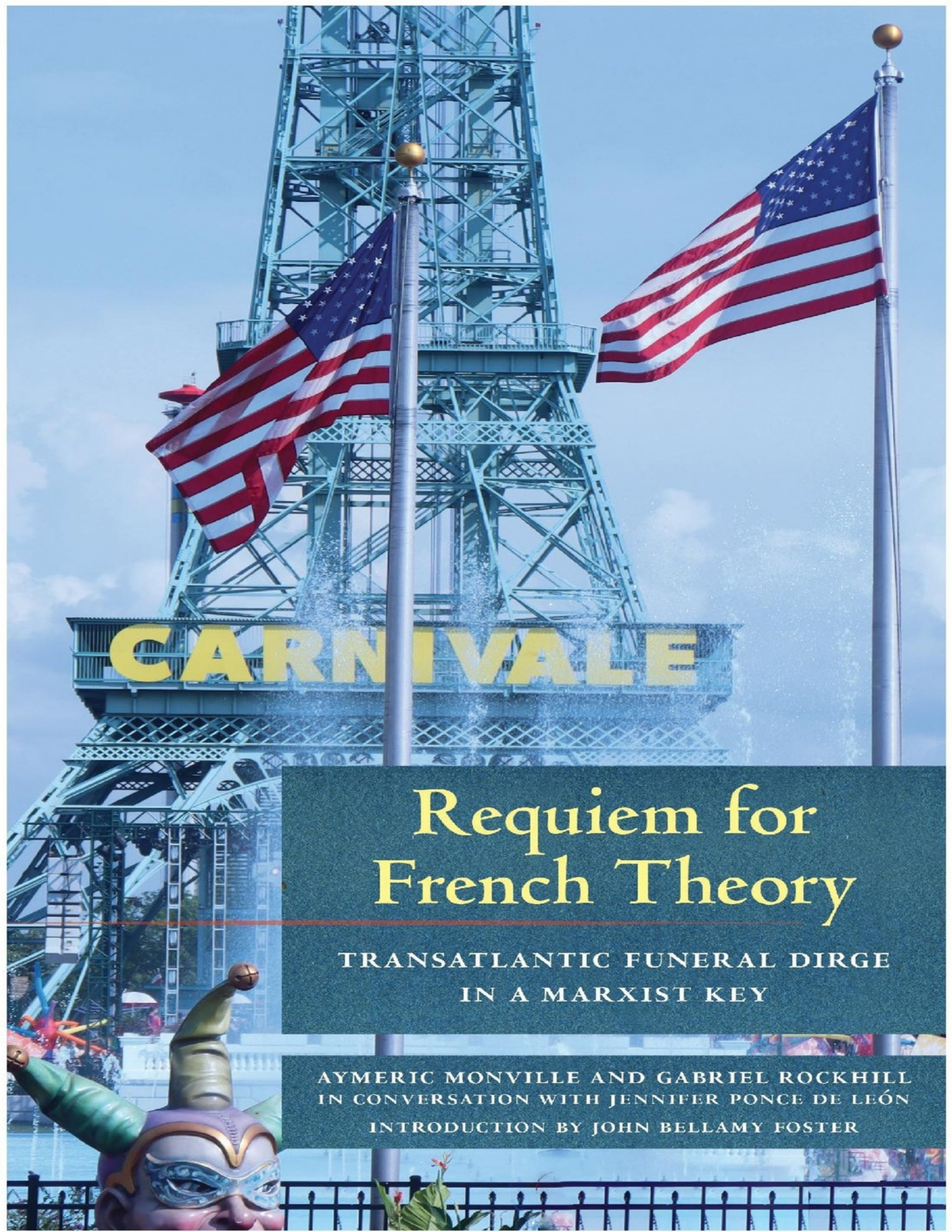




CARNIVALE

Requiem for French Theory

TRANSATLANTIC FUNERAL DIRGE
IN A MARXIST KEY

AYMERIC MONVILLE AND GABRIEL ROCKHILL
IN CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER PONCE DE LEÓN
INTRODUCTION BY JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

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REQUIEM FOR FRENCH THEORY

Transatlantic Funeral Dirge in a Marxist Key

by Aymeric Monville and Gabriel Rockhill
in conversation with Jennifer Ponce de León

Introduction by John Bellamy Foster



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Since Gabriel was able to complete some of the work for this project during his sabbatical from Villanova University, he would like to thank Villanova for supporting his research leave, as well as for a University Summer Grant.

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N.B.: Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book are our own.

INTRODUCTION

French Theory in the Intellectual Cold War

John Bellamy Foster

On October 18–21, 1966, a seemingly innocuous international conference titled “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” took place at the Humanities Center of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The conference was billed as bringing the main luminaries of French structuralist thought to the United States. Those who spoke at the conference included such celebrated French philosophers and literary critics as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Lucien Goldmann, Jean Hyppolite, and Jacques Lacan. Michel Foucault was unable to attend but played a principal role in the organization of the conference. Gilles Deleuze, though invited, was also not in attendance, but sent a communication to be read. At the conference, Derrida met Paul de Man (the former Nazi collaborator) who became a leading deconstructionist within U.S. literary criticism. The Johns Hopkins conference was to be universally designated as the point of origin of what came to be known in the late 1960s and ’70s as “French Theory,” a term never fully accepted in France, but representing an international amalgamation of French and American structuralist thought that generated what was later referred to as postmodernism.¹

Despite all appearances, the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference was not simply an ordinary academic meeting, on no matter how grand a scale, but rather a politically motivated attempt to create a beachhead for French structuralism in the United States that would counter the radicalization then

taking place. French philosophical thought in the 1960s, emerging from a period in which Jean-Paul Sartre was the preeminent philosopher, was increasingly enamored with the anti-humanist philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, the latter an unrepentant Nazi ideologue. The turn to Nietzsche and Heidegger was combined with the French tradition of structuralism, based in linguistics, anthropology, and Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Structuralism was opposed to all traditional forms of inquiry that relied principally on historical analysis, the (human) subject, and dialectics. The organizers of the conference at Johns Hopkins, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, indicated their intention to bring together thinkers in the traditions of Nietzsche and structuralism, thus casting the conference in conservative and anti-Marxist terms.²

In 1966, French thought was moving away from Karl Marx at the very same time that a reemerging radicalism in the United States was generating an increasing interest in Marxism. Lacan's *Écrits* and Foucault's *The Order of Things* both appeared in 1966 and became bestsellers in France. Both works trivialized G. W. F. Hegel and Marx. In France, the examination of Hegel's philosophy was highly selective and approached subjectively, heavily influenced by Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, focusing on the master-slave dialectic. In *Écrits*, Lacan presented Hegel's master-slave dialectic as an "iron law" of conflict, prior to Charles Darwin, which Lacan was to incorporate into his Freudian structuralism.³ Foucault dismissed Marxism by claiming that it had existed "in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water" and was "unable to breathe anywhere else." In contrast, Nietzsche, with his combination of philosophy and philology and his eternal return, had a meaning that "burned for us" in the twentieth century.⁴

The intellectual trends on the left in the United States in 1966 were then quite different from those most fashionable in France. The emerging U.S. student movement, which was then focused on the Vietnam War and the critique of capitalism, was reading such radical best-sellers as Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964, not translated into French until 1968, when it influenced the student movement there) and Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* (1966).⁵

As part of the general Cold War offensive, and with the aim of promoting ideas that would constitute a bulwark against Marxist ideas, the

Ford Foundation agreed to underwrite the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, bringing French structuralist theorists as a group to the United States. The Ford Foundation was then headed by McGeorge Bundy, Lyndon B. Johnson's former National Security Advisor, who was closely connected to the entire range of U.S. intelligence agencies. Bundy was one of Johnson's fourteen "wise men" who advised him on the Vietnam War.⁶

Significantly, it was within months of the Johns Hopkins meeting, in April 1967, that *Ramparts* magazine, which was closely associated with the growing student radicalism, broke the full story of the CIA's funding through its intellectual front organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, of dozens of prestigious putatively left journals in Europe and elsewhere, all of which had adopted an explicitly anticommunist stance. The CCF had been founded in West Berlin in 1950 and in the mid-1960s was operating in thirty-five countries. Many leading European and American thinkers were involved in CCF conferences and journals, including figures such as Theodor Adorno, Raymond Aron, Willi Brandt, Daniel Bell, James Burnham, Louis Fischer, Sidney Hook, Karl Jaspers, Arthur Koestler, Irving Kristol, Mary McCarthy, Nicolas Nabokov, Michael Polanyi, and Edward Shils. Following the exposure of the CCF as a CIA front, the Ford Foundation under Bundy, working closely with the CIA, took over CCF funding operations—an action fully in accord with its financial support of the 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins.⁷

Louis Althusser, the preeminent French Marxist structuralist thinker, was not invited to the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference, no doubt due to his connections with the French Communist Party. Goldmann, who was an anti-Soviet Western Marxist, and Jean Hyppolite, an anti-Marxist Hegelian scholar—who despite his Hegelianism, had exerted considerable influence on French structuralist thought—were both invited. Apart from this, the vast majority of invitees were dedicated enemies of Hegelian and Marxist philosophies, even if sometimes characterizing themselves as post-Marxists or as participating in some way in a "dialogue" with Marxism. In a move unusual for academic conferences, *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*, both dedicated Cold War organs, sent reporters, along with *Partisan Review* (which was then being covertly funded by the CIA) and *Le Monde* from France.⁸

Remarkably little of substance was said about either Marx or Hegel at the 1966 “Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man Conference,” although both nineteenth-century thinkers were often mentioned in passing, and despite Hyppolite’s efforts to make a case for structuralist linguistics in Hegel. Nor were capitalism and imperialism or the affairs of the world at large subjects of discussion. There was no mention of the Vietnam War. Most of the talks were aimed at working out interdisciplinary connections between the various conceptual frameworks of the structuralists themselves.

The big surprise was the presentation by Derrida, which was aimed at the deconstruction of structuralism itself, along with everything else, in accordance with neo-Heideggerian anti-humanism and anti-essentialism. Derrida’s analysis in particular gave rise to what in the United States was labeled poststructuralism, the most extreme version of postmodernism.⁹ With Derrida now playing a leading role, French Theory took on the form of a deconstructionism that was presented as more “radical” and more “left” than anything else, due to its deeply skeptical, nihilistic, anti-rationalist, anti-Enlightenment views, and its emphasis on purely discursive realities. Without a subject, structure itself became essentially meaningless, leading to a turn to discursive constructions entirely—all was language. This allowed for an almost infinite disassembling of everything in existence *in words*. The result was the creation of an aura of autonomous thought, lacking any objective moorings beyond those offered by mere discursive forms, while deconstructing the subject and agency. Such an approach could go every which way at once, based on the notion that nothing could ever be pinned down with any degree of certainty. As with all forms of skepticism, solipsism, and nihilism, it was largely impervious to refutation on rational grounds.

When Macksey and Donato sought to summarize the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference in their introduction to the 1971 edition of the proceedings, titled *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, they did not turn to Derrida or any other thinker who had been present at the conference. Instead, they quoted from an article by Deleuze on Foucault. Deleuze had written that Foucault’s postmodernist philosophy represented “a cold and concerted destruction of the [human] subject, a lively distaste for notions of origin, of lost origin, of recovered origin, a dismantling of unifying pseudo-syntheses of

consciousness, a denunciation of all the mystifications of history preformed in the name of progress, of consciousness, and of the future of reason.”¹⁰ It was obvious that what was being targeted here was all forms of historical, materialist, and dialectical reason focusing on human agency, and particularly the traditions emanating from Hegel and Marx. The strong rejection here of Hegel, who was reduced to an “Otherness,” was tied to French Theory’s adherence at all times to Immanuel Kant’s notion that the noumena (things in themselves), as opposed to phenomena (the world of perception), was beyond the realm of human knowledge, thereby curtailing the role of human reason.¹¹

Historical analysis too came under attack. Thus, in the 1966 conference, Goldmann remarked—no doubt with some hesitation given his still socialist outlook—that “for the present intellectual posture history doesn’t matter, the essential is to avoid history or historicity.”¹² Indeed, it was the rejection of the connection between history and critical reason that most characterized postmodernism. A crucial element in French Theory was its general Eurocentrism, which allowed it to ignore all that happened outside Europe and the United States. Imperialism did not exist even as a question within this insular paradigm. At a time when the United States had over half a million troops in Vietnam aimed at defeating a war for national liberation, the issue of the third world was off the table. The narrow Eurocentric viewpoint in which Europe formed the measure of the entire globe provided the cover for the retreat from both class and global struggle. In the philosophical view of French Theory, nothing outside of Europe and the United States, standing for the modern/postmodern world, really mattered.

According to Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), “I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹³ All grand historical narratives, including those of science, were to be abandoned. In French Theory, there was no longer any traditional history beyond genealogy in a Nietzschean sense.¹⁴ The scientific truth claims of the traditional approach to history, postmodernist Dutch historian Frank Ankersmit claimed, were simply “variants on” the ancient Greek “paradox of the Cretan who says that all Cretans lie.” Historical analysis for Ankersmit was no longer aimed at the study of the trunk, or even the branches, of a tree, but rather the examination of the leaves. Hence, “what remains now for Western historiography is to gather the leaves that have

blown away and to study them independently of their origins.” He concluded: “Within the postmodernist view of history the goal is no longer integration, synthesis, and totality, but it is . . . historical scraps that are the center of attention.”¹⁵

For French Theory in general, there was only *structure* and *event*, divorced from the subject and history. *Structure* was viewed in terms of signs/signifiers as evidenced through language, discourse, or psychoanalytic categories, invariably deconstructing the subject. The *event*, which negated the *structure*, was defined as a rupture that arrived unannounced. With this essentially irrationalist, skeptical outlook, everything that existed could be challenged. In Nietzsche’s terms, both “God” and “man” could be declared dead. But what primarily came under attack was materialist ontology and the very possibility of any relation between human freedom and necessity, and thus the potential for rational struggle and emancipatory projects.¹⁶

An event or rupture, from the perspective of French Theory, was clearly presented by May 1968 in France, with the mass revolt of workers and students. The inner meaning of May ’68, its struggle to make the supposedly impossible possible, was best described by French Marxist Henri Lefebvre in *The Explosion*.¹⁷ The ’68 revolt was inspired to a very large extent by Marxism and anarchism. The workers and students were soon defeated by the powers that be. Nevertheless, the ’68 revolt left its mark. The main proponents of French Theory, such as Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard, gained historical notoriety from this event, causing them to drop their more reactionary slogans for a time, seeking to clothe themselves as radicals engaged in a dialogue with Marxism, and even as intellectual instigators of the revolt.

In fact, none of these thinkers, including Althusser—as Gabriel Rockhill has shown—played any role whatsoever in the events of May ’68.¹⁸ Nevertheless “the explosion” of May ’68 was to give a kind of radical chic to French Theory and its endless deconstructions, which took on a mystique that quickly penetrated into departments of literary criticism, French language and criticism, philosophy, and the social sciences throughout the United States. Meanwhile, the major representatives of French Theory, while sometimes presenting themselves as left thinkers, sought to displace all forms of genuine radical emancipatory critique, principally Marxism, encouraging the general abandonment of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics.

An emphasis on *difference* at the expense of all notions of cohesion and unification encouraged a shift from class analysis to a focus simply on ascriptive identities, such as race and gender, no longer seen as dialectically related to class.

Particularly in U.S. postmodernism, the concept of “identity politics,” which had first emerged from Black Marxist feminist lesbian thinkers in the 1970s, as part of a revolutionary understanding of “interlocked” oppressions, became a carnival of *difference*, disuniting individuals and society, not as a necessary step in a process of reunification on a higher level, but simply in support of difference as a value in itself, removed from the question of the historical dynamics of the capitalist mode of production and the struggle for human emancipation.^{[19](#)}

The Rise and Fall of French Theory: Four Periods

Ironically, while French Theory was exerting a pervasive influence on the academy in the United States in the late 1960s and '70s (notably at Yale where de Man offered deconstructive readings of nearly everything), becoming fashionable in humanities departments throughout the country, it was already experiencing a rapid decline in France itself. According to Marxist cultural theorist Frederic Jameson in *The Years of Theory* (2024), there were essentially four periods in the rise and fall of French Theory.^{[20](#)} The first, or pre-stage, consisted of the years immediately after the Second World War, when France, like Italy, had a strong Communist Party, arising out of the Resistance in the Anti-Nazi War. The dominant left thinker was Sartre, representing existentialism and phenomenology, and increasingly aligned with Marxism, along with his close partner Simone de Beauvoir, a leading French existentialist and feminist theorist. These were the years in which the French state was trying to reassert itself as a major colonial power, drawing it into extended wars in Indochina and Algeria. Meanwhile, the United States, as part of its Cold War strategy, was trying to exert control over France through the Marshall Plan, which had a role in subsidizing elite French universities in order to create a more conservative intellectual climate. Washington in these years was in opposition not only to Marxism but also, though less fervently, to General Charles de Gaulle's

Gaullist-nationalist forces. The decolonization struggle centered on Algeria's revolutionary efforts to free itself from the rule of Paris (and from French settler colonists). The foremost theorist of decolonization was Frantz Fanon, who was influenced by both Hegel and Marx. The main new counter-current to Marxism that arose at this time was the structural linguistics of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, which gave a big boost to French structuralism in general. This first period can be seen as ending with the close of the French-Algerian War in 1962.²¹

In the early-to-mid 1960s, a second period emerged, marked by a decisive turn toward structuralism rooted in linguistics and psychoanalysis, divorced from both the human subject and history, constituting a shift to "trans-individual forces."²² Althusser, as a Western Marxist theorist, played a key role in the development of an anti-humanist, anti-historical structuralism, but French Theory proper was to be dominated by such major postmodernist figures as Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze. It was in this period, then, that French Theory attained its beachhead in the intellectual life of the United States at the 1966 Johns Hopkins Humanities Conference, followed by the intellectual ascendance of postmodernism in left thought. A related development was the Annales School of historians in France (associated with figures such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and Fernand Braudel), which, while not denying historical analysis, as in the case of postmodernism, had as its mission drawing selectively on the methods of historical materialism while also seeking to disavow Marxist historiography.²³

The third period, in Jameson's chronology, can be seen as commencing with May '68, which both conferred on French Theory a new radical aura and, paradoxically, led to the beginning of its decline in France itself, following the defeat of the left. The main postmodernist thinkers responded to the revolt of '68 by clothing themselves in the guise of post-Marxists, and then as the full extent of the defeat of the left became clear they came out more fully as anti-Marxists, as in Jean Baudrillard's 1973 *The Mirror of Production*, which tried, ineffectually, to provide a postmodernist/post-Marxist deconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy, emphasizing the symbolic elements centered on consumerism.²⁴ Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, published in 1972, was a profoundly anti-Marxist work, manipulating and

distorting Marx's concepts while representing, in the words of Ketiv Chukhrov, "*the radicalization of the impossibility of . . . exit*" from the capitalist system.²⁵

There were French Marxist theorists of considerable brilliance, who retained materialist and dialectical perspectives, such as Lefebvre and Michel Clouscard, developing their ideas in this same historical period. However, these thinkers were relatively isolated, not receiving the elite establishment support that underwrote the reputations of the principal structuralist and postmodernist thinkers.

