

Revolt: The sense and non-sense of Kristeva

Layal Ftouni, Magdalena Górska & Jamila Mascot

Abstract: Revolt, for Julia Kristeva, is not as a singular socio-political moment of breaking away, but as Rosemarie Buikema puts it, “a process of movement and repetition” (Buikema, 2020, 6), “a reversal, a relocation, a transformation, but also a return” (7). The article returns to Kristeva’s original approach to revolt. It will first retrace Kristeva’s peculiar conceptualisation of this notion; particularly focusing on its psychoanalytical dimension vis-à-vis ‘the semiotic’ and ‘the symbolic’. The article further discuss the limits of revolt’s intimate framing and the shortfalls of what we argue is Kristeva’s exorcism of the political from the spirit of revolt.

Keywords: revolt, symbolic, semiotic, psychoanalysis, politics

Revolting, intimately

In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* ([1996] 2000) Kristeva examines the crisis of revolt, reflecting on the legacy of 1968 nearly three decades later. By observing the downfall of rebellious ideologies and the rise of consumerism and entertainment cultures in post-89 societies, Kristeva tackles the transformations that have trapped the spirit of revolt, eventually leading to an impasse. She particularly highlights the power vacuum inherent in the new world order and the emergence of what she terms the ‘patrimonial individual’ – a possessor of organs rather than an agentic subject.

In her view, the collapse of authority in modern technocratic regimes has dramatically jeopardized the culture of revolt, fuelling the proliferation of what she refers to as the ‘new maladies of the soul’. Prohibitions rather than *injustices* are indispensable for Kristeva to keep the spirit of revolt alive: “There is no revolt without prohibition of some sort. If there weren’t, whom would you revolt against?” (Kristeva, 2002, 31). Hence her concern for the triumph of neoliberal governance where “prohibition or power can no longer be found, disciplinary and administrative punishments multiply, repressing, or better still, normalizing everyone” (5).

While detecting and dissecting the causes of the current crisis of revolt, Kristeva also reiterates the question of its conditions of possibility with the declared intention to rekindle its flame through art, theory, and psychoanalysis. On the one hand, Kristeva embarks in a captivating journey through the polysemic etymology of revolt from Sanskrit to French delving into the multifaceted meaning of the term that encompasses notions of turning, returning, and overturning. On the other, she inscribes the tradition of revolt within a predominantly Euro-centred genealogy of critical theories and cultures of critique spanning Descartes' radical doubt and Hegel's concept of negativity as well as Freud's psychoanalysis and twentieth-century artistic avant-gardes.

In spite of the crisis of revolt she diagnosed, Kristeva emphasises the pressing need to revitalise the spirit of revolt for both individuals and collectivities insofar as "happiness only exists at the price of revolt" (2000, 7). According to her, revolt is not only essential for intimate growth but also vital for the survival of civilization itself. It becomes a matter of life and death, an imperative rather than an option.

Drawing on Freud, Kristeva (2000) considers three main instantiations of revolt. The first Oedipal expression of revolt, as exposed in *Totem and taboo* (1913), refers to the ancestral transgression of the father's tyrannical authority by his offspring serving as the genesis of civilization. In this context, the ongoing re-enactment of the parricide by means of rituals and sacrifices is, in Freud's view, what perpetuates the performance of revolt throughout history. A second significant manifestation of revolt is to be found in Freud's conception of anamnesis conceived as a Proustian search for lost time. Here, revolt designates the platonic move of returning to oneself for uncovering the truth, or the critical gesture of retrieving and reviving the past to work it through – it is in this sense that Buikema's conception of cultural critique finds its primary inspiration in Kristeva's works. Lastly, the third meaning Kristeva assigns to the concept of revolt centres around processes of displacement and combinatory games that occur within language and that she explores in art, literature, and psychoanalytical work.

Accordingly, the intimate realm of the psyche that is activated through psychoanalytic self-interrogation, art and literature is the privileged locus of revolt. However, revolt also exceeds the space of radical interiority as it is bound to creating new meanings that only emerge through the encounter between the self and the world, through the "interstice [where] appropriating and being possessed" that constitute the individual take place (Kristeva, 2002, 122). Kristeva's conceptualisation of revolt thus enacts a relation between the self and the world structured by negativity delineating the impetus of the negative in the *semiotic* – related to the maternal, the feminine, and the poetic – which she argues holds the potential to disrupt the *symbolic* – linked to the paternal, the authority and the law.

