Book Review

Bonnie Honig: *Public Things. Democracy in Disrepair.* Fordham University Press, New York 2017.

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The final lecture of Bonnie Honig's latest book *Public Things* finishes redemptively on a golf course, which seems to me to be a very good place to start a review: When Trump (falsely) claimed that Obama spent more time on the golf course than any other US president, he sought to conjure up an imagination of wide open green spaces, sunny manicured fairways, relaxation and leisure. Obama's presence in this space signified a dereliction of duty—he was taking time off, with the 'globalist' elite when he should have been dealing with various crises.[1] Trump sought to draw the public's attention to an exclusive space. A space funded by private donations and fees, and where the greens and fairways could be finely manicured only because they first exclude the many from walking across them. In Trump's rhetoric, Obama was corrupt because he spent his time away from his public office, away from the space of government. Of course in this political imaginary Obama was damned either way because Washington was a swamp, populated by 'globalists' who had sunk their claws into Democrats and Republicans alike. The rhetorical solution was to 'drain the swamp'. The 'holding environment' of Washington had to be radically refashioned. Trump suggested he too would use the golf club, if he had any time. But on the greens, he would hammer out deals with foreign leaders that were in America's interest. Trump's emotional register established the image of the private

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1 For instance, Trump wrote on twitter on 21 May 2016: 'While our wonderful president was out playing golf all day, the TSA is falling apart, just like our government! Airports a total disaster!' or again at 5am on the 8th of September 2013; 'PresObama is not busy talking to Congress about Syria… he is playing golf… go figure'.

space of a golf club at once as a space of Obama's failure to act in the public interest, and at the same time the infrastructure of his 'art of the deal'. In other words, it was not simply a way to criticise Obama on behalf of the 'victims of globalisation', but also a way to underline the 'honesty' of Trump's position. Bonnie Honig's new book sensitises us to the terrain of this political imaginary. It draws our eye to the minor agency of environments, infrastructure and 'public things' as *they* structure our public life. The book which is made up of three lectures focuses on the capacity of public things as sites of care and concern, hope and play.

The golf course is an excellent place to start thinking about 'public things' because it is *not* public. It is not shared, open or universal. In that sense it can be contrasted with a park which is open to all. Park-goers must negotiate amongst themselves how best to use the space. But in the last pages of *Public Things* Honig tells the story of the 'San Francisco Recreation and Park Service that began to sell reserved time slots for the use of a public park' (Honig 2017, 96). This lead to a confrontation between a group of tech workers who had filled out an online booking form to reserve an hour of unadulterated use, and local teens who maintained that the park was for the public. Honig writes: 'In response to the request that they clear the field… the local teens showed they knew what a park is *for:* They invited the tech workers to join their game' (Ibid.). The logic of the golf course, with its reserveable tee-off times, creeps into the park. 'This alteration of the public thing into a rentable resource by local government is transformative. It does not just kick some kids off their field. When public things are subject to private rental, our entire relationship with them is changed' (Ibid.). As Honig explains, this is very close to Wendy Brown's recent analysis of neoliberalism in *Undoing the Demos* (2015). Honig adopts much of Brown's analysis of the catastrophe of neoliberalism. The 'stealthy work of neoliberal rationality' has hollowed out the core of democracy, without ever simply overturning it (Honig 2017, 13). In this neoliberal condition, we are left with a husk, a shell of democracy.

In Honig's hands, Brown's thesis about the infection of democracy with neoliberal rationality is subtly inflected to become an analysis of the 'almost always already overness of democracy's (or politics) necessary conditions' (Ibid., 15). Honig uses this shift to refocus our attention from neoliberal *rationality* to the necessary *object-ive conditions* and shared *environments*. Her wager is that an emphasis on public things loosens the grip of the question of 'the people', as the quintessential political frame. Explaining this shift she writes:

> When we think from the angle of public things, we are switched to questions of orientation and receptivity, from subjectivity to object-ivity, from identity to infrastructure, from membership to worldliness. From a public things perspective, we are more moved first to ask not 'who are we?' but 'what needs our care and concern?' We are moved out of the realm of infinite cycle (Rousseau's paradox) and into the realm of the more finite and futile, which is the realm of things and the gift (and curse!) of object permanence. Really, more precisely we are moved into the domain of relations between these two: object *relations*. (Ibid., 28.)

She suggests that objects allow us to think again about politics. We might say that they shift attention from the constitutional distribution of public power to the public distribution of constitutional things. Public things reframe the debate: 'If democratic theorists neglect public things, we end up theorizing the demos or proceeduralism without the things that give them purpose and whose adhesive powers are necessary to the perceptual reformation of democratic collectivity' (Ibid., 90). But it is not a headlong rush to the object as we have seen in other works on public things (Latour 2014). The aim is not to displace the anthropocentrism of the politics of the collective political subject. Things are given a certain limited vitality, which allows them to occasionally shine through: They 'have agency enough to thwart or support human plans or ambitions, and we do well to acknowledge their power and, when appropriate, to allow that power to work on us, or work to lessen or augment us' (Honig 2017, 28).

