Democracia, feminismo y lenguaje. Una conversación con Bonnie Honig

Democracy, feminism and language. A conversation with Bonnie Honig*

Bonnie Honig
Northwestern University and American Bar Foundation
ORCID ID 0000-0003-4426-6276
b-honig@northwestern.edu

Andrea Greppi
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
ORCID ID 0000-0002-6035-5714
agreppi@der-pu.uc3m.es

Cristina Sánchez Muñoz
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
ORCID ID 0000-0003-3925-2363
cris.sanchez@uam.es

Gonzalo Velasco Arias
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
ORCID ID 0000-0002-9584-5051
gvelasco@hum.uc3m.es

Cita recomendada:

Honig, B., Greppi, A., Sánchez Muñoz, C. y Velasco Arias, G. (2025). Democracy, feminism and language. A conversation with Bonnie Honig. *Eunomía. Revista en Cultura de la Legalidad*, 29, pp. 383-395.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.20318/eunomia.2025.9860

Recibido / received: 04/10/2025
Aceptado / accepted: 12/10/2025

Introduction

In the spring of 2024, Professor Bonnie Honig visited Madrid for the first time. The event, held at the Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, took place on February 10, 2025, in the Salón de Tapices of the Palacio de Godoy, Madrid. It was made possible thanks to her generosity and openness and was financially supported

* Participants, with abbreviations: Prof. Bonnie Honig (BH), Prof. Cristina Sánchez (CS), Prof. Andrea Greppi (AG) and Prof. Gonzalo Velasco Arias (GV).

by the research project El vínculo y su contrario. Desafección, mediaciones y representación política (VI_CO). The goal of the gathering was to revisit and explore some of the central threads in Honig's extensive body of work –«thread» being a concept that appears throughout her writings– as a way of framing key developments and tensions in political theory over the past three decades.

Bonnie Honig is the Nancy Duke Lewis Professor at Brown University, where she has held appointments in Political Science and Modern Culture and Media. Her work has played a foundational role in the emergence of political agonism, beginning with her seminal book Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics (Honig, 1993), which questioned liberalism's focus on consensus and proceduralism. In the years that followed, she published influential studies on feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt (Honig, 2010), the challenges of multiculturalism and gender, and the symbolic role of foreigners in democratic life (Democracy and the Foreigner) (Honig, 2001). Her contributions continued with Emergency Politics (Honig, 2009), Antigone, Interrupted (Honig, 2013), Public Things (Honig, 2017), and A Feminist Theory of Refusal (Honig, 2021), among others, combining political philosophy with literature and media studies, and drawing on authors such as Sophocles, Charlotte Brontë, Toni Morrison, and Daphne du Maurier. Across these works, Honig has consistently engaged with canonical thinkers–including Arendt (1958/1998), Agamben (1999), and Cavarero (2005)–not by rehearsing orthodox readings but by transforming them into resources for democratic critique and renewal.

The interview followed the chronological trajectory of Honig's publications, while returning frequently to a central metaphor that emerged in the preparatory conversations: the image of the hinge. This metaphor captured the way her concept's function–opening and connecting theoretical domains, allowing for new alignments, and sustaining the possibility of movement. Terms such as emergence, paradox, performativity, and agonistic democracy were already part of political discourse, but Honig's work has redefined them in surprising and generative ways. The interview was thus conceived as both a retrospective and an invitation: to read Honig's thought not only as a record of past interventions, but as a living archive that continues to reconfigure the present.

Andrea Greppi (AG):

Let us begin with the publication of your first book on the displacement of politics. After the so-called 'death' of political philosophy in the 1950s and 60s, and its return or rehabilitation in the early 1970s, mainstream political thought in the 1980s and early 90s took a strong turn towards what you cleverly described as the 'virtuous' displacement of politics. You pursued the idea that political arrangements are always imperfect and, even if they are just enough, produce exclusions, injustices or inequalities. The aim was not to recover a lost tradition of political thinking –such as Arendt, Nietzsche, or Machiavelli– but to argue that even in times of triumphant democracy, there was much political philosophy to be done beyond the liberals/communitarians debate. That's why in the introduction of that book you mention, you make a list of unorthodox political thinkers in that time. Names such as Stuart Hampshire, Sheldon Wolin, Nancy Fraser, William Connolly, Stanley Cavell, Bernard Williams, Isaiah Berlin, or Derrida.

