

The Politics of Public Things: Neoliberalism and the Routine of Privatization¹

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*It is not unfair to say that political philosophy has been
the victim of a strong object avoidance tendency.*

Bruno Latour

*human existence [. . .] would be impossible without things,
and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world,
if they were not the conditioners of human existence.*

Hannah Arendt

*The procedure of putting a lump of cheese on a balance and fixing the price
by the turn of the scale would lose its point if it frequently happened
for such lumps to suddenly grow or shrink for no obvious reason.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

In recent years, neoliberals have sought to privatize public things in the name of efficiency, citing waste in public bureaucracy and the unreliability of civil servants unmotivated by private market incentives. Empirical researchers and lobbyists can argue about whether we will find greater waste in the public or private sectors. But there are reasons other than efficiency for embracing public things. Public things (parks, prisons, schools, armies, civil servants, hydropower plants, electrical grids, and so on) are, we might say (borrowing from the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott) part of democracy's 'holding environment'. Efficiency is one value in a democracy but it is not democracy's only or regnant value, at least not for democracies that are,

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as Winnicott might say, ‘in health’.²

In health, democracy is rooted in common love for and contestation of public things. Without such things, citizenship in neoliberal democracies risks being reduced to repetitive (private) work—what Lauren Berlant calls ‘crisis ordinary’—and exceptional (public) emergencies—what we can call crisis extraordinary.³ A symptom of that reduction—of democratic life to repetitive private work and exceptional public emergencies—in contemporary neoliberal contexts, is the prominence of mourning in recent years in Left political theory and cultural studies. One benefit of turning to ‘objects’ or ‘things’ to think about democracy’s possible futures is that it invites us to turn to D.W. Winnicott—a key thinker in the British Object Relations School of psychoanalysis, working in England in the mid-20th century—who urges attention to a more diverse affective repertoire.⁴

Winnicott is usefully read in dialogue with recent work in thing theory and prior work on alienation in capitalism’s world of perpetual flux. For Winnicott, objects are vital, in that they have a life of their own and the power to enchant the world around them.⁵ But they are not fully autonomous of those who invest in them. Providing the human world with stability and form, Winnicottian objects are resilient, possessed of permanence, and not prone to obsolescence, though they are not immune, either, to wear and tear. Objects are essential to human development from infancy to maturity. Even those of us who never heard of Winnicott are familiar with these ideas of his and know the power of the child’s blanket, pacifier, or teddy to soothe. These fabrics, pacifiers, and stuffed animals are the enchanted source of magical comfort to infants of a certain age or stage of development. They are our ‘first possessions’, Winnicott says, and they function as ‘transitional objects’, a term coined by Winnicott to refer to their role in a transitional stage of development and to infants’ reliance on them to transition from dependence on the mother-figure to more independent capacities to play and to survive her absences.

Infants are desolate when such objects are lost, distraught when they are damaged or, god forbid, *laundered*, and relieved or blissful when they are found, recovered, or restored. In these cases, the object is not itself magical. In fact, it is often rather disgusting (though perhaps this is a sign of its magic). In any case,

2 See Walzer 1984 on the importance of not collapsing economic and political values.

3 See Berlant 2011.

4 One example of Winnicott’s (rather Wittgensteinian) commitment to the study of affect in its diversity is his critique of Melanie Klein’s focus on aggression as if it were a single thing rather than, as Winnicott thought, a host of affects that serve various developmental purposes over time. Moreover, Winnicott argued against Klein, these affects are not just misconstrued by her, as one single thing, but also pathologized by her when she calls them ‘aggression’. As Adam Phillips points out, Winnicott preferred the idea of developing instead ‘a natural history of the role of aggression in natural development’ (Phillips 2007, 104). We could extend that insight to mourning as well: not one single thing and not necessarily an affect to be privileged above others. This last is the argument of my *Antigone, Interrupted* (2013). More generally, Winnicott both decenters and pluralizes the affects that are important to psychological analysis. (Eve Sedgwick echoes him decades later when she says there ought to be more than one or two affects associated with a theoretical position). See Honig 2013, 19 and Sedgwick 2003, 146.

5 See Bennett 2010.

infants provide the magic that makes the object special, imbuing the object with the comfort, security, or calm that is then, in turn, bestowed on them by their precious thing. No one but the infant can appoint or designate a certain blanket as the blankie, the fabric that soothes. Such a relationship, an object relation, can be solicited by an adult, but in the end the psychic investment and the choice of object are the infant's to make, in one of her earliest acts of spontaneity and creativity.

The Marxian opposition between false, idol-like things that alienate us from ourselves versus authentic human desires and relations is upended by Winnicott who is no less attuned than Marx to the problem of authenticity, but who is interested in those *things* that play a fundamental role in promoting not thwarting the first and, later, lifelong authentic human relationships.⁶ The objects that Winnicott values may have been manufactured, produced by the thousands by alienated labor, but Winnicott treats them in their singularity, following the lead of the infant who knows nothing about the means of production and simply finds sooth in his blue blanket. (And of course, the transitional object may also be a rag, found in the rubbish).

