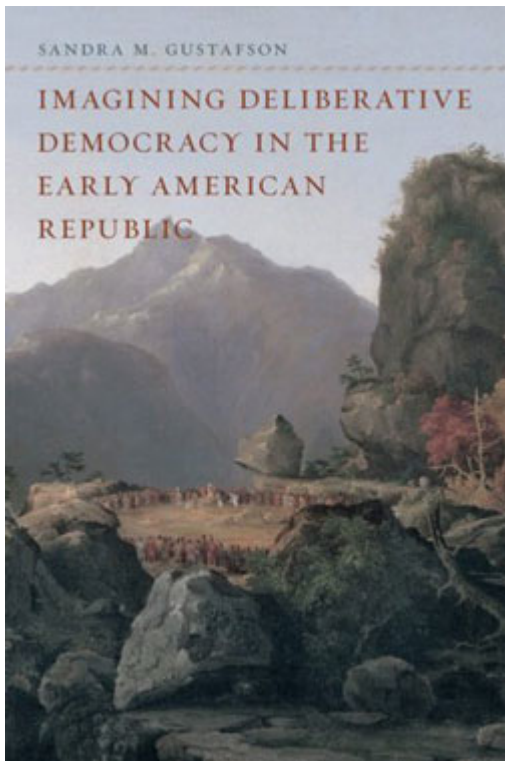


Cato's Literatures?



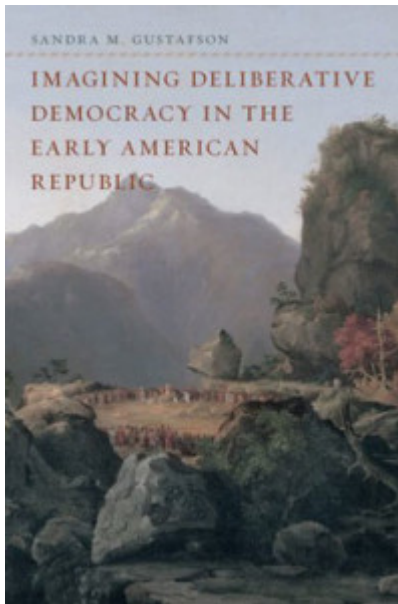
What work of English literature had the most significant influence on American literary history? Any given answer would of course depend on what, in the end, one wanted that history to look like. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, if one wants to authorize a masculine adventure tradition. Richardson's *Pamela*, if one wants to emphasize the sentimental-domestic. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to fathom American attempts at epic. It's a crude thought experiment; no single text generates a literary tradition. But different strains of a tradition are pulled into focus when we choose particular transatlantic points of departure.

Sandra Gustafson's remarkable new book begins by inviting us to give this kind of pride of place to Joseph Addison's 1713 play, *Cato, A Tragedy*, though she does it with a good deal more subtlety than I just displayed. With tongue in cheek, she imagines George Washington hailing Addison, in the way Lincoln is supposed to have hailed Stowe, as the man who wrote the play that started this great war—in this case, the Revolutionary one. In *Cato*, a deeply popular literary work throughout the eighteenth century and one particularly beloved by the statesmen who shaped the U.S. republic, we have a dramatic representation of deliberative democracy as an ideal form of discourse. In the play's second act, as Cato and his fellow senators debate whether to continue their resistance to Caesar's dominion or to end the war with a well-considered surrender, they not only dramatize an historical event of great moment, but model for contemporary audiences and future readers the virtues and rigors of deliberation itself. So: what version of American literature would that origin project? What genres or literary modes would deliberative thinking tend to

engender? Would imaginative literature grounded in such a notion of civic participation be tethered to drama? To the dialogue?

