

H-France Review Vol. 17 (July 2017), No. 111

Bruno Perreau, *Queer Theory: The French Response*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xii + 276 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780804798860; \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781503600447; \$25.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781503600461.

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In *Le sexe politique: Genre et sexualité au miroir transatlantique* (*Political Sex: Gender and Sexuality in the Transatlantic Mirror*), Éric Fassin writes:

Quant à *Gender Trouble*, l'ouvrage de référence que la philosophe Judith Butler publie aux États-Unis en 1990, il faudra attendre 2005 pour une traduction française, dans le sillage de plusieurs de ses ouvrages—soit encore une « exception française », puisque des traductions en seize autres langues l'avait précédée.[1]

(As for *Gender Trouble*, the authoritative work that philosopher Judith Butler published in the U.S. in 1990, one would have to wait until 2005 for a French translation, in the wake of several subsequent books by her—in other words, a “French exception,” since it had already been translated into 16 other languages.)

Fassin shares here a commonly held frustration in the transatlantic exchanges around what go by the names of “French theory” and “queer theory” in the United States. This commonplace involves a reaction of surprise that it took so long for works like *Gender Trouble* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* to be published in French translation.[2] Like Butler's, Sedgwick's book came out in 1990, but was not published in French until 2008, in spite of the fact that, also like Butler, she engages significantly with “French theory.”

Fassin himself had been an exception to the belated French engagement with queer theory from the very beginning. Both a sociologist and an Americanist who worked for a number of years in the U.S. academy, he published the first of the articles that would be incorporated into *Le sexe politique* as early as 1991. The very title of this book names the transatlantic comparisons that are central to his analysis of the contemporary societies of both France and the U.S. *Le sexe politique* would be published in 2009, but not before his *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle* (*Inversion of the Homosexual Question*) came out four years earlier.[3] This study as well—though more focused on France and, during recent years there, the rapid evolution of public opinion with regards to homosexuality, homophobia, and issues like gay marriage and adoption—engages in extensive conversations with queer theory. The first article that would be incorporated into *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle* came out in 1999, just as the delay Fassin decries above was starting to end. Indeed, Fassin would write the preface to the French translation of *Gender Trouble*.

Although I have long considered Fassin to be one of the most sophisticated of the French interlocutors with U.S. queer theory, he was far from the only French intellectual engaging with it by the end of the

1990s. One of the first notable events in such transatlantic exchanges was a 1997 conference organized at the Pompidou Center in Paris as part of Gay Pride activities that year. A number of U.S. scholars, including Sedgwick and David M. Halperin, were invited, and Didier Éribon subsequently edited a collection of their contributions to this conference, which was published the following year.[4] Éribon himself was a key figure in catalyzing these belated exchanges, for work on a 1989 biography of Foucault and a 1994 intellectual history of Foucault and his contemporaries would ultimately lead to his translating Halperin's 1995 *Saint Foucault* in 2000, the same year that Isabelle Châtelet translated Halperin's earlier work from 1990, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*. [5] Although Éribon's 1989 biography makes no mention of queer theory, at least the 1994 follow-up mentions Halperin, if no other prominent theorists such as Butler, who was already making important contributions to our understanding of Foucault at the time. [6] In the meanwhile, Éribon's *Réflexions sur la question gay (Reflections on the Gay Question)* came out in 1999 (two years after the Pompidou Conference and a year after the publication of its proceedings). [7] This is the text in which Éribon finally begins to engage with queer theory more extensively, [8] an engagement that would continue in subsequent works like *Hérésies: Essais sur la théorie de la sexualité (Heresies: Essays on the Theory of Sexuality)*. [9]

Around this time, even though Butler and Sedgwick were still unavailable in French, a transatlantic conversation around queer theory began to pick up steam. Marie-Hélène (Sam) Bourcier's *Queer zones: Politiques des identités sexuelles, des représentations et des savoirs (Queer Zones: The Politics of Sexual Identities, Representations, and Knowledges)* was published in 2001, and François Cusset's *Queer critics: La littérature française déshabillée par ses homo-lecteurs (Queer Critics: French Literature Undressed by Its Homo-Readers)* was published the following year. [10] Both engage significantly with queer theory, and Cusset even offers his French readership an account of how queer readings of canonical French literature have transformed the field of French studies in the U.S. Other American participants in the Pompidou Center conference would see their work translated into French shortly after: George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, translated by Éribon in 2003, and Michael Lucey's *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality*, also translated by Éribon in 2008. [11]

