

NEW FRENCH WRITING & SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Roy D Boyne, Strathclyde University, Glasgow Scotland

INTRODUCTION Social theorists have responded to the recent French philosophy in two ways. The onlooker admires it but does not change his teaching. The participant may use it unaware of its mediation through Marxism. It is common for new thought to be shaped for general reception by a theoretical avant-garde composed disproportionately of Marxists. For example, Giddens' account of Jacques Derrida shows this.

DERRIDA His respect for Saussure can become respect for Marx, since the langue-parole duo echoes that of means/relations of production. The symmetry is basic to what follows.

. Saussure wished to exclude reality from the signifying nexus. But, as Benveniste said, 'When he spoke of the difference between boeuf and ox .. the thing expressly excluded at first from the definition of the sign, now creeps in by a detour.' (Benveniste 1971 44). This begins a materialist critique of structural linguistics, and is the basis for recovering a theory of language and ideology from it.

. This general task provides a rule for selection from Derrida's work. Most will freely follow. It also fixes the point of selection, which is the search for utility. The great figures of progress, cumulation, and truth play their part once again.

. Giddens does not explain why Derrida is attractive for Marxism. It is complex, but it relates to his concept of difference.

DIFFERENCE The French verb différer means both to be other than, and to delay. In the sign, both meanings are in play. The difference between signifier and signified is spatial and temporal. The sign is merely a trace, given that structure, the signified is transcendental. "The term transcendental signified is Derrida's,

and indicates how the pyramid of the sign ends by resolving itself into the hypostasis of the signified that culminates in a God." (Kristeva 1973 28) Ideas like law, duty, tradition, goodness, and beauty are indicated by Derrida as derivatives of theology in that we cannot place ourselves in the presence of their essences.

. Derrida admits a link between his thought and materialist dialectics (Derrida 1972 97). His critique of the metaphysics of presence is available to undermine the dominant modes of bourgeois ideology: idealism, religion, and metaphysics. This does not establish the definitive status of Derrida's discourse, but rather its potential availability for the service of at least one theoretical formation.

. In sum, interest in Derrida is mediated by Marxism. But of course, his critique of theology can be of use within other discourses than Marxism, and need not be instrumentalized at all. Nor need we pick out those facets of his work that have commonly received attention up to now.

OTHER APPROPRIATIONS

. Michel Foucault's work has had most attention in Marx-influenced journals like Telos, Theory & Society, Radical Philosophy, and Ideology & Consciousness. No one is asking about the effects of such mediations. The work of the "nouveau philosophes" has filtered into Telos. Was it a passing media phenomenon? To what extent is that theoretical judgment an effect of Marxist mediation?

. Marxist analysis is a powerful method, but it is not the only one. There is no reason for non-Marxist theory to be dowdy and provincial. If we look at comparative literature, journals like Diacritics, Sub-stance, and Semio-texte manifest a spirit of irreverence which is so lacking in non-Marxist social theory.

CONDITIONS FOR LIFE

. For non-Marxist theory to recover a sense of style, some link from practice to theory must be made unproblematic at a first order level. the vitality of the literary critics is founded on the Being-there of their texts. The wildest flights of fancy remain tied to this grounding. The ground as a refuge allows for the flight as an adventure.

. What could form the analog of the novel for social theory? There are at least two possibilities. 1) We may see ethnomethodology as providing a base for social theory rather than as a school of theory. The link to phenomenology would be stressed. 2) Following Durkheim, we would eschew ideas and ideals, and look to their sedimentation in the form of a written record. The recent work of Foucault is germane. The concern with the sociological text would become a very small part of this. The paraplegia of theory would be cured by giving ground. Theory now is text-centered. It will become text-rooted. But the text will be society.

. Text-centered theory is tied to exegesis and truth, with hardly a gesture toward risk and innovation. This is where the conservatism of much Western theory lies, in a commitment to a hermeneutics of truth, which despite the anguished denials of Positivism, finally places this theory at the service of instrumental reason. The remedy is to transcend this commitment by a movement to a hermeneutics of exploration. We will now pursue that spirit.

