


## What Does our Feminism Need? Notes on a History “en sordina”

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**Abstract.** This text proposes a reading of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* assuming as its own the double theoretical and political key sustained by the book. I first summarize some of Honig’s central points on the type of complexification and impurification of current political theory that Euripides’ drama *The Bacchae* would enable, and on the importance of this new conceptualization for feminist political practice. After that, I formulate some remarks regarding the historical process in which this concept has become central for critical political theory and point out possible limitations of this approach to describe the type of challenges faced by the emancipatory and egalitarian struggles undertaken by the feminist movement in Argentina.

**Keywords:** Political Theory; Political Practice; Bonnie Honig, Refusal, Feminism; Revolution; Crisis

### [ES] ¿Qué necesita nuestro feminismo? Notas sobre una historia en sordina

**Resumen.** El presente texto propone una lectura de *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* asumiendo como propia la doble clave teórica y política que el libro sostiene. En la primera parte se resumen los puntos centrales de Honig sobre el tipo de complejización e impurificación de la teoría vigente que el drama *Las Bacantes* de Eurípides habilitaría, y sobre la importancia de esta nueva conceptualización para la práctica política feminista. A continuación se formulan algunos interrogantes respecto del proceso histórico en el cual este concepto deviene protagónico para la teoría política crítica y se señalan posibles limitaciones del mismo a la hora de describir el tipo de desafíos que enfrentan las luchas emancipatorias e igualitarias emprendidas por el movimiento feminista en Argentina.

**Palabras clave:** Teoría Política; Práctica política; Bonnie Honig, rechazo, Feminismo; Revolución; Crisis

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In one of the fragments that make up *Passagenwerk* Walter Benjamin maintains that “what differentiates images from the essences of phenomenology is their historical index”<sup>1</sup>. According to him this index implied that images not only belong to a given time, but they also become legible in a given epoch - legibility being understood as a double gesture, simultaneously cognitive and political. I believe that the problems raised by *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*<sup>2</sup> allow to be interpreted in this Benjaminian atmosphere: first, because the book reminds us that the critical potential of certain images must be re-evaluated each time, in

the face of the concrete challenges posed to a practice situated in specific conjuncture; second, because it sustains an idea of the theoretical-political in a strong sense: being deeply imbricated, neither of the two registers erases the other. Although the book proposes a theoretical reflection on a certain state of contemporary political theory, this same reflection is demanded by another type of practice, not alien but irreducible to theoretical practice: political practice. Hence, the theoretical and political questions that raise the argument overlap, but never end up being fully identified with each other. What figures are

<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, *La dialéctica en suspenso*, Santiago de Chile, ARCIS/LOM, 1996, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> B. Honig, *A feminist theory of refusal*, Cambridge-Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2021.

capable of inspiring a feminist politics? asks Honig in the preface. But also: what effects could the introduction of certain figures more akin to the practices of feminism have on a theory that has hitherto been unaware of them?

In Honig's book neither theory nor politics are said in general. From the very title the singular coordinates that allow the author to organize the reflection are declared: we deal with a reflection located simultaneously in the political theory of refusal and in the political practice of feminism. A reflection that seeks to contribute something to both. Beyond *Bartleby* and *Antigone*, the book seeks to theorize a feminist refusal in connection with the figure of Euripides' *Bacchae*. According to the author, they provide a vital contrast to the previous examples, showing themselves more capable of generating collective power and hosting new practices of mutuality that express care, but from which violence is not absent either. Thus, the figures that can inspire a feminist politics - suggests the book - are more Dionysian than the figures of those two great solitary refusers privileged in the theoretical register, a register where the bacchants tended to be pathologized and not taken seriously as political actors. For this very reason, if feminism as politics calls for images (and theory), it in turn calls for a critique of the most current contemporary theory - a critique that, while maintaining refusal as a privileged concept, is nonetheless capable of reformulating, inspired by them, the terms in which this concept should be conceived.