The fourth period of French Theory was the product of globalization, beginning in the mid-1980s. Postmodernist philosophy in France waned still further in the face of the continuing decline of the left, with François Mitterrand's Socialist Party, after its initial victory in 1981, capitulating to neoliberalism. The disintegration of the left in this period removed the importance of structuralism and postmodernism, which had served the needs of the system as intellectual responses to Marxism. Hence, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War led ironically to the rapid demise of French Theory. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty creating the European Union, which was negotiated on the side of Paris by Mitterrand, reduced France's independent imperial role. This was the period of the "epigones" of French Theory, figures like the posthumanist Bruno Latour, followed more recently, especially on the U.S. side, by the so-called new materialists and object-oriented ontology.²⁶

Here the search was directed at finding a place for a new irrationalism, at a time when French Theory had reached the end of its own deconstructive logic. Posthumanism privileged the pseudo-empirical *object* (or assemblages of objects) seen as "actants," now viewed as a supreme category, marginalizing not only the human subject and structure, but also, to a considerable extent, discourse.²⁷ Jameson identified this period, significantly, with "de-Marxification." The entire postmodernist/posthumanist tradition could reasonably be seen in these terms. However, in the fourth period, with the development of posthumanism and the "epigones," de-Marxification had reached such a point that there was no longer any connection, even in negation, with Marxist theory. Even the critical concepts of reification and commodity fetishism were abandoned.²⁸

Already in the mid-1980s, near the end of Mitterrand's first administration, the demise of French Theory as an intellectual force in France itself was noted by close observers. The situation was summed up in December 1985 in a research report from the CIA's Office of European Analysis (a "sanitized copy" was approved for release in 2011), which was particularly concerned to ensure that this demise would not lead to the reemergence of Marxist theories. Here the CIA analysts explained that while structuralism and the French Annales School of historians had by then "fallen on hard times . . . we believe their critical demolition of Marxist influence in the social sciences is likely to endure as a profound contribution to modern scholarship both in France and elsewhere in Western Europe." In this respect, Aron, Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault were particularly commended. Not only was Foucault, in the eyes of the CIA researchers, "the most profound and influential thinker" in France, he was to be praised for the direct support that he had provided to the French "New Right," viewed by the CIA as the successors of French Theory, and "for, among other things, reminding philosophers of the 'bloody' consequences that followed from the rationalist social theory of the 18th-century Enlightenment and the Revolutionary era."²⁹

For the CIA, then, the decline of French Theory was not a tragedy, because it had served what the intelligence agency considered its principal task, the destruction of Marxist thought. Moreover, French Theory had provided the added benefit of opening the way to New Right doctrines, also rooted in Nietzsche and Heidegger, made possible by the vacuum left by the self-destruction of French left thought.

Today the death of French Theory has become a common topic. It is not only the subject of Jameson's final book, but it is also addressed in a different way in the present dialogue, by Aymeric Monville and Gabriel Rockhill (in conversation with Jennifer Ponce de León). Attempts to criticize French Theory from a Marxist perspective have often been superficial and undeveloped because relatively few genuine Marxist theorists have had sufficient entry into the elite inner circles of French postmodernism to develop an *internal critique*. In this case, Monville and Rockhill, coming from two sides of the Atlantic, but both having an intimate, firsthand knowledge of French structuralism and postmodernism, are exceptions. They agree with the CIA assessment that the inner logic of

French Theory was the “critical demolition” of Marxist theory in France and the United States. But they disagree with the CIA’s wishful conclusion that this meant that the demolition of Marxism would “endure.”

Marxism in the Age of Globalization

As Clouscard said of contemporary capitalism, with Rockhill extending this to French Theory, “Everything is allowed, but nothing is possible.”³⁰ Marxist analysis, in contrast, is engaged in a real-world revolt against capitalism, and it is most influential not when emanating from the ivory tower, but, on the contrary, when emerging from organic intellectuals tied to material conditions and to the class struggle against existing social relations. Historical materialism is thus at its best when the struggles for human freedom and necessity coincide. It cannot be fully suppressed, because it is humanity’s defense against the totalizing destruction wrought by capitalism. In our time of planetary crisis, the necessity of Marxism’s confrontation of reality with reason is once again evident. Hence, there is little room today for an irrational discursive carnival as a substitute for genuine intellectual activity. Nevertheless, the vast armature of postmodernism, which was used as a weapon against Marxism, has to be engaged with and the reason for past failures of the left analyzed.

In this respect, every line of the present dialogue between Monville and Rockhill is essential, providing the basis of an internal critique of French Theory, the legacy of which still walks around in the world like a ghost of the early Cold War era. In this critique, which overlaps with that developed by figures such as Clouscard and Domenico Losurdo, French Theory and Western Marxism shared a common Eurocentric failure to confront the reality of imperialism and revolution in the world. In fact, it was the weaknesses of Western Marxism that left it intellectually vulnerable to the tactics of deconstruction that characterized French Theory. A critique of French Theory thus needs to go hand in hand with a critique of Western Marxism and its fourfold retreat from materialism, the dialectics of nature, class, and anti-imperialism.³¹

Nor is the intellectual civil war introduced by structuralism and postmodernism entirely over. Today this has taken new forms in Europe, the

United States, and the world at large, in the extremes of posthumanism and postcolonial studies.³² In today's fashionable posthumanism, there is a proliferation of Latourian-style object-oriented ontology and "new materialism," suitable for the age of Artificial Intelligence. Here the focus is on abstracted *objects* viewed as independent of any relation to human subjects, history, or social transformation. This leads to the worship of the technocratic. As Latour put it, in the context of the planetary ecological crisis, you simply have to learn to "Love Your [Frankenstein] Monsters." In the work of posthumanist thinkers such as Timothy Morton and Jane Bennett, objects such as a stone or a lump of coal are actors/actants on the same horizontal plane as human beings.³³ In such an irrationalist frame, the external *objects* of human production as opposed to the *human subjects* themselves have become the identical subject-objects, displacing all possibility of meaningful human social transformation and generating a perverse ecology that reverses the real alienated relations.

Meanwhile, the clownish Lacanian-Hegelian posthumanist Slavoj Žižek occupies a position on center stage, where, under the pretense of furthering Marxist dialectical materialism, he continually seeks to bury it, making him a celebrated and amusing figure in the eyes of the establishment, bewildering many on the left. As Žižek wrote in 2020, the neoclassical economist "Tyler Cowen [in 2019] . . . asked me why I continue to stick to the ridiculously outdated notion of Communism?" Žižek replied on that occasion, "For me, Communism is just, the name of a problem. It's not a solution." More recently he declared facetiously: "My reply [to Cowen] should have been that I need Communism precisely as the background . . . the commitment to a Cause which makes all my transgressive pleasures possible." All of this allows for continual reactionary antics dressed up provocatively and humorously in red clothing, accompanied by a kind of Tristram Shandy-like style of half serious/half comical transgressive erudition that ends up trivializing almost everything, while ultimately reinforcing the capitalist lexicon.³⁴

In contemporary postcolonial theory, which has grown rapidly in the present century, many of the characteristics of French Theory were carried over into the realm of the theorization of decolonization.³⁵ None other than Fanon was reinterpreted as a proponent of postcolonial discourse and even as an Afro-pessimist, rather than a dialectical thinker and a fierce opponent

of colonialism and imperialism, strongly influenced by historical materialism.³⁶ The Marxist critique of Eurocentrism, arising first in the 1960s, and most clearly articulated in the work of Joseph Needham, Martin Bernal, and Samir Amin, was to be turned against Marxism itself by postcolonial culturalist thinkers.³⁷ Thus, historical materialism, despite all the evidence to the contrary, was accused of Eurocentrism—an accusation that gained credence from the actual Eurocentric views of the Western Marxist philosophical tradition, which, as Losurdo argued, distinguished it from Marxism generally.³⁸

Indeed, as Simin Fadaee argues in *Global Marxism: Decolonisation and Revolutionary Politics* (2024), not only are such accusations of Eurocentrism inapplicable to Marx (at least in his mature phase), but “it is in fact Eurocentric to claim that Marxism is Eurocentric, because this entails dismissing the cornerstone of some of the most transformative movements and revolutionary projects of recent human history. . . . A more fruitful engagement with history would instead urge us to learn from the experiences of the Global South with Marxism, and ask what we can learn from Marxism’s global relevance.” Here we can draw on the theory and practice of Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Amilcar Cabral, Fanon, Ernesto Che Guevara, and many others. There is thus a need “to reconnect with Marxism as a framework for analysing global capitalism’s multiple crises and the prospects for revolutionary change but also as the basis for reimagining a world beyond capitalism.”³⁹

In October 2024, *Foreign Policy*, one of the two main U.S. intellectual organs of the New Cold War (along with the Council of Foreign Relations’ journal *Foreign Affairs*), published an article by Gregory Jones-Katz, titled “The World Still Needs French Theory: Postmodernism Is Dead. Long Live Postmodernism.” Consisting of a commentary on Jameson’s *The Years of Theory*, Jones-Katz’s article is illustrated with photos of Lacan, Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre, and Foucault. Brushing aside the radical criticism that French Theory was guilty of “capitulating to capitalism” (which in any case would hardly be a problem for *Foreign Policy*), Jones-Katz claims that it can usefully be revived as a force against globalization. The “conceptual instruments” of postmodernism, he contends, have given the world the basis for addressing its problems, independent of the theory’s decline in France. It does not take much imagination to see that the title of the *Foreign Policy*

article, “Postmodernism Is Dead. Long Live Postmodernism,” is in line with the recognition—contrary to the CIA’s triumphant assessment in 1985—that French Theory ultimately failed to put the philosophy of praxis to rest and hence is still needed on the intellectual front in the New Cold War. Here the revived French Theory is not to be employed against liberal globalization as such, but against the rise, in part, of the Global South, which, as in all anti-imperialist struggles, is informed by Marxism.^{[40](#)}

Viewed against this background, Monville and Rockhill’s *Requiem for French Theory: Transatlantic Funeral Dirge in a Marxist Key* can be seen as both a critical Marxist dialogue on postmodernism and a call to the left to inoculate itself against the Nietzschean and Heideggerian viruses, of which French Theory was in large part a manifestation: the scourge of the very idea of a *universal revolutionary humanity*.

PREFACE

A Transatlantic Exchange

Jennifer Ponce de León: We collectively decided to undertake this book project because of the unique positions that Aymeric and Gabriel occupy. From opposite sides of the Atlantic, you have both reached similar conclusions regarding the legacy of French Theory and its relationship to the tradition of dialectical and historical materialism, widely known under the moniker “Marxism.” I would like to begin, therefore, by asking you to situate yourselves and your work, elucidating how it is that you came to the positions that we will be discussing.

Gabriel Rockhill: Having grown up on a farm in Kansas, where I worked construction and as a farmhand well into my twenties, my first intellectual activities were driven by a desire to understand exploitation and how to overcome it. When I went to college in Iowa in the early 1990s, I encountered French Theory, which was presented as the most radical form of analysis on offer. With the naïveté of an uneducated farm boy whose intellectual horizons were being dictated by a system he did not fully comprehend, I dove in and ambitiously sought to acquire all the languages and background knowledge necessary to understand it. I was later able to obtain a scholarship to study in France, beginning in 1996. Living like a bohemian pauper and working odd jobs before eventually teaching, I did my graduate and postdoctoral work in Paris, remaining there until 2007. Naturalized as a French citizen around that time, I have continued to return to Paris every year for a summer school that I began there.¹

After having worked with Luce Irigaray for one year, I obtained a *Diplôme d'études approfondies* (M.A.) under the direction of Jacques

Derrida. I then went on to complete my PhD under the supervision of Alain Badiou, with Étienne Balibar serving as the president of my doctoral committee. I also obtained a master's degree in the social sciences with Bourdieusian sociologists and a postdoc in political theory. During this entire time, I read the work of all the leading luminaries of French Theory, and I attended the seminars of those who were still alive, including—in addition to the figures listed above—Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, François Laruelle, Jean-Luc Marion, Jacques Rancière, and Paul Ricoeur.

Very early in this process, I scrutinized the relationship between the claims advanced by the French theorists that I was reading and listening to, on the one hand, and the texts that these assertions were supposed to elucidate, on the other. I was struck by major discrepancies, particularly after I learned the languages of all of the original texts they were citing. Derrida, for instance, maintained that René Descartes's *Meditations* had ineluctably continued the Western metaphysical tradition of banishing madness from the realm of discourse. He neglected to mention, even though this tiny passage was the main focal point for his entire analysis, the patent fact that the mad only do one thing in the *Meditations*, both in the Latin original and in Descartes's authorized French version: they speak! They use discourse because they incessantly assert (*constanter asseverent /assurent constamment*) things that are obviously false.² Derrida also indolently ignored Descartes's extensive discussions of madness and language across his entire corpus, which would have revealed—as I demonstrated in detail in my first book—that he more or less systematically maintained not only that the mad speak, but more specifically that language is one of the primary means by which we can know someone is insane.³ In other words, discourse, far from being recalcitrant to madness, is one of its principal symptoms in the precise sense that it is a material manifestation of an immaterial mental state.

Michel Foucault committed much the same mistake, despite purporting to take a position opposed to Derrida's. He simply inscribed the supposed condemnation of madness to silence and its exclusion from the thinking subject into an event-based history of the imagined rupture of the classical age, rather than making it into a structural condition of Western metaphysics à la Derrida. In his other work, Foucault also made much ado about nothing by postulating a conceptual distinction between two types of

origin, *Herkunft* and *Ursprung*, that is nowhere to be found in Nietzsche. As a matter of fact, anyone who verifies every single one of his references to the original German text, which I have done, will be in for a rude awakening: Foucault often attributes the wrong term to Nietzsche, and he crassly misrepresents his text, including in the key passage that serves as the basis for his argument.⁴

I was, at the time, engaging in a process of empirical verification, which I also did with other French theorists, and their slipshod scholarship left something to be desired. I began to perceive their idealism, as well as their dogmatism. At the same time, I was increasingly drawn to forms of materialist analysis that did not only examine isolated texts but studied the broader context that had produced them. The historically oriented work of thinkers like Foucault and Rancière was initially appealing for this reason, as well as the sociological research of Bourdieu and others engaged in an analysis of the material world. Although this process took more time than the empirical textual verification just mentioned, I eventually became aware of their blind spots, methodological limitations, contortions, and misrepresentations. For instance, Foucault used his misreading of Descartes's *Meditations* to shore up a flimsy argument concerning a magical epistemic break in the seventeenth century, which did not stand up to materialist analysis. Rancière, including at conferences where I directly confronted him about the issue, refused to engage in a broader materialist analysis of the emergence of what he calls the aesthetic regime of art (his term for what is really, with a few exceptions, bourgeois aesthetics).⁵

As I moved from empirical to materialist critique, I became increasingly interested in the political consequences of their work. I was therefore attracted to the second generation of French Theory, which explicitly fashioned itself as politically radical, be it in the work of Badiou, Rancière, or Balibar. Here again, however, I was disappointed by the lack of materialist analysis, at least in the case of the first two, as well as the fetishization of theory that seemed to pollute their analyses, whether it was Badiou's Lacanianism, Rancière's Foucauldianism, or Balibar's Derrideanism. This, indeed, is one of the reasons that I was initially turned off by Marxism. In my small world at the time, the cutting edge of Marxist theory was represented by an openly messianic metaphysician (Badiou) and a kind of deconstructivist in deep dialogue with radical liberal theory from

the United States (Balibar). If *this* was Marxism, I was convinced it was as problematic as the forms of cultural Marxism I was reading in the Frankfurt School tradition. Rancière seemed to agree with this position, insofar as he had vociferously rejected Althusserian Marxism. However, he proposed, instead, a rigidly formalist and transhistorical account of politics that simply absolutized modern forms of insurgent anarchism, avoiding any serious materialist analysis of politics or its history, although he did engage in historical research to some degree—with important limitations—in his writings on aesthetics.

There were many other twists and turns in my intellectual and political trajectory that I am leaving aside. The work of Cornelius Castoriadis was extremely important to me, for instance, because it appeared to represent the type of historical and materialist critique I was looking for, even though he was openly hostile to Marxism. The position I arrived at, while still in France, was a form of autodidactic historical materialism that attempted to undertake a materialist analysis of concrete historical developments. However, I had not availed myself of all the collective knowledge of the dialectical and historical materialist tradition, which would have allowed me to move my work to the next level. That took place after I relocated for a teaching position to Philadelphia, and it was the combined result of increased study, organizing, and self-critique. I should insist, moreover, on this last point so that my criticisms of a certain tradition of French thought are not misinterpreted. They are, first and foremost, rooted in, and driven by, my own self-critique, meaning my painful realization that, after years of arduous elite training, I was incapable of understanding fundamental aspects of the material world (such as imperialism), which were often issues of life or death for the majority of humanity. I had been trained in imperial ignorance, and I therefore felt obliged to train myself anew.

Aymeric Monville: I am very happy about this meeting with you both, which began in Paris in 2023 and which is being extended by this exchange. It gives me the opportunity to take a closer look at so-called French Theory, not simply because it takes on its full political meaning only across the Atlantic, but also and above all because Gabriel is an expert on the question, someone who has gone through all the phases, from enthusiasm to criticism, from extreme involvement to dialectical overcoming. The

Arthurian myth makes no mistake: the only one who manages to find the Grail is Perceval, and not anyone else, in other words, the one who undergoes a complete initiation. This heroic journey, this *Bildungsroman*, reminds me of an economist friend of mine whom I published. After eight or ten years, I don't remember, of relentless study of economics, he realized that it was Lenin and his theory of imperialism that finally provided the most thorough rational framework for analysis today. In a way, this economist friend had wasted his time studying a science with no theoretical basis, designed to apologize for capitalism and all its turpitudes, neoclassical economics, which accounts for almost 90 percent of teaching in France and throughout the world. But on the contrary, all those years of work with ineffective methods were obviously not wasted, because a Leninism obtained as a result, at the price of a confrontation with all the rest of economic science, is much more valuable than a self-proclaimed Marxism-Leninism of pure adherence, motivated only by the natural sympathy one may feel for the cause of the revolutionary leader.

As for me, I wasn't lucky enough—or unlucky enough, if you think about the years it takes—to do this kind of continuous study, crowned by a magnificent “Plato is dear to me, but the truth is even dearer.” I was able to pass some rather difficult competitive exams in my country, such as the entrance exam to the Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris, and later the agrégation in classics, but, and perhaps because I had a certain disposition and above all the good fortune to have been born into an intellectual petty-bourgeois milieu relatively less subject than other social classes to symbolic violence and worldly intimidation, I have always looked upon the French university philosophy of my time without excessive reverence.

