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Hamner - A Private Happiness for All ... - JCRT 4.1

A Private Happiness for All, Or,

How to Cure National Depression, Hold Down a Career, Fulfill the Maternal Function and Still Wage Feminist Battle with a Smile

A Review of Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, ed. Sylv're Lotringer, trans. Brian O'Keeffe (*Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series*: 2002); and Julia Kristeva and CatherineClément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Columbia University Press: 2001).

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Perhaps the reader will hold on to the imperative for permanent questioning as the principal note of our approach to both the sacred and the feminine.

The above sentence forms the end of Julia Kristeva's entries in *The Feminine and the Sacred*, a book of letters she co-wrote with CatherineClément.¹ Clément's rejoinder is a mere two sentences, the second of which reads: 'Act will therefore be the last word.' Taken together the sentences cradle the best of *Revolt, She Said*, a collection of interviews with Kristeva that forms the substance of this review. Action, imperative, questioning, the sacred, and the feminine: these terms cradle 'the best' of *Revolt, She Said*. They also capture what is odd, if not downright problematic about it, a claim that will come as no surprise to those who have, like me, trudged through *The Feminine and the Sacred* and wondered with depressing frequency why, exactly, I was reading this bizarre 'exchange'. Nonetheless, I will focus on what I find compelling and helpful in this short book.

*It is when revolt becomes the majority position that it takes to killing.*²

Revolution

The text is divided into three sections. The interviews with Petit (originally published in France the same year as *Le féminine et le sacré*)³ are here divided into four mini-chapters: 'What's left of 1968?', 'Why France, Why the Nation?', 'The Disorders of Psychoanalysis', and 'It's Right to Rebel'. The second section holds interviews with Rainer Ganahl called *Revolt and Revolution* (divided into 'Politics and Psychoanalysis' and 'The Sacred'), and the third section offers Rub'n Gallo's interview titled *Can there Be Revolt without Representation?* (subdivided into 'Powers of Revolt' and 'Limits of Rebellion'). Each of the interviewers exhibits broad familiarity with Kristeva's work and each asks compelling, intelligent questions.

In what follows I will pull across the book's divisions to discuss certain key words and themes, notably revolution, the sacred, what I take to be her assessment, vision and hope for political action, and notions of femininity and feminism.

¹Translated by Jane Marie Todd (Columbia University Press: 2001), 178. The translation is from the *Le féminine et le sacré* ('ditions Stock: 1998).

²CatherineClément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 176.

³Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, ed. Sylv're Lotringer, trans. Brian O'Keeffe (*Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series*: 2002). Three-quarters of this text present a series of interviews with Philippe Petit originally published as *Contre la dépression nationale* (Les Editions Textuel: 1998). The remainder of the book consists of interviews by Rainer Ganahl and Rub'n Gallo, which I presume were conducted for this English publication.

In 'What's Left of 1968?' Kristeva shares her memories of the events, goals, and effects of May '68 amid a number of delectable bits of intellectual biography for those of us who seek out that genre. For instance, she talks of reading Hegel's *Logic* and Marx's *18th Brumaire*, of the currents of thought that led her into psychoanalysis, and of her early, disappointing experiences with the feminist movement. Still, her primary aim in this section is to convey the import and legacy of that unusual spring, and the conversation sets the theme of the entire collection.

In discussing the events of that unusual spring Kristeva avers that, even then, she was less interested in 'contestation' in the sense of the 'freedom to change or to succeed' and more in terms of the 'freedom to revolt, to call things into question' (12). This shift in understanding of freedom and revolution—from, to put it crassly, an externally oriented battle against the status quo to a more internal and constitutive mode of being and thought—is the leitmotif of *Revolt, She Said*. Revolution should not, Kristeva claims, connote political upset or a struggle to overturn oppressive norms, but rather a psychological, even existential disposition. Revolution means 'permanent questioning,' the same mood and mode as what she suggests her reader hold onto as 'imperative' in her last sentence of *The Feminine and the Sacred*. How does she come by this understanding of revolt?⁴

