

H-France Review Vol. 20 (April 2020), No. 72

Jason Demers, *The American Politics of French Theory: Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault in Translation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. x + 218 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$57.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4875-0448-9.

Review by Carolyn J. Dean, Yale University.

Jason Demers' book addresses the role of American politics and culture in the making of French theory from roughly 1968 to 1978. French theory is an American invention, a catchall term used to describe a variety of philosophical positions associated with French structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. Yet few scholars have ever addressed the significant cross-cultural relationship between American politics and French ideas except as a series of mistranslations.[1] Demers, in contrast, imagines these Atlantic crossings as readaptations, transformations, and refigurations of originals that were never merely lost in translation. Inspired by the interpretative innovations of the major French theorists he discusses—Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault—his account dispenses with origin-stories and synoptic intellectual histories of structuralism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism.

The book focuses on how American places, writers, and events inspired French thinkers to reinterpret contemporary philosophy through a political prism. It covers the 1966 Johns Hopkins University conference that introduced Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Derrida to an American scholarly audience. It also addresses the translation of Foucault's lectures at the Collège de France. Demers thus considers the work of French intellectuals as both intellectuals and activists. His main points of departure are "minor" moments from the point of view of canon-making but no less fertile. Rather than Derrida's 1966 presentation at Hopkins, he discusses a 1968 paper the philosopher delivered at Columbia University in the midst of the student rebellion there. Similarly, he writes about the important role played by the prison letters of Black Panther George Jackson in the French prison reform movement and their influence on Jean Genet and Foucault. Other chapters trace the work of mediators like Jean-Jacques Lebel and Sylvère Lotringer. Lebel hosted Guattari and Deleuze's road trip across the United States and translated their work in 1960s underground papers. Lotringer, a former student of Roland Barthes, organized lectures for Columbia's Reid Hall campus in Paris. He also founded *Semiotext(e)* in 1974 to publish French theorists in translation and organized a 1975 "Schizo-Culture" conference in New York on the themes of "madness and prisons." The event was attended not only by Deleuze, Guattari, and Jean-François Lyotard, but also by Patti Smith, William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, John Cage, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and other American alternative-scene celebrities. These encounters, Demers argues persuasively, shaped critiques central to French theory, from

Derrida's criticism of structuralism to Deleuze and Guattari's critiques of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

The book demonstrates how French intellectuals leveraged their power to make exploitation visible. It takes us out of academic settings and onto the streets of Paris and New York. Each chapter focuses on how ideas are generated, transformed, and live on in new guises as they cross borders. Each chapter also demonstrates how French thinkers brought the political concerns on the "margins" of Western philosophy--imperialism, Vietnam, and civil rights--to bear on the discipline of philosophy, including the political significance of philosophical inquiry and its political investment in universalism (pp. 28-9). Demers uses underground newspapers, correspondence, and personal archives to link French philosophy to American politics and to show how they are mutually constitutive rather than related as cause to effect. Because the book is primarily about the impact of American politics on French theory, it does not address thinkers important in the development of American poststructuralism, such as J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, and others.

The book is organized as a series of events that explore how French ideas were elaborated in the shadow of American student rebellions, civil rights activism, artistic innovations, feminism, and gay liberation (about the latter two Demers could have said a great deal more). He begins with a paper Derrida delivered at Columbia in 1968 on the topic "Where is France, as concerns man?," an allusion to structuralism's critique of "man" as a transcendental, knowing subject. The paper, Demers notes, was the first of Derrida's works to be translated into English.[2] When the philosopher gave his talk, he delivered a preamble professing solidarity with student demonstrators in Morningside Heights militating for civil rights and against the Vietnam War. By focusing on how the preamble implicitly shapes and structures the essay, and by juxtaposing the paper with Derrida's later work, Demers shows how it addresses structuralism not only as a particular method drawn from Saussurian linguistics, but also as a philosophical erasure of the history of the concept of "man" in spite of its rejection of centered subjectivity. The Western philosophical project, Derrida claimed, establishes its authority by folding the exclusions, struggles, and violence integral to a history of "man" into a story of Man as the be-all and end-all of History rather than its product. The talk, Demers suggests, reiterates in philosophical terms a student protest of the memorial held at Columbia in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Derrida references. Students had argued that Columbia's mourning of King whitewashed the university's implication in war and racism, in particular its expansion of property holdings in Harlem at the expense of the black community. In so doing, the university, like Western philosophy's celebration of Man, suppresses King's legacy.