Since then, simple empirical observations, of the same order as those made by Gabriel, and in particular those that appeared as soon as you took the trouble to leave behind the philosophical monologue, have not led to reconciliation. I will only take as an example Foucault's *The Order of Things* and the remark made, when it was published, by the great Marxist historian Pierre Vilar in *La Nouvelle Critique*, the theoretical journal of the French Communist Party.⁶ Foucault asserted in his characteristically sententious way that there was no political economy in the classical age, an age whose birth he dated from the publication of the second part of *Don Quixote* (1615). Foucault's idea was to jump immediately to the conclusion

that the critique of Marxist political economy could only be assigned to a singular epoch, hence his famous metaphor included in the same work: “Marxism is like a fish in water in nineteenth-century thought: in other words, everywhere else it stops breathing.”⁷ As Pierre Vilar noted, unfortunately for Foucault, 1615 was the very year in which Antoine de Montchrestien’s *Traité d’économie politique* [*Treatise on Political Economy*] was published. Montchrestien was the inventor of the term and concept of political economy! And to stay only with Foucault’s much-vaunted work, we might recall that *The Order of Things*, which opens with a “virtuosic” interpretation of Velázquez’s *Meninas* as a “representation of classical representation,” proposes the hypothesis that we should pretend we don’t know what’s reflected in the mirror. However, as an art historian such as Daniel Arasse has pointed out, this is “historically absolutely impossible, since this picture was painted at the request of the King of Spain, and intended for his private study. I can’t imagine the King of Spain pretending not to know that it’s him reflected in the mirror in the background.”⁸ In short, nothing works with Foucault, who stops breathing as soon as we leave self-reference and self-reverence.

Vilar’s attitude, which was as critical as it was informed, has nevertheless remained fairly rare, to the point where we might forget that the principle of authority was definitively invalidated in our country by a certain Descartes, under whose auspices Gabriel wisely began this exchange. Descartes is the philosopher with whom the French spontaneously like to identify by virtue of his rational and radical side, the thinker who, with Hegel, would turn out to be the *bête noire* of this theory decreed French by almost everyone except, ultimately, the French people. Strange, too, that French Theory should have rehabilitated the advocates of an aristocratic vision of the world, Nietzsche in the first place, but also Heidegger, in the very country that overthrew the *ancien régime* and proclaimed to the world the freedom and equal rights of everyone.

It is undoubtedly for these reasons, and others, that, contrary to all that, I put more energy into breaking away from the prepackaged framework of analysis offered to me by the left-wing intellectuality of my time and into founding a publishing house conceived as a veritable counter-university: in other words, one with an objective methodology, meeting the criteria of research, but completely independent of the *Zeitgeist* in its approach to

subjects. In terms of political orientation, my family was left-wing (for anecdotal value, one of my great-great-uncles, Charles Longuet, married Jenny, the eldest daughter of Marx), and I was confronted, like all my generation, with Mitterrand's treasons. François Mitterrand, elected on an almost Marxist program of appropriation of the major means of production and exchange in 1981, took the Reagan-Thatcherite turn of austerity in 1983. Then came the triumph of the generation of former sixty-eighters [*soixante-huitards*], right up to Emmanuel Macron, who has adopted some of the same codes and themes. These obvious dead ends, these paths that led nowhere, therefore led me to systematize my personal Marxist training by clinging, in contrast, to the dignity of what the heritage of Jacobinism may have represented, still structuring our country, but also French Communism, which I believe saved my country twice in a row during the Second World War, from the Nazi occupation but also from the U.S.-American takeover of France planned by Roosevelt shortly before the Normandy landings (a government called AMGOT, which was intended to take the same occupation measures as those used for the Sicily landings, thus treating France not as an ally but as an enemy).

What is more, when I was twenty, around 1998, I discovered the reprinted version of *Néo-fascisme et idéologie du désir* [*Neo-fascism and the Ideology of Desire*] by Marxist thinker Michel Clouscard, and there I understood the exact nature of the system put in place since May '68: the liberal-libertarian compromise as a balancing solution to save capitalism in crisis.⁹ I then had the good fortune of frequenting the Clouscard circle for several years of intense philosophical exchanges, with Clouscard himself, until his death in 2009, but also Dominique Pagani, his main collaborator. I'm still convinced that French Theory found its antidote in France, at the same time, in the person of Clouscard.¹⁰ Then there were other Marxist authors whom I had the pleasure of meeting and publishing, such as Domenico Losurdo, Jean Salem, and Georges Gastaud. They have played a decisive role in making me aware of the need to activate the potential of Marxism, which not everyone has yet fully grasped. But, let's be clear, this gallery of portraits of illustrious thinkers in no way exempts me, or anyone else, from the necessary work of analyzing ideologies in their internal contradictions. This of course applies to French Theory, which needs to be

examined in detail, and only then can we propose to see how Marxism can resolve some of the aporias we have observed.

PART I

Requiem for French Theory

Jennifer Ponce de León: In the U.S. academy and publishing industry, what is known as “French Theory” has been accorded a great deal of authority and prestige in many quarters. While it is regularly presumed that the obscurantist prose and idiosyncratic vocabularies of these theorists require years of careful study, the history of these discourses themselves is rarely addressed. How would you summarize the historical emergence of French Theory? Why does it rise to such prominence where and when it does?

Aymeric Monville: I know that Gabriel is working on a major trilogy in which French Theory will be seen as a strategy of Atlanticist influence within a wider plan that includes, in particular, so-called Western Marxism and support for the Frankfurt School. I would therefore refer readers to it as soon as the books have all been published in English by Monthly Review Press, and I hope that a French translation will not be long in coming.¹ After all, a previous book by Gabriel, *La CIA et les intellectuels: Une histoire souterraine des idées de l'École de Francfort aux “nouveaux philosophes”* [*The CIA and Intellectuals: A Subterranean History of Ideas from the Frankfurt School to the “Nouveaux Philosophes”*], announced by Éditions La Fabrique, was never published! No doubt it was too irreverent toward authors published by the same publisher, and here we touch on a phenomenon that is no minor factor in the undisputed triumph of French Theory: the cash interests of the publishing world.

In any case, to concentrate on French Theory, since this transatlantic dialogue gives us the opportunity to do so, I would say by way of

introduction that it only took on this meaning and this name from the moment when a certain number of French thinkers were grouped together in the United States, from the end of the 1960s onward, and were labeled with this term, which was abusive, arbitrary, and unrepresentative of the entire debate in France. To describe this phenomenon in our own language, that is, in French, we need to understand that we use the term French Theory directly in English, in order to describe this heterogeneous body of work, validated only from the moment it crosses the Atlantic, and is then used in return as a prescriptive ideology in France. There's inevitably a kind of discrepancy, bordering on irony or even joking, in using the term in English, and I'm not sure that Anglo-Saxon readers are always aware of this.

Concretely speaking, the currents of ideas used to establish this corpus are therefore necessarily dependent on our 1950s and '60s, and what we would call the specular opposition between existentialism and then structuralism, primarily. Jean-Paul Sartre, the leading exponent of French existentialism, described structuralism as the last bastion against Marxism. It's strange that he didn't see that existentialism was undoubtedly . . . the penultimate bulwark! What is above all anti-Marxist in any case, and even in the division of roles between existentialism and structuralism, is the very neo-Kantian idea—as you know, bourgeois ideology doesn't want to go beyond the Kantian stage—of creating this antinomy, this impassable abyss between knowledge and morality, between the phenomenon that we can know but not think, and the noumenon that we can think but cannot know. On the one hand, then, we have a morality of the noumenon, of unconditioned freedom that we can choose independently of context—hence Sartre's provocative phrase, “We have never been so free as under the German occupation”—and on the other the Eleaticism of the unchanging structure of the “process/trial without a subject [procès sans sujet],” which suits the technocratic society of the Gaullist era, immortalized, for example, in the films of Jacques Tati. In the end, this amounts to fulfilling the dream of every conservative power: morality is entrusted to religious and/or traditionalist dogmatism, and knowledge can only be exercised on the technical aspect of things, as if this were a question involving only social engineering, without ever calling into question the mode of production itself.

There was therefore a flaw in the constitution of this corpus from the outset. This is due to the fact that France, through an anti-Germanism that can be explained historically but is nonetheless highly prejudicial intellectually, had remained almost completely alienated from the dialectical depth of Hegel, who remains, obviously, the antidote for overcoming the dichotomy of the noumenal and the phenomenal. Ever since Victor Cousin's first translations of his *Aesthetics* into French and the ousting of Étienne Vacherot, judged too subversive, from the university (it was—go figure!—under the July monarchy in the 1840s), Hegel was literally *persona non grata* at the university, and it was not until Alexandre Kojève's seminar on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1933 to 1939 that Hegel was finally studied properly, at a time when this key work by the German thinker had not even been translated into French! The same was a fortiori true of Marx, with the exception of communist intellectual circles such as the "Cercle de la Russie neuve," which gave rise to the journal *La Pensée*.² So, when Marx inevitably became an essential part of the postwar debate, following the victory of the Red Army in 1945, he did not benefit in France from a philosophical context sufficiently conducive to a full understanding of his work. In the history of the reception of Marxism, it has often been interpreted in a mechanistic way, through ignorance of the contributions of German idealism in particular. Thus, we have seen a neo-Kantian reception of Marx, a Spinozist reception of Marx, etc.

Existentialism and structuralism, with their respective shortcomings, are therefore the insufficiently Hegelian and insufficiently Marxist currents of ideas that preceded May 1968 and, for this simple chronological reason, enjoyed a revolutionary or at least subversive aura, in an abusive parallel with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which preceded, and even led to, the French Revolution. "It's Voltaire's fault, it's Rousseau's fault," we used to say at the time of the French Revolution. The Revolution was certainly partly the fault of Rousseau, who saw "the century of revolutions" coming (as he put it in *Émile*), and who theorized the sovereign people.³ It was certainly not the fault of Voltaire, who deeply detested the "rabble." But these kinds of misunderstandings happen all the time in history. And so French theorists have benefited and still benefit from the smell of sulfur that rises from the barricades and clings more or less to France, from the Bastille to the recent Yellow Vests.

And yet there were profoundly anti-Hegelian and anti-Marxist elements in French Theory, which—and we must pay tribute to their cynical perspicacity—did not escape the notice of certain institutional supporters of the United States engaged in the ideological struggle at the height of the Cold War. But you, Gabriel, are the best specialist on the subject, and you can talk about it much better than I can.

In any case, several decades later—and I’m coming to the conclusion, but we’re going to explain this process in detail—we are now, particularly in the United States, witnessing the dereliction of all left-wing politics, a victim of its inability to think dialectically about the question of identities and to articulate the particular and the universal. A “deconstructionist” taste for the fragmentary and the decomposed has led to a profound division in the workers’ movement. All this does is confirm the status quo of methodological and practical individualism to which the empire assigns us, in the very name of rejecting totalitarianism!

On the pretext that the Hegelian dialectic, and particularly the moment of the negation of the negation, would be, as a common sophism puts it, “totalitarian,” we engage in endless discursive embroidery about “*différence*,” without ever being able to bring it back to the universal, and especially not to the proletariat, whose exact definition is to be the only class which, by liberating itself, abolishes all the others. The division of the poor is exactly what is needed to ensure that we never reach socialism. French Theory, a finished product assembled in the United States from French raw materials, extremely sophisticated but, paradoxically enough, philosophically backward in its obsessive avoidance of the Hegelian dialectic, played a key role in this process.

JPL: Gabriel, you’ve done a lot of research on the history of French Theory and specifically on the institutions and capitalist class and state actors that were involved in its promotion. Could you provide us with a synthetic overview of your account of the historical emergence of what is known as French Theory?

Gabriel Rockhill: French Theory is a transatlantic cultural product that can only be fully understood if it is situated within the global relations of production and international class struggle. This approach is markedly

different than what you find in the bourgeois humanities and social sciences because it develops an account of the social totality. It thereby rejects the binary of internal analysis (more common in the humanities) and external analysis (dominant in the social sciences), or text and context. For a complete account of the social totality, we need to be able to situate the subjective work of individual thinkers within an objective social world and detail the dialectical play of forces at work between these two levels of analysis, which are only heuristically distinct. Although I will primarily focus here on the objective sociohistorical conjuncture within which French Theory emerged, we will, in the course of our conversation, have an opportunity to examine some of the subjective contributions of the figures under discussion. I say this, in part, because I do not want to give the false impression that I am somehow claiming that French Theory is rigidly determined by external forces and that the thinkers in question have no agency. It is not a matter of privileging determinism over freedom, or vice versa for that matter, but rather of mapping out the complex, dialectical play of forces in the material world, which far surpasses the impoverished binary abstraction of “determinism” versus “freedom.”

To set the stage for understanding the social totality within which French Theory developed, then, it is important to note that the United States emerged from the Second World War as the leading imperialist power, but it had to contend with an ever-expanding socialist world that served as a bulwark against imperialism. Within this context, it sought to integrate the former imperialist powers of Western Europe as junior partners in an international war on communism. Since the communists had played the leading role in defeating fascism and thus benefited from enormous public credibility, this required a multifaceted assault to fight their magnetic pull, even within the imperial core. The United States thereby undertook to lead an overt and covert war on communism in every possible sector, including economics (the Marshall Plan), the military (NATO and Operation Gladio), politics (support for anticommunist governments and clandestine control of unions, parties, associations), society (extensive propaganda and control of organizations of civil society), culture (the Congress for Cultural Freedom/CCF and other anticommunist cultural platforms), and the intellectual world (the CCF, support for anticommunist institutions and intellectuals, the promotion of anti-Marxist theory, etc.).

This is, very briefly, the general context for the U.S.-driven intellectual world war on communism. Within France, Sartrean existentialism was the most prominent form of philosophy in the postwar era. Although Sartre himself had indulged in his bourgeois slumbers well into the war, he partially awoke from them as the Red Army marched westward and then came out in support of an idiosyncratic version of Marxism, which remained contaminated by the bourgeois ideology of individual human freedom, as Aymeric astutely pointed out. Nevertheless, given his international visibility as a writer and intellectual, as well as that of his closest collaborator, Simone de Beauvoir, their support for a subjectivist version of Marxism did put them in the cross-hairs of U.S. officialdom. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ran heinous slander campaigns against them, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) followed Sartre's every move when he traveled in the United States.⁴

At the same time, the U.S. national security state and capitalist ruling class supported anticommunist institutions and networks of knowledge production in France to counterbalance the influence of the Marxist intelligentsia. The CCF, which expanded on the work of the Information Research Department (IRD) in the British Foreign Office, was established in 1950 and headquartered in Paris. It oversaw such an expansive international propaganda network that Hugh Wilford has described it as one of the largest patrons of art and culture in the history of the world.⁵ Its intellectual godfather was Sartre's longtime personal rival Raymond Aron, who had a line on extensive U.S. funding for non-Marxist social-scientific research and played a central role in promoting Pierre Bourdieu's career.⁶ In 1966, it was revealed that the CCF was a CIA-front organization (a fact that Bourdieu disingenuously failed to mention in his later discussion of the CCF).⁷

The Agency collaborated with the foundations of the U.S. capitalist ruling class on this and other propaganda endeavors targeting the intelligentsia. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations were both involved, for instance, in funding anticommunist networks of knowledge production in France. In the interest of space, I will only mention the important role played by the Rockefeller Foundation in funding Section VI of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), which evolved into the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in 1975. The Ford Foundation

hesitated to contribute to this endeavor in the early 1950s because it was worried that its public image would be tarnished by participating in “American cultural imperialism.”⁸ However, its concerns were soon assuaged, and it began a massive financing campaign in 1959 by allocating \$1 million—a third of the overall budget—to the construction of a new building, the Maison des sciences de l’homme, to house Section VI of the EPHE. I mention all of this because this institution has been a bastion for structuralism, the Annales School of historiography, and some of the most aggressive forms of anticommunism like those of Aron and François Furet. Among the structuralists, Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Claude Lévi-Strauss all worked at the EHESS or its predecessor organizations (*n.b.*: the Anglophone category of poststructuralism is largely an exogeneous framing of traditions understood to share deep continuities in France, hence my use of the term “structuralists” to refer to all of these thinkers).

This is an extremely brief sketch of the material conjuncture within which structuralism—including structuralist Marxism, as we will see—emerged as the trend-setting rival to Sartre’s Marxian philosophy and would serve as the raw material for what would later become known as French Theory. As we can see, U.S. cultural imperialism already played a role in preparing this raw material through its Marshall Plan for the mind. At the same time, it is worth recalling that structuralism was by no means new because its theoretical framework can be traced back to the early twentieth century. The specifically French version of structuralism developed in the 1960s was a U.S.-backed form of anti-dialectical social science and logocentric humanities that accompanied the postwar modernization of French capitalism. It also evolved within the Marshall Plan’s fostering of an expansion of consumer society, with a baby boom–driven explosion in the new petty-bourgeois class stratum. At the same time, the contemporary press and technologies of communication introduced novel forms of mass marketing. These are but some of the factors that explain how two non-Marxist books became bestsellers in France in 1966: Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and Lacan’s *Écrits*.

Structuralism, which includes what the Anglophone world would later refer to as poststructuralism, was only integrated into the international phenomenon known as French Theory when this cultural product was

branded and marketed in the United States as a new, radical discourse surpassing traditional Marxism. This process began in earnest with the 1966 international conference at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center, which brought together Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Paul de Man, and Tzvetan Todorov (Foucault and Gilles Deleuze were also involved behind the scenes). Conceived as a beachhead in North America for French structuralism, the conference received an incredible amount of news coverage by the bourgeois press, including articles in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Le Monde*, *Der Monat*, and *The Partisan Review*.⁹ This grand arrival of what would later become known as French Theory was funded by the CIA's closest collaborator on the CCF: the Ford Foundation provided a remarkable \$36,000, which is the equivalent of nearly a quarter of a million dollars today.

Structuralist Marxism in France, dominated by the figure of Louis Althusser, also played a significant role in this process. Tending to turn his back on rigorous materialist history focused on class struggle, while primarily concentrating on the academic task of reading Marx (and other philosophers), Althusser developed a form of Marxism that could easily coalesce with the dominant trends of Western Marxism (which we will discuss later).¹⁰ This process was not devoid of contradictions, but it fed into a general tendency in the imperial core to academicize Marxism and divorce it from the extramural tasks of revolutionary organizing. As Adolph Reed Jr. has poignantly argued, "Structuralism's departure from the vantage point of class struggle supported a tendency to understate the space for meaningful human intervention in politics. The result was a form of theoretical narrative emphasizing the power of entrenched patterns of relations and institutions and discounting the possibilities for systemic change."¹¹ *New Left Review* played an important role, as he recalls, in promoting a structuralist and French Theory–inflected version of Marxism, beginning around the 1970s.