Subverting the social: on the semiotics of revolt

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Kristeva introduces the concept of the semiotic as the site of libidinal drives that precedes the subject's constitution by and entry into the Symbolic. By means of the Law of the Father, the not-yet subject proceeds from the semiotic to the Symbolic and therefore to the realm of language and communicability. Although understood to be in a chronological relationship to one another, the boundaries of the semiotic and the symbolic, according to Kristeva, are porous. The "subject" of the drives and the subject of language are dialectically entangled. The former holds the power of the negative that can potentially challenge the latter. As Sina Kramer (2013) argues, the disruptive movement of the negativity of the semiotic in Kristeva's work becomes "the condition of the possibility of anything like a stable subject, but that is also the possibility of that subject's dissolution and fragmentation" (467).

The semiotic for Kristeva (1984) thus expresses the libidinal *within* the terms of language. And so, rather than engaging 'subjectivity' as proceeding from a pre-linguistic/ libidinal 'subject' to a speaking subject within the symbolic, Kristeva emphasises the processual nature of subjectivity as a subject on trial (*sujet en procès*). However, as Judith Butler (1989) points out, even as Kristeva is able to challenge the universalization of the paternal law in language, in the core of her logic, Kristeva understands the semiotic as subordinate to the Symbolic, which reinscribes the hierarchy and stability of the law she aims to subvert. Any complete breakaway from the symbolic inevitably leads to psychosis (105). As Butler writes:

Kristeva accepts the assumption(...) that the symbolic is fully subsumed under the "Law of the Father", and that the only modes of non-psychotic activity are those which participate in the symbolic to some extent. Her strategic task, then, is not to replace the symbolic with the semiotic nor to establish the semiotic as a rival cultural possibility, but rather to validate those experiences within the symbolic that permit a manifestation of the borders which divide the symbolic from the semiotic. (1989, 107)

In that sense Kristeva's (1984) approach is indeed not about breaking away from the Symbolic but about *working through* the already mentioned interstices of the Symbolic and the semiotic which are, however, in a hierarchical relationship. The question, therefore, is how powerful the working in the interstices may be in disrupting the Symbolic while staying within the realm of non-psychotic (i.e. in the realm of intelligibility that is enabled through the Symbolic). This working in the interstices – that for Kristeva constitutes revolt as a continuous process of reimagining, returning, and redefining – takes place through heterogenous

maternal drives and in poetic language that enact subversions. As the semiotic is the repressed interior of the Symbolic, revolt, then, can only act in a form of change-from-within of the hegemonic 'Law of the Father'.

But, importantly, what is central to this conceptualisation of revolt is the role of the maternal body. While the Symbolic is understood by Kristeva as a domain of culture and language, it is the maternal body that enables what Kristeva considers as a subversive potential of the semiotic. For Kristeva, the maternal body's subversive potential lies in its pre-discursive character, as existing prior to signification, prior to the paternal law. However, the notion of the maternal is problematically reified in the "naturalistic ontology" (Butler 1989, 104) that anchors Kristeva's understanding of the maternal body, maternal drives, and motherhood. As such the notion of the maternal is grounded in essentialised, naturalised, feminised, and heteronormative notion of motherhood which, while being assigned as a force of multiplicity, becomes as much a "univocal signifier" as the paternal law (114). Moreover, as Butler (1989) points out, Kristeva's notion of maternal body is itself discursively constituted (through e.g. heteronormative discourse of sexuality, womanhood, and female embodiment that are, in turn, also founded on the concept of maternal body as pre-discursive):

The law that is said to repress the semiotic may well be the governing principle of the semiotic itself, with the result that what passes as "maternal instinct" may well be a culturally constructed desire which is interpreted through a naturalistic vocabulary. And if that desire is constructed according to a law of kinship which requires the heterosexual production and reproduction of desire, then the vocabulary of naturalistic affect effectively renders that "paternal law" invisible. What Kristeva refers to as a "pre-paternal causality" would then appear as a paternal causality under the guise of a natural or distinctively maternal causality. (Butler, 1989, 115)

