic about citizens' continuing ability to influence these changes, to educate "city planners, architects and the people who commission them" about the long-term benefits of designing for diversity (177). Delany thus finishes his book with a flourish more hopeful than the structuralist analysis he presents in the center of the "Times Square Red" essay. There, he outlines how "two orders of social force are always at work. One set is centripetal and works to hold a given class stable. Another is centrifugal and works to break a given class apart . . . Love/desire/awe/fear/discomfort/terror/abjection (horror) is the human response range to greater or lesser power differentials. The centripetal forces work to contain components of that response. Those components underlie and *are* the centrifugal forces" (140). This description is not about progress, but it offers hope for a changing, if not necessarily a settled, future for community.

With notably less attention to the kind of interclass analysis that Delany emphasizes, David Kirp, a public policy analyst, outlines in *Almost Home: America's Love-Hate Relationship with Community* (2000) "two distinct worlds," setting out to depict the tension between associational selfhood and individualism, "the pull and tug of isolation and communion" (2). Kirp begins with the question for the civil society theorists, "Why all . . . these efforts to mobilize the citizenry—and why now?" (15). He previews this conflict with the example that "tells a tale of American in miniature," of a fall day, early in the semester, at Berkeley (5). Tables are set up around Sproul Plaza representing an array of associational interests: political, social, sexual, sport. In Kirp's words, "Students wander slowly past these tables, as if window-shopping for an identity, deciding how to choose among their multiple selves" (4). These choices are counterbalanced by the game room, where solitary students play video games just "a few feet away" from the "civil society that is in the process of being formed on the Plaza" (5).

Kirp offers his book as a way to contextualize ongoing debates about the meaning and value of community in America, a word he describes as "a Rorschach blot upon which myriad hopes

and fears are projected" (6). For his part, Kirp sees community as an idea meant to counter the predominant value associated with democracy, which is that of individual liberty. As Kirp puts it, "freedom in action, even though deeply loved by Americans, can also be troubling" (8). The particular contour of US culture's affinity for democracy-as-individual-rights can culminate in a "Hobbesian war of all against all" and hence the habitual recourse to some idea of community to temper the economic competition of unfettered individualism (9). Where Skocpol sees association as an important form of citizen participation in government and Kaufman argues that it reinforces dangerous anti-democratic habits and policies, Kirp sees it as chimerical. Quoting Michael Schudson, he underlines association's limits: participatory forms are not always an "effective solution" for the problems citizens encounter (Kirp 10). As his opening anecdote indicates, Kirp uses the concepts of association and community almost interchangeably. For Kirp, then, neither associational practice nor community can rebuild the commonweal: it is simply political fantasy to believe that community can effectively counter "the unchecked and uncheckable growth of a national and increasingly international economy" (19). He indicates that we must look away from associational practice and community and toward national and international governing structures for remedies to growing inequalities of wealth and power.

Nevertheless, he turns to associational and community practices to examine the interaction of these forces in our lives. The book takes shape through 13 stories that describe in micro-detail the vicissitudes and rewards of community across an array of settings, from neighborhood emergency associations formed in the wake of a devastating fire, to community colleges cultivating community service, to individuals whose commitments cross identity or political lines. Kirp does not consider community as susceptible to institutional coordination or support; instead, he views community as sometimes beneficial, sometimes stifling, and always too unpredictable to be marshaled effectively for democratic purposes, even while admitting it can occasionally do that work. Kirp's analysis often willfully overlooks the ways institution and community overlap both negatively and positively (though another way to put this might be that his story-telling technique refuses to organize such analysis). Many of his stories have as their backdrop the anti-communal forces of big money and pro-business/pro-individual law. Many of his success stories are about people who manage to institutionalize democratizing practices against such forces, like Community Boards, a San Francisco area mediating service for community and neighborhood disputes designed

specifically to counter "the impact of law on daily life" (49–50). As Kirp acknowledges, the group teaches its volunteers "essential skills of democratic citizenship, the talents that Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, had in mind in his discussion of 'self-interest rightly understood.'" The impact of this training on the volunteers and those they counsel, he observes, "extends leagues beyond any specific dispute" (56), but because selfish individual actors often override the good work of such efforts, Kirp concludes that we cannot invest any hope in them. "The Disney Company can turn the New Urbanism vision of neighborhood life, intended to revive the public square, into a company run town called Celebration" is just one of many caveats against hope sprinkled throughout (331). Yet, he cannot let go of such hope himself, encouraging his self-divided (individualist? communitarian?) readers to become "ordinary heroes" like Ethel Lawrence, who led the fight for affordable housing in Mt Laurel, New Jersey.

