

Book Review

François Cusset. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Kristina Marie Darling, University of Missouri-St. Louis

Newly translated from the French by University of California-Davis professor Jeff Fort, François Cusset's groundbreaking book argues for an understanding of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and their contemporaries that takes into account the transformative effect of American academic culture on scholarly approaches to their work. Because he presents readers with a detailed analysis of the educational systems here and abroad, Cusset's landmark study reads more as a social history of ideas than an engagement with the texts proper. With that said, he posits the writings of Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Stanley Fish, and other prominent thinkers as illustrating the ways in which Continental influences have been re-imagined to suit American pedagogical values and the university publishing infrastructure. An incisive and level-headed contribution to the field, this book represents a useful attempt to reveal our appreciation of leading French theorists as historically situated, reflecting the cultural moment as much as the works themselves.

In the first section of the book, "The Invention of a Corpus," Cusset asks what aspects of late twentieth-century culture made audiences in the United States so receptive to the ideas of these French thinkers, who were continually overlooked in their own country. For Cusset, this

fascination first took hold in literature departments in American universities. As he presents us with a snapshot of social and intellectual landscape of the time period, Cusset focuses primarily on the enduring legacy of New Criticism and the ways in which radical social movements of the 1960s prompted academics to reexamine their approaches to literary texts. He writes,

In the end, like the evolution of the American university in general after the war, the experience of the New Criticism revealed in its ambivalences the same inextricable tension between expertise and general relevance, pure knowledge and historical engagement, culture and politics...This series of contradictions will be brought out into the open by the student movements of the 1960s...thus transforming the American university and its incessant discourse about itself into one of those knowledge/power spirals, delirious and unstable, that Foucault had described. (52-53)

In Cusset's assessment, the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and their contemporaries served a specific purpose within American university culture, allowing scholars to render literary analysis compatible with an emerging predilection for activism within academia. Thus *French Theory* offers readers a portrait of Continental ideas being constantly appropriated and revised, with more or less consideration for the authorial intention behind the work. With that said, Cusset often notes the productive, albeit unexpected, variations on structuralism, as well as deconstructionist and poststructuralist thought, that have surfaced among academics in the United States.

Cusset follows "The Invention of a Corpus" with a section devoted to more specific uses that French theory has found within American academic culture. These include disingenuous attempts to secure power and position within a university setting, as well as efforts to understand and eliminate social injustice. Cusset writes that in both cases "the American theoretical hero owes a good portion of his prestige to the unique way in which he draws on great authors,

forming a real trademark, calling upon them in order to associate himself with their works, citing them along the way to back up his own argument” (195). In Cusset’s view, this task of situating oneself within a broader intellectual heritage remains a uniquely American rhetorical priority. He suggests that, given the cultural moment that these thinkers inhabited, French theory provided the ideal backdrop against which to present one’s own ideas. For individuals like Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, French theory afforded an opportunity for the “critical shift in perspective” needed to challenge entrenched theoretical frameworks—those of political theory and psychoanalysis as well as feminism. He elaborates, describing *Gender Trouble* as a revision of Foucault and Lacan,

The book helps explain the continuous ‘production’ of sexual gender through ‘compulsory quotations’ and the iterative workings of femininity and masculinity (the period of sexual formation itself governed by two simple performative acts, the ‘it’s a girl / it’s a boy’ at birth and the ‘I do’ of marriage); and political, because power, even more diffuse than it appears in Foucault’s work, is nonetheless glimpsed at work behind this performative construction of gender identity (197)

For Cusset, then, Butler’s ambitious project represents a challenge to both male hegemony and the Hegelian master/slave dialectic that is typically used to understand gender relations. By invoking the ideas of Foucault and Lacan, Cusset argues, Butler offers a post-Hegelian alternative, in which the individual is “always both subject (in the sense of submission) to gender and subjectivity through the experience of gender” (196). Also including detailed readings of landmark works by Stanley Fish, Edward Said, and Richard Rorty, Cusset’s book suggests the ways in which French theory became a vehicle for American thinkers to challenge established ways of viewing literature, social relations, and the self.

The third and final section of the book, “There and Back,” looks to the future of French theory, examining the implications of globalization, technology, and the popularization of the works in question. Cusset argues that “theory has in fact been normalized, adopted, and institutionalized penetrating deep into American intellectual practices” (267). With that in mind, he sees twenty-first century American thinkers as situating French theory within a global literary context, allowing productive dialogue with such German thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, and Axel Honneth.

On the whole, *French Theory* offers a social history of ideas that proves at once comprehensive and forward-looking. The book proves especially impressive as it situates the work of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and their contemporaries within a changing university culture, all the while locating academia within a broader picture of late-twentieth century American life. With that said, the book’s strengths go hand and hand with its weaknesses. As Cusset examines the ways in which social forces have shaped our appreciation of French theory, he at times generalizes about the intellectual landscape of the United States. Suggesting that the contemporary fascination with celebrity has infiltrated even academia, for example, Cusset depicts Americans as privileging frivolity over high culture. He elaborates,

The press and society gossip publications, such as the *New York Times Magazine* rather than the cover of *People*, eagerly scrutinize the finery, symbols, and idiosyncrasies that make up the demeanor of the personality in question. The ironic consequence of this phenomenon is that scores of Americans have heard of Stanley Fish’s car collection, Cornel West’s salary, Stephen Greenblatt’s circle of friends, Donna Haraway’s provocative wardrobe, and queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s late conversion to Buddhism before—and, alas, often instead of—knowing their academic works. (194-195)

In passages such as this one, Cusset speaks as though there were one American cultural landscape, in which individuals relate to academia in a comparable way. While the project demands that he gesture toward general trends in our society, a more nuanced approach would recognize the presence of a wide range communities within American life, all of which maintain different relationships to the academy. Cusset takes such an approach when examining social interactions within a university setting, yet these careful distinctions remain strangely absent from his depictions of American culture in a more general sense.

Along these lines, Cusset often presents American scholars' readings of French theorists as being largely instrumental in nature, serving an agenda other than that of the original text. He writes that "these American interpretations of texts, whether they are carried out by academic superstars or simple students, are, above all, a means of reappropriating texts: their first move is a form of reterritorialization, importing texts and using them to shift their own borders and shake up their own categories of thought—sometimes losing sight entirely of the original text in question" (216). While it may be true that some applications of French theory lose sight of the authorial intentions behind the work, the use of such words as "reappropriation" and "reterritorialization" suggests a certain degree of ownership of these ideas. One might argue that the repurposing of ideas remains an inevitable, and undoubtedly necessary, part of academic life. To view these exchanges as a dialogue, as opposed to an appropriation of ideas, might offer a more useful framework in which to think about American responses to Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and their contemporaries.

All points considered, however, *French Theory* is a significant contribution to scholarship in both literary theory and cultural studies. Cusset offers an incisive analysis of the

role of social forces in shaping our understanding of some of the twentieth century's most influential ideas. Moreover, Jeff Fort's faultless translation is a true service to the academic community.