So, let me ask: 30 years later, how much is left of the once dominant consensualist mainstream? What remains of the agonist intuition in the present landscape of political theory? In the meantime, has a new canon of political philosophy emerged? Do we have something like a new pluralist mainstream in political philosophy?

Bonnie Honig (BH):

Let me begin by situating my response. At the time, I found myself resisting Rawlsianism just as it was becoming highly ascendant. I wonder whether Rawls is still considered central today–perhaps most of us are now «post-Rawlsian». Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, was enormously influential. It was important not only because of its substantive claims, but also because it demonstrated the possibility of once again articulating a «grand theory» in political philosophy.

For a period, when I was in college, most political theorists were engaged in smaller conceptual interventions. Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* is certainly significant but compared with *A Theory of Justice* it lacks the same systematic ambition. Rawls's book signalled that «grand theory» was once more possible.

Although I had serious criticisms of the project–for reasons I will explain–it was significant that political theory was permitted once more to think expansively, to take risks, and even to tolerate a degree of inconsistency in the service of vision. My problem was not that Rawls made glaring mistakes, but rather the opposite: his work was relentlessly rationalistic, increasingly aligned with what would later be called rational choice theory.

My own reaction was therefore one of resistance. I felt that there were other issues worth pursuing, yet in the United States at the time, there was little else on the agenda. Rawls dominated the field. That was not yet the case in Canada, where I studied as an undergraduate. Later, when I went to England, I discovered at Oxford that Rawlsianism was hegemonic; virtually all political philosophy was conducted in his terms.

When I returned to the United States for graduate school, I had to confront Rawls's limitations directly. He was not the explicit centre of every discussion, but he was the hidden driver behind much of the field. I read Kant because Rawls was a neo-Kantian; I read Sandel (1992) because he was then the most prominent critic. In that sense, my book can be seen as an attempt to create a battlefield and identify allies. The list of thinkers I highlighted was meant to show that, despite the ubiquity of Rawlsians–Rawls himself was a continuing presence at Harvard, where I taught at the time–there were others who resisted that rationalist orientation. It was a way of forging alliances. For those at the beginning of their careers, this may be instructive: originality is important, but standing entirely alone can make one appear eccentric, even unmoored.

I therefore sought to gather everyone who might, if given the chance, stand on the other side of the debate. Thinkers like Nancy Fraser, Cavell, Derrida, and Stuart Hampshire–diverse figures who shared little but an anti-rationalist impulse. It seemed important to mark that clearly.

So now, to your actual question: I wanted to provide some background on where it comes from. Since the 1990s, we have seen the rise of queer theory, the institutionalization of feminist theory in its various forms, and the emergence of Black studies. Saidiya Hartman's first book (1997) appeared in the mid-1990s, around the same time as Judith Butler's early work (1990) and Fraser's interventions (1990).

These developments did not merely move beyond the liberal–communitarian debate; they exposed its hegemonic character. As long as that debate defined the field, other perspectives could not enter the contestatory space. It therefore became important to use concepts strategically as a license to open room for opposition.

You asked whether that project succeeded. In some ways, yes. In others, the result has been a very dispersed field. My sense is that political theory today is highly fragmented. A few scholars read widely across areas, but most concentrate on specific domains: race, gender (sometimes together), class, neoliberalism, entrepreneurial subjectivity. These are not entirely disconnected, but they are pursued in relative isolation, and even different academic presses have come to be associated with particular subfields.

So rather than a hegemonic debate that everyone had to address–or else declare oneself «done with political theory» and turn to Foucault, which was not a bad option–the field has splintered. Think of Bill Connolly, who now works on environmental and ecological politics: a vital but rarely integrated area, though he himself attempts to connect it with other concerns.

There remains an agonistic space in which different currents can engage, but the fragmentation is less the result of theory than of institutional factors: the proliferation of journals and citational practices. It is simply impossible to read everything. That may have been difficult even in 1990, but then there were only three or four core journals in English. Today, there are hundreds. This explosion of venues, more than conceptual progress or regression, explains much of the dispersal we now witness.