Women's studies professor Miranda Joseph demonstrates no such ambivalence in *Against the Romance of Community* (2002): she is forthrightly dismissive about the possibilities of community for democracy. She starts by tackling a basic analytic paradox: postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and social justice scholarship of recent decades has always presumed that a remade community can "offer extraordinary promise as a ready-made basis for collective action" (xxii), while those same scholars have analyzed at length the disciplinary, exclusionary, and even genocidal mandates of "community." Joseph gives her own case study of Kirp's assertion that "life in tight-knit associations can be a miserable experience" (Kirp 17), agreeing with him that for better and worse, "community generates . . . the strongest of passions" (xxx). As a result of her own critical analysis of her unhappy and frustrating experiences conducting ethnographic research in the gay/lesbian Theater Rhinoceros, Joseph challenges scholars and activists alike to abandon their romanticizing of the community ideal, adopting instead a critical relationship to it: "Fetishizing community only makes us blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation" (ix).

Joseph undertakes ethnographically to study and to theorize the concept of community, both as a rhetorical invocation and as a practice, and ultimately as a compensatory device for and an economic unit implicated in the historical and ongoing predations of capitalism and its administrative handmaiden, the nation-state. In its anti-institutional aura, Joseph uncovers an alibi: community offers itself as an alternative to capitalism that hides from its members their own implication in the economic system's ongoing

injustices. Her Marxist-cultural studies theoretical apparatus might feel ponderous to some, but of all the books considered here, hers offers the most precise analysis of the term “community” and how we might counter its anti-democratic grip on our imagination. She is uninterested in the texture of personal interactions that captivate Delany and Kirp, turning her attention instead toward how people with overlapping political commitments might organize politically and institutionally to beat back the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism and nationalism in our lives today. Joseph urges that breaking the romance of “community” can lead to an expanded practice of strategic alliance and awareness for political coalition building and effective collective action.

Joseph’s analysis of democratic association turns to the proliferation of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and nonprofit organizations. In the age of global capital, nonprofits are associated with the recuperative notion of community as selfless and opposed to the destructuring effects of capitalism. Joseph notes that nonprofits “often articulate desires not met by capitalism for specific goods—religion, education, health care, arts, social services or social change—but also often for an alternative mode of production, namely gift-exchange” (72). NGOs seemingly offer to mediate the opposition between capitalism’s for-profit-exchange and communism’s redistributive community: nonprofits in her analysis articulate “the desire for community with a desire for capitalism” (73). Acknowledging that nonprofits have proliferated worldwide since the 1970s, “as capitalists and capitalist states repeatedly deployed nonprofits . . . to hegemonize potentially anticapitalist populations,” Joseph highlights “the willingness of the poor and all sorts of not-so-poor individuals and communities to participate in and make use of NGO activity” (116). Neither romantic nor cynical accounts capture this aspect of NGOs, how nonprofit services can organize new collectivities, and how the subjects they aim at can put their services to uses that exceed and/or redirect their founders’ intentions. Here Joseph makes an analytical move similar to Delany’s: she encourages us to look beyond the false choices structured by classic debates (association vs competition, community vs capitalism, help vs exploitation) in order to encounter different possibilities altogether.

