ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 52 No. 1 Pages 181–189
Copyright © 2021 Johns Hopkins University Press and the University of Calgary

Book Reviews

Scott Henkel. *Direct Democracy: Collective Power, the Swarm, and the Literatures of the Americas*. UP of Mississippi, 2017. Pp. xii, 209. US$45.50 (hardcover) / $21.00 (paper).

Scott Henkel's *Direct Democracy* focuses on the literary history of the Americas in the long nineteenth century to address one of the central questions in political philosophy: How can people replace oppressive, hierarchical political systems without simply substituting one hierarchical system for another? Attempts to overthrow capitalist colonialism have sometimes ended with equally oppressive forms of governance. Henkel traces instances of the "swarm metaphor" as "signpost[s]" (4) of what he calls "direct democracy"—not the institutionalized form of representative government that most people associate with democracy but instead "a complex and collective type of power" (152). In this sense the swarm shares an affinity with other theoretical terms that reference collective power, such as assemblages, masses, and multitudes (4). This "type of power," he argues, is "always present, if only like the energy waiting to be gathered together in a thunderclap" (48), and "stands in opposition to notions of vanguard parties, state bureaucracies, and representative forms of governance" (44).

By examining C. L. R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938), Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* (1871), Lucy Parsons' anarchist propaganda, B. Traven's Mahogany Novels, and Marie Vieux Chauvet's novella *Love* (1968), Henkel illustrates how direct democratic power emerges not from the institutional spaces of elected governments but from "the plantations where people in Haiti fought for their liberty and independence, in streets full of union picketers like Lucy Parsons, and in the textile factories that B. Traven shows as the incubators of dissent during the Mexican Revolution" (4). Using a Spinozan ethics of power, Henkel envisions power "in terms of the things that either increase or decrease our power to act" (7); as such, the relational properties of power sometimes coalesce into constituent or constituted power. He writes that "[c]onstituent power . . . wants to grow, to change; constituted powers want to conserve, to perpetuate the relations they have over the people they govern" (11). Authors of the long nineteenth century often narrate the actions of constituent power by attributing forms of direct democracy to a single person, thereby negating the actual distribution of direct democracy. Henkel's work performs the important task of recovering from these texts the properties of direct democracy, "the power of ability when multiplied by cooperation" (16).

Central to Henkel's analysis is the Haitian Revolution, a revolution often wrongly overshadowed in colonial education by the French Revolution. "Why the Haitian Revolution did not collapse in 1802 when its leadership structure became unstable," writes Henkel, "has as much to do with who the insurgents were—a *demos*, even after generations of systematic attempts by the slave trade to dehumanize them—as it does with what they had—a *kratos* that was sufficiently powerful to end that domination" (33). If you visit the Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba, for example, you will see the image of Haitian general Toussaint Louverture accompanying a brief description of the Haitian Revolution. But such a narrative obscures the collective action of the revolution, especially the "2,000 leaders in the Haitian Revolution" (Henkel 34). "The issue that we now face," Henkel observes, "is how best to understand the logic of collective action that the 2,000 present—both as it is represented in James's writing and also in light of the subsequent research about the Haitian Revolution" (34). This type of literary analysis performs the essential political act of liberating collective action from its mixed metaphors, from the reverential treatment of "great individuals" by historians of a certain generation, and from its tendency to be obscured for authoritarian purposes.

Henkel's treatment of the "swarm" metaphor in the Americas during the long nineteenth century shows the varied ways in which it was deployed to indicate everything from the inchoate mob challenging the aristocracy in Thomas Carlyle's authoritarian writings to the crudeness of the masses in Whitman's ambivalent liberalism to the realization of self-government in Parsons' anarchist communism. Parsons understood that the state form always defended the "established order of things" (Henkel 78), a realization advocated by anarchists but one that many Marxist experiments of the twentieth century failed to learn.

In his analysis of Nat Turner's *Confessions* (1831), a text written and published by Thomas R. Gray, Henkel sees a "literary misdirection" that "obscures an understanding of the Southampton Rebellion as a collective act against the constituted power of slavery and instead focuses attention on the part played by one of its participants" (86). The issue in *Confessions* is part of a broader matter for literary history and revolution: "what gets lost when a story about a collective act of rebellion is rendered as the story of a single person" (Henkel 85). When Henkel turns to Traven's Mahogany Novels, which trace the emergence and resolution of the Mexican Revolution, he contends that the novels show "that constituent powers can, and sometimes do, transform into new constituted powers" (123). He also suggests that in Chauvet's novella *Love*, set in the aftermath of the US

military occupation of Haiti that ended in 1934, the violent repression of the constituted power poses an explicit challenge to “networks of mutual aid” (137), problematizing efforts, both intimate and extravagant, to actualize forms of cooperation.

With a core text of 155 pages, *Direct Democracy* is an efficient and effective study of “cooperative resistance” (155). A potential flaw of the book could only be solved by writing a longer book, and that might diffuse the essential concept of direct democracy: I would have appreciated more extensive coverage of anarchist intellectual history. This history receives some discussion in the section on Parsons, but given that the political philosophy of anarchism parallels Henkel’s concept of direct democracy more closely than any other political philosophy, and given the profusion of anarchist intellectuals and revolutionaries in the long nineteenth century, a fuller discussion of anarchist philosophy and political ecology might have provided a more fulsome context for the literary texts Henkel considers. That said, the existing balance between anarchism and Marxism in the book provides for a satisfying nonsectarian study of how literature can reveal “cooperative diversity” (126) and its attendant struggles with constituted power.

Michael Truscello