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TRANSFORMED THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE UNITED STATES*

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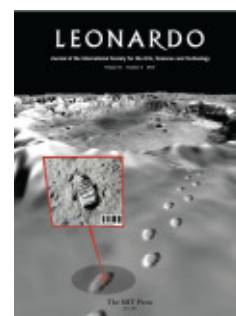
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## **French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States**

Jennifer Ferng

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an argument for the role of the analogical figure in sustaining dominant Western patriarchal cultural hierarchies. Keeping such brief detail in mind, and the synopsis in her conclusion, one can imagine the significant challenge this study will present to scientists not well enough versed in social science to be able to challenge the logic of her arguments on their own terms.

What *The Poetics of DNA* does is to very effectively bring together an intriguing range of the popular, scientific and philosophical literature on DNA to bear on the evolution of analogies, on the shifting metaphoric imperatives describing DNA—first so grandly as the “secret of life,” then the “book of life” and finally the less-magnificent “parts list” as hybrid metaphor. In doing so, Roof is able to explore fascinating and important issues concerning genetics, language, ideology and gender politics, as well as those of copyright and commodification and the implications all this has for the future. Apparently the crux of the matter is a clash of Enlightenment values, in which scientists seek explanatory factors, structures and mechanisms that humanistic social scientists necessarily reject as mere metaphoric vehicles for symbolic domination. Therein representations are always language- and culture-bound such that science is in effect ultimately a form of social science and not a separate realm with any specific claims to “truth” value.

It goes without saying that this book is avowedly political, that it has a very specific postmodernist agenda. Such arguments about the political uses of science and the misuse of science by pseudoscience are of immense importance in this age of the commodification of the gene. And yet all this critical insight also needs to be assessed in the tragic or stark comic light of the remarkable fact that almost half of the population in the United States does not even believe in evolution. In this I believe that the idea that any representation of science being dependent on analogy is necessarily a misrepresentation with compromising ideological baggage and is in itself deeply problematic: it allows for science to be seen as merely one form of truth, and thus intelligent design and creationism as merely another species of the truth, albeit it pseudo-truth to some. The challenge must be then to return to do intellectual and scientific justice to the reality of DNA. Instead of doing so, this book’s contribution will more likely

be to advance the creative application of concepts of metaphor, metonym, metalepsis, metathesis and allegory, synecdoche and such while significantly enhancing debate over what constitutes pseudoscientific versus scientific discourse. And there, as *The Poetics of DNA* concludes, the implications are of the utmost significance in the realms of technology, economics, politics and religion.

Writing as a social scientist with a scientific background, I would maintain that, in the end, the process and epiphany of coming to the realization that the structure of the double helix and its related structural reproductive logic is part mystery and part deductive progress is of the greatest value in and of itself. It is in itself prime evidence of the necessary power of the use of metaphor to advance science. Moreover, in assessing Roof’s critique of hyperbolized notions of DNA, one might ask whether her own hyperbolic ideological position has not served as pseudoscientific synecdoche.

Are we then simply not better off in the humanities in developing instead a much greater appreciation of the remarkable discovery of DNA and mRNA and the intricacies of these fields of investigation within molecular biology and biochemistry? And there, recognizing the majestic power of epiphany and the creative urge to determine structures, processes and principles of relations that drive science is of the essence. Thus take for instance the “uncanny description of the status of DNA at the identification of its structure” (note 7, p. 223) as Roof herself quotes from James Joyce:

This is the moment that I call epiphany. First we recognize that the object is one integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a thing in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is the thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul is the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.

And in this indeed, the discovery of DNA was as much art as science in terms of the style and suddenness in which it finally revealed itself (was revealed) through the workings of the engaged individual and collective scientific mind.

(A fuller version of this review can be found at <[www.leonardo.inf/ldr](http://www.leonardo.inf/ldr)>.)

## FRENCH THEORY: HOW FOUCAULT, DERRIDA, DELEUZE, & CO. TRANSFORMED THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE OF THE UNITED STATES

by François Cusset, translated by Jeff Fort, with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, U.S.A., 2008. Originally published in French in 2003. 388 pp. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8166-4733-0.

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Artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel, who had imported beat poetry into France from the United States, once invited Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to a 1975 concert held in Massachusetts, where the two had the opportunity to meet Bob Dylan and Joan Baez backstage. Somewhat unimpressed with the two French philosophers, the folksingers had not bothered to read *Anti-Oedipus*, and likewise the two theorists were unfortunately not interested in smoking marijuana: an inadvertent misalignment of social interests, creating a somewhat awkward encounter for all parties involved. This anecdote of an ill-conceived compatibility epitomizes the spirit of comprehending the objectives of French theory and prompts an inevitable query: have we on the U.S. side of the Atlantic been able to come to terms with the French, their traditions of intellectual thought and their philosophical legacy?