To Ganahl she notes her reliance on the Sanskrit root of revolt, meaning 'to discover, open, but also to turn, to return' (100). She says to Petit that revolt suggests 'return, returning, discovering, uncovering, and renovating,' and that it exhibits clear 'potential for making gaps, rupturing, renewing' (85). Kristeva takes the concept in two imbricating directions. First, summarized by Augustine's phrase '*Quaesto mihi factus sum* (I have become a question to myself)' (81), revolt concerns an intimate sense of self-questioning and anxious sense of negation or annihilation. Second, encapsulated in Thomas's dictum 'establish yourself within yourself' (17), she posits revolt as a discovery of or return to the self, a renovation that functions as a psychological and ontological precondition for (political) engagement with others. The two senses of revolt imbricate or co-implicate in that the anxiety or restlessness of self-questioning acts as a clearing or opening that allows for self-renewal ('establishment') and for a revealing to and of the other that she calls 'the foundation of freedom' (104).

To Kristeva, it is because social revolution 'turns its back on' (81) the relentless questioning that instigates it, that revolution 'turns into dogmatism, terror and totalitarianism' (81). To obviate this failure, she implies, but never quite states that social revolution must be accompanied or preceded by psychological revolution. May '68 continues to be our inspiration, she posits, since that moment was essentially about just this mode of permanent questioning (26), but revolution now is not behind a barricade so much as on an analyst's couch. With some humor and some sadness, Kristeva notes that today people 'are [at most] asked to work well and buy as much as possible.' In other words the hope of May '68 has devolved into the 'terror and dogmatism' of our corporatized and commodified worlds. Psychoanalysis, Kristeva urges, can act as yesterday's political leader or last century's spiritual shaman, guiding us in 'rehabilitat[ing]' our memories and disposing us to self-questioning in a process she terms an 'essential kind of resistance' to our technocratic society (101).

The goal of such analysis (as was the goal of May '68) is 'public happiness,' or 'public jouissance,' and Kristeva presumes the common currency of this goal in that we live in a culture that 'continually questions identities and institutions' (42). I'm not sure we do live in such a culture; but as with many of Luce Irigaray's stated hopes for the future of women, the future conditional regularly pops up in Kristeva's words. For instance, she rewrites Camus' statement, 'I revolt, therefore we are' as 'I

⁴The thematic reworking of revolution is given greater space in Kristeva's two recently translated works, *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Columbia UP: 2000) / *Sense et non-sense de la r'volte* (Jussieux, Paris: 1996) and *Intimate Revolt*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Columbia UP: 2002) / *La R'volte intime* (Librairie Arthème Fayard: 1997).

revolt, therefore we are still to come' (42). Thus rebellion morphs to revolution'which pulls change into the psyche and into the private spheres of society'and the immediacy of 'we are' morphs to the indefiniteness and deferral of 'we are still to come' 'which indicates that it is precisely the vagueness of permanent questioning that allows resistance to market forces.

Despite her claim that we (that is, the left descendants of May '68 and, I assume, practicing psychoanalysts) hold to a goal of *public* jouissance, the revolt Kristeva has in mind does not blend well with the inevitable dogmatism of public institutions and political parties. 'One wonders,' she says, 'if the realization of the revolt I am referring to is possible only in the private sphere' (107). In answer to another question, she states that one can only revolt as (within) an individual; revolution against systems is not possible (113). As a result, and although she declares herself less pessimistic than Petit about the public sphere (53), Kristeva conditions her optimism or future conditional hopes by avoiding the 'political'. We need to find spaces alternative to the political, she claims, spaces of 'new forms of spirituality where people can attempt to find this kind of freedom that politics cannot provide' (109).

The latter clause is my clear transition to the next section on the sacred, but it seems important first to put Kristeva's project in a larger frame. Doing so renders it unnecessary to ally with Kristeva's desire for spaces alternative to the political, or with her apparent mandate for undergoing psychoanalysis. One of the persistent and haunting questions of the post World War II episteme remains why the oppressed desire their own oppression.⁵ Kristeva's arguments remain compelling for the questions they pose and interventions they make within this larger question'questions about norms and values (and the desire to overturn them), questions about authority (especial vis'-vis the place of the maternal), and questions about the relations among affect, body and thought.

