

**Political Theology of the Ordinary:  
On Bonnie Honig's *Emergency Politics***

Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.

If Carl Schmitt offers a Christian political theology, what would a Jewish political theology look like? Instead of focusing on the exceptional moment, it would see every moment as exceptional. Instead of focusing on a single, transcendent sovereign, it would focus on sovereignty shared by a people and its leaders. Instead of opposing administrative discretion and juridical determinism, it would see discretion in law and determinism in administrative actions. Carl Schmitt is displaced by Franz Rosenzweig. In short, Jewish political theology is the political theology of democratic theory. These are the claims of Bonnie Honig's *Emergency Politics*.

It is our attachment to the Schmittian, Christian approach to political theology that makes the contemporary situation – the age of the War on Terror – seem so frightening. When the stable rule of law is suspended (in extraordinary rendition, at Guantanamo, in CIA “black sites”), we are left with the pure, brute, frightening, mysterious will of the sovereign. Honig charges that this story is descriptively wrong, leading to normative confusion (or a feeling of normative impotence). But these are the terms of much public debate, terms adopted not only by the Bush and Blair governments but often also by their liberal critics. The image of a (menacing, plotting, perhaps Straussian) cabal coveting, and then exercising, unchecked power in newly created gaps in the law mobilizes critics of the War on Terror just as the image of a terrorism suspect with knowledge of a ticking bomb justifies suspending the rule of law in the minds of War on Terror supporters. We must refuse these images, charges Honig, and to refuse them means to refuse Christian political theology. These images rely on the Christian imagination; it is no less Christian when it presents itself in the guise of secular liberalism. The problem is not to become more secular. The problem is to develop an alternative political theology.

Put another way, Honig's claim is that democracy needs political theology, and this need is felt particularly acutely in an age seduced by the image of emergency politics. The political theology that democracy needs, on Honig's view, has three components: commitment to paradox, commitment to neighborliness, and commitment to the everyday. While Honig resists opposing Jewish and Christian archetypes, it is in Rosenzweig's work that Honig finds these three components knotted together. But it is also in the milieu of radical democratic political theory: Honig's work is largely aligned with William Connolly and is informed by Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida. Honig does more than just refuse to be a secularist, as Connolly advises (refreshingly, Honig's thought is also more rigorous and her writing more precise than Connolly's). She also refuses to follow the later work of Derrida by becoming post-secular through giving the constant refusals of deconstruction religious-sounding names. Rather, she wholeheartedly embraces concrete radical democratic politics, drawing on examples ranging from the Slow Food movement to the early twentieth century pro-immigrant administrative activism of Louis Post, and takes the alternative (Jewish) political theology she embraces to entail those commitments.

In her first book, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Honig staked out the ground for agonistic political theory. She argued that, while many contemporary writers see the goal of political theory as resolving or soothing conflict, there is an alternative tradition of political theory, in which Honig locates herself, which sees the work of political theory as

exposing repressed conflict and the work of political practice as taking part in the public contest of such conflicts. The desire for everyone to get along need not be the goal of politics; indeed, such political projects masquerade as neutral, objective, or value-free while in fact they are advancing, insidiously, the interests of a very specific group. A more generic form of this Nietzschean point is at the heart of *Emergency Politics*. The desire for resolution is, in this work, opposed to the commitment to paradox.

The desire for resolution takes many forms (Honig does not call out this desire as Christian, though it would be hard to read it any other way). What is the paradox to be resolved? In the domain of political theory, the paradox is the following: good people make good laws and good laws make good people. Or, the people are two things at once: on the one hand, the unorganized masses governed (and made good) by good laws; on the other hand, the organized, rational conglomeration capable of creating good laws. The paradox of these two identities can be resolved by imagining a point in time (or, more often, outside of time) when they coincide. At that founding moment the people and good laws existed without contradiction. Since then, the (political) world has fallen: politics becomes the impossible longing to restore good laws and good people at once. This takes coercion, creative legal interpretation, and the familiar, less-than-pure techniques of politics. Yet in this story – a story Honig attributes to Rousseau – it is never certain that the founding moment was as pure as it seems. In Rousseau's account of the founding moment, an outsider, a lawgiver, is necessary to reconcile the people's two identities. It can never be absolutely certain whether this lawgiver was genuine or a charlatan. Despite the official storyline of resolution, and with it certainty, in fact contingency goes all the way down.