In the coming decades and especially as of the 1980s, French Theory rose to prominence within the imperial academy. As it developed into one of the prestige products of the increasingly global theory industry, it benefited from the powerful backing of major corporations in the fields of knowledge production and distribution. This included universities like Johns Hopkins, Yale, Cornell, Columbia, New York University, and the

University of California Irvine, among others. In the publishing world, Pantheon Books, Routledge, Semiotext(e), Continuum-Bloomsbury, Verso, University of Minnesota Press, Stanford University Press, and many others were involved. Nevertheless, the U.S. government and the foundations of the capitalist ruling class continued to supplement the theory industry in key initiatives in order to keep it on track and enhance its prominence. For instance, the National Endowment for the Humanities contributed a whopping \$90,000 to the first complete English translation of Lacan's *Écrits* in 2007.^{[12](#)} Recently, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has increasingly taken a leading role in funding U.S.-American-style critical theory directly inspired by the French, allocating for instance \$1.5 million to Judith Butler in 2009.^{[13](#)} The University of California Berkeley professor and her institution have since received millions of dollars from Mellon to develop the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs, including \$1.8 million in 2019.^{[14](#)}

Although this material context is excluded from the standard bourgeois historical narratives, the intellectual world war on communism, along with the international political economy of knowledge production, go a long way to explaining why and how French Theory became such a global phenomenon. It is, at least in part, a product of U.S. cultural imperialism. To fully understand it, then, we need to begin by situating it within international class struggle.

JPL: I know that when you have written and spoken about the involvement of the CIA in funding and promoting culture, people sometimes react as if this were a conspiratorial view of history, in which you are imputing all historical agency to a coterie of elite puppet-masters. However, I think your references to the CIA are simply material evidence of the way culture is shaped by class interests, whose influence extends far beyond the CIA and across institutions of civil society. Could you please explain how you understand the historical significance of the CIA's cultural programs and how this comports with your analysis of the various ways that ruling-class institutions shape culture and knowledge production more generally?

GR: There is such a cultural mystique around the CIA, as well as a dearth of knowledge concerning it, that it is difficult to have sober, scientific

discussions regarding its history. As soon as the CIA is mentioned, many assume that we are suddenly in a qualitatively distinct realm of conspiratorial thinking where the rigor of one's analyses magically disappears into a confused world of smoke and mirrors. My approach rejects these ideologically conditioned reflexes in favor of a historical materialist analysis of the social totality that examines the entire institutional framework of ideological production. It also refuses to follow bourgeois ideology in assuming that the state and the private sector or civil society are separate spheres that operate more or less autonomously.

Much of my work seeks to further develop, in the contemporary era, Marx's analysis of the superstructure. In a famous passage, he described the superstructure as being composed of a politico-legal element to which correspond "definite forms of social consciousness," both of which are rooted in the capitalist economic base.¹⁵ As can be clearly seen from our historical vantage point, the capitalist world has developed an entire framework for the production, circulation, and consumption of culture. This bourgeois cultural apparatus, as a key but undertheorized component of the superstructure, is what materially forges social consciousness. The analysis of this apparatus allows us to better understand how ideology is materially produced, why it is so ubiquitous and homogenous, and the concrete ways in which ideological subjects are composed. Many different forces have been operative in the development of this apparatus, including elements of the bourgeois state and non-governmental organizations (the CIA, but also the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the State Department, the Psychological Strategy Board, the U.S. Information Agency, the National Endowment for Democracy, and many other organizations), private security and public relations firms, the capitalist ruling class, and the major corporations involved in education, publishing, news and information, and other aspects of cultural production and dissemination. The CIA is thus but one powerful state organization that has been deeply involved with the bourgeois cultural apparatus, regularly collaborating, overtly or covertly, with these other actors.¹⁶ If it was or was not involved in a particular activity or event, this does not magically change its nature. Other state or private agencies, ruling-class entities, or corporations can serve the same purposes because they are all playing on the same—pro-capitalist, anticommunist—team. In conclusion, then, you are absolutely right: the

CIA's intervention into the world of culture, which has been much more expansive than most people think, is only the material proof of the way in which the capitalist class, through its state, fashions and controls culture so that it serves its interests.

JPL: Aymeric, in a talk you gave at the Critical Theory Workshop's Summer School in July 2023 you noted that the intellectual roots of much of French Theory—including the versions that are cast as “radical” and leftist—can be found in anti-humanist thinkers like Heidegger and Nietzsche, whose politics were, in fact, deeply reactionary.¹⁷ Relatedly, you addressed French Theory's embrace of an irrationalist philosophical orientation, which György Lukács famously critiqued, and you also noted John Bellamy Foster's recent writing on this topic. I know you have written at length on these issues in your book *The Poverty of Left Nietzscheanism* (forthcoming in the Studies in AIM series with Brill and Iskra Books). Could you map out the intellectual traditions that French Theory draws upon and help us understand the political-ideological orientation of these traditions?

AM: Yes, there has been a French particularism since the post–Second World War period, which is the left's valorization of Nietzsche and Heidegger through a truncated reception, an eclectic reading, with, at the end of the day, a form of political manipulation. Hence the fact that “left-wing Nietzscheanism” and “left-wing Heideggerianism” constitute two veritable pillars of French Theory. It's also a kind of metaphor for all the ambiguity of this so-called French Theory, presented as revolutionary but in fact profoundly anti-Marxist. Even if comparison is not reason, let's not forget that fascism, in the same way, presented itself as *both* revolutionary and anti-Marxist.

These truncated readings are in any case impossible in Germany, simply because access to the works of these thinkers is in the text itself and not through euphemistic translations. Just read Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity*, for example, to understand that, to a German ear, Heidegger renders music that is quite *Germania triumphans*, as could be said of certain interpretations of Wagner. And everything that has been published since,

from the Rector's address to the *Black Notebooks*, has only confirmed this impression.

To acclimate Nietzsche and Heidegger to postwar France could only be done with a minimal claim, a form of dandyism clearly displaying indifference to political content. Then, very quickly, from this fairly banal posture, we move on to formalist arguments, such as the glorification of the aphorism as a method. Finally, a systematization transforms things into a rejection of Hegelianism, hence Deleuze's essay *Nietzsche and Philosophy* and what he calls "the production of concepts" in a deliberately affirmative sense, in short the will to power versus dialectics ("We no longer believe in the dull gray outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off their rough edges," he would later say in *Anti-Oedipus*).¹⁸ I am thinking of his vitalist philosophy of immanence, which owes much to Bergson. And yet here we are well before his encounter with Guattari, anti-Oedipus, desiring machines. It is true that Deleuze was to radicalize his positions in the 1970s, but all this had been prepared for long before, by anti-Marxism. There is reason to wonder whether this Deleuzian voluntarism, by rejecting the patience of the Hegelian concept—Hegel's intention was to "renounce personal incursions into the immanent rhythm of the concept"—does not in itself carry with it an aristocratic vision of the world, akin to Schelling's intellectual intuition, reserved for an elite, whereas Hegel, in an approach that profoundly links rationalism to democracy, accepts only science as the path to knowledge.

As for Derrida, his relationship with Nietzsche can be summed up by the following judgment: "Nietzsche said everything and its opposite." This was a way of saying that the political question was of little interest to him, even though he could devote an entire chapter of his book *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* to a note in which the German thinker declares: "I've lost my umbrella." This is a philosophical position that is embraced: eclecticism. However, the fact that Nietzsche said everything and its opposite is by no means obvious. On the question of his opposition to socialism, for example, Nietzsche has always shown undeniable consistency, right from the Paris Commune, which for him meant the ruin of civilization.

As for Foucault, the Heideggero-Nietzschean influence can easily be seen in his anti-humanism, the death of man, the reduction of epistemology to genealogy and Nietzschean infinite interpretation, which counteracts the role of the economy in the last instance. Foucault proposed an archaeology of knowledge in which the “epistemes” succeeded one another without any prior material foundation, social groups being merely the passive supports of this history of knowledge. This amounted to perfectly assuming discontinuity, based on the pretext of rejecting the dialectical method. As for Claude Lévi-Strauss, he fantasizes about what he calls “societies without history,” even though these are, of course, subject to the historical process just like any other. This naturalization of the human sciences is in conscious conflict with the Marxian adage that “we know only one science, that of history.”¹⁹

In the end, infinite interpretation and anti-historicism give way to a single injunction, brutal in the extreme: “You must become what you are.” This Nietzschean adage is the bible of identitarianism. At the end of the chain, I see these identity movements inspired by French Theory, which start from anti-racism, which is obviously laudable, but end up only claiming identity, instead of dialecticizing it, and I say to myself that we don’t have fascism in its entirety, but one part of fascism: the division of the working people into conflicting entities. Michel Clouscard rightly said, “Capitalism will bring civil war to the poor.”

I think we can understand better why French Theory was promoted in the United States by propagandists who saw its reactionary potential much better than the theory’s promoters. The underlying idea, for those who understand what is at stake, is to rehabilitate nothing less than part of the reactionary software. Clouscard has spoken of “neo-fascism and the ideology of desire.” If we don’t use these categories, we can’t understand what happened, we’re just skimming the surface. That’s why I was struck by John Bellamy Foster’s recent article in *Monthly Review* against part of French Theory, which analyzed the problem very well and put it into a U.S.-American context. Above all, I was pleased to see that he too went back to the roots of German irrationalism, drawing on the Lukács of *The Destruction of Reason*, to explain what happened in France after the war and right up to the present day. I’ll quote a passage from it, which reveals

the importance of French Theory in this new “destruction of reason,” in which the central element is no longer German but French:

In this dangerous and destructive climate of late imperialism, irrationalism has come to play a growing role in the constellation of thought. This initially took the relatively mild form of a deconstructive postmodernism and poststructuralism, which, in the work of thinkers like Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, cast aside all grand historical narratives while embracing a philosophical anti-humanism emanating principally from Heidegger. In contrast, today’s new *philosophies of immanence*—associated with posthumanism, vitalistic new materialism, actor-network theory, and object-oriented ontology—constitute a deeper irrationalism, represented by such putatively left figures as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton. These thinkers draw directly upon an irrationalist, antimodernist intellectual lineage going back to the reactionary antimodernism of Nietzsche, Bergson, and Heidegger. Lacanian-Hegelian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has ultimately taken sides with the antihumanist tradition stemming from left-Heideggerianism, generating in his work a carnival of irrationalism. All of these various tendencies are coupled with skepticism, nihilism, and a pessimistic, end-of-the-world outlook.²⁰

JPL: Gabriel, is there anything you would like to add regarding the intellectual traditions that serve as the principal resources for French Theory and how they relate to its political orientation?

GR: I couldn’t agree more with Aymeric regarding the foundational role of a radical aristocrat (Nietzsche) and an unrepentant Nazi (Heidegger) in the development of French Theory, as well as the fact that they have both served as theoretical weapons against Marxism. It should not have been surprising when it was revealed in 1988 that Derrida’s close friend and partner in deconstructive crime, Paul de Man, was a Nazi collaborator who had aspired to become a “‘minister of culture’ in the embassies of the pan-European German Reich.”²¹ After all, this was one of his—and their—

privileged traditions of thought. Is it really that shocking that there would be a concrete relationship between theory and practice?

Since Aymeric only touched on it in passing, I would like to further insist on the anti-dialectical orientation of French Theory. In *Difference and Repetition* (1968), Deleuze characterized “the air of the times” in France as a “generalized anti-Hegelianism.”²² Interpreted as a thinker of the totality who reduced difference to sameness, Hegel served as one of the principal theoretical enemies of French Theory. Some even suggested that he was the intellectual progenitor of the Holocaust and so-called totalitarianism more generally. The equation is scandalously simplistic and crassly idealist: since Hegel thought in totalizing terms and purportedly rejected difference, he laid the intellectual foundations for totalitarianism. It is here that we see, moreover, that Hegel has largely been a theoretical stand-in for Marx, and anti-Hegelianism has served as a shibboleth for French Theory’s generalized anti-Marxism.

Although individual French theorists are compelled to market their products as radically different, their theoretical practice is remarkably consistent. Their rejection of dialectics, based on a clear misunderstanding of it as a purported logic of sameness, means that they openly indulge in pre-Marxist and pre-Hegelian forms of thought. One core aspect of dialectics, after all, is that *everything* is a product of history, which means that it has been made and can therefore potentially be remade. This does not imply, however, that *anything* can happen and that there is no structure or logic to historical change. On the contrary, whatever happens is necessarily conditioned by the immediate material circumstances.

We can see here that dialectics preempts what is arguably the major conceptual polarization that undergirds so many of the specific theoretical maneuvers of the French theorists. Although they use their own idiosyncratic conceptual vocabularies, for heuristic purposes we can refer to the two poles as structure and event. If it be between different thinkers or within a single corpus, there is a tendency to assume a non-dialectical relationship between the two: *either* everything is structured according to stable and fixed categories that cannot be changed *or* something miraculous happens that introduces an unprecedented transformation. This is quite obvious, for instance, in the case of Foucault’s epistemes (structure) and the discontinuous ruptures separating them (events). The same basic anti-

dialectical polarization also characterizes Alain Badiou's ontology, however, as well as Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of the police (structure) and politics (event), even though there are, of course, certain differences between all three thinkers. Many of the theorists invested in a discourse of irresolvable paradoxes and double binds erect absolutist structures that cannot be overcome or can only be surpassed via seemingly miraculous occurrences or inventions, as in Lyotard's differend, which was recycled and slightly modified by Rancière in *Disagreement*.

Since I am summing up an expansive body of work in broad strokes in order to reveal a fundamental pattern, and readers might wonder what this looks like in the details, allow me to briefly unpack one example. In Derrida's later work, he enumerated a series of aporias having to do with the gift, hospitality, forgiveness, and so on. In every case, he began by postulating an essentialist definition of each of these terms, as if they had no real history and operated in a purely semantic realm independent of the pragmatic use of language (even if he sometimes marshaled eclectic examples in a superficial attempt to confirm the essential meanings he postulated). These structural definitions were attributed to the ever-nebulous—and profoundly metaphysical—category that Heidegger called “Western metaphysics.” Once this logocentric and essentialist definition was in place and the entire realm of practice was bracketed, then Derrida could proceed to deconstruct it by demonstrating that there is an irreducible aporia that plagues the internal logic of each concept. It is of the utmost importance that this aporia not be understood as a contradiction in the Hegelian or Marxist sense, because then there could be a process by which it would be overcome. Instead, Derrida insisted on the impossibility of moving beyond it, thereby fixing dialectics at a standstill.

Consider his idealist and ahistorical account of forgiveness: “The pardon, if there is one, must and can only pardon the unpardonable, the inexpiable—and thus do the impossible. To pardon the pardonable, the venial, the excusable, which one can always pardon, is not pardoning.”²³ In Marxist terms, this aporia is simply the consequence of remaining trapped in what Engels referred to as metaphysics, in which it is presumed that there are fixed categories and static concepts. In actual practice and real history, it is of course possible for the unpardonable to become pardonable over time through real material changes in the circumstances. This dialectical

approach, or what Hegel called the use of reason rather than the understanding, is, however, condemned by Derrida because it does not maintain the absolutist nature of the unmodifiable structure of “the pardon,” and thus the hyperbolic ethical appeal to do the impossible (a miraculous event). We clearly see here, moreover, an example of what Aymeric brilliantly diagnosed as the predilection of a certain tradition of French thought for pre-dialectical Kantianism, notably by accepting the fundamental antinomy between phenomena and noumena, or knowledge and morality: forgiveness seems logically impossible (knowledge), but it nevertheless imposes itself as absolutely necessary (morality).

Derrida thus presents his “hyperbolic ethics” as truly radical because it has the distinction of ordering one to pardon in cases “where it is neither requested nor deserved, and even for the worst form of radical evil.”²⁴ He wrote these lines in a context where he had just discussed Vladimir Jankélévitch’s claim that “the pardon died in the death camps,” which Derrida dismissed à la Heidegger as a banal journalistic understanding of forgiveness.²⁵ In practical terms, then, this is the payoff for an idealist hyperbolic ethics: one is compelled to pardon Nazi war crimes and the Holocaust, even if this seems impossible. This is indeed fitting for a close personal friend of Paul de Man who had played a central role in rehabilitating Heidegger as a great philosopher after his extensive collaboration with the Nazis. Not only, then, is the rejection of dialectics intellectually regressive, it is also ethically and politically so.

AM: I completely agree with you about French Theory’s difficulty in articulating structure and event. This is the case from structuralism to the present day, with Badiou, who accentuates this hiatus. An event, for Badiou, is something that escapes the mathematical and ontological regularity of structures. With Badiou, the subject is rare, “improbable” even; the subject is in a sense constrained by an event over which he or she has no control.²⁶ In his own words: “I postulate a radical autonomy of the category of subject. I don’t believe in the idea of a field of dialectical homogeneity between being and subject. The subject is a singular, exceptional, improbable process, undoubtedly linked to very particular worldly conditions, but which had no kind of necessity. I accept this hiatus between the order of being, which can only be represented in the figure of

mathematical formalism, and the order of the procedure of truth, which is subjective.”²⁷ In a way, then, there is a heroization of the subject, who becomes himself only in fidelity to the event in order to develop his own truth procedures.

For example, what is valorized is the figure of the mathematician Jean Cavaillès, “a Resistance fighter by logic” as philosopher Georges Canguilhem said, to the detriment of collective subjects such as the role of the Communists in the Resistance. This brings us back to Sartre’s way of interpreting the Resistance, which I mentioned at the beginning, as a sudden act, unprepared beforehand, the expression of a possibility of freedom that it would only be necessary to know how to seize. Obviously, the weight of communism in the Resistance could, materially, be explained by habits of struggle acquired much earlier, networks, a capacity for organization favored by the Bolshevik mode of action, but it is, contrary to this type of analysis, always the discontinuous that is favored.

In terms of political prescription, this leads to caricatures à la Žižek, who declares: “I agree with my friend Alain Badiou, who characterized the failure of communism as an obscure disaster. It’s not a question of rehabilitating the communism of the twentieth century, it’s a question of starting at ground zero, of rethinking everything, anew.”²⁸

And Hegel, who could avoid the aporias of this kind of tabula rasa, must be eliminated, or else he will be reinterpreted by Žižek in a burlesque and purely formal way, but not in a materialist manner.

There are precedents for this complementary attitude of rejecting and paying tribute to Hegelianism in a roundabout way. “Today, Hegel is dead,” Carl Schmitt exclaimed with joy the day Hitler came to power. The French theorists, albeit in a completely different context, have said no more than “Hegel is dead,” if indeed Hegel had really begun to live in France, a country which, because of its anti-Germanism, did not have the theoretical wealth of the Italy of Antonio Labriola and Benedetto Croce, and later Domenico Losurdo. Italy, moreover, is a country where, *a contrario*, Hegel had become so inescapable that fascists like Giovanni Gentile felt obliged to put forward a right-wing Hegel, a bit like Heidegger would reply to Carl Schmitt that it was precisely now (with the Third Reich) that Hegel would begin to live. It’s really quite something for a philosopher who never ceased

to stress the importance of the French Revolution, the “bête noire” of the Nazis.

And Gabriel is right, the “death of Hegel” was anti-Marxist. I also note that this strategy is quite plastic and that after the war, when Marx had become inescapable, it was also a question of de-Hegelianizing Marx, to the point of making him unrecognizable. Hence the height of Althusserianism, the “Marxist” side of French Theory, which goes so far as to eliminate the dialectical core of the author of *Capital*. For example, by putting forward Spinozism, for which the soul is the product of a body, a great advance, but for which the body is not yet a product of history, since it will take Hegel to understand it. Althusser will trace the Marx after the epistemological break with Hegel, which is merely the mirror image of the attempt, a few years earlier, to impose a return to the “young Marx,” that of the 1844 *Manuscripts* and “human nature.” Today the rejection of the dialectics of nature, by separating Marx from Engels, who has been hastily labelled a philosophical simpleton, especially by those who have not practiced epistemology enough, works very well and has even become the hallmark of Western Marxism.