Marx might say that the infant and Winnicott both fall for the lure of capitalism's things, which promise to soothe us all. But it is fair, I think, to say that Winnicott's questions are simply not Marx's. Things perform a function in human development, regardless of their means of production. They soothe and provide the stability that only things, in their thingness, can provide. This is not to suggest their economic genealogy does not matter. It does and here Marx supplements Winnicott by pressing us to see that economies that produce and multiply things at dizzying rates, while marketing only the newest iterations of things as desirable, and while planning the obsolescence of the previous ones, arguably undo the thingness of things—attenuating precisely the qualities that Winnicott in his context, and Hannah Arendt in hers, see as the gift of things: their capacity to provide the stability and durability necessary to the stable and durable relationships that constitute human flourishing. Hence Arendt's concern about 'a world where rapid industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today's objects' (Arendt 1998, 52).

If public things are a constitutive element of democracy, then economies that undermine the thingness of things, as such, and reflexively prefer privatization to public ownership or stewardship, are in relations of (possibly productive) tension with democracy.⁷ Other social theorists have looked at how the neoliberal workplace emphasizes a narrow notion of productivity that undoes connections between work and dignity. Neighborhood-based collective action groups see how neoliberal deracination and mobility threaten democratic deliberation and will-formation. Attending to the viability (or not) of public things in neoliberal contexts, we add

6 Winnicott, too, will distinguish the true and false self, but will connect this to the infant's felt need to please or heal the mother-figure who is not in health, who is depressed or withdrawn.

7 Martha Nussbaum thinks Winnicott's views of a holding environment and culture could inform a democratic idea of flourishing while underwriting a commitment to a humanistic education. ('Indeed, one may learn many things about contemporary political life by posing systematically the question of what it would be like for society to become, in Winnicott's sense, a "facilitating environment" for its citizens.' (Nussbaum 2003, 39)). I agree.

another angle, and might gain a new perspective on our moment.

This requires that we analogize Winnicott's observations about infants' transitional objects and citizens' attachments to public things. Since Winnicott is not committed to a progressive nor to any linear temporality in development, we do not infantilize citizens when we think about democracy through Winnicott's categories or at least not necessarily so. That is, the various stages through which infants move in development, and the skills that attach to those stages (self-comfort, working through, acceptance of reality, and so on) are not left behind as the infant 'progresses'. Acquired skills stay in a person's repertoire. These are not infantile impulses that plague otherwise mature adults, nor are they the pathologized remnants of a stage that ought properly to have been left behind. Rather than move through time, the infant acquires in time a repertoire, a resource-rich skill-set that can be drawn upon in health over a life.⁸

Indeed, Winnicott asserts that the abundant energy conjoined early on to the transitional object is dispersed in later stages and is eventually redistributed, diffused onto culture, a transfer on whose details he is admittedly vague, as Adam Phillips also points out. Regardless of those difficulties, Winnicott offers, in any case, quite a shift in mood from Freud and Klein. As Phillips puts it in his book on Winnicott, 'Each psychoanalytic theorist, it could be said, organizes his or her theory around what might be called a core catastrophe; for Freud it was castration, for Klein, the triumph of the Death instinct, and for Winnicott it was the annihilation of the core self by intrusion, a failure of the holding environment' (2007, 149). But 'where Freud and Klein had emphasized the role of disillusionment in human development, in which growing up was a process of mourning, for Winnicott there was a more primary sense in which development was a creative process of collaboration' (2007, 101).⁹ Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis postulated a catastrophe to which treatment needed to respond and for which culture compensated. This is true for Winnicott too, but he does not begin with the child bereft. For him, what is primary is the child at play and this colors all his analyses. Catastrophe is in the background, however. Winnicott develops his ideas in part through clinical experience with children removed from their families during WWII in England, evacuated from blitz-bombed London to the safer countryside.

8 As Adam Phillips puts it: 'developmental stages do not progressively dispense with each other but are included in a personal repertoire'. Indeed, 'so-called developmental achievements are only achievements for Winnicott if they are reversible'. They are not signs of immaturity, regression, or failure. On the contrary, they become part of a repertoire of skills to be drawn upon later. (Phillips 2007, 82).

9 Where Freud saw human creativity as an expression of sublimated infantile sexuality, and Klein saw creativity as reparative secondary destruction inherent in infantile sexuality's depressive position, Winnicott saw creativity as a primary, presexual trait that was characteristic of a healthy, reciprocal relation with the mother-figure. In this Winnicottian world, the infant first creates out of desire for the mother who is available and ready to be found, and then is creative in response to that mother's eventual withdrawal, her autonomous comings and goings beyond the omnipotent control of the infant. (Phillips 2007, 102-103). See also his observation that Winnicott is a 'long way from Freud's view of culture as the sublimation of instinctual life, or the wishful compensation for the frustrations imposed by reality. In the Freudian scheme, culture signifies instinctual renunciation; for Winnicott it was the only medium for self-realization' (2007, 119).

Still, Winnicott switches us from the rather tragic and thwarting world of early 20th century mainstream psychoanalysis to a more beneficent domain, from that recently dominant register of mourning (influenced by Freud and Klein) in political theory and cultural studies to a family of terms that includes collaboration, spontaneity, joy, health, creativity, pleasure not compliance, love but also rage, anger, and self-surprise, all terms surely familiar to those acquainted with the political theory of Hannah Arendt, a surprising overlap given her well-known antipathy to psychoanalysis.¹⁰ Winnicott's terms and Arendt's concerns about the public world and its fragility in late modernity are useful to those who seek to apprehend the plight of public things under pressure.

