

# Collective Actors, Common Desires

Jason Frank<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Honig's essay emphasizes neoliberalism's destruction of a world of public things and addresses how we might respond to the catastrophe of their loss. However, to adequately confront the political dilemmas posed by neoliberalism, we must attend to the simultaneous disappearance of both common desires and collective actors. Honig's examples risk obscuring the political importance of this question.

## Keywords

neoliberalism, collective action, Honig, Tocqueville, radical hope

In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville offered a now-famous example of the nineteenth-century American orientation toward public things—what Bonnie Honig describes as “the pursuing in common of the objects of common desires” (Honig, 2015). Tocqueville's (2003, 220) example is mundane, lacking in drama or grandeur, but like many other examples from his great book, its quotidian quality gleams with political insight:

Should an obstacle appear on the public highway and . . . traffic be halted . . . neighbors at once form a group to consider the matter; from this improvised assembly an executive authority appears to remedy the common inconvenience before anyone has thought of the possibility of some other authority already in existence before the one they have just formed . . . There is nothing the human will despairs of obtaining through the free use of the combined power of individuals.

These lines have been frequently cited. They have been invoked to authorize very different political programs: from the critique of the welfare state on the libertarian right to the radical egalitarianism of the participatory democratic left. We are all by now familiar with neo-Tocquevillean reflections on the poverty of political and associational life in the contemporary United States, and with the accompanying nostalgia for a more robustly civic political culture.

On first glance, Honig's meditations on the contemporary “fight for public things” resonate with familiar concerns with the civic costs of a political culture too wholly enthralled by narrowing individualism and the withdrawal from public life . . . but only at first glance. The danger Honig identifies and explores in her essay is not primarily one of political psychology—the consequences for politics when citizens consider only their private

interests, or when a civic concern for the public good is economically converted into the aggregate effects of rational self-seeking utility maximizers. Employing a provocative combination of Donald Winnicott's object relations theory and Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology, Honig argues that the danger we are confronted with today is nothing less than the disappearance of a world of common things, a world that sustains our shared orientation as citizens united, or at least gathered, in the collective caring for, responding to, and engaging with that common world. Honig's intervention is, in other words, at the level of ontology—with what *is*, or more appropriately with what threatens to disappear. Without an affectively imbued orientation to common things, Honig argues, we risk losing a sense of a shared common world for which we are collectively responsible. Although it is not the language Honig uses in her essay, we could say that the catastrophe that she diagnoses is the disappearance of the political itself, in the broad but deceptively simple sense suggested by Tocqueville's famous example: the capacity of ordinary people to respond collectively to challenges they commonly face. The loss of this collective capacity will make it difficult if not impossible for us to confront the other more directly material catastrophe that quietly looms over Honig's essay as it does over our public life—the shared crisis of world and of earth posed by the human-made climate disaster of the Anthropocene.

<sup>1</sup>Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Jason Frank, Department of Government, Cornell University, 307 White Hall, Ithaca, NY 10014, USA.  
Email: jf273@cornell.edu

Honig's essay is focused primarily on the loss of common things. I am interested in exploring further the implied but not fully developed relationship between the loss of public things and the lost possibilities of collective action . . . indeed, the disappearance altogether of a collective actor. It is the mutually constituting relationship between collective actors and common desires that is suggested by Tocqueville's example: the inconvenience of the obstacle blocking the highway is the object of common concern; the self-constituted authority of the "improvised assembly" formed to confront that difficulty is the form of a collective action and the collective actor that takes shape around it. It is this mutually constitutive relationship I will emphasize here. I want to press Honig to think through that relationship more fully than she has, at least in this essay, and perhaps more fully than her primary examples—Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope* and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*—allow.