Other chapters also link a particular critique with an event or a movement in order to tie ideas to specific political contexts. Chapter two analogizes philosophical representation to the state and its rational administration and hierarchical organization. Against this vertical model of control, Guattari's concept of the "war machine" imagines equal but not identical forms of protest that cannot be formalized. They spill out and over, exceeding any top-down authority that tries to control them (p. 85). So, too, protesters at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, whose struggles Lebel reported in translation, lost their purpose once Lyndon B. Johnson decided not to run for reelection. The student movement was composed of overlapping and even rival groups and had no "center"; its Chicago gathering turned into an effort not to execute a plan but to work out its own aims and identity (pp. 78-9). As Demers notes, Deleuze and Guattari's work *A Thousand Plateaus* is a "kind of philosophical equivalent to the movement" (p. 87).

Demers demonstrates how the French *Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (GIP) relayed Jackson's prison letters, *Soledad Brother*, to a French public in order to advance prison reform efforts. An account of Jackson's shooting by police in San Quentin prison was published by the Black Panther Party Intercommunal News Service in 1971. It was banned in France and smuggled into the country clandestinely by Genet, who wrote the preface to the French version. GIP used Jackson's death to bring attention to demands made by prisoners in France, the U.S., and Italy, using the prestige of intellectuals and the voices of prison witnesses to the police shooting of Jackson (during a prison riot) in a chain of transmission in which no one spoke "for" anyone else. Demers takes this transmission as exemplary of Foucault and Deleuze's use of the term "relay" to define translation as "an active and fluid network rather than a singular disposition," one that does not privilege social status but deploys it to communicate voices that would not otherwise be heard (p. 112). In so doing, the group relayed prisoners' voices to expose the violence, racism, and homophobia of the French state.

Finally, Demers recounts the history of the journal and broader project of *Semiotext(e)* from 1974 to 1978. Its editor, Lotringer, invited scholars who were on the fringes of French academic institutions to lecture at Columbia's Reid Hall campus in Paris, including Julia Kristeva (a member of *Tel Quel*) and Guattari, who was a "schizo-analyst," among others. Together if differently, these speakers sought to undermine the organized semiotic systems then being developed under the rubric of structuralism, using innovative, non-Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts and a broad interest in topics like madness and prisons. Lotringer brought them together in New York with American artists, writers, and musicians at a chaotic conference. Until most of the authors it published became famous, *Semiotext(e)* was the source of French theory in the United States, a project imagined by a Frenchman at home neither in France nor North America who aimed to bring the two cultures into conversation. Like the dynamic political movement imagined by Guattari, the common ground of conversation was not defined by dialogue or reconciliation, but by irreducible differences that would generate endless perspectives and thus never end. "Whereas the Johns Hopkins conference related to its subject (structuralism) as a knowledge to be learned, discussed, and... applied, for the Schizo-Culture conference, various kinds of *madness* represented instances of, or strategies to, escape from confinement in various kinds of *prisons*—and the academy was one such prison....[italics in text]" (p. 153).

