



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

François Cusset, Jeff Fort (Translation), Josephine Berganza (Translator), Marlon Jones (Translator)

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“In such a difficult genre, full of traps and obstacles, French Theory is a success and a remarkable book in every respect: it is fair, balanced, and informed. I am sure this book will become the reference on both sides of the Atlantic.” — Jacques Derrida

During the last three decades of the twentieth century, a disparate group of radical French thinkers achieved an improbable level of influence and fame in the United States. Compared by at least one journalist to the British rock ‘n’ roll invasion, the arrival of works by Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari on American shores in the late 1970s and 1980s caused a sensation.

Outside the academy, ‘French theory’ had a profound impact on the era’s emerging identity politics while also becoming, in the 1980s, the target of right-wing propagandists. At the same time in academic departments across the country, their poststructuralist form of radical suspicion transformed disciplines from literature to anthropology to architecture. By the 1990s, French theory was woven deeply into America’s cultural and intellectual fabric.

French Theory is the first comprehensive account of the American fortunes of these unlikely philosophical celebrities. François Cusset looks at why America proved to be such fertile ground for French theory, how such demanding writings could become so widely influential, and the peculiarly American readings of these works. Reveling in the gossipy history, Cusset also provides a lively exploration of the many provocative critical practices inspired by French theory.

Ultimately, he dares to shine a bright light on the exultation of these thinkers to assess the relevance of critical theory to social and political activism today—showing, finally, how French theory has become inextricably bound with American life.

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

Date : Published April 1st 2008 by University Of Minnesota Press (first published 2003)

ISBN : 9780816647330

Author : François Cusset , Jeff Fort (Translation) , Josephine Berganza (Translator) , Marlon Jones (Translator)

Format : Paperback 413 pages

Genre : History, Philosophy, Theory, Cultural, France, Nonfiction

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From Reader Review French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States for online ebook

Avery says

This book about French theory in American spends a lot of time introducing aspects of American culture that French people might find foreign. I would recommend it to a young French intellectual. Anglo-Saxon readers would do better to read *The Myth of Disenchantment*, which unveils some hidden layers of 20th century theory. Cusset observes how Derrida's emphasis on misreading and the integration of the Other was anticipated by Oswald Spengler, but not that Spengler got his ideas from occultists...

Andrew says

Not for beginners, which, alas, I am. Still, the personalities are well-written and I've been inspired to catch up as best I can.

I youtube'd a bunch of Derrida lectures and bought some Levi-Strauss for background. Someday I'll pick this up again.

GloriaGloom says

Sarà capitato a tutti di incappare in un qualche post di certi blog tenuti da studenti del DAMS o da casalinghe di Voghera che alambiccando intorno, che so, all'ultimo film di Tarantino, si sostiene la tesi della decostruzione dei generi per non dire che è una divertentissima cazzata - e quanto ne guadagnerebbe Tarantino. Se ora è pratica riservata solo ad alcune categorie in estinzione che internet ha riportato in luce era costume comune - come i più anziani tra voi ricorderanno - nei primi '80 applicare in modo improprio qualunque singulto concettuale di Derrida & c. al qualsivoglia. Ovvero un gruppo di importanti pensatori francesi le cui teorie erano ormai da tempo agée oltralpe tornavano sotto i riflettori - disinnescate da tutto il loro reale potenziale - come una sorta di coltellino svizzero multiuso applicato al pop (e un po' ne hanno guadagnato anche loro, i pensatori, - a voler essere maliziosi - di questa mutazione genetica, visto il successo planetario, in quegli anni, di bignamini del pensar francese come i Frammenti di un discorso amoroso di Barthes, o il nostrano Eco con le sue fioriere medioevali). In realtà quella capriola rovesciata che portava a decostruire i film di Spielberg e le canzonette di Madonna nel nome di Derrida o a togliere il guinzaglio al cane per non incorrere nelle ire dei Foucaultiani non arrivava da oltralpe ma dall'appropriazione soft che i campus americani avevano operato di quelle teorie: la cosiddetta French Theory.