Another important development was the incorporation of literature, film, and popular culture as legitimate objects of political theory. This had not been the case earlier. In my first book, for example, I made a passing reference to Madonna–mainly to signal that such references were possible–but I did not dare devote a chapter to her. Later, however, I felt free to write entire chapters on figures from music, literature, or film when they were relevant. The reason these cultural materials gained entry was that they offered new ways to address questions of race, power, and gender–dimensions less accessible within the established political theory canon, beyond the familiar task of pointing to exclusions. Yet that exercise soon became repetitive. By bringing in literary, cultural, and visual texts, political theory itself was politicised. Many of us writing in the 1990s experienced what was paradoxically a rather unpolitical climate in the discipline, given the frameworks then on offer.

Cristina Sánchez (CS):

Let us now turn to Hannah Arendt, who has been a constant driver in your work. Your *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (1995) already highlighted some of the central threads that run through your later writings. Why has Arendt been such a persistent source of inspiration, and how does this connect with your idea of «agonistic sorority», which emphasizes refusal and solidarity rather than identity?

BH: Thank you. While I often positioned myself against Rawls, I was approaching political theory from an Arendtian perspective. I became deeply engaged with Arendt studies because, at the time, the dominant interpretation of her work was a liberal one. Readers struggled with her claim that identity emerges through action. Many dismissed it as nonsensical–arguing that we first are who we are, and only then do we act. To me, this seemed a misreading, an imposition of assumptions foreign to her thought, and it compelled me to remain with her work.

I did not, however, know what the alternative reading should be until I encountered Nietzsche. My background was in political theory, but reading Nietzsche convinced me that the subject is produced through practices and through language.

This connected directly with the work I admired in Judith Butler and other queer theorists, who insisted that sexuality–and even the body itself–are constructed.

This offered an emancipatory way of thinking about sex, gender, and the body. At first sight, it seemed difficult to reconcile with Arendt, who could appear culturally conservative in these areas. Yet her reflections on language, identity, and political action resonated with what was being developed in lesbian and gay studies. It was exciting to read Arendt through a Nietzschean frame–she cited Nietzsche frequently, after all. For me, it was crucial to open the possibility that identity, long experienced as a kind of prison, could be remade through what Foucault would later call «practices of the self».

Arendt thus provides not only an account of transformation at the individual level, but also a way to describe politics itself as a transformative experience. Political actors do not simply express a pre-existing identity through action. They act on behalf of a polity because they envision a better version of it.

What I particularly valued in Arendt was her insistence that we never fully know what we are doing. This captured my own sense that, while we aim to push events toward justice or equality, we are never sovereign masters of our actions. We are finite beings, the world is contingent, and countless others act simultaneously in ways we cannot anticipate. Outcomes may be unexpectedly good–depending on fortuna and on how others receive our actions. This focus on transformation was decisive for me.

It took me a long time to grapple with the division often imposed on Arendt: on the one hand, the political theorist–supposedly anti-feminist–and on the other, the Jewish thinker. To me, this separation was a distortion. For years, there was a large industry around her Jewish writings that failed to connect them with her political theory. But they are not disconnected.

For Arendt, and for me, even Judaism is a performative cultural practice, reshaped by how people live and interpret it–whether in relation to the Old World or the New, to Zionism, or to domestic politics. These practices produce unexpected, sometimes even miraculous results.

Much of what I have written stems from difficulties I faced in articulating these tensions when I first encountered them. Treating «Arendt the political theorist» and «Arendt the Jewish thinker» as parallel but separate figures create problems. For example, some interpreted her notion of the miraculousness of action as a Christian idea–partly because she quotes Jesus. But she names him Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish identity. To think seriously with her about natality and innovation, one cannot set Judaism aside and treat only the political writings.

These complexities were invitations to remain with Arendt longer than with any other thinker. I was drawn to her notion of public happiness–rare in the canon–and troubled by the distortions of her reception. There was important work to be done.

Let me end with a word on «agonistic sorority». For centuries, democratic theory relied on the concept of «fraternity», and this went largely unquestioned. I chose «sorority» deliberately, inspired by what I read as a secret alliance in Sophocles' *Antigone* between Antigone and Ismene. They are usually cast as opponents, yet I found signs of collusion and cooperation. Naming this «sorority» challenged the default reliance on fraternity, insisting that all of us could be sisters. For some time now, my term has been «agonistic sorority».