3. Markets, Crowds, and Disagreement

According to Joseph, intellectuals on both the right and the left habitually look backward to a better time—before enclosure, or industrialization, or multiculturalism, feminism, secularism, or the

Right's politics of intolerance ruined community's possibilities for all of us. Perhaps not surprisingly, each side tends to marshal Tocqueville's observations about democratic community for their nostalgic cause, but Joseph wants all of us to pay attention to the French observer's "more important analytic argument": "He posits the township as ideal not to argue that face-to-face relations are in themselves some sort of magic bullet but rather because, as townships functioned politically in the historical moment in which he observed them, they are the context within which two potentially problematic aspects of American political culture, equality and democracy, work together productively" (4). In Tocqueville's analysis, democracy, *not* community, is the antidote to rampant individualism. Democracy's institutions allow people to participate and organize, and as such, the forms community assumes under democracy are at once more active and more disconnected: "Tocqueville's 'communities' . . . are resolutely modern," Joseph summarizes, their texture a product of democracy's interaction with individualism's drives (4).

New Yorker writer James Surowiecki lauds this modern, disconnected but cooperative community—urban rather than rural, abstractly interdependent rather than thickly connected—in his *The Wisdom of the Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations* (2004). With Joseph, he suggests that familiar agonizing over prioritizing individuals or community is a false choice. While he does not make this point explicitly, he dispenses with Putnam's nostalgia for bowling leagues as nothing more than a market bubble, a decade-long, artificially propelled Wall Street push on bowling stocks that, for a while, created a "frenzy for anything bowling-related . . . until it died" (243). Although Surowiecki's critical aim is at the stupidity of markets, it is hard not to hear an implicit rejoinder to Putnam's idealization of what became known as "the people's country club" (243): "They overbuilt and over-invested in anticipation of a future that never materialized. The bowling bubble, in other words, was not exactly a glowing testimony to the wisdom of the crowd" (245). This is not your familiar dismissing of the stupidity of "the mob." Instead, Surowiecki's argument here implicitly returns us to the choice Kaufman frames for associations: community and cooperation or the challenges of intrasocial competition? Interestingly, Surowiecki (like Delany) answers: both.

Surowiecki is interested in describing modern human institutions—business, societies, markets, and nations—and to understand what makes them function more and less optimally ("healthy" is the word he uses to describe their optimal performance). He begins with an anecdote from the life of Francis Galton, when the aging

scientist decided at a country fair to request the 800 entries for a contest to guess an ox's weight, in order to prove how little average voters would achieve in such an experiment. What he found, though, proved just the opposite. After running a series of statistical tests on the ballots, what Galton learned was that the average guess of the crowd was only one pound off what the ox weighed (1197 to 1198 lbs). In Galton's words, "The result seems more creditable to the trustworthiness of a democratic judgment than might have been expected" (qtd in Surowiecki xiii).

Surowiecki idealizes not individuals and community but markets and democracy. He rejects the notion that "it takes a village," arguing that modern innovations like mass capitalist democracy, with its emphasis on collective decision-making in place of consensus or autocratic leadership, maximize the wisdom of the crowd. He marshals data to show that villages and individuals alike tend to produce less "healthy" decisions than properly diversified crowds of loosely linked individuals, the former because they tend toward an unhealthy homogeneity that biases decision-making toward extremes, the latter because study after study has shown that no individual is as smart or as good at problem solving as a diverse group of individuals. He highlights the work of political scientist Chandra Nemeth, who establishes that "the presence of a minority viewpoint, all by itself, makes a group's decisions more nuanced and its decision-making process more rigorous. This is true even when the minority viewpoint turns out to be ill-conceived" (183–4). Diversity for Surowiecki has more to do with experience and point of view than the simple fact of identity and familial background. Multicultural groups of academics, for instance, who agree on basic assumptions about their own area of expertise, can still make stupid assessments and choices because of their lack of ideological or disciplinary diversity, because of their shared assumptions. Groups of like-minded people are in fact highly susceptible to group polarization, a phenomenon Cass Sunstein has recently described at length in *Why Societies Need Dissent* (2003). In settings where a group shares basic leanings or opinions, deliberation tends to radicalize the opinion of the group and individuals within it, polarizing rather than moderating opinion, thus the value of injections of diverse opinion, different expertises, and diverging institutions that support dissent.