1. Public things under pressure

Sesame Street's Big Bird became a symbol of the struggle over public things in the United States in the fall of 2012.¹¹ The Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, promised, at the start of the first US presidential debate, to cut government funding to PBS, the US public television network. 'I like PBS. I love Big Bird', he said, referring to the character on the children's television show, Sesame Street. 'Actually, I like you too', Romney said to the debate moderator Jim Lehrer, who for decades has hosted PBS's 'Newshour'. 'But I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for'.

The amount of money involved is relatively small (1/10,000th of the budget according to the fact-checker at the Washington Post) and most of the budget of PBS is raised already through private fundraising (after private donations and licensing fees, only 6% comes from government funds), so what was the fuss about? Commentators see this as one more meaningless cut, or as red meat for the American Right which wants cuts regardless of their size. The former dismiss the gesture, the latter appreciate it, but both see it as a gesture. But what (else) is in that gesture?

After the debate, progressives aired TV ads defending Big Bird, but critics on both the Right and the Left mocked their efforts. Were progressives really rallying people to defend Big Bird? A character on a children's show? In the brouhaha over Big Bird, the implication from critics on both the US Right and Left (Romney and Jon Stewart) was that attachment to the television character was merely fetishistic or infantile. *Grow up!* they, in effect, said. But such charges, of fetishism or infantilism, may harbor a deeper, ironic truth: Are these the only ways left to attach to one of the few remaining public things in the US? That is to say, in a world with very few public objects, and not much of a 'holding environment', we may find it hard to imagine a healthy object relation—one of deep affection, say—in anything other than unhealthy terms: infantile, fetishistic. Or maybe we assume that maintaining such relations

10 But, then, Arendt did not know Winnicott, and was not, I think, aware of how close her phenomenology of worldliness was to the British Object Relations School of psychoanalysis.

11 The discussion of Big Bird and Hurricane Sandy expands on a blogpost for 'The Contemporary Condition' (Honig 2012). Since 2012, the more recent, salient example is, of course, Istanbul's Gezi Park.

with childhood things is a failure or a pathology rather than, as Winnicott would say, a healthy sign of a resource-rich repertoire in which our capacity to attach to all sorts of things remains vital and alive.

The issue of public funding for PBS is about the privatization and destruction of the public things of American democracy. To many American conservatives, government itself is only a necessary evil (except on the point where they split: the legislation of virtue or family values) and, these days, even those of its functions that have been historically granted by conservatives to belong properly to government, like imprisonment, border policing, and military defense, are increasingly sold off or outsourced to private industry. All that is left to government to do is to make the policies that these subcontractors then discretionarily implement. Often, the claim is that these private companies can do the job better or more efficiently.

For democratic theory, however, the issue is not about what institutions or organizations are most efficient in achieving certain ends. It is about whether democracies need public things for purposes that may not be entirely instrumental and may not rate well on the measure of efficiency. The issue is not whether conservatives or neoliberals are right to find efficiency only in the private sphere. The issue is rather whether they aid or undermine democratic politics when they promote, by way of efficiency, a political orientation rooted in fundamental antipathy to public things and their sometimes magical properties, which, not to put too flat a point on it, Big Bird represents. Everybody loves Big Bird! was the refrain after the first presidential debate. Exactly. This is not just funny. Big Bird is not just a childish thing that we all, voting adults, ought to have put away by now, in accordance with the instruction of First Corinthians 13:11, much beloved by President Obama: ‘When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.’ Winnicott would argue that becoming a man, as it were, requires the absorption, not the renunciation, of childhood things. Democratic theory has a further argument to make: Big Bird represents the public things that make us democratic, that put us into democratic (and, often, agonistic) relation to each other in a healthy holding environment. Indeed, Romney showed he knew all of this when he himself referred to Big Bird as a synecdoche for PBS, the public broadcasting system of the US. And then Big Bird took off and helped to make the point in opposition to Romney: democracy is rooted in common love for shared objects, or even in contestation of them (which betrays a common love, more than sentimental claims of devotion do).¹² But is it the object that we love and contest (is it Big Bird)? Or is it the deeply political publicness it instantiates (PBS)?¹³

12 Charles Blow, in his defense of the importance of the public/ness of public television, which he argued worked for him as a transitional object, pulling him from a rural home with limited opportunities into a world of education and social mobility, came closest to discussing the real issues in play. Jon Stewart, with his dismissal of the Big Bird story line as, well, childish (this was the implication), missed it.

13 ‘[T]he object of desire [is] not [...] a thing (or even a relation) but [...] a *cluster of promises* magnetized by a thing that appears as an object but is really a scene in the psychoanalytic sense’, says Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011, 16), echoing Winnicott, as we shall see, though Berlant does not, to my knowledge, engage his work. The recent, contested closure of Greece’s public broadcaster, ERT, is another instance of the issue.

The public love of public objects—discernible in the public outcry defending Big Bird—is different from the mass consumerist need to all be in love with the same private object, like the newest iPhone, and to have one, of which there are millions. That said, this consumer need may well be the ruin, the remnant, of the democratic desire to constellate affectively around shared objects in their pre-commodified or non-commodified form. And sometimes, the ruin speaks.

For example, after New York City was struck, also in the fall of 2012, by Hurricane Sandy, pay phones, normally treated as part of the city's ruined landscape, emerged suddenly to become communications life-savers; relics with an afterlife. One reporter noted that '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.' Pay phones are, as they were indeed once called, *public* phones, situated on the streets and available to everyone. Though not publicly owned (they are now serviced by 13 different local pay phone franchises), they are regulated by New York's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications. As one new user of this old technology said: 'It's funny what's hiding in plain sight [...] it's invisible, but when you need it, it's there' (Cohen 2012).