In this reformulation of theory, Euripides's drama is presented as what I would call a Benjaminian object. With that, I mean an element which is given as invisible to a certain reading, and whose advent to legibility is promoted. However, upon becoming legible it is not simply included in the field, but produces effects of estrangement in the very coordinates that organized the reading. As Honig says, it would be less a matter of an object already available in the register whose interpretation is disputed, than of an erased object, recovered for the register, and whose incorporation into it threatens to disorganize the archive itself:

The ambition here differs from my earlier work on *Antigone*. In *Antigone Interrupted*, I turned to classics for the history that might help decenter political theory's mythology of *Antigone*, finding in fifth-century norms and changing laws about women's lamentation the resources to develop a counter-reading of the play and then, with that, to interrupt its legacy of lamentational politics today. Here, I enlist the *Bacchae* as an exemplary illustration of the arc of refusal, chart the erasure in the play of the women's refusal, and, with the play, think about what rises to the register of refusal and what doesn't, and why. Since there is no political theory mythology of *Agave* to dethrone, I work not historically but conceptually, recovering the play for an archive of refusal, critically assessing some of the key contemporary concepts of refusal in the company of this drama<sup>3</sup>.

Although Honig refers here to an "exemplary illustration" of something that would ultimately be another theory - a novel theory of refusal that, as we shall see, conceives it above all as an "arc" rather than as a punctual gesture-, it is in any case a pending theory that has yet to be produced. In this sense, the case does not exemplify theory but rather calls for its advent. Theory must be produced, and it must do so by making room for what the object demands, for its excesses, which overflow the limits of the archive in which it is included. That is why, rather than as true illustrations of theory, the *Bacchae* - drama and figure - are presented in the book as schismatic objects that, when they become detectable by the theoretical radar, break it down, overturning certain key concepts that are part of its current constellation and calling for their reformulation.

What concepts are the ones involved? At the level of the elements that the book postulates as components of the available theory of refusal, Honig's question could be formulated as a question about what the complexities of Euripides's drama do to certain associations of emancipatory political action with inoperativity, heterotopias of care, or agonistic meaning making practices that renounce confrontation. As if it were a seismograph, the analysis seeks to detect the subversive effects that the introduction of this new object produces within each of them, and her aim is to recover them, but as internally tensed, impure concepts. She says:

In Chapter 1, I recovered inoperativity as an agonistic feminist practice of intensification that slows time and doubles down on use, rather than suspend time and seek a purist escape from use. In Chapter 2, I recovered inclination, shifting it from a feminist, pacifist, maternal orientation of care to a feminist, sororal practice of peaceful and violent mutuality and care. In Chapter 3, fabulation became a meaning making practice that postulates the return to the city that Hartman's wayward women may not (for good reasons) embrace but the bacchants do risk<sup>4</sup>.

According to Honig, a feminist theory of refusal requires more impurities than is acceptable in its available formulations. It requires inoperativity as a critique of use, but at the same time, cannot embrace this concept as given in Agamben's interpretation "because it generates no assembly and seems to abjure power".<sup>5</sup> It relies on an ethic of care and a disposition towards the other oriented to pacifism and mutuality, but joins together not with a maternal position but with sorority, "practicing a kind of care and power that seek peace but risk implication in violence, too".<sup>6</sup> It rejects dominant narratives and assumptions, but does not renounce telling the story of the political community for fear that this struggle for meaning and the production of new narratives of glory will course it into mimetic violence.

I think Honig's invitation to retain the impure ambivalence of emancipatory political practices in the

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 102.

concepts of a theory with critical pretensions is highly relevant because, while remaining alert to the risks of bad mimesis, she does not give up asking about what we could also lose when the phobia of speculation becomes our main preoccupation. Furthermore, I believe that this sensitivity to the internal ambivalence that, according to her, runs through feminist inoperativity, inclination and fabulation is composed in her book in a very powerful way with a second gesture of re-totalization that seeks to highlight the limits of an identification of refusal with an isolated event.

