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Adolescence and Religious Fundamentalism

In her keynote address to the Kristeva Circle 2014, Julia Kristeva argued that European Humanism dating from the French Revolution paradoxically paved the way for “those who use God for political ends” by promoting a completely and solely secular path to the political.¹ As an unintended result of this movement, the late 20th and early 21st centuries have seen the development of a new form of nihilism that masks itself as revolutionary but in fact is the opposite, in Kristeva’s view. Analyzing the culture of religious fundamentalism as “adolescent” in the sense that the adolescent, in contrast to the child, is a believer rather than a questioner, Kristeva gave a fascinating analysis of the religious devotee as well as the mystic and the lover as adolescents, not in the sense of being immature so much as in their capacity to hold on to a static fantasy that is passionately and protractedly believed to be true. We are all adolescents when we are in love, according to Kristeva, just as the Judeo-Christian paradise is an “adolescent” creation (though not the creation of adolescents). Although the psychoanalytic consideration of religious fundamentalism added a new dimension to attempts to explain the increase of this phenomenon in the late 20th and 21st centuries, Kristeva’s subsequent linkage of fundamentalism to the revolts in French suburbs in 2005 and beyond fell short of an insightful critique.

Kristeva calls the adolescent a “believer of the object relation and/or of its impossibility.”² The object relation in psychoanalysis is a relation to an object of need, whether real or imagined. In its early development the child builds up object relations in response to an initially inchoate but dawning awareness of its separation from the mother or caregiver, in particular in the context of her provisional and progressively lengthier absence as the child grows older. Kristeva follows the Kleinian idea that the initial or proto-object of the child, as a result of this progressive separation, is a schizoid

one, split into a good or idealized “mother” part-object who provides everything for the child, and a bad part-object perceived as the one who abandons the child for periods of time.³ Serving as a mediator between these two objects, Kristeva indicates a Freudian theme that often recurs within her writings, that of the child’s primary identification with the imaginary “father” external to what she calls the “horror of the dual interdependence of the mother and the child,” the one (male or female) who loves and is loved by the mother.⁴ This father is not an object *per se*, but rather makes separation between ego and object possible in the first place. Through recognition of and identification with this imaginary one in whom the mother has “invested” the symbolic identity of the child, the stammering of the child is eventually transformed into linguistic signs, and the good and bad mothers are unified into one, more complex entity or object.

Kristeva recalls the Sanskrit root of the word “credit,” *khred*, which is also the root of the Latin *credo*, “I believe.”⁵ This investment in a figure outside the mother-child bond, in a not-yet phallic Other who is the object of the mother’s desire outside her bond to the child, and to whom the “I” of the future subject responds, is a *sine qua non* of subjectivity. Without recognition from or investment in this other, the “I” cannot come into being. The Third (*Tiers*), as this “father of individual prehistory” is also known, is neither a “father” representing the linguistic and law-given order nor a care-giver “mother,” nor a determinate object of faith or belief. Rather, in specific contrast to the fused nurturing bond with the mother, this figure of a “loving father” is a guarantor of the child’s transition to a more stable, independent, and flexible, intersubjective identity.

Along with the language of love and belief, the economic or financial language of investment and credit is central to this account. In addition to linking “credit” to “belief” etymologically, Kristeva describes the “incredible need to believe” as grounding an expectation of restitution in the form of divine favor accorded to the faithful: “I set down a good and await my pay.”⁶ This “expectant believing” (*gläubige Erwartung*) implies trust, recognition, and reciprocity, the last being both intersubjective and material. For the “investment” to be successful, it must provide a return, a profit.

In order for this to happen, the original bond with the Third first assures creditworthiness. When the child invests in early life in this loving father, primordial angst is transformed into a primary identification that is “direct and immediate,” constructed neither by the child nor by the father of individual pre-history.⁷ Properly speaking, this is the investment that enables all subsequent investment, the moment of extending credit *tout court*.