'Hiding in plain sight.' 'Invisible, but when you need it, it's there.' These phrases excellently capture D.W. Winnicott's mother-figure, at the scene of healthy object relations, in which the child plays, observed by her, but unaware of her. Is this a metaphor for democracy, whose public things are not always in use, not always efficient, not always needed, but are always there, providing a holding environment, by hiding in plain sight (the parks, the prisons, the schools, the streets, the water, the transportation system)? When you need them or need to protest against them, they are there. The difference, and this captures the democratic quandary, is that in a democracy those things need tending. They are not the mother-figure who can, 'in health,' for the most part be trusted to appear more or less when needed. These things in the world may become ruins. They may decay if untended. They may be sold off, if unguarded, privatized if undefended. They won't be there in a few years unless we commit to maintaining them so that they may maintain us.¹⁴ In Hannah Arendt's terms, that is, these 'things' in a neoliberal context become more and more like the stuff of 'labor' (stuff like crops, food, kindling, which are used up when used, and disappear in time if left unused), and less like the stuff of 'work,' like sculpture, chairs, tables, or shoes, which last, which have a kind of permanence, and outlast both use and neglect. In a neoliberal context, 'things' become more and more like Wittgenstein's imagined lumps of cheese, undergoing sudden and unimaginable changes that strike us as more fantasy-like than real.¹⁵ Things we thought were defined by a definitive shape, morph into new things. National companies become global giants; local banks turn out one day to be arms of foreign ones; lumps of beef,

14 This is like the paradox of politics I discuss in *Emergency Politics* (2009), in which the political is always mired in a chicken-and-egg temporality.

15 See Wittgenstein 1953, #142.

called hamburgers, turn out to be horsemeat; public parks may become malls.

Thus it is no surprise that the public telephone which returns from disuse after Hurricane Sandy is seen as a rather quaint thing. But there is more to it than that: the quaintness of the public telephone stands as a synecdoche for the quaintness, in our neoliberal context, of publicness itself. That is, it is not just the technology of the phones that is like a relic from a past time. It is also the very idea of a 'public thing', waiting in the street to be taken up when needed, and used by all sorts of people, rich and poor alike.¹⁶ What is funny, invisible, but hiding in plain sight are public things, things that conjoin and are shared by people (who may be affectively divided by them, but this is a sharing too), people from all kinds of backgrounds, classes, and social locations.

After Hurricane Sandy, in the fall of 2012, there were calls to make cell towers more secure so as better to protect cell phone service in an emergency, next time. But no one called for better support for the public telephones that served the public so ably this time. Why not more expressions of appreciation for those phones? Why not turn them from relics of the lost past into the new stable infrastructure of a possible new, public future? The risk is that 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 kinds of public things. In the ruins of public things, the return of public things remains imaginable and realizable. Almost.

Also, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy (which resulted in devastating blackouts on the East Coast of the US), as the New York Times' Nicholas Kristof documented, there was a boom in demand for private generators. Costing well over 10,000 dollars, such generators are sought after because they protect those who can afford it from the ups and downs of power blackouts in the public power system. As Kristof, who spends much of his time in the so-called Third World, rightly sees: 'the lust for generators is a reflection of our antiquated electrical grid and failure to address climate change' (2012).¹⁷ Rather than demand that the public crisis be addressed, the wealthy and powerful opt out: 'About 3 percent of stand-alone homes worth more than \$100,000 in the country now have standby generators installed'. The situation is similar with public education, which could benefit from the engagement of the wealthy and the powerful, their donations, their influence, their volunteerism, their leisure, and their energy. Kristof says:

time and again, we see the decline of public services accompanied by the rise of private workarounds for the wealthy. Is crime a problem? Well, rather than pay for better policing, move to a gated community with private security guards!

¹⁶ It is notable that homeless people were making change for people to use the pay phones after Sandy. The privileged who had opted out via cell phones found they were dependent on the unprivileged to access this once accessible technology.

¹⁷ Kristof details: 'The American Society of Civil Engineers gave our grid, prone to bottlenecks and blackouts, a grade of D+ in 2009' (2012).

Are public schools failing? Well, superb private schools have spaces for a mere \$40,000 per child per year. Public libraries closing branches and cutting hours? Well, buy your own books and magazines! Are public parks—even our awesome national parks, dubbed “America’s best idea” and the quintessential “public good”—suffering from budget cuts? Don’t whine. Just buy a weekend home in the country! Public playgrounds and tennis courts decrepit? Never mind—just join a private tennis club! I’m used to seeing this mind-set in developing countries like Chad or Pakistan, where the feudal rich make do behind high walls topped with shards of glass; increasingly, I see it in our country. (Kristof 2012.)

Kristof makes a good point, though his suggestions that this is a feudal tactic, new to America’s rich and a familiar trait of a developing world mindset, are misleading. Kristof’s mode of emplotting the story renders strange and alien the private estates and privileged life that have really always been a trait of American Gatsby living. What may be new is the wealthy’s late-20th century *vocal* unwillingness to support the mid-20th century public system from which they also pay to withdraw or opt out.