Indeed, if we cannot circumscribe ourselves to this level of the concepts that make up a theory of refusal in Honig's approach, it is because one of the most interesting moves of her proposal consists in de-fetishizing them as paradigmatic and self-sufficient figures of transformative political action. If what is at stake here is the question of what we should conceive as refusal from a feminist point of view, I believe that the fundamental theoretical stake of the book consists in arguing that refusal cannot be identified with a single act, but must be thought of as a complex process, composed of singular, heterogeneous and even mutually contradictory moments. A political reading of refusal requires - in other words - transcending the level of isolated concepts to focus on their relationship:

Inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation together make up an arc of refusal. The idea of refusal as an arc and not an act is a central feature of the feminist theory of refusal as a world building practice (...) this makes of refusal a politics far larger than political theory's old debates about civil disobedience<sup>7</sup>.

The feminist refusal cannot be theorized as an isolated act of pure negativity, idealized and purified, but must be conceived first and foremost as an arc. It cannot be identified neither with refusal to work, nor with heterotopic flight, neither with the creation of another distribution of the sensible outside the city, nor with the production of new fugitive narrative. Instead must be thought of as what unfolds between them and includes a third moment of return to the political community to give a dispute for meaning, memory, and for the creation of new political myth that will eventually be able to transform it. Refusal to work, heterotopian escape, and the return to the city constitute three "stops", says Honig, of a single arc of refusal. Thinking of refusal as an arc implies once again assuming the risk that the impurities of politics entail in favor of transformation, but this time on a new level that we could call diachronic, where the question of emancipation is placed as a long-term process rather than as a set of isolated acts of repression/rebellion:

A refusal reading of the Bacchae notes the significance of the fact that what happens on Cithaeron does not stay on Cithaeron: it is one stop on a larger arc of refusal that includes the bacchant's work stoppage, escape from the city, fugitive experience on Cithaeron, violence against the king who first sought to tame them in the city and then to watch them in the wild, and finally, their return to the city to claim it<sup>8</sup>.

Honig undoubtedly wants to free political action from the rationalist, teleological and institutionalist reductionisms that imagined the seizure of power as a necessary moment and as a privileged milestone of the political. This is why her conception of political practice is in proximity to the idea of a transformative litigiousness of the "distribution of the sensible" proposed, among others, by Jacques Rancière<sup>9</sup>. But unlike him, she also wants to problematize the idea that these rejections of institutionalism somehow function as synonyms or guarantees of transformation. Hence her call not to settle for marginality and to avoid the phobia that might lead us to defect from a struggle for the occupation of the places laid out by the city, but also to resist the temptation to idealize purely negative gestures of in-operation, dis-identification, exodus, flight, and self-subtraction as if they constituted the last word in critique. "Creating counters to patriarchy requires more than a few days in the woods"<sup>10</sup>, she says. And, for her, creating the pending theory of refusal demanded by the practices of feminism requires more than the defense of the purified agonism insisted upon by many theories of the event: it implies assuming the impurities of political action as well as its processual character.

In the face of this stimulating development, my question would be: do we still need to think of this transformative political action as a refusal? Would it not be possible to radicalize a little the problematizing intention that animates the book and ask, what is lost when struggles for emancipation and equality are conceived in terms of a refusal? And also, what is the accumulated historical process that has allowed this to happen? How far are we willing to go when we seek to account for the dirt in which effective political struggles are configured? Is it enough to point out the inextricable association of care and violence that they often involve? Or might the emphasis on an image such as the regicide that the bacchant's perform as part of their arc of refusal have the paradoxical effect of making invisible other less ostentatious dimensions of the impurity brought into play by today's feminist movements?

I begin with this last point because it is the one most directly associated with a concrete feminist action that has been taking place for some years in Argentina and other countries in the region: the women's strike on March 8. In her book *Not One Less. Mourning, Disobedience and Desire*, María Pía López recounts the first two women's strikes that took place in our country. The first one was in 2016. As a response to a particularly bloody and cruel case of femicide, several organizations and activists who a few days earlier had gathered at a multitudinous National Women's Meeting, called a strike. Its organization, says López, staged a central hypothesis for the Ni una menos movement: gender violence had to be thought intertwined with social and economic inequality, and the strike was a tool to think about that articulation. But its implementation implied a negotiation with trade union organizations - without an official trade union call for a strike there is no protection

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xii-xiii.

