

Interpretation

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Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017, 144 pp., \$65.61 (cloth), \$19.93 (paper).

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Bonnie Honig's book makes the case for a common democratic life in a period of intense neoliberal privatization. Her twist on this common theme is to suggest that "public things"—the objects and infrastructure that operate as conditions of a common world in which democratic citizens live and relate to one another—provide the enchanting, collecting environment needed for democracy to flourish. In many respects her analysis of the problem is right: our world is run according to the logics of utility and efficiency. So much energy is spent on the search for efficient means to our various ends that the ends themselves fade to the background as means themselves increasingly become ends. We play sports not for enjoyment but for fitness. And fitness is for better sleep and a longer life. A longer life is for a longer and more productive career. And a career is for more wealth; and more wealth provides the means for good food and fitness... Around we go, endlessly pursuing efficient means. Instrumental rationality surpasses all.

Government is usually understood in these terms, providing the infrastructural means for people's various purposes. Government, the great enabler. Honig objects to this view, arguing that "there are reasons other than efficiency for embracing public things. Public things are part of the 'holding environment' of democratic citizenship; they furnish the world of democratic life. They do not take care of our needs only. They also constitute us, complement us, limit us, thwart us, and interpellate us into democratic citizenship. This is true of sewage treatment plants and railroads" (5). She offers "a political theory argument in favor of embracing publicness in democratic life, for the sake of democratic life, because public things constitute

citizens equally as citizens, or ought to, and can be made, sometimes, by way of actions in concert, to deliver on that promise” (11). She is concerned about the “discursive disintegration” (26) of the democratic populace. The beauty of public things is that they take highly individualized and individualistic people with their fantasies of omnipotence and invest them “with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency, and concern” (11). In this way, public things are an essential condition of democratic self-government.

Now Honig is a self-identifying member of the “progressive Left” and this limits the resources on which she can rely to make the case for a fulsome civic political life. The Left is good at criticizing neoliberalism and economic privatization, but falls short on a constructive alternative. Few take socialism or communism seriously. Progressives usually end up supporting some type of liberal individual autonomy project on strictly egalitarian terms. Honig attempts something different, calling upon political thinker Hannah Arendt and child development theorist D. W. Winnicott to argue for an enchanted world of public things to deepen and enliven democratic life. From Arendt she derives the idea of “work,” the creations of *homo faber* that have permanence and stability to anchor otherwise isolated, shifting individual identities. From Winnicott’s work on object permanence she sees a complement to Arendt’s account of work, labor, and action in *The Human Condition*. Winnicott’s idea is that the omnipotent infant is lord of all; nothing exists outside of him or her. But when the infant develops an attachment to a blanket or doll or toy car, s/he begins to learn of a world beyond the self. The child alternately wishes to embrace and destroy the object; but it lasts and functions as a holding environment in which the child understands his place among other objects, subjects, and the wider world. From Winnicott and Arendt Honig understands that things are important to humans; they constitute the world.

One of Honig’s most effective metaphors is that of the table, the family’s equivalent of a public thing. The table is a fixed object existing through time and serving as the object of attention and affection, and a rallying point for eating and conversation. It “holds” us, binding us together, helping to make a family more than a random collection of individuals (52–53). Yet another is Big Bird, the iconic yellow character from *Sesame Street*, public broadcasting’s public thing that is part of the mental furniture of the lives of many.

Honig’s third and final chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the enchanting character of public things, now articulated as the politics of hope and play—how best to grapple with the loss of public things and how to re-create

them in new and often difficult conditions. Her texts are a book by Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, and a film by Lars von Trier, *Melancholia*. This is perhaps the least successful of her three chapters, not least because the texts in question are little known. She struggles for the language and images to guide us to the resuscitation or re-creation of public things in the face of environmental decay, corporate bulldozing, and colonial oppression.

Her conception of “public things” is slippery and inchoate. She does not define the term. She is satisfied with examples since this book is more a rumination than a technical presentation. Nonetheless, it is fair to ask about the nature of public things, if only by thinking about her examples. Parks are paradigmatic public things, as are public squares. In European cities the center is often a square characterized by free entrance, spontaneous congregation, and civic events. The town square was also where the well was found. But many public things are more or less utilitarian in character. They may have more or less utility in different periods. Libraries are public but increasingly operate as warm spots for poor people looking for free Internet access. Libraries themselves have fewer and fewer books. And parks attract people but the walkers and sitters usually have their heads down, scanning the web and social media posts. They are in public in body but not in spirit or mind.

Honig waxes eloquent about public telephones, whose importance after a decade or more of inattention became acute after Hurricane Sandy. But the telephone seems antithetical to public things: devices for individual, private use (witness *Katz v. United States* [1967]), exclusive conversation, most often for utilitarian rather than affective purposes. Honig perceptively observes that emergencies are among the remaining circumstances in which public things are valued. But this was the only reason for the public phone’s brief renaissance. And can a phone in any case rise to the level of a public thing?

Honig discusses Hydro Quebec as a public thing. In the early 1960s the Quebec provincial government nationalized private electricity providers and created a Crown corporation. So the corporation became a public thing; it became an object of some affection as a symbol of the modernizing Quebec state. It stood as a shining example of the move away from Quebec’s Catholic, more rural, agrarian past. But in this very sense it was a case of a *disenchanting* public policy. Hydro Quebec is all about state building: a tool for the province’s autonomous economic development, a place where budding francophone engineers and management types could get good work, a piece of Quebec’s francization program, and a source of revenue for the burgeoning Quebec welfare state. These all sound like highly utilitarian uses of Hydro

Quebec. The corporation is now a global behemoth, no doubt looked upon with some ambivalence by local populations around the world. The public thing can actually be an engine of disenchantment.