Gonzalo Velasco (GV):

The next question–or rather, invitation to think together–concerns *Emergency Politics* and *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2017), which can be seen as your first systematic elaborations of the agonistic position. A decade had passed since *Displacement*, and the political landscape had shifted significantly, marked by the neo-Schmittian and populist revival that emerged in response to the crises of the early 21st century. At the time, much discussion revolved around the exception to the law, the opposition between force and law, and the very concept of emergency–analyzed by theorists with a mixture of fear and fascination. In some readings, the state of emergency was viewed as an opportunity to reform constitutional principles; at the same time, it posed a serious risk. Your books, particularly *Emergency Politics*, can be understood as part of a broader reaction to the limits of liberal democratic theory.

In Spain, the idea of agonistic democracy even shaped political practice: new parties emerged under a neo-Gramscian framework that had tangible effects in realpolitik. Yet many of those theorists now express regret. They argue that what once appeared as an emancipatory opening instead enabled conservative and even far-right forces, legitimizing new forms of exclusion through the very discourse of exception. Against that background, I would like to ask: how do you reflect on that historical moment and on the role of your books as a hinge between these shifts? Do you feel any regret about the «agonistic enthusiasm» of that period? Did your work already anticipate the risks of this turn? And were your books, in some sense, more resistant to the conservative reinterpretations that have affected the neo-Gramscian tradition?

BH: My books were absolutely not vulnerable to those misappropriations. *Emergency Politics* was written, I believe, precisely for this moment. Its purpose was to disenchant the affective appeal of emergency politics, to remind ordinary citizens that when the sovereign speaks, they are not compelled to obey. The authority of a dictator or autocratic leader depends on the active subscription of the people. Drawing on Rousseau's *Social Contract*, I argued that when the lawgiver appears and gives law, he depends on recognition by the people just as much as the people depend on him. This is not a relationship of equality, but it is necessarily dyadic, and it exposes a fundamental vulnerability in the position of the lawgiver: he cannot exercise power until he is acknowledged as such. What enchants his authority is precisely this act of recognition, which can take the form of a submissive attitude, though it need not always do so.

I turned to Franz Rosenzweig (2005) –admittedly a relatively obscure figure, even for me at first–because his work, written at the same time as Schmitt's early writings, seemed to open the possibility of a hidden dialogue between them. Both were aware of each other. The hinge of that dialogue was the notion of the miracle. Traditionally, the miracle is understood as an intervention from above: it interrupts the ordinary, manifests divine presence, and compels submission. This is precisely the sense Schmitt invokes when he equates the miracle with the sovereign decision: it ruptures the ordinary order and commands obedience.

Rosenzweig, however, offers a very different account. For him, the miracle is not a unilateral imposition but an event that solicits recognition. It requires acknowledgement by those who witness it in order to be complete. One might compare it to J. L. Austin's notion of the speech act (1975): an utterance carries force, but its efficacy depends on its uptake. This circularity, I suggested, provides a better framework for thinking about emergency. Thus, in *Emergency Politics*, I asked: if we want to theorize the «miracle» of sovereignty, why go to Schmitt? Why not to

Rosenzweig–who wrote in the same period, had comparable intellectual credentials, did not become a Nazi, and engaged seriously with questions of law, albeit not constitutional law? My aim was to place Rosenzweig on a larger stage, to juxtapose him with Schmitt, and to reframe the discussion of emergency away from «fear and fascination» toward an Arendtian emphasis on *emergence*: the coming-into-being of something new.

This is why I can say, only half in jest, that I do not feel responsible for the distortions of agonism. My work has always been explicitly oriented by Arendt's norms of plurality and equality. Agonism, as I understand it, is fundamentally committed to both. Of course, there are other forms of contestation that aim at domination, but those are not what democratic theorists mean by agonism. If we are not vigilant in guarding plurality–which, as Bill Connolly emphasizes, requires ongoing pluralization–then contestation collapses into fixed identities and risks sliding toward Schmittian logics. Equality and plurality are the safeguards of agonism, though even they are subject to contestation: What does plurality require? How much pluralization is enough? These are questions democratic theorists must continually revisit. But nothing in agonism itself licenses the authoritarian appropriations we have witnessed.