Contemporary liberal democratic theorists, on Honig's view, recognize the paradox of politics but cannot stomach it any more than Rousseau could. They desire resolution, albeit in more sophisticated ways. The resolution they seek is in the future. Through proper deliberation, for example, we could achieve this resolution, we could bring about good laws and good people at once (Honig identifies the political theoretic concern for legitimation as another avatar of the desire for resolution). In our world, in our time, we have but the “rational trace” of the resolved world to come. Again, the desire for resolution blinds us to contingency. To read the moments of political history that Habermas names “Paris” and “Philadelphia” as “rational traces” is to distract from the myriad contingencies associated with those moments. Perhaps we could add that the desire for resolution, and the political theory that it spawns, is a symptom of melancholia. It feeds a fixation on a lost object (the harmonious world), projecting that object outside of time (before or after historical time), and allowing that lost object to color the experience of our current world. The result of this melancholia is misperception and misjudgment: the fine details of the situations in which we find ourselves, and the political action that they may or may not call for, is distorted when the world is seen in the gray light of lost, or hoped for, resolution.

Honig's alternative is for political theorists to shift her attention to paradox-spotting. In other words, the task of theory is to be critical, to look for the moments that do not fit into a teleological narrative, moments that thwart the desire for resolution. This is a politics of the tragic, for the tragic is paradox in the domain of morality. In a tragic situation, regardless of what decision one makes (and inaction is itself a decision), there will be regret. All options are bad options; there is not one thing which is the right thing to do. Teleological stories, stories of resolution, make sense of the tragic – by destroying it. In light of the telos, the right thing to do becomes apparent. What Honig is proposing, it seems, is a politics that sees tragic moments as supremely political moments, moments when innovation is possible, is forced, but is also costly.

Something will be lost: other paths could have been taken, but the mourning for their loss must not turn into a melancholia fixated on a hoped for future or remembered past when the tragic will not be tragic, a right answer will be revealed, and apparent contingencies will appear as necessities.

Hope enters Honig's discussion as she stages a debate between Kant and his Jewish contemporary, Moses Mendelssohn. Kant famously commended the duty to hope which, along with progress and evolution, promised to bring about "man's most sacred rights" (43). Mendelssohn endorsed the striving for improvement without the expectation of achievement. Sometimes the slate is wiped clean, sometimes we have to start over. Progress need not be assumed to motivate political action. Perhaps this debate can be used in a different way than Honig intends (she simply intends to decouple hope and progress, rather like Christopher Lasch's distinction between hope and optimism). If paradox opens the door to political agency, it also would seem to close the door to political action. Even if a situation is perceived and judged rightly, if it is genuinely tragic, and the political agent acknowledges that there is no right response, what incentive does the political agent have to act at all (certainly not acting may be acting, but it is less daunting). Yet some people, some times, are motivated to act. If they were motivated by hope tied to progress they would not be acknowledging the paradox. Perhaps we can say that they are motivated by faith without hope, a commitment to persevere in the face of the tragic, in the face of paradox, but a commitment that is not motivated by any teleological narrative.

But it seems as though Honig wants to say something a little different. Drawing on Bernard Williams's discussion of tragedy, she asserts that "[t]he goal is to salvage from the wreckage of the situation enough narrative unity for the self to go on" (5). That there is no right course of action does not mean that there is no better course of action. It means that there are no objective criteria that can be applied to every situation by any moral agent to decide what to do. Rather, the moral agent ought to decide based on the effect that possible courses of action will have on the agent herself. Will the possible course of action preserve the "integrity," the "narrative unity," of the agent? Even if there are decisive utilitarian (or deontological) reasons to act in a certain way, if the agent is not able to survive the choice, if she would not be recognizable as the same moral agent after the choice, it is the wrong choice. Honig suggests that we consider tragedies to be about "moral emergencies." The emphasis on survival and integrity over principle and universal is suggestive of how we might respond to political emergencies as well: "here we are looking into the conditions of a democracy's survival; we are, in short, committed not to national unity but to the preservation of a regime's identity as democratic – its democratic integrity" (5). Pushing the analogy further: moral character does not just inform the decision that ought to be made in emergency situations; character is constituted by such decisions. So, too, does Honig argue that political emergencies do not just reflect the character of a people; they constitute the character of a people (this dovetails with Honig's overarching point that emergencies are much more common than we ordinarily think).