The Quebec government's hydroelectric policy speaks to another concern: nationalism. As a progressive leftist, Honig is understandably wary of nationalism. But the reader wonders where the enchanting character of public things stops and nationalism begins. Honig strains at the limits of liberalism and its valorization of individual autonomy. The theory of public things gives her a means of transcending the individual. So does nationalism. What is the difference? Is nationalism good? And is there some new thing that would replace it, if it is bad?

Honig's book raises another set of questions. Public things are unifying and this is what Honig finds attractive about them. But she acknowledges that public things likewise divide people. A railroad, for example, is a nation-building unifier, a symbol of purpose and achievement against the odds. (Think of the challenges associated with getting a safe rail passage through the Canadian Rockies.) But it is part of a colonial project of confinement and assimilation of aboriginal peoples (24ff.). Statues are commemorations of a people's past, but recent events in the United States make clear how divisive these commemorations can become. Her answer to the charge that public things divide as much as they unify is that public things need care, attention, and occasional renovation and updating. This may be so, but then the permanence and resilience of public things is compromised, and the churn of change and disorientation proceeds apace.

Like most academics, Honig travels a lot, but she dislikes having to go into the "box" at the airport to be body scanned, hands over her head. Protocols require passengers explicitly to "opt out" and then be screened by different means. Honig refuses to speak these words, to the consternation of officials. Later in the book, we see why "opting out" so exercises her. She sees in opting out a creeping privatization of the public realm, the carving of exceptions to otherwise democratic rules and procedures that should apply equally to everyone. Differentiated service erodes the public. Accordingly, she disdains the Kentucky marriage commissioner who wishes to be excused from performing same-sex marriages. The commissioner would like to "opt out" of performing this public service for conscientious reasons while retaining her job (32–34).

As I write this, the Quebec government is responding to the fallout of its new law that bans face coverings for all persons who deliver or receive public services. The government's argument is that for security reasons everyone's face ought to be exposed in the public realm. In this sense, I suppose, faces are public things. The other argument, less forthrightly advanced, is that in a secular society Quebecers should confine their particular, differentiating religious scruples to the private realm, thus preserving public space as an undifferentiated commons. Critics who know some history also know that this is largely window dressing: the major reason is anti-Muslim animus. Many Quebecers are offended by the sight of niqab-wearing Muslim women.

Honig is distressed by racial and ethnic animus. And she seems receptive to conscientious objection in respect to military service. She offers an unpersuasive distinction between conscientious objection to military service and opting out of the performance of same-sex marriage. And it is odd that she accepts conscientious objection. After all, a country's military forces are quintessential public things, at the heart of what a political community is all about. Does she think a country's defense forces are inessential to the integrity of the political community? It is hard to say, since she does not address the point. Her argument is incomplete for not having addressed this feature of the coercive apparatus of democratic societies.

The paradox here is that as the state becomes larger and more intrusive, it penetrates people's lives more comprehensively and clashes with their private ideas of the good and the sacred. Either the public things are to steamroll diverse beliefs, or accommodations will have to be made. But Honig is highly ambivalent about accommodations, because these look to her like creeping privatization, the triumph of neoliberalism over democracy. In Canada the law of reasonable accommodation is highly developed. If a person's particular commitment or condition can be accommodated without harming the overall purpose of the general law or policy, and if undue hardship is not imposed on the entity asserting the policy, then that person's particular situation must be accommodated. A ramp has to be installed outside a building, a law against face coverings must be relaxed, an employee must be given a day off on his or her Sabbath, and so on. Necessarily, the uniform, undifferentiated character of the law and related public things is diluted. Would Honig object to this, or is the robust protection of public things simply incompatible with other democratic norms?

The greater the conceptual distance that public things move from Arendtian labor needs to works of symbolic significance like statues, the

more freighted and divisive they become—that is, the more they fail in the unifying, enchanting project for which Honig hopes. For example, sewers and fire departments provoke little rancor, but statues of Robert E. Lee and certain names of schools and roads at times produce conflict and even physical harm. We seem to live in a climate of repudiation: each investigation of the past debunks rather than valorizes, or at least understands, it. These days the progressive agenda is tied to a politics of identity that targets conservative projects of preservation, continuity, and permanence. The politics of identity, in turn, owes much to the Marxian critique of bourgeois order, a critique in which the veils of tradition and the sacred are ripped away to expose the naked self-interest by reference to which the ruling class dominates all others. Progressives believe in... well, progress. For them, the future is felicitous possibility, the past a tale of oppression and woe; the political project is to move society from the past to the future. The disturbance, if not the destruction, of public things is a necessary and salutary feature of progressivism. The political theory of public things is at heart a conservative project, at odds with progressive politics. I am not sure Honig comes fully to terms with this.

Honig's is a thoughtful and provocative book, one that prompts the reader to think about important things in interesting ways. It struggles with some of the tenets of liberalism and attempts a sophisticated approach to transcend at least some of liberalism's more intemperate tendencies. But I suspect that the book does not go deeply enough. It examines a problem of modernity but within the assumptions of modernity. Neoliberalism's instrumental rationality takes us to Bacon, Hobbes, Heidegger, Weber, Charles Taylor, and George Grant, among many others. Honig's references to enchantment evoke Max Weber. But we never get there. An important opportunity missed.