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French Theory, by François Cussett

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François Cusset *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Trans. Jeff Fort. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008. Pp. xxi + 388. __ (Cloth: ISBN 978-0-8166-4732-3); \$24.95 (Paper: ISBN 978-0-8166-4733-0)

François Cusset's important and widely discussed *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* has now been translated into English. It's a valuable contribution to recent intellectual history – maybe better, echoing its French subtitle's reference to 'mutations', to 'the epidemiology of ideas'. Focusing on seven authors (namely, Barthes, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Guattari, and Lyotard), its central topic is two-fold: (1) in what ways was French Theory taken up in the United States, and (2) why did it have such enormous impact there?

With respect to (1), Cusset, in a wide-ranging survey, illustrates the American reception of French Theory not just in literature departments, but in pop art, punk rock, identity politics, and much else besides. This part of the book is (mostly) fun and fascinating: gossipy, and sprinkled with anecdotes about how academic stars such as Deleuze, Foucault, Guattari and Lyotard socialized with the likes of William Burroughs, Bob Dylan, and Allen Ginsberg. (Sadly, the candid photographs included in the French version have been omitted from this translation.) Also described, in gory detail, are fierce battles for-and-against the 'industrialized university', for-and-against the Western canon, etc. Eventually, he maintains, despite the occasional 'reaction' and 'backlash', it more or less colonized the human sciences generally. Goes the idea: French Theory is a tool applicable to any text, and what everyone in the Humanities studies are texts; thus, as he illustrates, French Theory took hold in cultural history, film theory, legal studies, museology, theology, women's studies, etc.

The most thought-provoking material addresses question (2). Cusset maintains that there was a "systematic misreading" behind French Theory's success. It genuinely is a *mutation*: despite its French lineage, really it is Made in the USA; and it departs not just accidentally and in detail from the original philosophical texts that inspired it, but majorly and structurally. To oversimplify, Cusset suggests that in order to render it useful (e.g., teachable, readily applicable to art works, and practical as a political 'tool kit'), American academics merely quoted from the original philosophical texts, forged a series of 'isms' out of the unstable aporias to be found there, and ultimately crafted prescriptions not far from 'eight simple rules for postmodern political activism' or 'three easy steps to creating deconstructive art'. The result was not so much *une philosophie française* merely received in the U.S., but rather, as per the original's English-language title, French Theory. Cusset sums it up nicely: 'the very logic of French theoretical texts prohibits certain uses of them, uses that were often necessary, however, to their American readers in order to *put the texts to work*. It is an example of the recognized interplay between betrayal and reappropriation' (278).

Having described its main questions and theses, let me turn to evaluation. I begin with the book's greatest strength, at least for a reader such as myself. My fellow Analytic

philosophers are notorious for complaining that French Theory is unclear, sloppy, and thin on arguments. And where there are arguments, continues the refrain, they all too frequently suffer from hackneyed confusions: e.g., between (a) the truistic claim that *truth-bearers* are social constructions and (b) the deeply controversial suggestion that their *truth-makers* are. (For instance, the English sentence ‘The earth revolves around the sun’ is patently a human product, specific to a given cultural epoque; whether the truth-maker of that sentence, namely the Earth’s rotating around the sun, is equally ‘socially constructed’ is, however, a very different matter.) More fundamentally, one can’t help but worry that French Theory has never seriously questioned the soundness of its proto-scientific roots: Marx’s economics, Saussure’s linguistics and Freud’s psychoanalysis. Each of these is, empirically speaking, deeply problematic.

Equally notoriously, such complaints seem to carry no weight. Indeed, they are heard, by those who do French Theory, as reactionary, a backlash, a crass attempt to maintain hegemony.

