

Democracy's Necessary Conditions

The importance of public things to democratic life is not currently a central concern in political theory. The *res of res publica* is unmentioned by civic republicans today, and the attention of a great deal of political theory has been focused for a while now on a host of other necessary conditions of democratic life: just procedures, free and fair elections, mechanisms of deliberation, the constitution of the demos, the security of territorial boundaries, the ethics of immigration, legitimization crises, or the need to rethink democracy in transnational terms.¹ Most recently, Wendy Brown has called attention to the stealthy work of neoliberal rationality, which infects but does not *obviously* overturn such commitments to democratic norms, process, and procedure.² The shell of democracy remains, for the moment, says Brown, but inside the shell everything done in the everyday life of democratic citizens and subjects undermines democracy or “hollows” it out further.³ People are now trained to think of themselves as a resource to be invested in for future profits or earnings, not as subjects of integrity or, as Brown argues

and as I, too, would say, stewards of shared futures. Citizenship itself is undone by neoliberalism's unremitting calculations of instrumental worth and its incapacity to imagine a world-building project that is not entrepreneurial by nature.

Proceduralism and process are no defense against this. They are sadly compatible with it,⁴ or at least not incompatible with it, and so they yield easily to “benchmarks” and “best practices,” which may seem like mere verbiage but in fact promote an epistemic sea change that, Brown claims, leaves the fundaments of democratic life behind.

Thirty years ago, when Reaganism was rife, Michael Walzer, too, noticed the tendency of certain kinds of calculation to bleed into other domains of life to which they were ill suited. His response, in *Spheres of Justice*, was to propose that we think of justice in terms of spheres. In different spheres of life, justice consists in the application of different standards. Thus, justice requires that certain values, like efficiency, stay in their own sphere. Efficiency need not be a vice or a threat. It has its place. The problem comes when we mistakenly appeal to efficiency in other domains, where it is ill-suited, may be a source of corruption and is certainly not just. The conceptual boundaries that distinguish the different spheres should be strengthened, and the boundaries respected in practice, Walzer argued in the 1980s at the birth of what we now call neoliberalism, one of whose chief traits is arguably its imperviousness to such boundaries, and others, whether conceptual, territorial, or national. In 2015, Brown argues that the genie is well out of the bottle. Efficiency is no longer one value among others. It has become rationality itself, and it is the standard by which everything is assessed. It has infiltrated everything; it has no rivals. All spheres submit to its homogenizing powers.⁵

A similar argument was made by Hannah Arendt thirty years earlier still, in her 1958 text, *The Human Condition*, on which I focus in some detail in Lecture Two. Arendt highlights the invasion of the properly political sphere of Action by the temporalities and mentalities of two other registers of the *vitae activae*: Labor (which is all about reproduction and consumption, she says) and Work (which is all about production and product). Once Action is corrupted by these other modes of life, it loses its redemptive and powerful qualities. Arendt sees the rise of bureaucracy, mass society, and consumerism (not yet neoliberalism) as having precisely this impact. Her book charts

the decline of “the political” while retracing the lines of its proper circumscription. There is something tragic and belated about the book’s story: The horse has gone out of the barn, and there is no getting it back, it seems. Nonetheless, Arendt, like Walzer, writes in the hope that there may yet be a way. Some clarity in understanding and precision in analysis may yet inform our understandings and lead to change. Brown’s tone in her book is a bit more tragic still. The strongest notes are those of loss, not mobilization. In Walzer, too, there is a certain “resignation.” He acknowledges the fact that many of the spheres he delineates are subtended by traits he himself identifies as corruptions of the proper. This is a sad fact of practice that somehow does not have the power to undo the theory—but does, it seems to me, lessen the power of the theory.⁶

In the context of the work mentioned here by Arendt, Walzer, and Brown, in the context of sixty-plus years of charting the almost always already over-narrative of democracy’s (or of politics’) necessary conditions, it may seem belated and downright nostalgic (or, worse yet, self-delusional!) to suggest we think now about public things and their role in democratic political life. Or perhaps it is useful to think about public things now precisely because it is not quite too late to defend those we still have, to render them more fully accessible and egalitarian, and to generate or promote new ones if we can appreciate their constitutive necessity to democratic life and act in concert to secure them. Even political theorists currently focused on subjectivation may find promise in such “objectivation” because democracy, whatever its many other constitutive conditions, always involves inaugurating, maintaining, and contesting shared or public things, and responding to them when they call to us, as well.

New York’s Central Park was built in an awful swamp, but on it were lavished incredible skills, craftsmanship, design, and materials. This and, in particular, the use of Alhambra style tiles whose colors do not stop at the surface but run all the way through, stands as a great metaphor for public things whose powers run all the way through us. And this lavish care was no accident. As Joshua Cohen explains: “Olmsted had spent the 1850s working as a journalist, writing about slavery and aristocracy. He thought that the conflict between North and South in the United States was part of a global fight between democratic and aristocratic models of society. There’s an aristocratic criticism of democracy that goes all the way back to Plato, that when

you try to do things for everyone you end up with lowest common denominator crap. Olmsted saw building Central Park as a way of proving the aristocrats wrong. It was built by a democratic society for a democratic society—for the people—and was incredibly beautiful. His bet was that people would be drawn to it.⁷ And they have been. At their best, public things gather people together, materially and symbolically, and in relation to them diverse peoples may come to see and experience themselves—even if just momentarily—as a common in relation to a commons, a collected if not a collective, to redeploy Michael Oakeshott's distinction.⁸

My speculation about the power of public things is invited by the work of D. W. Winnicott, who is one of its inspirations. Rousseau—who understood the importance of joy and sharedness to the adhesiveness of national identity—is another: “It must be fun to be a Pole!” he says in his *Gouvernement of Poland*, as he lists the things—costume, ritual, food, dance, and so on—all specifically Polish things that may impart a unifying sense of “Polishness” to a people at risk of foreign occupation and the consequent loss of national selfhood. If I turn in these lectures to Winnicott rather than Rousseau it is because, for Rousseau, public things are like accessories to the human while, for Winnicott, things—transitional objects—are key to what makes us human. Rousseau surrounds the human with things that bestow identity. Winnicott, by contrast, sees humans as constituted in their liveliness by relations to things as such.

