

REVIEW

François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003) ISBN: 2707137448

A poster entitled '*Deconstruct the Deconstructers*'¹ featuring four haphazard portrait photos of Jacques Derrida, Noam Chomsky, Jean Baudrillard, and Rem Koolhaas is pinned onto a door near my office, at the University of British Columbia. It appeared in a recent *Adbusters* magazine, a publication usually known for political critique and satires on conventional consumer goods. The irony, the attempt at a tongue-in-cheek parody, is heightened by the appearance of the poster from a distance: it looks just like a teenager's attempt at decoration, composed of ripped photos from music magazines pinned next to cartoons and newspaper snippets. These iconic nameless faces say something about the inhabitants of the office and much about North American academies, creating icons out of thinkers, removing them from the context of their writing. Disembodied faces, grouped together in one surprising homogenous clique: the *Deconstructers*. It sounds like an academic *Ghostbusters*. Existential angst, the search for a grafted identity and created cliques, are present in both adolescence and the academy, appropriate starting points for a discussion of François Cusset's book on French Theory. On opening the book, I admit that I first looked at the pictures. In one photo, Baudrillard, dressed in an outrageous sparkly dinner jacket and flanked by a long-legged woman with a generous décolleté, is reading a text into a microphone in a casino in Nevada, in 1996. Where Cusset is most efficient and convincing is in laying out the historical, social and institutional processes that permitted such an incongruous scene, part of the creation of a truly global politico-theoretical arena fed by French theory, but firmly centered and grounded not in France, but in American universities. The main irony, the central argument, is, of course, that while Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and others humorously referred to as '*et Cie*', as though belonging to a *de facto* company were becoming unavoidable in universities

1 Anon, *Adbusters* collective. no. 52, 2004.

across the Atlantic, “their names were being systematically set aside in France”² [*leurs noms connaissaient en France une éclipse systématique*].

Cusset’s book can be read as the bemused observations of a Frenchman surveying the world across the Atlantic: an anthropological and quasi-Latourian view of what English-speaking academics and society at large have made of the writings of these varied authors. He traces the circulations, appropriations and hybridisations of their writing, slowly transformed from highly theoretical proposals into pop culture fodder. The fact that in North America, and to a lesser point in Britain, they are thought to belong together – like faces on a poster – in complete contrast to their reception in Europe, is Cusset’s main point, which he hammers home chapter after chapter. In many ways, his bemusement might not have been one-sided: one hears many Francophone academics speak of *Les Anglos* [the Anglos], a hotchpotch of North American and British writers, as though this covered one uniform school of thought, vaguely postmodern and broadly cultural. Yet Cusset makes a convincing case for the uniqueness of the *Anglo* take on what has become ‘French Theory’, from tracing its origins in the ideological upheavals of the Seventies to explaining the particular structure of academic institutions in North America, so different from those in France. He makes in effect a detour via North America, “the American place of fake otherness”³ [*ce faux ailleurs américain*], to speak eloquently about the French intellectual landscape “that sociologists and journalists have described as a field of ruins”⁴ [*que sociologues et journalistes décrivent aujourd’hui comme un champ de ruines*].

The main surprise for Cusset-the-sociologist, surveying the North American scene, is what he calls the ‘litterarisation’ of the writings of these authors at the end of the Seventies: they are first picked up not by philosophy departments, but by literature studies, leading to an increasing merging of the two fields as philosophy is increasingly colonised through the notion that everything is a text. This strikes one as being of curiously restrictive departmental territoriality, yet his point is interesting when taken as a contrast to what has happened in France, for Cusset is writing, in French, initially for a domestic audience. This becomes most clear in the last section in what is a pretty savage – but largely justified – attack on a number of contemporary French intellectuals, leading to vociferous and vicious rebuttals of his accusation that France’s legendary ‘universalism’ had turned into nothing less than intellectual provincialism.

The tale he tells is one of intellectual quasi-ecology: the principles of ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ as applied to the academic world. American academics

2 François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les Mutations de la Vie Intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), 22.

3 Cusset, *French Theory*, 23.

4 Cusset, *French Theory*, 23.

are portrayed as recuperating, ripping out and reassembling bits of writing, substituting argumentative logic with “the magical interweaving of enchanted names”⁵ [*la magie d’un croisement de noms enchanteurs*]. This series of repeated editorial and lexical processes, in addition to both literal and theoretical translations, set the scene for the invention of “a certain intellectual promiscuity: the deformed yet efficiently unified figure of an intertextual space suddenly made narrower”⁶ [*une certaine promiscuité intellectuelle – figure déformée, mais efficacement unifiante, d’un espace intertextuel soudain resserré*]. Unlike Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen’s book – the ‘other one’ on French Theory in America – Cusset is unambiguous about his position. Where the former two cannot make up their minds about it, discussing it simultaneously as “arguably the most intellectually stimulating series of texts produced in the postwar arena”⁷ and as “an American invention going back to at least the eighteenth century,”⁸ eventually stating that “there was never any ‘unity’ to such French Theory, even among those close to each other,”⁹ Cusset clearly lays out the process of invention. This is refreshing.

