Radical Americas

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Book Review

Scott Henkel, *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*, (Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 224pp., $65.00

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Abstract

Review of *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas* by Scott Henkel.

Keywords: direct democracy; Haitian Revolution; gilded age; slave rebellion

Scott Henkel has produced an excellent intervention on behalf of scholars of the revolutionary Atlantic World, one which uses literature to centre voices that have been marginalized by traditional scholarship on revolution. Beginning with the Haitian Revolution and wending its way through the Americas, *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas* exists within a long nineteenth century that runs from the 1790s to the occupation of Haiti by the United States in the 1930s. Henkel constructs a literary history of what he terms 'direct democracy', which he explains is 'the power of ability when multiplied by cooperation' (p. 16) and 'whereby a group's power can add up to more than the sum of its parts' (p. 17). Problematizing traditional theories of democratic power, which privilege individual actors, the author suggests that we need to assess the power dynamics of revolutionary upheaval and make them broader and more inclusive by focusing on the 'swarm'. The swarm, according to Henkel, acts as the literary metaphor through which to trace direct democratic action. The swarm's existence isn't evident under capitol domes, but in plantation fields and by industrial workers inspired by the writings of Lucy Parsons, for example. Wherever direct democracy is at work, the swarm is its physical manifestation.

The author urges the reader to move away from understanding democracy strictly in a bureaucratic or 'limited' capacity and instead to interpret democracy as a complex type of power wielded by the majority (constituent power) against the empowered minority (constituted power) (p. 3). Building directly from Spinoza's conception of power, that every being has the capacity to persevere and maintain its existence, Henkel in turn suggests that such a capacity is amplified when combined with others. Such an intervention acknowledges the importance of figures such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines – the most visible leaders of the revolution in Haiti – but stresses that alongside these two leaders stood a thousand more revolutionaries who often are cast as passive actors in narratives detailing these events. This is similar to the way Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri characterize 'the multitude'.

Structurally, the author starts his analytic narrative in revolutionary Haiti. Situating the struggle in St Domingue as the greatest example of direct democracy in modern history, Henkel sees the Haitian Revolution as an ideal instance to illustrate how less visible individuals can be subsumed by events of such magnitude, at least within narrative representations. Addressing C.L.R. James's admission that *The Black Jacobins* (1971) would have benefitted greatly from less emphasis on Toussaint and more on the thousand 'little leaders', Henkel believes that the swarm – especially in 1802 – diligently and in a decentralized manner, orchestrated continued resistance against French colonial power (p. xi). Rather than dissolving in the wake of Toussaint's arrest in June 1802, the revolutionary movement maintained cohesion and collective capacity.

The second chapter presents the varying degrees to which intellectuals of the gilded age in the United States (1877–98) understood the swarm. Direct democracy, as represented by the swarm, was perceived along a spectrum that ranged from productive to ultimately dangerous. Writers such as Thomas Carlyle abhorred the capacities of direct democracy, as exemplified by the Paris Commune in 1871 and the Morant bay uprising in 1865, while Walt Whitman praised democratic institutions but pushed back against what he saw as excessive radicalism. Like Carlyle, Whitman believed in the 'aristocratic thesis' or mandate of the few, but applied it democratically; everyone has the *capacity* for democratic participation, but under the guidance of talented leaders. In contrast, Lucy Parsons promoted the dismantling of structures of inequality and their replacement with more egalitarian and radical ones through mass organization and demonstration (p. 81).

In chapter three, Henkels asks what is lost when representations of direct democracy are overwhelmed by narratives that focus on a single individual; such was the case during the Nat Turner Rebellion, which he purposefully refers to as the Southampton Slave Rebellion, disrupting the tendency to assign ownership – in this case to Turner – over a social movement in response to a social institution. Slavery as an institution was a braid of 'economies, laws, cultural norms' that increased its sense of permanency (p. 85). Individual resistance to slavery, although important, required group resistance in tandem for greater success. Henkel stresses that collective movements for liberation, rather than a select few individual actors, challenged slavery's existence and eventually brought its demise. In contrast to Thomas R. Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which sought to limit the visibility of the swarm by allocating responsibility

to one person, B. Traven's Mahogany Novels, set in revolutionary Mexico (1910–9), focus on the collective intelligence of the swarm. More than just 'two thousand vigorous arms' demonstrating their combined strength, they also had the intellectual capacity to organize effectively (p. 109). The final chapter returns to Haiti, focusing on Marie Vieux Chauvet's novel, *Love*, which depicts the lengths to which constituted power – the power of the constitution and its enforcers – are willing to go to in order to quell the power of constituent power; that is, by breaking the bonds of the swarm through fear and repression.

One of the key interventions made by the author is to express that the English language provides limited avenues through which to understand power, noting that other romance languages account for several iterations. French has *pouvoir* and *puissance*, while German has *macht*, *gewalt* and *vermgen*. According to Henkel, this linguistic discrepancy would suggest, at least in the English language, that there are those with power and those without. Wherever people exist, there is a multiplicity of power relations that people can occupy (contrary to linguistic disparity) so as to extrapolate on the theme of direct democracy. The project started by Henkel is an exciting one, and it provides a theoretical and transnational model that can benefit scholars working outside of the northern Atlantic world to South America and the African continent or even further abroad. Moreover, the theoretical framework utilized by Henkel holds promise for the study of social movements and to move beyond the leaders toward models of collective action.