
BOOK REVIEW

Bonnie Honig, *Public Things. Democracy in Disrepair*. Thinking Out Loud: The Sydney Lectures in Philosophy and Society. Fordham University Press, 2017. 154 pages. ISBN-13: 9780823276400

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I visited Oodi, Helsinki's new central library, shortly after it was opened to the public in December 2018. The building has been praised for both its architectural innovativeness and for the way in which it redefines the whole notion of a public library. The 'Ode' is a three-story construction made of wood, steel and glass that cost 98 million euros to build, furnish and equip. It hosts computer workstations, meeting rooms, recording studios, a cinema, a kitchen, a gaming room, 3D-printers, CDs and, yes, some books too. Walking around, I could see how the library's various services corresponded with the interests of different visitors, including those who were there just to while away the time in the spacious interiors. Among this last group of visitors was a small gathering of Romani people who were there to seek shelter from the biting cold outside.

Bonnie Honig's *Public Things* is about the ability of projects like Oodi to bring together a multitude of actors with different needs and desires, but without reducing them into one.

For those familiar with Honig's work, this short book resembles her previous major publications in at least three ways. First, and quite obviously, the book deals with democracy and politics. But rather than pursue further the expressly agonistic themes of politics that have been central in her work from *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993) to *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013), here Honig is more concerned about the prerequisites of democracy in contemporary times. More specifically, the book is about the objects and spaces that make democracy possible, but that are under constant threat in what we can, perhaps, shorthand as neoliberalism. Think of, say, a public library. Not necessarily as a building, a service or a collection, but rather as something marking the 'publicness' of spaces and fora that democracy requires. Second, as in most of her books, Honig delivers her own arguments mainly by engaging with a number of other authors and texts. These include familiar names such as Hannah Arendt, but some more unexpected conspirators as well. Honig has always managed to weave her more unexpected characters into the mix with delightful ease, and in

this respect *Public Things* is no exception. And third, Honig here again demonstrates what a remarkably insightful close-reader she is. Even when she is engaging with the more familiar sources that one might have good reason to consider as wells that have dried up long ago, she comes up with fresh and engaging interpretations.

Public Things is a relatively compact book put together from lectures originally delivered in Sydney in 2013. These lectures have then been considerably reworked and enlarged for the book and sandwiched between an introduction and an epilogue.

In the first main lecture, Honig discusses the necessity of public things for the sense of collectivity that democratic politics requires. The lecture is mainly a critique of the logic of neoliberalism in which Honig's main sister-in-arms is Wendy Brown. In *Undoing the Demos* (2015), Brown analysed the various ways in which the market rationality of neoliberalism prevents democratic concerns from materialising into concrete politics. Honig certainly shares Brown's concern and reminds her reader time and again of the political danger of, for example, neoliberalism's ever-growing appetite for the privatisation of the public sphere. But perhaps she is also more optimistic than Brown about the possibilities of breaking free from the neoliberal stranglehold. Enter 'public things'. As such, publicly held objects and spaces have the potential to maintain a sense of collectiveness that goes beyond ourselves and that enables us to act collectively in pursuing democratic policies. Honig's account of things is, however, far from a simplistic account of objects and their symbolic power. Drawing on Bruno Latour among others, Honig attributes things with a wealth of capabilities. A flag, to take an obvious example, may well arouse sentiments of belonging in some. But as a public thing, it can equally well be an object of contestation and have the opposite effect. Honig's point, which is very much in line with her agonistic premises, is that in democracy, both relationships to the public thing are important. Democratic politics is played out on a terrain where such contestable public things exist.

The second lecture, which brings Donald Winnicott's object theory together with Hannah Arendt, is perhaps the most intriguing academically. For Winnicott, the human child discovers the existence of a world beyond herself only when she manages to destroy an object realising that the object nonetheless survives. An abandoned toy still remains 'there'. In Winnicott's scheme, the capacity of a subject to *use* an object is not inborn but, rather, the outcome of a process in which it must first destroy it in order to perceive of it as external and to recognise it as an entity in its own right. In the process, the child's fantasy of omnipotent object-relating gives way to the reality of a subjectivity and object-use. As the subject's life among external objects begins, it must also accept an unconscious fantasy of ongoing destruction. Honig then parallels these Winnicottian ideas about subjectivity and external objects with Arendt's notions of labour and work, through which the conditions of the political are created. While there is a convincing and even easily detectable symmetry between the ways in which Honig's protagonists address the world of public things, one can't help feeling that the two are not read entirely on equal terms. Perhaps Winnicott's main role here is to introduce more nuances into Honig's long-term engagement with Arendt, nudge Arendt a bit closer to the world of fantasy and psychoanalysis that she was so sceptical about.

Most readers will, however, find the third lecture the most readable and thought-provoking. In it, Honig creates two situations in which the destruction of public things is imminent, and two potential strategies of survival. The first situation is extracted from Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope* (2006), which tells the story of how the Crow Nation sought to fight off its own annihilation in the aftermath of the Sioux Wars of the 19th century, while the second is recounted from Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011), where the looming catastrophe is caused by a planetary collision. In Lear's account Plenty Coups, the visionary chief of the Mountain Crows, provides something of a workable compromise by telling his story through

his memoirs. Through his story, he preserves 'Crow things' beyond the point of extinction, but in a way that, as Honig notes, 'refurnishes' the world with public things that would matter to his people. On the other hand, in von Trier's film, *Justine*, one of the main characters, confronts the destruction of the world with a 'magic cave' that will supposedly provide shelter from the cataclysmic collision. While neither strategy really works, Honig is clearly more sympathetic towards von Trier's strategy than Lear's 'collaborative' solution. She favours it because it somehow reasserts the magical character of public things even if we know that the magic isn't real. Perhaps this preference is also an echo of the way in which Honig introduced Winnicott's fantasy element into her reading of Arendt in the first lecture.

While *Public Things* may not be one of Honig's 'major works', it is, nonetheless, both timely and significant. The need to reimagine democratic counterstrategies has become more important than ever. And this is one of Honig's undeniable strengths as a political theorist. Not only does she have her sights on the contemporary world regardless of how 'classic' her sources may be, but she is also always aware of the necessity to consider the strategic positions of radical politics when democracy is 'in disrepair'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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