Let me end with a point I developed in an early article, *Care for the Agon*. There, I argued that agonism presupposes care. Drawing on Nietzsche's *Homer's Contest*, I noted that the Greeks understood the dangers of domination: if one competitor became too dominant, the agon itself would collapse. Their solution was ostracism. If someone repeatedly won every contest, they could be expelled–not for the sake of a rival, but for the sake of preserving the agon as a space of contestation. This practice exemplifies what I call the care of the agon: legislative and political measures that protect the field of contest itself. For democracy, the lesson is clear. If the agon is to survive, it requires not only struggle but also active protection against forces that would destroy it.

That, then, was the Greek solution to the problem of agonism's limitations. The agon itself contains no internal safeguard against domination, yet it carries within it a kind of drive to persist. Sustaining it, therefore, requires legislative and political care. One manifestation of such care was the practice of ostracism: not undertaken for the benefit of a particular competitor or faction, but for the sake of preserving the agon itself as a space of contestation.

GV: This is a very compelling response, and it also anticipates a possible objection. What I find particularly interesting is the way your work links the pluralism inherent in agonism to the idea that the state of emergency demands action–it requires agency. Too often, discussions of messianism in philosophy, or of the «event», reduce subjectivity to a passive stance, as if we were merely waiting for otherness to arrive.

By contrast, your work emphasizes that those on the margins must act: they are not simply positioned outside, but must engage in practices that shape their own legitimacy. This is evident in your recent *Feminist Theory of Refusal* (2021), where the Bacchae leave the city. Their legitimacy does not stem merely from exclusion; it arises from the work they do in constructing a narrative that justifies their return. I would like you to reflect on this demand placed upon those who refuse or step outside. Their position is not inherently privileged; they must actively engage in creating new fables, narratives, and frameworks. Could you elaborate on this? The alternative would be a purely negative position–perhaps exemplified in Melville's *Bartleby*, as read by Giorgio Agamben–where refusal remains static, with no corresponding work of transformation.

BH: Thank you. I wrote this book precisely to consider what refusal requires beyond the simple «no». In democratic theory, we are all adept at negation, but I wanted to ask whether that «no» –not whether it is politically sufficient, but conceptually– already contains an affirmative «yes». Where does the power to refuse come from? To explore this, I turned to Euripides' *Bacchae*, treating it as a motif and focusing on three scenes that illuminate the dynamics of refusal.

The first act of refusal occurs when the Bacchants ignore the king's command. They do not receive his order as intended, and they leave the city. What do they do then? Most readers overlook this, but the play notes that they abandon their infants at home, renouncing maternity. Outside the city, however, they nurse wild animals. To my mind, this acknowledges that renouncing maternity–at least for women of childbearing age in that society–was to renounce humanity itself. Within that cultural framework, not being tethered to children rendered one monstrous.

For a time, they live outside the city in a state of abundance. Not passive, but at peace: they eat, drink, and enjoy life. Eventually, however, they return. Why return if they lacked nothing? Not because they missed their children, as some interpretations suggest. Instead, upon returning, they say to the men they had abandoned: «We are back–let us feast!» The city was, unsurprisingly, not prepared to welcome them in this spirit. Their leader, Agave, the daughter of the former king and mother of the current one, plays a decisive role here. What matters, for my purposes, is that by demanding a feast, they symbolically reclaim the city.

They could not have made such a claim while still under the king's command. Only by leaving, by engaging in new practices and dis-identifying from old modes of subjectivity, could they reconstitute themselves. Importantly, they did this not through austerity but through plenty: they had enough, and they enjoyed life together in a kind of sorority. Of course, the play also depicts violence–when men, including the king, come to spy on them. Many readers are shocked that I work with a play in which the king is killed. But I always ask: are we shocked by the French Revolution?

Democracies, after all, are founded on regicide–sometimes literal, as in France, sometimes figurative, as in the Americas. They overthrow the old order and call the result fraternity. If we accept that legacy, then «sorority» cannot itself be the problem. The problem, rather, is the appearance of violence. To be clear, I do not endorse violence. But violence is often part of politics, and it should not be regarded as uniquely scandalous when women enact it in a fifth-century play, especially given how normalized it is when men do so in the texts that democratic theorists usually cite without hesitation.

This is why I resist framing the Bacchae's return in terms of «legitimation». In English political theory, that term carries specific connotations I do not embrace. What the Bacchants do is prepare themselves to take power. If they fail, it may be because their withdrawal lasted only a few days; to truly reconstitute subjectivity requires more than a brief sojourn in the countryside. But the lesson is that refusal has an arc: departure and return. The return, in turn, is an affirmation. This resonates with traditions of fugitivity in Black studies–not as a permanent resting place, but as a step toward reclaiming power. Democratic states hold immense power, and we should not be too pure to contest and claim it.