L'avvincente libro di Cusset narra l'epopea dello sbarco nel Nuovo Mondo di quella teoria di teorie che per vie traverse e originali (in fondo non si è rizomatici a caso) risolleverà l'economia dei campus umanistici americani, regalerà brillanti carriere a docenti disperati per poi deflagrare nella società americana rivitalizzando gli strumenti della critica e regalando nuovo carburante ai più disparati e sfiatati movimenti d'opposizione. Con lingua brillantissima, ora ironica, ora sarcastica, Cusset ricostruisce minuziosamente quella scalata nel cuore dell'America pensante, all'indomani dell'insediamento di Reagan, quando i campus, spenti gli ardori movimentisti, erano tornati a essere deposito di futura mano d'opera intellettuale per

l'industria, a scapito delle facoltà umaniste, che, con pragmatico tempismo USA, colsero al volo l'occasione di recuperare un pensiero europeo oramai appassito nella patria d'origine per riconfezionarlo a uso e consumo dell'istituzione universitaria americana - e quindi finanziamenti, congressi, pubblicazioni, feroci polemiche, istituzione dei corsi più astrusi, quarti d'ora di celebrità- e perfino riesportarlo mutato da dove era arrivato (una decostruzione della decostruzione alla fin fine). Libro che avvince, non annoia mai, e getta uno sguardo interessante nel sistema universitario americano. Forse, in alcune parti, un eccesso di stronzissima e francese onniscienza, lo rende un po' ingeneroso.

A latere, i cultori, come son io, della narrativa dell'ottimo David Lodge, non potranno esimersi da farsi grasse risate sovrapponendo alcuni degli attori principali di questa epopea alle fattezze dell'immenso Morris Zapp, e di ritrovarsi improvviamente catapultati nel backstage di Scambi o de Il professore va al congresso. A latere bis, ovviamente ho letto il libro in traduzione, ma qui non è in archivio

Kim Lacey says

Cusset argues that the US has reinvented French Theory for its own purposes, straying far from its original intentions in France. At the start, there's a fascinating chapter on the development of the US university that really situates how this reinvention was able to bloom here. If I would have read this at the beginning of grad school, I would have felt he was totally wrong; but looking back, Cusset nails a lot of the resistance to theory that surrounds humanities departments (like, from the sciences). We use this stuff for everything, and it was simultaneously refreshing and mindblowing to read how so much of what we've been trained to understand (well, 'accept' because of translation and publishing issues, which Cusset spends some time discussing) is possibly bogus. I can see that a lot of academics might be offended by this book, but I highly recommend to my peers.

Melusine Parry says

Un livre vraiment excellent, clair et précis, très agréablement écrit et extrêmement bien documenté. Même quand on connaît un peu l'histoire, la voir articulée de cette manière lui fait prendre beaucoup de valeur. Le plus: le chapitre sur ce que les étudiants trouvent à la French Theory, qui m'a beaucoup parlé, et qui forme un ajout très original au reste. J'aime aussi beaucoup le fait que cette histoire de l'invention de la French Theory aux Etats-Unis est aussi souvent l'occasion de raconter l'histoire des idées aux Etats-Unis depuis la 2e guerre mondiale. La postface à l'édition de 2005 est éclairante.

Emahunn Campbell says

In the ivory towers that blanket America, especially in the humanities, acquiring the language of French Theory separates one scholar from her contemporaries. But to possess this language, to use it willingly and willfully, simultaneously necessitates scrutiny. The scholar is challenged on her understanding of Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, and, if one cares enough to cite a woman in his relentless interrogation, Kristeva and, to add an element of resounding surprise, Spivak. To take a course in literary theory is to read excerpts from these intellectuals, which is to then make sense of their entire corpus. Tenure may be slightly harder if you deny access to one of these towering giants of intellectuality.