One of the practical effects of this Zeitgeist, marked by the hegemony of French Theory, has been the defanging of Marxism, which has taken place in various ways, for example when Marxism begins to be abandoned in its own field of knowledge. Let me explain: the Marxist physicist will not concretely defend the dialectics of nature but will say that Marxism is valid in the human sciences. The economist will not defend the downward trend in the rate of profit but will praise historical writings, and so on. In short, we end up with a Marx whose ingredients you choose at the supermarket, as it were—Marx in kit form. Derrida could, for example, agree with Lucien Sève when the latter had to tell him that Marx had spoken out against the death penalty—at a time when Derrida was working on the subject!—which obviously didn’t fit in with the totalitarian image he was still being portrayed as having. It never hurts to acknowledge the merits of an opponent whose internal coherence you obviously refuse to analyze or even cut into pieces.

All this, I must add, could not have happened without a form of resignation on the part of the Marxists themselves. Let me explain: you have to understand that the Lysenko affair, in the 1950s, and even if the

French Communist Party had not been the most shameful (compare the very sensible reaction of the Party biologist Marcel Prenant), triggered a crisis of meaning in Marxism in the West.²⁹ It was precisely at this point that we withdrew into the human sciences and stopped saying that Marxism was a general philosophy, namely dialectical and historical materialism. Marx remained more or less valid, in the consciousness of the time, in the field of social conflict, science being left to the specialists. It is nevertheless an asylum of ignorance, because it has allowed a fragmentation of knowledge, which is always a form of resignation in the face of philosophical demands, a headlong rush into hollow erudition at the cost of non-thinking. We therefore need to rethink the question of the dialectics of nature and dialectical and historical materialism. There can be no philosophical approach that is fragmented or that does not strive for unity, otherwise it will lose its coherence.

GR: I am in full agreement regarding the importance of a unified, scientific approach to social history and the natural world. It is worth considering for a moment the real-world consequences of the fetishization of fragmentation, one of the many anti-dialectical tendencies in French Theory. Is it really the case, in any endeavor, that the lack of a unified understanding is more advantageous, or has some kind of epistemological or practical superiority? I certainly would not want to board a plane with a pilot who had fragmentary knowledge regarding how to fly, nor would I want to get operated on by a surgeon who only knew a few bits of the procedure to be performed. Perhaps if some of the French theorists had put these principles into practice there would be fewer of them around to contend with.

A dialectical approach seeks to understand how everything is not only in process, as we discussed earlier, but it is also connected in an interrelated totality. It is of the utmost importance, in this regard, that human beings are part of the natural world, and the severing of human history from the dialectics of nature makes no sense, particularly in a conjuncture where a socioeconomic mode of production produced by human beings is rapidly destroying the biosphere, and thus the conditions of possibility for human existence. Georges Gastaud's work on this front is extremely important.³⁰

When French theorists like Rancière, or followers of French Theory such as Žižek, use dialectics, we need to be clear about what they are doing. Far from being a materialist dialectic and a concrete method of analysis, or even a rigorous process of reflection, dialectics is turned into a purely formal tool and a rhetorical stratagem. Assertions are thus constantly overturned, in a dizzying display of discursive acrobatics, sometimes—as in the case of Žižek—to say everything and its opposite.³¹ This pseudo-dialectics goes around in circles, reducing the conceptual rigor and materialist orientation of dialectics to a mere language game used to produce texts of the most superficial sophistication, and to pump them out ad infinitum, as one can always go on by proclaiming, à la Žižek, “And what if it were precisely the opposite (of what I just asserted)?!” French Theory’s vertiginous pseudo-dialectic leads precisely nowhere, and that’s its main objective: to reduce everything to the text of the thinker in question in an opportunistic and self-aggrandizing self-referencing that suggests that the latter has thought of everything (and its opposite!).

* * *

JPL: While, as you both have made clear, French Theory has its roots in reactionary intellectual traditions, it nonetheless is historicized and marketed in ways that associate it with left-wing politics. In this vein, it is often explicitly associated with the movements of May 1968, in what you, Gabriel, have referred to as an instance of historical commodity fetishism.³² What do you both make of the association of French Theory with ’68 and with movements of the left?

AM: In our collective imagination, the term “May 68” maintains a profound disjunction between sign and meaning. Despite the ten million strikers (the biggest strike in French history) and the 35 percent increase in the minimum wage, the outcome of May ’68 was, unfortunately, also the defeat or, at the very least, the retreat of the two forces of resistance, Gaullism and communism, with the deleterious consequences we all know: France would sink ever deeper into subservience to the Atlantic Pact and what was to become the European Union, with the attendant loss of sovereignty, massive deindustrialization, and an exit from history.

You can't expect me to believe that this change was simply part of the time and the order of things and that there had been a "spontaneous generation" of new political forces in France that would have replaced the forces of resistance as if nothing had happened. Nothing springs from nothing. Giscard's betrayal of de Gaulle meant the return of the so-called Orléanist Right (in reference to the July Monarchy), the one most closely linked to the business world and most compromised with the collaboration of the Pétainists. The rise of Mitterrand and his ousting of the Communist Party within the left was the rise of a shady character. We know that Mitterrand was the brother-in-law of Eugène Deloncle, the leader of the Cagoule, the terrorist organization of employers who collaborated with the Nazis. André Malraux, a leftist who became De Gaulle's Minister of Culture, rightly said of Mitterrand: "You speak of Fleurus [the great victory of the French Revolution], you who were not even in Spain [unlike him, Malraux]." ³³ The amnesty granted to the putschist generals in Algeria after Mitterrand's election was just one symptom of a man from the left coming to power from the right.

It's true that in 1968, the CGT, the largest trade union in France and strongly linked to the Communist Party, was said to have "jumped on the bandwagon." It was said in a pejorative way, but I think they simply took advantage of the unrest to strengthen the workers' camp for the future. This was the content of the Grenelle Agreements, which were not signed because the CGT was hoping to get more but realized that bourgeois power had reached a deadlock.

This workers' strategy was legitimate. We can gossip endlessly, and leftists will always tell you that the Paris Commune had to be remade, because the Commune remains a romantic myth, and it doesn't matter that it failed and that its suppression left the French workers' movement so bled out that before the 1914 war, it was no longer France that revolutionaries were looking to, but Germany.

The French Communist Party concluded that there was not a revolutionary situation in France. This attitude could be described as pusillanimous. Nevertheless, a sober analysis of the situation would show that, even in Portugal, where there had been a genuine revolution in 1974, we would see a genuine movement stemming from the end of Portuguese colonialism thwarted by NATO, with a Portuguese Socialist Party

completely absent from the struggles against Salazarism. In fact, the party was created from scratch in the Federal Republic of Germany, but it won the day at home, to the detriment of the Communist Party, which had led the internal struggle against fascism for fifty years. This is proof, in my opinion, that the Cold War did not allow a way out of capitalism in Europe *at that time* (the situation has changed since then, in my opinion), even if, *elsewhere*, Cuba's role in Africa shows that room for maneuver was possible on other fronts.

So what we saw in '68 was first and foremost a revolt, starting on the campuses, but not a revolution. You know that this conceptual distinction is part of the French imagination, in the sense that in 1789 Louis XVI is said to have asked "Is this a revolt?" "No, Sire, it's a revolution," was the reply.

To make the connection with what we are saying about the link between structuralism and May '68, we know about the tug-of-war between the man who saw '68 as a revolution, Lucien Goldmann, and Jacques Lacan, who saw it more as a revolt. At the height of '68, Goldmann said, "Structures do not take to the streets," to show that the revolutionary event was destroying the conceptual framework that had been structuralism and in which Lacan had, of course, participated. Goldmann had fought a subtle battle, even though he was taking a step backwards in a form of anthropologization of Marxism, by introducing the term "genetic structuralism," a kind of compromise that made it possible to reintroduce Marxist dialectics into the structuralist framework, a concept that Pierre Bourdieu robbed from Goldmann without paying tribute to him. And Goldmann must have been delighted to finally see the end of a "process without a subject," to use Althusser's well-known expression.

Jacques Lacan, who was a conservative but anything but an imbecile, quipped: "May '68 is proof, precisely, that structures take to the streets." This is certainly not a true political analysis, but I don't think we can deny Lacan's ability to read symptoms, symptoms linked to structural effects and not events that make a hole in the real. So, yes, the children of the baby boom, the Marshall Plan surpluses, all of this contributes to a revolt of the youth, which is only ever a revolt and not a revolution. And precisely as such, it was a structural effect. It was a revolution in morals, but one that was the order of the day in all Western societies, with or without a "revolution," and in most cases it was obviously a good thing, contributing

in concrete terms to the liberation of women that had already begun in other areas in the twentieth century, thanks in large part to the Communists.

In this context, the society that emerged from May, with its undeniable social and societal advances but no prospect of a transition to socialism, can in reality only be based on a compromise. Michel Clouscard summed things up masterfully in 1972 in his book *Néo-fascisme et idéologie du désir* [Neo-fascism and the Ideology of Desire]: “Everything is allowed, but nothing is possible [*tout est permis mais rien n’est possible*].”³⁴ Since ’68, there has been an almost total permissiveness toward the consumer, but this is always to the detriment of the producer, because we obviously consume what someone else has produced, unless we deny production by passing off desire as the creator. Clouscard calls this state of social conflict “capitalism of seduction” or “libertarian liberalism.” In a sense, this compromise has triumphed so well that it is currently being carried forward by President Macron, who is “neither of the right nor of the left” because he is precisely the product of this “libertarian liberal” compromise, permissive for some who consume and always ruthless for those who work, when they are still lucky enough to have a job. Of course, capitalism does not rule out a structural crisis. Macron calls this the “at the same time,” a sort of subjectivist dialectical mantra for the exclusive use of his class.

This is how I would sum up the contradiction to which French theorists were subjected at the time: confronted in 1968 with an evolution in the mode of production rather than a revolution in its foundations, they would resort only to the formalist opposition we have already pointed out between structure and event, between the “practico-inert” as Sartre would say, and the mystique of the *Grand Soir* [Big Night]. In so doing, they engage in praise for an imaginary revolution. But we can’t do without Marx: whatever the national characteristics, there are universal conditions for the transition to socialism. Marx called these “despotic incursions into property rights,” and as far as I know, this never happened in France in ’68.

GR: The association between French Theory and progressive politics is a category mistake at multiple levels. To begin with, the rise of structuralism in France accompanied the country’s postwar capitalist development and its gradual integration, via the Marshall Plan and other transatlantic projects, into the U.S. sphere of influence. As France modernized its economy, it

proceeded to develop technocratic forms of social scientific analysis that sought to study, manage, and control the new social, political, economic, and historical dynamics (while rejecting Marxist accounts thereof). The United States supported these endeavors, and its capitalist ruling class provided funding for non-Marxist institutions and research.

As mentioned above, the EPHE and the EHESS both played major institutional roles and were bastions for the structuralists, as well as for the Annales School of historiography. The latter, for those unfamiliar with it, had a reputation for insisting on long-term social history, taking into account the spatial dimension of history, mobilizing social-scientific research methods in service of a transdisciplinary project, focusing primarily on large-scale socioeconomic factors rather than political struggles, and—particularly beginning with the second generation—expressing reservations regarding Marxist historiography. Historians of the Annales School like François Dosse situate Foucault's work as a continuation of its basic orientation, so it segued in important ways with what was widely described as structuralism.³⁵ The Annales School was, moreover, strongly supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. This meant that the leaders of the second generation of this school—particularly Fernand Braudel—strived to walk a fine line by more or less abiding by the anticommunist dictates of their benefactors and the intelligence services of the U.S. State Department, which kept an eye on these activities, while endeavoring to maintain a reputation for open-minded scholarship that was not besmirched by their public affiliation with U.S. intellectual imperialism.³⁶ It is revealing in this regard that a very close ally of the major foundations, the CIA, drew the following conclusion regarding structuralism and the Annales School in a 1985 research paper: “We believe their critical demolition of Marxist influence in the social sciences is likely to endure as a profound contribution to modern scholarship.”³⁷

Marxists like Lucien Sève and Henri Lefebvre, as well as libertarian socialists like Cornelius Castoriadis, understood that structuralism in France was an ideology intertwined with the country's process of capitalist modernization, which further bureaucratized society, submerged the population in a universe of consumerist manipulation, and subjected it to the directives of a managerial technocracy. According to Lefebvre, human beings increasingly found themselves in a world that they seemed incapable

of mastering, as powerful bureaucratic institutions subdued their agency and historical change appeared to dissipate in the face of omnipotent systems of techno-scientific control. In a partial summary of Lefebvre's position, Kristin Ross wrote:

Instead of analyzing (much less proposing a direction for transforming) that society, structuralism served as an underlying ideology *justifying* the devaluation of humans under capitalist modernization. Rather than theorizing the liquidation of the historical, structuralism enacted and legitimated that liquidation. After all, structuralism's concern was the ordering of objects, not the criticism of their function. The idea that society was composed of agentless structures helped reinforce people's growing sense that the future was not in their control, or that it would play itself out as a kind of slow petrification, that their life was defined by lifeless, meaningless, and unchanging bureaucratic structures ruled by no one.^{[38](#)}

With the postwar demographic boom and the explosion of the student population, as well as the rapid expansion of consumer society and the mass media, structuralism was popularized within the new petty-bourgeois class stratum. The structuralists' critical devaluation of human beings ("man" or "the subject"), agency, history, and dialectics—which are of course all integral to Marxism's understanding of history being driven by class struggle—reflected in more ways than one the juggernaut of a highly bureaucratized and dehumanized society controlled by anonymous technocrats. To be clear, this does not mean that all of the structuralists took the exact same intellectual positions (or that there were no major class struggles within France). On the contrary, the very nature of their theoretical practice, as competitive individuals promoting their particular brands, required disagreements. However, these generally took place within the same ideological field, and their work thus tended to abide by a shared set of ideological coordinates. Individual cases that appear to contradict this trend, like that of Althusser, would require extensive analysis to reveal how he at least partially operated within the same coordinates, even if some of his work pushed in a different direction.

Given its increasing prominence in France, as well as its promotion in the United States beginning in 1966, many academics have assumed that there was some kind of causal relationship between structuralism and the uprisings of 1968. Furthermore, since the French theorists were marketed as iconoclastic masters of suspicion, it has often been presumed that they were radicals who questioned all forms of power and knowledge, purportedly like the students who had stormed and occupied the Sorbonne. However, given the structuralists' rejection of dialectics and class struggle, some in France at the time asserted that the events of May–June actually marked the end of this intellectual fad. In November 1968, the mainstream newspaper *Le Monde* even published a report that asked: “Was Structuralism Killed by the May Movement?” To be sure, the leading luminaries of structuralism, as I have argued in a detailed article on the subject, were dismissive of the historic workers' mobilization, skeptical of the student movement, and generally withdrew and were disconnected from the events, which they sometimes publicly spurned.³⁹

Foucault is highly representative since he actually served on the governmental commission that enacted the Fouchet counter-reforms, which are widely recognized as one of the principal sparks that set off the student movement. He did not get involved or express any public support for the mobilizations.⁴⁰ In their wake, however, he quickly reinvented himself, not unlike some of his fellow French theorists, as a purported radical who was now on the right side of the barricades. His post-factum leap to the other side was short-lived, however. As his career advanced, both in France and internationally, he gradually returned to his aggressive anticommunism, demonstrating the close connection between social ascension within the capitalist world and right-wing opportunism.

Since the work of the French theorists was marketed as radical, new, and unorthodox in the United States and the larger Anglophone world, this historical reality was of little import. Affiliating French Theory with the uprisings of 1968, and particularly the petty-bourgeois radicalism of the student movement, branded it with a highly marketable image of chic iconoclasm. It was thereby subjected to a process of historical commodity fetishism by which the actual social relations operative in 1968 disappeared behind a commodifiable aura of radicality. This carried over as French Theory came to be mobilized in an attempt to provide intellectual

credibility and sophistication to neoliberal identity politics in the ensuing decades.

Identity politics, a recent iteration of bourgeois ideology's essentialism and individualism, strives to naturalize socioeconomic relations that are the results of the material history of capitalism, thereby reifying categories of existence that have varied over time and been important sites of collective class struggles. If it is presented in the imperial core as a robust form of progressive politics, this is because it is not only anti-Marxist, but it also serves to divide and conquer the global working class by driving it to identify with individualized and naturalized constituencies over and against class solidarity (though it is important to note that identity politics was nonetheless the result, via elite capture, of class struggle from below and marks an advance in relation to, for instance, white supremacy).

French Theory has been used to try to give a patina of sophistication to identity politics. "Frog fog," as it is sometimes called, has openly indulged in an anti-totalitarian politics that generally affiliates communism with fascism insofar as they both purportedly reject difference in favor of totalizing forms of identity and sameness. French Theory's über-sophisticated fetishization of difference, which mirrors the consumerist cult of difference in contemporary capitalism, has thus been widely mobilized to try to give an aura of refinement, erudition, novelty, and even radicality to identity politics, which is ultimately an imperialist politics very much rooted in a class project, namely that of the imperialist ruling class. The idealist cult of abstract conceptualizations of difference in French Theory, like the symbolic and gestural celebrations of difference in identity politics, rejoices in the individualizing free play of differentiation—affiliated with the freedom of free-market capitalism—as opposed to the supposedly leveling and totalizing politics of socioeconomic transformation (associated with communism). Frog fog's incessant and repetitive valorization of difference, heterogeneity, alterity, multiplicity, singularity, and so forth over and against identity, homogeneity, sameness, unity, totality, and so on can thus be understood as a highly intellectualized metaphor for the Cold War.

In summary, the affiliation between French Theory and progressive politics is misguided for a number of reasons. This tradition of thought has generally been anticommunist, and it has been supported by the imperial ruling class and its state managers. It largely emerged, moreover, as an

ideological reflection of a modernized, bureaucratic, inhumane, capitalist control society, and its anti-dialectical rejection of class struggle clearly resonated with segments of the new petty-bourgeois class stratum. Unsurprisingly, French Theory has usually been dismissive of and disconnected from major class struggles like the 1968 workers' mobilization. It has also openly indulged in the primacy of theory and a conceptual Cold War in which the free play of difference bedevils the totalitarian thinking of Marxism, meaning the attempt to understand and transform the social totality. Finally, French Theory has been mobilized to dress up the imperial ideology of identity politics with French finesse. In all these ways, it should not be understood as a truly progressive political force in the world.

JPL: Aymeric, is there anything that you would like to add to Gabriel's description of the politics of French Theory? Since you have written poignantly on Michel Clouscard's critiques of the petty-bourgeois class stratum and its preoccupation with the societal (*le sociétal*) at the expense of the social (*le social*), perhaps you could elucidate this distinction and the light that it sheds on French Theory's political orientation?