CS: I would like to return to the figure of *Antigone.* What is striking in your interpretation is that you highlight Ismene, Antigone's sister, and propose her as a figure of an ethics of care in contrast to Antigone's ethics of heroism and sacrifice. Ismene raises the question of who counts as a political agent. Here, we can connect this to Arendt's idea

of action as something extraordinary, but also as ordinary practices that allow new political subjects to emerge in the public sphere. In this sense, I would like to ask about the contemporary Ismenes. Who and where are the silent and less visible figures who might play the role of Antigone or Ismene today? Human rights activists? Could you suggest examples of invisible, collective action that constitutes a form of refusal grounded in sorority, as in Ismene's case?

BH: Let me begin with the play itself before turning to the present. In my book (2013), I tried to rethink the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. Earlier readings cast Antigone as the hero and Ismene as either the realist or the weak figure–always less «good» than Antigone. I immersed myself in classical scholarship and the Greek text–though with the help of classicists, as I do not read Greek myself–and I found support for another interpretation: that the sisters conspired together against Creon, feigning antagonism to confuse him.

There is a scene in which Creon, sentencing Antigone to death, declares that both sisters were involved. At that point Antigone lashes out at Ismene, who is taken aback and asks, «Why are you speaking to me like this? What have I done to you?» She even says she wants to die with her sister, but Antigone rejects her. Most interpreters have accepted this quarrel at face value, reinforcing a binary opposition between them–strong/weak, masculine/feminine, heroic/ordinary. But I argue that the play allows us to read their exchange as a performance staged for Creon, resulting in his decision to spare Ismene. This means that someone from the «tainted» family line survives to continue unsettling the royal order. For a long time, classicists seemed unable to imagine such a conspiracy between sisters, which I take as symptomatic of broader assumptions about the improbability of female agency and solidarity.

As for contemporary examples, it is not always easy to name them–especially from an American perspective–not because they do not exist, but because discretion is often essential. There are women quietly ensuring access to abortion pills in states where abortion is prohibited, or hosting women who must travel to receive medical care. These forms of solidarity and refusal are necessarily discreet.

In my book *Shellshocked* (2021), I wrote about the 2017 hearings for Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the U.S. Supreme Court. At that moment, migrant women who had survived sexual violence came forward, breaking the silence to protest and to insist that such experiences disqualified him from office. Their intervention exemplifies how those at the margins can turn refusal into political action.

Beyond the U.S., I think of feminist movements in Chile and Mexico. These activists publicly name sexual violence, denounce the complicity of police, and organize collective performances in the streets that both display and amplify their power. They embody the kind of sororal action I associate with Ismene: less visible than heroic sacrifice, but crucial in sustaining collective resistance.

AG: In the first decades of this century, we saw a reaction against the contractarian «man without qualities» and the communitarian self. The narrative dimension of subjectivity opened the way for political theory to engage with language and storytelling through the recovery of gendered, racialized, and subaltern voices. Attention then shifted to the affective dimension of experience, and more recently to the visual dimension of politics. Your writings are full of stories but also of images: Antigone interrupting and being interrupted, Penelope undoing the veil, your reflections on cinema in your book on Lars von Trier, or in *The Feminism of Refusal* on the power of fabulation–such as the difference it makes for Agave to see a lion or to see her son.

You have also pointed to the political power of visual interventions, for instance, the projection of the letters 'BLM' (*Black Lives Matter*) onto a statue. Today, the interest in the visual, ocular, and spectacular dimension of politics seems far removed from Debord's anxieties about the spectacle, and closer instead to Arendt's «space of appearance» or Nietzsche's sense of theatricality. Some have even suggested that we are witnessing an «aesthetic turn» in political theory. How do you view this?

BH: One point I would emphasize, also in relation to your earlier question on subaltern agency, is the importance of *action in concert* in an Arendtian sense. Antigone represents a kind of movement. While dissident action can sometimes be embodied by a single heroic individual, democratic theorists understand it primarily as collective action. In this regard, I found the projection of 'BLM' onto a Confederate statue after the murder of George Floyd to be a particularly brilliant act of visual politics. At a time when many such monuments were being removed, this one remained untouched. Had anyone used spray paint, they would have been arrested for defacing public property. Instead, activists projected light onto it, spelling 'BLM' and displaying images of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and other emancipatory figures.

