


Toward a new imagination of revolutionary struggle. Conversations with Bonnie Honig's *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*¹

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The imagination of revolutionary change in today's world is said to be in crisis, or rather it has been for a while – we only need to think of the chronic reciting of Walter Benjamin's notion of "Left melancholy." We still struggle to make room in an imaginary of revolutionary struggle that is occupied by the historical experiences of the implication of transformative politics with violence, political oppression, guillotines and gulags. With *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), Bonnie Honig turns to our literary and cultural archive in search for figures and scenes that can provide us with a new register – of concepts, allegories and metaphors – upon which we can rely to imagine transformative politics today; a politics that is able to emancipate itself from the symbolic frameworks of hegemonic structural powers whilst at the same time intervening in them. For Honig, this requires an agonistic approach, which is characteristic of her work, and which sets her apart from many of her contemporaries. Politics of equality, according to her, are to be found in the remainders of political settlements and in the moments when the ordinary proceedings of the regime are interrupted. In her first book on *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993, 2023), Honig therefore pushes back against consensual understandings of democracy brought forward both by liberal and communitarian authors, and instead defends a politics of contestation. Against the purification or aestheticization of politics, however, she also demands our attention for the structural and institutional conditions, the *Public Things* (2017) that she contends are necessary for and indeed serve to foster politics

of contestation in democratic societies. This also means that the implication with power (and sometimes even violence) is not something that transformative politics can, or should, avoid. Honig resists what she understands to be an inclination (of feminist theorists) to withdraw from political struggle into a pacifist and maternal ethics that intends to avoid the problematics of the existing political register – something that she finds exemplified in a political theory tradition that celebrates the figure of Antigone for an absolute rejection of sovereignty (*Antigone, Interrupted*, 2013). Honig's conspiracy with counter-hegemonic efforts and theories of counter-sovereignty is also reflected in her most recent book *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, to which this special issue is dedicated. Here, she takes the bacchantes – and those are not solely the women in Euripides' drama but also Toni from Anna Rose Holmer's film *The Fits* (2015), Muhammad Ali, and BLM activists – as illustrations of different refusal struggles that allow us to rework and expand existing categories of political contestation and transformation.

In *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Honig picks up a story from the archive of the literary classics, Euripides' *Bacchae*, a book that we might deem to be outdated, unsalvageable even for its misogyny and narratives of exclusion. With a counter-intuitive reading, Honig salvages the bacchantes' struggle from its incapacitating portrayal as the actions of "honey-mad women", whose demand for glory ends in a tragic act of filicide. She does so by beginning her reading from speculation: What if the bacchantes were not mad, "but knowing (at

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some level) what they were doing when they took Pentheus down"?² What if the king's death through the hands of Agave, his own mother, belongs to the refusal of the patriarchal order of their hometown and thus to a regicide that had begun long before and stretched from the defamation of the king to ultimately the annihilation of the sovereign's body? Honig follows the ambiguous moments in the text, and those between the lines, that allow for the women's story to be rewritten, taking them as political subjects rather than the victims of divine temptation. In this special issue, Liesbeth Schoonheim emphasizes the critical quality of Honig's play with the textual elements. As feminist practice, fabulation and speculation, though appearing in the form of playfulness and storytelling, allow such stories of refusal to be released from a patriarchal stronghold that until then has denied their emancipatory potential.

Honig's reading of the *Bacchae* is more ambitious than her previous work on the figure of Antigone, which participated in a contest over the figure itself dethroning those narratives that held Antigone captive, Gisela Catanzaro notes. Staging the bacchants' actions as refusal allows Honig to critique the conceptual register through which we imagine transformative politics today: The book undertakes the reformulation of existing categories of refusal – specifically inoperativity, inclination, and fabulation – that the bacchants' struggle and their "historical index" demands. Catanzaro suggests, however, that Honig does not fully follow through the book's critical gesture as she fails to put the historicity of the category of "refusal" itself into question; a paradigm that Honig still holds up, though in the form of an arch and process rather than as an "isolated act of negation." Catanzaro asks whether refusal really can take into consideration the historical formations that are playing into the oppression of peoples today (she addresses this question in light of the historical alliances that Argentine feminism has taken); is refusal enough to be *talkin' bout a revolution*?