*I am not speaking of secularism, understood as a battle against religion,
but of atheism as the resorption of the sacred into
the tenderness of the connection to the other.*⁶

Sacred

Kristeva's delineation of revolt as an anxious and permanent questioning that opens a space of self-renewal or establishment helpfully contextualizes her conviction that the most important thrust of May '68 was the shout,'We're realists, we want the impossible!'' She expounds, 'Does the impossible mean happiness? The impossible and more'happiness for all' (13). The desire subtending a practical, material calling-into-question of all norms and values (thus, the desire subtending 'realism' or our response to actually existing conditions) is desire for an impossible happiness, not as a private and personal condition merely, but also as a social, collective condition. This 'public jouissance' gives content to Kristeva's deployment of 'the sacred' and to that phrase we read above, 'new forms of spirituality.' As she herself exclaims, 'Infinite jouissance for each person at the intersection of happiness for all'is it anything else but the sacred?' (34). She also expresses the sacred as 'a fine-tuning between the body and the soul, public and private' (34).

The importance of the body, of desire, and of the public character of this happiness lies in its power to be a means of liberation from bondage to the marketplace or the mere 'entertainments' of popular culture. Kristeva does not display a complete or fundamental skepticism about mass culture, but she joins most theorists of modernity in expressing concern about alienation (the term in the text is 'isolation', e.g., 32), that is, the market and other structural forces that keep us from

⁵This question is posed, for example, in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, especially in their two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. But the question 'belongs' to no theorist in particular, acting, as it did, as a rhizomatic network growing over the Cold War landscape.

⁶Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 60

ourselves and from each other.⁷ She discusses the sacred in terms of the 'bonds' that hold the socius together and, more generally, as whatever enables desire to break through its constraints and reveal itself to an other.⁸ To Petit's question whether this vision is not 'reactivating a kind of civilization of love,' Kristeva responds simply: 'Of course' (77).

Because her hopes lie in and for this civilization of love, Kristeva maintains the necessity of some idea of the nation, not as nationalism, but as 'the people' (54) or 'the country' (55). Indeed, she claims (and this has been a substantive part of her work for some years) that the nation is depressed, or functions collectively as a depressed patient. Critique or disavowal of the nation will only exacerbate this depression. Instead, Kristeva argues, we need to draw on and develop public, cultural antidepressants. She offers one such tonic in her redescription of the nation as offering citizens 'a sense of identity, memory and an ideal'; the nation, she insists, can act 'as a reserve of memory or an imaginary limit' (61), that is, as a concept that can embrace our experiences and hopes for public jouissance. Here, then, lies the terrain of a public that is not a politics: the concept of nation acts as a personal and ideological imaginary that ropes the subject (identity) to history (memory) and to the skittering trajectory of that history into a 'we' that 'is still to come' (ideal). To put this in slightly different terms, Kristeva's hopes for a civilization of love lead her to broaden the concept of the sacred to mean 'recognizing fundamental values [held in memory] and how we [identity] can continue to question them [for the sake of a better future].' (111). Thus revolt itself 'as permanent anxiety and establishing oneself in oneself' is a sacred process.

Kristeva ably condenses her theorizing of these issues when she states that her goal for psychoanalysis is 'to provoke people's anxieties and to free their creativity.' Revolt, the transcendental process conjoining body (insistent desires) and mind (anxious questioning) against what is taken for granted in our memory and our history, clears a space of freedom and revelation that establishes in oneself (without ground) a creative and loving response to the other. This, she implies, is the sacred for our times.

Still, though the sacred implies the public and the collective terrain of history, nation and hope, Kristeva shies away from positing that the sacred can have a primarily social or collective *expression*. Rather, she suggests the need first to attain psychological harmony. The phrase 'to establish oneself' had a particular connotation in the summer of '68, namely the practice among intellectuals of taking up a position in a factory in demonstrative solidarity with the working classes. This manner of 'establishment' is doomed to fail, Kristeva stresses, because without a (renewed) sense of oneself 'which is not the same as a stable or certain sense of oneself' an outward, political mode of establishment will only result in guilt, frustration, and resentment. If Kristeva refuses outward 'establishment,' however, remains suspicious about the political, and emphasizes the private nature of the sacred, what, then, is left of political action?

*Supposing that a non-sacrificial sacred exists, might not the imaginary be one of its possible variants? The imaginary as eternal return, which opens the mind and body to an inquietude without end, and makes it possible to stand straight and lithe in the world?*⁹

⁷Isolation or alienation differs from a conflict and fragmentation within the self, which Kristeva terms pleasurable (100).