Demers treats the relationship between French theory and American politics as associative and dynamic rather than as causal and linear. He writes deftly across cultures and established narratives, linking texts to politics both empirically and imaginatively—a difficult undertaking that involves managing an extensive secondary as well as primary literature. Though it is inimical to his approach, clearer framing would have helped the uninitiated reader follow the text, whose engagement with other approaches is mostly compressed into the introduction or consigned to footnotes. There are few references, for example, to the recent historical works that share Demers' concern with the pitfalls of reception theories and the limits of synoptic intellectual histories, and some discussion would have oriented readers and illuminated more clearly the book's accomplishments for historians.[3] Similarly, some general historical background regarding various references, like the anti-psychiatry movement and the importance of La Borde psychiatric hospital, which are never sufficiently explained, would have been enormously helpful in establishing the broader French context.

Like the French theorists about whom he writes, Demers points out that theory and practice are caught up in a dynamic and fluid relationship, one never reducible only to resistance or the reproduction of authority, and always alternating between both. In this vein, Demers discusses postcolonial and feminist critiques of French theory's negligence of gender and race. In order to address the dynamic of resistance and authority historically as well as theoretically, he recounts at length American feminists' take-over of a left-wing underground review's editorial board in response to a sexist issue. Initially, he argues, feminists reiterated in practice Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "war machine," eschewing the hierarchy that men had established. But the rebels eventually sidelined the concerns of women of color, reproducing top-down authority and closing down the political openings generated by potential alliances, including with men (pp. 89-109). Feminists opted for "regime change," failing in practice to sustain a politics of association, contiguity, and horizontality (p. 109).

Demers offers this episode as exemplary of the inevitable blind-spots of all theoretical and practical efforts to resist authority, and characterizes feminists' "regime change" as a failure to live up to the anti-authoritarian and anti-identitarian promise of French theory.^[4] His account shows very effectively how French theory incorporated and reconfigured radical forms of American politics. It does not, however, address how or whether theory's blind-spots as well as its insights are themselves historically constituted. Demers does not discuss whether the sexism or racism of male 1968ers, which was pervasive, was immanent in French theory, even though he features their radical politics as far more central to French theorists than feminism. He addresses sexism and racism head on by describing the sexism of Guattari or the racism of some student leaders in New York, but the episode of feminists' ultimately problematic rebellion stands in for the blind spots of radical theory and practice even though it has no evident connection to French theory. I wonder if his focus on this episode, which is representative of white feminism in the 1970s but not of the gay/queer/straight white male 1968 story he narrates, suggests a reluctance to acknowledge fully the limits of French theory. It may also explain why French feminist theorists—Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Sarah Kofman—who lectured at Reid Hall, are mentioned only in passing.

To demand this kind of historical and textual analysis is a very tall order, and is testimony to the expectations raised by the high level of Demers' argument. He addresses these historical questions by drawing our attention to them, and his book offers exciting and original explorations of the relationship between politics and theory.

NOTES

[1] Historian François Cusset argues that American scholars, and particularly those in cultural studies, misapplied French thought to popular culture and identity politics and distorted its meaning in the process. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[2] "The Ends of Man," later published in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 109-36.

[3] Historians have loosely maintained the older division between the structuralism of Lacan and the poststructuralism of Derrida (among others), but have blurred the boundary between them by mapping out other trajectories and influences, including Catholic existentialism on Derrida, anti-psychiatry on Foucault, and other poststructuralist strains of thought. Others have complicated assumptions about “right” and “wrong” readings of texts by demonstrating the political and social salience of so-called mis-readings. When Demers criticizes older historical interpretations of ideas, he never notes how far the literature has moved beyond them in recent historical work on French political and intellectual cultures. These works bring ideas into far more intimate relation with their contexts. See, among others, Drew Baring, *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy, 1945-1968* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); and Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[4] Similarly (in a footnote), Demers describes how *Semiotext(e)* reinvented itself as a smart business operation once French writers became famous, becoming a source of the authority it had initially sought to undermine, but does not explore this dynamic (p. 176n28). He takes his cue from writer Chris Kraus’s semi-fictional account of Sylvère Lotringer’s work.

Carolyn J. Dean
Yale University
Carolyn.Dean@yale.edu

Copyright © 2020 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 redistribution/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