Kristeva describes this moment of investment as fulfilling a “pre-religious need to believe” in a “truth that keeps me, makes me exist,”⁸ a belief in the “God *Logos*,” as Freud called it in *The Future of an Illusion*. The

subject can only eventually become speaking and intersubjective if a “beloved authority” first acknowledges her⁹ and receives her capacity for meaning, however inchoate it may initially be. The assurance of creditworthiness responds to this pre-religious, pre-social need for investment.

Subsequently, with the Kleinian “depressive” position, the child gradually becomes reconciled to the progressive absence of the mother and learns to turn to a broader social sphere to “rediscover” her in symbolic life, resulting in an attachment to an object that is less alienated than in the initial schizoid position, and, ideally, an identification with a broader social and ethical sphere. Language and social recognition are the rewards for the shift away from the mother and toward the “paternal” realm.

However, this process can and does go awry when creditworthiness is not firmly established, either due to a caregiver who is distant or cold, or a Third who turns out to be unreliable. Rather than receiving credit and being invested into an indeterminate identification with symbolic allegiance *per se*, the child, unmoored, may turn instead to a determinate and fixed object of adherence. Mistrust of parental authority may be a normal dimension of adolescence, to be followed by progressive integration into the adult world and reconciliation with the parental figures. However, in the case of fixation at the adolescent stage, there may be a turn instead to an “ideal object” in place of the parental figures and what they represent. In her essay “Adolescence: A Syndrome of Ideality,” Kristeva writes that what allows the adolescent to escape childhood is her conviction that there is another unwavering ideal beyond the imperfect parental bond, whether a romantic partner or a political or ideological ideal.¹⁰ According to Freud, idealization is a result of the splitting of the narcissistic actual ego when it enters into conflict with pre-existing cultural and ethical ideas. The actual ego, as a result of this conflict, divides into an offending part that is repressed and another part that is set up within the self as an ideal by which to measure the ego.¹¹

The turn toward a Great Other, a “God” (in a “pre-religious” sense) that cannot disappoint, or to pleasure or love itself, that is, to a belief that this ideal exists and can be attained—a belief that is nonetheless continually under threat—characterizes adolescence, according to Kristeva. The adolescent separates from parental figures and replaces them with a new model, “rush[ing] toward a new love that will open the doors to new paradises” surpassing them.¹² Kristeva goes further than Freud in indicating that the process of splitting the ego into a repressed unconscious on the one hand and an ego ideal on the other has gone awry in a very specific way in the late 20th century, resulting in a “deep disorganization of the self” in which the “I” is replaced by an “unbinding drive ready to go to any extreme.” There results a “de-objectification” in which “the other has neither meaning nor value,” where “the death drive alone, the malignity of

evil, triumphs.” We thus find ourselves today facing a new kind of radical evil.¹³

What is this new kind of radical evil, which is presumably different from the evil considered by Arendt in her discussion in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, upon which Kristeva, albeit in a very abbreviated way, is clearly drawing? Kristeva writes that adolescent objects of passion inevitably disappoint: lovers turn out to be flawed and unreliable, paradises after death are unverifiable, political-ideological programs are revealed as imperfect, and humans are often unable to sustain the emptying out of mental activity that mysticism, another seemingly indeterminate but actually fixed alternative idealization, seems to demand. When the adolescent object of devotion fails, this may lead to depression, boredom, and aggression or even destructiveness. Yet, the “adolescent” still wants to hold on to something that will not fail, and, in Kristeva’s view, this can increase the attraction of fundamentalist religious programs that combine elements of the great Other’s idealized form. She writes that “the slightest disappointment of this ideality syndrome” casts the adolescent “into the ruins of paradise and leads him towards delinquent conduct.”¹⁴

Kristeva writes that in the last two hundred years the interrogation of values (childhood) has in an increasingly global manner been transformed into an eternal (perpetual or terminal) adolescence (complete rejection of all old values) in the name of a pseudo-revolution, one which proscribes all questioning of its nihilistic stance. The human “incredible” religious need to believe has been replaced, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by “ideological enthusiasm,” to the extent that the death drive has been encouraged to “shift into high gear.”¹⁵

This psychoanalytical account of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism’s attraction and its periodic violent outbursts adds complexity to accounts of religiously motivated terrorism that would trace it to pure irrationalism or simple rejection of cultural values. We can see this phenomenon not only in suicide bombings, to which Kristeva seemed to primarily allude in this quotation, but also in the increasing militarization and anti-government rhetoric of some fundamentalist Christian groups in the United States, and in sectarian violence in India and Iraq, among other places.