Deleuze stated in *Cinema I: The Movement Image* that “Theory is itself a practice, no less than its object is . . . It is a conceptual practice, and it must judged in terms of the other practices with which it interacts” (in an epigraph before *French Theory*’s preface), and if this inaugural quotation is an evocative portent, the book unfolds as a meta-narration of the historical misunderstandings, mistranslations and misappropriations that emerge from within the differing internal organizations of France and the United States, leading French theory into formidable political situations—involving Western capitalism, multiculturalism and post-colonialism, to list a few—and to all-star personalities such as Judith Butler, Edward Said and Frederic Jameson. “The still unidentified flying object” known as French theory, a general term applied by Cusset himself throughout the book, which refers to the body of

works originating in the 1960s and 1970s by theorists ranging from Deleuze to Virilio, remains an influential and preeminent set of academic methodologies, and there has not been a single discipline or field, including art, cultural studies, film, gender studies, history or literature, that has remained untouched by its pedagogical impetus.

Densely written, highly informed and comprehensive in its scope, connecting theory to the far-flung reaches of politics and social action both inside and outside the university setting, Cusset's book, as translated from the original French, sets out in a cultivated, distinctive fashion to rediscover why American academics became so enamored with the ideas of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and others such as Baudrillard. In his intricate descriptions of how these concepts were appropriated, skewed, then deployed in the service of politicized agendas that ranged from affirmative action to neoconservative crusades for counter-intelligentsia to deconstruction and postmodern architecture, the multifarious episodes and numerous examples are well-contextualized and historicized, expatiating how these reactionary thoughts were transmitted from French institutions and intellectual figures to those corresponding in the United States. What the French call "thought" is what Americans know as "theory," or so claims Sylvère Lotringer, who edited an older volume of articles with Sande Cohen, similarly entitled *French Theory in America* (2001), and views the first book of French theory as John Cage's *For the Birds*. For those not well versed in French philosophy, post-structuralism and Marxism, this book may prove to be a fairly difficult task, since Cusset assumes that the reader is familiar with the suppositions associated with Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze and is capable of seeing beyond the popularized associations of power, discipline, difference, and schizophrenia to some of the more sophisticated philosophical consequences of these arguments.

Three moments of cultural contact between France and the United States—the artistic and intellectual exiles who traveled from the U.S. between 1940 and 1945; the exportation of Surrealism, Sartrean existentialism and the ideas of the Annales group; and the October 1966 conference held at Johns Hopkins University—mark what Cusset views as integral, prolonged exchanges that revolutionized viewpoints for those in both countries. Alan Sokal's notorious hoax article of

1996, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" in the cultural studies journal *Social Text*, performs as a crux of vexation and controversy, launching debates about the merits of these theorists' ideas, printed through underground publishing houses such as Semiotext(e) and communicated to an American audience in the 1970s, who, in turn, disseminated French theory through many seminars, conferences and artistic movements.

Cusset assembles his book around three central themes, although there are, in fact, many more that could be recognized: the French issue of writing that becomes the American issue of reading, how capitalism was transformed into the enigma of cultural identity, and how micropolitics turned into a different question of symbolic conflicts (the "denationalizing" of texts in a global market). French theorists cast representation and language as problems in specifying any goal, pressuring existentialists, structuralists, Marxists and feminists to surpass their critiques. While the entirety of the book is engaging but concentrated, two sections are rather compelling: Chapter 6, "The Politics of Identity," and Chapter 12, "Theory as Norm: A Lasting Influence." Intellectuals from the third world, as Cusset indicates, are forced to use the "arms of the adversary," such as terms taken from the Enlightenment and rational progressivism, and the subaltern is often taken as the "blind spot of the historical process" (p. 147). French academics are set apart from the international networks set up by American universities, theorizing exile and miscegenation as a political condition of the contemporary subject (p. 296). How Foucault and Derrida are read directly in Mexico and Brazil, for example, produced entirely different readings than those generated from within the United States.

Stanley Fish, a literary critic who pokes at the uselessness of academics and who has also reviewed this book, does not believe that such intellectuals need be essential, stating, "Although the 'textual' or the 'discursive' is . . . a crucial site of social contestation, the people who study that site are not crucial players in the contest" (p. 157). Theory should be given a place in contemporary times and a global destiny to fulfill, as Cusset intimates; along these lines, what is the expected responsibility of a public intellectual in the United States, and how can academic encounters

foster the adoption of given ideological policies related to the present global recession, climate change and the environment, or the crisis of the humanities in education? French society, Cusset insists, is just beginning to grasp the multiple subject and the consequences of intellectual isolation, where, in the words of Walter Benjamin, their drive for knowledge derives entirely from "a feeling of obligation, not to revolution but to traditional culture" (p. 323). By exploring social critique beyond Marx and continuing to exercise political vigilance (p. 330), French theory may bring about the convergence of opposing philosophical ideologies. It not only produced "intensive hypotheses, general and specific at the same time . . . on communitarian apparatuses, discursive regimes, or the machinery of capitalist desire," but if it could reestablish opposition to polarized representations and binary discourses such as German Marxism and French Nietzscheanism and join such apparently disparate camps (p. 334), theory could coincide with forms of activism today (even in 1978, when Foucault was arrested for visiting both sides of Berlin). Oswald Spengler, in *The Decline of the West*, acknowledged the importance of the "art of deliberate misunderstanding" or "felicitous misreading," which was indissociable from a culture's pure essence, and this very act is what Cusset conjures for us and demands that we owe to the life of texts—or "the interval between the emergence of writing and its canonical normalization, between the logics of the intellectual field and the unpredictabilities of posterity" (p. 338)—and to an existence of devoted political engagement, either at home or abroad, that will help us fathom the conditions of our changing world.

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