

Ordinary Emergences in Democratic Theory: An Interview with Bonnie Honig

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ABSTRACT: In contrast to framings of the political that emphasize heroic action or emergency's exceptionalism, Bonnie Honig's agonistic democracy is linked to ordinary emergences and the sororal bond. In this interview, Honig explores the political potential of the ordinary in Franz Rosenzweig's theology of the everyday, as well as in the work of feminist theorists and writers such as Hanna Pitkin and Adrienne Rich. Commenting on her reading of the relation between Antigone and Ismene in the famous tragedy by Sophocles, Honig also addresses the sororal bond in times of exception. Finally, she extends her argument on the everyday to a discussion of public things and anticipates ideas of her ongoing project on Arendt's essay "The Jew as Pariah."

KEY WORDS: democracy, emergence, ordinary, things, Arendt, Antigone

A political scientist working at the intersection of political theory and the critical humanities, Bonnie Honig is Nancy Duke Lewis Professor of Modern Culture and Media, and Political Science, at Brown University. She was previously assistant and associate professor at the Department of Government, Harvard University, and Sarah Rebecca Roland Professor at Northwestern University. She is also Affiliate Research Professor at the American Bar Foundation. Professor Honig's work has been influential in the fields of democratic theory, legal studies, feminist theory, immigration studies, and literary and cultural theory, among others. She has published in prestigious journals across the social sciences and the humanities such as *American Political Science Review*, *Political Theory*, *Arethusa*, *New Literary History*, *Social Text*, and *diacritics*, among many others. An internationally renowned scholar, her work has been translated into Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Greek, Japanese, Korean and Rumanian.

Trained at Concordia University (B.A.), in Montreal, The London School of Economics (M.Sc.), and The Johns Hopkins University (Ph.D.), where she

worked under the supervision of Richard E. Flathman and William E. Connolly, Professor Honig is a leading proponent of agonistic democracy. Her first book *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Cornell, 1993) was awarded the Scripps Prize for best first book in political theory. In the book Honig discusses liberal, communitarian and republican attempts to insulate politics from conflict and uncertainty. Drawing on Nietzsche, Arendt, Machiavelli, and Derrida, among others, Honig explores an alternative approach in political theory that tracks the disruptive remainders of political closure or settlement and recasts them as potential sites of democratic freedom or engagement. Her second monograph, *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton University Press, 2001), established her as an influential voice in the politics of immigration. Here Honig mobilizes readings of the Biblical book of Ruth as well as of popular movies such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Shane*, and *Strictly Ballroom* to interrogate the myth of an immigrant America where the foreigner is often seen not just as a threat, but also as a supplement or source of renewal for democracies whose energies are depleted. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton University Press 2009), her third monograph, was the co-winner of the David Easton Prize and discusses sites of potential democratic emergences in a time of sovereign exception and emergency politics. Her fourth monograph, *Antigone Interrupted* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), offers an original interpretation of Sophocles's *Antigone* that explores previously neglected resources for thinking agonistic sorority in the play. The book has already been the subject of critical exchanges with the author in journals such as *Philosophy Today*, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* and *PhiloSOPHIA*. In a recent essay in *boundary 2*, called "Three Models of Emergency Politics," Honig develops and extends her thoughts on emergency politics drawing on material from *Emergency Politics* and *Antigone, Interrupted*, to engage critically with Elaine Scarry's *Thinking in an Emergency*.

Professor Honig has also been a prolific editor of influential academic volumes. She edited *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (Penn State, 1995) and co-edited *Skepticism, Individuality and Freedom: The Reluctant Liberalism of Richard Flathman* (Minnesota, 2002) and the *Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford, 2006). She is also co-editor of a symposium in the journal *Theory & Event* dedicated to the films of the Danish cinematographer Lars von Trier, scheduled to appear, in revised form, as a book with Oxford University Press. In 2013, Professor Honig delivered the Sydney Lectures as part of the Thinking Out Loud Series, and in 2014, she performed for the second time as a respondent to the Tanner Lectures, these delivered by Eric Santner at the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently working on two lines of research: a series of essays on public things, and a book called *The Lost Sabbath*, which is focused on Arendt's famous essay "The Jew as Pariah."

Diego Rossello obtained his Ph.D. in Political Science at Northwestern University under the supervision of Professor Honig. His work has been published in journals such as *New Literary History*, *Political Theory* and *Theory & Event*, and looks at the politics of human-animal indistinction in modern sovereignty. He is assistant professor of political theory at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and is academic editor of *Revista de Ciencia Política*. This interview took place as an exchange of e-mails during the months of August and December, 2014.