For Surowiecki, the vitality of association is at least irrelevant, even damaging to the larger good of democratic community. His test for functioning community is not how people interact face-to-face with those they feel comfortable among: "It may be, in the end, that a good society is defined more by how people treat

strangers than by how they treat those they know" (118). Here he is solidly with Delany. Intriguingly, however, he attributes to *capitalism*, not democratic institutions, our ability to behave in both trusting and trustworthy ways towards strangers. In Surowiecki's view, the impersonality of the market worked to break up the homogeneity of familial or ethnic-based communities and created broader communities of market and/or democratic trust, and he cites research demonstrating that people from more market-oriented societies display markedly higher proclivities toward being fair to and cooperating with strangers than people in more ethnic and familial cultures (economist Benjamin Friedman has more recently suggested, though, that such trust develops in markets only when economies are good). Surowiecki finds support in the work of historian T. H. Breen, who has recently produced a lengthy study to document that the growth of capitalism has maximized the kinds of behaviors we need for healthy democracy. If the wisdom of the crowd cannot resolve the basic difficulties of democracy (which are not typically susceptible to tests of fact the crowd so excels at solving), still, its ability to generate solutions to cooperation and coordination always trump those developed by managers and intellectuals. Surowiecki apparently intends this argument as a shot in the arm for democratic citizenship, a manifesto for those who habitually defer power to democratic leaders and experts.

Democracy is the subject of Surowiecki's last chapter. He clearly hopes that his arguments about the wisdom of the crowd provide a boon to offer our political system. Here his argument loses precision. He makes of fun of James Fisher Fishkin's model of deliberative polling (too expensive) and Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman's proposal for a national deliberation day (utopian!), countering their "school-marmish" civic optimism with Richard Posner's snuffy dismissal of the average citizen's ability or will to participate in such projects (261). Surowiecki himself hovers between wanting to let the market decide and wanting some notion of national community to keep us together as more than just an abstraction of polling decisions. He suggests that democracy is "an excellent vehicle for making intelligent decisions and uncovering the truth" (262), only to conclude that "choosing candidates and making policy in a democracy are not, in that sense, cognition problems and so we should not expect them to yield themselves to the wisdom of the crowd" (270). Still, he invokes two of the three problems that crowd wisdom can help solve: if not cognition, then coordination and cooperation. Democracy, he asserts, "is a way of dealing with (if not solving once and for all) the most fundamental problems of cooperation and coordination: How do we live together? How can living together work to our mutual benefit?" (271).

Thus Surowiecki both raises and represses the limits of his model. His abstracted, smart-crowd democracy cannot, as he acknowledges, help us to be smarter about non-factual, value-laden, and day-to-day processes of *living together*. We cannot do this work without encountering each other directly, and we cannot make our day-to-day, face-to-face decisions protected by voting booths. Living together, we need not just answers and strategies but also skills. These skills can only be developed in practice with disagreeable fellow citizens. Surowiecki invokes without specifying the *intersubjective* labor democracy requires: "Democracy helps people answer those questions because the democratic experience is an experience of not getting everything you want. It's an experience of seeing your opponents win and get what you hoped to have, and of accepting it, because you believe they will not destroy the things you value and because you know you will have another chance to get what you want" (271). He summarizes this as "*healthy* democracy" (my emphasis), concluding tautologically that wise crowds of isolate individuals will continue choosing democracy because it is "the foundation of the social contract" (270). Democracy, as Surowiecki acknowledges, may be the best answer, but what he cannot seem to admit is that choosing it on a multiple choice test is not the same as the public, intersubjective exercise of making it happen with strangers and neighbors whose political commitments seem revolting.

Voters in this country always think they are choosing democracy, however different their ideas about what that means. As an intersubjective exercise, as a form of self-governance that we have to work out together across these differences, fewer feel sure we are making the grade. Maybe that has always been the case, as Schudson suggests. What many describe as a "decline" can also be described in Schudson's terms, as changing conditions. I am entirely persuaded by Schudson's arguments that "individual political activity in the past quarter century has actually risen" (299). Yet activity can rise as skill falls, and it is hard not to feel persuaded that what we are seeing today in the zero-sum Senate "deliberation" named the "nuclear option" is an outcome of a historically specific process of civic deskilling and socio-political enclaving. I do not think the solutions for the problems facing democracy today come solely in finding ways to limit the power of the political elite. Unlike Skocpol, I do not think promoting association will answer our current problems—Sunstein confirms Kaufman's suspicion that like-minded association breeds like-minded intolerance. So, face-to-face interactions are not a magic bullet. Yet why turn our face against them because *under some circumstances* they can foster the formation of intolerant

