

H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 186

Niilo Kauppi, *Radicalism in French Culture: A Sociology of French Theory in the 1960s*. Farnham, England and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2010. x + 154 pp. Bibliography and index. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-0783-6.

Review by Julian Bourg, Boston College.

During the 1960s and 1970s, French avant-garde writers and academics pushing structuralism to its limits argued that criticism of the workings, concealments, and absences of language could pave the way for liberation and even revolution. Theory was indispensable, for it expressed and reinforced, when it did not supplant altogether, more pedestrian forms of social action. The actual connection between French theory and its original socio-political context has always been tricky, both as a question of its performative realization at the time and as a matter of ex post facto explanation. Niilo Kauppi has been pursuing the question of French theory's social context for the past twenty years, first in his published dissertation on *Tel Quel*, then his analysis, at once succinct and extensive, of the French intellectual field in the post-Sartrean era, and now in the present book.[1] Kauppi's approach has always been indebted to his mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, even if he has always been amiably critical of him. Where other historical sociologists of French intellectuals, such as Christophe Charle and Christophe Prochasson, turned Bourdieu's insights on earlier periods, Kauppi has set his sights on the recent era that gave birth to French theory, offering self-reflective accounts of the very intellectual field that gave rise to Bourdieu's own notion of the intellectual field.[2] In contrast to a dry mapping of the institutions, reviews, and behaviors of postwar French intellectuals, especially in *Radicalism in French Culture*, he takes concepts themselves seriously and aims for the precise target where social structures, collective and personal experience, and "power-ideas" [*idées-forces*] converge.[3]

In truth, recently Kauppi has been thinking about other things than French theory, engaging with Max Weber and reflecting on the European Union.[4] *Radicalism in French Culture* marks *un retour en arrière* to an early project. As he notes in the opening pages, the present book is based on revised excerpts of an 800-page thesis he defended in 1987 in his native Finland before moving to France (pp. ix-x). Prior to his apprenticeship with Bourdieu, he had been drawn to French theory itself, notably the thought of Julia Kristeva. *Radicalism in French Culture* is a work of reflexive sociology in the literal, biographical sense that it retraces Kauppi's own development from that early enchantment with Kristeva through the books on *Tel Quel* and French intellectual nobility to his thinking with and beyond Bourdieu. Compared to his earlier works, however, he pays greater attention to individual thinkers and their ideas—notably Kristeva and Philippe Sollers—as well as to criticisms made at the time of their version of "symbolic revolution."

*Radicalism in French Culture* is also self-reflexive on another level. The Telquelians had at one point envisioned intertextuality as a political enterprise that moved outward not to mere context but rather to materiality and historicity. New critical relationships to language were the necessary condition for transforming forms of life in the name of heterogeneity, marginality, and poetic possibility. To some extent, like the Telquelians, Kauppi, too, seeks to connect French theory to historical materiality, although he does so from the position of sociological explanation rather than for the sake of political revolution. Although the last three chapters of the book, in which Kauppi tacks toward Bourdieu, seem somewhat ancillary, they also enable him to assert his own position: that sociology does a much better

job than Kristeva's "semanalysis" and Sollers' monumental history of linking texts, ideas, persons, collectivities, institutions, materiality, and history. Thus, sociologically minded French theory of the 1960s and 1970s is employed to explain the emergence, aspirations, crises, and frustrations of textually minded French theory from the same decades.[5]

Unavoidably, parts of *Radicalism in French Culture* will already be familiar to readers of Kauppi's earlier works. Several chapters can be read as expanding the analysis of a single page in *French Intellectual Nobility*. [6] With *Tel Quel* as a barometer, Kauppi follows the avant-garde theoretical practice from the *Nouveau Roman* of the early 1960s to *Tel Quel's* thwarted pursuit of a materialistic "science of the text" to the arrivisme of a new, post-1968 professoriate to Bourdieu's satisfying, if incomplete social theory. The overall story is one of de-radicalization. Beholden to the surrealists and the *Nouveau Roman* crowd, whom they promoted through theoretical elaboration, the Telquelians formulated the notion of symbolic revolution as a way to integrate avant-gardism, structuralist linguistics, and radical politics. Where in his earlier works Kauppi had largely avoided unpacking theories themselves in preference to the sociology of intellectuals, here he dives headlong into the tangled thickets of Kristeva's semanalysis and Sollers' aestheticized marginality. That his expositions of their thought are not the clearest parts of *Radicalism in French Culture* is not entirely his fault. *Tel Quel*, Kristeva, and Sollers in the 1960s and early 1970s invoked materiality via rarefied theoretical incantation. They set the now-familiar positions of subjectlessness, uncertainty, and plurality against the tyranny of "One Meaning" (p. 33) Connecting modernist aestheticism to structuralist formalism, they turned their science of the text on bourgeois ideology and hoped to link textual production to the politics of labor more generally. The Telquelians shuffled Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida in and out as needed. Merely repeating the axiom that intertextuality was a materialism, however, did not necessarily make it so, and the paucity of articles in *Tel Quel* on contemporaneous social and political questions spoke volumes about the group's unfulfilled wishes.

