
6

Conclusion

If there is a single conclusion that I hope this story of the unfolding of philosophy in France in the twentieth century supports, it is that French philosophy has been badly misunderstood if it is seen simply as a response and reaction to a number of significant German philosophical thinkers. In particular, it seems that the American reception of French philosophy has grossly over-estimated the role that Heidegger's philosophy has played, with the result that for much of the twentieth century, "French philosophy" meant Sartre's philosophy, and when it no longer meant Sartre's, it meant Derrida's. While Sartre and Derrida are both significant philosophical voices, they are not the only voices, nor were they ever the exclusive French voices or, in Derrida's case, even a dominant voice. Because the American reception has been so heavily invested in Heidegger and a certain version of the phenomenological tradition, what resulted was an almost total blindness to important trends within French philosophy that are not amenable to being framed as Gallic Heideggerianism.

Most notable here is the French epistemological tradition, represented by Bachelard, Canguilhem, Cavailles, and more recently, Michel Serres, a major French philosopher whose work is virtually ignored by American Continental philosophers. Author of more than thirty books, Serres is only the tenth philosopher to be elected to the *Académie Française* since 1900, and the only one since 1979. The English-speaking philosophical community's relative indifference and inattention to Serres is reflected as well by its failure to note that some of the most influential philosophers of the last two decades of the twentieth century work in what can only be called the analytic tradition. In fact, since Foucault's death in 1984, all of the Chairs in Philosophy at the Collège de France have been held by philosophers who work in the

analytic tradition:¹ Jules Vuillemin, Gilles-Gaston Granger, Jacques Bouveresse, Anne Fagot-Largeault, and Ian Hacking. And since Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961, only Foucault and Jean Hyppolite have held Chairs in Philosophy at the Collège de France in which they did work that one in the English-speaking philosophical world would commonly associate with "French" philosophy.

Beyond this blindness to the French epistemological tradition, there have been other consequences of the general view of philosophy in France as Gallic Heideggerianism that inform the way French philosophy has been read and taught. Bergson, for example, has been largely overlooked, with the notable exception of those who follow Deleuze's work, for whom Bergson is an essential reference. And Deleuze, for his part, was "discovered" by English-speaking philosophers long after his impact on French thought was made. Where Derrida's early works of the 1960s were translated into English usually within 5–10 years of their appearance in France, Deleuze's major works took three to four times as long to appear in English. For example, Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*, all published in France in 1967, appear in English translation six, nine, and eleven years later. By contrast, although Deleuze's early text on Proust appeared in English in 1972,² eight years after its French publication, none of Deleuze's important historical studies of the 1960s (on Hume, Nietzsche, Kant, Bergson, and Spinoza) appeared in English less than

¹ While I am characterizing these philosophers as "analytic," this means something different in the French context than the American one. In "Continental Insularity: Contemporary French Analytical Philosophy," Pascal Engel notes that both Vuillemin and Granger are, for different reasons, not easily situated within more mainstream analytic philosophy (in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], pp. 6–7). The same can also be said for Bouveresse, Fagot-Largeault, and Hacking.

² This points to a factor other than the Heideggerianism I am highlighting in the reception of recent French theory, namely, that the initial positive responses to French theory have consistently come from departments of literature rather than departments of philosophy. With very few exceptions, the translators of the works by recent French theorists, and especially the early translations, were done by scholars trained in literature, not philosophy, and the history of the early and enthusiastic response to Derrida's work by faculty and students in departments of French, English, and Comparative Literature, is well known. To substantiate this, consider the following: from 1963 to 1980, the number of journal articles published on Derrida's work in France was 110, with 53 in journals of philosophy and 57 in journals of literary criticism; during the same period in the United States, 133

21 years after their French publication, and his two major works, *Difference and Repetition* (1968) and *The Logic of Sense* (1969), appear in English translation in 1994 and 1990, respectively.³ And while the translation of Deleuze's book on Proust was initially well received and continues to be an important resource for scholars of French literature, his series of historical monographs, which offer as significant a rereading of modern philosophy as has appeared in recent years, is largely overlooked by those philosophers who consider themselves specialists in recent French philosophy.⁴

Even Foucault, who would be regarded by many as the most dominant philosophical presence in France in the latter half of the twentieth century, was initially far less enthusiastically read by American "Continental" philosophers than he was by historians, social scientists, and feminist theorists. In fact, much of the early *philosophical* reception of Foucault's works came precisely from philosophers whose interests were in feminist theory.⁵ But the fact that feminist philosophers as well as other feminist theorists were interested in Foucault's work from its first appearance does not alter the fact that the "mainstream"

journal articles on Derrida were published, with 35 in philosophy and 98 in literary criticism. In the next four years (1981–4), five additional articles on Derrida were published in France (4 in philosophy, 1 in literary criticism); in the US, on the other hand, from 1981–4, 130 articles were published, with 5 in philosophy and 125 in literary criticism. These figures come from Michèle Lamont, "How to Become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (November 1987): 584–622.

