

---

H-France Review Vol. 15 (May 2015), No. 64

Tom Eyers, *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. x + 217 pp. \$120 U.S. (hb). \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-4411-8688-1 (hb). 978-1474213011 (pb).

Review by Knox Peden, Australian National University.

Tom Eyers has written an important book and that Bloomsbury has seen fit to republish it in an affordable and elegant paperback edition is validation of its central intuition: that the conceptual tensions forged in 1960s France at the intersection of psychoanalysis, epistemology, and Marxism are no less pertinent to critical theoretical work in the humanities today than when they were first formulated. The book has a revisionist tenor in that it questions the predominance of deconstructive and hermeneutic styles of thought in the reception of French post-structuralism in the Anglophone world. Eyers admits at the outset his aversion to post-structuralism—the term and the referent—and presents his work as an effort to show that thinkers associated with the moment of high structuralism, Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser chief among them, were attuned to the instabilities of rationalist epistemology from the outset. Far from being the ruin of rational thought, “ideological or nonscientific elements within various domains of conceptuality are often taken within post-rationalism to be definitive of those very domains” (p. 7). His coinage of “post-rationalism” is in part an attempt to re-brand structuralism in a way that accounts theoretically for the dynamism at its heart and historically for its dependence on a body of thought that was more putatively rationalist in its principles, namely, French philosophy of science as it emerged earlier in the century in the work of Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, and Alexandre Koyré.

Eyers’s re-branding is also a kind of displacement. If post-structuralism displaced structuralism by revealing the element of play at the heart of all structure, Eyers credits structuralism with making evident the appeal to inscrutable or intractable exteriorities at the heart of any rationalism. The grounds of rationalism are always in some way or another irrational; doing the work of grounding, they are themselves ungrounded. Concern for this problem is what makes Lacano-Althusserian structuralism a “post-rationalism” in his rubric.

This is forbidding territory and Eyers proves to be a sure and able guide. The book is structured as a set of case studies in theoretical exegesis, each of which makes evident that the effort to think a structural determination of subjectivity cannot but invoke a *locus* or element of the structure that at once destabilizes it and serves as the very site at which subject and structure—instance and substance; or *tuché* and automaton (in Lacan’s Aristotelian vernacular)—are epistemologically and ontologically inextricable. But Eyers’s point is not to reveal some unthought flaw in the structuralist edifice. Rather, he puts an end to the myth of a post-structuralist recusal of structuralism by showing that this intercalation was central to the structuralist enterprise itself, at least as developed by Lacan and Althusser and those inspired by them in the pages of the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, a journal housed at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) and published in ten issues between 1966 and 1969.

*Post-Rationalism* is the first monograph to focus on this journal and to give this central chapter in the history of postwar French thought its due. Eyers’s book was conceived and written while a major collaborative project on the journal was pursued and completed under the direction of Peter Hallward at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy at Middlesex University (now at Kingston University), which is also where Eyers earned his PhD. The result is a comprehensive

website (<http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk>) devoted to the journal's contents, complete with summaries of each article and glossary entries for key terms and figures, and a two-volume collection of interviews and texts from and devoted to journal for which I served as a co-editor alongside Hallward.[1] Eyers's volume is, in addition to being many other good things, a validation of this undertaking, not simply by developing it further, but more importantly in the way that it departs from it by demonstrating that the contents of the *Cahiers* are capable of sustaining myriad interpretations.

What Eyers's inquiry shares with the CRMEP project is a conviction that the contemporary significance of Alain Badiou's work points to alternative genealogies in postwar French thought that have yet to be adequately appreciated or understood. There's more than a little overstatement in Eyers's remark that "Badiou has come to occupy the position that was accorded to Derrida in the 1980s and the 1990s, namely the 'house' French philosopher for the critical humanities in the United Kingdom and the United States" (p. 194). Such may have been the view from north London, but there are at least as many who view Badiou with bemused skepticism or plain hostility as there are enthusiasts. Still, that Badiou's ambitious metaphysics rests upon a sustained engagement with contemporary mathematics, all the while blending his mathematical ontology with familiar tropes of French existentialism and post-structuralism, raises the question: where did this monstrosity come from?

It wasn't *sui generis*. The *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* was the brainchild of a group of precocious ENS students who took their distance from the stalwarts of the rival *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes* primarily because of their interest in uniting the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis with a broadly Althusserian understanding of science as a discourse that is indifferent, if not impervious, to the philosophical problem of subjectivity. Althusser's attempt to reframe Marxism as a science has been much pilloried. But what is often lost in the recrimination is the extent to which such an effort was engaged with the questions raised in French epistemology and philosophy of science more broadly. As a tendency in French academe, philosophy of science had restricted its inquiries to specific domains, e.g., biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics. In a way, the recusal of *mathesis universalis* was part of its ethos. Knowledge production was a local, concrete, and contingent affair. Scholarly inquiry into how such conceptual production took place had to follow suit.