Winnicott makes the case in object-relations psychology for the centrality of objects to the developing infant’s capacity to relate to the world as an external reality. The baby, on Winnicott’s account, needs its transitional object (the blanket, a toy) to supply it with a kind of object-ivity, or realness. The baby learns about the existence of an external world when it destroys/disavows the object and the object survives. This is object permanence. The fantasy of infantile omnipotence gives way, in the face of the object’s permanence, to the reality of subjectivity, finitude, survival.⁹ The object thus *thwarts* the infant with its object-ivity, but that very same trait also *underwrites* the infant’s own developing subjectivity. The object’s capacity to thwart is the same as its capacity to support: Both are related to its permanence. The object’s survival of the baby’s destruction is how the baby learns it is safe and permissible to experience and express feelings of aggression, rage, even hatred. (In the amazing comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin frequently

throws his beloved toy tiger, Hobbes, off cliff tops or treetops, and the tiger always survives.¹⁰)

The object’s unitariness is also a resource for the developing infant who comes by way of object relations and object use to understand itself as a unit as well. For Winnicott, dispersion or fragmentation is always a psychological possibility and the therapeutic aim is to be (self-)collected, to collect oneself. “Pull yourself together,” we say to distraught people who are—we say—“coming apart at the seams” or “going to pieces.”¹¹ The baby has, in intrasubjective terms, to learn to act in concert. She learns about cohesion and unitariness from the object world, and ultimately she takes it on. Now, what if the same is true—analogously—for democratic citizens? That is, what if democratic forms of life depend partly upon objects to help collect diverse citizens into self-governing publics divested (like Winnicott’s maturing infants) of fantasies of omnipotence and invested with a sense of integrated subjectivity, responsibility, agency, and concern?

In political theory, where collectivity is the point of departure, we can see how collectivity, just like personality in Winnicott, postulates successful acts of collection and re-collection and that such self-collection occurs in relation to objects. Hence Winnicott’s initial term: object *relations*. In political theory, we might attend in particular to the power of *public* things to stimulate the object relations of democratic collectivity. As I noted in the introduction, those public things are the infrastructure of democratic life, and they underwrite the signs and symbols of democratic unity that, for the moment, still survive. The ubiquitous flag pins that even the American president must wear are underwritten by the public things of democracy: schools, prisons, water treatment plants, wars, transportation, and more.

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown comes close to commenting on this. She notes the undoing of the demos by way of privatization and by new habits of rational calculation that, she says, have taken the place of public things and civic mindedness. But her primary focus, notwithstanding her discussion of the demise of the public university, is on the educational goods the public university has the power to deliver and on the demos that needs to be educated, and not on the powers of the public thing as such. She charts the loss of the idea of a people united in deliberation and action to build a collective, democratic present and future. She faults neoliberalization, as a result of which markets are everywhere, market rationality governs everything,

and the basic terms of democratic life have been lost. Looking for ways out of the problem, Brown is drawn to Rousseau's paradox of polities in which, he says, a good people and good law or institutions presuppose and require each other.¹² In the period of founding, good law is required to found a people but good people are needed to found good law. How to break out of the impasse of the paradox? In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau imagines a ridiculous lawgiver who appears on the scene for long enough to get the social contract going by convening the people, setting the agenda, and giving good law. I will suggest here that the lawgiver's role may be played by public things.

- I have argued elsewhere that Rousseau's problem of beginning is not a one-time thing but a quandary that besets every day, as new members immigrate and are born into it, and established members are every day reimpressed (or not) into its norms anew, with varying degrees of success.¹³ If, on Rousseau's account, we need a miracle (Rousseau's lawgiver) to get started, then we need one every day, on mine.¹⁴ For Brown, though, we are further and further removed from such miracles now. Rousseau's paradox reasserts itself ever more powerfully under neoliberalism because of the evisceration of the public university system whose mission of civic education is undone not only by underfunding, which requires ever more fundraising from private sources (which drives the university's research and priorities according to values that may be dear to the donor but are often alien to the institution and far from any true democratic needs), but also by neoliberalism's cultivated hostility to anything that is not clearly instrumental, profitable, and practical from the perspective of late capitalism.
- Without the public university's commitments to liberal arts education, we are thrust back into the insoluble paradox, albeit now with no miracle in sight. Says Brown: "Hence, another variation on Rousseau's paradox: to preserve the kind of education that nourishes democratic culture and enables democratic rule, we require the knowledge that only a liberal arts education can provide. Thus democracy hollowed out by neoliberal rationality cannot be counted on to renew liberal arts education for a democratic citizenry."¹⁵
- Without the vision and aspirations nurtured by such education, we are, Brown laments, limited to mere "reform and resistance,"¹⁶ both of which, she thinks, do little or nothing to remediate the bleak conditions under which

democracy labors fitfully to survive today, a labor that, Brown intimates, has already been rendered nugatory.

Brown's analysis of the wholesale conquest of democratic life by neoliberal reason and, more importantly, of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*, is compelling and stark. This particular statement of it contains one of her explicit references to public things as such: "when there is only *homo oeconomicus*, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good. Here, the problem is not just that public goods are defunded and common ends are devalued by neoliberal reason although

this is so, but that citizenship itself loses its *political* valence and venue [sphercism again; italics in the original]. Valence: *homo oeconomicus* approaches everything as a market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purposes or common problems in a distinctly political way. Venue: Political life, and the state in particular, . . . are remade by neoliberal rationality [and] . . . the very idea of a people, a demos asserting its collective political sovereignty [is eliminated]."¹⁷