Regardless of how compelling the analogy between responses to moral tragedies and political emergencies is, the use that Honig puts it to is puzzling. The key quality of character defining Honig's hypothetical nation is its democratic identity. The nation successfully survives a political emergency just if it remains democratic. Yet that any nation's character is predominantly democratic – or that any nation's narrative unity is held together by its democratic identity, is a claim that reflects rhetoric more than reality. A nation's character, it would seem, is better characterized by its traditions (its history, its practices, its values) than by any one label that

would seek to unify these, effectively elevating certain history, practices, and values over others. In a political emergency it is traditions that are at stake, questioned, reconfigured, but not disfigured so greatly as to become unrecognizable. This messy work is made to seem easy when traditions are congealed into one pithy identity label like “democracy” (the analogy in a moral tragedy would perhaps be something like a “bourgeois identity”; this may be more than an analogy).

Honig is an unapologetic (and, one is tempted to add, uncritical) partisan of democracy. Democratic theorists have understood democracy wrongly; Honig takes her own task to be understanding democracy rightly. Her argument is structured so that there is no “outside” of democracy, there are just better and worse forms of democracy. While Honig is careful to interrogate and explore the nuances of every other piece of political language she employs, that democracy is deserving of allegiance – or, more to the point, that the concept of democracy is useful or even coherent – is never subject to debate. Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that Honig preserves a hollowed out form of the resolution narrative that she ostensibly rejects. Democracy still has enough substance to function more as an umbrella for agonism than political agon itself. With democracy placed in this role, the paradox of politics is not resolved before or after time but in time, in the performance of political practice, in the constant response to political emergencies. This is not hope, but neither is it faith. Democracy, strangely, seems to be simply the result of describing politics correctly; no normative supplement – no virtue of faith – is necessary. There is no question of perseverance; there is only a question of survival.

A charitable reading, one which associates Honig closely with Connolly’s work, might propose that it is a democratic ethos rather than the banner of democracy to which Honig is committed; it is this ethos that perfectly aligns with paradox, neighborliness, and a focus on the everyday, and it is the goal of preserving this ethos that is to guide action in political emergencies (something like virtuousness would be the analogue to be preserved in the moral tragedy). In such an ethos there would be no need, no possibility, of separating the descriptive and the normative. In such an ethos, emergencies exist epistemologically rather than ontologically (or the distinction is refused). There are not particular moments when there is no right thing to do; any moment, looked at in a certain way, could be a moment of emergency, could be a moment of beginning. Receptivity and generosity are the virtues associated with such an ethos.

An ethos is not a tradition. An ethos is smooth, a tradition is rough. An ethos is spirit-imbued, a tradition is always already fractured. Agency, in a tradition, is the inevitably futile work of mending those fractures through the work of the human spirit; agency, in an ethos, is the work of harmonious participation, of dancing in line -- really no agency at all. A tradition calls for faith without hope, perseverance without telos; an ethos refuses both faith and hope as virtues, embraces them only as rhetoric (or, rhetoric and virtue are not distinguished). An ethos satiates the desire for resolution; a tradition harnesses the desire for resolution without ever sating that desire, or even offering an object onto which that desire can fix. Honig, it seems, aspires to offer a democratic ethos, but her refusal of the desire for resolution (and, relatedly, her refusal of Schmittian political theology) ought to motivate an account of democratic tradition. Such an account of democratic tradition would be modest, presenting a specific set of practices, their history and their implications, all open to contest. An ethos is immodest, saturating an ethical-political horizon and refusing its own contingency even if it is an ethos ostensibly embracing contingency.

