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Arendt's Bearings on Kristeva's Project

Noëlle McAfee

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Noëlle McAfee

Emory University

This new species of rebels/revoltes are enraged and they have not lost the decisive and specific sense of revolt. ...They are discovering for themselves that there is no answer to the social, historic and political dead-ends without a radical inner experience; an inner experience that is altogether demanding, specific and capable of fully understanding the complexity of the past in order to be able to approach the present and the future.

– Julia Kristeva, *New Forms of Revolt*

What is at stake when political revolt depends upon radical inner experience? Is the only route to cultural and political change, as Kristeva seems to argue, through personal introspection and revolt? If we want more from life than the freedom to channel surf, as she says, need the direction of inquiry be primarily inward? Need there be an either/or of psychical versus public life? Is the only answer to social and political dead ends really found by turning inward? Is the micropolitics of the couch the path to freedom? "Today," Kristeva writes, "psychical life knows that it will only be saved if it gives itself the time and space of revolt: to break off, remember, re-form. From prayer to dialogue, through art and analysis, the crucial event is always the great infinitesimal emancipation: to be endlessly recommenced."¹ In this essay I ask whether we might move Kristeva's "New Forms of Revolt" from the couch to the *polis* with the help of one of her major interlocutors, Hannah Arendt, who reminds us that thinking is always a plural affair. I develop a link between Arendt's *thinking* and Kristeva's *revolt* to show how thinking-as-revolt puts subjects in relation to each other and to the political. Such a political culture of revolt can engage in the work needed to move beyond adolescent fixations in melancholic times. And with it we might in fact create more meaning for our lives.

Hannah Arendt gives us ways to think about democracy and political speech and action in a post-metaphysical age, that is, showing how we can

possibly make any political claims to each other when there is no ground to ground our claims, how we can do that without bursting out laughing. Julia Kristeva helps us think about the precarious subjectivity of anyone who enters into the space of appearance, how our own energy and desires help us become meaning-making beings, and how the otherness within, if not attended to, can lead to xenophobia and even war. Kristeva brings much to political theorizing that Arendt neglects, namely the psychic life of political actors, but Kristeva largely neglects what Arendt cares about, and that is the public world.

In her autobiographical essay, “My Memory’s Hyperbole,” Kristeva recalls her 1974 trip to China during which she found nothing in the Cultural Revolution to indicate that it wouldn’t become another national and socialist variation.² “It marked my farewell to politics,” she wrote, “including feminism.... I can say, however, that for most of the Paris-Peking-Paris travelers (Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers, Marcelin Pleynet, François Wahl, and myself), this arduous journey, one that from the outset was more cultural than political, definitively inaugurated a return to the only continent we had never left: internal experience.”

In that essay, Kristeva sets up an opposition between politics—of whatever leftist variety—and inner life. “The psychoanalytic experience struck me as the only one in which the wildness of the speaking being, and of language, can be heard.” Political adventures seem to her to be ways of avoiding the “desire and hate that analysis openly unveils.” Politics to her is a way to flee inner experience, especially the power of horror and abjection. To put it in another register, the political activist lives in bad faith—unless she is also in analysis? But the analyst herself has already said farewell to politics!

Yet there is a lynchpin between inner experience and politics, and that is her concept of revolt. Until the present text we are considering, though, revolt has been primarily for the benefit of the psychic life of the subject in process. Or as Elaine Miller puts it, “She explicates the word ‘revolt’ or ‘revolution’, terms that formed the central focus of her early *Revolution in Poetic Thinking*, as a search for the past, in a Proustian sense, an attempt at anamnesis in which [quoting Kristeva] ‘language...returns to the past in order to displace us towards progress. It is the past which prepares a renaissance, a rebirth’.”³ For Kristeva, revolt-as-rebirth has been for the inner life of the subject. For Arendt, rebirth is very much a public affair, something that can only take pace in the space of appearance, in the company of others.

This is what makes it strange to read the apolitical psychoanalyst, Kristeva, engage so positively the 20th century thinker extraordinaire of the political. Certainly Hannah Arendt did not shy away from dallying with hate and horror, though perhaps not with her own internal demons—rather

she interrogated the ones that chased her out of Germany, then France, and to the freedom she found in the United States, though even there she remained “stateless” for many years. In a strikingly original body of work, Arendt gave us powerful accounts of politics in dark times as well as road maps to the treasure of revolution, of founding something new, not out of whole cloth but out of no cloth at all. Arendt understood that the only condition we could really call human is one in which we can take part in a world with others and initiate things radically new. To start anew is key for Arendt and the center of her focus on natality. Further, she developed an understanding of judgment: the ability to discern what is right and wrong without any metaphysical standard or banister to lean on.

