

Honig, Bonnie. *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 197 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-14298-2, hardcover. \$26.95

### **The Rule to the Exception**

It is an accepted commonplace that the exception is more interesting than the rule. The normative is of little value, while the extraordinary captivates our theoretical and political imaginations. In the Preface to *Emergency Politics*, in a discussion of how to revitalize present-day political and democratic resources, Bonnie Honig refers to what she terms the necessity to “de-exceptionalize the exception” (xv). This phrase serves as an apt summary of her book. In it she contends with and displaces much of what passes as contemporary political theory, and its emphasis on what Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben have theorized as the state of exception—the state produced when a sovereign decides to suspend a formal law in the face of extraordinary circumstances. This state of exception, as Honig notes, has “captured the imagination of contemporary political theory” (87), and it is not difficult to see why. The exigencies of a political landscape in which, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, accused terrorists are exempted from the status of legal enemy combatants, new discretionary executive powers are called upon, and pre-emptive wars and torture are justified by the invoking of exceptional dangers, and extraordinary threats seem to demand exceptional responses and diagnoses. However, without sentimentalizing a currently lost normativity or eroded legalism, Honig seeks to “highlight the dependence of the so-called state of exception upon democratic energies and to mark its vulnerability to democratic action and resistance” (87). Her book offers a set of essays on a set of diverse yet important topics that offers a way of interrogating not just contemporary political theory’s reliance on Schmitt and Agamben’s account of the state of exception, but also political practices and their potential for what Honig describes as an agonistic understanding of politics.

The theoretical trope of the “state of exception” names in contemporary thinking both the ability of a unitary political sovereign to draw upon and institute emergency powers, and, closely allied with this, a performative articulation of state power that forecloses on democratic possibilities. Contemporary theorizations of this intrusion of state power into ordinary life, governed by the rule of law, re-inscribe for Honig this political closure, or rather this foreclosure of the possibility of an ongoing politics. By focus-

ing on the moment of decision whereby the rule of law is suspended and sovereign power imposes itself top-down upon citizens and non-citizens alike, state of exception theories elide the ongoing negotiation between sovereigns and citizens whereby the “operations of plural elements of that state of exception in ordinary democratic politics” (xvi) become apparent. Through this elision of the tensions and heterogeneous element operative within the state of exception, these theories evade the responsibility to identify and re-imagine democratic possibilities within emergency situations, and thereby cement “emergency’s closures” (xv) while also indirectly suggesting their own complicity with the unitary politics of the state of exception. In contrast, Honig wants to “make clear actually existing opportunities, invitations, and solicitations to democratic orientation, action, and renewal even in the context of emergency” (xv), and enable their conceptualization by contemporary political theory. Her remarks on Jacques Derrida’s explication of the French term for survival—*survivance*—makes it clear that she, like Derrida, is not interested solely in the survival of mere or bare life within the exceptional context of emergency, but in possibilities for “more life, surplus life” (10) as these are articulated daily within a democracy, no matter how contested and constrained. To make these possibilities available to thinking, it is necessary for Honig to think outside and across the boundaries of state of exception theories.

In her counter-narrative to theories of the state of exception, Honig emerges as a theorist of the ordinary, marshalling Ludwig Wittgenstein and Franz Rosenzweig, as well as a recast Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Hannah Arendt, to articulate her disagreement with state of exception theories. Her predilection for the ordinary is most centrally and forcefully articulated in relation to what she offers as the ongoing, everyday paradox of politics: good laws presuppose good men making and working with the law, yet good laws are required to make good men. Instead of taking this apparently vicious circle as pertaining only to originary moments—the founding of the state—, Honig posits it as a part of daily democratic life. Thereby she forces into view a picture of the state and the people as always interlinked in an ongoing process of becoming. In other words, the multitude—legal and illegal—is always passing into a people, or democratic actors, even as democracy is refigured as a form of politics “always in emergence in response to everyday emergencies of maintenance” (xvii). From this perspective, we might say of Honig (as she does of Arendt) that we “find a commitment to the inaugural, even ruptural or revolutionary political powers of daily



political practice" (xviii). We might say also that her work has the virtue of bringing to light the political role of the people even within a situation determined by the politics of emergency: there is, she writes, "no getting away from the need in a democracy for the people to decide" (23). Here in a single stroke, Honig at once associates the people with a certain kind of political potentiality, and restores a degree of accountability for the politics of the nation-state to the people—an attribution difficult, if not impossible, from within a framework in which power resides primarily or only with a unitary sovereign.

