
Review

New forms of revolt: Essays on Kristeva's intimate politics

Sarah K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel (eds.)
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New Forms of Revolt is a rewarding volume for those with a serious interest in Julia Kristeva, especially her theory of revolt. In this review, I will first name the overall strengths of the volume, then I will provide chapter summaries. Because this is a review for *Contemporary Political Theory*, I will summarize only those chapters with explicitly political themes, omitting the volume's third section, 'Language and Narrative in Kristeva.'

One strength that runs throughout the volume is the contributors' ability to relate Kristeva's thought to that of other theorists. For example, Hannah Arendt's writings are discussed by Sara Beardsworth, Elaine P. Miller, and Sarah Kathryn Marshall, but each chapter contributes something unique to Kristeva's interpretation of Arendt. And Surti Singh's chapter considers Kristeva's use of the 'society of the spectacle' as developed by Guy Debord and the ways in which their thinking converges and diverges. The second strength is the devotion of each author to reading Kristeva with a critical, yet generous eye. The editors, Sarah K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel, begin the volume with this careful balance. They note the increasing importance of Kristeva's understanding of revolt to our contemporary world, but they make clear the limitations caused by her failure to take histories of racism and colonialism into account. Similarly, Elena Ruiz judiciously highlights the potential of Kristeva's theory of language for understanding political art in Latin America, while also explaining how Kristeva's framework participates in a history of linguistic violence.

The editors' introduction presents a summary of Kristeva's concept of 'revolt' and then briefly summarizes the contributions that follow. In concise and clear terms, Hansen and Tuvel explain that Kristeva's understanding of revolt has changed over the decades of her authorship. Whereas her earlier work, particularly *Revolution in Poetic Language*, focused on language, there is a shift to the intimate, that is, to individual psychic life, on the one hand, and to the diffusion of power, on the other. One of the most helpful things about the introduction is that the editors show how *Powers of Horror*, *Tales of Love*, and *Black Sun* paved the way for her



later development of intimate revolt by turning to both individual psychic processes (like abjection) and the social conditions that enable those processes. While revolt is not a central concern of this trilogy, Hansen and Tuvel make it clear that these texts are important for understanding Kristeva's later writings. The editors also explain that Kristeva is increasingly concerned with the absence of a unified authority, law, or the Symbolic, against which one can transgress. Instead, power is becoming diffuse, disciplinary, normalizing. Without a commonly understood power against which to revolt, it becomes less and less clear how one can even conceive of revolution, let alone actually revolt. This is why revolt must be intimate.

The chapters in Part I consider the theory of revolt Kristeva has developed. The first chapter is a contribution by Kristeva herself. Here, she briefly outlines her understanding of humanism, then discusses two examples: 'adolescents in want of ideals and maternal passion at the crossroads of biology and meaning' (p. 19). At barely five pages, this chapter only touches on some themes that concern Kristeva at greater length elsewhere. As such, it would not serve well as a general introduction to her thought. Instead, the chapter makes connections between her different concerns in a concise way for those already familiar with her work.

The second chapter, by Singh, has two aims: first, to interrogate the extent to which Kristeva's own psychoanalytic categories perpetuate the society of the spectacle and second, to interrogate the specifically masculine perspective of the spectacle which is neglected by Debord's analysis. Singh explains Kristeva's understanding of fantasy as occurring at different levels and across different levels of conscious awareness. Thus, whereas the Lacanian imaginary would only reinforce the society of the spectacle in which the presence of images floods our daily lives, fantasy (and the forms of art that provoke fantasy) hold the promise of encouraging revolt as questioning, as thinking and imagining ourselves and the world otherwise. Turning to Debord, Singh argues that his understanding of the society of the spectacle as constructing our subjectivities can add a social dimension to Kristevan intimate revolt. In other words, the questioning involved in intimate revolt must also be a questioning of the social conditions that give rise to particular subjectivities, namely those social conditions that hinder revolt by determining in advance what we imagine and desire.