Now, to tell the truth, Gustafson does not seem at all interested in authorizing a particular version of the canon, nor, even if she calls oratory the "preeminent genre of republicanism" (42), is she interested in establishing an equivalence between an argument about civic participation and a particular literary form. If her playful opening gambit seems to raise such questions, she soon quite decisively changes the subject. Her object is deliberation as a rational and formal process of "moderate, thoughtful consideration of public issues" (2), and some of the cultural forms that represented it. In order to take account of this idea, she returns to the two decades following 1815, a period during which deliberation "began to be imagined as a democratic form of republican self-governance and a defining characteristic of American civil society" (40), yet at the same time, a period of crisis in which this idealized national self-image found itself seriously challenged by debates over slavery and Indian removal that threatened to break it apart.

That national story is framed by the larger context of "Modern Republicanism in the Atlantic World," as the book's second chapter has it. This larger frame not only brings something important to the argument, but as Gustafson shows, is demanded by her subject. For as much as the U.S. republic may have celebrated its exceptional capacity for deliberative democracy, it could only make that exceptionalist claim through referential gestures to world history and global context. As a self-styled modern republic, it cast itself explicitly as a revival of classical ideals formerly incarnated in the Roman republic and finally perfected in modernity. But it also defined itself in relation to other modern forms, setting the United States against the global backdrop of other recently constituted republics in France, Haiti, Spanish America, and Greece. Thus, for example, Daniel Webster expressed his commitment to deliberative republicanism by invoking a larger context of "international republican movements" in order to "place the history of the United States in the leading ranks of an Atlantic world transformation" (59).



Sandra M. Gustafson, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 288 pp., \$45.

In contrast to the euphoric representations of a democratic ethos in that other book about the relationship between democratic theory and American culture, F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, the civic ideal Gustafson traces for us was a democracy carefully contained, qualified, and hence protected against the threatening excesses of populism. Yes, we already knew this, but what Gustafson crucially shows us here is that "deliberation" itself was one of the mechanisms of that containment and qualification. This was a political culture founded on John Quincy Adams's premise that "eloquence is power" (the slogan that provided Gustafson's 2000 book with its title), but the deliberative model was specifically focused on an ideal of public, collective communication that would avoid the pitfalls of dangerous eloquence, demagoguery, and the fractious nature of public discourse. In the eyes of federalist theorists like James Madison, deliberation would bring a principle of "wisdom and stability" to bear on a republic that might otherwise be "too subject to the whims of a potentially gullible electorate" (2-3).

Deliberation is no doubt put to the ideological test in the pages of this book, and it does not always come out shining. At the same time, Gustafson does not want us to identify deliberation as always a strategy of containment, much less an essentially anti-democratic cultural impulse. Chapter one, "Deliberation: A Very Brief History," gives us a particularly clear sight of that choice in the early twentieth century perspectives of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. Lippmann fashioned an early and trenchant critique of deliberative democracy as a "spectacle managed by the elites" rather than a true form of popular self-governance. (It was Lippmann's notion of "the manufacture of consent" that provided Noam Chomsky with the starting point for his "propaganda model" of media.) Dewey conceded that deliberative communication relied on symbols and representations, and thus had a certain "fictional" or artistic dimension, but "refused to concede the failure of democratic self rule" (32) as an inevitable

consequence. Gustafson describes this showdown, and then traces it from the 1920s to the contemporary theoretical literature on republicanism and deliberative democracy.

On balance, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy* sides with Dewey over Lippmann—embracing the positive potential of the deliberative ideal rather than a cynical chronicle of its mystifications. But to the extent that it adjudicates the question, it does so on the terrain of nineteenth-century culture rather than that of twentieth-century theory. The most telling figure here, and the one to whom Gustafson must devote the closest and most sustained consideration, is Daniel Webster. For Webster was at once the early hero of the deliberative ideal, and the eventual villain of the abolitionist cause by virtue of his support for the Compromise Measures of 1850. “His quality is not wisdom, but prudence,” Thoreau had written of Webster a year earlier in “Resistance to Civil Government.” Gustafson does not attempt to rescue Webster from the charge, exactly, but she does lend the picture some depth of field. She gives us close and well-contextualized readings of some of his most celebrated earlier orations, from his commemorative speech at Plymouth in 1820 to those on the Greek Revolution in 1824 and the Congress of Panama in 1826—key addresses in which he clarified his version of deliberative ideals and honed the oratorical style which aimed to incarnate them. The problem was that Webster’s commitment to the political moderation represented by republican deliberation was precisely what tethered him to gradualism and enabled that notorious bargain with the devil. This larger context does not recuperate Webster’s politico-ethical failures, but it does help us to understand precisely why he found himself thus “compromised,” and also why his constituents experienced this so dramatically as a Miltonic fall from grace.

