

**François Cusset,  
*French Theory, Foucault,  
Derrida, Deleuze & Cie  
et les mutations de la vie  
intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis***

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**By Bridie Lonie**

François Cusset's work on French theory, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Co. and the transformations of intellectual life in the United States, has not yet been published in English, but I found it in a wonderful bookshop in Brest, in the west of France and judged by the use of the English term "French Theory" in its title that I might find my own attitudes and prejudices described within it – Francophile, speed reader, prone to broad and unsubstantiated generalisation on the basis of some wonderful fragments of text. I was right. Cusset outlines the process by which the thinking of a group of loosely-connected philosophers and cultural theorists was received in the English-speaking world and in particular in university departments of English and Literature in the United States. He argues that the process was one of "othering", that is, the ideas in question were homogenised inappropriately and seen in terms of received notions about the relationships between national character and theoretical positions, seeing them as much as behaviours as concepts. Taking a historical approach, Cusset is also actively engaged, funny and clever, sideswiping pretensions on either side, while acknowledging the deeper implications for such groups of people as women, people of

other cultures and gender preferences, and for the academic disciplines which, facilitated by the lens of French Theory, purported to represent them. This becomes particularly relevant as he outlines the movement from cultural studies to identity politics.

Positioning the first significant encounter between "French Theory" and the academic world in the United States "...as the symposium at Johns Hopkins University in 1966 on 'The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man'", he prepares the ground by explaining two things: attitudes to things French in the United States throughout the twentieth century, and the specific disciplines which were to receive the impact of the new theorists: those of literary and cultural studies.

Cusset describes the pragmatism of the American approach to literature and its roots in a humanist democracy focused on notions of individuality. Considering the physical and social nature of academe in the United States, he suggests that the institutions of higher learning had become by the 1960s curiously adolescent places where students, and consequently what they studied, had become divorced from active engagement in political life. This made the progressive deradicalisation of the American campus in the 1970s easier after the struggles for civil liberty in the 1960s.

Against this context then, Cusset places the arrival of a set of theoretical positions which destabilise both belief and individuality, substituting instead desire and collectivity, and including as an aspect of desire the appeal to Francophiles of the speakers in question. He argues that this contributes to an accelerated polarisation within the academic institution of two positions: the "reaganothatcherite" individualist and the "foucauldeleuzian" for whom the human

position is always collective, for whom the foundations and formation of subjectivity is to be found in the performative nature of social and linguistic discourse.

French theory supported the development of identity politics, but Cusset suggests – not originally – that it also worked against the universities' ability to critique national politics. He argues that the most damaging effect of the decontextualisation of French theory in the United States was its depoliticisation, its reception as a set of epistemological paradigms rather than its reasonably consistent position as a resistance to the political arenas of France. This enabled, for instance, a reading of Deleuze and Guattari's interest in the de-homogenisation of French Marxism – and their argument that capitalism in its libidinal excesses was perhaps more emancipatory than the hegemonic concerns of class – as an endorsement of global capitalism. Cusset then considers the development of the sets of theoretical frameworks around the terms “enunciation”, and “performativity”: terms which – while almost synonymous – demonstrate different theoretical allegiances; and he discusses their impact on the various discourses of the universities and on the development of tributary disciplines in the visual arts.

Meanwhile, in France, Foucault and Co. had been forgotten. Cusset describes the increasing globalisation of French theory against their positioning in France through funereal notes of celebration and mourning; while in France their thought was seen as redundant or irrelevant. Cusset's text was first published in 2003. The second edition, in 2005, notes that the French are now reconsidering these thinkers and translating the works of writers whose thinking is contiguous: Donna Haraway, Judith Butler. Now that the original texts of the theorists

in question have returned to their original contexts, Cusset suggests that they can perhaps act in the ways that they were once intended to.

This book then, very neatly returns to its origins and its centre, having explored the effects of de- and re-contextualisation. It is informative and entertaining, passionate and challenging. Its chief concern is with a history often enlivened by anecdote or sound bite. It offers in itself an example of what the term “enunciation” might mean; that is to say what will be made of a coalescence of institution, desire, historical circumstance and language. This text is as a construct an example of the performative: unpredictable, at times appearing to act autonomously, at times capable of being hijacked by contingencies. “French theory” never was a unified field, but here it comes very close to having become one. Other reviews argue that the book should appear in English and I wholeheartedly agree; at the time of writing this has not yet occurred.

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