Alejandra Castillo speaks of the double signifier of 9/11, for the terrorist attacks in 2001 and Chile's tragedy of 1973, as the moments that mark a break in the political register of the Left which since has struggled with the imagination of revolutionary change. Castillo finds in feminist refusal politics as Honig delineates them, carried by inoperativity and inclination, a first step toward a new revolutionary politics, what she calls "infrapolitics", that goes beyond the logic of hegemony. Castillo, however, questions the figures that Honig relies on in her arc of refusal; specifically, she is concerned with Honig's "sisterly rejection" of Arendt for the figure of Muhammad Ali, a brother. The figuration of our politics, Castillo reminds us, is not secondary because the intelligibility of these figures reflects and potentially reiterates the very register that we intend to break away from.

Indeed, Honig shows how the withdrawal from the patriarchal order of Thebes to a feminist

heterotopia on Cithaeron, allows the bacchants to find themselves in the position to radically reimaging their social relations and found a new normativity. A significant contribution of Honig's conceptualization of political refusal is, however, that she does not conclude with this scene. Instead, Honig understands the women's return to Thebes to be part of their struggle. She thus addresses the difficult moment of "the return", i.e. the moment that radical imagination must be translated into a politics that can bring about structural change. This certainly is a controversial aspect to Honig's work – one that, I believe, speaks to a difficult experience of democratic critique today. In light of a "revolutionary" destruction of the social by neoliberal policies and far-right forces, those defending radical democratic principles find themselves with the unfamiliar task of *conservation*: protecting welfare politics, social infrastructures, and even those simple but vital "public things"³ that provide democratic societies with spaces, that might not be perfectly inclusive, but still matter for the sense of a world in common.

The bacchants' arc of refusal illustrates "a deep attachment" to the world, maybe not as it is, but certainly to "a more just world that is not yet."⁴ What happens after the return? Catherine Koekoek picks up on what is ultimately an institutional, or infrastructural, focus in Honig's argument, and asks how we might affect then structural transformation of the city that refuses our demands. Or put differently, how can this commitment to the world translate into effective institutional change without losing its revolutionary imagination? In the *Women of Waves* project, Koekoek finds an example of activism that seems to have found a way to handle the conundrums of returning. By providing reproductive healthcare in international waters, "on waves", the activists circumvent national law whilst at the same time tending to its communities, not solely clinically but also by educating and struggling for legal changes. By upholding the antagonistic tension between a feminist heterotopia and the city, between radical imagination and pragmatism, the project withstands the pressure of conformism. Honig's commitment to return to the city goes hand in hand with conceptualizing refusal as "world-building practice," Sergej Seitz argues (a perspective that is shared amongst us Viennese colleagues). With this "affirmative" understanding of refusal, illustrated by the bacchants' struggle, Honig breaks with a paradigmatic negative conceptualization of refusal and resistance fashionable amongst a "Bartleby Left," but also present in fugitive accounts, which for Honig risk a certain purism. Seitz departs from this affirmative understanding when he brings Honig's interpretation of the *Bacchae* together with Foucault's reading of Euripides' tragedies. He takes the women of Thebes as exemplary for parrhesiasts who not merely proclaim but live their truth, thereby exposing the epistemic order toward democratic

² Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2021, p. 67

³ Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2017

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3

contestation. In our times where we are still held in the iron grip of Thatcher's TINA doctrine ("There Is No Alternative"), Seitz finds in the *Bacchae*, as it is read by Honig and Foucault, an illustration of how such parrhesiatic struggle opens "the realm of the radically possible".