Longing to anchor their symbolic revolution in materiality led the Telquelians, after a brief flirtation with the Communist Party, into an equally flighty dalliance with Maoism. Yet Maoism seemed mainly to foreground the fact that the avant-garde committed to aesthetico-political revolution had long had a bad conscience about its own elitism. Commitment to poetic revolution also caused *Tel Quel* to break with Derrida, whose endless deconstruction was accused of "political conservatism" (p. 89). The end of the project of symbolic revolution came in the 1970s through what Kauppi calls "the taming of French theory," by which he means the arrivisme of certain theoretical stars and the mainstreaming of their previously critical and marginal positions (p. 91ff.). Academism contained and subdued earlier cultural radicalism. Kristeva, for instance, ultimately resolved the stymied project of interlacing semanalysis, politics, and textual materialism by turning to psychoanalysis. Kauppi's analysis of this de-radicalization in *French Intellectual Nobility* is somewhat richer than what he offers here (the issue of mediatization has all but disappeared). Refreshingly, though, the new work integrates voices that were critical of the Telquelians at the time. Bernard Pingaud, for example, chided Sollers for turning the science of the text into a new ideology and doubted that a revolution could be made out of such "ultranominalism" and "idealism" (pp. 61–62). Jean Baudrillard dissented from the Telquelian position that Marx's notion of production could be so seamlessly squared with Georges Bataille's theory of excess (p. 96). *Radicalism in French Culture* ends with that turn to Bourdieu (spiced with a little Michel de Certeau) who provides the elusive recipe of culture *and* society, ideas *and* institutions, agency *and* collective experience, that embodied the aspirations of an age and now provides the means to retrospectively understand those ambitions—*l'autoréflexion s'accomplit*. The final word, however, goes to a Weberian pessimism that sees in the academism of theory the defanging of radicalism in French culture.

For Kauppi, French theory was radical for a brief moment in the 1960s and 1970s due to the convergence of contingent forces. The literary avant-garde brushed up against cutting-edge methods of the human sciences, and changes in publishing facilitated the rise and success of reviews like *Tel Quel*, whose rapid ideological outfit exchanges epitomized the flux and contestation of the day. Certain

theories were “power-ideas”; they were adequate to the moment and therefore momentarily successful.[7] Notions such as Kristeva’s semanalysis and Sollers’ monumental history appealed to a young public hungry for new, difficult, and marginal ideas. As social conditions changed, though, so did the fortunes of symbolic revolution. A sociology of French theory aims to synthesize its parts (texts, persons, institutions, etc.) into a comprehensible whole. It treats the time and place of French theory’s genesis as a field that can be described, mapped, and understood. What such an approach might smooth over and thus underestimate, however, is French theory’s critical edge. This issue echoes the Frankfurt School’s vintage criticisms of Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge.[8] For the former, as for *Tel Quel*, avant-gardism, ideology critique, and theory led by emancipatory interest amounted to much more than symptoms of an established social order (in whose shadow all radicalism “fails”). For both the Frankfurt School and *Tel Quel*, culture was a site of reflective and transformative intervention; the goal was not to integrate parts into an existing whole but to indicate lines that gestured toward as-yet-unrealized possibilities. In other words, the “is” envisioned by the sociology of knowledge—the adequacy of theory to its contemporaneous social life—is itself only one possibility of what can be. Such a debate may turn on what one means by “the conditions of possibility.”

## NOTES

[1] Niilo Kauppi, *The Making of an Avant-Garde: Tel Quel* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994) and *French Intellectual Nobility: Institutional and Symbolic Transformations in the Post-Sartrian Era* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).

[2] Christophe Charle, *Naissance des “intellectuels,” 1880–1900* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990); and Christophe Prochasson, *Les Intellectuels, le socialisme et la guerre, 1900–1938* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

[3] For dry mapping see Rémy Rieffel, *Les Intellectuels sous la Ve République*, 3 vols. (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993). For exemplary syncretism see Bernard Brillant, *Les Clercs de 68* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003).

[4] Kauppi, *Democracy, Social Resources, and Political Power in the European Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[5] As he wrote in *French Intellectual Nobility* (p. 5): “I believe that the greatest homage that can be paid to a given method is to attempt to understand it critically in its own environment, to turn it partially upon itself, and to build upon it.”

[6] Kauppi, *French Intellectual Nobility*, p. 120.

[7] Kauppi borrows the concept of power-idea from Alfred Fouillé, *Morale des idées-forces* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1908).

[8] Martin Jay, “The Frankfurt School’s Critique of Karl Mannheim and the Sociology of Knowledge” [1974], in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

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ISSN 1553-9172