³ Even more striking is the reception of Derrida's later works, which often appear in English before they appear in French or are translated almost immediately after their French publication, and would seem to have a far larger audience of English than French readers.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *David Hume, sa vie, son oeuvre* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1952); *Empirisme et subjectivité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1953; English translation: 1991); "Lucrece et le naturalisme" in *Études philosophiques*, No. 1 (Jan.–May 1961); *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962; English translation: 1983); *La Philosophie critique de Kant* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963; English translation: 1984); *Le Bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966; English translation: 1988); *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968; English translation: 1990); *Spinoza, philosophie pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981; English translation: 1988). Publication information for the English translations can be found in the bibliography.

⁵ I am thinking here of the work of people like Linda Alcoff, Sandra Bartky, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Jana Sawicki.

Continental philosophical establishment and most of the large graduate programs in Continental philosophy were slow to warm to Foucault's importance and his position in these programs is far less important than the position of several other French philosophers who are more easily assimilated into the phenomenological–Heideggerian tradition, broadly construed.⁶

One last significant philosophical development that has received little attention outside France, again because it does not fit the dominant model of what the English-speaking philosophical community considers “French” philosophy, is the work that brings a Spinozist approach to Marxian theory. This work reflects the long tradition of Spinoza scholarship in France in the twentieth century, beginning with Alain, Lagneau, Delbos, and Brunschvicg,⁷ and continuing in more recent years with the teaching and writing of Ferdinand Alquié, Martial Guérout, Gilles Deleuze, and Louis Althusser.⁸ Spinoza has been throughout the century one of the authors whose works were most often part of the required reading for the *agrégation*,⁹ and while today the English-speaking philosophical world has all but given up on political theories that don't in some way ground themselves in Kant, whether in a Habermasian or Rawlsian guise, many of the politically engaged students who came under Althusser's influence in his years at the École Normale

⁶ A similar point could be made by examining the English-speaking philosophical community's response to the two most productive of the French philosophers associated with Derrida: consider the relative indifference to the work of Sarah Kofman, who always maintained her distance from the work of Heidegger, in comparison to the relatively enthusiastic reception of Jean-Luc Nancy's work, which maintains a consistent engagement with Heidegger's *oeuvre*.

⁷ Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), *Les Philosophes* (Paris: P. Delaplane, 1901); Victor Delbos, *Le Problème moral dans la philosophie de Spinoza et dans l'histoire du spinozisme* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1893); Léon Brunschvicg, *Spinoza* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1894) and *Spinoza et ses contemporains* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1923).

⁸ Ferdinand Alquié, *Nature et vérité dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: Centre de documentation universitaire, 1965) and *Le Rationalisme de Spinoza* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1981); Martial Guérout, *Spinoza I. Dieu (Éthique, I)* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968) and *Spinoza II. L'Âme (Éthique, II)* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1974). For Deleuze's texts, see note 4, above.

⁹ From 1900 to 1958, Spinoza's texts, sometimes in French and sometimes in Latin, are part of the program for the *concours* in 1900–3, 1906, 1908, 1913–14, 1919, 1923–4, 1926, 1928–31, 1933–4, 1936–9, 1942–4, 1948, 1951–2, 1954–6, and 1958. Only Plato and Kant (who appear almost every year), Aristotle (44 times), Descartes (41 times), Leibniz (33 times), and Hume (32 times) appear on the program more frequently. The somewhat unexpected presence of Hume is in part a consequence

Supérieure have followed his turn away from Kantian transcendental philosophy and toward a Spinozist immanentism.

One place to locate this turn from Kant to Spinoza is in terms of how the French Spinozists avoid the Kantian assumption that the individual autonomy of the isolated subject is the *summum bonum*, an assumption that leads to the modern idea that politics begins with the problem of balancing the rights of the individual against the needs of society. For Deleuze as well as French Marxists like Althusser, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Pierre Macherey, Pierre-François Moreau, Alexandre Matheron, or Étienne Balibar,¹⁰ the political attractiveness of Spinoza is in part because his metaphysics of the subject can avoid this problem by allowing the subject to see him- or herself as *one* with the public rather than a *part* of the public. As Antonio Negri has argued, in a book well known in French philosophical circles,¹¹ contrary to the rigid

of selections from Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* being one of the two choices for the English language oral explication 17 times between 1937 and 1958. Spinoza's centrality to the French canon should be compared to his role in US philosophical instruction, where he is by far the most often marginalized or overlooked of the "Gang of Seven" that typically comprise the syllabi for courses in the History of Modern Philosophy.