The theoretical heart of the book is the second lecture where Honig convincingly reads Winnicott and Arendt together. She insists that the purpose here is *not* to synthesise their work nor to translate one into the other, leading to an inevitable loss of all that separates them. Instead the book is an attempt to use each theorist to extend 'each one's vocabulary to rework or resituate the other's ideas' (Ibid., 51). So it circles around a number of key interlocking similarities, where the two run in parallel tracks. In both, objects and environments give us a sense of permanence beyond ourselves. From Winnicott we learn that objects 'are key to what makes us human' (Ibid., 16). 'The baby learns about the existence of an external world when it destroys/disavows the object and the object survives. This is object permanence. The fantasy of infantile omnipotence gives way, in the face of the object's permanence, to the reality of subjectivity, finitude, survival' (Ibid., 16). From Arendt, we find Labour and Work undergirding Action. '[W]e make things and things condition our existence' (Ibid., 46). The social is the space wherein conditions are fabricated for the political. Labour and Work are re-read through Winnicott's 'object-mother' (who provides satisfaction of basic needs) and the environment-mother (who provides a holding environment, 'warding off the unpredictable' (Honig 2017, 20)). Arendt's emphasis on the facticity of things—they are the 'common world'—is rebalanced through Winnicott's emphasis on fantasy. But while the book insists that connecting Winnicott and Arendt together enlarges both vocabularies, in reality the tendency throughout is to put pressure on Arendt. Torsion is applied and Winnicott is often the unmoving fulcrum around which Arendt is twisted. I say this not as a criticism, but in admiration. Because through Winnicott, Honig sensitises us to a reading of Arendt that neither accepts her problematic characterisation of the relation between the social and the political, nor brackets it (for a full discussion see Wenman 2015, 218-59). Honig writes: 'With Winnicott in the picture, it is less easy to berate Arendt for being simply and cruelly oblivious to the *needs* of the poor or disenfranchised' (2017, 51).

The book insists that public things generate an environment in which the political becomes possible: they 'are the world-stabilizing infrastructure on which

our capacity to act in concert depends' (Ibid., 96-7). There are few more beautiful instantiations of this relationship between infrastructure and the political moment of the people coming forth, than Eyal Weizman's *The Roundabout Revolutions* (2015). He observes that when the first crowds gathered in Tunis, it was the roundabout at the *Place du 7 Novembre* to which they were drawn. And they returned there again and again. When the rupture began in Egypt it was the Tahrir Square roundabout that drew the crowds. Also in Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout and before at the Azadi square roundabout where Tehran's 2009 Green revolt centred. Over and again: the roundabout. Of course there were crowds that did not gather on roundabouts, but Weizman argues we should not simply dismiss the significance of this traffic architecture. He offers a number of observations: The 'roundabout organise[s] the protest in concentric circles, a geometric order that exposed the crowd to itself, helping a political collective in becoming' (Weizman 2015, 1). The roundabout exercises a strange gravity, with bodies strewn about in orbit. While they 'exercise a centripetal force, pulling protestors into the centre, the police seek to generate a movement in the opposite direction… to break a collective into controllable individuals that can be handled and dispersed' (Ibid., 14). Gas, water cannon, rubber bullets and other dispersal agents are thus a centrifugal technology in this context, seeking to break the gravity. At the same time, their centres often house statues of major political figures, and carry names like liberation (*tahrir*) and liberty (*azadi*), or carry the date of the establishment of the previous regime (*Place du 7 Novembre*). Thus they hold a certain symbolic cache in terms of who they represent. The symbolism of a roundabout, Weizman says, 'is almost jokingly obvious, what better place to stage revolution, after all, then one built for turning around?' (Ibid., 8). Weizman underlines the manner in which a proto-neoliberal traffic infrastructure that establishes material and symbolic conditions that are inimical to the presence of individual bodies, can be performed differently. The cars whizzing around are displaced by crowds who take possession of public space in the name of a different public. In this sense, the everyday infrastructure has a minor agency in shaping the events of the revolutions. But while it would seem to fit well with Honig's framework, she overwhelmingly eschews such examples.