Is Brown's case so compelling because it is so obviously true? Perhaps better, we can say that her powerful writing makes what is true about it into something that suddenly seems inescapably obvious. We have seen public universities trade in faculty governance and accountability for private donors, market incentives, and industry benchmarks. We have seen those who once appreciated an institution's uniqueness turn, instead, to talk about its "branding." We have witnessed the craze for "massive open online courses" (MOOCs) as the next big thing, and the sight of universities as unabashed chasers of the next big thing, and we have heard the silence that followed the apparent collapse or normalization of the craze that was originally touted as foretelling the transformation of education into service delivery. Thus, when Toni Morrison charts the transition in her political lifetime from U.S. subjects being addressed as "citizens" to being addressed as "taxpayers," most of her readers will experience the jolt of recognition that underwrites Brown's theoretical arguments.¹⁸

But the power of the case may also be its limitation. The overtaking of the contemporary mind by neoliberal rationality is so powerful in Brown's account that it is difficult to understand where resistance could come from

and how a politics of alternative movements could take hold. That is precisely the problem Brown wants to chart. With her jeremiad, she seeks to awaken a public to the problem, but she risks becoming its captive.¹⁹ She mentions, in passing, some alternative movements, intimations of possible alternative politics, and this suggests that other things may also be afoot, but she does not give them any real weight, and it is hard to imagine them getting a grip on, much less interrupting, the incredible powers of the new episteme charted by her. These alternative political movements are always there, but, Brown says, they only surface episodically. When they do surface, they politicize what neoliberalism naturalizes or economizes and they do so, often, by way of objects. Inequality was politicized by Occupy, which began with the occupation of a hybrid public/private space, an act quickly followed by the installation of a public library. Our homogenized and industrialized agricultural system undoes food sovereignty and creates food and seed dependency for profit, as Brown notes in an important discussion of Monsanto's operations in Iraq, but this has been resisted too.

The Monsantoization of Iraqi agriculture is just one particularly egregious example of the worldwide industrialization of agriculture, which has been politicized by many activists, though Brown does not note that in detail here. Resistance generates alternative sovereignties gathered around the thingness of food. Slow Food and movements like Food Sovereignty Ireland are instructive examples of resistance to industrial monoculture.²⁰ Another is the indigenous people in Guatemala who recently won a victory against Monsanto's efforts to patent their seeds, which, because they tend to wander onto other people's farmlands, become like a colonizing force that secures the dictates of Monsanto well beyond the domains of the original buyers of Monsanto's products. In this case, courts, protests, and organizational pressure serve the cause of a sovereignty that Brown laments is lacking on the Left. As one observer says: To the "Mayan people that make up around half of the Guatemalan populous, ownership of the simple corn seed and the freedom to be able to cultivate their own crops mean so much more than simple food freedom."²¹ They mean food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty is not just about food; it is about worldviews, action in concert, and public things.²² Says Lolita Chavez of the Mayan People's Council: "Corn taught us Mayan people about community life and its diversity, because when one cultivates corn one realizes that there is a variety of crops

such as herbs and medical plants depending on the corn plant as well. We see that in this coexistence the corn is not selfish, the corn shows us how to resist and how to relate with the surrounding world." To say that the corn is not selfish, and that it gives us instruction, is to say that the corn—a public thing in this context—has agency.

Is the Mayans' activism a mere episode? An expression of a merely infrapolitical experience, as one critic of Latour suggests all such thing-oriented activism turn out to be?²³ Or might it be evidence of a kind of political action rarely reported in the headlines but nonetheless (or, if we follow James Scott, *therefore*) an important current rival to a momentarily dominant paradigm that claims, falsely, that such rivals have been long since left behind?²⁴ Food politics depend on their own public things. For example, seed banking is an institutionalized practice, thousands of years old, around which food sovereignty constellates, by which it is periodically (re)generated.²⁵

Brown mentions Occupy and other movements in Southern Europe, Turkey, Brazil, and Bulgaria, which "repossessed private as public space, occupied what is owned, and above all, rejected the figure of citizenship reduced to sacrificial human capital and neoliberal capitalism as a life-sustaining sacred power. [All] sought to reclaim the *political* voice hushed by those figures."²⁶ But none fully succeeded, she says.²⁷ (Occupy is still at work, however, and it has reset the political agenda. I am not sure how we can yet judge it a success or failure.) Though she notes the various uprisings of 2012 and 2013, Brown does not account for them. How are these neoliberalized subjects acquiring the wherewithal to protest? Why do they risk what they have been taught to think of as their precious human capital? Is it simply that their situation is so bad that they have nothing to lose? Is desperation, rather than the slim hope to which Brown will appeal at the end of her book, actually the source of action? Or do these actors in concert spy alternatives that energize them and give them hope? Not wholesale, perhaps, but piecemeal?

There are other examples to which we could turn for such inspiration. Most revolve around public things—building them, maintaining them, responding to their call. For example, sustainable farming communities, several in the Northeast but also throughout the United States, make real what others might only imagine, or may not be able to imagine.²⁸ What these farmers have done, many moving from cities to establish rural roots,

may look like withdrawal. But these are (also) experiments in living that vivify the imagination and help others to enact alternatives too. Living sustainably and communally on locally grown food, residents of Hardwick, Vermont, model what many elsewhere think is unimaginable. Some of those in the Hardwick area who began committed to building a local sustainable economy went on to become big businesses, it is true (Pete's Greens, for example, exports all around the country now); but the town's model shows the viability of an antigrowth commitment even today when many find irresistible the siren call of growth. The infrastructure of antigrowth—the storefronts, the community meeting places, the farm-to-table delivery systems, and so on—is a public thing.