I accept with Honig that the loss of public things, and the related disappearance of a collective actor, can be productively described as effects of the material, institutional, and ideational world brought about by "neoliberalism." Neoliberalism is an obviously contested term—sometimes narrowly applied to Washington consensus economic policies of deregulation and marketization, at other times much more broadly applied to an organizing and hegemonic logic of late modern capitalism. Honig invokes neoliberalism to conceptualize the relentless conversion of all aspects of social existence into economic terms, not only the commodification of the objects of a common world—air, water, land—but also the disappearance of sites of collective deliberation over collective problems and their replacement with market mechanisms. Neoliberalism is not merely about economic policy, in other words, or the privatization of once-public goods, but is rather what Michel Foucault described as an order of normative reason. Wendy Brown has examined and elaborated upon Foucault's conceptualization of neoliberalism in her recent book *Undoing of the Demos*, where she describes neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" that extends "a specific formulation of economic values and practice and metrics to every dimension of life" (Brown 2015, 30). "Neoliberalism," Brown (2015, 44) succinctly writes, "is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity—not only with its machinery of compulsive commodification and profit-driven expansion, but by its form of [problem solving] and valuation."

Tocqueville's prosaic example can help illuminate this conception of neoliberalism. Rather than confronting the problem of the highway obstacle as a collective problem to be addressed by common deliberation and the self-created authority of "improvised assemblies," neoliberalism creates a market around the removal of individually

experienced inconveniences. The private firm capable of removing the obstacle most efficiently and at least cost to individual stakeholders gets the contract. Rather than citizens deliberating on common problems and creating a public executive authority to address them, we have individual consumers facing the problem from the narrow purview of their private interest and their own bottom line (thus the constant preoccupation with the dilemma of the "free rider"). The common inconvenience of the highway obstacle no longer has the ontological status of public problem to be confronted publicly but is a difficulty best confronted by creating a competitive market animated by economic incentives. Citizenship loses its political value and valence. The *homo politicus* is replaced by a *homo oeconomicus* that approaches everything as a potential market and knows only market conduct; it cannot think public purpose or common problems in a distinctly political way. Neoliberalism, when it reigns ascendant, eliminates the very idea of collective action and of a collective actor capable of forming a common will.

In her essay, Honig is concerned less with detailing how neoliberalism destroys public things and the civic orientation to them that constitutes a common world, than with understanding how we might effectively respond to the catastrophe of their disappearance. This is her reason for turning to the two texts that make up the body of her essay: Jonathan Lear's powerful philosophical anthropology *Radical Hope* and Lars von Trier's troubling film *Melancholia*. I am going to focus on Honig's reading of Lear, because it is most directly relevant to my larger question concerning the relationship between the loss of public things and the disappearance of collective action and of anything that might be construed as the collective actor.

In her reading of Lear, Honig begins by provocatively analogizing the contemporary expansion of neoliberalism with the threatened disappearance and destruction of a common way of life experienced by the Crow people in the nineteenth century; Honig examines our shared exposure to what Lear describes as a peculiar ontological vulnerability of human beings: that a shared world of common practices and significance can come catastrophically to an end. In Lear's words, the danger is that there can be a complete collapse of the field of intelligibility in which "occurrences occur" (Lear 2008, 34).

The hero of Lear's story is Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow nation, who provides Lear with the quotation around which his extensive reflections turn. Plenty Coup says to a white interviewer that after the forced enclosure of his people on reservations and "the disappearance of the Buffalo," "the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened" (Lear 2008, 3). Lear takes the Crow chief to mean nothing psychological by this

statement, but, like Honig, something ontological: a world of intelligible happenings has ceased to exist. Like Honig, Lear suggests an analogy between the experience of the Crow and ourselves, but he gives this connection a different inflection, focusing on Nietzschean or existentialist concerns with a world without meaning, nihilism, value relativism, and so on. “We live in a time of a heightened sense that civilizations are themselves vulnerable,” Lear writes.