Noting that ‘Half-a-century of tax cuts focused on the wealthiest Americans leave us with third-rate public services,’ Kristof argues against this privatization by mobilizing not publicity or solidarity or even national unity, and certainly not social democracy, but rather ‘efficiency.’ The opt outs are, he says ‘inefficient private workarounds.’ Indeed, ‘It’s manifestly silly (and highly polluting) for every fine home to have a generator. It would make more sense to invest those resources in the electrical grid so that it wouldn’t fail in the first place.’ He is not wrong, but can an appeal to the inefficiency of private workarounds be effective?¹⁸ Private workarounds are inefficient from a social or policy perspective. But they are not inefficient from the perspective of the private self-interested consumer who may well pay more for private electricity than for subscription to a public service, but who thereby gains, or think he gains, a greater degree of control. Perhaps it would be more effective to ask: What does he lose?¹⁹

18 Here is another, from the same article: ‘A wealthy friend of mine notes that we all pay for poverty in the end. The upfront way is to finance early childhood education for at-risk kids. The back-end way is to pay for prisons and private security guards. In cities with high economic inequality, such as New York and Los Angeles, more than 1 percent of all employees work as private security guards, according to census data’ (Kristof 2012).

19 That is, he gains release from the burdens but also from the benefits of collectivity. It is worth noting that the loss of national infrastructure is accompanied by a loss of any ability to act collectively at all, even in response to (some kinds of) emergency: ‘The National Climatic Data Center has just reported that October was the 332nd month in a row of above-average global temperatures. As the environmental Web site Grist reported, that means that nobody younger than 27 has lived for a single month with colder-than-average global temperatures, yet climate change wasn’t even much of an issue in the 2012 campaign. Likewise, the World Economic Forum ranks American infrastructure 25th in the world, down from 8th in 2003-4, yet infrastructure is barely mentioned by politicians’ (Kristof 2012).

2. Object relations

In the film *Lincoln* (2013), the President cites Euclid's first theorem—that if two things are equal to a third then the two are equal to each other. 'There it is,' says Lincoln to two telegraph operators (i.e. *he* is the third thing in the scene), 'even in that two-thousand year old book of mechanical law: it is a self-evident truth that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. We begin with equality. That's the origin, isn't it? That balance, that's fairness, that's justice.'

For Tony Kushner's *Lincoln*, the lesson is that we begin with equality.²⁰ He sees that Euclid's truth is geometric but that it might also be political. And indeed, Euclid himself may have known this. When Ptolemy I asked if there was an easier way to study geometry than *The Elements*, Euclid is reported to have replied, 'Sire, there is no royal road to geometry.' (That is, there is no opting out. There is no private workaround). In geometry: it is a self-evident truth that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Might it be the case that in politics, by extension, when two people occupy a relationship of equality to a third (thing), then the two (or more) people are put by the common thing into a relation of equality, as such?²¹

In Winnicott's object relations theory, the object and the relation presuppose and require each other. The object must have certain traits to work as a transitional object, yes. But even when it possesses all those traits, it is still only a necessary and not a sufficient condition of health. Our relation to it exceeds those traits and is not secured by them. Similarly, in democratic contexts, public things are a necessary and not sufficient condition of democratic health. This means that it is not fundamentally about the phone, or the bird, or the generator. It is also about how we think about the phones, the bird, the generators, in what sort of holding environment we experience them, what sort of holding environment they help constitute, and with what sorts of words we take them up or they, us.²² Do those public objects interpellate those shaped by them into equality? Are we energized or depleted by them? Are they a prod to new forms of life, imagination, creativity, resilience, or joy?

In neoliberal economies, we are pointed to the finitude and zero-sumness of things and to their instrumentality. Do they get the job done? Are they worth

20 Although this wording and the occasion may be of Kushner's invention, we do know that Lincoln carried around in the early 1850s the first 6 books of Euclid's *Elements* which at the time 'represented the apex of logical rigor'. Studying them, 'he came to master them, a quiet triumph of reason in an unreasonable world' (Hirsch & Van Haften 2010, 222).

21 While other political theorists rightly emphasize the problems caused by the shift, under neoliberalism, to evaluate everything with reference to efficiency, or to prefer, almost automatically or reflexively, privatization over public investment in and regulation of collective institutions, I approach the issue from a slightly different but connected angle. Instead of asking, 'Are public or private sectors more efficient in solving certain problems?' I ask: 'What kind of problems (collective or individual) are we interpellated into when we relate to each other through certain public and/or private things?' (Dayan (2013) distinguishes three kinds of public—political, recognition-seeking, aesthetic—, acknowledging these are ideal types that shade into each other, and that different publics have different histories and biographies. They may consist of different kinds of people—audiences, activists, voters, spectators, and more—and different kinds of things may command different kinds of attention. His work is relevant to my concerns but I want to keep the attention on things).

22 Barbara Johnson (2008) amends his argument to insist on the always already linguistic character of things.

owning? Do they insulate us from ‘undesirable’ others? But in democratic theory, especially when conjoined with Winnicott’s object relations, attention is called to the generative power of things, and their magical properties to enchant, alter, interpellate, join, equalize, or mobilize us. Here Big Bird is the rule, not the exception.

Think, for example, of Benedict Anderson’s claim in his important book, *Imagined Communities* (2006), that newspapers, when read daily by diverse persons across space and time, contribute to the development of national consciousness, and imbue in us a sense of shared imagined community. Reading the New York Times in Ithaca or Providence, I read in the company of others, reading the same paper, in San Francisco and next door. Indeed, that shared newspaper experience makes San Francisco into my ‘next door’ and this experience of (some) others far away as neighbors in news is part of what national consciousness is. In this context, it is funny to revisit Wittgenstein’s witticism in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, #336) that we do not buy a second copy of the newspaper to confirm what we read in the first. That is true, in one way, and it is an apt critique of certain forms of self-referential argumentation (or of resort to private sensation). But in another sense, it is not true, for something is indeed confirmed (not the content of the story, true, but something else) when we as a collectivity buy second and third copies of the very same newspaper. What, in Wittgenstein, fails as logical confirmation for a doubting individual works, in Anderson, precisely, as political confirmation (or inauguration, or interpellation) for a political community in formation.