Diego Rossello: In your book *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* you offer an alternative conceptualization of emergency.¹ Unlike the interruptive, extraordinary state of exception decided by a Schmittian sovereign, you invite us to think, drawing on Franz Rosenzweig,² of an occurrence in (and of) the everyday that requires receptivity, readiness and preparation—or what could be called a state of emergence. In your opinion, why is this image of Schmittian emergency still holding us captive, and what is the price that democratic theory pays for this fixation with (and in) emergency?

Bonnie Honig: This question brings us to the heart of something central to political theory as such and not just to emergency politics: The fixation on or at least attraction to the extraordinary, the ruptural, the heroic. This is a feature of Schmittian framings of emergency and sovereignty,³ but it is also broader than that: a feature of democratic theory more generally, for which some—like Hannah Arendt and Sheldon Wolin for example—have been sharply criticized. My own first book, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*,⁴ erred a bit in this direction, before swerving to greater balance (I hope) in the conclusion. The central question here is: Why confine politics (as “the political”) only to the heroic act or the grand gesture? Why think of politics only in terms of its interruptions of the everyday? Politics is itself an everyday activity, critics like Hanna Pitkin argue,⁵ as much dependent on virtue as on *virtú*, and it has as much to do with maintaining and defending cherished institutions as it does with interrupting or rebelling against unjust ones.

So, even before the turn in the last decade or two to Schmitt in North American democratic theory, there was a debate about whether to approach politics, as such, and not just emergency, under the sign of the ordinary or the extraordinary. Second wave feminism was particularly critical of the register of the extraordinary for being masculinist and heroic. The “everyday” was feminine or feminized and ought not to be demeaned but rather elevated and celebrated, critics like Adrienne Rich argued.⁶

This is one context in which to read the North American reception of Carl Schmitt’s work in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It helps us to

see it in this context because we see that there was already a prepared groove of reception for his decisionism, prepared for by a prior reading of Hannah Arendt who could not, however, have been more different from Schmitt nor more dedicated to criticizing his work. A former student of mine and colleague of yours, John Wolfe Ackerman, has written an excellent dissertation (“The Politics of Political Theology”)⁷ and published some essays showing in compelling textual detail how Arendt was engaged in a tenacious, lifelong effort to defeat Schmitt’s arguments.⁸

Still a preference for the interruptive, or the existential dimensions of politics opened many theorists of politics to the Schmittian politics of emergency and decision. Also, in the US, after 9/11, many of us looked for a way to understand the operations of sovereignty under attack. Schmitt seemed useful in that context.

And perhaps he was. But there were costs to that move, just as there had been costs to the earlier focus on “the political” as extraordinary and unusual by contrast with the less exciting but equally important everyday work of politics. One cost is that the focus on the honorific, “the political,” readies us for the march, the mobilization, the revolution, but cedes to others the difficult work that enables those “events” to come into being. Those others may not share our commitments. Also, and more important, showing up, as it were, only for the event, means that we march with less context and claim solidarities that are less earned and less powerful than might be the case had we devoted ourselves to more encompassing practices of political engagement. The really resilient ties of democratic activism, like those of friendship, come as much from doing nothing or little together (which is part of what activism entails) as from participating in the big events that bring everyone on board for a moment.

I recall, early on, writing an essay (“Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home”)⁹ that drew on Bernice Johnson Reagon, the singer and activist, who gave a great speech at a music festival. I do not recall the exact words but Reagon says something like: “Don’t just be moved by what we have experienced here at the festival. Take it home with you and wake up with it everyday and feel yourself alive. Talk to people everyday the way you talk with them here. Be as principled, as joyous, as *engaged* everyday as you are here.” It is a very difficult thing to do, though! And she knew that.

It is what Franz Rosenzweig wanted to do. He approached the problem in the context of Judaism and Jewish theology. His aim was to take the extraordinary Sabbath, the enchanted day of the week, and to show how it was not just a release and interruption of everyday, but an intensification of the everyday, a redoubling of experience. In Judaism, the everyday is sacred as well! Rosenzweig saw “miracle” in the same way—not as a suspension of the ordinary but as an intensification.¹⁰ That is why, in *Emergency Politics*, I argued that Schmitt, who sees miracle as a suspension of the ordinary and analogizes sovereign decisionism to divine miracle, could be seen in contrast to Rosenzweig, for whom divine miracle is an

invitation to *attend to* the sacred *not* a command to *be obedient* to it. By extension, then, Rosenzweig points us to a different conception of sovereignty. Or might do so. Schmitt was familiar with Rosenzweig's work and was likely arguing directly against him.