Beardsworth's contribution is a reading of Kristeva alongside Gillian Rose. She shows how Kristeva's Freudian inheritance and Rose's Hegelian inheritance lead both authors to be critical of Arendt's dismissal of the social, but in different ways. For Kristeva, revolt involves a retrospective return to the timeless, a return in which we are pushed to the border of our speaking being, where drives meet thought and language. Rose encourages us to embrace the anxiety of beginning, the awareness that the result of our actions cannot be predicted in advance, because otherwise we fail to take political risks and fall into either a 'moral judgment that does not act' or a political idealism that acts without thinking (p. 55). In modern worlds,



Beardsworth contends, the relationship between Kristeva and Rose is a chiasmatic one: 'In the life and consciousness of action we are already strangers to ourselves; strangers to ourselves, in revolt we advance to the break of life and consciousness' (p. 60). This formulation shows how Rose's problematization of action and Kristeva's problematization of psychic life cannot be reconciled, nor are they contradictory. Instead, read together they offer two simultaneous approaches to a critique of life in modernity.

Part II contains three chapters, each of which offers an exceptionally clear application of Kristeva's theories to particular works or settings. Ruiz's chapter skillfully navigates between the promise of Kristeva's theory of language for understanding narratives of resistance in Latin American contexts and the danger of Kristeva's theory in the same contexts. Ruiz first gives a brief history of the way in which Amerindian languages that were embodied and laden with ambiguity were colonized by being forced into European grammatical strictures like the alignment of script with spoken language. She then argues that Kristeva's theory of language participates in this colonization by assuming that language is universally representational. She attributes this flaw to her commitment to psychoanalysis which leads her to make universal claims about psychic structures (and thus language). Despite this worry, Ruiz concludes by contending that Kristeva's development of the semiotic elements of language can help us understand artistic and narrative forms of resistance in Latin American contexts, precisely because of the already colonized signifying economies that threaten to erase a range of meanings and experiences.

Amy Ray Stewart's contribution analyzes the artwork of Kara Walker through a Kristevian lens. Walker's images call forth a revolt through their ambiguity, inviting the viewer's questioning and participation. Stewart borrows Lacan's term 'extimate,' understood as the Real that cuts through both the internal and external of the psyche, to describe the affect of Walker's artistic depictions of trauma as they call forth the histories of racial and sexual violence that are external to us and yet shape us deeply. But the presentation of the trauma is not just about reliving the trauma. Instead, understood as a form of intimate revolt, Walker's images call upon viewers to return to the repressed, the individual and cultural memories that are foreclosed or ignored. This offers the possibility of sublimating these traumatic memories into new forms of questioning, thinking, and response.

In the sixth chapter, Melinda C. Hall offers a model of 'patient interpretation' for medical professionals. Noting that the experience of abjection (a revulsion, for example, that I may be made sick by this patient) is a common response of medical professionals to their patients, Hall is skeptical of attempts to care for patients in which the caregiver puts herself in the shoes of the patient. Instead, she calls for a patient interpretation that listens without imposing meanings or diagnoses that allows patients to represent their own suffering, and helps them come to terms with their altered identities in their own time. In other words, patient interpretation



opens up a space and time for the patient's intimate revolt. This model differs not only from the diagnostic paradigm, but also from other forms of narrative medicine, namely 'narrative phronesis,' because these medical paradigms impose narratives from the outside rather than allowing patients to develop their own self-understandings. Hall concludes by suggesting that this ethics of interaction between care-givers and patients may also become a new politics, one in which we patiently allow others to be in progress – rather than tokens of 'prefabricated images and stereotypes' – and one in which we acknowledge but refuse to be overcome by our revulsion at others' differences, illnesses, and disabilities.

In short, *New Forms of Revolt* offers multiple readings of Kristeva, each of which shows the promise of her writings while at the same time – indeed, in a Kristevan way – creating something new.

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