

Alasia Nuti Reviews Birgit Schippers' Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought



Alasia Nuti, an MSc student at the Gender Institute, reviews Birgit Schipper's new book on Julia Kristeva and feminist philosophy.

Ultimately, the most valuable part of the Schipper's book is that it does what feminism does best: applying ideas in unexplored and unconventional contexts and being original in its dismantlement of reality.

“O Kristeva, Kristeva, wherefore art thou not feminist?” – This Shakespearian-esque cry is frequently uttered by feminist readers of Julia Kristeva. **Linda Zerilli** and **Judith Butler** with their antithetical interpretations of Kristeva, are a testimony of the feminist strong but ambivalent interest in Kristeva's thought. Indeed, the influential contemporary psychoanalyst seems to provide insightful analyses that feminists ought not to dismiss so easily; alas, at the same time, she has rejected feminism as a normative enterprise and collective movement, labelling it as “totalitarian”. And, **as Slavoj Zizek reminds us**, to defeat an intellectual adversary there is no more popular and powerful weapon than accusing her of “totalitarianism”. Then, it is not surprising that many feminists are not at ease with Kristeva's thought and with the fact that her spectre haunts (European) feminism. More precisely, a question arises: What to do with Kristeva's work? Or rather, as feminists, should we refuse an engagement with Kristeva's concepts or should we make it more attuned to feminist demands? At first sight, it does not seem an either-or situation.

Birgit Schippers, with her book entitled *Julia Kristeva and Feminist Thought* (Edinburgh University Press) and lately published, might help us to cast light on this thorny issue. Schippers analyses the key ideas of Kristeva and interprets the mixed and often chilly reception that Kristeva has received among feminist scholars as symptomatic of the heterogeneity inherent in contemporary feminism. Surprisingly enough, Kristeva's conception of the fluidity and precariousness of the subject has been harshly criticised not only by feminist theorists hostile to psychoanalysis and poststructural theories of identity, but also by those who are (willy-nilly) labelled as the feminist poststructuralist thinkers *par excellence*, such as Butler.

Attempting to scrutinise feminist awkwardness towards Kristeva, Schippers masterfully examines some pivotal concepts of Kristeva's thought and shows how feminists have too often overlooked their importance. Kristeva's account of instable subjectivity and her conception of a maternal ethics, to mention but a few, **have had a major impact on (at least a certain) feminist attention on maternal thinking.**

However, according to Schippers, other notions developed by Kristeva might prove to be of particularly interest to feminists: Kristeva's original and provocative conceptions of “female embodiment”, “revolt”, “alterity” and “freedom” could turn out to be compatible with a feminist perspective and could be usefully deployed in feminist critique of society.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Schippers reveals shortcomings in acknowledging the significance of Kristeva's criticism of feminism and her refusal to be numbered among feminist theorists. In her brave endeavour to show the compatibility between Kristeva's theory and feminist analysis, she tends to reproduce the “totalitarian” move that Kristeva (provocatively or not) has argued to be typical of contemporary feminism: “the levelling out of difference, plurality and singularity” (138). To incorporate an author in a particular doctrine, when she has explicitly declared her distaste for that specific set of ideas, is quite problematic, even when a doctrine is highly heterogeneous, as in the case of feminism. Moreover, Kristeva is right: her theory **is**, in

some respects, alien to feminist goals. For example, Kristeva's insistence on maternal bodies, femininity and feminine genius has caused several raised eyebrows among feminists. Overemphasising maternity and essentialising femininity not only represent a misleading depiction of the multiplicity of women's experiences but could also backfire on women's emancipation itself. Undoubtedly, as Schippers finely contends, Kristeva develops a conception of subjectivity and an ethical theory that hinges upon the value of plurality and alterity, but her accounts of motherhood and femininity remain quite problematic. In addition, her distrust of political movement and collective activism, which she sees as the result of a defence of singular initiative, is not ideally suited to feminism as a political (besides intellectual) movement aimed at changing gender relations.

Despite these divergences, two concepts developed by Kristeva are particularly noteworthy for a feminist critique of male chauvinism and global injustice, namely the notions of "abjection" and "strangeness". The former is introduced by Kristeva in order to explain the psychoanalytic process whereby the self casts off the parts of her body that are disgusting, dirty and shaming. Once applied to the social body, the concept of "abjection" might shed light on sexism (and racism) as social and individual pathologies. The latter, instead, is at the core of Kristeva's ethics and illustrates how "foreignness" is an existential condition since each person is, at first sight, a stranger to herself. The avenues that such an inspiring idea might open to a feminist cosmopolitan theory, aimed at both facing the challenge that contemporary porous borders present and unmasking the stereotypes reinforced by nationalist discourses, are still to be pursued. Nevertheless, that same feminism should be able to criticise the role that these concepts play in Kristeva's theory refraining from an ambiguous celebration of abjection and an adoption of a republican universalism.

With my scepticism about Kristeva's theory as whole, I do not mean that all her concepts cannot provide new insights to feminism. Neither do I infer that some of her notions cannot be legitimately employed by a feminist analysis despite the fact that she does not identify as a feminist author. The history of feminist thought is fraught with examples of non-feminist thinkers whose work has been seminal to the development of feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt are cases in point.

After having said so, are we running around in circles? What should we do with Kristeva's thought if her concepts appear, to a certain extent, appealing but, when analysed within her theory, reveal serious flaws? Should we keep crying our pain or should we make an effort to prove that Kristeva's theory as a whole cannot be jettisoned by feminist scholars, as Schippers tends to do?

I know that now you are probably expecting from me a final word on this matter but, unfortunately I believe that it is not available. I would like to accept Kristeva's challenge and ask to future feminist theorists to play with her concepts, apply them to unexplored and unconventional contexts and do what feminism does better: being original in its dismantlement of reality.

Alasia Nuti is a graduate student who is currently pursuing a MSc in Gender at LSE. She holds an Italian BA and MA in Philosophy and she is generally interested in Political Theory and Feminism and particularly focused on global justice, multiculturalism and egalitarianism.