But how and why did French Theory become such a big hit, a language requirement, in the United States?

This is the project of Francois Cusset's *_French Theory_* (2003). Yet, Cusset does not limit himself to this intriguing task of intellectual history. He seems to be just as curious as to how intellectuals and scholars in the United States appropriated the thoughts of French theorists, engaging in what he refers to as "creative misreadings" that fit the cultural and political conditions of the time (early 1970s to late 1980s). Aptly, the author writes "that the very logic of French theoretical texts prohibits certain uses of them, uses that were often necessary, however, to their American readers in order to put the text to work. It is an example of the recognized interplay between betrayal and reappropriation...The American 'invention' of these French texts, therefore, designates a skill at making texts say what one has understood of them or, at least, what one needs to draw from them" (278). It is this reappropriation that essentially functions as a translation of French works that are interpreting German philosophy. And it is quite useful, evidenced by how many times Foucault is cited in graduate papers, Derrida is discussed in coffee shops, and Deleuze used as a way of nuancing conversations about capital.

In the conclusion, the author, I feel, accurately admits that Marx is the center for many of these theorists. They are either extending his theories, complicating them, or calling them into question without ravenous intentions to dismantle them. What I find to be lacking in his analysis is a fuller discussion of their relationship to Marxism. It is well known that Foucault was a student of French structural theorist, Louis Althusser, and was also, albeit briefly, a member of the Communist Party in France. Jacques Derrida, also a student of the latter, sustained a lasting friendship with the leading theoretician of the French Communist Party. One reads about Derrida's remarks on Marx and Marxism in the early 1990s, later published as *_Spectres de Marx_* (1993) and the responses comprised in the anthology *_Ghostly Demarcations_* (1999), but Foucault and Derrida have a deeper relationship to Marxism, both personally and politically, at least for Foucault, than the author chooses to investigate.

There is also a great aperture in Cusset's treatment of what he calls "minority groups" and their relationship to French Theory in the 1980s. He says nothing about the importance of *_The Signifying Monkey_* by Henry Louis Gates in terms of deconstruction and intertextuality, making the provocative argument that these practices are embedded in the African (American) diasporic literary tradition. In his conversation about feminism, bell hooks or Hortense Spiller are not mentioned once, despite both authors being major contributors - originators in some respects - to womanism, feminism, and postmodernism. His conversation regarding Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha comes off as circumscribed in relation to other American theorists. All this is to say that the minority experience, regardless of how French Theory functioned as one of many parts of an intellectual cache for groups of color and women, is exactly that - MINORity, the condition of being "minor."

But this book is critically important in terms of understanding the political and intellectual (which is also political) landscape that fertilized the United States for growing its own unique brand of French Theory. I recommend it as a supplemental text to understanding what why we are doing what we are doing in academia, and how.

Alex says

The book begins by comparing the assemblage of post-'68 French theorists as the rugged actors in those lovable American cowboy Westerns.

What is this object called 'French theory,' and what kind of social and material conditions led to its practice?

Apparently, pragmatism + "college kultur" + identity politics + rugged individualism + hegemony + supercapitalism + proto-post-structuralist styles + neo-conservative backlash in America. And so you get histories in bite-sized chapters of: Sokal's hoax, the idea of the university, post-structuralism's rapid introduction and assimilation (bypassing structuralism) into the humanities, politics behind cultural studies, 'French Theory' as object in the culture wars, 'French Theory's life in the art world and internet/movies, global 'French Theory,' short biographies of American disciples/interlocutors like Butler, Fish, de Man, Spivak, Jameson etc.

Then a series of "betrayals": of Derrida and Co. by French intellectual community, of American "French Theory" by those same French Theorists. Thus, outlines of two critiques: the first against American French Theorists for balkanizing the intellectuals and abetting the Reagan Revolution. Second, against French intellectuals for turning up their noses at the cowboys and their subsequent mutation *à l'américaine* especially as "difference" becomes more and more a real thing in the world.