Events around the world—terrorist attacks, violent social upheavals, and even natural catastrophes—have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot quite name . . . Perhaps if we could give a name to our shared sense of vulnerability, we could find better ways to live with it. (Lear 2008, 7)

Honig concurs broadly with Lear that Plenty Coup’s confrontation with catastrophe is a successful and admirable strategy of “resilience” in the face of immanent cultural devastation. Both present Plenty Coup’s efforts to ritualize radical change via the “thin” rather than “thick” courage of “radical hope” as a powerful counter-example to the messianic and catastrophist tendencies of so much contemporary political theory on the radical left (Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, etc.). What both Honig and Lear seem to admire most about Plenty Coup’s vision of radical hope is its successful navigation of the poles of messianism, on one hand, and despair, on the other. Both affirm the mediating imagination and thin courage that allows Plenty Coup to guide his people from one world of intelligibility into another, but without losing a sense of transitional continuity between the two. What Honig and Lear admire most, I would argue, is his “realism.” Plenty Coup is held up as an example of “realism, pragmatism, ritualization, and healthy adjustment” (Honig, 2015).

The risk in this portrait, as Honig recognizes more than Lear, is that it ends up retrospectively assuming an outcome of white conquest and domination that was not so absolutely assured from the perspective of the actors themselves (although indigenous destruction appeared providentially sanctioned for many whites, notably Alexis de Tocqueville, who viewed native genocide in America as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of settler democracy). The occasional appearance of psychological terms such as “resilience” and “healthy adjustment” seems to imply, if not conceptually entail, a confrontation with a political reality that has the closure and fixity of natural necessity or an objective condition. Honig rightly worries that Lear’s account may concede too much to the givenness of the world in his celebratory portrait of Plenty Coup, but I worry her reliance on psychological metaphors risks the same in her own analysis. It is a risk that is made particularly clear in an example from Lear’s book that Honig mentions briefly in her paper, but does not

fully explore: Lear’s contrast between Plenty Coup and Sitting Bull.

Sitting Bull was, of course, the chief of the Sioux nation, and his response to white settler conquest was much more oppositional and intransigent than Plenty Coup’s. He did not manifest the “flexible realism” of Plenty Coup and indeed saw the Crow Leader as, in Lear’s words, “a collaborator with malign forces” (Lear 2008, 107). Sitting Bull, on Lear’s reading, was in a state of profound denial as to the reality of the historical situation that confronted him and his people. He remained too fixed within a thick traditional way of life that was being destroyed and therefore could not engender the imaginative and ritualistically creative resources that might allow him and his people to transition from one frame of reference into another. Rather than offering what Lear celebrates as “a traditional way of going forward”—as Plenty Coup had done with the dream of the Chickadee—Sitting Bull’s messianic dream visions and the ritual institution of the Ghost Dance, which Sitting Bull hoped would usher in an apocalyptic punishing of the whites and a restoration of the Sioux to their previous way of life, was little more than a dangerous fantasy. “It is a hallmark of the messianically wishful,” Lear writes, that the world “will be magically transformed—into conformity with how one would like it to be—without having to take any realistic steps to bring it about” (Lear 2008, 151). According to Lear, unlike Plenty Coup, Sitting Bull used his dream vision to “short circuit reality rather than engage with it” (Lear 2008, 150).

Lear’s frequent appeals to the reality of the situation operate rhetorically as fixed and relatively uninterrogated placeholders, and some of this rhetorical fixity creeps into the realism of Honig’s analysis as well. It is worth remembering that Sitting Bull’s Ghost Dance so worried U.S. authorities for its subversive potential that they actively tried to suppress it, and that Sitting Bull also attempted to organize a pan-Indian alliance—to mobilize an oppositional collective actor—against white settlers. Who is to say whether such a strategy—when viewed from the perspective of the actors confronting the catastrophic political situation before them, rather than looking back on events from over a century of subsequent history—indicated a state of denial or acting out on the basis of a “false messianic promise?” Is Lear projecting this necessity and reality retrospectively onto events and not giving enough credence to the openness and contingency from which these actors viewed the events as they transpired? Is he, in other words, enacting precisely the forms of retrospective and self-congratulatory narrative justification of the “reality” of events that Honig has done so much to illuminate and criticize in the progressive teleologies of contemporary liberal theorists such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas (Honig 2007)?

