

Iwona Janicka, *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism: Solidarity, Mimesis and Radical Social Change*

London: Bloomsbury, 2017; 192pp; ISBN 978-1-4742-7618-4

During the heyday of classical anarchism in the nineteenth century, the prevailing view among many radical thinkers – including some anarchists – was that history represented a gradual movement toward the actualisation of a universal end. In jettisoning views of this sort, poststructuralists and poststructuralist-inspired anarchists alike have had difficulty explaining what history itself *is* and, by extension, how radical change is possible within particular historical contexts. Seeking to clear this stumbling block, Iwona Janicka's *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism* attempts to articulate 'a new idea of social transformation and a new set of concepts to accurately describe social change that is happening today' (p1). Her overarching strategy in so doing is to rethink the concept of universality and its relationship to 'radical left politics' in a way that 'tak[es] on board the poststructuralist heritage' while simultaneously 'overcom[ing] poststructuralist angst over concrete political action' (p1).

Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, René Girard, and Peter Sloterdijk, Janicka rejects the notion that history is 'a steady development towards a goal, a deep procedure that is occasionally ruptured by great events' and, in its place, proposes an alternative picture of 'social and historical change' as 'a dispersed and decentralized process' that unfolds gradually in accordance with 'the logic of mimesis ... and the spatiality of spheres' (p3). According to this view, historical universality is a function of mimesis – i.e., 'witting and unwitting imitations of behaviours in the bodily practice' which, when directed, become 'a form of training ... an exercise of repeating certain practices that lead to specific habits' (p4). Habit-based communities (or 'habitable spheres') result when specific habits are trained 'in a milieu where others do it as well and where at each point there is a possibility of mimetic contagion' (pp4-5). Because this repetition cannot be sustained indefinitely, however, the universality of directed mimesis will always be ... interrupted by singularity' – that is by the continuous (but not irruptive) appearance of 'entities that remain unintelligible from within a given status quo' (pp4-5).

While the appearance of singularity within universality is unfailingly met with reactionary practices that seek to re-inscribe universality, such practices are counteracted in turn by what Janicka terms 'solidarity with singularity' – i.e., 'a form of political practice that is predicated on acts of cooperation and with and support for ... whoever and whatever is in the position of oppression or unintel-

ligibility' (p4). Such a practice operates by means of 'collectively creating habitable spheres on a daily basis in the hope that other people or groups will be mimetically infected by the change that [it] implement[s]' (p153). It is precisely the interplay between the re-inscription of universality (which is rooted in the past and aims at stasis and centralization) and the enactment of solidarity with singularity (which is rooted in the present and aims at movement and decentralization) that 'drives slow social transformation' (p5). For Janicka, intriguingly, anarchism provides an ideal framework within which to understand the latter 'in that they both share solidarity with singularity as the central idea' (p153). If solidarity with singularity represents the 'actualization of slow social transformation,' however, this implies that 'neither equality nor domination ... are the most appropriate terms for understanding [contemporary] anarchism,' as 'neither covers the diversity of anarchist concerns nor does it provide the most fruitful framework for thinking about entities in the position of singularity' (pp153-154). Among other things, she thinks, both of these concepts are fundamentally anthropocentric and so are unable to account for 'entities such as animals or the environment' (155). When understood as solidarity with singularity, anarchism is, by contrast, able to 'fully account not only for all entities that make up singularity (*homo sacer*, animals, the environment) but also for their singular (unintelligible) ways to affect universality' (p155).

Despite its straightforward remit, Janicka's volume is sprawling, ambitious, and intimidatingly complex – especially for those who, like myself, are less than well versed in the central elements of its theoretical apparatus. For these reasons it does not lend itself to cursory synopsis and, I suspect, is very easy to misinterpret. (I apologise to author and readers alike if I end up doing so in this review!) On my reading, in any case, Janicka's account seems to be both a re-thinking and a reinforcing of traditional anarchist emphases on prefiguration and 'making the new world in the shell of the old', albeit at the expense of anarchism's equally traditional emphasis on revolutionary praxis. Indeed, as she herself notes, 'revolution, defined as an irruptive event and as represented in the Marxist tradition, constitutes the principal counter model to ... slow social transformation' (p4). I wonder, though, to what extent this view can be accommodated within the *anarchist* tradition, which has not typically understood the kinds of prefigurative practices Janicka describes as *alternatives* to revolution so much as necessary *components* of any sustained revolutionary project.

While prefiguration discloses what is possible and even inspire efforts to achieve it, does it actually bring about radically new political and social realities by itself? If not, might this be because the prevalence of domination and inequality in existing reality makes it exceedingly difficult to engage in meaningful prefigurative practices in the first place, let alone to encourage others to follow suit? How

is solidarity with singularity sufficient when it is relentlessly opposed by the very conditions in which it is enacted? These (potentially misplaced) worries notwithstanding, Janicka deserves high praise for bringing a fresh and original theoretical perspective to bear on a host of extremely important, if frequently overlooked, issues. *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism* is a remarkably rich and intrepid work that will surely make a lasting contribution to anarchist discourse in the present. I cannot recommend it to readers strongly enough.

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Petar Jandrić, *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason*

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Petar, I agree: ‘Research and education can be sexy’ (p361) ☺ I’d like to thank yourself and each of the interlocutors for being *themselves* at your ‘virtual party’: honest, direct, illuminating, provocative, scary and encouraging. Feelings and ‘chemistry’ emerge from your party ‘guests’ within this collection of conversations – the term you quite rightly use instead of ‘interviews’. *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason* WILL reach a broad audience, as a ‘form of teaching’, bringing ‘ideas into the school reform marketplace’ (p12). As an artist-researcher-teacher with an irreverence for texts ‘written without much flair’ that ‘put people to sleep’ (Levinson, p283), these conversations kept me up at night. This tantalising collection of minds – forged by philosophy, activism, education, and creative practice – crosses and re-crosses artificial academic and linguistic ‘borders’ (p140). As a critical pedagogue and fledgling academic I have met too few ‘border-crossers’. And too many whose ‘vision of artistic development’ is ‘reactionary and boring’ (p342) – more enthused by homogenisation than discussion of the differences ‘between art education and education in other fields’ (p333) and arts-based research that is ‘predominantly linked to funding and academe’. Provocative honesty permeates the book, e.g. the response of Dmitry to Ana and yourself: ‘Art education is interesting because no one knows what art is – consequently, it is impossible to know how to teach it’ (p333). Each of these sixteen conversations is grounded in expertise that informs, and knowledge that surprises. As a video artist who worked with emerging digital technologies in the ’80s and ’90s, I was profoundly affected by feminist videos. But there are feminist media practices in this book which are completely new to me. For example, ‘Face Settings’ (1996-1998) – Kathy Rae Huffman’s collaboration with Eva Wohlgemuth (pp315-317).

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