The book's writing style struck me as very self-consciously French, i.e., asserting things without needing to defend assertions, playing with dichotomies. This was annoying. Also, the Germans were brought up too late in the narrative.

Wm says

This is the sort of title that has limited appeal, but for those of us who experienced the ripple effects of the importation and Americanization of French theory in college, this book explains a lot. While Cusset tells the intellectual history from a distinct point of view, it's one that is neither ra-ra nor nay-nay. It's somewhat more pragmatic and at times bemused.

The book explains the institutional, personal, cultural and political dynamics that explain the success of French Theory in the American academy and how that then relates to how it was received (mainly in being rejected) in France. More importantly, it teases out why it was successful in its transformation. Even if one leaves still thinking French Theory is utterly rubbish (and one of the points Cusset makes is that the actual work of the French theorists had less of an impact than how that work was interpreted and re-appropriated and packaged for America, and mainly for academia in America), one still understands why it had the success it did -- and why the backlash against it was not much more sophisticated either.

It does help if you know a little bit about the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and co, but that's not really a requirement. I should warn that Cusset is in the end a defender of the French theorists -- but that does not mean he agrees with how they were used in the U.S. and indeed it's exactly this bemused, sharp, informed point of view that makes the book worth reading and why it works as intellectual history.

Elizabeth says

from the library c 2008 for English translation by U of Minn

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from the library computer:

Choice Reviews

Although the dust jacket promises a "gossipy" history of many leading French intellectuals and their rise to celebrity status in the US, this book is anything but gossipy. Cusset (Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Paris) offers a rather scattered account of the arrival of these French theorists on US soil beginning with background on the American university scene of the 1960s-70s. The overall argument is that French theory was adopted and adapted by American intellectuals in the 1980s-90s, giving it a power and credence that it never achieved in France. It has become integral to American culture through its influences on art, identity politics, cultural studies, literary theory, and cinema, as well as through all manner of conservative backlash. Cusset elaborates in detail on the influence of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, et al. while also showing the ways their theories have been differently interpreted in the US and in France. The overall result is not as clear as one

might hope--readers may get bogged down in details that often lack accompanying evidence, and the book does not quite bring the theorists themselves to life. Summing Up: Recommended. Lower-division undergraduates and above; general readers. Copyright 2008 American Library Association.

I have a philosophy background (analytic more than continental) and I read this for a history graduate class (in the course of getting my PhD) and I found it to be too esoteric for me. The nature of the subject-matter is really to blame rather than the author. I'm glad I read this and certain parts were fascinating but I found it to be a book for the author's peers and colleagues rather than a book for the general public.

Leland says

A truly pleasurable experience to read, and incidentally, an especially timely analysis as Barack Obama's U.S. Presidency shakes up the established foundations of "identity politics." Cusset has understanding in depth of the period depicted -- and remarkably, this includes a sensitive appreciation of the circulation of ideas across the Atlantic and the more sophisticated of the "pop" phenomena in the U.S. - not a dismissal. It's darned exciting to follow his theme of a "feedback loop" -- Americans taking up the concerns of French theorists (I use the term in an inclusive sense -- putting the competitive impulses of the French aside) and offering back an invigorated discussion of the possibilities opened up -- . Well, it turns out that the French have moved on -- but, to what - ? I hope Cusset gives us a guide to events unfolding more recently - those disputes in France over Muslim headscarves demand a follow-up - !

David M says

This book is something much more interesting than another introduction to Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, etc. It's really a chapter in US intellectual history. How these disparate French thinkers came to represent a vanguard (if not a new orthodoxy) for many American students and professors. In part it's a story of the disappointments of the sixties. After any truly radical social transformation failed to materialize, radicalism tended to retreat to the confines of the university. Identity politics and a supposedly radical "theory" became the consolation prize for a revolution that didn't happen.