The editors of the *Cahiers* were inspired by this mode of inquiry even as they imbued it with broader ambitions. Led by Jacques-Alain Miller and Jean-Claude Milner, they saw the historical and institutional intersection of psychoanalysis and Marxism at the ENS as an opportunity to revisit the perennial philosophical problem faced by any rationalism that has ethical or political aspirations. How is it possible to know how things work, in a deterministic and scientific sense, and yet retain the idea that things can fundamentally change, that genuine novelty can be introduced into the world? Erudite and at times arcane, the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* pursued this inquiry in a variety of fields, from literature to political thought to the foundational texts of analytic philosophy and logical positivism. Late to the enterprise, Badiou was ultimately a core contributor, defending a strongly Althusserian line that insisted that a full-blooded scientific discourse--and mathematics was the only discourse to really meet such stringent criteria--was ultimately one that escaped and transcended the inflections of the subject. The canonical read on Badiou's project suggests that the experience of May 1968 showed him the error of his exclusionary, ultra-rationalist ways. It's also possible that the theoretical vigor with which others like Miller and Milner insisted on the inextricability of subject and structure in all discourses left a lasting impression.

Such is the background to Eyers's intervention. The book comprises five main chapters. The first introduces us to the project of "psychoanalytic structuralism" as it was pursued in the *Cahiers*. The second shows how Lacan's focus on the indeterminacy of the subject and object in a scientific discourse was in many respects prefigured in the work of Gaston Bachelard. The key figure of "formalization" is also introduced and developed in this chapter. If scientific discourse *grosso modo* aspires to formalization--that is, a level of consistency that allows it to confidently do its descriptive and predictive work--what both Bachelard and Lacan allow us to see is that any such effort is constitutively impure. An element of desire attends to the project of formalization from the outset, a

quest for the mastery of an object, discursive or otherwise. For Lacan, the subject bears an essential relation to the object-cause of its desire, the *objet petit a*. Yet the very formalizing process is one that attempts to exclude the desiring, subjective element. It's an impossible project. The unconscious haunts and produces slips in scientific writing no less than in plain speech.

Chapters three and four consider other iterations of this problematic, to pair a Derridean term with an Althusserian one. The first considers the debate that followed from Jacques-Alain Miller's programmatic article titled "Suture." In a heterodox reading of Frege, Miller suggested that the application of the unitary term "0" (zero) to the category of non-identity, a category which has no members since nothing is not identical to itself, was an analogue to the way in which subjective identity is instituted by naming and covering over an inaugural non-identity. Following on from debates about "Suture," the next chapter moves quickly through Althusser to Badiou to Lacan to Milner to convince us that the attempt to formalize scientific discourse doesn't exclude ideological perspectives but presumes and includes them. Eyers's argument that such efforts were unstable succeeds, almost by sheer volume.

The final chapter takes leave of the *Cahiers* for a wider view of the terrain. The inquiry looks at the concept of "life" in the work of Georges Canguilhem and Gilles Deleuze and shows how the knotted effort pursued in the *Cahiers* helps illuminate projects with no direct connection to it. In Eyers's reading, both Canguilhem and Deleuze appreciated in different ways that any attempt to forge a firm distinction between life and the concept of life—in other words, life "as such" and life as we know it, conceptualize it, or represent it—is doomed to fail. And it "fails" in the same way that the distinction between subject and structure, or ideology and science, failed in the *Cahiers*. A conclusion hastily traces this relation between formal analysis and its outside in Badiou's more recent work, in Jacques Rancière's political thought, and in François Laruelle's project for "non-philosophy." The claims are undeveloped, but the point is clear enough: this problematic is, by any measure, contemporary.

*Post-Rationalism* is tightly argued and the attention Eyers shows to the finer details of Lacanian and Althusserian analysis is salutary, even if it may scare off readers who are not already predisposed to see value in such forms of thought. But in the very ambition of the project, which turns on the claim for the importance of this moment in French thought, Eyers's approach to the *Cahiers* ironically obscures some of its specificity. Kantian readers of H-France likely have already noticed that this core tension articulated in the *Cahiers*—between the determinism of structure that obtains in scientific discourse and the contingencies of a subject who grounds, redirects, transcends, or potentially transforms such discourses—is arguably the central concern of post-Kantian philosophy in the widest sense. More bluntly: how do we reconcile the laws of nature and the experience of freedom in the same framework? Eyers's work definitely shows that the *Cahiers* is an important chapter in this story, but claims to its uniqueness at a theoretical level are questionable, and in part undermined by the method Eyers brings to the material.

In making a claim for the pertinence of the *Cahiers* to contemporary critical theory, Eyers insists "my practice of reading refuses any sense that the works in question here are somehow 'dated', or beholden to any naively conceived sense of historical 'context' within which they were written" (p. 5). This sounds good, but what about a maturely conceived sense of historical context? (Also, why "context"?) Eyers seems to think a historically buffered account of the *Cahiers* project would sap it of its ingenuity or somehow limit it and "date" it. But such an account might serve to accentuate its originality, not obscure it. Eyers's concern is with the theoretical conundrum articulated in the journal and its current, if not perennial traction. This allows him to proceed more or less indifferently to the order of composition of texts, and to avoid questions of influence and genealogy. Yet here there is some equivocation. Not long after it is suggested that it may be "possible to locate the influence of [Canguilhem's] particular approach to life on the work of Gilles Deleuze," we are told that focus on the conceptual links in their projects "is not to suggest any direct or determinative 'influence' of Canguilhem upon Deleuze" (pp. 162, 170).