Another example: the Unist'ot'en Camp's ongoing efforts to prevent oil and gas pipelines from being built on tribal lands in the vicinity of British Columbia, Canada. The pipelines were proposed by Trans Canada (the Pacific Trail Pipeline), which in October 2015 yielded to the tribe, and by Chevron, which, as of May 2016, continues to build in the direction of the camp. As the short film *Holding Their Ground* reports: "The Unist'ot'en never signed a treaty with the Canadian government so, by law, the government or private interests need permission to access their land."²⁰ This doesn't prevent representatives of Trans Canada's Pacific Trail Pipeline and Chevron from trying. Over and over again. Knowing that the Harper government's anti-terror law, C-51, passed in June 2015, "criminalizes interference with critical infrastructure," a tribe member, Freda Huson, turns the charge back against the Harper government and the corporations when she says, brilliantly: "They say they developed C-51 for the purpose of protecting Canada's critical infrastructure projects, and what we're doing here is we're protecting *our* critical infrastructure," by which she means the land, itself, and the medicine, berries, fish, and wildlife hunting it provides. When pipeline companies use helicopters to bypass the road checkpoints erected by the Unist'ot'en (an almost weekly occurrence in the summer of 2015), Huson and others jump in their trucks and hurry out to meet them. Asked who they are, the pipeline workers respond: "we're just from Coastal GasLink. We're doing noninvasive testing," as if that absolves them of trespass. But the tribal activists know how invasion begins. Huson says: "Noninvasive testing leads to permits. Permits lead to projects we do not approve of. It's gonna destroy our lands. And the company has already been told you don't have

permission to be here. So I'm going to ask you guys to leave," and that day they do.

In July 2015, Chevron representatives appeared at the camp and appealed to the activists' neoliberal rationality, to no avail: "We're here today to talk to you about doing work on your land and are requesting access onto your territory so that Wet'suwet'en people can work and to see benefits from the project. Will you allow access . . . us to access the territory here today?" The reply: "We've already said no to these projects. And that no pipelines will come on our territory and *irregardless if you've got other Wet'suwet'en members working for you* does not gain you access to our territory. . . . You're trying to convince us to give up our way of life so you can reap the benefits for government and investors and . . . while you're throwing crumbs to some of the partners that signed on. . . ."²¹ The Chevron representative tries again: "We brought you an offering. We've left some water and some tobacco."

With their choice of objects, the Chevron team evokes the history of white "gifts" to native peoples. The evocation is so explicit that it seems ironic; it is surely meant to provoke the tribe members into reactions that may serve as a pretext to override their rights. But the locals do not take the bait. They have been well trained and are impressively self-disciplined. Huson replies: "No thanks. We've got clean water right here [she points to the fresh water running right alongside them]. That's what we drink and that's [pointing to the "offering" of bottled water] pollution; that's the plastic that adds to the landfill. So you can take your water because we don't want it." This is resistance. But it is not mere resistance. It is resistance to neoliberal rationality on behalf of a vivid and cherished alternative steeped in history, committed to a different future, and vivified in the public things of tribal life: the land, the water, and the herbs, fish, and berries around them, around which their rituals are built. The sovereignty of the tribe and its relationship to public things are constitutively and inextricably intertwined.

Is this not just a clash of things, however? A pipeline versus a river? Gas versus land? As we shall see, Arendt does not allow thingness to be attributed to nature which she thinks is too vital, shapeless, and repetitive, to be thing-like. For her, the natural world lacks the property of object-permanence that makes the human world worldly and human. But, for these tribal activists, nature is not as shapeless and repetitive as Arendt assumes. For them, the natural world is imbued with meaning, myth, and the powers of nurturance,

and so it offers, too, the gifts of subject-formation that Winnicott will highlight as part of his object-relations theory. Thus, in the clash between pipeline and river, when both sides claim that what they are pursuing is a public thing (“critical infrastructure”), each is right. One public thing is extractivist and the other is sustainable, one recognizes no limits and the other is sensitive to limitation (hence the mention of landfills). But both *are* public things. Both *are* infrastructure. Pipelines, like the aforementioned sewers, swimming pools, schools, and prisons, create a solidarity against which democratic actors committed to environmental preservation may chafe.³¹ Other democratic actors may see them—indeed, have seen them!—as unifiers of a nation; this is one task of “critical infrastructure,” which was once, and for some still *is*, a nationalizing tool. Think of the national railroads for example: critical transportation infrastructures that were touted as unifiers of the nation in both Canada and the United States.

Pipelines do not just transfer oil or gas. They also underwrite a form of life and give it traction in a world of flux. That is to say, not all public things are “good” from every political angle. Nor can they be all bad, surely. At their best, in their public thingness, they may bring peoples together to act in concert. And even when they are divisive, they provide a basis around which to organize, contest, mobilize, defend, or reimagine various modes of collective being together in a democracy.

Any successful public thing presents us with this problem: the public things that constitute the demos exclude some and privilege others.³² In the United States, what is called “public” is sometimes white, sometimes black; it is rarely both. Public housing has one racial connotation, public pools, before they were desegregated, another. After public pools were racially integrated, *private* pools became popular among whites, and suburban houses increasingly came with swimming pools in their backyards. The public things of U.S. democracy have been part and parcel of a regime of white supremacy in which equal access to public things—accommodations, travel, parks, streets, wine trains, and more—are denied to people of color. In the context of white supremacy, public things have operated not to equalize people into citizenship but to communicate the terms of a differential citizenship and the frequently subordinating terms of governance and belonging.³³ Thus, when public things *are* democratized, the response of the powerful is often to abandon them. White flight is not just from the urban to the suburban;

it is from the public to the private thing.³⁴ Privatization and neoliberalization in the United States are part of a racial politics that economic and epistemic analyses sideline as merely coincident or irrelevant when they are likely co-constitutive and certainly coimplicated.

In a way, focusing on the objects rather than the subjects of democracy might help to highlight anew the inequalities of race and the operations of white supremacy in the U.S. context. Talk of the demos or the people distinguishes who is in and who is out but it often obscures unequal memberships. Talk of public things, however, immediately calls to mind which of the demos’ bodies are policed in public venues and which are assumed to belong there. American streets are open to free use by some citizens, but when frequented by others those same streets quickly turn into sites of surveillance or control. Hoodies in malls, homeless people in parks, ethnic minorities in the “wrong” neighborhoods, Muslims going to the mosque, black protesters sitting at whites-only lunch counters, black teenage girls swimming in a communal pool, dragged out because they are “too loud,” then tackled by grown men in police uniforms, dead bodies left lying in the road.³⁵

These incidents, familiar from decades of headlines and history, remind us how public things are asymmetrically policed, restricted, controlled, these days without the brazenness of “Whites Only” signs but often no less voluntarily or effectively. Everyone knows. That is why those excluded or marginalized, and their allies, demand access to them—because that access looks like citizenship; and it is. But all too often, as soon as access is won, the value of the public thing or, more accurately, its desirability among whites, goes down. This is a reason to struggle more mightily for public things, not a reason to give up on them. It is a reason to invest our best in them, as was done with New York’s Central Park, something everyone wants to be part of. Democratic sovereignty is an effect, I want to say; public things are its condition, necessary if not sufficient. They are the basis of democratic flourishing, prods to action in concert.