Not everyone, however, agrees with Honig's commitment of feminist struggle to the return. Mareike Gebhardt reminds us of the violent response of the city to the women's return, how it is deaf to their demands and refuses to be transformed. What if the city is nothing but an inhabitable place, a hostile environment without nourishment and tolerance for feminist demands to flourish? This is the city's tragedy and not the women's, Gebhardt argues. Taking seriously the prioritization of unsettlement, which she traces back to the virtù politics in Honig's early work, Gebhardt insists on a "right to leave" (behind) the city. For her, it is in claiming this right that we can free ourselves from the settlers' (the city's, the virtue thinkers') terms.

For Honig, of course, leaving the city also risks leaving the city to be, leaving its oppressive structures and logics intact, and, in the worst case, leaving it "to come for us."⁵ Against that, German Primera asks what it is that we leave to be if we return? In the first chapter of the book, he reminds us, Honig moves Agamben's concept of inoperativity from suspension toward intensification. She thereby resists the category's role in purifying or aestheticizing refusal, which, for her, risks reducing political struggle to negativity and the moment of withdrawal. Against that, Primera reads the category in the context of the greater critical project of Agamben's philosophical archeology that aims at the radical suspension of "the machines that control the intelligibility of the West." He is concerned that what Honig misses in her equation of inoperativity to its *Bartleby* analogy is the "productive, generative force" of this category, and also of fugitive accounts: These accounts aim to restore political practices and common forms of use that are overwritten by the existing political register. Primera's concern here is that strategies that seek transformation all too quickly might leave unquestioned the use of "'the master's tools,' that is, the established modes of engagement based on the politics of recognition."⁶

Luke Edmeads, too, is concerned that the bacchants' struggle as it is read by Honig does not adequately liberate itself from a hegemonic political register. Suggesting the violent intervention (the killing of Pentheus) to be part of the bacchants' refusal Honig risks perpetuating the very patriarchal normativity we want to resist. Honig calls on Ahmed's work to demonstrate the possible implication of care, or inclination, with violence. Honig here resists Cavarero's identification of the category with a maternal pacifism that must be posited

in absolute contradistinction to a patriarchal normativity of verticality.⁷ According to Honig, an ethics of inclination that shies away from any potential implication with violence or the "master's tools" risks, again, to becoming paralyzed in the political struggle against the structures it is meant to be posited against. For Edmeads, however, this misses the performative critique that such an ethics of inclination, illustrated by the idea of a "slow regicide", holds in itself. It describes the undoing of those structures and norms in which political subjectivity is produced in the first place.

While my co-editor still sees in the moment of violence the bacchant's downfall, I (Viktoria Huegel) propose to hold onto an affirmative aspect in this conflict. It is then that the women no longer act as the women of Thebes, but of Cithaeron. The women defend the political subjectivity that they have practiced and rehearsed together against the intrusion of a king, that is no longer theirs, that they have already toppled. We should not forget that Pentheus, who as a king is by no means a neutral figure, forces his way into the women's territory. This moment demonstrates that the distinctions between failure and success, between revolution and reform, are not ever as clear as we might wish them to be. The bacchants are still seen to have failed, not only by critics but also by Honig herself; but who is to judge this failure? And upon whose terms have the women failed? What Honig demonstrates with her reading of the *Bacchae* is that even after their movement comes to a halt there remains political power, a promise, in their struggle. And it is incumbent upon us to evoke it, in its reciting, its rehearsal, its fabulist augmentation – and in allowing it to extend our political imagination of what is possible.

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⁵ See p. 65 of Bonnie Honig's contribution, "Archives of Refusal." *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 27(1), 2024

⁶ See p. 48 of German Primera's contribution, "Inoperativity as a form of Refusal: On Bonnie Honig's Reading of Agamben." *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 27(1), 2024

⁷ For a related confrontation of Cavarero's ethics with a possible agonism in inclination see B. Honig, "How to Do Things with Inclination: Antigones, with Cavarero", in *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence*. Adriana Cavarero, with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices, herausgegeben von Timothy J Huzar und Clare Woodford, pp. 63–89, New York, Fordham University Press, 2021.