Kristeva deeply appreciates Arendt’s critique of metaphysics and received truths.⁴ But in her analysis of Arendt’s concept of thinking, as the two-in-one of consciousness, she locates a “sort of endemic ‘psychosis’” amenable to psychoanalytic interpretation. Yet, I see Arendt’s two-in-one of thinking as the door to Kristeva’s revolt: the activity of radically questioning one’s own culture’s presuppositions and norms and with it the capacity to imagine and constitute new alternatives. Arendt would surely agree with Kristeva’s claim that “revolt, then, as return/turning back/displacement/change constitutes the internal logic of a certain culture, whose acuity seems quite threatened these days.”⁵

Both Arendt and Kristeva call for radical questioning of given norms, and both reject the flipside of certainty: nihilism. While there may be no truth and meaning in the world, Arendt and Kristeva look for conditions and opportunities to *create* meaning. So, in place of the prevailing values or the absence of values, the task is to create values in the perilous space of no certitude. In a post-metaphysical age, we need to create the meaning of our own lives. If we don’t take up this momentous task, we will lead empty and perhaps even dangerous (to our selves and others) lives. *That he would not think* was Eichmann’s evil. *That we cling to a need to believe* is the adolescent’s downfall.

Kristeva’s analysis of the adolescent, the need to believe, the syndrome of ideality, and the need for revolt tracks Arendt’s similar concerns about the rise of totalitarianism. Like the adolescent who cannot tolerate ambiguity and imperfection and holds out for an ideal, the society prone to slip into totalitarianism is vulnerable to the promise of an ideology not only to answer all questions but to become the real. There will be no more need to think, for the answers are all magically laid out in whatever grand narrative the ideology offers. That Kristeva’s analysis in the text we are reading here echoes Arendt’s is no coincidence. Note Kristeva’s description of Arendt’s project in her volume on Arendt:

In the wake of the terror of the totalitarian regimes that
destroy thinking *and* life, it is politically paramount...to

insist on freedom, which Arendt identifies with birth: “This freedom...is identical with the fact that men are being born and that therefore each of them *is* a new beginning, begins, in a sense, the world anew.” Terror, on the contrary, eliminates “the very source of freedom which is given with the fact of the birth of man and resides in his capacity to make a new beginning.”⁶

It is difficult to draw a parallel, though, between how an adolescent can make a new beginning (which is through analysis, transference, and “metabolizing the need to believe through the pleasure that comes through thinking, questioning and analyzing”⁷) with how a whole society can. Kristeva’s concern seems to be with both: the adolescent on the one hand and on the other the society of the spectacle, globalization, and neoliberalism. Kristeva not only calls on analysis for individuals but also attention to “the variants of our civilization’s new malaise and the renaissance of the ‘need to believe.’”⁸

What is this “new malaise”? Recalling Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia, we might say that instead of collectively working through and getting past our lost idealizations, a melancholic society clings to what it cannot yet grieve. In her recent book on Kristeva’s aesthetics, Elaine Miller identifies this “new malaise” with our own depressed times:

As the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, approached, American journalists and artists were obsessed with the question of properly representing the loss and melancholia brought about by the attacks on the World Trade Center.... What does it mean, then, if our nation, society, or culture can be said to be depressed? ... Certainly it seems that something within symbolic life must be out of order if depression continues, either at the individual or the cultural level, despite individuals’ entrance into linguistic and political life.⁹

Miller quotes Kristeva’s observation that in France, having lost their image as a great power, “the country is reacting no differently than a depressed patient.... People withdraw, shut themselves away at home, metaphorically and literally don’t get out of bed, don’t participate in public life or in politics, and complain constantly. ... French people today, on her account, are both arrogant and self-deprecating or lacking self-esteem because of the ‘tyrannical ideals’ of the inflated ego of the depressed.”¹⁰

Miller highlights two key points in Kristeva’s account of the melancholic society, which at first seem contradictory. One is that melancholia is a relation between the melancholic and the world that cannot be cured without transforming the world of the individual.¹¹ The other is

that to heal society, one must heal oneself. “In other words, although as a whole a society or nation or culture may be considered to be depressed, nevertheless, the depressed and depressive state of society cannot be collectively psychoanalysed or addressed and cure on a mass subjective level.”¹²