However, Kristeva went a step further to touch on what she called the “suburban troubles” in Marseille and elsewhere in France. Kristeva argued that the “delinquency of ‘disadvantaged teens’ in France in fact reveals a more radical phase of nihilism, a phase taking place beneath the ‘clash of religions,’” at the level of the lack of response to the pre-religious need to believe. She characterized the destructive behavior of the rioters within “so-called suburban troubles” as the actions of a paradoxical figure she called a “nihilist believer.” The nihilist believer, she writes, is the result of

disconnection and desocialization within the “ruthlessness of global migration.” The result is “adolescent gangster fundamentalism” that is “ready to go to any extreme.”¹⁶

It is true that in an interview with Carmine Donzelli, Kristeva clarifies, as she did not in her talk to the Kristeva Circle, that “the crisis of our suburbs” is not religious, “nor is it aimed *a posteriori* against ‘the not-displaying-any-signs-of-religious-affiliation rule,’” namely, the well publicized ban on Islamic headscarves and veils for women. She also acknowledges that the destructive actions of the “pyromaniacs” and “incendiaries” displays a “need for recognition” and reveals “suffering” in the “battle against discrimination.”¹⁷

In a few offhand remarks in her talk, however, Kristeva nevertheless seemed to conflate the unrest in French suburbs with Islamic terrorism, in particular with suicide bombing, when she described youth as being “incapable of distinguishing good from evil” and ready to “sink into blind destructivity and finally auto-destruction.”¹⁸ Kristeva’s analysis appeared to be superficially drawing on that of Hannah Arendt, but she omitted Arendt’s careful historical analysis and thus made some hasty and even dangerous implications. Despite admitting to a distinction between a “clash of values...produced by divergent or competing libidinal interests,” on the one hand, and “extreme evil, which sweeps away the sense of distinction between good and evil itself,” on the other, she still seemed to align the “new radical evil” with both the French suburban unrest and with auto-destructive terrorism in general. In addition, by attributing both these forms of “evil” to a vaguely generalized “ruthless global migration” Kristeva unmoored her account from any historical genealogy.

Colonialism and its Aftermath

Had Arendt lived to witness these events in France and elsewhere in the world in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, she might not have descried in them a completely new type of evil. This is because a line between auto-destructive terrorism and the uprisings in France can only be drawn, as Kristeva seems to want to do, if we also consider it in relation to the colonialism that predated and produced it, in such a way that, as Arendt writes, “some of the fundamental aspects of [the period of Imperialist scramble for Africa] appear so close to totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century that it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes.”¹⁹

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt describes Algeria, colonized by France in the late nineteenth century, as “the nonsensical hybrid of a nominally French territory legally as much a part of France as the *Département de la Seine*, whose inhabitants are not French Citizens.”²⁰ This description could almost fit the situation today of Algerian and other North

African immigrants to France, even if they have sometimes gained French citizenship.

Tracing the history of French colonization of Africa, Arendt writes that “the French Empire actually was evaluated from the point of view of national defense, and the colonies were considered lands of soldiers which could produce a *force noire* to protect the inhabitants of France against their national enemies.” She quotes Poincaré’s famous dictum of 1923 praising the discovery in African soldiers of an “economical form of gunfodder, turned out by mass-production methods.”²¹

Fast forward to 2005, when more than two million African immigrants, directly as a result of French colonization of North and East Africa, now live in France, largely in suburban communities with inferior social services. As Justin Smith notes, “Francophone Africans do not choose to come to France on a whim, but because of a long history of imposed Frenchness at home.”²² The majority come from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, countries with majority Islamic populations. It is not religious concerns that cause most unrest in these “suburban troubles,” but rather unemployment and discrimination and a *de facto* second class citizen status.