Tocqueville mentions more than once in *Democracy in America* (1994) the talismanic power of things. Noting Americans’ veneration for Plymouth Rock, the place where the Puritans landed seeking refuge from religious persecution, Tocqueville says that, still, two centuries later, broken-off bits of the rock are popularly sold, like relics, so that everyone can own their own ‘piece of the rock’ (this is right now the slogan for an insurance company in the US). The singular Plymouth Rock is not undone by its fragmentation, multiplication, and dispersion (as we have come to expect from the Frankfurt school). On the contrary, the Rock’s symbolic status as sacred is paradoxically underwritten by its commodification and dispersion, by this ‘Romancing of the stone.’ We could dismiss this as mere idolatry or fetishism, and decry it.²³ Or we could enter into the romance, and take its power as an invitation to think further about the power of objects, originals, copies, wholes, and shards, and about how to enlist that power on behalf of democratic forms of life (not just on behalf of commercial profit, as Apple incites us to, via the latest iPhone or iPad).²⁴

In his essay, ‘The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications’ (2005b), D.W. Winnicott (seemingly channeling Wittgenstein or perhaps all ludic thinkers) defends his views against ‘an armchair philosopher’ and invites that philosopher to ‘come out of his chair and sit on the floor with his patient’, from which position

23 The name of a late 20th century film, the phrase ‘romancing the stone’ is also played with by Barbara Johnson in her fabulous book, *Persons and Things* (2008).

24 It is a bit of a stretch but still hard to resist noting that D.W. Winnicott’s father, Frederick, sponsored ‘the memorial to the Pilgrims who set sail from Plymouth for the New World’ (Rodman 2003, 30).

he would find that the clinical world is one of many middle positions and not just a world of either-ors.²⁵ It is one of the many democratic markers of Winnicott's work (Alison Bechdel notes several others in *Are you My Mother?* (2012)). What if we political theorists got off the chair and onto the floor, as Tocqueville himself arguably did? Working with Winnicott, approaching the topic of public things as he approaches the study of transitional objects, we would ask, from the floor: What are the properties of such objects? What makes them work?

For Winnicott (2005a, 2), analyzing the workings of transitional objects requires attending to:

- 1) The nature of the object (a character)
- 2) The infant's capacity to recognize the object as 'not me' (Big Bird)
- 3) The place or location of the object as outside, inside, or at the border (on TV)
- 4) The infant's capacity to create, think up, devise, originate, or produce an object (that is to say, the infant's imagination, creativity, spontaneity) (friends of Big Bird)
- 5) The initiation of an affectionate type of relationship (which could include rage, as well as love) ('everyone loves Big Bird!')

Finally, though Winnicott mentions it not here but elsewhere, it is also important that the object has the capacity to withstand the infant's rage and powerful love. The object must be resilient. In health, the object's resilience will transfer to the child. It will become their shared trait.

Playing with its blanket or teddy bear, the baby comes to know a reality beyond him or herself. When s/he cathects onto that object, s/he acquires the emotional resources to withstand the disappointments of the mother or caregiver, to feel s/he may safely rage against them, and when s/he exercises control over the blanket, hiding and finding it, for example, as in Freud's fort-da game, Freud says s/he learns mastery, control, but Winnicott emphasizes the lesson of object-permanence. The object is what enables the child to exit continuity with the mother to experience contiguity in and with the world in a healthy way. It is also what allows the child to survive temporary separations from the mother. As the woman may come and go (perhaps even talking of Michelangelo), the child's blanket (ideally) has a stubborn existence and this is how the child learns there is a world. The object can survive not only the child's rage but also the child's love, which can be powerful and destructive. Thus, the child learns that s/he, too, can survive these powerful emotions.

25 '[H]e will find that there is an intermediate position. In other words, he will find that after "subject relates to object" comes "subject destroys object" (as it becomes external); and then may come "*object survives* destruction by the subject". But there may or may not be survival. A new feature thus arrives in the theory of object-relating. The subject says to the object: "I destroyed you", and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: "Hullo object!". "I destroyed you". "I love you". "You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you". "While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*". Here *fantasy* begins for the individual. The subject can now *use* the object that has survived. It is important to note that it is not only that the subject destroys the object because the object is placed outside the area of omnipotent control. It is equally significant to state this the other way round and to say that it is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control. In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties.' (Winnicott 2005b, 120-121).