Honig suggests as much, when she challenges the “catastrophist” frame that shapes Lear’s study. Honig worries that Lear may “catastrophize a situation that is not best seen in apocalyptic terms,” a situation that radical democratic actors should seek not only to survive or manage but to actively shape. In the contrast with Sitting Bull, Honig writes, Lear must present “the disaster as inevitable and possessed of nature-like force” (Honig, 2015). Here I wholeheartedly agree, but the significant aspects of Lear’s analysis that Honig accepts qualify the force of her argument against his catastrophism; Honig’s focus on the loss of public things at the expense of the related loss of collective action and of a collective actor short-circuit what could be a more forceful critique of Lear’s analysis. They leave Honig’s argument vulnerable to the charge of a kind of radical democratic defeatism, to making the historical failure of past acts of radical collective emancipation—like those sought by Sitting Bull—into foregone conclusions that can then be retrospectively diminished as unrealistic messianic dreams, romantic fantasies, and utopian desires. This turns chastened political aspirations of resilience and healthy adjustment into political virtues in and of themselves. Honig’s other primary example—von Trier’s *Melancholia*—courts the same problem as the ritual the magic cave presents is nothing more than a Winnicottian “holding environment” (Honig, 2015). It is not a ritualized form of collective action capable of confronting the catastrophe the actors collectively face. Indeed, in the example of von Trier’s catastrophe—the cataclysmic collision of worlds—how could they? I am not sure Honig’s ultimate arguments are best served by the examples she has chosen to articulate them.

A central aspect of Tocqueville’s writing on the French Revolution and its revolutionary dreams of collective emancipation was that he denied the actors the validity of their most cherished self-understanding: the faith in their own Promethean and collective capacity to make the world anew. As Francois Furet (1981, 27) famously argued, Tocqueville punctured the hegemonic “discourse of the radical break” and the central idea that “democratic politics had come to decide the fate of individuals and peoples.” For Furet and other liberal admirers, Tocqueville disenchanted contemporaries of the “revolutionary catechism,” “the radical project of a self-instituted society” that views “politics as pure action, the unmediated expression of a directly perceptible will” (Rosanvallon 2011, 125). Tocqueville exposed this catechism, in other words, as unrealistic fantasy, a utopian dream, and a dangerous political delusion.

Alongside Tocqueville’s rejection of the world-making capabilities of the popular will, however, was his concern with the disappearance of meaningful

human agency in the democratic age, including collective political agency. Although Tocqueville was unwilling or unable to discern catastrophe in democracy’s destruction of indigenous peoples, he repeatedly invoked catastrophe to describe democracy’s subversion of its own collective power to act. In a late letter to his friend Arthur de Gobineau—the great nineteenth-century theorist of the inequality of the races—Tocqueville wrote of the enervated exhaustion that had followed in the wake of the Revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848. “After having felt . . . capable of transforming ourselves,” Tocqueville wrote,

We now feel incapable of reforming ourselves; after having excessive pride, we have fallen into excessive self-pity; we thought we could do everything, and now we think we can do nothing; we like to think that struggle and effort are henceforth useless and that our blood muscles and nerves will always be stronger than our will power and courage. This is really the great sickness of our age. (Tocqueville 1959, 232)

Tocqueville’s concern with the pervasive sense of human powerlessness and political incapacity in the wake of the democratic revolutions of the modern age is one of the aspects of his work that remains with us still, however troubling other aspects of his thought remain. If anything, as Honig’s essay shows, the sense of collective powerlessness has become ever more acute. The fight for public things, which Honig’s essay so brilliantly reveals, will also require a fight for unforeseen possibilities of collective action and for envisioning and enacting new and unanticipated forms of political subjectivity. These are important considerations for political theory and for contemporary politics in a time when democratic theory proceeds largely without consideration of the demos, and our most influential theories of collective action are premised on the impossibility of a collective actor.

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