Honig finds in every emergency an opportunity, the possibility of a new beginning. Indeed, the project of her book could be characterized as a transformation of emergencies into beginnings by means of pluralizing both. Any moment, looked at in a certain way, could be such a moment, or it could not be. This is how Honig attempts to narrow, and de-transcendentalize, the distinction between administrative and juridical decisions. To say that the work of the judge is that of purely applying the law is flat wrong. Honig embraces technicalities: through readings of the American Red Scare and of Talmud she suggests (following Derrida, Butler, and others) that there is no solid core of law surrounded by room for interpretation. Once this is acknowledged, the distinction between debate over technicalities and debate over the law itself disappears. Honig points to the way that Louis Post, U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Interior during the Palmer raids of 1919, creatively used legal technicalities to prevent the deportation of immigrants for political reasons. Post's role combined bureaucrat and judge, and also rhetorician as he skillfully defended his practice to Congress. He was accused (by, among others, J. Edgar Hoover) of being arbitrary, of letting criminals go free. But Post always cast himself simply as doing his duty as defined by law, no more, no less. Honig holds him up as an example of how doing one's duty, following and implementing the law, can be a political act when one recognizes in the law the ever-present possibilities of emergencies as beginnings. For a moment, Post's position did catch, did capture public sympathy – but only for a moment. A beginning it was, but an infelicitous one: the conditions for it to catch were not yet in place.

While Honig targets the supposed distinction between making rules and applying them, the focus of her strategy is to attack the distinction from one side. She looks for the fecundity within the law rather than the law within fecundity; she looks for the cases of rule application which are actually rule making. Rule applying sounds boring, sounds apolitical (rule making, in its Schmittian form, sounds excessively political). But what of “the thrilling romance of orthodoxy,” to borrow Chesterton’s phrase recently re-popularized by Žižek? Might not taking what seems to be a discretionary political activity and showing how it is as much about rule applying as it is rule making also exemplify the sort of political theorizing that Honig would commend? But these are not the sorts of examples that Honig presents. She prefers the effervescent delights of a democratic ethos to the sober rigors of democratic tradition. The ethos model makes the task of the political theorist that of seeing something fluid and bubbly where others see something solid and crusty. Tradition makes the task of the political theorist discerning social norms based on a community's practices and its history. Each decision, administrative or judicial, draws on custom and precedent but also makes custom and precedent, applying and making rules at once.

Moreover, Honig's preference for beginnings over orthodoxies limits the repertoire of political resources available to the democratic citizen. While she commends a “political care for the self,” the association (with Foucault) suggests asceticism, as care, through self-imposed rules. The topic arises in her discussion of surviving tragedy (emergency): the suggestion seems to be that part of surviving with integrity is somewhat arbitrarily delimiting what cannot be changed through the emergency so that what is preserved, even if it cannot be absolutely justified, is integrally connected with the identity of the survivor, connected because it was chosen by the survivor before the emergency. Yet the “romance of orthodoxy” is made possible by commitment to some set of rules imposed from the outside. Against the aspiration for resolution, for the harmony of nature, animals, humans, and machines that some contemporary theorists desire, orthodoxy recognizes the impossibility of resolution, the need (and unique ability) for humans to subject ourselves to authority not entirely of our choosing. This sounds undemocratic:

is not democratic politics all about the continuing contest of authority? But orthodoxy ought to have a place within the democratic political toolkit: does not disciplining the mind and body make a better (more discerning, more persuasive) participant in the agon of the public square? Does not the needleprick before the battle make the soldier all the more heroic; does not the pronged cilice wrapped around his thigh make the Opus Dei-affiliated professor all the more sharp in an academic debate? The quite absurd image of continuous democratic agon is but another symptom of the desire for resolution; the practices of orthodoxy can thwart that desire.

Honig, and other radical democratic political theorists, are willing to write about the tragic, about difficult choices, but rarely do they write about moments when democracy genuinely hurts – and when alleviating the pain would be undemocratic. In her discussion of new rights claims, Honig reflects on her mixed feelings about the “right” to assisted suicide before turning to a more comfortable right, warmly describing the newly claimed “right” to slow (local, unprocessed) food. Her discussion of Post secures a comfortable politics by setting up a curious, implicit distinction between the realm of law and the realm of morals. Post is *using* the law (understood in the radical democratic way that Honig proposes) *in order to* advance his view of the treatment of immigrants, a view that Honig happens to endorse. Honig warns against reading Post's work as anticipating later developments in the law, of anticipating a time when the law is more just. But without the social shift to make Post's views more or less mainstream why would he be chosen as exemplary of the politics Honig wants to commend? Would not Vice-President Cheney, who shares with Post a similar taste for mixing administrative and juridical power, for *using* legal technicalities *in order to* advance his views, have been an equally good example, and one which could less easily be obscured by *post facto* assessments of what Cheney's political practice may or may not “anticipate?”