AM: I think Gabriel and I might have a few differences in our perception of May '68, in the sense that I'd be more inclined to see in it the seeds of an "Orange Revolution" before its time, designed to topple de Gaulle, but also to get rid of the pro-Soviet French Communist Party. I think this is understandable if you look at the long-term relationship between the United States and General de Gaulle.

From the outset, President Roosevelt, working with René de Chambrun, a military attaché in Washington and the son-in-law of Pierre Laval, Philippe Pétain's prime minister, hated de Gaulle and did not recognize his legitimacy. Roosevelt went so far as to choose as his French representative Admiral Darlan, Pétain's designated successor (!), until he was assassinated in Algiers, and then General Giraud, another pro-Vichy general who compromised himself by declaring to the United States that not everything was bad with National Socialism. I won't go back over the AMGOT affair and the attempt to impose on France, an allied country, the conditions for occupying an enemy country, as I've already mentioned.

Nevertheless, de Gaulle obtained the support of the United States at two decisive moments, in order to counter a Communist threat that Washington considered to be worse than anything else: in August 1944, when U.S.-American troops organized a show of force in Paris on the 28th, and in 1958, when his return to power was facilitated in the midst of the Algerian crisis, U.S.-American intermediaries asked Guy Mollet's SFIO (the social-democratic party) to support this maneuver. After that, everything was done to destabilize de Gaulle, including support for the Front de libération nationale (FLN) and then support for the Organisation armée secrète (OAS).

During the period from the end of the Algerian War in 1962 to 1968, it seems eminently plausible that de Gaulle's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command, and his subsequent anti-imperialist speeches in Phnom Penh and Quebec, not to mention his demand that the dollar be converted into gold, were not going to reconcile him with the U.S.-American leaders. Let me be clear: my praise of de Gaulle's policies is primarily dialectical, and I am not unaware of the importance of his anticommunism, but it is clear that the General embodied the French bourgeoisie's desire for national independence before it chose to become comprador. To sum things up: for the U.S.-American leaders, de Gaulle was always preferable to the Communists, but apart from the Communists, nothing was worse than de Gaulle. In fact, Gaullism was like Bonapartism, a compromise between monarchical reaction on the one hand and the Jacobins on the other, which could only last with a personal policy. Someone like de Gaulle, who was certainly not lacking in character, was only made possible because there was a strong Communist Party acting as a counterweight, preventing the systematic policy of support for ex-fascists by the United States, from Spain to West Germany. From this point of view, I think that Gaullism was an eminently transitory phenomenon, which will not return. The only current conditions for preserving my country's national independence are now solely the transition to socialism.

As far as I know, there is no proof of the direct involvement of the U.S.-American services in the attempt to destabilize Gaullism in 1968, but I don't see why this would have been an exception. For the time being, we must confine ourselves to conjecture. De Gaulle's grandson, Yves de Gaulle, for example, said in the documentary *De Gaulle, un homme à*

abattre (broadcast by La chaîne parlementaire) that de Gaulle considered Jacques Sauvageot, one of the three main student leaders of May '68, to be a CIA agent. There has been no confirmation of this, but I would nevertheless point out, for the record, that another of the three leaders, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, had, from the outset, targeted Georges Marchais, representative of the French Communist Party. Later, Cohn-Bendit declared, "I am a libertarian liberal," thus paying an involuntary tribute to Michel Clouscard.

Finally, and this brings us back to the subject at hand: support for so-called French Theory, from 1966 onward, fits in well with the promotion of a certain leftism that is as anti-Gaullist as it is anticommunist.

But it's true that May '68 was a mixed bag: the anticommunist students, Cohn-Bendit being the most representative, the social democrats who tried their luck at the Charléty Stadium with Mendès-France and Mitterrand, the Communists and the CGT who jumped on the bandwagon and did everything they could to defend the situation of the workers, but without believing that they were in a position to take power. It's true that almost everyone is there, except the thinkers usually associated with '68, the French theorists. You show this very well, Gabriel, especially in your article on 1968, "The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia: Historical Commodity Fetishism and Ideological Rollback."⁴¹ I remember that you used the examples of Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida, who, at the time, didn't subscribe at all to revolutionary rhetoric.

It's true that Foucault was a good Gaullist technocrat who actively participated in the Fouchet plan to reform education. Gaullist technocracy, sometimes frightening if you think of the reinstatement of Prefect Papon, who went from the deportation of Jews under Vichy to the assassination of Algerians on October 17, 1961, a Gaullist technocracy that I do not confuse with the Gaullist policy of independence, which, in reality, made a good part of the French bourgeoisie cringe. Foucault then caught the wind of the times, carried out actions of solidarity with the prisoners, and why not, but, if you'll forgive me, it was the minimum to exist politically, a bit of political correctness at the time. And, with a few modifications, some of his analyses were later taken up by French employers, notably by François Ewald (the "risk society" versus the "great isolation").⁴² This path is fairly representative of Foucault's social background: he was a structuralist before

'68, a rebel (but not a revolutionary) in the 1970s, and a post-capitalist afterward. This would be the ideal type, to use Max Weber's expression, of the intellectual in power at that time.

In fact, as you noted, May '68 cruelly rendered structuralism out of fashion. The structural method, while valid within certain epistemological limits, was not very capable of accounting for the genesis of structures, their development, their disappearance, in short, their historicity. But, and this is not the least of the paradoxes, the Cold War had frozen the situation in Europe for quite some time, and so there was indeed the weight of a structure preventing an event, even if this case, as we have shown, can never be generalized. From this deliberately Eurocentric point of view, structuralist ideology even had a head start in that it was already announcing the "end of history," dear to Fukuyama, from 1990 onwards. So for twenty years or so we had to put up with a bit of everything and anything, as long as there were no dirty words like "social class," a term which, as Derrida admitted, made every sentence incomprehensible.⁴³ There were other similar developments. Althusser, for example, was to move from structure to randomness (see his late texts on the "materialism of the encounter").

In between these two moments, Paris became the "the capital of intellectual reaction," as Perry Anderson said.⁴⁴ In this connection, he spoke of the operation of the "new philosophers," highlighted by *Time Magazine* in 1977, a well-oiled manipulation of opinion in an anticommunist direction. This literary way of doing philosophy, which works very well with thinkers like Barthes or Lacan who, failing to have a well-shaped head, at least have the merit of having a well-filled head (to use Montaigne's categories) as well as a vast culture, quickly falls into eclecticism and trickery with people like Bernard-Henri Lévy or André Glucksmann.

In any case, I completely agree with what Gabriel says about commodity fetishism, and about the consumerist appropriation of "difference" itself. I think that's even the main key to explaining it, and that should lead us to a more sociological study of the consumers of this new market. I would say that, above all, what we need to understand in France is that these are mainly credit buyers.

Gabriel is going to tell us how he sees things from the point of view of the distribution of social classes in the United States, which I don't see very

clearly from Paris. But it is certain that if I were to carry out this analysis in France, I would also have to mention a reality partly created by the United States: the creation of new markets with the arrival of the Marshall Plan, this large loan intended above all for two purposes: to stem the Communist advance in Europe and to prevent a crisis of overproduction by turning countries ruined by the war into new outlets.

These are systematic examples, but the underlying trend is the generalization of salaried employment. There are new middle classes marked by a loss of assets: they have access to a good salary, the neo-petty-bourgeois status that goes with it, a new way of life rather than a standard of living, but they are deprived of their means of production, of a form of intrinsic security. They must therefore be contrasted with the traditional middle classes, because these layers are superimposed on and supplant the previous ones.

It's these people, living on a sort of air cushion, that Deleuze would like to make believe that "desire is productive." And don't forget the slogans of '68: "Take your desires for realities." Those who stormed the Odéon Theater in '68 did so so they wouldn't have to storm the Élysée Palace [the official residence of the French President].

Michel Clouscard, in a provocative way, went further, identifying three strata that he called the "Marshall Plan surplus": the Poujadists, the repatriates from ex-French Algeria after 1962, and the students in May 1968. Three surplus populations, who couldn't really find their place but who managed to survive. The loss of the production tool for the Poujadists, who would be wiped out by the supermarkets, the loss of the colonial land for the repatriates, the loss of certainties and the loss of the nation for the students. It's provocative in the sense that, while the first two were happy to join the far-right movement founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, the so-called *Front national*, the students in May 1968 liked to think of themselves as leftists, but in the tradition of abstract cosmopolitanism, alien to the internationalist traditions of the French Communist Party.

In postwar France, there was something of a mirage. This was typical of the West during the Glorious Thirties, but in the case of France it was even more pronounced because, thanks to de Gaulle, France was able to pretend that it had won in 1945, when in fact, historically speaking, it had lost in 1940.

The feeling of being downgraded and frustrated is obvious, though masked by postwar expansion. The year 1940, with the German army on the Champs-Élysées, a trauma that still haunts the national subconscious, robbed France of the great power status it had previously enjoyed. De Gaulle (and above all, behind him the Communist resistance that threatened privileges at the Liberation) saved France from outright U.S.-American occupation, obtained a seat on the UN Security Council, and equipped the country with nuclear weapons, a prelude to France's entry into civil nuclear power, which gave it an energy autonomy it would not otherwise have had. But after 1940, France would always be a middle power, tied militarily to the United States and integrated into the imperialist chain.

By way of comparison, in 1918 France still had the most powerful army in the world and, for once, was almost the only country in Europe where revolution was not in full swing as a result of victory. It was a self-confident country, but with a still archaic economy of small landowners and an agricultural base. Paul Valéry's phrase—"We modern civilizations have learned to recognize that we are mortal like the others"—resounded, much pondered and commented on at the time, because it was particularly prophetic.⁴⁵

On the contrary, postwar France is a country in real decline that neo-capitalist modernity has brought into the age of *sunlight* (in the sense of the powerful projector). It has a prestige that it recycles, like a condiment, at every turn. We've talked about French Theory, just as we'll later talk about the "French Touch" in electronic music. You have to understand that there's something derisory about it, a bit like an Italian who, seeing himself reduced to the cliché of spaghetti and mandolins, finds himself obliged to point out the evidence of the Renaissance. You have to understand that France was literally the center of Europe, and therefore, at one time, of the world. Most of the castles in Europe are modeled on Versailles. It was called "the China of Europe," the most populous country at the time, the country of the absolute monarchy by divine right, then the country of the "Enlightenment," the "great nation" (from the Revolution onwards). The very idea of having been selected for cosmetic reasons as the proponents of "French Theory" by the masters of the Empire is, by contrast, somewhat humiliating.

Speaking of aristocracy, we also need to understand who the French theorists are, sociologically speaking. Badiou is again an example and, as a perfect backup accomplice, he has an aura due to the fact that he has mechanically inherited a sort of guaranteed income. These people come, by birth and place of training, from the three or four high schools in Paris, which they attend from 15 to 18. Then, when they're 19 or 20, someone decides they're brilliant and they enter the *École normale supérieure*. This establishment is no longer the breeding ground for top government officials as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it does guarantee a kind of aura, the government of letters, a consolation prize that encourages a certain upward mobility.

What we ask of people who are well-born and very young is obviously not to have rethought the world or the history of philosophy, but to have mastered the art of the French "dissertation," a highly formalistic exercise seen from abroad—France is a country where the slightest letter you write irremediably indicates the class to which you belong—and then to adopt a kind of literary, dandy, "Grand Siècle" posture (the Grand Siècle or Great Century refers to the seventeenth century and the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV). You have to be sophisticated, and also play a form of *sprezzatura*, the art of not touching, the art of hiding art and, above all, the art of hiding work, which quickly becomes the art of hiding the absence of work. The promotion of French thinkers reinforces their sense of exceptionalism.

In short, the paradox is that the U.S.-Americans think they are importing a subtle fragrance that smells of the barricades mounted by Marianne and Gavroche. What they're really importing is the Ancien Régime.

The Enlightenment was, however, quite the opposite of French Theory, with its major interest in science, not in charlatanism or "intellectual impostures." With this title, I'm referring to the book by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, which in 1996 followed on the heels of a hoax, the publication of a deliberately absurd pseudo-scientific article in the very heart of the U.S.-American journal *Social Text*: "Transgressing Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravitation."

The Enlightenment was also a time of frontal opposition to dogma and arbitrariness. It was the time of the "lettres de cachet" that imprisoned

Diderot, Voltaire, and the statue of Rousseau burned in effigy in Môtiers. It was a time of social discomfort and exclusion, which the enlightened absolutism of Frederick II and Catherine II was able to exploit through patronage.

Admittedly, what French Theory has in common with the Enlightenment is that the CIA effectively played the role of enlightened despot, that's undeniable, and we see once again the importance, in all eras, of a kind of inescapable foreign validation of the universality of the doctrine defended. But we must add that Voltaire's England and Prussia, Russia that welcomed Diderot, Geneva that Rousseau rightly boasted being a *citizen* of—and not a *subject* of the King of France—were Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, Calvinist, and a space was needed to oppose the Catholic absolutism of France, the “eldest daughter of the Church.” Whatever their ulterior motives, the systems were opposed. Conversely, French Theory does not appear to have confronted the prevailing system in the United States, of which it appears rather as an appendage of its cultural policy. The only people who opposed the United States in the postwar period were the Communists and the Gaullists, including the dissolution of France into a European Union. Yet the only thing that French Theory retained from May '68 was that which could degrade the two historic forces of the Resistance. In the end, Jacques Derrida even uttered a rather significant phrase at the end of his life: “Deconstruction is America.” Fascinated by its effect, by its power of synthesis, but at the same time worried about seeing himself summed up in it, he disavowed this phrase only to revalidate it later, drowned in more consensual definitions:

If, for the sake of speed and a bit of playfulness, I try to remember the definitions of deconstruction that I allowed myself to give under the pressure of a question, briefly, there are at least four. I once said that deconstruction is America, in a text on Paul de Man. Another time, in the same book, having abandoned this first hypothesis, I said deconstruction is more than one language. Then another time, deconstruction is the impossible. And finally a fourth time, deconstruction is what happens. I believe that these four definitions, which are at once algebraic, brief, ironic but also

serious, are not disparate or incompatible. They form a kind of coherence.⁴⁶

And this coherence does not need to be deconstructed!

GR: To pick up on one of the threads, which relates back to Jennifer's original question, it is worth insisting on the fact that the correlation between French Theory and the uprisings of 1968 is largely a marketing ploy, which has repackaged anti-Marxist thought rooted in the reactionary traditions of Nietzsche and Heidegger as a radical contribution that overcomes the limits of Marxism. It seems we both agree that, far from surpassing the tradition of dialectical and historical materialism, French Theory signals a regression to pre-dialectical, metaphysical thinking, as well as an ethical and political regression.

The leading luminaries of structuralism, as I briefly mentioned, ignored or dismissed the '68 workers' movement, which was the most significant development, and they were also generally skeptical of the student mobilization, though for reasons very different than the Marxists who were critical of petty-bourgeois radicalism. This was the case for all of the major thinkers attacked from the right as so-called '68 thinkers by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut: Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lacan.⁴⁷ Although I disagree with Castoriadis on a number of points, his concise summary of Ferry and Renaut's book gets at something important: " '68 thought' is anti-'68 thought, the thought that built its mass success on the ruins of the '68 movement and in function of its failure."⁴⁸

As often happens in the wake of a popular uprising, many French theorists restyled themselves as revolutionaries in an effort to catch the wave of post-'68 radical consumerism. Foucault was exemplary in this regard, given his openly reactionary views before 1968, but Deleuze also moved from doing provocative but highly academic research to an anarchist-oriented embrace of a theoretical free-for-all by linking up with the Trotskyist and anarchist-leaning Guattari (who had been involved in the occupation of Odéon Theater and the National Pedagogical Institute). Even those who maintained, more or less, their conservative or consensual liberal political views—from Lacan to Derrida and Bourdieu—nonetheless were often affiliated with an ethos of theoretical revolt.

Indeed, one of the most persistent marketing myths that has accompanied the French theorists has been that they are radicals who attacked the very foundations of Western knowledge in a kind of theoretical '68. The actual substantial relationship between French Theory and '68 is thereby ignored in favor of recuperating the symbolic value of '68 qua radical insurgency in order to enhance the cachet of the theoretical products put out by this coterie of anticommunist thinkers. This is what I mean by historical commodity fetishism: the real social relations that characterize particular historical struggles vanish behind the enchantment with a commodity, which in this case is an intellectual product that has been marketed as revolutionary when it was not at all. For those duped by it, who read French theorists looking for revolutionary theory, they encounter little more than an imaginary revolt in discourse completely disconnected from the real class struggles of working people.

JPL: Gabriel, you talked about the connections between French Theory and identity politics. In the U.S. context, identity politics has been historicized as an expression of a politics of the professional managerial class stratum, whose promotion owes itself to post-desegregation racial liberalism. French Theory, I take it, is also a product of the same middle layer of society. Could you therefore talk more about the cross-pollination between the two and the reasons for the prominence of both traditions within this specific class stratum?

GR: Identity politics can be understood as the set of practices and discourses that prioritize group identities—often those derived from ascriptive categories like race and gender—over and against class as a means of analyzing social relations and conflicts, as well as organizing political constituencies. It was ideologically consolidated in the United States in the wake of the counter-hegemonic movements of the long 1960s. It therefore needs to be understood as a counter-revolutionary enterprise that sought to recuperate potential radicals and direct them toward a representational brokerage politics, as opposed to substantive material changes. This orientation was already operative within the New Left, insofar as certain sectors disingenuously presented themselves as overcoming the reductionist limitations of the Old (Marxist) Left by

engaging in so-called new struggles around race, gender, sexuality, and so forth. However, whereas some elements of the leftist movements of the 1960s remained invested in anticapitalism and radical social change, identity politics further institutionalized the forms of New Left politics that turned away from class analysis and struggle in favor of a symbolic politics that preserves and perpetuates class relations by dressing them up as “different” due to their racial, gender, and sexual ratios. It gradually became the dominant ideological framework of the professional managerial class stratum in the imperial core, with the United States as its vanguard, and its diversity industry became hegemonic in major social institutions. The academic world is a good example thereof, and it is primarily here that identity politics constituted a receptive basis for the integration of French Theory: Parisian preciousness provided an aura of European sophistication to idpol’s anticommunist fetishization of symbolic difference.

The U.S. capitalist class and its bourgeois state were deeply involved in an ideological and repressive hybrid war on the more revolutionary elements of the left movements of the 1960s. The FBI’s Counter-Intelligence Program (Cointelpro) did much of the dirty work by running heinous slander, subversion, and assassination campaigns. This repressive assault was seconded by a hegemonic war that sought to uplift reformist opportunists and provide them with platforms that allowed them to exercise leadership over various movements.