In my view, democratic theorists have reason to prefer Rosenzweig.

This is because the Schmittian idea of sovereign decisionism, so focused on the power of sovereignty, tends to obscure from view the ongoing dependence of even the Schmittian version of sovereignty on popular subscription. That is to say, as Elaine Scarry also points out in her book *Thinking in an Emergency*, even sovereign decisionism depends on citizens to obey.¹¹ Rosenzweig understood this in the domain of theology (where it is an especially brazen claim): For Rosenzweig, *pace* Schmitt, miracle was not about sovereign or divine interruption. What was miraculous was our openness to receive divinity. And such receptivity is not a chance event but an effect of preparation, habituation, orientation. In Rosenzweig these are practices of attunement to divinity. In more secular terms, we might say this is the work of attunement to others in political work and commitment. Without it, we cannot be who we need to be if or when we do show up at—or are taken up by—the events of political action.

DR: The contrast you establish between the ordinary and the extraordinary via Rosenzweig and Schmitt is very suggestive, and it seems to be linked, according to your perspective, to the feminist critique of the conceptual, political and/or attitudinal priority of the heroic-extraordinary versus the quotidian-ordinary. In your latest book, *Antigone, Interrupted*,¹² you explore at length the sororal bond as performed by Antigone and Ismene in times of sovereign emergency and civil strife. The political potentialities of the sororal bond seem to be a recurring motif in your work, as you also focus, in *Democracy and the Foreigner*,¹³ on the relationship between Ruth and Orpah in the Biblical Book of Ruth. How does your understanding of sororal agonism map onto the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary? Is sororal agonism a way of reconceptualizing such distinctions for democratic theory?

BH: Sororal agonism is one example, not the essence of action in concert but a good example, of important forms of solidarity that are often overlooked by those who focus in their study of politics either on state actions or on heroic interruptions of them. And you are right to notice the recurrence of this theme from one of my earlier books, in which I moved from sisters in a founding narrative (Ruth and Orpah in the Biblical Book of Ruth), to *sister-cities* as a striking instance of solidarity across national boundaries. The idea then as now is not to idealize sisterhood (as some feminists have done to counter brotherhood or fraternity), nor to argue for kinship-based relations as the privileged form of feminist politics. It is rather to highlight, by way of the usually demeaned or overlooked sororal figure, the rather insistent nature of interpretations that assume political

agency is individualistic, heroic and explicit rather than solidaristic, subtle, and conspiratorial.

For centuries Antigone has been treated—and celebrated!—as a lone heroine, a rogue resistor, a martyr who cares not at all about others but only about her principles, or her brother. This means she is either self-less or selfish, and most debates about her go back and forth between these two options. But Sophocles's text offers a few other possibilities.¹⁴ Attending to certain subtleties and *double entendres* in Antigone's scenes with her sister, Ismene, I find evidence of a possible sororal collusion between them that ultimately subverts Creon, the tyrant, and the emergency he declares, or creates. This possibility *solves* several longtime interpretative problems with which critics have struggled, most notably: how to account for the fact that Antigone is presented as a devoted sister, to both her warring brothers, Polynices and Etecoles, but as impatient and terribly harsh with her sister, Ismene? Perhaps her harshness is an act? Designed to fool Creon and protect Ismene from his wrath? Why not? Most critics do not consider such possibilities, preferring to struggle, deeply, with the problem of Antigone's inconsistency or even to question the authenticity of certain passages rather than to question their own deep assumptions about Antigone as a heroic singular actor.

But why *not* question them? Sophocles was well aware of the power of sisters to overcome male power by subterfuge and action in concert. In his tragedy, *Tereus*,¹⁵ which we have only in fragments, Sophocles tells the story of two sisters, Procne and Philomela, who conspire to avenge the rape of Philomela by Procne's husband, Tereus. Tereus had cut out Philomela's tongue, to prevent her telling Procne about his violence against her. Philomela finds a way to tell the story of her rape, by weaving it into a tapestry. Weaving, which is a slow and unheroic act of labor, becomes a powerful instrument of justice, a political act. And sorority finds its voice.

It is important to note, though, that this sororal voice, audible thanks to Sophocles (and Aristotle, who mentions the play), is not the only or the best voice by way of which emergent politics may proceed. I have written recently on the ordinary men of the Pequod in Melville's *Moby-Dick*,¹⁶ who surround a whale with their little whaling boats and force those all-powerful creatures into a "helpless perplexity of volition."¹⁷ The men who do this work act in concert. They show the vulnerability of leviathan (or Leviathan) to such action in concert. Emergency politics can be a politics of civic emergence—in which people emerge to claim the rights of citizenship by forcing sovereign powers into helpless perplexities of volition—or it can be a politics of emergency, in which citizens are re-impressed into the logic of sovereignty and obedience. On my reading, Antigone and Ismene, caught in a situation of emergency, deprived of the conditions of emergence, find their way to a neither-nor—and they claim what can be claimed. It is left to us to see that. It is also left to us to diagnose the resistance to that interpretative

possibility that marks so much of the scholarship on Sophocles's play in political theory as well as classics.

