

Book Review: Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 197 pages.

Beyond the State of Emergency

Simon Stow

Toward the end of *Emergency Politics*, in a discussion of popular orientations to political decision making, Bonnie Honig refers to “an unsettling encounter with that which disrupts the binary of ordinary-extraordinary” (p.107). It is an apt summary of her wonderful new book. In it, Honig displaces much of what has passed for conventional wisdom in recent democratic theory by recontextualizing, refiguring, and sometimes refuting its central claims. Most obviously, she is concerned with Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben’s account of the “state of exception,” which has, as Honig notes, “captured the imagination of contemporary political theory” (p.87). More than that, however, the book offers a series of critical reflections on a set of important—though sometimes unlikely—topics as a way of engaging not just with recent trends in political thought, but also with our contemporary modes of political practice.

Since the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the “state of exception” has become a recurrent trope in attempts to understand the politics that emerged from the rubble of the Twin Towers. For Schmitt, whose work provided an intellectual justification for the Third Reich, the ability to declare the state of exception and/or the institution of emergency powers is the mark of a unitary political sovereign: the performative expression of state power. For Agamben, this state of emergency forecloses any possibility of meaningful democratic politics. The dominance of this combination of thinkers in the contemporary Academy has produced a political theory largely concerned with detailing the multiple expressions of state power in the public and private life of the citizen. Perhaps content with the view that analysis is itself a form of political practice, such theory has not offered much by way of systematic consideration of modes of political engagement and resistance. Noting, in response to criticism of her work by Seyla Benhabib, that her book seeks to argue “*in favor of something*” (p.137), Honig wishes “to make clear actually existing opportunities, invitations, and solicitations to democratic orientation, action, and renewal even in the context of emergency” (p. xv).

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The cornerstone of Honig's approach is her attempt to "de-exceptionalize the exception" (p.1): identifying its methods and paradoxes in the normal functioning of democratic practices and institutions. State of exception theory, she observes, focuses on the moment of decision: the point at which laws are suspended and sovereignty is established. Honig's insight is, however, to identify the ways in which such decisions are always ongoing in democratic politics—the product of constant negotiation and renegotiation of power relations between the sovereign and the citizenry. It is an understanding of democratic politics as an activity; one that moves beyond political theory's concern with the singular event. In this, Honig also offers a rejoinder to theorists of deliberative democracy who seek—like Habermas in his account of the deliberations of the American Continental Congress—to identify the genesis of rationality in moments of political founding. By situating herself in opposition to these schools of thought, Honig identifies herself as a theorist of the ordinary, employing the work of thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Rosenzweig, and recontextualizing others such as Rousseau and Arendt, to articulate her claims.

For those who would employ the state of exception as an analytical and theoretical tool for counting the ways in which contemporary social and political formations make democracy impossible, Honig's attempts to locate strategies of resistance might seem hopelessly naïve; the product, perhaps, of an unwarranted optimism about democratic politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Underpinning her claims is a theory of the tragic borrowed and adapted from the work of Bernard Williams. Tragedy is, of course, a highly contestable concept with theorists who employ it often simply projecting onto it their own values and concerns. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that most recently, tragedy in political thought has been associated with an understanding of hopelessness in the face irreconcilable conflicts. Drawing on Williams's work, however, Honig sees the productive possibilities of the tragic. A tragic perspective, she writes, "no less than the ancient Greek tragedies themselves, can be seen rather to issue a call to action, responsibility, and the creative communalities of festival and ritual" (p.11). It is an account in which, in Paul Gilroy's phrase, tragedy is made useful, but not redemptive. Indeed, while Williams's account of the tragic understands—like many other contemporary accounts—the impossible choices conjured up by modernity, it recognizes that decisions must, nevertheless, be made. In the face of the tragic condition, Williams argues, we should focus not on doing the right thing *per se*, but rather on surviving the decision that we do make. Such a calculation includes, of course, a fundamental recognition of the ways in which the chosen course of action will and does affect who we are as a result of it. "On Williams's account," notes Honig, "acting for the best in a tragic situation involves remaining around for the cleanup" (p.7). It is, furthermore, a theory which acknowledges regret as an appropriate moral response to the consequences of our decisions.

Williams's understanding of the tragic is concerned with the individual, but Honig expands this to encompass democracy more broadly. Focusing only on the moment of decision in the manner proposed by the state of exception, she suggests, "tends to make us feel like everything is justifiable and there can be no cause for regret when our survival is at stake" (p.9). Moving away from the focus on the singular, Honig argues, would help the polity to recognize the ways in which it is implicated in the states of emergency that lead to the suspension of its own rules: "Political emergencies rarely occur as a result of more innocent wanderings. Instead, emergencies are usually the contingent crystallizations of prior events and relationships in which many are deeply implicated" (p.10). It is this recognition of the intimate connections between actions, events, and their consequences that drives Honig's analysis of the political moments that provide the book's case studies.