Honig's emphasis on politics as an ongoing activity finds clearest expression in the second and third chapters of her book. In Chapter 2, she is concerned with the emergence of new rights within a democracy, noting that this coming into being of new rights is frequently not something that occurs through the extension of *a priori* rights to new groups; this emergence is triggered by an agonistic politics that transforms the political and the social as, for her, the American civil rights struggle illustrates. In this chapter, she focuses on the right to suicide, animal rights and food politics. In relation to the latter, she shows how the "Slow Food" movement is altering via their argument for a "right to taste" our understanding of time in relation to rights and consumption. In Chapter 3, in many respects the central chapter of the book, she draws on the actions of U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis Post during the United States' first Red Scare. With her argument proceeding from Wittgenstein's claims that it is always possible to deviate from the expectations governing a rule's application, Honig shows how a new right—due process protections for aliens—came into being as a result of the unpredictable exercise of the discretionary power of a government agent to extend these rights to a group of immigrants suspected of terrorism. For state of exception theories, governmental decision-making is associated with the sovereign's decision to suspend the normal rule of law; Honig's discussion relocates the question of political decision-making from its exceptionalist context to that of the everyday struggles over governance and proceduralism that determine the administration of a liberal democracy. From this angle, an agonistic politics such as Honig's is not concerned with an exit from daily politics, its transcendence via socio-political movements, but with rendering government power "more responsive to the needs, rights, and views of the actually existing people" (82). It is also informed by the recognition that the U.S. is not only a rule-of-law state but also a bureaucratic one, frequently concerned as part of its regular, ongoing

business with administration, decision-making, and the implementation of laws, and that it is within this bureaucratic apparatus that democratic possibilities might emerge.

As her emphasis on politics as an ongoing activity intimates, Honig's argument with state of exception theories is at bottom a temporal one. Instead of focusing on points at which laws are suspended, or on paradoxes inherent in the founding moment of the nation-state, she seeks to position her discussion within a temporal narrative in which the constitution of the state and the people are processes that have not been granted closure. Within this temporal order, which she aligns with that of the everyday, decisions by administrators or sovereigns form part of the ongoing agonistic struggle over rights and power taking place between the people and rulers of a liberal democracy. Chapter 4 makes this clear. Questioning the political theology informing Schmitt's account of the state of exception, associated by him with the figure of a miraculous event produced by divine or quasi-divine power, Honig turns to Rosenzweig for a different conception of the event of the miracle. This extraordinary event, for Rosenzweig, is not the "imposition ... of top-down sovereign power" (108), as it is for Schmitt, but an invitation to "forms of life that orient people towards alien pasts and promising futures" (111). It is also then not an event productive of a static, immobile state of exception. That is to say, Rosenzweig's miracle, in contrast to Schmitt's, works within time and history, where it is received, re-enacted and transformed by the people, who themselves also constitute a miracle of sorts. Both interrogating distinctions between the exception and the ordinary, and opening up the closures of the state of exception to an open-ended temporality, Honig again draws attention here to both the ongoing and worldly characteristics of politics.

Honig's project risks drawing criticism for its insistence on the possibility of politics and political practices, especially of the agonistic sort, within the current global climate. If anything, state of exception theories have delegitimated the imagining of such possibilities by dividing up the political into spheres of sovereignty and bare life, and immobilizing these into a depiction of the present in which political possibilities are registered only by virtue of their absence. Yet, as Honig points out, the survival of a democracy depends on viewing states of emergency from "the perspective of a democracy's needs rather than those of emergency" (9). That is to say, she links the necessity to theorize openings within the closures of the state of exception and its theories to the possibility of cultivating a perspective



within which the needs of a democracy rather than a state of emergency become apparent. To do so, for her, is not to dismiss the existence of a state of exception, or of an emergency situation. It is to reconceptualize these within a narrative wherein it becomes clear that they are tragic in nature, and that what is at stake is how to engage with the existence of this tragedy. Emergencies, and the issues around survival they raise, tend towards legitimating any action for the sake of survival itself without concern over the long-term effects and ethics of these actions. However much this might be justified within the context of the state of emergency, Honig cautions that it needs to be supplemented with a tragic understanding of the situation in which the politics of emergency puts us. Bluntly, the tragic perspective she views as necessary demands the recognition that the best thing to do in tragic situations is “remaining around for the cleanup” (7), which is to say it demands reflection on how to live what has been done for the sake of survival—this question Honig claims rightly as being the paradigmatic question of the torturer and those who in one way or another allow torture to take place in the first instance. The working out of a response to a question like this can only take place in a time during which the relation between the state and its citizens is being negotiated and renegotiated. The question itself, however, cannot be posed from within a state of exception theoretical framework. It depends on a theorization of survival as also allowing for the possibilities of more life, a better life than is currently available to democracy and its citizens.

David Watson

Uppsala University

Charles H. Russell, ed. *Light on the Prairie: New Writings of Elise Wærenskjold*. Houston, Texas: Shining Brightly Books, 2010. 226 pages. ISBN 978-0-978-0-9800061-8-6. \$ 20.00 paper.

Two very different women have had a canonical status in the historiography of Norwegian immigration in the US: Elise Wærenskjold and Gro Svendsen. Letters by both are published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association (Wærenskjold in 1961 and Svendsen in 1950) and both have made frequent appearances in the work of immigration historians. There all similarity ends. Gro Svendsen was a farmer's wife from one of Norway's valleys and did not become a public figure until Theodore C. Blegen found