This transformed the statue into a screen. The monument, which had long drained democratic energy by commemorating the wrong side of the Civil War, became a background surface for new images that claimed public space for a minoritized perspective. The ingenuity lay in turning a symbol of exclusion into a medium of contestation–without criminalizing the act. This intervention showed how visuality itself can animate public space and open it to democratic contestation.

More broadly, my own work has often been available for aesthetic theorization, though I have not usually described it that way. In my formative years, political theory was often defined in opposition to aesthetics, as if attending to aesthetics distracted from democratic theory. My response has been simply to integrate them, to insist that politics and aesthetics were never truly separate. That means I do not theorize aesthetics in the abstract, but I embed it within democratic thought.

Alongside visuality, I have recently been thinking about sound–the politics of the sonic rather than the visual. This comes partly from questions about democratic voice. Many of the examples I used earlier in my career were more vocal than visual, even if I did not always frame them that way. More recently, visuality has become central, especially because I often teach with film. When explaining Rousseau's idea of the lawgiver, for instance, students find it abstract until you show them a Clint Eastwood film: suddenly, the figure becomes intuitive. Film makes arguments graspable without excessive mediation.

At the same time, my more serious theoretical attention has turned to sound. The temptation is to think of sound as disembodied voice, but Adriana Cavarero reminds us that voice is always embodied, produced through breath and the body, inseparable from corporeality. Nothing escapes the body. For me, this is an essential lesson: politics is not only visual but also vocal and sonic, and democratic theory must take both dimensions seriously.

GV: I would like to turn briefly to *Public Things*, a book that has been highly influential and remains a valuable resource for understanding contemporary democracies. One might read it as an attempt to think about democracy without beginning from individual subjects. Typically, we frame democracy in terms of consciousness, reflection, deliberation, agon, and sometimes consensus. Yet in a moment when «the public» –if it still exists– is often imagined as non-violent but is in fact deeply polluted by forces we know well, perhaps the way to cultivate democratic subjectivity is by starting from

public things. These objects enable us to generate effects, shape subjectivity, and establish orientations or inclinations toward democratic life even before reflection or deliberation. In your work, drawing on authors such as Adriana Cavarero and Sara Ahmed, you connect these orientations to pre-reflective dispositions. Do you see democracy as necessarily grounded in such dispositions, rather than primarily in reflective, conscious frameworks?

BH: I hesitate with the term «pre-reflective» because it carries a Cartesian connotation of separating mind and body. My aim, in thinking with Cavarero (2005) and Ahmed (2006), is to resist that dualism. In their phenomenological register, thinking itself is embodied, inseparable from our sensory and bodily activities. That is the perspective I try to adopt.

In *Public Things,* I wanted to highlight what I saw as a missing piece in democratic theory. We have long debated who counts as «the people» –residents, citizens, neighbours affected across borders– and we have elaborated multiple models of representation, agenda-setting, and legislation. But what seemed absent was attention to objects. Why do we have public parks, public libraries, public monuments, or even the infrastructure of sewage systems? Democracies announce themselves through the creation and sharing of such objects, which not only represent but also structure democratic life.

This led me to think with Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), which draws attention to how we are magnetized by objects and the animacy of matter itself. Transposed into political theory, this perspective allows us to see objects as democratic matter, as part of the infrastructure that sustains shared life. It also invites us to reconsider orientations toward commonality and mutuality, against the ideological emphasis on self-interest, individuation, and autonomy. Voting, for instance, is not easily explained through self-interest: walking into a polling place, placing a ballot in a box, and engaging with the physical infrastructure of democracy situates us in relations with others.

In writing the book, I deliberately chose unattractive public things–such as sewage plants or prisons–so as not to make the argument too easy. Community gardens or parks are appealing examples, but democratic infrastructures are not always beautiful. My claim is not that existing prisons are necessary as they are, but that democratic life depends on infrastructures, and what those should be is itself a political question.