In 2005, famously, the first riots in Clichy-sous-bois, a suburban housing project northeast of Paris with a large immigrant population, were set off by the deaths by electrocution of 15-year-old Bouna Traoré and his friend, 17-year-old Zyed Benna, who fled and hid in an electric relay station when they were chased by police in an apparent case of racial profiling. The subsequent outrage, which included both relatively peaceful mass protests and destructive actions such as setting cars ablaze, clearly reflected perceived class and racial discrimination, but had no clear connection to religion. Instead, news reports indicate that anger over poor housing conditions, racial profiling by the police, inadequate basic public services, and, in the years since the incident, no prosecution of the police who caused the incident, were the primary reasons for dissatisfaction among residents of this and other suburbs.

The city of Marseille, which Kristeva particularly referenced in her talk, has also had its share of violence, but most of it has been a result of unemployment, gang warfare, and drug trafficking. Unemployment is particularly high in Marseille for youth descended from North African immigrants, who are treated as second-class citizens. According to one account, employers are loath to hire even well-qualified job applicants if they have the wrong ethnicity or an address in the wrong part of a city divided according to class and ethnic background.²³ Nevertheless, Marseille was spared the worst of the rioting that swept across France after the events in Clichy-sous-bois, and has a history of fewer crimes motivated by religious belief.²⁴ The reasons for the unrest are complex and always involve multiple factors, but socio-economic injustice and racial segregation are widely cited

by reputable journalists and scholars as the primary motivation, even if religious fundamentalism is sometimes blamed in popular opinion.

As historian Robert Aldrich notes, in June 2005, before the riots, a French news magazine published an article that was presciently titled “Suburbs: A Colonial Problem?,” reporting on a group that called themselves the *indigènes de la République*, who protested that the French republic was not one of equality, and that descendants of immigrants from countries colonized by France, notably North African countries, were the victims of systematic racial discrimination and economic disenfranchisement and exploitation. These children and grandchildren of workers recruited from the colonies in the 1960’s and 1970’s have never been fully integrated into French culture.

The historical linkage of colonialism, fascism, and terrorism results in an evil that is not so much categorically new as a continuation of the same in various new forms. The evocation of a kind of “evil incarnate” without historical lineage resides, as Derek Gregory points out, in the Hegelian “innocent gaze” that perceives evil all around but not in itself.²⁵ It focuses on the few angry perpetrators of a heinous crime while masking the suffering and dispossession of thousands to which it responds. It is important conceptually to separate the uprisings in France from suicide bombings linked to the conflict between Palestine and Israel, not because they have completely different origins, since both phenomena are rooted in economic and political concerns, but because they take different forms. Whereas in France the legacy of colonialism has resulted in a two-tier system of the rights of the citizen, whether French or of a country formerly colonized by France, in Palestine the human is not a citizen at all. The level of violence of the form that resistance to the colonizing power takes reflects this difference in identity. Furthermore, while resistance to this phenomenon may or may not be played out in the name of religion, religion is fundamentally supplemental to political and economic concerns, not the primary motivation for the violence. The compulsion to self-destruct while destroying others cannot be traced to an incredible need to believe in a religious sense, but rather to a complete lack of investment from the other.

Again, Arendt is instructive. Writing in 1941, she deplores the emergence of “a new class of people in Europe, the *stateless*.”²⁶ The Jewish question, after the war, was solved “by means of a colonized and then conquered territory” which then produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, “thereby increasing the number of the stateless and rightless.”²⁷ Arabs were given the choice “between voluntary emigration or second class citizenship.”²⁸ According to Arendt, “no conflicts can be solved within the framework of a colonial system, *no matter what form it takes*.”²⁹

What Kristeva fails to include in her analysis is the complicity of France—not because of its secularism, which she addresses and denies is at

the heart of the problem, but rather in the form of the legacy of its colonial empire—in the problems that it now faces, primarily in terms of its “suburban troubles,” but also to the degree that it shares in the pain of global terrorism. Even the current spate of suicide bombings, techniques that originated in Russia in the nineteenth century, must in turn be traced to the desperation of a people who have already been divested of almost everything, including state citizenship, and who struggle with possibilities that have been stripped down to the bare minimum. If one’s life is worth nothing, if one has no civic identity, it may well be extinguished in the name of something better, whether worldly or otherwise.³⁰ While Kristeva’s analysis focuses on the individual unmoored from recognition, she might have also turned to the imaginary “father,” who in this case is unloving.