In that sense, the semiotic and the maternal body that is at its core are themselves products of and governed by the Symbolic they aim to subvert. Their relationship – and potential of subversion – takes place on the level of signification, as it is through signification that intelligibility is constituted and negotiated. Revolt – whose site once again resides in the psyche – then becomes a continuous reworking of existing relations of signification (Buikema, 2020, 7). This understanding of revolt then addresses the possibility of change from within the Symbolic, through the semiotic, on the level of signification. This is indeed an important work of continuous resignification in which the semiotic and the maternal are vehicles of a discursive revolt, while at the same time they cannot escape their own discursive (and Symbolic) constitution. For Kristeva, however, it is not possible to break away

from the Symbolic in an act of complete overthrowing. Her vision for political agency then lies in the reworking, relocating, returning, refiguring, resignifying. And it is the process of resignification that is the stage for revolt.

Exorcising the political

Despite Kristeva's (2002) claim of intimate revolt's framing as a "dialectic process" (120) her argument raises a manifestly a-dialectical dilemma qua politics. For her, only intimate revolt via radical questioning allows for the renewal of social relations and symbolic rearticulations. Political revolt, on the other hand, as a collective expression of discontent with the status quo, inevitably leads to dogmatic perseverance. Kristeva thus explicitly takes aim at political understandings of the concept of revolt that establish a rapprochement between revolt and revolution:

In contemporary society the word revolt means very schematically political revolution (...). I would like to strip the word "revolt" of its purely political sense. In all Western traditions, revolt is a very deep movement of discontent, anxiety, and anguish. In this sense, to say that revolt is only politics is a betrayal of this vast movement. People have reduced, castrated, and mutilated the concept of revolt by turning it only into politics. (2002, 99)

Detaching revolt from its ordinary political connotation, Kristeva thus frames it as an intrapsychic experience and/or a mode of representation that is embedded in language. The intimate act of returning and resignifying is key to revolt to avoid foreclosures of dogmatism or repetition of oppressive logics that consolidate the Symbolic order and the Law of the Father, both of which Kristeva argues are often reinstated in the tradition, process, and the aftermath of political revolutions:

When one is involved in politics it is very difficult to escape dogmatism (...). I am increasingly skeptical about the capacity of political movements to remain places of freedom. Liberation movements are often threatened and monitored. They become paranoid and turn into sects driven by death and dogmatism, often even with the best intentions. We saw this with the feminist movement which rapidly became a movement of chiefs where women crushed women inside the same group. (2002, 107-108)

Therefore, for Kristeva, revolt cannot be reduced to protest and rather designates a permanent movement of discontent in the pursuit of happiness. Revolution, instead, becomes synonymous with the death of revolt. As she argues:

What I am trying to say is that the meaning of revolt, which could be taken as revolution, would reduce the concept to socio-political protests. This constitutes a betrayal of revolt. Very often political movements have tried to abolish old values in order to replace them with new ones, but without questioning these new ideas. For example, the French Revolution was against the Ancien Regime. As a consequence, the Third-Estate becomes the new power, however the Third-Estate ceases to question itself. (...) Thus, you can see how the French Revolution becomes a betrayal of the initial movement of revolt. If you take the Russian Revolution, things are even clearer. The Russian Revolution established a totalitarian regime which betrayed the revolt, because the rebellion against the old bourgeois world forgot to question the new values that it put in its place. The so-called proletariat was the bearer of freedom. But the proletariat later became the Communist party without self-questioning, thus killing freedom. (2002, 102)

In Kristeva's view, history has sufficiently demonstrated that revolutionary adventures cannot but end up being reified into dogmatic nightmares. In this regard, her words align with Hannah Arendt's (1970) well-known apprehension that "The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution" (70). Instead, revolt, qua permanent *revolvere*, appears as the only possible antidote against the fixation of new oppressive structures of power. For this purpose, revolt must be stripped of its all-encompassing political semantics and relocated in the intimate realm of the psyche:

One wonders if the realization of the revolt I am referring to is possible only in the private sphere: for example, in the psychoanalytical self-interrogation that people practice with themselves, or in an aesthetic framework (in literary or pictorial creation), or maybe in certain contexts that are not directly political, but at the meeting point between different religiosities that question the sacred. (Kristeva, 2002, 107)