One of my favourite examples is Central Park in New York. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, it was built on land cleared of a Black community–an exclusion that resonates with current struggles over land and displacement. Olmsted insisted on using the most expensive Alhambra tiles for the tunnels, because he wanted democracy to manifest a kind of majesty. These tiles were not merely decorative: their patterns run through the entire material, so even after a century of wear the design endures. For me, this became a metaphor for democracy itself. Democratic life is walked upon, used, and abused, yet ideally its underlying pattern persists. This material metaphor captures the importance of «thingness» in rooting democracy in the world–not only as an idea, but as a durable, embodied practice.

Question from the audience: I am very interested in your reading of Arendt's conception of truth and its relation to Trump. It seems to me that one of the main problems in politics today concerns truth itself: how do we establish what truth is? I used to think of politics as oriented toward the future, but now we see powerful

movements that treat the truth of politics as something rooted in the past. Arendt wrote extensively about this. Do you think communities can establish truth collectively?

Second question from the audience: Earlier, you described the current situation of political theory as one of «dispersion». Could this not also be described as «fragmentation»? Dispersion might still allow for communication, while fragmentation implies a lack of connection between different strands of work. Do you see dispersion as something positive or negative?

BH: Let me answer both questions together, because they are related. When I speak of dispersion, I mean a form of pluralism in which different areas of political theory exist side by side but often without dialogue across their boundaries. This is preferable to a hegemonic focus on a single debate, but it also falls short of the kind of dialectical engagement that allows different perspectives to confront and enrich each other. So, I would not call it fragmentation, but dispersion does point to a difficulty in sustaining conversations across fields.

This connects directly to Arendt's reflections on truth. For her, plurality is not an obstacle but the very condition for truth. Against the philosophical problem of «other minds» –the idea that we cannot know what another person thinks–Arendt argued that plurality allows us to verify reality. Truth emerges when we compare perspectives. If I see something unusual in the sky and turn to you and ask, «Did you see what I saw?», your answer does not eliminate uncertainty, but it grounds my perception in a shared world. Plurality, then, is the political solution to the philosophical problem of scepticism.

Truth, however, also requires infrastructure: spaces and institutions where diverse perspectives can meet. It requires media willing to tell the truth, universities that preserve intellectual independence, political parties that function as genuine organizations rather than cults of loyalty. It requires what Arendt called the «space of appearance», where people are unafraid to speak their minds. Without such infrastructure, plurality collapses into manipulation.

This is why I resist the neoliberal tendency to place the burden of truth entirely on individual ethos–as if the duty were simply to «find the truth for yourself». We see this in the way people consume information online. Someone reads a claim on social media and shares it instantly, without checking for a second or third source. This habit undermines the very possibility of truth. Truth does not serve us automatically; we also serve it by maintaining the infrastructures that sustain it.

I do not believe the main problem in American politics is ignorance of truth. Powerful actors often know the truth perfectly well. When a lawyer trained at Yale claims that courts cannot check executive power, it is not because he does not know better–it is because sowing confusion serves his interests. This deliberate blurring of truth and falsehood is precisely what Arendt identified as a hallmark of totalitarianism.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Duke University Press.

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1958).

Austin, J. L. (1975). *How to do things with words* (2nd ed., J. O. Urmson & M. Sbisà, Eds.). Harvard University Press.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

Berlin, I. (1969). *Two concepts of liberty*. In I. Berlin, *Four essays on liberty* (pp. 118–172). Oxford University Press.
Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
Cavarero, A. (2005). *For more than one voice: Toward a philosophy of vocal expression* (P. Kottman, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text, 25/26*, 56–80. https://doi.org/10.2307/466240
Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. Oxford University Press.
Honig, B. (1993). *Political theory and the displacement of politics*. Cornell University Press.
Honig, B. (2001). *Democracy and the foreigner*. Princeton University Press.
Honig, B. (2009). *Emergency politics: Paradox, law, democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Honig, B. (1995). *Feminist interpretations of Hannah Arendt*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
Honig, B. (2013). *Antigone, interrupted*. Cambridge University Press.
Honig, B. (2017). *Public things: Democracy in disrepair*. Fordham University Press.
Honig, B. (2021). *A feminist theory of refusal*. Harvard University Press.
Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press.
Rosenzweig, F. (2005). *The star of redemption* (B. E. Galli, Trans.). University of Wisconsin Press. (Original work published 1921).
Sandel, M. J. (1998). *Liberalism and the limits of justice* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
Schmitt, C. (1985). *Political theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (G. Schwab, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1922).