<sup>9</sup> J. Rancière, *El desacuerdo. Política y filosofía*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> B. Honig, *op. cit.*, p. 110.



for women strikers, and employers can sanction the abandonment of work- indeed, they objected to the legitimacy of the women's movement to call a strike at first. However, on March 8 of the following year, the second women's strike took place as a result of a network of movements in different cities of the country which had different degrees of involvement in and/or alliance with trade union organizations:

In the city of Cordoba an inter-union women's committee was formed, bringing together activists from twenty organizations from different trade union centers (CGT, CTA, autonomous CTA) (...) in other cities groups of unionized women workers participated as such in assemblies that included social movements, political parties, feminist collectives, cultural and artistic activist groups. The discussion about the strike and the right to call a work stoppage involved another fundamental controversy: about work<sup>11</sup>.

Significantly, in her book Honig refers to Argentine feminism, but she does not do so in reference to this series of strikes whose effectiveness was - and still is - partly given by the different levels of political articulation<sup>12</sup> that could be achieved with part of the massive Argentine organized workers' movement, but in reference to an attempt of anti-patriarchal recovery of tango by the dance group La Furiosa<sup>13</sup>. With this reference Honig wants to argue, in confrontation with Agamben's idea of inoperativeness, that the political practices of feminism are associated with a strange and impure reactivation rather than with a purist suspension of certain devices marked with a patriarchal bias. I agree. But I also think that the case of the women's strike in Argentina and the reappropriation of the strike as a tool of struggle in a conflictive, but also productive, articulation with part of the trade union movement would have constituted a more powerful example of the complexities involved in political practice. Its evocation would possibly have made it clear that neither the trade union movement nor the women's movement are coherent identities. Instead, they are fields of forces internally divided, as it became clear when only part of the feminist movement decided to highlight that the struggle against patriarchal domination and gender violence could not be dissociated from a critique of the social and economic inequality constitutive of neoliberal capitalism.

In any case, I believe that making justice to the complexity of political practice necessarily involves the consideration of a singular history. When we talk about articulations and translations we never speak "in general" but rather in light of specific conditions and traditions that suggest certain possibilities of reappropriation while hindering others. Specifically, I believe that, in Argentina, the articulation between

feminist struggles and struggles of the unionized labor movement was undoubtedly not guaranteed. This is why it was necessary to *produce* it politically. Still, it was not an entirely contingent articulation either if by "contingency" we were to understand something arbitrary or founded on emptiness. The possibility of political articulation was based, instead, on the peculiarities that union struggles had taken in our national history, in which the Peronist tradition - majority in union culture - had promoted, among other things, the legislative sanction of pension rights for the "housewives" even if they had not made contributions. This signifies a latent recognition by the Argentine union movement of reproductive work - globally feminized - as a form of work.

Regarding my question as to whether we need to continue to think of such transformative political action as refusal and how this might be possible, I understand that Honig's concern with what kind of theory and practice of refusal feminism needs, has a controversial spirit. It seeks to polemicize with attempts to uncritically transpose into feminism approaches made by certain indigenous theorists of refusal and emerging conclusions from certain areas of Black studies in the United States, where either the need to establish parallel sovereignties is upheld - without commitment to improving or infiltrating the colonizer's societies - or the image of the fugitive is embraced as the only instance in which "black life can flourish"<sup>14</sup>. This local polemical stake of Honig's seems to me highly relevant. However, my feeling is that the problematization of refusal that she proposes unfolds in a scene that, in the very thing it brings to light - that is: the need to complexify the current theory of refusal as well as its privileged figures -, it simultaneously installs a sort of presupposition, which is not in itself subject to problematization. This presupposition is that the political practice of feminism that is neither exhausted in exodus nor fully peaceful, and that occurs as a process rather than as an isolated act of negation, is still adequately conceptualizable as a refusal.

I think this assumption promotes an unjustified identification of political struggles that seek equality and emancipation with practices of refusal, and likewise, an identification of political theories that think about these political practices with theories of refusal, as if these were not particular practices and theories that differ from other ways of practicing and conceiving socially transformative practice. Actually, in some parts of her book, Honig recognizes that refusal reading is a particular way of reading. But what relation does this way of reading maintain with other ways of reading transformative political practice? What happens, for instance, when the privileged concept in the analysis is not refusal and rather this place is occupied by other figures such as counter-hegemonic struggle or revolution?