Perhaps Brown’s idea that the Left lacks any interest in sovereignty is related to the fact that she does not thematize, in their thingness, the public things that do provide some political actors with orientation and cause. Indeed, the actual existence of movements like the Unist’ot’en Camp’s and other lived alternatives undoes a bit the nearly totalizing picture painted by Brown, and in particular her book’s claims that *homo economicus* has won,

or virtually won. What renders such activist movements unreal by contrast with the supposedly harder, more real realities (often self-proclaimed) of economization?³⁶ Is it that these movements are good only at reaction, as Brown says, but not at action?³⁷ Is it that they lack “faith in the powers of knowledge, reason, and will for the deliberate making and tending of our common existence”³⁸ Is it that they represent the mere ‘reform and resistance’ whose inadequacies plague a Left dispossessed, Brown says, of any visionary and effective programs and institutions? But maybe “the Left” is the wrong place to look. Recalling no one if not Tocqueville, Brown takes note of the power but also the limits of Occupy and its proclaimed constituency of the 99 percent—which “was not founded on associations of workers, students, consumers, welfare clients, or debtors. Rather, Occupy in fall 2011 was a public coalescing of uprising of solidarities dismantled and citizenries fragmented and dispersed by neoliberal rationality.”³⁹ The old infrastructures of political membership are lacking. They will need to be built. But by whom? And how? The commitments that once informed them have lost out to managerial calculation, Brown says.⁴⁰ In place of such calculation, nothing less than sovereignty will do. But the Left seems to lack the appetite or the vision for that.

Acknowledging liberal democracies’ implication in “imperial and colonial premises,” as well as their many exploitative cruelties and injustices, Brown notes nonetheless that the same liberal democratic form “has also carried—or monopolized, depending on your view—the language and promise of inclusive and shared political equality, freedom, and popular sovereignty.” She seems to want to reclaim that, and rightly so: “*What happens to the aspiration for popular sovereignty when the demos is discursively disintegrated?* How do subjects reduced to human capital reach for or even wish for popular power? What do radical aspiration for democracy, for humans crafting and controlling their fates together, draw upon . . . ?”⁴¹ But Brown’s claim that we have lost the desire or “aspiration” for sovereignty is resonant in some contexts, less so in others: tribal activists exercise sovereignty in northern British Columbia, Guatemala, and elsewhere. Similarly, the proponents of “food sovereignty,” which Brown does mention in the context of her riveting critique of the operations of Monsanto, might have complicated her picture had she considered it in more detail a hundred pages earlier in the book in the context of this lost liberal democratic quest for sovereignty.⁴² Sovereignty

seems to be not so much lost as dispersed and relocated, growing like a weed in places where it has not been planted before (food sovereignty) or not permitted to grow for a long time (tribal sovereignty). Neoliberalism may “wholly” abandon “the project of individual or collective mastery of existence,” deferring instead to markets, but there are other instances of action in concert on the ground, some of them practicing precisely what Brown describes as lost: “collaborative and contestatory human decision making, control over the conditions of existence, planning for the future [and the] deliberate construction of existence through democratic discussion, law, policy.”⁴³ These alternatives are not currently in possession of state institutions and they lack the centralized and accountable power that may be necessary to meet some of our most pressing challenges. But they exist, they understand the predicaments of the moment, and they do not recoil from sovereignty, they seek it on behalf of and in relation to public things that point them to a past and a future.

Brown thinks the takeover of *homo economicus* is complete. Or almost complete; she enters an important caveat: “Alertness to neoliberalism’s inconstancy and plasticity cautions against identifying its current iteration as its essential and global truth and against making the story I am telling a teleological one, a dark chapter in a steady march toward end times.”⁴⁴ But the energy of the book is devoted to tracking the power of neoliberalism, not its limitations. And indeed much of the evidence supports Brown’s claim: universities occupied by best practices and benchmarks, the new admin-speak (metrics! learning outcomes!) that evidences many administrators’ remove from the spirit of the institutions they are charged with caretaking (though it is only fair to note that these mechanisms began as efforts to exact democratic accountability for schools that failed their students); the Monsantoization of agriculture, which homogenizes and patents food production, obliterating the diversity that is the key to sustainability and local autonomy, and spreading carcinogenic pesticides in its wake. Monsanto’s latest seeds are touted as Roundup resistant; this allows the free use of pesticides to kill everything *but* the plant. There is no Roundup resistance for humans, though, nor for the earth and water.

If, as Brown thinks, again with good reason, we have *only homo economicus* to guide us, then we will never work our way out of this mess. And if that is all we have and have become, then singing the praises of public things may

seem a paltry response. But Brown herself insists the work is still possible. She says the Left must work to “counter this civilizational despair.” The task may be virtually impossible and yet it must be taken on. It is only “this work [that] could afford the slightest hope for a just, sustainable, and habitable future.”⁴⁵ For me, *public things* are necessary to do this work. They have the power to loosen the grip of Rousseau’s paradox of politics, which trains our attention on the people, who are never fully who they need to be in order for democracy to thrive. The focus on the people as such may be precisely the problem, theoretically speaking. It may just pull us back into the orbit of Rousseau’s paradox. When we think from the angle of public things, we are switched to questions of orientation and receptivity, from subjectivity to object-ivity, from identity to infrastructure, from membership to worldliness. From a public things perspective, we are more moved first to ask not “who are we?” but “what needs our care and concern?” We are moved out of the realm of infinite cycle (Rousseau’s paradox) and into the realm of the more finite and futile, which is the realm of things and the gift (and curse!) of object permanence. Really, more precisely, we are moved into the domain of relations between these two: object *relations*.