This is because another Third operates historically in France and in the world, namely, the Third World (*tiers monde*), a term coined in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy as a warning that poor countries would get lost in the Cold War. Sauvy wrote, “After all, this Third World — ignored, exploited, scorned like the Third Estate — wants to be something, too.”³¹ The term “third world” also recalls the pre-revolution Third of the French Third Estate (*tiers-état*), consisting of the “commoners,” or all those who belonged neither to the nobility nor to the clergy. Although the analysis of the riots in terms of a terminal adolescence would seem to place equal or greater responsibility for this situation on the “parent,” Kristeva pointed instead, disappointingly, to the power of a ghostly Third of religious fundamentalism, as being at the origin of the nihilistic destruction that results from disappointed adherence, investment without a satisfactory return.

Given Kristeva’s celebration of a kind of migrant subjectivity that intentionally crosses boundaries in a constant attempt to reinvent or transform oneself, her vague critique of global migration and her implicit self-alignment with French nationality is surprising. It was interesting and dismaying that Kristeva did not even mention or seemingly consider the legacy of French colonialism in Africa in her discussion of the “suburban troubles” in France. Although this omission allowed her to develop her argument about the relationship between adolescence and the appeal of a seemingly unwavering ideal, her conclusion did not fit the facts in France or accord with her usual careful scholarship. Investing in a chimera, Kristeva turned away from the abject history of her own adopted nation. She seemed to disregard the fact that in the development of the adolescent, it is the parents who must take responsibility in large part for successful socialization.

¹ Published in this issue as Julia Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, vol. XXII, no. 2 (2014): 1-19.

² Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 14.

³ See Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein: On Matricide as Pain and Creativity*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 66f.

⁴ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 13.

⁵ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 16.

⁶ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 13. In *This Incredible Need to Believe*, Kristeva refers to the linguist Emile Benveniste's insistence on the correspondence between belief and credit, meaning "to give one's heart, one's vital force, in the expectation of a reward." Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverly Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.

⁷ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 13.

⁸ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 3.

⁹ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 9.

¹⁰ See <http://www.kristeva.fr/adolescence.html>

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism," trans. James Strachey, in *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction"*, ed. Joseph Sandler et. al. for the International Psychoanalytical Association. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 93.

¹² Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 14.

¹³ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 17.

¹⁴ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 15.

¹⁵ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 16.

¹⁶ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 22.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, 21-22.

¹⁸ Kristeva, "New Forms of Revolt," 22-23.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 123.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 127.

²¹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 129, citing W.P. Crozier, "France and her 'Black Empire'" in *New Republic*, January 23, 1924.

²² Justin Smith, "Does Immigration mean 'France is Over'?" *The Stone*, *New York Times*, January 5, 2014

²³ <http://world.time.com/2012/12/07/the-problem-of-clichy-after-2005-riots-frances-suburbs-are-still-miserable/> Accessed on 4/15/2014

- ²⁴ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/marseilles-ethnic-bouillabaisse-180191988/?no-ist> Accessed on 5/10/2014
- ²⁵ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 21.
- ²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 138.
- ²⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 290.
- ²⁸ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 343.
- ²⁹ Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, 179.
- ³⁰ See Jeffrey Williams, "The Human Use of Human Beings: A Brief History of Suicide Bombings," *Origins* 6:7, April 2013 at <http://origins.osu.edu/article/human-use-human-beings-brief-history-suicide-bombing/page/0/1>. Accessed on 9/30/2014.
- ³¹ Pooja Bhatia, "How the French Revolution Gave Birth to the Third World," OZY.com, June 14, 2014. Accessed on 4/26/14.