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Humanism from an Agonistic Perspective: Themes from the Work of Bonnie Honig

Without things to fight about...democracies cannot exist

Bonnie Honig

Few theorists have done more in recent years to explore and develop our understanding of the political conflicts and struggles that lie at the heart of democratic politics than Bonnie Honig. Through books such as *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, and Democracy* (2009); *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2001); and *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), along with numerous scholarly journal articles, Honig has sought to develop an agonistic account of democratic politics, and also sketch out a role for political theorising that alerts us to the exclusions and remainders that accompany any political order. She prompts us to be attentive to these exclusions, and to believe that political theory should provide resources for those engaged in democratic activism to challenge the existing order of things. At the same time, we are reminded to be solicitous towards democratic achievements, and to protect those institutions that make democratic life possible against the challenge of more authoritarian forms of politics. Thus we should engage in *both* 'combat', as we seek to render our democratic institutions more open, inclusive, and just, and also 'care' as we seek to protect the values that have been created in, and by, the - always imperfect - forms of democratic politics that we currently possess.

Recent years have seen a revived interest in 'humanism' in democratic theory. This is interpreted by Honig as a return to an older tradition, as it is a form of humanism grounded not in rationality, but 'the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason but vulnerability to suffering' (2010, 1). Against this mortalist turn, Honig reminds us that there is more that binds humanity together than the inevitability of suffering and death, and through readings of (for example) the story of Antigone she develops an account of agonistic humanism that posits, alongside these mortalist elements, the equally important qualities of natality, of creation and new beginnings. Politics may consist of 'struggle, pain, and conflict but also of mutuality, pleasure and care (2010, 26).

The three engagements with Honig's work in this critical exchange take up this humanist theme in various ways. Clare Woodford draws on themes most fully developed in Honig's *Democracy and the Foreigner*, in particular her use of the work of Jacques Rancière to develop an account of 'the 'taking' immigrant as a positive democratic actor' (p.). Woodford articulates a concern that Honig's development of this idea may not adequately account for structural features that could 'make demonization of difference more likely' (p.). On this view Honig's preferred 'democratic cosmopolitanism' can itself become a 'police order', in Rancière's terms, recuperating inequalities and entrenched antagonisms within its institutional and policy-orientated dimensions. To counter this, Woodford seeks to draw together Honig's invocation to employ myths in order to foster alternative imaginaries, with Rancière's affirmation of *poetics* as a precursor of politics. This would encourage us to view our cultural norms and practices anew, as they themselves become 'foreign' to us, leaving us receptive to the possibility of disruptive change.

Alan Finlayson explores the ways in which Honig's practice of political theory itself inscribes or 'enacts' agonistic claims. This occurs through two devices. Firstly her use of the epigraph, employed not merely to display erudition or add an element of external authority to an argument but (having itself an agonistic role) to render visible the traditions of thought against, through, and with which political thinking must always take place. The second element of Honig's practice is the use of exemplars, figures who engage in the forms of natalistic, creative politics that interest her. The examples of Ruth, Antigone, and Louis Post all exemplify a kind of political action that embodies Honig's notion of *virtú* – 'flexible and timely judgment and adaptive strategy' (Finlayson, p?) - which allows them to 'work the intervals', to call for, or create, more inclusive forms of political life. Finlayson sees this work as related to the Renaissance Humanist tradition as exemplified in the work of Machiavelli.

The contribution of Marc Stears focuses on British intellectual life in the mid-to-late 1930's, a time when Europe was of course living in the shadow of the Nazi threat and thoughts were turning to the likelihood of war. This was a time, according to Stears, when questions that we would now recognise as revolving around 'humanism', 'realism', and 'agonism', the central concerns of Honig's work today, were becoming dominant. In response to the thesis of Jed Esty that British intellectual thought at this time retreated to the comforts of conservatism and romanticism, Stears offers readings of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* that seek to show British cultural artifacts of this era as both more complex and more agonistic than that. Woolf's apparent portrayal of rural stability and communal values carries an undercurrent in which 'violence, death and destruction remain...as our genuinely unifying characteristics' (Stears, p.). Thomas's work comes closer to the mix of natality and mortality highlighted as desirable by Honig, portraying a town in which this violence, death and destruction are all with us, but in which death does not have 'dominion', and in which the combination of communal life and 'salty individualism' provide life and hope.

These three essays provide thoughtful and insightful reflections upon Honig's work itself, or upon themes that relate closely to it. Honig's reply, at the end of this collection, is itself a model of both generosity and engagement. We would like to thank all four contributors for giving so willingly of their time and effort, and all those who attended the conference at the University of Nottingham in April 2011 from which this critical exchange emerged.

MH/JH/DO

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