

POLITICAL THEORY

The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy. By Nolan Bennett. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 276p. \$74.00 cloth.
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The founding political documents of the United States of America rest, implicitly and explicitly, on claims of experience—that is, on the authority of the evidence of ordinary life. The Declaration of Independence renders the “consent of the governed” as the keystone of legitimate governance and makes its claims “in the Name, and by the Authority, of the good people of these Colonies.” The everyday experiences of the people, say the Declaration’s signatories, are the reason they need to assert political independence.

A decade later, the Constitution’s location of the voice of authority in “We the People” picks up on the logic of the Declaration. The more implicit but still central message is that the collective experience of ordinary human beings is the solid ground of political legitimacy and knowledge.

Of course, any halfway conscious reader understands the tricky nature of claiming such a “we.” As Jason Frank has put it, the figure of “the people” is an impossible presence, an assemblage that always eclipses the claims made for it on paper (*Constituent Moments*, 2009). More prosaically—since the founding, Americans have looked at the Declaration and the Constitution and failed to see themselves and their own experiences encapsulated in the “we” therein. Am I in the “we” if I am being denied the right to vote? Am I in the “we” if I am against independence from the crown? Am I in the “we” if the “we” tallies me as .6 of a human being?

There are so many exclusions built into that inclusion, always in practice but also in theory. It is hard not to have the impulse, sometimes, to throw up our hands and to try to throw out the founding “we”—its simultaneously inclusive and exclusive gesture—in favor of a less vexing alternative. But it is less clear what such an alternative might be, short of a move toward rule in the name of elites or algorithms, a move that would flush democratic ideals down the drain with the bathwater. How do we save the ideal of the authoritative “we” when some of us invariably feel left outside its embrace?

Nolan Bennett shows us that, throughout American history, Americans have found a creative way to challenge and expand the “we” while still treating ordinary experience as the foundation of political legitimacy: they have done so through autobiography. In his excellent new book, *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and*

American Democracy, Bennett makes a compelling case that autobiography has served throughout the history of the American republic as a way for individuals to contest “prevailing narratives and the power others held over their stories, not to proclaim themselves individual or unique but to summon among readers a new community and vision of what lay before them” (p. 163). In other words, the autobiographer challenges the prevailing “we” within the framework of agreeing that claims of experience form the ground of the politically legitimate.

In claiming the authority to articulate one’s own experience, and to claim the attention of readers, the autobiographer demonstrates the way in which we all have the capacity to make meaning of our lives. This often involves challenging prevailing stories and authorities and, in so doing, calls us to communal reflection. As such, autobiography could be considered a “radical fundament of a dynamic and egalitarian society,” one that helps us maintain our democratic aspirations and recharge our democratic practice (p. 168).

Importantly, in making this case, Bennett is no Pollyanna in the defense of his central idea. He does not claim that the composition of an autobiography, or what in these late-capitalist days we now call the “consumption” of an autobiography, is like drinking a magical potion for democratic revitalization. Bennett calls on his own readers not just to take on responsibility to take autobiography—and other expressions of life experience—seriously but also to seek them out.

Until now, Bennett notes, most political scientists and theorists, even those of us who think of ourselves as democrats or scholars of literature, have mostly failed to appreciate the role and scope of autobiography in politics. Even political scientists who have read autobiographies have largely treated them as documentary source material, “not as a deliberate act or method of political thinking.” As a result, we have largely missed “the many trends and traditions whereby political thinkers and actors have turned to autobiography in the history of American politics” (p. 6). Bennett calls on us, with his own example, to devote more attention to the political meaning and method of life-writing.

Bennett also calls on us to seek out “claims that emerge from unlikely sources, not from well-known political figures” as a way to fully appreciate the political dimensions of autobiography—a standard that Bennett himself strives to meet in this book (p. 169). Probably the most well-known figure in *The Claims of Experience* is Benjamin Franklin, but Bennett reads the *Autobiography*—a likely book—in an unlikely way: he argues that, for Franklin, autobiography was a seizing of his life story to counteract the popular “self-made man” narrative about him. Franklin, says Bennett, knew that “his youthful success required more his dependence upon higher authorities

than overcoming them,” and the *Autobiography* was meant to impress on the American community the importance of acknowledging one’s faults and dependencies, rather than basking in the glow of his own achieved fame (p. 49).