Although this question may sound a bit arbitrary, I believe that this is not a merely external objection to Honig's text because, in fact, the book invokes the idea of revolution on several occasions (among others, in a quotation from Judith Butler and when referring to Hannah Arendt's approach) without, however, further

<sup>11</sup> M. P. Lopez, *Not One Less. Mourning, Disobedience and Desire*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2020, pp. 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> As I hope will be clearer in what follows, although I use the term "articulation", I do not understand by it an arbitrary association of elements completely external to each other. From my perspective, it is the overdetermined history of a specific social formation what enables - or not - certain resonances between immediately disparate struggles.

<sup>13</sup> B. Honig, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

consideration of the aspects in which it might differ from the concept of refusal. Is it the same to speak of refusal as to speak of revolution? Are they comparable concepts? Are they simply different and everything depends on the perspective in which one is placed? Or is there a certain history between the two?

The central point of these questions is not to establish a polemic on whether the perspective of revolution is better or worse than that of refusal. That is not the point, among other things, because I believe that the concepts in which we configure our theoretical (and political) thought bear the traces of historical processes and that, for this very reason, the question of their eligibility or rejection exceeds the simple will of the theoretician and would be greatly simplified by being posed as a debate between perspectives. What I wonder is whether it might not be important for a theory of refusal to historicize itself, i.e., asking the question of how it has come to constitute itself as a more or less dominant theory of the political, the meaning of which is therefore worth disputing. I think, more specifically, that it would be productive for a theory of refusal - especially if it claims to be a critical theory of refusal that seeks to emphasize what refusal creates as community and history and not only what it rejects - to attempt to specify the relation that the concept of refusal maintains with the concept of social revolution. Is the advance of refusal as a paradigm of contemporary political theory thinkable independently of the fate of the concept of revolution? More specifically, is it possible to think of the rise of refusal without thinking of the crisis of the utopia of a socialist revolution? And what would have been the consequences of such a crisis in our capacity to imagine revolution? Would there have been only gains or would there also have been some losses?<sup>15</sup> I think that even if the concept of refusal includes the possibility of killing the king - the supreme figure of political-cultural domination-, something of the order of economic exploitation in capitalism remains out of focus or excessively reduced to the exploitation of women's unrecognized labor when this mention of capitalism disappears from the bibliography.

I fully agree when Honig argues that "Creating counters to patriarchy requires more than a few days in the woods"<sup>16</sup>. I believe that, indeed, in Argentina, without a reference to the history of the struggles of

the popular movements that imagined the foundation of alternative orders to really existing capitalism and the successive crises they had to go through, feminist struggles tend to be reduced, at best, to revolt or insurrection, and at worst, to the production of alternative private lifestyles. In either case, they find severe limits to figure not only the most pervasive adversaries of feminism, but also - as María Pía López suggested - its possible allies. Creating counters to patriarchy, in Argentina, will indeed require more than a few days in the woods because it will require to think, among other things, about the historically possible convergences of our feminisms with the anti-neoliberal traditions (that since the '90s fight against privatizing precarization); with the union movements (whose struggles harbored the possibility of being understood as struggles for unpaid work and not only for salary improvements at least since the fifties); with the human rights movement (which fights the symbolic, judicial and economic legacies of the last civic-military coup d'état during the Seventies, responsible for imposing neoliberal reforms and annihilating the socialist project); with the struggles for national sovereignty against the indebtedness of the country in the international financial system (which today constitutes one of the main ways in which imperialism is being reactivated in the so-called peripheral regions), and with the struggles against various forms of authoritarianism and radicalization of inequality that are taking place in the world today. Is it possible to think all this within a theory of refusal? Or perhaps certain references and concepts -such as capitalism, imperialism and (crisis of) revolution- that may be indispensable to us, are either missing or pale in such a theory too much?

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<sup>15</sup> C. Menke, *En el día de la crisis*, Buenos Aires, Ubu Ediciones, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> B. Honig, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