Thus, those who want to do the work that “could afford the slightest hope for a just, sustainable, and habitable future” would do well to devote some of their attention to the defense of existing public things, to make them deliver more fully on their promise of true publicness, and to building new ones. For me, public things are like Rousseau’s lawgiver who arrives on the scene and finds no *homo politicus* at all. Like that lawgiver, public things, too, have the power to (re)enchant, to interpellate us as a (n often fractious) public in relation to their public thingness and, thus, to break the grip of a seemingly intractable paradox so we can rework it, rather than think we have to escape it, knowing we can only fail in the latter effort since the paradox is inescapable. This way of thinking about public things is different from (though indebted to) the varieties of vitalism and thing theory that attribute agency to things and decenter the human. Here the human remains the focus, but things have agency enough to thwart or support human plans or ambitions, and we do well to acknowledge their power and, when appropriate, to allow that power to work on us or work to lessen or augment it.⁴⁶

If Brown does not look to public things for their possibly miraculous agency in this context, it may be because she is wary of thing theory’s cele-

bratory redistribution of agency to objects at a moment when she thinks humans are lamentably and increasingly deprived of it. This is implied, I think, by Brown’s quick dismissal of recent work in posthumanism more generally: “contemporary prescriptive posthumanism expresses the historical conjuncture [of neoliberal reason] and colludes with it.”⁴⁷ Also, the implication of her reference to Rousseau’s paradox of politics is that even if things could issue a call, their call cannot be audible because we are no longer (or not yet) the people we need to be in order to hear it. But sometimes the call breaks through; it starts something where there seems to be nothing.⁴⁸

Or, as in the case of the Unist’ot’en activists, it continues something that was almost crushed but rises up again. Those activists tune into and respond to the berries, the herbs, the salmon, the land, and the rushing waters. Their public things call to them and they respond with sovereignty. The same goes for the Mayans who learn about life from corn and respond to Monsanto with their own brand of sovereignty. It may be that, as with Winnicott’s infants and their transitional objects, we depend on public things and they depend on us. And this may mean that Rousseau’s paradox, or something like it, is inescapable and irresolvable. But this does not mean we are necessarily defeated by it; there are ways for democratic activists to work within the paradox, to be energized by it.⁴⁹ The improbability of the situation leads Arendt to refer to action as a miracle. She also imagines the call that inaugurates action as a kind of speech act. But the call may come from the object world as well.

Take, for example, public telephones.⁵⁰ After Hurricane Sandy, pay phones, normally treated as part of New York City’s ruined landscape, emerged suddenly to become communications lifesavers, relics with an afterlife. As Ben Cohen noted in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Natural disasters tend to vindicate the pay phone,” which is “mounted high and sometimes behind glass stalls [and so] generally remains serviceable during power outages, even amid flooding.” Cohen goes on in his article to focus on the only problem would-be users of public telephones faced after Sandy (coin overload), missing the irony of a situation in which the immediate problem is seen as being too much money (coin overload) rather than too little (too little money provided to maintain public things).⁵¹ As a result, the real story—the democratic story of public things—is only intimated but left untold. The real importance of

so-called pay phones is that they are, as indeed they were once called, *public* phones, situated on the streets and available to everyone.⁵²

Dealing with the effects of flooding, a blackout, and downed cell towers, stormstruck residents of New York City eager to get in touch with friends and loved ones rediscovered the public telephones they had been blithely passing by for years. Said one new user of the old technology quoted by Cohen: “it’s funny what’s hiding in plain sight . . . it’s invisible, but when you need it, it’s there.”⁵³ Was she just talking about the phones? What is funny, invisible, but hiding in plain sight is the very idea of public things, things that conjoin people. Shared among users from all kinds of backgrounds, classes, and social locations, the public thing calls out to us, interpellating us as a public. It is all too funny that, in this particular case, the public thing that is calling out to people is in fact a telephone. Will we answer its ring? Many did so, in the aftermath of Sandy, coming together to share the phones, taking messages for strangers, offering change. But with the passing of the emergency, the sound of the public phone became less and less audible.

We might see the quaintness of the old fashioned phones as a synecdoche for the quaintness, in our mostly neoliberal context, of publicity itself. I imagine that is how it would look to Brown, and it does so to me, too, a lot of the time. But the public phone harbors another possibility, as well. We could say that the emergency of the storm brought out a kind of craving for the public thing, the thing that hides in plain sight, but when you need it, it’s there. This is different from the mass consumerist need to all be in love with the same private object—the newest iPhone, say—and to have one, of which there are millions. When people own objects privately, they experience the objects’ personal and perhaps fetishistic magic (otherwise why would we bother owning anything?) but privately owned objects lack the political magic that is my focus in these lectures. That is why Arendt says about such things that “this enlargement of the private, the enchantment, as it were, of a whole people, does not make it public . . . for while the public realm may be great, it cannot be charming precisely because it is unable to harbor the irrelevant.”⁵⁴ Thus, it is not exactly that objects lose their thingness in neoliberalism (they may or may not); the concern here is that they lose their *political* thingness. That political thingness is as precious and necessary for the body politic as is the personal magic of the transitional object for the individual in Winnicott’s object-relations theory. It is not that the object

exerts a personal magic on all of us in common, but that all of us in common get our very sense of commonness from the object. We may think this happens in relation to objects like the iPhone, and it may; we cannot rule that out. But the consumer need for such commodities—the fetish—is more like the ruin, the remnant, of the democratic desire to constellate affectively around shared objects, public things. The ruin testifies to a not quite lost past; might it also bode a possible future?

Sometimes the ruin speaks. The desire for a democracy of public things has been in recent decades rechanneled into commercial formats, but it is not extinguished. The signs are there: The desire remains, the aspiration is alive, but they require redirection and sustenance.

