

---

H-France Review Vol. X (December 2010), No. 225.

François Cusset. *French Theory: How Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault & Co Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 388 pp. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-4733-0

Reviewed by Tarek Elhaik, Rice University.

Reading this fascinating book is akin to entering the magic conceptual playground of what has been framed, labeled and inevitably marketed from the mid-1970s on as the American phenomenon called French Theory. Yet, once the reader (even the more cynical one) is done with the last page, she is left with a sense of disenchantment *vis a vis* the star system that French Theory has given birth to, the profound mutations of academic culture and campus life in the United States since the late 1970s, and the affective economy of joy, *ressentiment* and ambition generated by the vertiginous speed of what Edward Said has once called ‘traveling theories.’ While the cross-cultural *mise-en-scene* of Cusset’s narrative is hinged on a complex history of animosity and admiration between France and the United States, the book seems to seek, unwittingly to be sure, an alternate mode of figuration between Alexis de Tocqueville’s ambivalent diagnosis of political and pedagogical culture in *Democracy in America* and Gilles Deleuze’s unabashedly celebratory essay *On the Superiority of Anglo-Saxon Literature*.

Stimulating and intriguing, the book re-frames the legacy of French Theory and the various forms it has taken since the “Unidentified Flying Objects” Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida and company first landed in the late 1960s, unexpectedly and clandestinely, on a planet USA in the throes of countercultural convulsions and re-mappings of academic disciplinary borders. Written in a passionate essayistic style, the book is ambitious in scope, relies on stunning background research, and first-hand experiential engagement with intellectual life in France and the United States. Patiently narrated by the author, the book is divided in three parts, each more or less evenly divided into several chapters chronicling “the canonization of French Theory, first in the United States, then globally” (p 107). The conceptual architecture of the book invites a reflection not only on the meandrous cultural history of de/re-contextualization of intellectual debates from France to the United States (and vice versa), but also on the after-life of a corpus of intellectual productions, celebrated and demonized, the multiplicity of which does not lend itself to easy categorization.

The book begins by surveying the invention of this corpus and by chronicling the fashioning of trendy and cutting-edge intellectual household names and the disjunctures and convergences that have shaped the contours of an amorous affair that would eventually culminate in a messy breakup between French Theory, counter-cultural politics, and academic life. The historical chapters attempt to elucidate the context of production of French Theory against the background of post-New Criticism academic culture in the United States and traces its moment of emergence to a constellation of events, affinities between avant-garde media arts and radical theory, political upheavals, and more importantly, to profound mutations in departments of

French and English literature that radicalized American campuses in the late 1960s and 1970s. Cusset's modernist narrative situates the emergence of French Theory in the late 1960s in a confusing, transitional landscape where artists, intellectuals, journal editors, and underground militants increasingly becoming blurred. The book judiciously identifies a set of continuities and discontinuities in the late 1960s with the constitutive alliance, forged during the 1930s and 1940s, between the Annales School of historiography, French existentialism, the *depaysement* of intellectuals and artists fleeing Nazi Germany or occupied France who were given teaching positions on legendary American campuses such as UC San Diego and Columbia University, and the anti-aesthetics, ethnographics, and subversive cultural critiques of Surrealism. The convergences on which Cusset focuses suggest that the historical displacement of Paris by New York is the book's backdrop. At times, one cannot but raise one's eyebrows at the author's attempt to restore the centrality of intellectual and artistic life that Paris undoubtedly lost not only in the immediate post-WW II era, but has failed to recover in recent decades.

The book is in itself a conjugated effect of both Cusset's liminal institutional location and of French Theory's politics of differentiation, cultural relativism, and hybrid strategies of contamination. Cusset argues quite eloquently that the staunch cultural resistance in 1970s France to its intellectual *enfants terribles* and the moral panic triggered by such concepts as relativism and contamination ought to be read hand in hand. French Theory is thus a *valise à porter* of sorts, a meandering migratory path traced by a portable set of concepts that could not find a fertile soil in the purist and universalist intellectual landscape of 1970s France. It needed to be de-territorialized and de-patriated in order to be re-territorialized across the Atlantic. In a sense, Cusset relies on several operative concepts that blend and sample Foucault's 'site of problematization,' Deleuze & Guattari's imperceptible rhizomatic extensions, Derrida's gap-opening textual dissemination, Baudrillard's simulacra, and Lyotard's libidinal economies. This strategic deployment of concepts, textual and extra-textual, overlaps in productive tension at the 'interface' between counter-culture, academia and avant-garde art practice. Ultimately, the mood of the book is pessimistic and indeed Cusset's central motif gradually emerges: the impossibility of the American phenomenon of French Theory to operate, simultaneously, both in academic and non-academic spheres.

This explains, perhaps, why Cusset spends such remarkable effort on drawing the contours of the eventful encounter between academic and counter-cultural life at the legendary 1966 conference at John Hopkins University that brought together, for the first time, the future gurus of French Theory. Cusset underscores in quasi-heroic and pathos-laden terms the key mediating and tactical role played by Sylvere Lotringer, the notorious young professor from the French Department at Columbia University. A catalyst of sorts, Lotringer provided the inspiration for the eventual establishment of an arsenal of journals that would devote immense (and often polemical, as in the case of the so-called Sokal affair) editorial and intellectual energy to the transmission of the radical politics and ethics—the conceptual alterity—of French Theory amidst dominant institutional-disciplinary academic formations. Cusset's story assigns to Lotringer the emancipatory function and leading role in the intensification of the potential blurring of academe and counterculture characteristic of 1960s cultural life. This objective would nonetheless logically fail to materialize since disenchantment is structural to the utopian underpinnings of emancipation itself. Although implicitly echoing Foucault's ambivalent notion of 'heterotopias', those 'other spaces' that "desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source, dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences" (Foucault, 1973), Cusset nonetheless sums up Lotringer's historical intervention in paradoxically utopian terms:

“Sylvere Lotringer thus embodies, perhaps more than anyone else, the radically singular figure, always threatened with invisibility, of these transmitters of French theory, caught between adhesion and irony and escaping the bulldozer of its institutionalization in two complementary directions—towards the living world of a rich American itinerary, in which theoretical motifs and life experiences constantly resonate, and toward the lightness of the player and gambler, the furtive intuition that the whole thing was an intense but impossible task. Nothing better summarizes the contradictory stakes of the category of French theory than Lotringer’s ambivalence towards the university. He teaches in the university, has participated in key conferences, but he continues to rail against its ‘men of resentiments’” (p.75).

