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Book Reviews

Nolan Bennett: *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. ix, 257.)

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When Benedict Anderson argued in 1983 that modern nations were "imagined communities," he opened many promising paths of inquiry for social scientists, humanists, and political theorists that scholars have yet to traverse fully. Print technologies may well have helped enable millions of people who would never meet to picture themselves as fellow nationals, as Anderson suggested. But what sorts of accounts of their shared community would those millions, or subgroups among them, attend to, and who would write the accounts? To understand the formation of modern nations—or arguably any political community—it would surely help to explore what substantive themes, what genres of communication, what categories of authors shape popular political imaginations, and how they do so.

Political scientists, this reviewer included, have focused most on the narratives of nations advanced by leading political figures and institutions, as expressed in speeches, writings, and public policies, including education systems. Some have joined scholars in other social sciences and the humanities and examined conceptions of political community in the arts, in popular discourse, and in social movements. In *The Claims of Experience*, political theorist Nolan Bennett usefully analyzes a genre, autobiography, through which an intriguing variety of public figures, who have gained prominence in very different ways, have sought to shape the imagined community of American democracy.

Sensibly, Bennett does not worry about whether autobiographies are themselves works of "political theory" or "political philosophy," inquiries that risk fetishizing academic categories and hierarchies. Instead, he simply presents autobiography as, potentially, a deliberate "method of political thinking" (6), and he offers a theory of its characteristics. He sees political autobiographies as making three moves: *upward*, seizing from political authorities the role of defining what conception of political community readers should embrace; *inward*, exploring how the author's own experiences make a claim for that conception; and *outward*, communicating to readers a new narrative of peoplehood expressing the conception. Bennett argues in conclusion that

Nolan Bennett's names was misspelled in the second paragraph of the original online version of this article. Additionally, Whittaker Chambers's name was misspelled. Both errors have been corrected here and a corrigendum has been published.

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autobiographical claims that seek to shape political communities are necessarily tentative, since no interpretation of one person's experience can be fully authoritative for any society, and risky, since there is no guarantee for how anyone's claims will be received. He maintains, however, that readers who care about their lives and their communities should feel required to respond to thoughtful claims of experience offered by diverse voices.

The autobiographical writers Bennett explores in chronological order are Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Henry Adams, Emma Goldman, and Whittaker Chambers. This array—a celebrated "founding father," an African-American abolitionist, a late nineteenth-century historian and public intellectual of distinguished lineage, an early twentieth-century anarchist and feminist immigrant, and a mid-twentieth-century former Communist turned Christian conservative—represents a fascinating range of distinct voices, and Bennett's analyses of all of them are persuasive. He sees Franklin presenting himself, as his autobiography proceeds, not simply as entrepreneurial and hardworking, but as one who needs to work with others to overcome personal and social imperfections, a lesson Franklin hopes all citizens of the young nation will heed. Frederick Douglass's transition from his first autobiography to his second displays a growing conviction of the need not simply to dramatize resistance to slavery but to make all Americans see their complicity in it, and their shared responsibility to overcome it. Henry Adams, whose heritage and talents enabled him to live a life at the center of the nation's political and intellectual elites, nonetheless reported to his fellow Americans that the world was moving beyond anything his education prepared him to grasp, so that they faced the daunting task as well as opportunity of making their country anew. Emma Goldman's autobiography portrayed her own evolution from chiefly serving as a militant adversary of the powerful, to an empathetic ally of all the oppressed—a community she defined as the transnational "masses," not as "Americans." Whittaker Chambers turned from a 1930s idealism that led him to the Communist Party and friendship with Alger Hiss to disillusionment with Stalinist Russia and a quest for solace in a populist, patriotic Christianity—though Bennett rightly argues that Chambers gave more allegiance in practice to conservative statist authority than to his moral ideals. These characterizations not only correct other depictions of all these figures. They also clarify how these authors offered their readers new visions of political community, and just what those visions were.

Bennett's conclusions focus on the qualities of this genre of political thought, not inappropriately. As in the case of Anderson's book, however, *The Claims of Experience* may prove most significant for the questions it raises that go beyond its scope. Empirically, we might explore what impacts these works had on the development of conceptions of American political community and democracy. We might consider what views, from what sources, contested them. We might ask what the predominant outcomes were in particular periods, and what trajectory America's "imagined community" has taken over time. Did in fact the policies, institutions, and practices of the new American nation celebrate Franklin's story of individual achievement but not

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his call for recognition of imperfection and an ineradicable measure of interdependence, reflecting and fostering an enduring but excessive individualism? Did postbellum America embrace the Douglass of the *Narrative*, rising up alone against his slave master, far more than the Douglass of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, with his challenge to all Americans to rise up against much in their institutions and themselves? Did Americans grasp the depths of Henry Adams's dark irony and the moral and intellectual as well as political challenges it posed, and if so, how did they respond? Did many accept the need to aid each other in the face of not just capitalism and patriarchy but nationalism, as Goldman came to urge? While it seems clear that many Americans found Chambers's witness to the Communist "God that failed" convincing, what role did he play in strengthening affirmations of America as a conservative Christian nation-state? Should we understand American democracy in particular periods, or over time, as expressing any, some, or all of these views? Along with what others—and were those others still more influential?

Normatively, though Bennett offers brief critical judgments along the way, there is much more to ask and answer about the strengths and limitations of each of these narratives of American democracy, or in the case of Goldman, simply democracy. Though *The Claims of Experience* is subtitled *Autobiography and American Democracy*, Bennett seeks in this work more to show us the characteristics of autobiography than to make or assess claims about American democracy. His concluding point about politically potent autobiographies, that they prompt readers to respond, nonetheless richly applies to his own work. It, too, spurs reflections both on the voices through which "imagined communities" are made and changed, and on what American democracy might be and should be. The reflections that *The Claims of Experience* inspires are vital to pursue now, and they will be for as long as American democracy, in one form or another, endures.

–Rogers M. Smith
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Jeremy D. Bailey: *The Idea of Presidential Representation: An Intellectual and Political History*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2019. Pp. x, 259.)

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Our constitutional republic contains opposing principles of political accountability. Congress is primarily representative of the people, and the courts, of

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