In the society of the spectacle we’ve lost our culture of revolt, thinking, and critique. As I’ve argued elsewhere, our neoliberal modes of collective decision making invoke formulas rather than public processes of deliberation and choice. Neoliberalism is anti-political. It has no need for the public spaces of appearance that Arendt thought necessary to become speaking and thinking beings who create new things, including the meanings of their own lives. Here surely Kristeva should follow Arendt to this other space of becoming a thinking and speaking being where revolt is not just on the couch but in the *polis*. Our engagements there shape our world.

For Arendt, the momentous task of thinking and natality starts the moment we are born, entering the world as newcomers, and quickly receiving the question asked of every newcomer: “Who are you?”¹³ This “who” is not some identity or essence waiting to be discovered or drawn out. Nor is it an empirical matter of an amalgam of an individual’s qualities and attributes—of what he or she is.¹⁴ For Arendt, the “who” is something that emerges from the performance of a life and the stories others will tell of it:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.... *This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does.* It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that *the ‘who’, which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.*¹⁵

Arendt contrasts this “who” to a “what.” Any description or definition of a human being is a determination or interpretation of “*what man is,*” Arendt writes, “of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other

living beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a 'who' he is."¹⁶

So for the "who" to emerge, many conditions need to be in place: a space of appearance in which one sees and is seen by others; this is a realm of plurality. Also there needs to be a common world that is the object of their concerns, their worldly interests:

These interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.... [T]he physical, worldly [sic] in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the 'web' of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.¹⁷

Just as Arendt's political theory shows how the condition of being human can be achieved, so too does psychoanalytic theory, especially the work of Julia Kristeva who famously named us each as subjects in process or on trial, constantly caught up in the rhythms of affect, semiotic eruptions into the symbolic as we try to articulate our desires and the meanings of our lives.

In Arendt's work, the human condition takes place in the context of living in plurality, seeing and being seen by others, speaking and acting in concert with others, having a place in the world that "makes opinions significant and actions effective."¹⁸ So too psychoanalytic practice involves the transference and countertransference relations with the analyst — and I'd include our friends, colleagues, and neighbors. Becoming human and living a human life is thoroughly interpersonal. Only a monster or a god, as Aristotle noted, could live a full life apart from others.

But Arendt herself rejected any aid from psychoanalytic quarters. "Psychology, depth psychology or psychoanalysis," she writes, "discovers no more than the ever-changing moods, the ups and downs of our psychic life, and its results and discoveries are neither particularly appealing nor very meaningful in themselves."¹⁹ What matters to Arendt is not what she deems the "monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so highly characteristic of the findings of modern psychology" but "the enormous variety and richness of overt human conduct, witness to the radical

difference between the inside and outside of the human body."²⁰ Inside we are all the same, she thinks; only in relation with the world, through our deeds and actions, can we individuate ourselves. We can only become someone unique and memorable in the space of appearance, not in the ugly and monotonous sameness of the body and its desires.

Notice the inside/outside dichotomy that Arendt is drawing. Nothing internal to our biology or passions differentiates us; only our speech and action in the external world can differentiate us. Kristeva stakes her own continental divide between internal experience and leftist politics, but for her what is important is on the inside, not the outside. Both Arendt and Kristeva posit an internal/external dichotomy, with Kristeva valorizing the internal and Arendt shunning it. Arendt embraces the political, while Kristeva sees the political as a retreat from what is real. And this is what worries Kristeva about Arendt's work.

To Arendt's description of psychoanalysis and depth psychology as revealing the ups and downs of our moods, whose results "are neither particularly appealing nor very meaningful in themselves," Kristeva writes, "The expression 'neither particularly appealing' is undoubtedly the most revealing here: not only is psychoanalysis 'not appealing,' it is frightening. It frightens *her*.... And she goes further," Kristeva writes, "talking about the 'monotonous sameness and pervasive ugliness so high characteristic of the finding of modern psychology.' Monotony or ugliness?" Kristeva asks. "Who is afraid of ugliness, of repetition and dysfunction?"