Robert L. Allen has elucidated an important example in this regard: the Ford Foundation, the same year that it funded the grand arrival of French Theory in the United States (1966), “made an important decision to expand its activities in the black movement.”⁴⁹ It quickly became “the most important, though least publicized, organization manipulating the militant black movement,” since it was “deeply involved in financing and influencing almost all major protest groups, including CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], the National Urban League, and the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People].”⁵⁰ This included penetrating some of the more militant organizations in order to secure “corporate domination of black communities by means of a new black elite.”⁵¹ The overall orientation that Ford sought to foster was identitarian, reformist, corporate liberalism, in order to counter the revolutionary politics of those who understood that

the struggle against racism was ultimately a class struggle. In the words of Allen: “Indirect control and manipulation of the black liberation movement was the hallmark of the new liberalism, which even went so far as to endorse black power and black separatism—not to mention black capitalism—as a means of sidetracking black revolution.”⁵² This helped foment a split in the black power movement between the recuperable rebels and the revolutionaries. Ford thus played a direct role in running an identitarian counter-insurgency program that contributed to the development of the black misleadership class. These opportunist, corporate-backed leaders, or at least a significant portion of them, “call themselves nationalists and exploit the legitimate nationalist feelings of black people in order to advance their own interests as a class. And chief among those interests is their desire to become brokers between the white rulers and the black ruled.”⁵³

This example is significant because it demonstrates that the same corporation involved in funding French Theory was also bankrolling counter-revolutionary culturalist movements that were the predecessors to neoliberal identity politics. This makes perfect sense from the point of view of a materialist analysis of the social totality because they are both anticommunist practices dedicated to radical recuperation. They mobilize intricate sign systems to present themselves as being at the cutting edge of new ways of thinking and speaking, while their fundamental orientation is opposed to a revolutionary transformation of society. Both of them rode the radical waves, moreover, of the movements that preceded them. French Theory, as I mentioned, has been largely affiliated with the uprisings of 1968, in spite of its disconnection from them and its generalized skepticism toward truly leftist political organizing. Indeed, in certain ways French Theory can be understood as a pseudo-radical consumer product for the new managerial class stratum bolstered by the post-’68 corporate counter-revolution. Similarly, identity politics has also positioned itself as somehow pursuing the pluralizing and radical agenda of the New Left. As Adolph Reed Jr. and others have argued in minute detail, the fact that it turned its back on class analysis should not obscure the reality that it is itself a class politics of the imperial professional managerial class stratum.⁵⁴ Both French Theory and identity politics are thus counter-revolutionary developments

that mobilize the symbology of radical movements as cover for their corporate and academic recuperation of them.

The social logic of radical recuperation can best be understood as a manifestation of the ideological orientation of the class stratum that serves as the principal basis for identity politics and French Theory: the new petty bourgeoisie in the imperial core, which was consolidated in the latter half of the twentieth century. This middle layer is generally afraid of the threat of proletarianization from below while being attracted to the bourgeoisie above. Among the members of this middle stratum, there is an important segment that would like to appear to be on the side of the people and dedicated to a more just society, which has fostered a tendency to fetishize the symbols of radicality. At the same time, their individualist aspirations to climb the social ladder erected by the bourgeoisie drives them to play their prescribed role as recuperators who channel potentially insurgent forces into the symbolic politics of identity and difference that are not a threat to the system (*au contraire!*). These petty-bourgeois radicals can thereby market themselves as anti-Establishment while serving their bourgeois masters, thereby securing an extremely lucrative career under the very thin guise of radical theorists.

Although it theoretically rejects class politics and struggle, identity politics is practically engaged in them. It constitutes an effort, on the part of the professional managerial class stratum, to recuperate the racial, gender, and sexual class struggles of the working class for its own purposes. As Domenico Losurdo has explained in detail, the best elements of the Marxist tradition have always understood class struggle to include the fight for full human dignity, and thus the battle against various forms of oppression.⁵⁵ Far from being economic reductionists, there is a vibrant tradition—from Marx and Engels to V. I. Lenin, Clara Zetkin, and beyond—of understanding the fight for recognition as part of class struggle. This means, moreover, that substantive recognition requires a transformation of the material relations of production, overcoming the thralldom and super-exploitation of racialized groups, as well as domestic slavery and the double day imposed on women. These class struggles for recognition by the working and oppressed masses are precisely what the identity politics of the professional managerial class stratum attempts to recuperate for its own ends. This is done by transmogrifying a substantive politics of materialist reconfiguration into a

symbolic politics of representation, in order to maintain extant class relations. Identity politics is thus very much a class politics, which consists in recuperating the antiracist and antipatriarchal class struggles of working and oppressed people for a symbolic politics of identity that can be used to advance one's own class standing while keeping those below in their place.

In the contemporary world, identity politics has become so institutionalized that it has led to the development of a veritable diversity industry, which has an imperialist dynamic. It is a weapon of war against communities unified in class solidarity against imperialist domination insofar as it seeks to divide them, through the promotion of racial, ethnic, religious, and other differences, in order to better conquer and rule over them. Major institutions in the United States are governed by this culturalist ideology that puts a premium on uplifting privileged identity categories and engaging in branding strategies based on symbolic games of representation, while keeping extant material relations in place. As the United States emerged as the world's leading imperialist power in the wake of the Second World War and became more assertive around the world, it had to deal with extensive pushback abroad and uprisings on the home front, often driven by those who had suffered the most from its imperial escapades. Identity politics thus developed, in part, as a counter-insurgency tactic that consists in providing social uplift and leadership positions to people who superficially look like the victims of imperialism, on the condition that they do the same work as their less diverse predecessors.

It is important to emphasize that this phenomenon needs to be understood dialectically insofar as this process was ultimately driven by class struggle from below, and not simply by recuperation from above. It is precisely because there were militant battles to transform the socioeconomic dynamic of racial, gender, and sexual relations that the ruling class had to acquiesce to change, meaning that identity politics was the result of a class compromise. In making concessions, though, the bourgeoisie has done everything in its power to limit the gains of the super-exploited workers like racialized groups and women by shoring up a diverse group of managers to oversee them, thereby cleverly maintaining the fundamental class relations. Just as imperialism has sometimes propped up a comprador bourgeoisie in target countries in order to confuse—and better manage—the local population, it has also given birth to what we might call

a domestic comprador petty-bourgeoisie at home by developing a managerial stratum that increasingly looks like the target populations of imperialism, precisely in order to better continue the work of its perpetrators. The diversity industry thereby has an imperialist dynamic baked into it since it seeks to make the professional-managerial class layer in the imperial core as diverse as the historical victims of imperialism. Its pernicious motto is: “All of the races, genders, and sexualities of the global empire shall be present in the class stratum that serves to manage it!”

The Ford Foundation is a great example of this trend. Although its presidents were all white men through the 1970s, it has since cultivated a more diverse image with an African-American president (1979–1996), a woman president (1996–2007), a Latino president (2008–2013), and another African-American president (2013–present). This certainly creates the appearance of difference and change, at least if one views the world through the individualist, competitive logic of capitalist ideology. Isn’t it better if this powerful foundation is run by a person of color or a woman? The real question, however, is how it is run, and what its material impact is on the masses of racialized people and women, not the life of a single person (who was given uplift by the system for conforming to its dictates). If we look at the social totality instead of individual stories of imperial career preferments, then it becomes clear that the bourgeoisie knows full well how to mobilize identity politics to create illusory change. It can be as easy as breaking a glass ceiling for a single opportunist individual, on the condition that they continue business-as-usual, in order to make them into a symbol or spokesperson that serves to keep down the masses they purportedly represent.

French Theory’s fetishization of symbolic difference, independently of material social relations, follows the exact same logic insofar as discursive radicality serves to displace substantive struggles for material changes. Its consumerist base is also composed of the same class stratum, namely the imperial professional managerial class stratum and those who aspire to it. Although French Theory, like identity politics, does not present itself as a class project, it is very much inscribed in the same class dynamic. In condemning communism as totalitarian and excluding real social alternatives to the extant system, while celebrating cultural and discursive practices as the real site of liberation, rather than class struggle, French

Theory contributes to shoring up the capitalist world. It is here, after all, that the French theorists are not only powerful mind managers, perched at the very top of imperial intellectual power structures, but they are celebrated as the world's leading luminaries, who are destined to go down in bourgeois history as the greatest thinkers of their day. They have every material and symbolic interest imaginable in preserving the capitalist world that has consecrated them and in inoculating it against revolutionary social transformation.

The most recent developments in U.S.-American politics demonstrate how important it is to engage in a thoroughly dialectical critique of identity politics, to return to this issue. The Trump administration's attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion seeks to roll back the clock on even the symbolic and representational gains of the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although these tactical compromises on the part of the ruling class sought to contain the more revolutionary aspirations of the time, it is nonetheless the case that it was forced to walk back some of the overt forms of racial, gender, and sexual oppression. In attempting to "Make America Great Again," Trump's administration would like to return to a bigoted era of more open racism, misogyny, and homophobia. This should *not* be celebrated as somehow a win in the fight against identity politics.

To begin with, MAGA politics is itself simply a long-standing form of white, male, heterosexual identity politics, so it is not at all a departure from culturalism and the attempt to naturalize socioeconomic divisions and hierarchies. Secondly, instead of simply eradicating the superficial politics of recognition affiliated with identity politics, the goal should be to expand recognition and render it substantive by addressing its material basis. This has been the project of the best elements of the revolutionary movements of the Global South. In standing up to the forces of empire, they have not only sought liberation from exploitation, but also from oppression. Their claims to sovereignty consist in saying, among other things, that *we*—the racialized underclass of the world—are people too!

The material struggle for recognition on the part of the peoples of the Global South has also been an important feature of class struggles within the capitalist core. The best elements of the socialist tradition have understood that class struggles include racial, gender, and sexual struggles since these are key aspects of how capitalist society organizes its dominion

and secures structural hierarchies and the division of labor. Far from being class reductionist in the sense of boiling everything down to purely economic factors, this tradition has focused on combating oppression and super-exploitation in any form they take. In this battle, it has also recognized the importance of doing the hard work of addressing the specific problems of particular groups and organizing around them.

To bring all these threads together, we can say that the point of the Marxist critique of identity politics is not to abandon or sideline racial, gender, and sexual issues. On the contrary, it consists in recognizing that liberal identity politics does not at all go far enough because it provides a limited solution—primarily symbolic changes and individual forms of career advancement for the professional managerial class stratum—to very real problems. The goal should actually be to expand the struggle for recognition and give it real teeth by grounding it in the material fight to transform the socioeconomic hierarchies of an imperialist world order, whose structures of exploitation go hand in hand with systems of oppression.

* * *

JPL: Given your trenchant criticisms of French Theory, readers will likely wonder if there is anything to be salvaged from this tradition. What are your thoughts on the matter?

AM: I think, Jennifer, that you are asking the most complicated question, but at the same time the most demanding. I would say, to sum things up straightaway, that French Theory is like Frankenstein, a perfectly monstrous being made from the assembly of “normal” limbs. What is frightening, because of its systematic nature, is this project, instigated by U.S. imperialism, to establish doctrinal coherence by taking the lowest common denominator of what was produced by the thinking in vogue in France at the time: its class character, its rejection of Marxism, its inability to enter into dialogue with Marxism. But in the end, the thinkers in question were by no means nullities, quite the contrary. And it was still a time of creative optimism, when France believed itself to be—wrongly of course, far be it from me to be chauvinistic!—the center of the world.

From the outset, I would like to make an observation that is essential for the reader in a hurry, in order to rule out any reading that I would describe as systematically conspiratorial. The advantage of Marxism is that it allows us to understand that a particular social actor does not necessarily need to be completely aware of what he or she is doing, or to belong to a particular sect, in order to play their class role perfectly well. So when we point to a clear recuperation of certain areas of French thought by the CIA's cultural departments, it is, for each theorist subjectively, more a question of complacency with an anti-Marxist way of thinking—which Derrida will pretend to reverse, in a rather superficial way, incidentally, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with his *Specters of Marx*—than of the precise idea of becoming an ideological war machine in the service of the Cold War hawks. Systematization unfolds through other channels.

Now to the positive points. To begin with, structuralism is always partly scientific, as long as structures are placed in their dialectical process, and provided we do not radically oppose the logical order to the historical approach to reality, the logical identity to becoming and interaction.

Similarly, the affirmation of the affirmation à la Deleuze, as expressed in *Difference and Repetition*, can be reinterpreted in dialectical terms, as a negation of the first affirmation, at a higher level, as the negation of the negation would be an affirmation of the first. In the same way, Nietzsche's eternal return produces differences through its very repetition. Nietzsche's invocation of affirmative and reactive values is of great interest not only to Deleuze but also to the dialectician. But there is, indeed, no dialectic of the master and the slave in Nietzsche, since the slave can only live, according to Nietzsche, in resentment. He lives, however, in work, which is the primary transformative force.

In the same way, we can reasonably present things by saying that there is room for a dialectic of the heterogeneous that would take *differentiation* into account, or rather, if there is no room, it is no longer dialectics. Derrida's error lies not in his claim, very Nietzschean in its intentions, to the heterogeneous, but in his conviction that no logic, and especially no dialectical logic, could account for it, which borders on irrationalism.

Derrida, for example, can be an ally against Foucault's anti-Cartesianism. In *De quoi demain . . .* (For What Tomorrow . . .), he shows that hyperbolic doubt is claimed by Descartes as a properly delirious

experience, the description of the cogito including and not excluding madness. Admittedly, there are grounds for questioning the dangers of a normative conception of reason, the legitimization of power, and the technicist capture of nature and society that it can entail. Here again, it is the assignment of proper names that poses a problem, this way of doing philosophy by creating scarecrows like Descartes or Hegel, obviously the two men to shoot down when you want to refute both the subject and dialectics.

Let's take Roland Barthes. His postwar book *Mythologies* is virtually pro-Marxist. I recommend it to anyone who wants to understand the great national myths of the French unconscious. It's a book that attacks the Poujadist hatred of dialectics, to which an entire generation would succumb.

Some people might be surprised that I defend Lacan. However, behind his attempts to express his concepts in terms of mathematical topology, which are not always successful, there is a serious Lacanian element: the unconscious structured as a language, which combines the Freudian corpus with the achievements of structural analysis. And let's not forget his fine understanding of the recognition of the Other, which he draws from Hegel, via Kojève. Let us also think of the mirror stage, which was to become one of his key concepts and which comes from Henri Wallon, who derived it from his reading of *Capital* (man develops in relation to others as if in a mirror)!

And again, Lévi-Strauss's analyses in *Le Cru et le Cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*) of the double articulation of language, which also applies to musical language but constitutes a turning point from the moment it is called into question by serial music, are an essential milestone in our approach to contemporary art. Again, Deleuze's *Proust et les signes* (*Proust and Signs*) is a masterpiece, perhaps the author's best analysis. And his works on Spinoza, on Kant, show that he was a great teacher, before his encounter with Guattari.

Linguistics has been considered the leading and pioneering discipline of structuralism ever since Ferdinand de Saussure rightly spoke of the "system" of language, drawing, among other things, on the metaphor of the game of chess, in which, for example, any additional piece would change the "grammar." However, the valid observations that must be made in the

synchronic study of a language, where the dialectical effect of evolution on that language may initially be considered negligible, did not, of course, preclude the founder of modern linguistics from resorting to the *diachronic* approach.

The same is true of his school, which ranges from Antoine Meillet to Emile Benveniste. One can certainly read Benveniste exclusively, as the French theorists did, in the sense of the remarks he addressed to Claude Lévi-Strauss, which were the original source of the commentary on Baudelaire's "Cats," a veritable "manifesto" of structuralism that the French anthropologist wrote with Roman Jakobson in the journal *L'Homme* in 1962. But it is nevertheless symptomatic that, in contrast, the diachronic discoveries of Benveniste, which are now considered classic by linguists, did not attract the attention of philosophers. And yet, as he demonstrated, the anteriority of "pecūnia" (fortune, money) over "pecū" (herd, livestock), which only expresses a late and derived meaning from a concept that originally referred to all movable property—whereas it was naively believed that money previously referred only to wealth in livestock!—is a diachronic observation implying a definite change in structure. The same evolution led to the transition from the Latin "capitale" (main asset) to "cattle" in English and "cheptel" in French, with the Spanish "caudal" retaining the meaning of "property, wealth." Here again, the anteriority of "capital" cannot leave any Marxist indifferent. We can also mention, in the same work, the impossibility of tracing back to an original term for religion in what we can reconstruct in terms of historical linguistics among the main languages of Europe, which was conceived as "religio" in Rome, "dharma" (rule) in Sanskrit, "věra" (belief) in Old Slavic and "thrēskeíē" in the Ionian Greek of Herodotus, but which disappears from classical Attic Greek and only reappears in "koine."⁵⁶ Here we do not see a change in structure, but rather a shift from a relative absence of religious structure to different independent systems. A religion that is difficult to define universally as an institution is also of interest to researchers!

In fact, to clearly distinguish between the scientific and ideological aspects of structuralism, I believe we must play, if you will allow me the expression, Saussure with Marx, that is to say, distinguish between the formal study of a system, as Marx did with capitalism or as Saussure did with language, and the fixed conclusions drawn by the proponents of

structuralism, particularly those from the Prague Circle, whose influence on Lévi-Strauss is notable. The spirit of the Marxist method consists not in accounting for capitalism solely through a historical analysis of property, but through an analysis of the relations of production. A fruitful analogy can be drawn if we compare Saussure's efforts in his time to combat the positivism of the neogrammarians (*Junggrammatiker*) school, which tended to make the laws they found (the laws of Verner, Osthoff, Brugmann, etc.) into universal phenomena, even though they are certainly valid but only within a given framework. Marx and Saussure both rejected the positivist approach and historical reductionism. Their intersection lies not only in the rejection of positivism, but also in the idea that reality is mediated by systems (linguistic or economic) whose logic escapes immediate consciousness. This is in fact the interpretation of Saussure by the Prague Circle and the proponents of an ontological and metaphysical interpretation of language (I can only refer here to the study devoted to it by Patrick Sériot, *Structure et totalité*, that turned it into a rigid system from which Lévi-Strauss, introduced to linguistics by Jakobson in New York, drew a number of fixist and ahistorical conclusions that were deliberately anti-Marxist).

Today, most Marxists often go about it the wrong way when they want to criticize structuralism. They agree that language is very fixist, very synchronic, much as Stalin was forced to note in his essay on linguistics that language was not a superstructure. Indeed, Russian has hardly changed at all despite the great proletarian revolution, that is true. But to think that Saussure is incapable of conceiving of change on the grounds that his concept of diachrony is also subject to structural laws is a bit much. I would remind you that Saussure, like Le Verrier predicting the existence of Neptune, proved the existence of laryngeals before the discovery of Hittite after his death confirmed the views of his "Memoir on the primitive system of vowels in Indo-European languages" of 1878, which put forward the hypothesis of "sonantic coefficients," the basis of the now generally accepted theory of laryngeals. In other words, Saussure was able to trace, without the aid of empirical observation, a completely different state of language dating back to 1400 BCE, solely through analysis of the phonological system. Similarly, Marx demonstrated the transitory nature of capitalism. The system, because it frees itself from a naive historical

analysis, becomes the royal road to understanding history, not its brutal denial.

As you will have gathered, I find that the best criticism is always dialectical. The more judo you can do with the theory you're studying, the better.