EMILE ZOLA

. The key to Germinal is Lantier's rejection of the tyranny of the past. Just because previous generations had taken their lot as the unchangeable work of inexorable fate, the miners of 1860 need not do so. Someone says, "The worst of it is when you have to admit that it can't ever change. When you are young you think happiness will come later on, and you hope for things; and

then the same old poverty gets hold of you and you are caught up in it." (Zola 1954 166) Zola writes of Lantier's response in these terms: "He talked on and on like one possessed. Suddenly the closed horizon burst asunder as he spoke, and there opened a gap of light in the dark existence of these poor folk .. misery vanished .. God was no more, it was the turn of justice to bestow happiness on mankind." (168) Powerful emotions and impossible visions inspired the speeches which stirred the formerly fatalistic miners into action. The miners moved from the past to the present, from reverence to self-constitution, from religion to hedonism, from signified to signifier. And the future is in league with the past. Souverine exclaims that any reasoning about the future is criminal (Zola 1954 237).

PAST AND PRESENT

. Past-orientation and present-orientation are conceptually isomorphic with two views of language. The former is consonant with Saussure's association of signifier and signified in the totality of the sign; the figures of reference/reverence appear as the signifier is taken back, in an analogon of historical movement, to the signified. The latter, with its differentiating mode, is compatible with the view that meaning is produced through difference within the chain of signifiers.

. The miner can define his life in two ways. It is the same with language. Either the signifier or the signified has primacy. To carry on signifying and also deny these alternatives would be deceitful, as in the claim that both positions are wrong, or it would be frustrating, as in the claim that escape is impossible but must be tried. A strategy of confusion would serve both attitudes, since it would conflate past and present. This idea of a strategy of confusion overlaid on a basically deceitful or frustrating project explains the work of Foucault and Derrida on language.

LEGERDEMAIN

Foucault writes of a world without objects. He says of sexuality, "Perhaps we could say that it has become the only division possible in a world now emptied of objects, beings and spaces to desecrate." (Foucault 1977 30) He also affirms the primacy of difference, "Being that which is always said of difference: it is the Recurrence of difference." (192)

But how can we conjoin these thoughts with the idea of archeology? If the new historian, armed with the archeological method, denies that history is the investigation of the past, then all will be well. But this is not the case. The radical otherness of past epistemes, and the idea of a discontinuous history, can only be founded on the rehabilitation of the signified. The aim is only, "to define a method of historical analysis freed from the anthropological theme." (Foucault 1972 16) It is not the total denial of history demanded by the belief in the absence of the real object, a belief which appears all through Foucault's work.

Repeatedly, one can find those strategic sites where past and present are assimilated. Consider the following example: "Is not discourse in its most profound determination a 'trace'? And is its murmur not the place of insubstantial immortalities? Must we admit that the time of discourse is not the time of consciousness extrapolated to the dimensions of history, or the time of history present in the form of consciousness? Must I suppose that in my discourse, I can have no survival?" (Foucault 1977 210) The rhetoric misleads. As the object is preserved, so too is the subject.

FULFILLMENT IN DEPRIVATION

Derrida and Foucault share the concept of 'trace'. Perhaps their concepts of time will be similar. We already know that Derrida takes the side of the signifier. And we can now see that his critique of the metaphysics of presence will lie uneasily with any

form of present orientation. This provides the reason for the opacity of much of Derrida's work. He knows he is caught, admits it freely, but still tries to evade capture by the metaphysics he seeks to deconstruct. This is what Derrida has to say on the notion of 'trace': "We have to deal not with the horizons of modified presents - past or future - but with a past that has never been nor ever will be present; whose 'future' will never be produced or reproduced in the form of presence. The concept of trace is therefore incommensurate with that of retention, that of the becoming-past of what had been present .. a past that has never been present .. that is, the Other." (Derrida 1973 152) But if the 'trace' is not to be seen as a signifier whose positivity is provided by some uncritical notion of history, how is it seen? There are two issues: 1) Derrida's reading of Being and Time; 2) his idea of metaphor.

