

Book Reviews

François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2003), 352 pages.

In March 2003, “freedom fries” were served on Capitol Hill instead of the usual french ones. A year later, the French government banned a cherished pastime—the right to take to the street—in order to ensure that George W. Bush enjoyed a peaceful rendezvous with President Chirac. Yes, the relationship between France and the United States is nothing if not complex. The love-hate relationship between the American academy and France’s intellectuals reflects these cultural and political differences. François Cusset attempts to fit together a few pieces of the puzzle in his recently published study.

French Theory is the story of the arrival in America of a handful of French academics and the indelible impression they left on its vast cultural landscape. It is an account of the making of that strange object, “French Theory,” that turns out to be more American than European. Cusset does not take his object of study for granted but provides a detailed and evocative genealogy of the reception and the deployment of the texts of scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and many others. In the process, readers are treated to a crash course in the workings of the American academy, whose recent multicultural transformations, disciplinary divisiveness, and insularity Cusset often remarks upon. Cusset wants to explain to his French readers how those very thinkers who became increasingly marginalized inside their Hexagon homeland simultaneously became stars on the American campus.

He dates the implantation of poststructuralism to October 1966, when two professors at Johns Hopkins University, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, hosted an international colloquium

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they titled “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” that assembled Barthes, Derrida, Lacan, Girard, Hyppolite, Goldmann, Morazé, Poulet, Todorov and Vernant. Deleuze, Jakobson and Genette also sent texts, though they did not make the voyage. Several ironies are involved here. First, the title of the event, in referring to “the Sciences of Man” attempted to translate a category, *les sciences humaines*, that is conventional in the European academy but meaningless in America. Second, the colloquium, whose proceedings were published in 1970/1972 under the additional title *The Structuralist Controversy* (Johns Hopkins University Press), came to serve as a reference for *post*structuralist theory, even though it was held at a time when structuralism reigned in France and when humanism and logical positivism dominated the American academy. A final irony is that this group of thinkers was assembled and unified in Baltimore in a way that they never related to each other in France, before or since. Indeed, it was on this occasion that Derrida and Lacan first met.

The Franco-American ties that were introduced in 1966 took another ten years to bear fruit. In the meantime, profound cultural upheaval—often with the university as its crucible—paved the way for a new countercultural discourse. In the late 1970s, says Cusset, “French theory intervenes precisely at the boundary that separates counter-culture from the university.” (80). One of the ways the new theories were first diffused was through a new generation of scholarly journals such as *Diacritics*, *SubStance*, *Glyph*, *Critical Inquiry* and *Semiotext(e)* and a few key publishing houses. Cusset explores how the selective translation and repackaging of the French texts rendered them readable and significant in entirely different ways. The first works translated of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Lacan were read primarily in terms of their analyses of texts and textuality which went along with their early popularity in the discipline of comparative literature. Cusset describes this reception as a “literarization” of philosophy and a “theorization” of the study of literature. Strategies for teaching the new French material necessarily reduced and oversimplified the diversity of the works. For instance, there was a marked interest in constructing dialogical relations between authors who rarely even referred to each other. Even more striking was the circulation of certain sound bites (e.g., Derrida: “there is nothing outside the text”; Foucault: man would be erased “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”) that popularized

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certain portrayals of French thought and freed people from the difficult task of actually reading each text. "So that *inventing* French theory signifies nothing other than to manage to make . . . Foucault or Derrida less references than common names, a form of discursive breathing. Citations are the endlessly reusable materials of a changing construction, able to be assembled and disassembled" (103).

Of course, the incorporation of French theory on the American campus was neither always nor only a matter of the free play of signifiers. Its reception/production was complex, fraught with resistances, and tended to fracture along disciplinary lines. Literary theory proved early on to be the most amenable discourse for a sympathetic promulgation and utilization of the French works. In departments of history and philosophy, by contrast, French theory was often perceived as a menace to sturdy proofs, or as flowery phrases concealing baseless generalizations. Apart from a few exceptional universities that welcomed "continental" philosophy, "nothing predisposed American philosophers to cast more than an amused glance, or an irritated look, at the enthusiasms of their literary colleagues" (107).