In the aftermath of Sandy, there were demands for better cell phone towers to secure coverage in emergencies. But no one called for better support for the public telephones that served the public so ably this time. Why not? This response (the response of Brown’s *bono economicus*, undoubtedly) is rather like the decision to build more roads for cars a century ago, in place of investing in public transportation. But the ruin calls for a different response. Why not commit instead to preserve the pay phones in appreciation of the fact that the ones in New York City, that most palimpsest-like of all cities, seem miraculously to work? (But not only miraculously, or at least not miraculously in the usual sense: Someone has been tending to them, maintaining the critical communications infrastructure of the city undeterred by the fact that most city residents have withdrawn from it, preferring their own private communications devices, until they fail.⁵⁵) Why not turn pay phones from relics of a lost past into the stable new infrastructure of a possible new future of public things?⁵⁶ True, in such a scenario public phones may become mere emergency phones, which would be ironic since “emergency” has fast become the only public thing left to us. On the other hand, though, as long as we have *a* public thing, the space is arguably open for the return of other public things. In the ruins of public things, the return of public things remains imaginable and realizable. Almost.

Public phones hide in plain sight, but when we need them they are there. (This is how Winnicott characterizes the “good enough mother”—invisible, but when you need her, she’s there.) We just need to answer their call. And if we do not answer, they may not be there for us the next time. For Brown, presumably, the loss of public things is part and parcel of the loss

I—as a moral agent of integrity—am constitutionally at odds, I am not necessarily morally bound to devote myself to opposing them, politically, but I may be morally bound to refuse to be a vehicle through which such ends are pursued. There is a difference, however, between Williams’s “not through me” and the neoliberal practice of opting out, and we may put it like this: Opting out postulates a kind of membership in the public thing that is rooted in buy-in. Buy-in is a very different relationship to public things than the constitutive, enchanted affiliation and desire explored here. Buy-in postulates something more like a prior purchase that can be returned when we decide we don’t want it after all.⁶² There are other differences as well.

Brown ends her book with a kind of appeal to something like what Jontathan Lear calls “radical hope” (though Brown’s is a “slight” hope) or to Hanna Pitkin’s “just do it.”⁵⁸ For Lear, radical hope springs from the very abyss in which despair might take root. Such hope is unaccountable and it presses us to act without knowing what the future may bring, without a plan, without a program: blind. Brown recalls Lear when she closes her book worried about despair (*désespoir*: hopelessness). But Lear, unaware perhaps, offers us something other than radical hope. He does not single it out for attention but in his portrait of the Crow chief Plenty Coups, whom he admires for his capacity to act hopefully in the context of catastrophe, Lear reports Plenty Coups’ profound dedication to establishing new public things for a tribe whose old ones had been destroyed. Lear’s Plenty Coups, like a Rousseauian lawgiver, understood the power of public things and was committed to providing them for his people who had somehow survived world-ending white conquest and had to face the impossible task of rebuilding their world.

Having noted public things’ occlusion of past injustices, thefts, injuries, and their ongoing harms, we must note another problem too: insofar as they conjoin us, public things may also implicate us in causes and actions in which we would rather not be implicated, for political or moral reasons. In the context of neoliberalism, we hear about “opting out.”⁵⁹ A clerk working in a Kentucky public office that grants marriage licenses refuses to serve gay couples after the Supreme Court prohibits such discrimination.⁶⁰ Hobby Lobby and others have sought exemption from participation in the new U.S. national healthcare system, since they object to being a vehicle through which birth control is delivered to women.⁶¹ We have seen in recent years many such efforts to opt out of part or all of the public thing (which is then renamed in a way that marks it as a partial, not public, thing: “Obamacare,” “gay marriage”). Those opting out invoke reasons that sound quite like Bernard Williams’s well-known motto for integrity over compliance: “Not through me.” What Williams means is that when a society pursues ends with which

I—as a moral agent of integrity—am constitutionally at odds, I am not necessarily morally bound to devote myself to opposing them, politically, but I may be morally bound to refuse to be a vehicle through which such ends are pursued. There is a difference, however, between Williams’s “not through me” and the neoliberal practice of opting out, and we may put it like this: Opting out postulates a kind of membership in the public thing that is rooted in buy-in. Buy-in is a very different relationship to public things than the constitutive, enchanted affiliation and desire explored here. Buy-in postulates something more like a prior purchase that can be returned when we decide we don’t want it after all.⁶² There are other differences as well.

Williams nearly anticipates the case of the Kentucky clerk when he imagines the example of a pacifist chemist, George, who has to decide whether or not to take a badly needed job in a chemical weapons factory. Williams argues that even a badly needed job is not reason enough for moral subjects to put their integrity at risk, which is surely what happens when we go daily to work in a place whose mission is deeply at odds with our fundamental moral commitments. Notably, here, “opting out” consists in *refusing* the job, not in performing the job in some sabotaging way (an option considered by George, but ultimately dismissed by him in Williams’s telling). This is quite different from the Kentucky case where the officeholder holds on to the job that requires performance of an act she says she considers morally repugnant. Perhaps the job is badly needed. But perhaps, given her celebrity-seeking behavior during and after the initial controversy, the clerk held onto the job precisely in order to refuse to serve an already beleaguered minority, even though (or, more likely, because) such service is now legally required. Perhaps she chose a *political* alternative, not moral cleanliness but political sabotage, the very alternative that Williams’s George dismisses as unlikely to add up to anything and likely to undermine his own integrity.⁶³ Either way, this is not an instance of Bernard Williams’s considered “not through me.” The Kentucky clerk here opts out but declines to give up the job that puts her in this compromised (from her point of view) situation. True, the chemist has to decide whether or not to take the job, while the clerk has the job and would have to decide to give it up when its obligations change due to a Court decision. So there is some difference there insofar as inertia protects the moral integrity of the chemist but betrays that of the clerk. But inertia is not a factor in Williams’s account, nor should it be. It may be a

part of the story but it is not a reason. From Williams's perspective, the clerk ought to leave the job but, instead, she refuses to leave the job while refusing to do the job as is now required. We could see this as civil disobedience, or as a politics of conscience, as she and her supporters certainly want us to, but such cases of conscience and disobedience are usually about responsibilities that cannot be avoided or evaded, such as serving in the military when there is a military draft. In such cases, the subject of integrity *cannot* simply refuse the job; s/he is forced into criminality by such a choice or into exceptionality, if there is allowance for conscientious objection. Still, such refusal is clearly what Williams would prefer over the daily erosion of moral agency and the destruction of self that are bound to result from immersion and implication in ends we judge morally repugnant.