Cusset is fair and balanced, but I'm sorry to say we Americans sometimes come off as a bunch of dullards. You can't effectively subvert a tradition you haven't bothered to read.

Yann says

Un livre vraiment dense et instructif, pour quelqu'un comme moi, totalement neuf sur la question, la seule introduction au sujet ayant été au travers du livre de Jacques Bouveresse sur les *prodiges et vertiges de l'analogie*. Il est question d'un courant universitaire aux États-Unis, inspiré par quelques français établis là-bas, et de leur diffusion et ramification dans le monde entier au bout de quelques décennies. C'est très précis et abondant, tout à fait bien adapté au public français puisqu'il fait bien sentir les différences entre nos deux pays qu'il connaît bien. Il est aussi relativement objectif, même si au final, l'auteur regrette amèrement que ce courant ne soit pratiquement pas estimé ni même connu chez nous.

En même temps, la peinture qu'il en fait n'est pas très convaincante, d'autant qu'il le défend surtout pour l'opportunité qu'il y aurait à gagner pour nos enseignants du supérieur, en emboitant le pas à cette mouvance, d'avoir plus d'influence, de reconnaissance, d'argent, de citations, de réseau, de pouvoir à l'intérieur du monde de l'enseignement supérieur. Tout cela dans un contexte mondialisé de concurrence entre les

universités, les départements d'enseignement et les professeurs, plutôt qu'un quelconque idéal politique, amour de la science, recherche du bien public, ou autre sottise qu'il affecte de mépriser comme des vieilleries auxquelles, selon lui, nous resterions sottement attachés.

Mais bon, ce n'est pas le titre qui honore l'homme, mais l'homme qui honore le titre. Les espoirs qu'il fonde sur les affaires de foulard me laissent froid. L'enseignement est devenu un business, et comme disait Casanova, l'argent des sots est le patrimoine des gens d'esprit. Il faut juger l'arbre à ses fruits. Toutes ces exégèses clinquantes faites de cabrioles rhétoriques, postures de divas et autres galipettes littéraires pourraient bien n'être au fond qu'un beau miroir aux alouettes.

Sam says

This was like reading a book-length version of US weekly but for critical theory. My goodness it was dripping with gossip and scandal.

nick says

Probably closer to 3.5 stars, but I'm rounding up because of the excellent cover and typographical presentation. If I were more finicky about spelling errors, though, I might have chosen to round down.

This is an excellent overview/analysis of both the epistemological context (especially insofar as it is organized, materially, by divisions in disciplinary knowledge production) and the historical conditions that allowed French theory to live in the U.S. university system. I kinda think that the first half of the book--which, in my opinion, is much stronger and well-argued than the second half, which, however delightful for its gossipy, "fun fact" approach, never quite reaches the analytical sophistication or precision of the first 150 or so pages.

Zach and I both noticed Cusset's emphasis on the influence of French theory in the Humanities--writ large insofar as cultural studies doesn't quite belong there, though it doesn't not belong there either--and doesn't touch as much on the influence of these theories on the social sciences. This is a significant oversight, because chapters on the "star system" of the U.S. academy would have had to be carefully rethought. For that matter, history in its disciplinary form is not very well represented here save the occasional Joan Scott reference.

Anyway, this isn't so much a book that you read for the minutiae of its details but for its narrative arc and structural analysis. It's also not a good book to introduce or explicate the concepts or the content of "French theory"--scare quotes, yes. It assumes from the outset that you either know this stuff or you don't. It's interested, rather, in the effects of "FT"--and the historical conditions that allowed it to take shape as part of the everyday in the U.S. academy. Moreover, it's also engaged in the questions of the relationship between this body of knowledge and U.S. politics. And for me this is where Cusset's perspective, which is one of both an outsider and an insider the the U.S. theoretical enterprise, is most valuable.