Cusset points out that in the United States there existed an unprecedented imperative to test the *utility* of French theory. The mixed reception of French thought is thus also the story of the politicization of theory. In the book's second part, "The Uses of Theory," Cusset considers at length the ways in which theory was employed. He spends a chapter discussing the appropriation and extension of French theory by well known Anglophone scholars, from Frederic Jameson to Edward Said to Judith Butler. There is also considerable attention to the influence of French theory in various artistic communities, in pop culture, and in technological advances. But perhaps the most interesting impact has been felt on the debates surrounding the role and the nature of the university within American society. Simplifying the matter, based on Cusset's account there emerges an antagonism between two camps: (1) the various forms of "identity politics" that coincided with and often drew on newly available ideas from French theory and "postmodernism," and (2) what Cusset calls the "neo-conservative crusade," an ideological counter-offensive against the gains of so-called "politically correct" agendas.

In Cusset's capable hands these "culture wars" make for

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great reading. He draws out the difficulties of engaging in identity politics, e.g., in the case of feminism, arguing that in many cases left-leaning academics played into the hands of right-wing critics as debates became increasingly polarized. Perhaps precisely because this constellation of issues concerning affirmative action, the content of the canon, the representation of minority cultures, and the political and social location of the professoriate is related to fundamental questions about American values and priorities, it tends to build to absurd exaggerations and nasty polemics. (The book opens by unraveling the bizarre history of the Alan Sokal affair.) Cusset delivers one humorous example after the next, most of them drawn from editorials and debates in the nation's leading newspapers. One of my personal favorites comes from a 1991 editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* which accused the professoriate of nothing less than "crimes against humanity" (189).

French Theory gives those of us who are on the inside of the American academy a valuable experience because it takes the academy as something to be explained. The result is that one finds one's familiar turf and passionate attachments presented as ethnological objects. This can be jarring, but also illuminating, as the taken-for-granted character of familiar debates and political imperatives is stripped away. This book forces us to acknowledge that that cultural values, political will, contingent events and misunderstandings are integral to the spread and consumption of ideas. It also offers food for thought on larger, perplexing questions about how we want our universities to be and about the political relevance of our scholarly pursuits. It is itself an exercise in critical thinking and a genealogical investigation, and thus a project that owes much to the French thinkers it discusses. Cusset shows that it is useful to deconstruct "French Theory" and that doing so does not detract from the obvious fact that French theory is alive and kicking, firmly part of our scholarly practices and our social imaginary. What it will look like in the future remains to be seen.

Do not pick up this book, however, if you want to learn about Deleuze's philosophy, Foucault's analyses, or Derrida's conceptual framework. It does not summarize this material or even engage with it, but rather presupposes some familiarity with the major works of these thinkers. Do not be surprised, moreover, that Cusset treats these men—there are only fleeting references to Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray—with a respect just shy of admiration.

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Cusset sometimes appears defensive when he criticizes the scholarly community for misreading or failing to appreciate Derrida or Foucault. Cusset's allegiances emerge perhaps most explicitly at the end of the work, when he laments the rise of an "isolated humanism" that, in taking over the French academy, has needlessly vilified and made obsolete anyone associated with *la pensée '68*.

It is interesting to speculate about the significance of Cusset's contribution in providing a text that comments on, as well as participates in, the ongoing global dissemination and recuperation of French-American theory. With this effort Cusset has made French theory accessible to the French. Yet, it is probably only when this book is translated into English that it will become a part of that multifaceted and changing body called "French Theory."

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Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), x+291 pages.

***Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, edited and translated by David A. Sprintzen and Adrian van den Hoven (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2004), 299 pages.**

With the publication of these two books, we have a timely coincidence. Taken together, these texts offer us new information and tools with which to understand what, in 1952, created international controversy—the decisive end to the friendship of two of post-war France's premier public intellectuals on the left. Until now, this event has attracted mostly irreconcilable and noisy polemics on both sides of the Atlantic. Ronald Aronson is surely correct that only after the arrival of new materials and, more importantly, the demise of the Cold War can we fairly assess the debates that rent asunder the famous relationship between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The same Cold War that "finally