From Aristotle to Heidegger, talk on time summons up the enigma of the present. "If time is thought on the basis of the now, we are forced to conclude that it doesn't exist. The now presents itself both as that which no longer is and as that which is not yet." (Derrida 1970 62) Might we solve the puzzle by looking to the relation between the point and the line? Like the present, the point is internally odd - a non-spatial spatiality. This does not help as the structures of linearity and temporality are not congruent. Time cannot be a co-existence of now-points in the same way that the line can be seen as a set of space-points, because the latter do not destroy each other reciprocally. Two nows cannot co-exist.

But we need not forget the idea of line. Careful thought reveals that since the point does not exist as a real location, the line could not be seen simply as a set of points. Perhaps we should rethink the line as movement and thus reinscribe it within the

philosophy of time. But this does not help. The line must not end as we cannot countenance the idea of stopped time. It must be endless, and will merely return us to the over-worked figures of infinity and circularity, the endless journey, and the eternal return.

. Derrida will finally agree with Heidegger that time is an ordinary concept of day-to-day language, and it is the source of that concept, as expressed in the idea of "within-time-ness and the genesis of the ordinary conception of time." (1972 472) Derrida will defer this capitulation for a while but finally concedes his frustration: "Perhaps there is no ordinary concept of time. The concept of time belongs entirely to metaphysics, and designates the domination of presence." (Derrida 1970 88) Here we can see his self-affliction. When a concept so nodal, so ineluctable as time is denounced as metaphysical through and through, and yet must form a foundation for any critique of metaphysics, the explanatory power of the idea of frustration is well demonstrated.

. We have been at the second level of analysis pertaining to the idea of metaphor, all the time. The grip of time is displaced by the impossibility of escaping the orientation to presence, even though that escape is demanded by the critique of the transcendental signified. The play of metaphor seems to be at work in the movement between time and line, but this is actually metonymic. We might call this internal metaphor. As we can render past-orientation in terms of external versus internal, then the figurative movement initiated in respect of time and the line is consistent with the critique of the signified.

. But the idea of metaphor in Derrida's work is once more bound up with the theme of frustration: "I cannot treat it without dealing with it, without negotiating with the loan I take from it in order to speak of it. I do not succeed in producing a treatise on metaphor which is not treated

with metaphor, which suddenly appears untreatable." (Derrida 1978 7)

OTHER DIMENSIONS

. This brief look into the worlds of Foucault and Derrida had the aim of characterizing the contemplative life as one of frustration or deceit. By way of amelioration, perhaps Wittgenstein's remarks are apposite:

"297 - It is also a part of dissembling to regard others as capable of dissembling."

"298 - If human beings acted in such a way that we were inclined to suspect them of dissembling, but they showed no mistrust of one another, then this doesn't present a picture of people who dissemble." (1977 56)

. Clearly, this essay must be regarded with the strongest suspicion.

REFERENCES

- .Benveniste E 1971 Problems in General Linguistics. Miami U Press
- .Derrida J 1970 'Ousia and gramme...' Phenomenology in Perspective. F Smith ed The Hague Nijhoff
- _____ 1972 Positions. Paris Minuit
- _____ 1973 Speech and Phenomena. Northwestern U Press
- _____ 1978 The retreat of metaphor. Enclitic 4 Fall
- .Foucault M 1972 The Archeology of Knowledge. London Travistock
- _____ 1977 Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Oxford Blackwell
- Giddens A 1979 Central Problems in Social Theory. New York Macmillan
- .Kristeva J 1973 The semiotic activity. Screen 14 1/2
- .Wittgenstein L 1977 Remarks on Colour. Oxford Blackwell
- .Zola E 1954 Germinal. Penguin