⁸Kristeva calls the 'Sacred' a 'knife-edge between life and meaning that goes beyond the social,' and on which women are 'positioned more dramatically' than men. The sacred incarnates 'through revelation to the other' a type of freedom that is both 'impalpable' and 'a very pragmatic one of production and the market.' To her, this type of freedom can act against the limited freedom encased in 'free enterprise' (76).

⁹Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 117.

Political Action

Kristeva's conversations depict political action as aesthetic and affective. For instance, when she discusses the demands of the '68'ers, she lists 'greater democracy, less centralization and finally, greater happiness for all' (13). But the seemingly practical demands of this agenda become swept away in the beautiful and sensual delineation of them: 'The demand for happiness, which all revolutions in modern times harbor, has never been simply a demand for economic happiness more bread for the poor. It's an immediate [aesthetic] claim for sexual and spiritual liberty, an adjustment of private and public pleasure, and as such, it implies a modification of the previous conception of the sacred. A sacred that is no more and no less than the most singular gratification intersecting with the constraints of the community balancing pleasure and sacrifice' (34-35). Political action consists not in goals, but in process, in the tender movements of body and psyche that creatively constitute public, social and affective bonds, without necessarily creating 'community' or a 'polis'. Kristeva's perspective on political action presents a philosophical rendering of the French 'art of living' (82) or *joie de vivre*, which combines (in these interviews, at least) sexual desire and intellectual rigor,¹⁰ 'grace and coquetry' (73), and a vague but real sense of French moderation or maturity by which Kristeva justifies a notion of 'the French exception.'¹¹ It comes as no surprise, then, that her model for public interaction is Proust, a man exiled from society and who teaches us, she says, to 'belong and not belong' (131).¹²

A skeptical interaction, then, an opening *onto* that is not an opening *into* this is the *Gestalt* of public revolt. By this view Kristeva holds in tension optimism about the public, with pessimism about the political. Thus, she imagines a public which 'would be fairer, sensitive to people's singularity, without condemning them to isolation' (43), and counterpoises this public to the dangers inherent in the reifying and reified institutions of politics. Intellectually, I understand her hesitant balance, her depiction of public interchange as a teetering between private retreat and either political domestication (at best) or totalitarianism (at worst). More, I concur with the implicit critique of *pouvoir* or structured power contained in this repositioning of the public. Still and perhaps it's because I am, in my heart, an angry American activist it remains unclear what exactly this public life looks like or consists in. Indeed, Kristeva is not herself always successful in keeping the political out of or away from the public. For example, at one point she conflates the two by calling public engagement a 'political life of contestation and permanent scrutiny' (44).

More troubling, or at least unsatisfactory, is the reasons given for her confession that she has not signed any political petitions in years. She worries, it seems, about her patients; since they are not yet established within themselves, they apparently become discombobulated by their doctor's show of political partisanship (46). In effect, however, Kristeva's concern for her patients is, equally, a refusal of the political as it streams over the face of the public and demands (as does any 'other' before us) recognition. I worry, then, that love obstructs love, that is, I worry that concern for others' establishment (the love of the analyst for the analysand) obstructs the desire for happiness (the anxiety of permanent questioning that arises out of a hope for public *jouissance*).

Kristeva answers my worries in part by dubbing psychoanalysis as the new high priest of society; in other words, she can be read as claiming that the private work of psychoanalysis is always already social in its deployment as well as its effects. She thus asserts that psychoanalysis today 'takes over

¹⁰Page 20: 'In modernity from Diderot and de Sade to Proust and Bataille, this way of taking into account sexual experience and its co-presence with thought is unique to France.'

¹¹See, e.g., her preference for dialogue with what she terms the 'maybe more mature, more knowing' French than with Americans with their 'na've curiosity' (51).

¹²She, too, exemplifies this virtue it seems, since she claims that she remains a stranger in France and probably always shall (45-46).

from politics and religion' in the task of healing citizens, that is, in giving them the tools for working out 'conflicts and crises' (57). She continues: 'That's what public service means, doesn't it? To serve, care for, preserve, revive? Caring, like a basic degree of love, is like a powerful antidepressant' (61). Public life, for Kristeva, extends as a material but tenuous network of intimate associations, each angle of which opens in tender restlessness (inquietude) toward the other, revealing itself in freedom and in love. This ideal, while not a pragmatic program of political action (nor one that yet convinces me), does serve as a powerful *imaginary*, one that lends the body a 'straight and lithe' disposition. For Kristeva, the imaginary of the public-sacred or sacred-public not only forms the precondition for effective intervention in the political but substitutes for it in an act of love that tries to pull against the heavy weight of national depression.