Since then, Bourcier has added a second and third volume to *Queer zones* (in 2005 and 2011). [12] Her eclectic mix of political polemics, theoretical reflections, Birmingham-School-style "cultural studies" (which she always names in English), and post-porn, in-your-face feminism has accomplished a great deal in evening out the playing field between France and the U.S. when it comes to transatlantic scholarly exchanges in queer studies. "Queer theory" has now become such a household expression in France (known by the somewhat surprising translation "la théorie du genre") that Bruno Perreau's socio-political contextualization of the reception of queer theory in France often takes us far beyond the hallowed halls of French academia. Indeed, his well-written and very readable *Queer Theory: The French Response* uses as its point of departure debates around what the French call *le mariage pour tous* (marriage for everyone, i.e. gay marriage). With its carefully reconstructed history of the legalization of gay marriage in France, *Queer Theory* is written with an American audience in mind and, for Anglophone readers, even serves as a great introduction to queer France and its recent history. Especially surprising to those of us used to thinking of France as a secular Republic is the overarching and nefarious role of France's Catholic Church and of the marginal monarchist movement in stoking the homophobia of the French Right during this recent history. Actually, for those of us also used to thinking of a French difference from the U.S. when it comes to sexual politics, in *Queer Theory* France actually begins to look rather American in its sex panics.

Indeed, Perreau traces how American queer theory was demonized and became a scapegoat for any French objection to gay marriage and LGBTQ rights that raised its ugly head under the guise of republican universalism:

On the other side of the Atlantic, one key aspect of the anti-gay-marriage movement in France went almost unnoticed. The demonstrators were not merely denouncing the potentially damaging effect of the law on marriage; they were also claiming that its origin was to be found in “gender theory,” an ideology imported from America. By gender theory they mean queer theory in general and, more specifically, the work of philosopher Judith Butler, whose publications were translated into French throughout the first decade of the new millennium (pp. 1-2).

That American queer theory would figure so prominently in French political debates might seem less surprising, however, once one realizes that, on the LGBT left, such as the political collective Zoo, with its “séminaires Q” in 1996 and 1997 in which Bourcier also played a prominent role, calling for translations of Butler and others became a political rallying cry: “*GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY*, 1990. A TRADUIRE D’URGENCE” (To be translated ASAP).<sup>[13]</sup> The point here is that they wanted France’s LGBT movement to *se faire “queeriser”*; they wanted, in short, to add the Q, in a call for “le Queer Made in France.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Perreau does much more, however, than simply chronicle the reception of queer theory in France within both academic settings and political ones; the comparative context that he establishes provides unique insight for understanding the import of queer theory and politics even in the U.S. for American readers. (Indeed, Perreau chronicles some of this history as well.) In parallel, this same American readership will find in Perreau’s study a viewpoint from which to better understand France as a whole, since the contentious series of politico-cultural exchanges and debates that he chronicles can be understood as offering insight into the very core of French self-definition: “I show that the fantasy of the contagiousness of homosexuality underpins France’s republican values even today, as it did throughout the twentieth century” (p. 10). Furthermore, and this is one of the book’s major strengths, he characterizes the French vision of the supposedly American phenomenon that is queer theory as an invention of the French Self through the construction of an American Other:

[T]here is no specifically French origin of queer theory any more than queer theory is today American. The idea that French theory has returned to France via queer theory is a transatlantic cultural fantasy that postulates the existences of two distinct, stable territories defined through their exchanges and oppositions (p. 143).