Why such profound and long-lasting cross talk? I think it may be Cusset’s most important contribution to uncover at least one of its roots. What he makes clear is that French Theory had its origins in surrealist avant-garde art and radical political activism. Related to this, it rose to prominence not *in spite of* its erudite/exotic language, its playfulness, its “freedom-seeking experimentation” (p. 70), but *because of* these. To critique French Theory by means of clear, careful, empirically-grounded arguments is, then, simply to miss the point. (Put otherwise, as Cusset lays things out, if there is any kind of divergence between Anglo-American philosophy and French Theory, it’s an offshoot of the old ‘battle’ between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Or maybe it’s even older than that: the ‘battle’, familiar since Plato, between the Philosophers and the Poets!)

Now for the negatives. For Analytically-inclined readers like myself, it’s a disadvantage of the book that it isn’t merely about French Theory, but is itself, stylistically, an example of it. The troubles with style appear at both the level of vocabulary and of sentence structure. Cusset’s word choice is often esoteric to the point of being exclusionary: e.g., rather than saying that American college life is more fun than hard work, he writes that it is ‘more ludic than Stakhanovite’ (35). Equally, his prose is often unnecessarily tangled and opaque, as in ‘the double, convergent ambition of politicizing certain Lacanian theses and examining the psychic implications of Foucauldian politics creates, between these two remote poles – the psyche and polis, the process of subjectification and the modes of power’s circulation – a zone of indistinction, neglected and incompletely covered...’ (197).

Turning from matters of style to substance, the fundamental weakness is lack of reliability. Cusset epidemiological study purports to describe the specific ways in which French theory was received; and he urges that its dominance was nearly absolute. There are two features of the book which render his claims less credible than they might otherwise have been. First, there are small lapses: errors of detail that a fact-checker might have noted. (A fact-checker about French Theory? Oh, the irony!) Cusset refers to the ‘generational grammar’ of Zellig Harris and Noam Chomsky. (In the French original,

p. 110, 'grammaire générationelle'.) That should of course be *generative* grammar. And he recounts a 1985 visit by Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman to 'the University of Montevideo'. But there was no such place in 1985. (An institution by that name does exist nowadays; but it is very unlikely that it was ever the site of a postmodernism workshop, being an Opus Dei-backed school of law and business.) Knowing something about linguistics and about Uruguay, I caught these specific slips. And there were a dozen or so more that I noticed. Not a serious problem, maybe – except that I induce that there must be many such errors, unnoticed by me, in those domains where I lack expertise. The second worry about reliability runs deeper. Cusset claims that French Theory came to dominate the Academy in general. Yet he seems to me to be drawing upon a 'biased sample'. It's plausible that those domains Cusset really knows well were heavily influenced by French Theory; but that's arguably because he knows a domain well only if it was heavily influenced by French Theory. One example: he suggests that those who early on co-opted the Derridean program were "the most brilliant professors of their generation" (114). Only someone with a very literature-centric point of view could make such a claim: what of Francis Crick, Gerald Edelman, Murray Gell-Mann, Jane Goodall, Donald Hebb, Linus Pauling or Edward O. Wilson, just to name a few? Or again, in Chapter 4 Cusset dismisses Anglo-American philosophy as having two branches: the cult of ordinary language, and neo-conservative logical positivism. Fifty years ago, such an oversimplification would be uncharitable but forgivable. Nowadays, anyone who truly believes this is, *ipso facto*, not in a position to draw conclusions about the *overall* intellectual life of the U.S.A.

Two concluding remarks. Regarding (1) above, it may be inapt to complain, as I have, about the clarity and reliability of the book's description of the spread of French Theory. Maybe, being an instance of French Theory, the appropriate evaluative measures for this book are, as Cusset hints, merely aesthetic and political. Indeed, just this is suggested by the manner in which Cusset himself addresses criticisms of French Theory: it seemingly never occurs to him that someone might object to Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and their American followers because their views are incorrect, based on faulty preconceptions, or merely badly argued for; instead, he assumes that all opposition must be politically/culturally motivated. Regarding (2), the biggest lesson of *French Theory* may well be this. Given its name, it's natural to think of it as a philosophical theory which is French. If Cusset is right, however, though the texts that inspired French Theory in the U.S. in the last three decades merit both these labels, the postmodern turn itself merits neither. Fascinating stuff.