DR: Your work helps us identify democratic emergences in a vast repertoire of texts and contexts: the Hebrew Bible, the work of Rosenzweig, Sophocles's *Antigone*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, among many others. And yet it can be argued that the main influence in your work continues to be Hannah Arendt, to whom you return in your public things projects. In the "Thinking Out Loud"¹⁸ lectures, you draw on Arendt's work to re-conceptualize the status of public things. One intriguing example you discuss in the lectures is the crucial role pay phones (or public phones) play in the US when natural disasters occur. Is this relation to, one could say, "ordinary" political objects another site for potential democratic emergences?

BH: Arendt is an important influence, yes; you are right about that. And I have always thought in her company. As you note, I have just recently returned to write on her more directly than I have done since my first book, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Several books and projects later, in my project on "Public Things," which began as a series of lectures given for the University of Western Sydney's "Thinking Out Loud" series, I returned to her work on things in *The Human Condition*¹⁹ and to her great essay "The Jew as Pariah."²⁰

Why these two of her works? Because I was interested, in the context of neoliberalism, in the current tendency in many western democracies to turn to privatization as a solution for every public policy problem. I wanted to ask after the political-cultural effects of that. That is, others may calculate the (in)efficiencies of privatization. But I thought it was also worth thinking about other kinds of costs that result, the possible costs to democracy as such. Does democratic citizenship require public things? Might it be that in addition to a demos and proper procedures, and electoral and participatory processes, democracies also postulate public things, shared objects around which citizens constellate, about which they fight, and whose importance they contest? Is it possible to have a democracy—the people and the procedures—without also having public things to fight about or care for, together?

I began the project with D. W. Winnicott, the midcentury modern psychoanalyst who treated traumatized British children, separated from their parents and families during the London bombings of the Second World War. For Winnicott, stable objects provide the security by way of which maturing children can gather themselves and their feelings together into some sort of integration that allows them not only to survive trauma but also to thrive in its aftermath. Winnicott gave us the term "transitional objects" to describe the blankets and stuffed animals that help a child do this work in a child's early years.²¹

But Winnicott did not write very much about politics. The question for democratic theory is whether public things provide citizens with something analogous

to the stability and resilience that a child acquires from its blanket, on Winnicott's account. Hannah Arendt's answer to that very question (more or less) is YES. In *The Human Condition*, the central section on "work" is focused on things and their capacity to provide humans with the durability and the sense of permanence that neither "labor" nor "action" (the other domains of the active life) can themselves provide. Things, objects, some private some public, provide the sense of permanence that humans need if they are to be able to act together on behalf of care for the world. My essay on this topic is forthcoming in *Political Theory* in 2016 ("What Kind of a Thing is Land? Hannah Arendt's Object Relations").

If I turn then to "The Jew as Pariah," that is because in *The Human Condition* Arendt talks about the importance of things, but she does not distinguish public from private things with any attentiveness, nor draw out their political implications. Her questions there are more phenomenological. The "Jew as Pariah" is helpful because it is more expressly political and because it serves as a kind of *via negativa*. There Arendt explores what happens to those prevented from accessing the public shared goods of the societies they live in. There she explores what I call (in a Winnicottian way) the "resources of resilience" that allow pariahs to find their way to worldliness even though they are deprived of access to public things. Thus Arendt in the earlier essay invites the more political thought about public things, albeit allusively.

Public things are things like railway lines, libraries, parks, prisons, water, the environment, museums, public television and radio and, yes, public phones. The phones, as your questions suggests, are a great example of the adhesive and, indeed, magical powers of public things. I first thought about this in the context of Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York City and the rest of the east coast of the U.S. in the fall of 2012 right before that year's U.S. presidential election. The cell towers were knocked out and so cell phones were not working. People who had not used a public, pay telephone in a decade or more rediscovered them. The phones, in their booths, had attracted little notice for years, but there they were, and still for the most part in good working order. A woman commented to the *New York Times* that she was surprised to find them, that she guessed they had been there all along, but she had never noticed them before and then, when they were needed, they were there! (This is almost exactly what Winnicott says about the good-enough mother. She is nowhere to be seen, but when she is needed, she is there.) In New York City after the storm, people were brought together in an emergency by their shared dependence on public phones. As I recall, people waiting to use the phones talked with each other, shared information, and offered comfort. Homeless people who normally use the phone booths for shelter made change or offered coins. The phones became a site of emergence. What I found so striking at the time is that, in spite of all this, that is to say, in spite of the fact that the public phones came to everyone's rescue, allowing them to get in touch with