In the end, Kristeva's disillusionment with politics drives her "to get back to the intimate well-springs of revolt" (2022, 85) at the expense of political engagement. This apolitical, if not outrightly anti-political, take on revolt is supplemented by a turn towards the spiritual dimension of revolt, or what she calls the 'new sacred'. The 'new sacred' she observes is free from the dogmatic ordinance of religion and its institutions. It is experienced in the search for happiness as a journey for the individual and by extension the social. This, she argues, was a primary demand of the May '68 revolts signalling an unprecedented shift in values from a fight for *homo faber* to that of *homo ludens* (2002, 36). For Kristeva, the 1968 revolt allowed psychic and bodily pleasures and desires to access representation and was less so

about economic equality or better working conditions and more about the pursuit of subjective freedoms through calling into question laws, norms, and orders. In Kristeva's own words, 1968 has been indeed the revolt of "young people abreacting their 'second Oedipus', i.e. their adolescence, on the back of an obsolete State and a prurient consumer society" (2002, 12). Interestingly, Kristeva's psychic portrait of the adolescent as a believer praises its faith or capacity for belief, which she considers crucial for both identity development and production of meaning. Marked by stubborn beliefs and romantic devotion and punctuated by identity crisis, the adolescent's faith may be crucial to rekindling a sense of revolt against the *ennui* pervading our post-1989 society of spectacle, according to Kristeva's diagnosis. For the adolescent, as much as for the believer and the revolutionary, all spirits that demand the impossible, intimate, and ceaseless questioning – Kristeva's only radical premise for revolt – meet the *longue durée* of an obstinate attachment to the ideal. However, in her turn to the 'new sacred', Kristeva extricates once more the political from the spirit of revolt, in a move akin to an exorcist ridding the soul from the haunting ghosts of death and defeat. The ghosts of failed liberation struggles, of the promise of communist utopia turned to totalitarianism, or those of the fall of socialism and the intensification of late neoliberal capitalism that haunt Europe today are exorcised into oblivion. As Enzo Traverso (2016) writes, the disenchantment with the revolutionary past of the twentieth century has made "the tension between the future and the past a sort of 'negative, mutilated dialectic' (xiv) often leading to a melancholic attachment to an ideal that never was and has no visible future; a melancholia that posits historical defeats as definitive downfalls. He further argues such "a theory of defeat is an attempt at exorcism" (33). Traverso makes a clear distinction between melancholia as an attempt at severing ties with the revolutionary past and transformative melancholia true to a Marxist tradition and that refuses to be overcome by such defeats. He writes:

Left-wing melancholy does not mean to abandon the idea of socialism or the hope for a better future; it means to rethink socialism in a time in which its memory is lost, hidden, and forgotten and needs to be redeemed. This melancholia does not mean lamenting a lost utopia, but rather rethinking a revolutionary project in a nonrevolutionary age. (2016, 20)

Despite Kristeva's attempt to revive the spirit of revolt in the non-revolutionary age, her understanding of intimate revolt as ceaseless self-interrogation exposes an astounding blindness to the socio-political and historical material conditions that compelled workers, anti-colonial, feminist, anti-fascist and socialist revolts and the array of hopes, freedom dreams and perseverance that mobilised such revolts. The blind spot in her perspective lies precisely in the inability to conceive – beyond the

alternative between permanent questioning and dogmatic perseverance – of radical perseverance, namely the possibility that conviction and disillusionment, doubts and passions, scepticism and idealism can coexist within a continuum of political affects that form the foundation of partisan long-lasting political commitment, without which the lost causes of previous revolutions will simply be lost forever.

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. 1970. "Reflections on Civil Disobedience". *The New Yorker*, 12 September 1970: 70.
- Buikema, Rosemarie. 2020. *Revolts in Cultural Critique*. London: Rowman and Littlefield International.
- Butler, Judith. "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva". *Hypatia* 3(3): 104-118.
- Kramer, Sina. 2013. "On Negativity in Revolution in Poetic Language". *Continental Philosophy Review* 46(3): 465-479.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1984. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Translated by Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1989. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Translated by Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 2000. *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 2002. *Revolt, She Said*. Translated by Brian O'Keeffe. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Traverso, Enzo. 2016. *Left-Wing Melancholia*. New York: Columbia University Press.

About the authors

Layal Ftouni: Assistant Professor, Gender and Critical Theory, Utrecht University.
Magdalena Górska: Assistant Professor, Gender and Critical Theory, Utrecht University.
Jamila Mascat: Assistant Professor, Gender and Postcolonial Studies, Utrecht University.