In object relations theory, certain kinds of objects and certain kinds of orientations to them and certain kinds of contexts in which to relate to them, all serve as epistemological props to enable people to transition from continuity to contiguity, from self to neighbor, from solipsism to knowledge. (In solipsism, one person tries to confirm one newspaper with another and experiences a failure. In nationalism, two people do this and it is called knowledge). Might there also be, analogously, some objects, relations, and contexts that serve as episte-political props to enable democratic citizens to make analogous *political* (and not just psychic) transitions? In that context, the transitional object, which is ‘not me’ and yet ‘in a relationship with or to me’ might offer a model of democratic orientation to public things, over which we lack mastery but which are nonetheless inescapably ours/us. The objectively permanent object would need to be, in a democratic context, not a teddy bear, as in Winnicott, or a blankie, but a ‘Big Bird’ (i.e. PBS, which is to say a very big ‘bird’), or tax code, a constitution, a political party, a movement, a piece of Plymouth Rock, a public park, a hydroelectric plant, or public telephones.²⁶ And if, as Winnicott observed, children deprived of such objects, or of the contexts that help make them ‘work’, or of the mother-figures who secure them, if such object-deprived children fail to attach properly, and are trained by that deprivation into mere compliance and inauthenticity, might the same be true of object-deprived citizens in a democracy? They will need to seek out or establish democratic contexts, collectivities, movements, congresses, transnational alliances, to constitute a democratic holding environment that operates ‘in health.’

3. Pariahs, para-politics and the quest for public things

In conclusion, I turn to Hannah Arendt, whose work has been informing this essay throughout. Her famous essay, ‘The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition’ (2007), makes the case for public things by a *via negativa*, detailing the distortions that happen in public object-deprived environments. Arendt had argued, in her earlier biography of one of the 19th century salon hostesses, Rahel Varhagen, that the salons that entertained Jews in apparent equality were a distorting and corrupt form of proper publicness, staged in a semi-public sphere that focused its attendees’ attention on mere social equality and the good of belonging whether by way of social inclusion or by way of exoticism. Salon status-seeking, or *parvenu* behavior, betrayed the rather more desirable goods of political equality and heroic distinction in which one strives not to be ‘interesting’ but to be brave.

In ‘The Jew as Pariah,’ Arendt also looks at how Jews, marginalized by anti-Semitism and deprived of access to politics and public things, before or after the Second World War, without access to a democratic or national holding environment, sought to make meaning of that deprivation, or in spite of it—seeking an unrealizable assimilation after emancipation or engaging in the para-politics of salon life. They

²⁶ Though of course, teddy bears are not simply private either—named for the president, Theodore Roosevelt, with a political history of their own.

mistook the salons for a common world and mistook their pretense of social equality for a real political equality. Such inclusion came at the cost of authenticity.

But some Jews, a very few, found their way, and refused to trade authenticity for anything. They embraced their pariah status and tried to work through it to access something more. As artists, writers, and activists, they chose to mock or ironize the situation rather than comply with it. Arendt tracks their shared tactic by looking at how 4 representative Jews, pariahs, embraced their role as pariahs and used that role as a way to mount a challenge to their exclusion from equality. What she does not note is the role of 'things' in these men's repertoires of resilience.

For Arendt, those Jews who do not identify as pariahs, are stranded.²⁷ They seek out things, specifically *public* objects, to hold and secure them, but, like many of Winnicott's patients, they are thwarted in their quest and develop parallel skills, compensations, self-betrays (like being *parvenus*, in quest of social (salon) acceptance), and even a para-politics that functions like what Winnicott once called 'shop window faces,' faces turned outward for others, but with no invitation to look in, past the surface show. What they all fail to grasp is something real. Arendt's pariahs are all distorted by their deprivations, in one way or another, but they retain some measure of authenticity when they access what Arendt dubs in the subtitle of her essay 'A Hidden Tradition'—a tradition of action and agency that wrests triumphs in the domains of poetry, literature, cinema, and pariah-politics by basing itself on the role of pariah that others seek to overcome or obscure or deny.

Arendt often sounds quite like Winnicott when she charts the soul sickness of those who succumb to inauthenticity in quest of a never fully achievable emancipation. Her *parvenu* is his *shop window face*, both are compliant and inauthentic. Hannah Arendt adds to our appreciation of Winnicott, though, when she suggests that sometimes rather than soul destruction, something else occurs in response to deprivation. The human capacities to imagine and play are not always the products of a good holding environment. Sometimes they are the resources whereby those deprived of a world enact alternatives by way of their own insistent creativity. (These success stories, presumably, do not go on to become Winnicott's patients).

In 'The Jew as Pariah,' she turns to four representative figures: Heine (the poet), Lazare (the rebel), K. (the protagonist of Kafka's *The Castle*), and Chaplin (the film maker). Each is different. One, Chaplin, is not even Jewish, as Arendt concedes in what must have been a hastily added footnote. But they have one thing in common. They don't deny their pariah status, they embrace it and they adopt common tactics in response to the majority that marginalizes them: laughter, irony, and the pariah's mocking infiltration of, or resistance to, the dominant culture that excludes him, are among the strategies Arendt admires in these four men. Lazare, because he is, as she says, a rebel, is the only one of the 4 to whom political theorists have thus far paid

²⁷ Eric Santner's *Stranded Objects* (1993) makes use of this term in a Winnicottian way, as well. Co-teaching Arendt with Santner a year ago was also a great opportunity to think through some of the issues in play here.

much attention.²⁸ But the other three, all operating in the object-deprived world of European Jewry, are instructive as well. I close with some thoughts on Heine, because he represents culture, the domain in which Winnicott sees healthy object relations as ultimately resettled. Also, Heine's Sabbath poetry offers an important instance of thingification, the making of a public thing.