The first chapter of *Emergency Politics* is constituted by a series of reflections upon what Honig, among others, has labeled "the paradox of politics": in order to become good citizens, citizens must be shaped by good laws; but good laws, nevertheless, require good citizens for their construction. Attempts to resolve this paradox have drawn on some formulation of what Rousseau called "the general will," the idea of some underpinning rationality or superior power in politics which eliminates the tension. Employing her tragic understanding of politics, Honig explodes the myths upon which such attempts rest. "There is" she writes, "no getting away from the need in a democracy for the people to decide...appeals to god or divine power do not escape this predicament, they replay it" (p.23). Thus, she suggests, attempts by deliberative democrats to find some solution to this paradox are actually attempts to resolve politics into something else. Approvingly quoting Patchen Markell's observation that the tensions between law and politics need "to be negotiated by citizens, not transcended by the theorist" (p.30), Honig once again returns politics to itself, identifying its as an activity or a practice, rather than an attempt at overcoming. It is, as she notes, an approach firmly within a tradition of agonistic understandings of politics.

Honig's agonism finds further expression in the second chapter of the book where she considers the emergence of new rights within democracy. There is, she observes, a tendency to see the emergence of new rights as an act of incorporation by the state: the simple extension of privileges and protections already provided to some groups as a condition of their citizenship, to other groups who do not currently fall under the same umbrella. "Looking backward," suggests Honig about such an understanding, "we can say with satisfaction that the chrono-logic of rights required the eventual inclusion of women, Africans, and native peoples into the schedule of formal rights" (p.47). Such accounts, Honig argues, miss the very-real conflicts and hard-fought political battles that made this supposed "extension" possible. In the case of the American civil rights struggle, for example, such an understanding omits the violence,

suffering, and death that made the political inclusion of African-Americans possible. “Those victorious political actors,” Honig observes, “*created* post hoc the clarity which we now credit with having spurred them onto victory *ex ante*” (p.47).

Unexpectedly, perhaps, Honig’s discussion of the emergence of new rights draws on a consideration of the “Slow Food” movement which, she notes, posits the existence of a “right to taste.” As Honig acknowledges, such a right might seem laughable, but so, too, do all rights upon their first positing. What the discussion shows is how the emergence of new rights is not simply an act of inclusion into an unchanging system, but rather an inclusion or expansion that fundamentally alters our understanding of our political and social existence, in this case, our understanding of time. It is a measure of Honig’s creativity as a thinker that this potentially outlying discussion of “Slow Food” fits so comfortably with the rest of *Emergency Politics*. Indeed, it also becomes an opportunity for Honig to display the erudition and wit that helps to make the book such a compelling read: what this reviewer would have given to have written the line about “Slow Food’s commitment to its own fork in time” (p.63).

Drawing on an account of U.S. Assistant Secretary Labor Lewis Post’s actions during the First Red Scare, chapter three identifies what Honig calls “the paradoxical dependence of the rule of law.” Once again, Honig’s tragic and agonistic understanding of politics serves to demonstrate that politico-legal decisions are themselves products of actual struggles and human decisions rather than the simple application of pre-established rules; that we are, in Aristotle’s phrase, a government of men and laws. Employing the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Honig notes that a rule does not provide for its own understanding, nor, indeed, any external criterion for securing its specific application (p.75). Chapter four is, in many ways, the heart of the book. It is here that Honig takes on and exposes the problems of the state of exception theory. As was already noted, Honig’s characterization of politics as an ongoing activity serves to defang the theory and, one hopes, to undermine its current popularity within the discipline.

The book closes with a discussion of recent attempts, most notably by Benhabib, to identify the development of “cosmopolitan norms” within the international political community. Such norms are said to be evidenced by the emergence of international tribunals that are often seen as the expression of Kantian universals in politics. Once again, Honig returns to a tragic perspective and an understanding of the ordinary as a way to call such undoubtedly optimistic claims into question. Contra Benhabib, Honig calls for a double gesture toward such tribunals, noting both that we need such institutions to protect rights, and that we cannot trust them to do so. Taking on Benhabib’s notion of progressive and evolutionary time, Honig observes: “We are not yet at the end of the story nor could we ever be” (p.123).

With its careful considerations of diverse issues from a variety of perspectives, Honig's book is an enactment of the very same thing that it seeks in its reader-citizens: a series of multiple engagements with the thought and practice of democratic politics. In this, the author has performed a valuable service to the theorist, citizen, and reader alike.