History haunts the project in other ways as well. In the chapter on Canguilhem and Deleuze, Eysers begins with Foucault's canonical observation of a distinction in French thought between a "philosophy of experience, of meaning, [and] of the subject" and a "philosophy of knowledge, of rationality, and the concept," only to disavow it.[2] But the context of Foucault's comment suggests this was not an absolute or transcendental condition of French thought (though later Badiou would elevate it to such status), but a way to describe two heterogeneous tendencies resulting from the impact of German phenomenology in France. Phenomenology barely gets a mention in Eysers's engagement. What's more, Foucault suggested that his generation saw it as their task to bring these tendencies together. In the most basic sense, then, Foucault is an ally for Eysers in that this intercalation was integral to the *Cahiers*, as Foucault well knew when he contributed to it and engaged in a published dialogue with its editors.[3]

But even at a conceptual level, there is something curious in Eysers's disavowal of this distinction. For the entire substance of *Post-Rationalism*, both in its analytic methods and the objects it focuses on, far from recusing this distinction, *presumes* it. Binaries were made to be deconstructed. The entire substance of Eysers's account is focused on the co-dependence of these tendencies. To be sure, Eysers could rightly insist that the co-dependence obtains even within the specific thinkers that Foucault ranges in each camp. Jean-Paul Sartre was no less concerned with the structure of existentialist subjectivity than the philosopher of mathematics Jean Cavaillès was with how a generic concept is formed in the thought of an individual instance. Foucault would no doubt agree. That's why the distinction is a heuristic, a figure of thought that is evidently essential to Eysers's valuable contribution to theoretical debate in the humanities today.

Moreover, the historical perspective, far from fixing conceptual usage, can help us see the extent to which such concepts ramify within and across traditions.[4] Throughout the book, Eysers rarely refers to post-rationalism *tout court*. More common is a variation on "what I'm calling post-rationalism," accompanied by some measure of justification. This tentativeness is to the point and does its own measure of theoretical work. Insofar as Eysers ties post-rationalism back to rationalism via Bachelard and others, it is to the French tradition associated with the immortal name of Descartes. The rationalism that yields post-rationalism is a distinctly Cartesian rationalism. It is not coincidental that Lacan focused so much attention on Descartes in the inaugural article of the *Cahiers*, "Science and Truth." This is significant because the indeterminacy of the subject in its grounding relation to truth is the instability at the heart of the Cartesian enterprise. The source of certainty, the subject or *cogito*, nevertheless remains a mystifying element in Descartes' thought, tied to the no less mystifying figure of God. Spinoza tried to excise this mystifying element, which is why he's been the patron saint of philosophers who think an "absolute rationalism" is possible, up to and including Althusser. I've written elsewhere about Spinozist rationalism in France in its historical and theoretical relation to phenomenology, and the result, at least in my view, is a complementarity in our approaches to the extent that Eysers is more focused on the Cartesian elements in the rationalist trajectory.[5] Despite Spinozism's recent popularity, this Cartesian element is certainly the dominant one in the French terrain. The persistence of the mystifying, or the exteriorized, inscrutable ground, is as central to Eysers's formalist project as it was and is to French phenomenologists from Emmanuel Levinas to Jean-Luc Marion.

But the presence of this Cartesian element is what renders the appellation "post-rationalism" dubious in my judgment. Eysers deploys it to distinguish the work of the Lacano-Althusserians from their forbears Bachelard and Canguilhem. But his own analysis serves to show the limits of any solid theoretical distinction separating these efforts. Rationalism is no more monolithic than structuralism, and exchanging one post- for another (post-rationalism for post-structuralism) doesn't seem to be much of a heuristic gain. But again this is why Eysers's tentative approach to the term is justified and hardly to be regretted. The book is a decisive intervention, and something of a promissory note. It puts central relations between structure and subject (not to mention form and history, and science and ideology) back on the agenda and encourages us to reconsider them with the best available resources. No doubt *Post-Rationalism* portends something more than a resurgence of interest in the themes and figures of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. It also foretells the significance of Tom Eysers's future contributions to this set of perennial concerns.

## NOTES

[1] Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds. *Concept and Form, Volume One: Key Texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. London: Verso, 2012 and Ibid., *Concept and Form, Volume Two: Interviews and Essays on the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. London: Verso, 2012.

[2] See Michel Foucault, "Life: Experience and Science," in Idem., *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, eds. James D. Faubion and Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1998, pp. 465-478.

[3] Foucault's contribution to volume 9 of the journal would later serve as the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969], trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books, 2010. The rest of the book is in many respects a response to the editors' "New Questions" published in the same issue of the journal.

[4] The notion that "concepts ramify" is elevated to something of a methodological principle in Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

[5] Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2014. (This note risks the narcissism of small differences. Although to Spinoza the difference was hardly a small one!)

Knox Peden  
Australian National University  
[knox.peden@anu.edu.au](mailto:knox.peden@anu.edu.au)

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172