associations of the like-minded? Intolerance is not, as Kirp and especially Delany so engagingly trace, the only thing local practice can foster. With institutional supports, the self-reinforcing habits of like-minded association can be interrupted by the unexpected pleasures, challenges, and skill-building of cross-class (or cross-identity, cross-ideology) contact. In other words, we need to continue thinking, critiquing, contributing, and insisting on our right to develop our involvement in cultivating the arts and institutions of democratic self-governance. Such a strategy moves us beyond the safety of mass opinion polling that leaves us simply bemoaning the stark divisions evident in blue and red state outcomes.

4. Conclusion

These books do not offer a consistent or precise definition of democracy: mostly they mean a more or less ideal version of US representative democratic institutions and culture, loosely collapsing one specific historical practice into a definitional paradigm. Their version may be less idealized than that of many literary scholars, but for most of these scholars it is less examined than assumed. Many of these scholars are skeptical about the value of association or face-to-face community for democracy. Most see institutions as sites that provide support for more and less healthy democratic practice. Provocatively, Delany, Joseph, and Surowiecki converge in their emphasis that insofar as community supports democracy, it is modern and urban, not pre-modern and rural forms of community that do so: the democracy of strangers rather than the democracy of neighbors.

Such arguments should be an interesting spur for those scholars whose investment in democracy emerges from an interest in multiculturalism or diversity. In the light of the studies considered here, diversity is a problem for community but a boon for mass democracy. These studies signal that those interested in democracy's ability to foster and enhance diversity should stop wanting "community" to be a metaphor for democracy. Instead they might study the kinds of informal and institutional structures that make trust, compromise, cooperation, action, and contact possible without preexisting or existing affective bonds of consensus, kinship, or identity—for instance partnering Delany's suggestions about how promiscuous sexual practice can expand democratic community with Surowiecki's appreciation for how promiscuous capitalist institutions have done similar work. Such investigations might lead, as Surowiecki (and Breen) suggest, to a more careful investigation of whether some aspects of capitalism have fostered, and not just attacked, the democratic imaginary. They might investigate Joseph's Toquevillian postulate: does

literature show us earlier citizens imagining democracy rather than community (and what kind of democracy?) as individualism's antidote? And they might consider something none of the studies here undertake: the role of religious practices in shaping individual and group understandings of community and democracy. Here scholars might take a lead from, for instance, Marjoleine Kars and Brendan McConville, whose recent books on property rebellion in the late colonies and early US emphasize the importance that Methodism and other radical, evangelical strains of Protestantism had in fostering a democratic working-class temperament that made it possible for commoners to imagine challenging aristocratic privilege. What is the relationship of evangelical Protestantism, to take one possible question, to the developing cultural dynamics of capitalism? Where does democracy, and/or community, fit into such narratives?

In these tense times, it might be tempting for literary critics to play it a little safer, turning away from the sticky implications of politics toward a more sanitized study of, say, structure and aesthetics. As I read these books, I could not help but think of how much our field brings to such debates. Literature is rich in collective insight and imaginings. It can play a crucial role in understanding, for example, the overlap between aesthetic, social, and political forms of democratic representation, how, for instance, the stories we tell—even the shape of the stories we tell—condition what we imagine to be possible, what we are willing to undertake. As literary critics, we have done a good job in showing how much of our traditionally canonical literature has both supported and worked to interrupt the state power that so often works against democratic power. We have found many—though I suspect not nearly all—dissenting and alternative narratives. If it is true that democracy—the self-governing processes of a people—is the “best answer,” it is worth looking for what literature has to tell us about how to enact that answer when we find ourselves disliking our neighbors or regarding them as strangers. Continuing to elaborate on what literature can teach us about the overlap of democracy and disagreement, community, and coalition, we might find what it takes for us to keep believing, investing in, and acting on the value of that project in our own lives.

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