Perhaps someone with Arendt's "store of personal and political experiences," someone who had to flee her own country and then later escaped detention in a Vichy camp, someone who spent years stateless, who learned first-hand that "universal" rights were not universal for a stateless person, someone in short who knew the "fragility of human affairs" and sought, Kristeva thinks, too quickly to sublimate this fragility through political speech and action. Kristeva suggests that Arendt shunned Freud's discovery "that psychic life is a real life only if it succeeds in representing itself uniquely—in unique discourse, which is truly a poetics and maieutics of each subject. And it is to be represented even to the point of the 'ugliness' of the 'pulsion' or drive, necessarily sexual or deadly, which for the analyst exists only if someone has expressed or said it in a certain way."²¹

Kristeva also faults Arendt for failing, because of her neglect of the body and the psyche, to note the role of sadomasochism in the political violence of twentieth century movements, "this alchemy of fear and authority at the heart of the modern, secularized world."²²

This is an element that Arendt would rather do without, no doubt for reasons that one might call personal, but also in order to be able to maintain the coherence of her thought. It is especially important to her to save the

freedom of the “who” at the heart of an optimal political plurality, and to not hand it over to some uncontrollable unconscious.²³

Kristeva also notes “Arendt’s conception of life and birth, which she sees not as biological experimentation but as the ultimate experience of renewable meaning. A woman who bore no children,” Kristeva continues, “Arendt bequeathed to us a modern version of the Judeo-Christian affection for the love of life through her constant drumbeat of the ‘miracle of birth’ that combines the risks of beginning and the freedom of men to love one another, to think, and to judge.”²⁴

Where Arendt had nothing to say about the maternal body, Kristeva reads this body right into her work. “To transform the nascent being into a speaking and thinking being, the maternal psyche takes the form of a passageway between zoe and bios, between physiology and biography, between nature and spirit.”²⁵ And where Arendt neglects psychoanalysis, Kristeva notes a parallel: “To the extent that psychoanalysis questions a diverse subject—drive *and* meaning, unconscious *and* conscious, somatic *and* symbolic—it finds itself along the same frontier and it helps keep open, both parallel to the maternal journey and apart from it, the question of life as meaning and meaning as life.”²⁶

Given Arendt’s abjection of depth psychology and the body, one might wonder why Julia Kristeva, the psychoanalytic philosopher of the body, desire, and meaning would devote two volumes to Arendt, two very loving volumes, the first being volume I of her trilogy on female genius (volumes II and III are on Melanie Klein and Colette, respectively) and the other a book based on her series of Alexander Lectures delivered at the University of Toronto. But in Kristeva’s reading the body into the political can we also discern that Kristeva abjects the political? Or fails to see that Arendt’s political is a far cry from the politics that Kristeva endured growing up in communist Bulgaria and then flirted with in Paris and China?

Arendt thought that what was essential to human being is the fact of natality or birth, both the birth of the newcomers coming into the world and the birth of new events, words, and deeds in the world. The newcomers who arrive remind us of this astonishing fact that we can create something new. It is only in our own second birth of bringing about something new in the world in the realm of human plurality that we become a really human and distinctive unique being. This is indeed a process of sublimation, but not one of avoidance as Kristeva suggests. The promise of politics that Arendt opens up is anti-authoritarian down to its core. It’s a politics even those of us who embrace psychoanalytic theory should also embrace. Instead of posing an internal/external dichotomy, we can pose, as Kelly Oliver has, a continuum from the psyche to the social and, I would add, to the political. In this way

our own *daimon* can be revealed on a couch but won't really be *remembered* until revealed in the polis.

¹ Julia Kristeva. "New Forms of Revolt," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, Vol XXII, No 2 (2014): 1-19.

² Julia Kristeva, "My Memory's Hyperbole," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 3-22.

³ Elaine Miller, *Head Cases: Julia Kristeva on Philosophy and Art in Depressed Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 5.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 193-198.

⁵ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt."

⁶ Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 141.

⁷ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt."

⁸ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt."

⁹ Miller, *Head Cases*, 9.

¹⁰ Miller, *Head Cases*, 10.

¹¹ Miller, *Head Cases*, 11.

¹² Miller, *Head Cases*, 12.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 178.

¹⁴ "The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a 'character' in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us." (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 181).

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179-180. (emphasis added)

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182-183.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York : Harcourt, 1951), 296.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind/Thinking*, 35.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind/Thinking*, 35..

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 65.

- ²² Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, 66.
- ²³ Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, 66-67.
- ²⁴ Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, 45-46.
- ²⁵ Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, 47.
- ²⁶ Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, 47.