Because queer theory is already an American reading of its own vision of French theory, instead of constituting an invasion by a foreign influence, “transatlantic exchanges are the product of cultural fantasies whose effect, if not function, is to mask their original source. Thus, ‘French theory’ becomes American when it returns home to France” (p. 7). Indeed, at his best, Perreau reminds me quite a bit of Fassin’s style, insights, and methodology in the latter’s sociology of micro-moments of relatively rapid shifts in collective political mindsets. Yet, as an avid reader of Fassin, I nonetheless find much of interest in Perreau, who does not duplicate but rather complements the former.

Perreau provides a succinct and useful chapter-by-chapter summary in his introduction. Chapter one, “Who’s Afraid of ‘Gender Theory?’” “deals with manifestations of opposition to gay marriage in France” (p. 11). Chapter two, “The Many Meanings of Queer,” “examines how queer theory... was variously employed in France” (p. 12). Chapter three, “Transatlantic Homecomings,” “discusses the effects of French theory’s return home” in the form of queer theory (p. 13). And chapter four, “The Specter of Queer Politics,” “analyses political resistance to queer theory in France” and traces “the genealogy of a fear of homosexual betrayal that dates back to the First World War” (p. 14). Rather than proceed in chronological order, therefore, in each of his four chapters, Perreau tackles a slightly different aspect of his subject matter. And whereas it might otherwise be difficult to discern how these pieces fit together as part of the larger puzzle, chapters tend to end with a restatement of their contribution and a transition to the next chapter to remind readers where they are in his overall structure, in which chapters might otherwise seem to overlap.

In each chapter, one may appreciate the cultural studies model that Perreau represents: for example, in chapter two, his sociological interviews with the very political actors who constitute his subject matter. Also indicative of his cultural studies approach are his consideration in chapter one (with wonderful accompanying illustrations) of political posters, websites, and demonstrations—in short, the analysis of visual culture defined broadly. One of the delightfully queer aspects of Perreau’s study is his insight regarding the French Right’s deployment of “partial nudity in public places” (p. 17). With photographs of shirtless men, *Queer Theory* exposes scantily-clad, svelte, right-wing activists to the very gay gaze that they oppose in a way that deconstructs the homophobic political activism these young men “embody.” In fact, I consider this first chapter to be a very teachable one for undergraduate and graduate students alike. As someone who has never found anything remotely interesting about France’s Right, I find that his analysis of a conservative fascination with sexuality as well as of the skillful way in which conservatives played the underdog, even hijacking the notion of gender parity to uphold it as a foundational principle for defining marriage as being between a man and a woman (as requiring parity, in short), complicates the very Left-Right opposition that divided proponents and opponents of gay marriage.

Speaking of Right and Left, Perreau contributes much to our understanding of not only France’s right wing but also its socialist establishment. In a context in which the French Left has abandoned activism and the faction of the intellectual elite once associated with it, Perreau’s account of how the socialist government caved in to demonstrations against gay marriage on a number of occasions and dragged its heels in implementing its own proposal for a *mariage pour tous* allows us to see France’s (Center) Left in a newly critical light. Indeed, Perreau understands “cultural insecurity” (p. 154) as characteristic of both the Left and the Right. And when the Right attacked not only “skirt day,” “the action of high school boys in Nantes who decided to wear skirts to school as a sign of protest against sexual prejudice..., which took place on May 16, 2014...” (p. 67), but also even “l’enseignement du gender... au lycée” (p. 71) (the teaching of gender in high schools) more generally, the socialist government gave up on a unit on gender equality in schools. Again and again, the Right successfully used leftist tactics and feminist rhetoric to cast curricular promotions of gender equality as perverting children.

There is even much of interest in Perreau’s study for all teachers of French. As a teacher myself of not only French literatures and cultures but also language, I still have a rather recent memory of teaching students how to discuss gender in French, indeed of how to translate, into French, the very words “gender” and “queer.” The latter’s adoption in political and scholarly discourses and the media (as already mentioned above in relation to Bourcier and the Zoo collective) has its own interesting history in France, which Perreau also details in chapter two in an excellent and useful chronicle of some of the more radical queer groups to emerge after ACT UP in France. One group, Les Tordu(e)s (Twisted Sisters) takes its name from one attempt to invent a French version of queer. It is also in this chapter that I learned of several other such attempts, like “transpédégouine” (transfagdyke) (p. 105) and even “une pédée” (girlfag) (p. 83). Ultimately, however, usage would settle on the adoption of the English word queer.