For Arendt, Heine is the 'poet-king' of the unassimilable Jews. He responds to their pariah status by way of universals, both low and high: food and bodily pleasure, on the one hand, and the sun, the gods, the universals of nature and culture, on the other. Heine 'turns,' Arendt says, 'naturally to that which entertains and delights the common people,' sharing 'their joys and sorrows, their pleasure and their tribulations, from the world of men [...] [to the] bounty of the earth!' (2007, 278). Some 'stupid and undiscerning' critics see in this, in Heine, a certain 'materialism or atheism,' but, Arendt says, it is in fact just 'simple joie de vivre [...] which one finds everywhere in children,' a 'passion' underwritten by a 'bare fact'—that of human equality, experienced in 'the presence of such universal things as the sun, music, trees and children.' Nature is Heine's ally, enlisted in the 'spirit of mockery' and 'scorn' to deny the 'reality of the social order' that discriminates unjustly. But laughter is not enough. It 'does not kill,' nor liberate.

Heine's triumph was to not just mock but to perform a catachresis, joining Jewish and German themes, particulars and would-be universals. Like a Trojan horse, he insinuates the goods of Judaism into the heart of German art. In beautiful German verse, his Sabbath poetry celebrates Cholent (or, in German, Schalet), the low stew of beans eaten by Jews on the Sabbath because it can be laid up to cook before the day of rest and thus not violate the prohibition against cooking on the sacred day.

Schalet, ray of light immortal
Schalet, daughter of Elysium!
So had Schiller's song resounded,
Had he ever tasted Schalet

Arendt argues that Heine puts Cholent alongside the universal, on 'the table of the gods, beside nectar and ambrosia,' and imagines Schiller would join him in his judgment. There is, Arendt insists with admiration, no hint of chosenness here, nor of the exceptionalism of 19th century Jewish mysticism. Instead, Arendt says, Heine turned to the 'homespun Judaism of everyday life, to that which really lay in the heart and on the lips of the average Jew; and through the medium of the German language

28 Jennifer Ring is an exception; see her 'The Pariah as Hero' (1991), especially 438, but she does not go into detail. What she does is interesting, though. Ring establishes the importance of private things, on Arendt's account, like chairs and tables, to a shared public world, and she sees the centrality to Arendt of public space. But Ring does not cross from this to wonder about the hybrid, the public things that do for the public what the chair and table do for the private, act as the stuff of the world (1991, 438). Ring also puzzles over the seeming contradiction between what Arendt says about the public sphere needing to be both permanent and portable (440). Winnicott can help solve the puzzle: these are precisely the traits he prizes about the transitional object—that it is (relatively) permanent and portable.

he gave it a place in general European culture. Indeed, it was the very introduction of these homely Jewish notes that helped make Heine's works so essentially popular and human' (2007, 282).

Unfortunately, Arendt's mention of European culture erases Heine's actual point of departure, which is not European but rather the Arabian tales of transformation, in which a human, often a prince, is changed into an animal or monster, with the occasional relief or restoration for a day.²⁹ This is the genre into which Heine emplots the Sabbath ritual in which the lowest Jewish man becomes a king in his house once a week as he welcomes the Sabbath bride. The Sabbath suspends the ordinary relations of social hierarchy. The Jew who lives all week long as 'a dog, with dog ideas,' is on this one day, dignified, a follower of god, a man out of time.

Also, though Arendt does not note it, it is key that Cholent, a public Jewish thing, becomes a public thing by *way* of this Heinean catechresis. It is not mere food (doomed to disappear in 'use' like the stuff of Arendt's unreliable and impermanent Labor, in *The Human Condition* (1998)), nor is it obviously one of Work's objects, for it is what it is because it comes to stand for the Sabbath, in word, song, and experience. The category defiance of Cholent, which is a food and a word, a thing and an idea, is mirrored by Poetry itself, which causes Arendt quite a bit of consternation as she puzzles over where it belongs in her three part schema of Labor, Work, and Action, in her great book, *The Human Condition*.³⁰ In its transgressive undecidability, Cholent leads us from Work to Action, from Cooking to Fabrication to Politics: it is a public thing, around which publics constellate, by which some are interpellated into an equality that we may need to reimagine. Cholent, and perhaps also the table on which it sits (and for which it is a synecdoche), becomes a public thing once worded in poetry. This is what Heine leaves to us and it is the sort of thing—hybrid, public, magical, and nutritional—that might have the power to enchant future citizenships.

29 'In Arabia's book of fable / We behold enchanted princes / Who at times their form recover / Fair as first they were created'. On Heine's life and this poem, see Brenner, Jersch-Wenzel & Meyer (ed) 1997, 199-218.

30 On Cholent, in German, Schalet, see Cooper (1993), especially 183 ff. Patchen Markell has also recently turned to Arendt on Work, though not to object relations, as such. In an essay published in *College Literature* (2011), he notes that Arendt's treatment of Work is actually full of 'torsions' that undermine the seemingly categorical distinctions in *The Human Condition* among Labor, Work, Action. Instead, Markell argues, we should see Work as partnered in separate pairs to Labor and Action, leaving us with Labor/Work, and Work/Action. These pairs undo established 'territorial' readings of Arendt, which unduly emphasize her distinctions and fault her for a rigidity that is not hers. Focused on liminal examples like art, which appears toward (though not at) the end of the Work chapter, Markell suggests that Work bridges over to Action, rather than demarcating an unbridgeable difference between them. Poetry, part of Work, Arendt decides in the end, bridges to Action, as Markell suggests, but, as Heine's Sabbath poetry suggests, it has the power also to bring food with it. On the importance of food in the context of contemporary global/local politics, see my discussion of Slow Food in *Emergency Politics* (2009).

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