worried relatives, to get needed information about resources or relocation, and so on, the first thing we heard after the emergency passed were not calls to refurbish the public phone system but rather calls to make cell towers more secure so that next time people's individual cell phones would go on working in an emergency. The habit of privatization is hard to break and the desire for personal control, especially in an emergency situation, is powerful.

The task of emergence is to find and cultivate alternatives to this habit, to establish ways to orient democratically in relation to public things, to harness their magical powers of adhesion, and to commit to their maintenance and protection. The National Park system in the U.S. is a great example. I was at Yellowstone a couple of years ago. When you go into those parks you encounter people from all walks of life, all kinds of abilities, all kinds of backgrounds. The commitment of public things is precisely to be accessible to everyone; the hikers walk in, the disabled drive to beautiful view points, some bring in the camper vans, everyone has some sort of access. In the case of the public parks, there is no doubt there is an identity-effect not just from spending time in nature but from spending time in a natural site stewarded by a national agency. This is a governmental service that is for the people and it (re)interpolates us into citizenship in a different way than our interactions with other government institutions often do.

Right now another example is pressing: the case of Steven Salaita, de hired by the University of Illinois because he tweeted in passionate and incautious ways about what was going on in the summer of 2014 as Israel bombed Gaza. The University of Illinois is a public institution and yet, it seems, it was instrumentalized by donors and others who demanded that someone who was so "uncivil" not be allowed on the faculty. Instead of providing citizens with the friction and boundedness that are the (Winnicottian) object's gifts to us, the University of Illinois failed in its mission; it betrayed the faculty and procedures that had produced an offer of employment to Professor Salaita. It succumbed to pressure from a few who arguably needed to experience the recalcitrance of resistance to their demands. Without such friction, Winnicott says, children never learn boundaries, nor do they come to understand that mastery is not the proper relation to the world. They never experience finitude, which is a fundamental aspect of human experience. The University also seemed to agree that students should feel safe on campus by not having their views challenged too strongly or in the wrong ways. This was a bit of a red herring, actually, since Professor Salaita had excellent teaching evaluations and seems to have been able to distinguish quite well the different features of the speech act situation of Twitter versus university classroom teaching.

In any case, the point is, the public thing is NOT a blanket that only gives comfort, it is also a locus of identification that may enrage us, and a site of reality that teaches us limits. When we think about which public things to fund and to

support, we need to address the basic needs and rights of citizens—to housing, to fair wages, to education, and to health. We do well to also identify the ones, prioritize the ones, that interpellate us, broadly, into civic relations and alliances.

DR: Our exchange now stands in a paradoxical relation with the theme of the issue: “The Emergency of Philosophy.” Your take on emergency as sovereign emergency invites the investigation of a plurality of sites of potential democratic emergence. In addition, the influence of Arendt in your work may foster skepticism about the task of philosophy and its relation with metaphysics. In this context, how can we conceptualize the relation between emergency and philosophy? Would it be unfair to claim (democratic) emergence as the vernacular of political theory?

BH: That is funny. And true. But I don’t know how much claiming we need to do as far as political theory versus philosophy goes. Some philosophers like Giorgio Agamben have done a lot of the work that put emergency on political theory’s agenda.²² Agamben works between Schmitt and Benjamin, where your own work is positioned, along with Derrida and Hobbes.²³ Agamben is in a position to see and to call attention to the workings of law in the domains of seeming lawlessness and to the working of lawlessness in the domains of law. So Philosophy has given us the “emergency” to think with and through. If I as a political theorist have worked to produce critical alternatives to Agamben, this testifies to and should not distract from our debt to him. A situation of indebtedness is probably the most apt way to describe the relations between philosophy and political theory today. And Hannah Arendt, her critique of metaphysics notwithstanding, remains an important figure for many philosophers (Peg Birmingham’s work is an important example).²⁴ Perhaps we would do best to think of Arendt (and maybe even of political theory) as philosophy’s autoimmunity (and vice versa!) and work to produce the new forms of inquiry that may illustrate and deepen their complex relations, while also broadening political theory’s interdisciplinarity to include not just philosophy and history but also and especially theater, literature, classics, film studies, media and more.

NOTES

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