The French use of “gender” follows the opposite trend, starting by simply adopting the English word, as in a 2011 poster proclaiming “LE SCANDALE DE LA théorie du gender” (The scandal of gender theory) (p. 26). By 2014, however, we see a demonstration placard stating, “Aujourd’hui, la théorie du genre. Demain les bienfaits de la pédophilie” (Today gender theory, tomorrow the benefits of pedophilia) (p. 54). Previously the French word “genre” named genre (as in literary genre) or grammatical gender, and I taught students to translate gender as “la différence sexuelle” or “la masculinité et la féminité.” Québécoise feminists had been using “genre” to name gender for a number of years, but the French took more than a decade to follow suit. Although Perreau mentions Quebec feminist Louise Turcotte (p. 97), his study could have benefitted from a bit more comparison between Quebec and France in such matters. For in France, the very notion of gender would be considered a concept invading from the U.S., even

though American feminist analyses of gender were heavily indebted to the work of Simone de Beauvoir. And whereas in Quebec, feminists took the lead in making “genre” the word to name gender, in France it seems that we may thank a misogynistic and homophobic Right for this addition to a feminist critical vocabulary in French.

Finally, Perreau examines not only homophobia but also its intersectionality with racism, which will be of great interest to specialists of postcolonial studies as well as of other fields, like African American studies. It so happens that the author of the proposal to legalize gay marriage was “the French minister of justice, Christiane Taubira...a black woman from French Guiana and the author of a law that made slavery a crime against humanity” (p. 11). When the Right began its attacks on gay marriage, therefore, they also targeted Taubira in ways that were simultaneously racist. One chant stands out in particular: “Y’a bon banania, y’a pas bon Taubira” (p. 205, n.193) (“Banania so good, Taubira no good”) (p. 60). As Perreau explains, “Banania was a brand of chocolate whose advertising mascot was a good—because submissive and uneducated—Negro” (p. 60). So ubiquitous was its slogan “Y a bon Banania,” itself written in stereotypical Blackspeak, that Frantz Fanon used it to name a particular stereotype of the grinning, happy-go-lucky Black. In fact, it was even so ubiquitous that what Richard Philcox translates as “the grinning stereotype Y a bon Banania” goes without saying in the original simply as “Y a bon Banania.”[15] Perreau’s careful attention to this intersectionality also extends to France’s extreme political Right, represented by the Front National (FN) party, whose candidate Marine Le Pen made it all the way to the second round of the 2017 presidential elections. Yet while the FN was founded on hyper-nationalist, pro-colonial, anti-immigrant principles, it has not, as Perreau rightly points out, always been homophobic in any simplistic way, in spite of its hyper-virility. Along similar lines, the intersectionality that Perreau establishes between homophobia and racism is especially strong in relation to France’s colonial history in North Africa, since the law legalizing gay marriage initially excluded eleven countries, including all three Maghrebian ones, due to French treaties respecting laws there that explicitly prohibited gay marriage (pp. 4–5). Furthermore, the kind of anti-communitarianism that contributed to resistance to gay marriage has also fueled rejections of wearing head scarfs in schools and other public places. Indeed, the veil controversy in France becomes an important lens through which Perreau reads the skirt day already mentioned above (p. 68).