Bennett then turns to Frederick Douglass, but moves our attention from the much-ballyhooed *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to the more difficult and innovative *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Bennett thus shows us how Douglass used autobiography as a way to speak publicly to, with, and against his former self. *My Bondage and My Freedom* was Douglass’s way of demonstrating that even our stories about ourselves are open to revision and challenge, as our experiences in life change us over time. Nolan’s read, in that sense, complicates both the usual stories about Douglass and the usual stories about autobiography.

The last three chapters—on Henry Adams, Emma Goldman, and Whittaker Chambers—are similarly striking in terms of Bennett’s ability to do interesting thinking with unfashionable or unlikely figures in American political history. His careful endeavor to see in Chambers “an earnest attempt to reimagine American democracy not through legal prosecution nor even guilt but in moral faith and founding,” even as Bennett acknowledges that the attempt was perhaps a failure, reveals the strength of Bennett’s own determination to hear with openness the claims of our fellows (p. 161).

Following Richard Wright, Bennett reminds us that the American republic depends on our willingness to travel a “bridge of words”—on the audacious idea that if we communicate our experiences to others and listen to them communicate theirs, we can find kinship or at least some common ground, providing us some grounds to claim more rightly that we are a “we” (p. 173). For American politics, at least, we shore up the bridge with the stories of our lives.

Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another

World. By Eli Meyerhoff. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 272p. \$100.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.
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The act of study, abstracted from any of its particular modes, is “an activity in which people devote attention to the world” in such a way that it “modifies their capacities and dispositions for understanding the world” (p. 13). Eli Meyerhoff begins his contribution to moving us *Beyond Education* by denaturalizing the “mode of study” employed by modern institutions of education in which we are usually more or less submerged. Although we have long lived in a world shaped by the “global hegemony of

education,” Meyerhoff shows that “elements of the education-based mode of study emerged contingently” in conjunction with early modern capitalism and “through ruling powers’ reactions to threats to their dominance” (p. 163). A central task of this book is to offer a critical genealogy of the education-based mode of study such that we might be better able to study otherwise.

A second task of *Beyond Education* is that of taking stock of the experience of working in higher education in the United States in the present. For many, this experience is shaped by the conflict of laboring for the ideal of education as an inclusive and egalitarian project in institutions that appear more to serve the consolidation of class power than to open doors for new co-participants in self-governance. This task of taking stock is as central to the book as that of critical genealogy, if much less well trodden in its techniques and narrative arc. Meyerhoff interviews graduate students, contingent faculty, and tenure-track faculty who experience this conflict through the strains of exploited academic labor, lack of support, and hostile, competitive environments. He also interviews Macalester and University of Minnesota students and Twin Cities community members who forged experimental community study organizations, because, among other reasons, they recognized the increasing racial and economic inequality not only in “access to” but also “success within” institutions of higher education (p. 163).

At first glance the cohort of those struggling within and against institutions of higher education for whom *Beyond Education* was written seems to overlap with those who identify with the undercommons approach to the university—those who are “*of* but not *for* the university” and who channel its resources to projects for those whom the university does not usually serve (p. 17; quoting Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, 2013). Yet at many points in the book, Meyerhoff addresses a more indefinite and perhaps broader audience. The book begins, for instance, with a vignette of Corey Menafee, the 38-year-old African American man who worked in Yale University’s Calhoun College dining hall and who one day “snapped at his university” (p. 2). While at work, Menafee took a broomstick and smashed a stained-glass window that depicted two enslaved peoples of African descent picking cotton (p. 3). His action, and Menafee himself to some extent after he undertook it, participated in a wave of activism around Yale’s historic and ongoing implication in white supremacy. On Meyerhoff’s telling, Menafee, alternative education activists, and some unknown number of academics share a sense of strain and impasse in relation to the university, despite their different positions in its structures of rewards and exploitation. What they share, however, does not appear to orient toward a project of sustained subversion within academia but rather toward a common potential to snap at it.