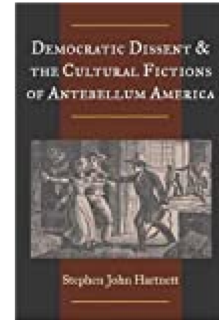

Stephen John Hartnett. *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. x + 230 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02722-2.

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Fictions Believable and Otherwise: Are We Ourselves?

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Stephen John Hartnett's *Democratic Dissent and the Cultural Fictions of Antebellum America* is at turns illuminating and provocative, dense and frustrating. It is also serious, thoughtful, searching, and, for those who read with care and patience, rewarding.

Hartnett's approach is interdisciplinary; the book is both historical and rhetorical analysis. The emphasis on the latter is pronounced enough to make the book distinct from such familiar warhorses as Kenneth Cmiel's *Democratic Eloquence* and Garry Wills's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*.[1] And though his focus is upon the rhetoric of antebellum cultural debate–not just its contours, but its properties and paradoxes–his purposes are manifold. Most immediately evident is the author's commitment to comparative textualization and his reliance on cultural theory. In trying to tease meaning from Solomon Northup's autobiographical *Twelve Years a Slave*, for example, Hartnett turns to Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, a post-Holocaust meditation on the alienating, crushing force of modernity. The works of Kenneth Burke, Benedict Anderson, and Hannah Arendt, among others, all extend the reach and depth of Hartnett's comparative approach. In defining "democratic dissent," the author even leans upon Marion S. Barry.

Less immediately evident is Hartnett's close and constant scrutiny of the emerging forces of capitalism and modernity in antebellum America. The book is a series of thick-description case studies. The language of abolitionism, proslavery, and Manifest Destiny all receive treatment in separate chapters; so does young America's (particularly Walt Whitman's) fixation with visual representation and the daguerreotype. All were substantively related, Hartnett argues, and all operated according to related dialectics. Yet the construction of the language that Americans used to express themselves, as well as its properties, betrayed confusion and anxiety, uncertainty and fear. The analysis here unfolds in layers, an effect that adds nuance and is one of the strengths of the book.

Most of Hartnett's substantive arguments will be familiar to historians of the period, especially those versed in the work of Edward Pessen and Charles Sellers.[2] In analyzing the rhetoric of antislavery, for example,

Hartnett stresses a powerful undercurrent of racism. In proslavery, he sees Herrenvolk politics. In Jacksonian America as a whole, he sees less of the period's self-congratulating democracy and equality and more of its exploitation and stratification. These interpretations set up Hartnett's exploration of dialectics, language, and paradox, but in emphasizing the development of class power, they also give the work a consistent analytical theme. "It is clear, then," Hartnett writes, "that the politico-economic elite of both the North and the South desperately needed cultural fictions that could justify and explain their profound economic, political, and cultural power as enmeshed in larger issues of nationality, freedom, race, and even historical destiny" (p. 58).

Because he is most concerned with analyzing rhetoric, Hartnett is less concerned with crafting new interpretations than with drawing upon and giving new dimensions to existing ones. To do so–and to add a consistent theoretical link to his substantive one–he employs the concept of cultural fiction. In Hartnett's view, a cultural fiction is two things at once: a "coping mechanism," an encapsulation of "stories, norms, explanations, icons, justifications, and sustaining myths" that explains the world and gives it order (p. 2); and, also, a rhetorical tool that is constantly being shaped and re-shaped in a larger world of debate, argumentation, dissent, and assent.

The definition of cultural fiction is not as precise as perhaps many historians would like it to be, but the concept is the heart of Hartnett's book. It yields a deeper appreciation of the period as a whole as well as some wonderfully nuanced insights about the shared properties and the paradoxes of argumentative rhetoric. Many of the these ultimately come back to a disturbing, overarching paradox: in pushing their arguments as stridently as they did, as in the case of abolitionist rhetoric, as aggressively defensively as they did, as in proslavery rhetoric, or as jingoistically as they did, as in the case of Texas annexation and Manifest Destiny–in short, in arguing with one another as bitterly as they did–Americans North and South were crafting cultural fictions both to express their dissent from one another and to find assent with one another. They were searching for and using sectional and national arguments, seeking to separate from and to unite with one another, trying to distance their positions from one another and to persuade one another.

As fruitful as some of Hartnett's manifold contributions are, he is likely to run into criticism. Hartnett's overarching cultural fictions are built upon an array of other cultural fictions. In proslavery's case, for instance, the central fiction that slavery was good was constructed of other fictions of racial supremacy, white economic opportunity, and the onward march of civilization and progress. Yet, at the same time, supremacy, opportunity, and progress were fictions with their own overarching power. Each works as part and whole, servant and master. It is not always clear whether a cultural fiction describes a single set of myths and explanations–a theory that creates a coherent pattern out of otherwise disparate but related elements–or is instead a theoretical tool so nicked and blunted by such all-purpose usage that it loses some of its synthesizing power and precision.

For many historians, the device will also appear to be an elastic one. Hartnett uses it to cover a wide range of cultural and political discourse. What will appear to some readers as transparent political strategizing, rhetoric devoid of any real substance, is in Hartnett's view a cultural fiction. One can hardly fathom that Robert Walker and other proponents of Texas annexation truly believed themselves when they argued that annexing Texas (and maybe more territory in South America) would satisfy antislavery sentiment and national prejudice by slaves and blacks out of the United States. Let alone can one fathom that other Americans believed it or, to be strictly faithful to Hartnett's interpretive framework, that this cultural fiction could persuade them to believe it. If that were so, annexation itself would become a word without meaning, and the very terms of the debate were meaningless.

>From the opposite end of the spectrum, what will appear to some readers as arguments born of developing ideologies were also, in Hartnett's view, cultural fictions. Ideology, he argues, is a "pejorative word used to describe actions or thoughts that strike one as unfamiliar or different from one's own.... [I]t has no interpretative or pedagogical ability to explain either rhetorical patterns of meaning making or political methods of persuasion" (p. 24). One may be more inclined to grant the former proposition over the latter. There was, as we know in hindsight, no cultural fiction in the coming decades persuasive enough to stop Americans from killing one another in the bloodiest war in the nation's history. There are times, indeed, when it appears Hartnett himself is unsure, as when he claims that "proslavery cultural fictions articulate a coherent and considered worldview" (p. 47).

Nevertheless, Hartnett argues, approaching antebellum debates as cultural fictions rather than ideologies allows a broader understanding of the past as well as a kinship with it. Hartnett's view is a perspective from what

Kenneth Burke called humble irony: a "sense of fundamental kinship with the enemy, as one *needs* him, is *indebted* to him, is not merely outside him as an observer but contains him *within*" (p. 7). To understand how crucial humble irony is to Hartnett's approach is to understand that for him it helps shape the dialectics of antebellum cultural debate as well as the relationship of the present (and present historical inquiry) to the past. To be sure, one may appreciate the humbly ironic approach without adopting it wholesale. One suspects that many historians will not equate ideology with restriction of scope, narrowness of interpretation, or irreconcilable divorce from the past. But in showing us that Americans in the antebellum era had more in common than their sometimes strident debates made it appear, Hartnett succeeds beautifully–even if what they agreed upon reinforced social and economic inequalities, white supremacy, and the imperialism of Manifest Destiny.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

[2.] Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985; originally published, Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1978).

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