H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kimberly K. Smith. *The Dominion of Violence: Riot, Reason & Romance in Antebellum Politics.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999. viii + 318 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0957-4.

Reviewed by Elizabeth R. Varon

Published on H-Pol (January, 2000)

Smith's book is a fascinating but frustrating foray by a political theorist into the world of antebellum politics. Smith draws on historical examples to challenge a strong consensus that prevails in the field of political science that "rational public debate should be the primary means of practicing politics in a liberal democracy" (p. 1). Her primary goals are to historicize the concept of rational public debate, illustrating that is has a complicated genealogy, and to argue that there were, in the Revolutionary and antebellum eras, three significant alternatives to the call for rational debate: a defense of mob action as a legitimate form of democratic protest; a persistent suspicion that public debate could devolve into demagogery; and the practice, by abolitionists in particular, of a politics of storytelling. The book is divided into three sections, corresponding to the three "antideliberative themes" (p. viii) that Smith has identified. Each section is a heady mix of historical vignettes, the elucidation of key texts, and the marshalling of modern day-theory (the work of Jurgen Habermas in particular).

Section one traces the public discourse about rioting as it evolved from the late eighteenth century into the antebellum period. The author draws her material here as elsewhere in the book primarily from the urban North, with a special emphasis on Philadelphia. During the Revolution, colonists saw mob action, as exemplified by the Stamp Act protests, as a necessary and defensible form of civil disobedience. As part of the post-Revolutionary backlash against democratic excesses, the founders cast rioting (exemplified now by Shays Rebellion) as irrational and undemocratic and held up reasoned debate, obedience to the law, and the practice of voting as the proper forms of popular politics. During the antebellum period, leading theorists, reformers and public authorities alike worked self-consciously to further taint rioting, principally by assailing the character of rioters and arguing that the very right to participate in democracy was premised on the citizen's capacity to use reasoned argument and not violence as the vehicle for his views. Smith's argument in this first section is persuasive, and best read in conjunction with David Grimsted's *American Mobbing, 1826-1861* (Oxford

University Press, 1998). Grimsted features evidence from the antebellum South, the more violent and mob-prone of the two sections, that lends credence to Smith's contention that anti-riot rhetoric was deeply contested.

Section two, on public debates over political oratory, begins with the claim that while mob action "had come to define democratic politics during the Revolution, public speaking took on an equally definitive role in antebellum politics" (p. 93). Smith ably shows why in such a political climate those groups denied full citizenship (represented by proto-feminist Frances Wright and black activist Samuel Cornish, among others) fought so hard to assert their right to speak in public and thereby to show themselves capable of rational discourse. Smith then goes on to contrast two models for political debate that prevailed during this era: the neoclassical model, in which the orator uses a combination of rational and passionate appeals in pursuit of his personal glory and policy objectives, and the Enlightenment model (elucidated by theorist Habermas), which privileged a dispassionate and scientific presentation of "facts" over passionate appeals, and pitted the "truth-seeking press" against the "power-wielding state" (p. 133). Smith identifies a handful of antebellum figures (Horace Greeley and Nicholas Biddle, for example) as representatives of the latter model, and then goes on to show that the behavior of the partisan press during the Jacksonian era flew in the face of Enlightenment rationalism. Smith's emphasis on models in this second section of the book is problematic, for it comes at the expense of a sustained treatment of any of the political issues that divided antebellum Northerners.

Part three of Smith's argument positions slave narratives as an innovative contribution to long-standing debates about what constitutes legitimate public discourse. Authors such as Frederick Douglass adapted the Enlightenment model of truth-seeking by emphasizing the role of moral intuition in political enlightenment; in the face of public skepticism and hostility, Douglass sought not only to assert the authority of his own moral intuitions but to appeal to the innate moral sense of his audience. He and other abolitionists employed personal narratives as political discourse because that was the only way to spark the moral intuitions of the public -- they sought not so much to marshall the "irresistible power of truth" but rather the "irresistible power of sympathy" (p. 201). Those who remained unsympathetic in the face of antislavery appeals abolitionists saw as possessing an impaired moral sense. Smith ends the book by drawing an analogy between slave narratives and the genre of conversion narratives, noting that both aimed at "reforming the listener's moral intuitions" (p. 229).

Smith has written an erudite book that succeeds both in tracing the roots of the rational debate paradigm and in showing how that paradigm was contested. Historians may find her methodology -- particularly the way she jumps back and forth between the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- off putting at times; in section three, for example, she works her way back from Douglass to colonial spiritual narratives, bypassing any discussion of the Second Great Awakening, the "benevolent empire,"and the antebellum roots of abolitionism. Smith has nonetheless made a valuable contribution to an expanding historical literature on the roles of reason, passion, and violence in antebellum political culture.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol

Citation: Elizabeth R. Varon. Review of Smith, Kimberly K. *The Dominion of Violence: Riot, Reason & Romance in Antebellum Politics.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. January, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3703

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.