Rather than paint the entire concept of deliberative democracy with that brush, however, Gustafson hastens to add that the deliberative ideal also animated the progressive discourses of various “counterpublics” during this period and hence enabled a political alternative to Webster’s “white Christian republic” (219). As she argues in chapter five, “Prophesying the Multiracial Republic,” the political visions projected by figures like William Apess, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and Lydia Maria Child were just as centrally concerned with deliberation, though in a more complex way: they had simultaneously to “make visible the deliberative crisis produced by racial prejudice and legal exclusion that needed to be remedied if the ideals of the multiracial republic were to be realized,” and also come up with a new model of deliberative communication capable of enacting it (151). Supplementing the deliberative mode with that of “prophecy,” this particular variety of early republican political discourse had to navigate a general tension between classical and biblical models of communication in the period (86-96). But by doing so, works such as Walker’s *Appeal* (1829), Stewart’s “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality” (1831), and Apess’s “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (1833), were able to adapt the jeremiad form to a particularly modern species of “American protest writing.” Rhetorical form in these cases is inseparable from political content, to the point where the distinction itself is to some

extent misleading.

This raises the question, finally, of the status of the “literary” here—as it is almost bound to whenever a professor of English presents a work so deeply engaged with the disciplines of history and political theory. As the book’s title indicates, this is not a political history of deliberative democracy, nor a theoretical entry into its philosophical grounding, so much as a literary and cultural history of how the notion was imagined, represented, and formulated in early U.S. culture. The strongest examples of this kind of argument are found in chapter six, “Deliberative Fictions,” which features readings of the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Lydia Maria Child. The most impressive accomplishment of this chapter is that it takes what first appear to be strange bedfellows, the novel form and deliberative democracy, and marries them so thoroughly that in the end it seems perfectly natural to read fiction in such terms. At the same time, since the majority of Gustafson’s textual sources are far removed from imaginative literature (orations, political treatises, and pamphlets) the question lingers: what distinguishes this inquiry from, say, the history of an idea? Gustafson perhaps tries too hard to keep this question at bay through strategic deployments of the language of aesthetics—as in the proposition that an “aesthetics of deliberation involved in tandem with its politics” (98), for example, or the reference to Webster as the “preeminent aesthetician of modern republican eloquence” (102)—for it is not always clear just what sense of the “aesthetic” is at issue here and how precisely it differs from rhetoric. Far more convincing is the more general argument that “civic values and political practices are shaped by the imagination” (9). The proposition appears to cut both ways: there is an imaginative dimension to political communication, but at the same time, the realm of imaginative literature itself was no less a part of the formation and dissemination of the deliberative ideal. This kind of reciprocity between literature and politics is what generates the book’s many fascinating and surprising interpretive turns.

Is Gustafson more interested in what the political theories tell us about literary form, or in what the literary forms tell us about political theory? In truth, that question misrecognizes what *Imagining Deliberative Democracy* is ultimately after. The book’s final chapter, “How to Read Deliberatively,” along with its conclusion, make an inspirational call for a “deliberative hermeneutics” (220), a mode of reading literary works that “highlight[s] their deliberative content.” Perhaps the most striking claim here is that “such reading practices promote the values of deliberative democracy” and foster the best aspects of the political-linguistic culture the book describes—its “commitment to dialogue and persuasion as the best means to resolve conflicts and forge a progressive consensus” (180). The “imagining” of the book’s title thus refers finally not only to the writers and orators in Gustafson’s historical period, but to her own acts of critical imagination in which we as readers are meant to share. That is a tall order for a work of scholarship, but eloquence is indeed power, and *Imagining Deliberative Democracy* abounds with both.

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