There is something to stay with here, however. There is much to criticize in the Kentucky clerk case and in the case of Williams's imagined pacifist chemist. But both examples usefully press on us acknowledgment of the fact that public things involve us in matters not of our own choosing. This is a fact in their favor, insofar as this trait works to weaken the Rousseauian paradox of politics. But it is also a problem, of course, insofar as their claimed universality is never truly so (hence the move in the last twenty years by Nancy Fraser and others to talk about "multiple publics"), and insofar as they may not only enchant us into equality but also implicate and enlist us in policies and actions we abhor. The Winnicottian holding environment, we may note, is a place where we are, as he puts it, "handled" and "held." In political life, we are handled into crimes and held alongside injustices, and we should object to that. Conscientious objection is one safety valve for such situations, a limitation on the expectation of subscription, an allowance for principled, costly disavowal or disidentification.⁶⁴ But the conscientious objector and the opt-out are importantly different. The objector, with her objection, claims membership in the public thing, but the opt-out can opt out because her relationship to the public thing is transactional, perpetually subject to (re)evaluation.⁶⁵

In the remaining two lectures I will be looking at the constitutive powers of public things and how we relate to them in democratic settings. In Lecture Two, I argue that Arendt herself can be read as a kind of object-relations theorist, given that she granted to object permanence the important capacity to stabilize a world fit for human inhabitation. The argument

develops out of a new reading of *The Human Condition* in which the Work section of the book—the relatively neglected part of the book that details, among other things, the functions and powers of things—is key. Read with Winnicott, Arendt emerges as a thinker keenly committed to the power of thingness to stabilize the flux of nature and the contingency of action. Things, on her account, gift us with permanence. But the relations she thinks are most fundamental are human ones, and when she turns to focus on those in the Action section of her book, objects drop out of view. Winnicott helps generate an appreciation for the important place of things in Arendt's work but he also introduces a supplement: a kind of thing-agency that goes beyond Arendt's account. He knows we are born into a world of things, from which we learn and to which we respond, and he does not underrate their power to mediate and enable relations among persons.

It is notable that Arendt and Winnicott both developed their ideas about object permanence in the context of World War II. Winnicott worked with children orphaned or separated from their families by the London bombings. Arendt was, herself, a war-tossed Jew who saw firsthand how people who were denationalized, deprived of their civic belonging, were also deprived of the belongings that betokened their humanity. For her, as we shall see, things have the power to humanize. These are points made, as is well known, in her study of the conditions and conduct of European anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. My claim is that they may well inform what many have until now taken to be her merely phenomenological account of Work in *The Human Condition*.

In Lecture Three, I turn from the catastrophe of war that is in the background of these particular works by Arendt and Winnicott to the world-ending catastrophes that are in the foreground of Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope* and Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*. Both Lear and von Trier explore the repertoires of resilience on which people draw when facing world-ending calamities. We may read their work as parables of climate catastrophe, perhaps, or of the end of capitalism, or even of the world-endingness of capitalism. If both explore or imagine the experience of world-ending, is that, perhaps, for reasons suggested by Fredric Jameson's observation in *The Seeds of Time*: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thorough-going deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations"?⁶⁶

This connection between capitalism and catastrophe is thematized in von Trier's *Melancholia*, as we shall see, but what is important is that the film depicts resignation but does not traffic in it. Many viewers reported a sense of euphoria after seeing the film and certainly both von Trier and Lear seek to strengthen our imaginations. From both, we may also learn about the importance to us now of a democracy of public things, though von Trier, I will argue, goes further than Lear to underline the necessary conditions of action *in concert*, which include not just hope but also play.

Perhaps not coincidentally, both also feature adolescents faced with dilemmas of maturation and progress in a world that is inhospitable to their needs. Thwarted adolescence was one of Winnicott's own areas of interests, as it happens. He saw the thwarting as a sign of popular discomfort with the emerging autonomy and power of young people, and he worried about how, in the United States, where postwar culture demanded that youth be compliant rather than autonomous, adolescent transgression was too quickly criminalized. Winnicott did not address the racial and class makeup of these asymmetries in the United States but demands for conformity and compliance have always been asymmetrically enforced in the United States. Some adolescents are allowed their waywardness, and others are criminalized in anticipation of their perceived likelihood to become wayward lawbreakers one day soon. From some, compliance is expected. From others, autonomy is assumed. Some are seen as criminals in the making, others as youth sowing wild oats.

If public things have a certain Winnicottian magic, it is not that they can magically heal such social divisions or blind us to racial hierarchies. It is that they furnish a world in which we encounter others, share the experience of being part of something that is larger than ourselves, and work with others, acting in concert, to share it, to democratize access to it, to better it, to de-segregate it, to maintain it. A politics of public things is committed to the daily practice of preserving, augmenting, and contesting the qualities that make public things both "public" and "things." Public things are things around which we constellate, and by which we are divided and interpellated into agonistic democratic citizenship. They are not innocent or pure. They are political.

Care and Concern: Arendt with Winnicott

I turn now to look at "things" in Hannah Arendt's work, in connection with D. W. Winnicott's object relations discussed in Lecture One and now, in more detail, here. My aim in this lecture is to generate a lexicon for a political theory of public things that we can then use in Lecture Three. Reading Arendt with Winnicott here, in Lecture Two, I argue that there is a case to be made for seeing Arendt as a kind of object-relations theorist whose concepts, along with Winnicott's, call attention to the centrality of public things to democratic forms of life. Winnicott is interested in the psychological development of the individual and Arendt in political action in concert, but his concepts are useful to thinking about collectivities and public things, and not necessarily in developmental terms. Moreover, when Arendt explores categories of experience and sensation (privacy, needs, pain), her claims seem idiosyncratic and often confound her readers: Winnicott's psychoanalytic perspective helps make sense of them. Arendt does not join Winnicott in thinking of objects or things in relation to fantasy, nor does she explicitly