Instead of simply turning to the agency of public things in revolution, Honig instead identifies more everyday and quotidian moments. Food and water, for instance crystallise sovereignty claims, bridges and parks mark a politics of everyday life. At the heart of this decision is Honig's understanding of politics, or more accurately, the paradox of politics. This is framed in *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Honig 2003) through Rousseau's liminal figure of the lawgiver, who arrives on the scene of a revolution to resolve the problem that the collective subject of politics is always constituted under imperfect conditions. The people that overthrow tyranny will have been habituated to tyrannous conditions and so are incapable of willing a good and just settlement. In Honig's hands, this problem of radical refoundation of the political order becomes immanent to political orders. The paradox of politics is constantly being rearticulated in multiple ways in each body politic. In *Public Things*, rather

than 'escape' the paradox of politics (an impossibility she claims), Honig suggests that we might rework it by way of object relations politics. 'The democratic paradox does not need to defeat democratic activists, they may be energised by it' (2017, 29). Like Rousseau's lawgiver who mystically settles the paradox of politics, public things 'have the power to (re)enchant, to interpolate us as a(n often fractious) public' (Ibid., 28). In short, rather than think about the importance of public things in bringing forth the people as a claim to unity in action, she wants to get to a position where we are attuned to the plurality of agonistic public sites that facilitate a multitude of positions *between* accommodation and revolution. Crucially, this includes a struggle for the state, which should also be considered as a public thing (Ibid., 92). It is something that might enchant and unite, rather than control, discipline, govern or exclude—she suggests.

The stakes of the book are never clearer than in the prologue where Honig observes that the 'infrastructure of security is a public thing' (Ibid., xii). Like bridges and parks, the body imaging machines that we find in airports and ports are transitional objects that help society to adhere, she suggests. But Honig explains her discomfort with these machines. She explains that she tries to avoid the most invasive scans, refusing to '"assume the position", hands on head, legs spread apart' (Ibid., xi). She refuses to enter the screening machine, but for US airport security that means she must utter the performative speech act: 'I opt out'. 'So, of course,' she says, 'I try to refuse that, too.' What follows is a linguistic duel with the guard where she refuses both to go through the machine, but also to utter the 'opt out' phrase. 'The insistence that I *say* 'I opt out' is productive. It obscures the real opt-outs, those who have paid an annual fee, had their irises scanned and their fingerprints taken so that they can be whisked quietly and quickly through security' (Ibid., xi). Public things 'constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpolate us into democratic citizenship' (Ibid., 5). But they are not simply determined by the administrators, guards and police. The park is not determined solely by the local authority, the roundabout is not controlled simply by traffic police, and the body scanning machine is not the sole purview of the border guard. Each of them might be contested, perhaps even re-appropriated or re-performed. But the airport security machine is also the moment where Honig comes closest to acknowledging the power that such a contestation has to face. Honig nods to this when she notes her privilege in refusing the machinery of security: 'I was never taken to a private room for questioning, and I never worried I would be detained. I don't fit the profile' (Ibid., xi). Her privilege is to be one of those people that the agents imagine themselves securing. She is not the object-threat, not a dangerous subject. If she were to challenge the San Francisco park attendants she would have been less likely to be shot or tasered, because she is one of the public imagined by the guards. In this, it would be productive to read *Public Things* alongside Butler's recent *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015)—a source that Honig avoids. In Butler's quasi-Arendtian account the question of differential precarity of assemblies-in-dissent is brought to the fore, along with a shared interest in infrastructures. But while Honig is evidently aware of the role of

privilege and precariousness, it takes something of a backseat. Reading *Public Things* with *Antigone Interrupted* (2013) the reasons for this become a little more clear, but that is for another day.

I said at the outset that the final lecture finishes redemptively on a golf course. The terrain is von Trier's *Meloncholia*, which Honig pairs with Lear's reflection on the world-ending genocide faced by the Crow people. For both the world is coming to an end. Unlike Butler's almost infinite lines of precarity, there is something common, shared, almost public about Honig's catastrophes. Butler's precarity leads to a performative ground of alliance, but here there is nothing less than the world at stake. This is because Honig claims through Arendt and Winnicott that public things open us to worldliness. For Honig, this is a way to think through the neoliberal situation described by Brown. The catastrophe that is relevant to us now, she says, is 'capitalism in a neoliberal context, and its attendant modes of individuation, alienation, overwork and desolation' (Honig 2017, 80). The golf course then, is the site of our world-ending catastrophe. But on it, Honig recounts how von Trier's protagonists build a holding environment: an empty bare stack of sticks. Something that could not protect them from the destruction of the earth, but that creates a kind and humane holding environment in which they live out the catastrophe. Crucial to this is Honig's reading of Winnicott, who insists 'that in such an environment [of catastrophe] we experience what feel like world-ending feelings, and we—and the world—survive' (Ibid., 79). We must create in our democracy-in-disrepair, new, kinder holding environments. The way to do this, it appears, is to reinvest our attentions, our care and concern, our hope and play in the public things that remain.

The book is vivid and lucid. It surprises you with turns and twists. There are beautiful insights lying in wait for you around every corner. The lectures were given in 2015, before Trump stood for office. It takes aim at the very clear target of the hopelessness of the left under neoliberal conditions. But the book has come out after Trump and his radical right, protofascist or white nationalist assemblage has come to power. In this sense, it demands a creative and generative reading—the type of reading that Honig herself applies whenever she turns to a new text. It is an astute book, its argument is at once subtle and bold, and I think it should form essential reading for our current conjecture.

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