This attention to France’s colonial history is to be welcomed and commended. Some of Perreau’s treatments of intersectionality, however, are more problematic from the perspective of postcolonial studies. One telling section heading in chapter three, for example, proclaims “Intersectionality Is Not Enough” (pp. 134). Granted, the concept of intersectionality has been subjected to recent critiques, with which Perreau is well acquainted, but it is under this rubric that Perreau also questions Joseph A. Massad’s notion of the “Gay International,” Momin Rahman’s concept of “homocolonialism,” and Jasbir K. Puar’s theorization of “homonationalism”[16]: “...I propose a deconstruction of the notion of ‘homonationalism’ itself, demonstrating that it manages to critique North/South and East/West forms of domination only at the cost of misunderstanding the complex links between sexuality and sense of belonging in the Euro-American world” (p. 115). However, unlike some critiques of an over-simplifying intersectionality, Perreau’s treatment of Puar, especially, but also Massad risks undoing the very complexity that intersectionality originally sought to account for. In a sort of reverse move, he claims that writers like Puar “ascrib[e] their cause to some essence—the ‘homo’ in homonationalism, the ‘pink’ in pinkwashing” (p. 188)—whereas proponents of intersectionality have deployed the concept precisely to avoid essentializing these categories as white. To carry out this “deconstruction,” Perreau devotes special attention to Puar’s analysis of the Lawrence and Garner v. Texas U.S. Supreme Court decision (pp. 121–25), often by using such formulae as “noted... without exploring” (p. 122), “admits...without exploring” (p. 122), “fails to consider” (p. 123), or “fails to analyze” (p. 123). Yet I would assert that stating what an author does not do is not the same as deconstructing what she does. Interestingly, it is precisely the intersectionality that Puar establishes between implications of the Lawrence decision and the “War on Terror,” torture, and racial profiling (which Perreau “fails to consider” when he focuses instead on the decision itself as opposed to the context Puar builds around it) that may have allowed

Perreau to make further insights with regards to an intersectionality that he otherwise examines rather well. Regardless of these relatively minor issues that I take with Perreau's study, however, his remains a book well worth reading.

## NOTES

[1] Éric Fassin, *Le sexe politique: Genre et sexualité au miroir transatlantique* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2009), p. 63.

[2] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Trouble dans le genre*, trans. Cynthia Kraus (Paris: La Découverte, 2005); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and *Épistémologie du placard*, trans. Maxime Cervulle (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008).

[3] Éric Fassin, *L'inversion de la question homosexuelle* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2005).

[4] Didier Éribon, ed., *Les études gay et lesbiennes* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1998).

[5] Didier Éribon, *Michel Foucault: 1926-1984* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989) and *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* (Paris: Fayard, 1994); David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), *Saint Foucault*, trans. Didier Éribon (Paris: EPEL, 2000), *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *Cent ans d'homosexualité et autres essais sur l'amour grec*, trans. Isabelle Châtelet (Paris: EPEL, 2000).

[6] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 93-111. In contrast, Halperin engages extensively with both of Éribon's books on Foucault in *Saint Foucault*.

[7] Didier Éribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

[8] His index lists references to Butler, George Chauncey, and Michael Lucey, but not Sedgwick. There are two footnotes in which Fassin appears as well as one in which Gayle Rubin appears.

[9] Didier Éribon, *Hérésies: Essais sur la théorie de la sexualité* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

[10] Marie-Hélène Bourcier, *Queer zones: Politiques des identités sexuelles, des représentations et des savoirs* (Paris: Balland, 2001); François Cusset, *Queer critics: La littérature française déshabillée par ses homo-lecteurs* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

[11] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and *Gay New York: 1890-1940*, trans. Didier Éribon (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Michael Lucey, *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and *Les ratés de la famille: Balzac et les formes sociales de la sexualité*, trans. Didier Éribon (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

[12] Marie-Hélène Bourcier, *Sexpolitiques: Queer zones 2* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005) and *Queer zones 3: Identités, cultures et politiques* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2011).

[13] Marie-Hélène Bourcier, ed., *Q comme queer: Les séminaires Q du Zoo (1996-1997)* (Lille: Cahiers Gai Kitsch Camp, 1998), p. 95. In 1999, Éribon made his own list of ten works that should be translated: Didier Éribon, "To be translated..." in *Papiers d'identité: Interventions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), pp. 117-24.

[14] Bourcier, *Q comme queer*, p. 56.

[15] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), p. 17, and *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952) pp. 27, 42 n.12, 90, 186.

[16] Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Momin Rahman, "Queer Rights and the Triangulation of Western Exceptionalism," *Journal of Human Rights* 13.3(2014):274-89; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

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ISSN 1553-9172