Honig might respond: Cheney's motivation is wrong not because of an ethical error but because it does not further a democratic ethos. Commendable political practices are made visible by radical democratic political theory, but such practices also advance radical democratic politics. In a democratic ethos we can identify democratic practices and democratic practices advance a democratic ethos – we have returned to the paradox of politics in another guise. Cheney may be using a democratic technique (exploiting technicalities in the name of the law) but he is using it for undemocratic ends, in order to limit the possibility of other democratic practices by strengthening a sovereign independent of the people it claims to represent. Yet this explanation is not particularly satisfactory. Cheney, it seems, would welcome Honig's emphasis on survival and integrity, using technicalities in order to endure tragedy, and would embrace democracy as the flag which must keep flying. Indeed, it is possible that he would wholeheartedly embrace a democratic ethos as Honig understands it.

To differentiate between Post and Cheney we need to understand democracy as a tradition, not an ethos. As a tradition, the particular positions and strategies of each man can be checked against social practices, history, and values. Embracing tradition is to embrace a politics of technicalities: law just is the careful consideration of precedent in light of present social conditions. Yet embracing tradition, even the democratic tradition, is not easy. Even if we greatly desire legalized abortion, or gay marriage, or headscarves in public schools, perhaps there are times when, as an ascetic democratic practice, it is best to set aside these desires in deference to tradition. Indeed, perhaps there are times when it is best to reflect on why it is that we desire the untraditional to begin with. To set aside our desires is painful. Those we care for may be hurt, it may seem as though our deep values are being compromised. But ascetic practices train us to be better democratic citizens, to respect the authority of tradition; they even train our very desires.

Here is where democracy hurts, but it is only by participating in the rigors of tradition that we can separate the democratic Post from the anti-democratic Cheney, for it was the American democratic tradition that Cheney's critics allege he abandoned.

What has happened to political theology, to Honig's claim to offer a Jewish political theology as an alternative to Schmitt's political theology? This is it: the picture of democratic politics that Honig presents is just another name for her Jewish political theology. Rosenzweig's account of the miracle is the democratic alternative to Schmitt's account of the miracle, which forms the basis for the state of exception (this is Schmitt's normative complement to his famous descriptive claim about the relationship between religious and political concepts). According to Honig, "The Rosenzweigian miracle postulates not divine command but rather human orientation to divine sovereignty in everyday life" (88). Rosenzweig does not secularize. He takes theology to be necessary, but he proposes a "this-worldly theology" rather than a (Christian) other-worldly theology. For Rosenzweig, writes Honig, miracles are not "about the contravention of everyday patterns of existence or laws of nature." Rather, a miracle "is a sign of divine providence that is experienced as such and that opens us up, both to providence and to the everyday. It allows or solicits us to experience the everyday as miracle, the ordinary as calling for acknowledgment, or receptivity or gratitude" (97). A miracle reminds us that what seems contingent may be necessary and what seems necessary may be contingent. Political decision is not a miracle, but it is analogous to a miracle – analogous to Rosenzweig's miracle, not Schmitt's.

To complement Rosenzweig's account of the miracle, Honig turns to Moses Mendelssohn's commentary on the Biblical story of Moses. The reason God punishes Moses is that he stops hearing the Israelites' complaints and turns directly to God. On this reading, Moses is punished for understanding sovereignty wrongly. He tries to please the Israelites with magic rather than with miracles. Moses's failure, according to Honig, was that "he did not see the people as they need to be seen, as the people to whom this land has been given – as a free people, capable of giving and receiving prophecy" (102). The people's leader acts correctly when he is not sovereign over them but sovereign with them, when all are aware of the continual process of interpretation, and when all are open to each other. The leader attempts to interpellate the people, but fails. The leader attempts to decide for the people, but "[t]he leader's decision is not decisive" (106).