¹⁰ Among the significant texts by this group are the following: Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza et la politique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1985); Pierre Macherey, *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1979); *Avec Spinoza: Études sur la doctrine et l'histoire du spinozisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992); *Introduction à l'"Éthique" de Spinoza, 5 Vols: 1. ptie. La Nature des choses; 2. ptie. La Réalité mentale; 3. ptie. La Vie affective; 4. ptie. La Condition humaine; 5. ptie. Les Voies de la libération* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994–8); Alexandre Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969); *Individualité et relations interhumaines chez Spinoza* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969); *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971); *Anthropologie et politique au XVIIe siècle: Études sur Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1986); Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975); *Spinoza: L'Expérience et l'éternité* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994).

¹¹ Although written in Italian while in prison and published in 1981, Negri's text was translated into French by François Matheron in 1982 as *L'Anomalie sauvage: Puissance et Pouvoir chez Spinoza* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1982), with prefaces by Gilles Deleuze, Pierre Macherey, and Alexandre Matheron. Negri had been invited by Louis Althusser to teach at the École Normale Supérieure in 1977–8. A leading figure in the Italian extreme-Left *Autonomia* movement, Negri was arrested in April 1979 and accused of having been the leader of the Red Brigades, the terrorist movement that had assassinated Aldo Moro, two-time Prime Minister of Italy (1963–8 and 1974–6) and leader of the Christian Democrat

individualism that characterizes seventeenth-century thinkers like Hobbes,¹² Spinoza understands human individuality constructing itself as a collective entity.¹³ “By singular things,” Spinoza writes in the *Ethics*, “I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.”¹⁴ This understanding of individual and collective, which Spinoza elaborates in his political works in terms of his concept of the multitude,¹⁵ departs from both the Kantian and contract-theory traditions, and it has facilitated a continued attraction to Marxian theory that one sees in the works of Badiou, Rancière, Balibar, Macherey, and others. But insofar as these thinkers work out of a tradition that is alien both to the Heideggerian–phenomenological tradition that has dominated English-language Continental philosophy and to the neo-Kantian tradition that dominates current English-language social and political theory, their work has been all but ignored.

As I have tried to suggest throughout this chapter, were one familiar with the institutions that govern philosophical instruction and the indigenous developments in philosophy in France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it would be harder to ignore some of the

Party. After awaiting trial for four and a half years, during which time most of the charges against him were dropped, Negri was released from prison in July 1983 following his election to the Italian parliament as a member of the Radical Party. Two months later, after a vote to remove his parliamentary immunity, he escaped to France and sought political asylum. From 1983 to 1997, Negri taught political philosophy for 14 years at the University of Paris-VIII-Saint-Denis. In July 1997, Negri voluntarily returned to Italy to serve the remainder of his sentence at Rebibbia prison in Rome. He completed his sentence and was released on April 25, 2003.

¹² C. B. Macpherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) is the *locus classicus* for this account of individualism in seventeenth-century thought.

¹³ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 135.

¹⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Book II, Definition 7. The importance of this idea for Deleuze’s thinking about becoming, de- and reterritorialization, and assemblages must here also be noted.

¹⁵ See Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, pp. 194–210, and Étienne Balibar, “Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell,” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 3–37.

philosophical positions that have been obscured by the English-language, and particularly the American reception, of a few “master thinkers.” While it might not be surprising for philosophy, which has often understood itself to be the most transcendent of disciplines, to see itself as distinct from the institutional practices that form its practitioners, it is ironic that followers of trends in twentieth-century French philosophy, who pride themselves on their attentiveness to history, should be guilty of the same conceit.¹⁶ And, to return to an idea suggested at the outset, I hope that it is now clear that it makes sense to speak of “French philosophy” and mean by that something more than simply the philosophy that is written in France or in the French language. For while there may be no unifying themes that describe what one would identify as uniquely “French” philosophy, there are certain institutions – the *lycée* education and the *classe de philosophie*, the preparation for and study at the *École Normale Supérieure*, the preparation for and admission into the *agrégation*, the tradition of public instruction at the University of Paris, the institutional practices at the Collège de France and the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* – that throughout the century and continuing to this day have marked the activity of philosophizing in France. And these institutions have created a unique philosophical sensibility that does allow one to identify developments in “French philosophy” that distinguish it from its German, British, and American counterparts. Why so many of the English-speaking “specialists” in French philosophy are unaware of these institutions and their effects on French philosophical sensibilities remains a question worth asking. This chapter closes with the hope that more attention will be spent examining the academic institutionalization of philosophy in France – and the United States – with rather less spent awaiting the next appearance of a master discourse from a master thinker.

¹⁶ Soulié comes to a similar conclusion at the end of his “Anatomie du goût philosophique.”