This is a book that reads like a Who’s Who of the American academy: a tale with a simple plot and many, many characters, from Abraham to Žižek, condescending at times, biting, but rarely boring. The roll-call starts, surprisingly, with Sokal and his eponymous *affaire* and the tale of the strangely delightful pastiche that was unknowingly published by *Social Text*. The subsequent much more savage attack on all things ‘postmodern’ mounted jointly by Sokal and Bricmont is used by Cusset to express the chasm between French and American universities, pointing out how misplaced Sokal’s attack (first published in France) on ‘French’ theory was in a country that superbly ignored it. The famed Science Wars were North American through and through, notwithstanding Bruno Latour’s place of residence, as he is a marginal figure in France in any case and not one of the better known public intellectuals such as Luc Ferry, Bernard-Henry Lévy and the other self-declared New Philosophers¹⁰ [*nouveaux philosophes*].

Cusset narrates how, on the continent that invented *Reader’s Digest*, the ubiquitous Readers bringing together ‘key texts’ are thrust upon unsuspecting undergraduates and eager faculty, forcing proximity and promiscuity through systematic intertextuality. Crossovers and counter-references are explicitly favoured by editors and university publishers – Duke, Columbia, Minnesota to name a few – in order to create a label, a brand, and to

5 Cusset, *French Theory*, 100.

6 Cusset, *French Theory*, 98.

7 Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen, *French Theory in America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

8 Lotringer and Cohen, *French Theory in America*, 1.

9 Lotringer and Cohen, *French Theory in America*, 8.

10 Cusset, *French Theory*, 327.

naturalise a corpus. Deleuze's *Foucault*; Baudrillard's *Oublier Foucault*; Foucault's cryptic and misunderstood comment about a Deleuzien century; Foucault and Deleuze's common introduction to Nietzsche's complete works: all are invoked together, systematically, eclipsing the wider epistemological context of the full *oeuvres* of each individual thinker. Cusset, like a benevolent but patronising uncle, cannot help noting repeatedly how philosophically unsophisticated the consumers of French Theory really are, as American commentaries replace the historically situated texts themselves.¹¹

Cusset tells the tale efficiently, coming up with many astute and often barbed comments, railing against the simplifications and fundamental changes made in what constitutes theory, which, as Derrida pointed out, does not have an accredited conceptual equivalent in French,¹² making authors "appear less as references than as common nouns, a form of respiration or tempo within the discourse"¹³ [*moins des références que des noms communs, une forme de respiration du discours*]. Cusset also directly points his finger at American academics, who are seen as no more than poseurs, in effect cultivating "the maximum possible gap, by its very nature surprising, between a run-of-the-mill lecturer and his incisive political positions"¹⁴ [*l'écart maximal, garant de la surprise, entre un enseignant sans histoires, et son discours tranchant*]. Students stuck in womb-like university enclaves do not escape his critique, as they are seen to individualise their encounter with theory within an escapist space in which to flee from the uncompromisingly cutthroat professional 'real world'. But, far from being simply chauvinistic, he saves his sharpest comments for his French colleagues.

It is throughout a tale of recuperation and intellectual reterritorialisation: Americans and British from the end of the Sixties to the Nineties being caught up in the mystical invocation of French names; 'new' French philosophers in the late Seventies trying to gain notoriety by swiftly condemning contemporary philosophers *en bloc* and seeking to take their place in the public eye; the global success, notoriety and spread of French Theory into new fields – subaltern studies, cultural studies, feminist critiques; and finally the tale of Cusset himself, writing this useful book about big names, no longer one of the few lonely Queer Theorists in France, but instead cast as an efficient transatlantic mediator. It is not only a tale of philosophical Frankensteins, of ideas running amok. Cusset is careful to show how the original authors, and in particular Derrida, are entranced by what is happening to their words and thoughts, by the endless circulations and reinventions. Foucault, perhaps,

11 Cusset, *French Theory*, 315.

12 Jacques Derrida, "Deconstructions: The Im-Possible" in *French Theory in America*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen. Trans. Michael Taormina (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 13-31.

13 Cusset, *French Theory*, 103.

14 Cusset, *French Theory*, 104.

would have been most surprised to find himself cast as the great inspirer of a theology of liberation for women, and a poetics of the revolution.

The tale is far from over. A new recuperation has obviously taken place in my office corridor: Chomsky and Koolhaas recast as disciples of Derrida. The surprising tale continues...

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