Femininity and Feminism

Kristeva has written consistently about women and has been read and used by feminists internationally. As is well known, however, she exemplifies toward feminist movement exactly the 'belonging without belonging' she thinks Proust models for public life. Nevertheless, far before cultural feminism's exuberant celebrations of 'woman's nature' or more recent (and more sober) discussions of the contradictions encountered in being both laborer and mother, Kristeva was there, quietly theorizing the desires and anxieties subtending 'the maternal'. In these interviews, Kristeva takes one (but too briefly) what she terms the 'real challenge' before women today, namely, 'to do both things at once, i.e., to lead a professional life and life as a mother' (70). Maternity, as she has claimed for decades, is 'the most important civilizing vocation of women' (69), which is not to suggest that women who do not have children are incomplete, or that men do not also exhibit 'symbolic maternity' (70). Again, it is not necessary to assent completely to Kristeva's theories of maternity or to the extreme formulations that sometimes tinge them to recognize the urgency and pertinence of her intervention in the questions and complications surrounding the production and reproduction of labor within global capitalism. Indeed, (presuming my bracketed extension of her following claim) the future of humanity 'depends on our capacity as women [and men] to reconcile sexual and professional freedom with the wish to give life and guide it towards meaning' (69). My extension arises from my own conviction that if this particular social contradiction incarnates most poignantly on, in and through women's bodies, still the burden of 'reconciliation' belongs to all of us, women, men, and also those who resist gender categories. It will take us all to unravel (if not solve) this contradiction because it involves not simply a desire for a child, but the desire for life, for more life, for the life of the future.

Aside from intervening in the current ideology of our social landscape, Kristeva also toys with the utopian. When asked if women should work toward representational parity with men, she hedges. Perhaps, she offers, but often it seems as if women simply are not interested in participating in politics. Maybe, though, this is not a rejection of the political (as her own interviews seem to express!) but a cry for change. 'Give this expression form and content,' she urges. 'Maybe they want a different kind of politics. What kind? What kind of love, family, and procreation might this involve?' (75) The answers received from this line of questioning may not lead to parity but to something else, something I warrant is almost unimaginable to us because it entails shifting the structures of capitalist society off their axis.

Coda

Perhaps it is evident that I hold Kristeva's theories at a certain distance, and this is especially true with regard to her theories about maternity. I must admit, though, an irony in my posture since

she, apparently, would be equally hesitant to stand too close to my American feminist 'aggression' (71), my 'bitterness' (73), and my 'depressions and ill-humor.'¹³ Perhaps she would be surprised that I laughed purely at these caricatures, uncontaminated by any American feminist dark emotion, and at her attempt to justify them with gestures to my 'puritan' culture and my omission from the mature panoply of 'French universalism, that taught us that we're all of the Human race, before we're men and women' (74). As if America's own puritan imaginary doesn't hide the slip of gender oppression under just such a Humanist, albeit Christian, garb.¹⁴ 'French women fight, but with a smile on their faces' (73). Kudos to the French women, then, who 'always with difficulty and always deploying a permanent and open problematic (forever questing, forever questioning)' can cure national depression, hold down a career, fulfill the maternal function and still wage feminist battle with a smile. Let's only hope they expire from mere exhaustion, and not melancholic weariness.

Notes

Gail Hamner is Assistant Professor of Religion at Syracuse University and author of *American Pragmatism: A Religious Genealogy* (Oxford UP: forthcoming). Currently she is editing a manuscript on religion and film and researching the feminist political legacy of Roland Barthes' philosophy of love.

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¹³True, she does say 'it would be pointless for us to mock the American feminists' aggression', but only because 'it's not clear that our refinement as Latins and Europeans can protect us in the long run from this very same barbarity' (72).

¹⁴See Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (NY: Routledge, 1991), 23: 'The slip of anger passes through the conventions of gender', a rhetorical image that has stuck with me for years.