Honig's opposition of Rosenzweig's miracle to Schmitt's is rhetorically effective, but it (perhaps necessarily) elides some of the complexity within Schmitt's own account in *Political Theology* – setting aside the complexity that would be introduced if Schmitt's work as a whole were to be considered. While Honig attempts to position her "Jewish" political theology as embracing immanence, implicitly opposed to a "Christian" political theology that would embrace transcendence, Schmitt's work actually tracks competing immanent and transcendent strands of the religion-politics analogy. In Chapter 3 of *Political Theology* Schmitt portrays the immanent version of the analogy as dominant; he ends with a longing glance at the possibility that counterrevolutionary thought could lift the fortunes of the transcendent version of the analogy – the version that authorizes the dictatorial politics for which Schmitt is so notorious. In other words, positioning Jewish political theology as the most plausible alternative to Schmittian political theology ignores Schmitt's own identification of a viable (and, indeed, successful) alternative which also embraced immanence.

As charitable readers of Honig's work, we might suspect that there is some crucial difference between her Jewish political theology and Schmitt's immanent Christian political theology. An uncharitable reading would worry that Honig slips in specifically Jewish, and

unjustified, concerns about neighborliness through the rhetorical force of positioning Jewish political theology as the only alternative to transcendent Christian political theology. Schmitt's project is plausible because of the analogy between Christian religious concepts and the concepts of European politics. By investigating Christian theology (for example, various accounts of the miracle), Schmitt can present options that are possible to catch as political concepts. It is unclear how Jewish religious thought has the potential to catch, except as an academic exercise. Investigating Jewish religious concepts might make sense for a study of Israeli political theology, but not European or American political theology.

This line of thinking returns us again to tradition. Implicit in Schmitt's claim about political theology is the assumption that the repertoire of religious concepts available to serve in the analogy with political concepts are in the same tradition (so share a common history) as the political concepts to which the analogy will be made. But what if there is a tradition-independent reason to embrace Jewish political theology: paradoxically, that Jewish religious ideas uniquely embrace tradition? This could be the crucial difference that the charitable reader is looking for between Honig's Jewish political theology and Schmitt's (Christian) immanent political theology. Perhaps this unique embrace of tradition, and the contest of tradition, is exemplified by the well known Talmudic story, quoted by Honig, concerning an interpretive dispute between rabbis in which Rabbi Eleazer repeatedly appeals directly to God to intervene and show that the law is on his side. A tree moves, water flows backwards, a voice even booms down from the heavens. Yet Rabbi Eleazer's antagonists are not swayed. Rabbi Joshua responds, "The Torah is not in heaven!" Like the story of Moses, Honig reads this story as a refusal of absolute sovereignty, an embrace of sovereignty held together, between sovereign and people, always already mediated, always already contested. But might the story be read as more than an embrace (by analogy) of a democratic ethos? Might it be read as an embrace of tradition, authoritative but always in need of interpretation? The contest of the rabbis is contest about laws, about what ought and ought not to be done based on layers of authoritative texts. Here, it seems, is the potential for Jewish religious thought to inform contemporary political theory. It does not offer an alternative to Schmitt's political theology; rather, it offers a resource for reflection on tradition-rooted democratic political theory.

Finally, what are we to make of Honig's claim to be offering a political theory (or theology) that embraces the everyday? There are two ways to interpret the everyday: as the ordinary or as the obvious. The everyday as the obvious is raw, pre-theorized experience – which is to say, experience clouded by ideology, by the regimes of seeing, knowing, and feeling in which we always already find ourselves. As the ordinary, the everyday is post-theoretical experience, experience cleansed, by means of theory (or some other means), of ideological distortion. Achieving the ordinary, cleaving it from the obvious, is an aspiration that is not, must not, be understood as achievable. It seems as though Honig aspires to achieve the ordinary, that this is what she means by her embrace of the everyday. A case could be made that a democratic ethos embraces the obvious; a democratic tradition embraces the ordinary. Tradition has the traction necessary to distinguish itself from the obvious. Tradition embraces the notion that there is a fact of the matter about what, in any given circumstance, ought to be done. It is a fact of the matter that we can strive to know by investigating practices, history, and values. We never succeed in knowing what the fact of the matter is; our aspiration is to fail better. At the end of the day, this is why political *theology*, in the broadest sense, is required: because the aspiration to fail better *requires faith*.