A constellations of parameters constitutive of the risks entailed by the whole enterprise of making visible French Theory are taken up in the remainder of the book and expanded in subsequent chapters where Cusset rings its death-knoll by judiciously establishing the 'missed encounters' between counterculture and academic life in the United States, regardless of the magazine culture that would emerge out of the success and institutionalization of radical journals and publishers such as Diacritics, Semiotex(e), Zone Books, etc. While figures like Lotringer and Semiotext(e) are assigned a Hermes-like status of trans-atlantic and cross-cultural translators bound to failure, the book is also filled with less traumatic but equally moving and indelible legendary partnerships. For instance: the friendship between William Burroughs, perhaps the greatest figure of American counter-culture and the beats, and Michel Foucault, perhaps the thinker who more than any other has ripped apart France’s cult of the general intellectual. A moving note speaks of a party thrown by the latter on the occasion of the former’s birthday, shortly before Foucault’s death, the last time the two men saw each other. This passage offers one of the few re-enchanting counterpoints to the book’s narrative of missed encounters such as that between Dylan and Deleuze, the multiple interruptions by American activist-hecklers accusing French theorists of apolitical indulgence, and French reactionary intellectuals dismissing the sons and daughters of Nanterre on the grounds of excessive relativism or libidinalism.

Several chapters are devoted to the re-appropriation and re-contextualization of French Theory by the politics of representation in multicultural America. Others dwell on the question of ethnic and identity politics as a sublimation, in the American context, of a Marxist class warfare from the French context. Yet other chapters give a detailed account of the rise of the star system (populated by Judith Butler, Edward Said, Frederic Jameson, Stanley Fish, among others) in the “bucolic” setting of most prestigious campuses as an effect of the retreat of (Marxist?) intellectuals from public life in the United States. Still other chapters give a sense of the incursion and *detournement* of French Theory in the social sciences and adjacent fields. These rather brief accounts in particular reveal some of the blind spots in Cusset’s vision of the past, present and future of French Theory. Cusset moves rather hastily over references to the Latin American response to French Theory, and to the re-appropriation and dissemination of French theory in the social sciences and humanities. While eloquently articulated as a symptom of what seems like a genuine effort by the author to underscore the margins of the star system and the imperial political economy of the American university that ‘assigns to social scientist from Tijuana the task of border data-gathering’, these brief gestures are nonetheless not without important omissions. To take just the case of Latin America: Carlos Monsivais and Nestor Garcia Canclini are given a mere paragraph, the latter mentioned it seems only on grounds of a clear chain of transmission and link to French Theory (Canclini studied with Paul Ricoeur). After that, there is no mention of other intellectuals from the region. At the trans-disciplinary level, anthropology seems to be frozen in time, with the focus being on the overwhelming figures of Gregory Bateson, Deleuze & Guattari (having borrowed the concept of plateaux from *enfant terrible* anthropologist Gregory Bateson) and Clifford Geertz (having ushered in the interpretive/hermeneutic turn via the concept of culture-as-text). The book would have

certainly benefited from an engagement with the upheaval that took place in anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s under the clearly French Theory-inspired marketable label of Writing Culture that took seriously the task of decolonizing the strategies of textualization characteristic of classic ethnography. Other similar omissions punctuate the second and third part of the book. Although not seriously undermining the strength of Cusset's innovative cultural history, these blind spots can nonetheless only be attributed to the effect of the American phenomenon of French Theory itself and the culture industries that subtend the well-oiled machine of American academia without which Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Ricoeur and company would have never weaved their conceptual webs through the global intellectual fabric of intellectual life.

Even considering the scope of the subject matter and the demanding horizon of references, the book is still highly readable. Contrary to first impressions, this book is not specifically directed towards intellectual historians, although its ambivalence towards "the bucolic backdrop of most university campuses in the United States" and the disciple-making enterprise to pursue today French Theory by other means is certainly a harsh sentence that many an academic will find it a hard pill to swallow (p. 34). But this book is an eye-opener that certainly deserves a wide readership, especially among graduate students and young academics who dwell in the interstices between academic life and non-academic life, between the cultural critiques of contemporary media arts, of popular culture, and of academic writing. Yet, Cusset, as Lotringer before him, is "aware of a dawning realization that French theory will be academic or it will not be" (p. 75). Cusset also seems to be discreetly arguing that French Theory will have to be repatriated to France, in its American form, if it is to have an after-life. That is reflected in the ambivalent title of his last chapter, 'meanwhile in France....' Perhaps it would mean a second volume, tentatively entitled *French Theory Part 2: How Butler, Spivak, Rorty, Jameson, and company transformed the intellectual life in France*.

Tarek Elhaik  
Rice University  
[te1@rice.edu](mailto:te1@rice.edu)

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#).

*H-France Review* Vol. X (Month 2009), No. XXX.

ISSN 1553-9172