GR: Dialectical analysis is highly refined because it is attentive to the infinite complexities of social phenomena, recognizing that they have different dimensions and relations, and that they change over time. It also allows us to concretely abstract from these complexities in order to conceptualize and judge them without, however, ignoring the important fact that these complexities overflow the container concepts that attempt to capture them. In our discussion of French Theory, we have thus far mainly operated at a relatively high level of concrete abstraction by approaching it as a global social phenomenon, although we have occasionally focused in on more concrete and specific instances, which is also something that Aymeric and I have done in our previous publications. A dialectical approach allows us to move between these different levels in a coherent and systematic manner, tracking out to see the big picture or zooming in on specifics, but always in such a way that the entire analysis hangs together.

Regarding the contributions of French theorists, it is certainly the case that we are dealing with highly trained, elite intellectuals within the premier institutions of the capitalist world. Formally speaking, they have developed research techniques, reading practices, forms of linguistic analysis, argumentative strategies, rhetorical moves, and stylistic enhancements that now form part of a repertoire. Usually, this armamentarium has been mobilized to shore up bourgeois ideology and attack communism. However, there are elements that could be used for dialectical and historical materialism, as long as they are cleansed of their ideological content and orientation.

There is some intellectual work under the broad label of French Theory that has made significant contributions. I would argue, though, that these are generally grounded in, or are offshoots of, Marxism. Barthes's *Mythologies* is a great example because it developed a generalized ideology critique via a refined analysis of the intricate system of signs operative in quotidian culture. Barthes did, however, move rather quickly away from his

early Sartrean phase, which also suffered from some important limitations, and his later work became increasingly distant from this powerful form of ideology critique. A dialectical approach requires a variegated hermeneutic analysis that brings to the fore different dimensions of the work in question, including those that constitute important contributions and those that do not.

Consider the complexities of Althusser's work. On the one hand, he was a Marxist who made some significant contributions, even if his approach suffered from idealism and a lack of historical materialist analysis. More precisely, then, he was a Marxist in the structuralist sense of the term, meaning that he provided a bridge between Marxist discourse and one of the dominant ideological trends of the time, thereby contributing to the academicization and neutralization of Marxism, integrating it into the fold of Western Marxism. On the other hand, he attempted to merge Marxism with specific non-Marxist discourses like Lacanian psychoanalysis, which set the stage for eclectic radical discourses like those of Étienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière, and Alain Badiou. These two sides of his work can be clearly seen in his famous essay on ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). Indeed, they are responsible for the fundamental contradiction that plagues it. In the majority of the essay, Althusser describes ideology as a material practice conditioned by the dominant institutions in society, demonstrating that people are always already ideological subjects because they are forged by the ISAs that materially condition their existence. However, in a brief passage that has been one of the primary focal points for prominent intellectuals in the theory industry who engage with Althusser, he flagrantly contradicted himself by imagining a scene in which an individual becomes an ideological subject when he or she is interpolated by a police officer in the street. This imaginary scene presents ideology as an external force imposed all at once by an outside authority on a pre-ideological individual, who appears to have at least the semblance of a choice in the matter, in the sense that they might prefer not to respond to being hailed. Every single aspect of this characterization of ideology contradicts the rest of his argument, which he at least partially recognizes, and it has therefore generated ample academic debate (little of which, in my opinion, has gotten to the heart of the matter). The real issue is that Althusser was endeavoring to inject Lacan's mirror stage into his account of ideology, which led him to suggest that individuals become ideological subjects at the precise moment

at which they recognize themselves in an external image of themselves. In merging Marxism with the non-Marxist discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusser created a contradictory discourse on ideology. This is, moreover, but one important aspect of the major contradiction that characterizes his work, which consists in attempting to integrate Marxism within the general ideological framework of structuralism.

Such an approach has wide appeal within the consumer-driven intellectual markets of the imperial core, where academic exchange-value supersedes collective use-value. In this realm, it is widely assumed that Marxism can and even should be combined with other discourses in order to enhance it, particularly those that have more cultural cachet—perhaps even some Parisian panache—than “old school” Marxism. This is one of the reasons why Althusser became so famous within the world of Western Marxism and was integrated into the corpus of French Theory, unlike so many of the other French communist intellectuals. This should give us pause to reflect on the general question of whether Marxism is indeed enhanced by being combined with non- or even anti-Marxist discourses.

Responding to such an inquiry requires engaging with the question of science and the status of dialectical and historical materialism. For the natural sciences, few people would argue that they would be enhanced by combining them with quackery. If a science is correct, why pollute it with unscientific ideas? The theoretical practice of eclecticism is therefore rooted in the assumption that Marxism is not a science, but rather an interpretive framework that can be combined with other forms of interpretation, including French theoretical quackery.

This position is incorrect. Marxism is not just one discourse or frame of analysis that can be mixed with any other, although it can recuperate certain elements. It is a science that aspires to develop the most coherent and systematic elucidation of reality and provide people with the necessary tools for transforming it. This does not mean that it is a science in a positivistic sense or in the objectivist manner that has sometimes been attributed to it by its detractors. It does not purport to provide privileged access to an unchanging objective truth behind reality, nor does it provide an infallible roadmap to revolution or predict the future. It is instead a collective process that consists in developing a coherent and systematic elucidation of the fundamental forces operative in material reality, and it is

thoroughly faillibilistic, meaning that it tests itself and adjusts itself to practical reality in an ongoing process of refinement. It is, moreover, a science of a particular sort because it has always been a science under siege, attacked in various ways by forces that seek to destroy it, including from the inside. It is a wartime science, if you will, that has always been a site of intense class struggles, which is not the same thing as a science allowed to fully develop itself by the powers that be.

Western Marxism tends to be eclectic because, as Walter Rodney pointed out, you can mix science with non-science if you are not actually headed anywhere, meaning you do not have a concrete plan for improving the material reality of the masses of humanity.⁵⁷ French Theory, for its part, is thoroughly eclectic in its endless proliferation of references to the bourgeois canon, so much so that French theorists have converted Marxism into one discourse among others that can be used for the advancement of their own career-oriented projects. While turning their backs on Marxism in so many ways, they have thus sometimes used it as a radical spice for their theoretical concoctions, thereby giving a revolutionary flavor to their consumer products for the imperial professional managerial class stratum. However, the principal French theorists feted within the imperial intellectual apparatus are not Marxists in the scientific sense described above. They are not contributing to the collective elucidation of material reality so that it can be transformed. Instead, they are petty-bourgeois prestidigitators who have been trained in the capitalist world's foremost institutions to make it appear as if their eclectically resourced disquisitions were more radical and sophisticated than the writings defamed as so-called orthodox Marxist due to their dedication to science and liberation.

JPL: The phenomenon of French Theory is now half a century old, and many of its canonical figures have passed away. Yet, it seems to me that a number of its core precepts are carried forward by more recent theoretical trends, such as decolonial theory and new materialism. What are some of the important legacies of French Theory in contemporary thought? Why have these arguments and methods been embraced by subsequent generations?

AM: There is a striking contrast between, on the one hand, the rise of tensions in our country, what can well be called a fascisation of society—anti-Russian warmongering by President Macron, which could lead to nuclear war, and the exacerbation of inter-community tensions with the French parties—and on the other, the legacy of “’68 thought” and French Theory, which is increasingly inaudible, incapable of responding to the challenges of the times, incapable of providing a global philosophical vision that would enable us to establish an effective strategy for the left. In the vacuum remaining from this, it is communitarianism that reaps the rewards.

I explain this theoretical impotence in part by what Louis Pinto, a disciple of Bourdieu, has described as the emergence of “luxury intellectuals” (Alain Badiou, François Julien, and Jacques Rancière are good examples). The hallmark of these intellectuals is that they eschew polemics on subjects deemed too “trivial,” instead cultivating a form of hermeticism deemed “artistic” or a pseudo-prophetism à la Heidegger. For example, we hardly hear Badiou on the subject of the European Union, no doubt because pointing the finger at its anti-democratic construction would risk leading him to make too many concessions to the mental horizon of the French struggle for sovereignty, stemming from Rousseau and the Jacobins, a horizon far too concrete for the ethereal thinker of the “communist idea.” I think we need to make a distinction between the ability of these luxury intellectuals to sell books, to put it trivially, particularly abroad, and their ability to really influence society. For example, Pinto notes that Badiou published no less than thirty-four books between 2015 and 2019!⁵⁸ No doubt these are “bottom of the drawer” books, no doubt they are quick analyses, but it is clear that “the most widely read philosopher abroad” is benefiting from a bonanza. Their success is due to a hermeticism that runs counter to their ability to influence reality. On the other hand, it’s possible that it’s in the United States that they’ve had the greatest influence, because there you have the massively funded institutional relays of decolonial studies, gender studies, and so on, anything that can replace class struggle and anti-imperialism with endless fashionable [*mondain*] chatter about identities. In short, I would distinguish between a fashionable [*mondain*] influence in France and a mass influence in the United States, no doubt also because in France this fashionable [*mondain*] knowledge is specially

designed to be cut off from the people and therefore cannot claim to exert any influence on them.

At the moment, the left in France is once again united on a common electoral program involving the acceptance by all of arms deliveries to Ukraine, in other words, acceptance of the NATO program. We have seen the return of all the Atlanticist social democrats, led by Lionel Jospin and François Hollande. As a result, in the three main groups in the National Assembly—left, center, and far right—you have NATO across the board. Symptomatically, there were protests from young communists against Raphaël Glucksmann, who is the most Atlanticist of the left-wing candidates—and not for nothing the son of one of these “new philosophers” who took part in the campaign we have described—but this was stifled by the party leadership. This complete bankruptcy of the left, this submission to imperialism, is reminiscent of the Second International in 1914. I think French Theory played a major role in the intellectual disarmament regarding this issue.

GR: French Theory has served as the wellspring for so many of the trend-setting discourses within the imperial theory industry, from the radical liberal queer theory affiliated with Judith Butler to radical democracy, the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the prolific rantings of capitalism’s court jester (Slavoj Žižek), the third and fourth generations of Frankfurt School critical theory, new materialism, postcolonial thought, decolonial theory, and many other discourses. In spite of their market-driven brand differentiation, these discourses share an anticommunist baseline and engage in very similar theoretical practices. After all, they emerged in the wake of French Theory’s global promotion via Western cultural imperialism, and they have generally been modeled on the work of their celebrated forebears, who remain among their privileged reference points.

One of French Theory’s major contributions, in this regard, has been to provide a model for radical recuperation. This principally applies to those discourses that aspire to some semblance of progressive politics, not those that are openly reactionary. If we concretely abstract to the most general level of analysis, which might require nuances and modifications at lower levels of abstraction, we can identify a fundamental pattern that is

widespread in French Theory and the imperially feted discourses it helped spawn:

1. Misrepresent the Marxist tradition by depicting it as class reductionist, deterministic, economistic, Eurocentric, teleological, and uninterested in liberation struggles related to race, colonialism, gender, sexuality, the environment, etc.
2. Reductively mischaracterize the international communist movement as a totalitarian hellscape, usually devoid of the slightest positive contribution.
3. Present your franchise's discourse as overcoming the aforementioned limitations of Marxism and actually existing socialism.
4. Market a new, idiosyncratic way of thinking and speaking as a radical path forward.
5. Introduce a heavy dose of pseudo-poetic obscurantism, empty phrase-mongering, signature neologisms, interrogative skepticism devoid of denotative statements, and a proliferation of bourgeois cultural references in order to kick enough discursive dirt into readers' eyes that they might have trouble immediately recognizing your radical discourse for what it is: an idealist theoretical practice grounded in the petty-bourgeois politics of a magical third way, which is devoid of rigorous materialist analysis and a grounding in real collective struggles.

This pattern knows a number of variations, and some partial exceptions, but it is extremely common in contemporary radical liberal discourses inspired by French Theory. Indeed, one of the interesting features of these discourses is that they demonstrate the chameleonic nature of ideology: it needs to regularly modify its appearance via fashionable updates in order to distract people from perceiving its unchanging substance (anticommunist capitalist accommodation, at a minimum).

The French-inspired version of third-generation Frankfurt School critical theory found in the work of Nancy Fraser adheres very closely to this pattern, while focusing specifically on denigrating Marxism for its supposed lack of concern with the flagship reference points of U.S.-driven identity politics.⁵⁹ This is particularly clear in her recent attempts to brand herself as an intersectionality-inspired critic of capitalism, including in her

collaborations with Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Rahel Jaeggi. Regarding the fifth point in this pattern, it is worth noting that Fraser's prose tends to be much more straightforward than, for instance, the ever inquisitive and obscure Judith Butler, who is capable of generating pages upon pretentious pages of questions without clear answers.

Much of decolonial theory, to take a different example, abides by this general model, while tailoring it to an investment in an imperial noble savage discourse. Decolonial theorists are generally dismissive of the tradition that has been the single greatest anticolonial force in the modern world (anti-imperialist Marxism), and they have sought to displace it by drawing, for instance, on Heidegger and French theorists like Foucault and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom were supporters of colonialism in Palestine. They thereby propose, in a remarkable move, to decolonize our minds by replacing anticolonial practice by thought inspired by pro-colonial philosophers, which is a theme that I know Jennifer is working on elucidating for all of us.⁶⁰ Fraser's orientation is not that dissimilar insofar as she rejects, and generally appears to be ignorant of, Marxism's enormous contributions to gender and racial liberation.

Many of these discourses inspired by French Theory follow the latter's general displacement of politics in favor of ethics, in the superficial sense of this term. Rather than providing a systemic analysis of the social and natural totality from the point of view of the overall relations of production, they prioritize subjective orientations (including ways of thinking and speaking), interpersonal relationships, and tribal identifications as the privileged sites of politics. This constitutes, in sum, a turn away from objective class analysis toward subjective accounts of personal experience. This shift allows people who share the same objective class position—such as being members of the imperial intellectual labor aristocracy⁶¹—to make their interpersonal relationships, as well as their manner of thinking and speaking, into politics proper. The implicit message is that the system does not really need to be changed, only how we comport ourselves within it. This is, from the point of view of an international class analysis, perfectly logical insofar as the intellectual labor aristocracy in the imperial core has no material incentive to question or dismantle the system that promotes it. Very much like the classical aristocracy, they therefore place a premium on proper interpersonal protocols instead of on a critical analysis of the social

framework within which these take place. This allows them to focus on refining their aristocratic manners rather than calling into question their very standing as an intellectual aristocracy.

One final point that I would like to make is that there has been a palpable shift in the primary site of ideological production. In the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, the intellectual traditions of the former leading imperialist powers, such as France, still had a lot of symbolic capital within the U.S. academy. Increasingly, however, the trend-setting discourses that are being promoted worldwide are now largely homegrown, in the sense that they come from academics ensconced in U.S. universities (like some of the examples just mentioned). French Theory still has plenty of cachet in certain sectors, and some of its leading luminaries are still alive, but “woke” identity politics constitutes the cutting-edge ideology of the empire. For quite some time now, French Theory has been adapted accordingly by using it to provide a patina of Parisian refinement to identity politics. However, in the current context of the imperial diversity industry, it seems highly unlikely that a new generation of white guys from France would be promoted as the most important theorists in the world. Instead, as we have already seen, French Theory has largely been incorporated into U.S. theory by a group of internationally promoted thinkers who provide a more diverse version of the same basic theoretical practice: Judith Butler, Walter Dignolo, Gayatri Spivak, and others. This trend is unlikely to change any time soon (although the Trump administration’s attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion will certainly have its effects). This does not mean that French Theory is over, but rather that the reigning discourse today is U.S.-American theory, and French intellectual production that seeks international promotion and uplift will need to integrate itself into its framework. In the final analysis, our requiem for French Theory must extend to the many discourses inspired by it, so that the burial is complete, and all the various forms—infinitely different and differentiating—of bourgeois pseudo-radical ideological production are brought to an end in favor of a revitalization of revolutionary Marxism.

PART II

Toward a Revitalization of Marxism

Jennifer Ponce de León: French Theory has often depicted Marxism as reductivist, deterministic, teleological, totalitarian, etc. What do you make of these characterizations?

Gabriel Rockhill: French theorists are academic products of elite institutions in the imperial core. With only a few partial exceptions, they are generally poorly educated regarding the Marxist tradition, particularly when it comes to its international breadth. Moreover, they tend to know little about the material history of the global struggle to build socialism. For their claims concerning it, they therefore generally rely on personal anecdotes, propaganda narratives in the bourgeois press, and, in certain instances, the work of a few anticommunist historians (some of whom academically laundered state propaganda). Their depictions of Marxism thus tend to be the result of cultural stereotypes and propaganda that circulate in their class stratum in the capitalist core rather than the consequence of rigorous study, comparative analysis, and collective scrutiny worthy of the name *scholarship*.

The idea that Marxism is reductivist, deterministic, etc., is a massive oversimplification that is itself thoroughly reductivist. It ignores all the complexities of Marx's work, not to mention that of the entire Marxist tradition. Turning a blind eye to the material history of texts and of concrete political realities, it reduces Marxism to a static set of ideas that are judged to be pernicious. This reductivist idealism generally goes hand in hand with an idealist historical etiology, that attempts to explain so-called totalitarianism as the consequence of a purported totalizing thinking.

According to a widespread narrative within French Theory, it is this form of thought, which is not sufficiently open to difference, that led to the Third Reich, and this same totalizing conceptuality has been the driving force behind totalitarianism in general (and Stalinism in particular). This basically means, if we formulate it in the most crass and straightforward manner, that Hegel caused the Holocaust, and Marx laid the foundation for the gulags (which themselves are presented in the most underresearched and vulgar manner). From a materialist vantage point, this is obviously a reductivist, deterministic, and teleological narrative that is thoroughly idealist.

Many examples could be cited, but I'll restrict myself to the case of Foucault. In a series of interviews in 1978 with the communist journalist Duccio Trombadori, he exclaimed, "Now that it has become such a fashion to relegate to Marx much of the responsibility for the gulags of our time, I might be awarded the certificate of paternity for a certain type of criticism."¹ Indeed, in his laudatory review of one of André Glucksmann's poorly researched anticommunist screeds, Foucault declared in 1977 that Stalinism had revealed the truth of Marxism because "with the gulag, we did not see the consequences of an unfortunate error, but the effects of the 'truest' theories in the order of politics."² Marx's ideas were thus the ultimate source of the gulag, according to his idealist etiology and his clear attribution of an "origin," in spite of his critiques of this concept elsewhere. And yet, in a classic rhetorical display of irrationalism, Foucault claimed in the very next sentence in the interview cited above with Trombadori, "But it is absolutely false," suggesting that he had not helped inaugurate the idea that Marx's philosophy led to—and revealed its true essence in—the gulag.³ Although this statement might be a bit surprising to any reader familiar with his fulsome praise of Glucksmann, or anyone who simply assumes that Foucault is engaging in rational argumentation, the Frenchman followed Nietzsche in embracing his own self-contradictions and celebrating the construction of "fictions"—including in the exact same series of interviews with Trombadori—over and against the use of discourse to make truth claims.⁴ Other than being a cheeky and puerile attempt to tap out from rationality when confronted with the internally contradictory nature of his own discourse, this claim to producing fictions does have at least one

advantage (if we can take it at face value): Foucault is literally telling us that, when it comes to history, he simply makes things up!

These mischaracterizations of Marxism are so extreme that they beg the question of whether they are ultimately the result of philosophic projection. In spite of their fetishization of difference and alterity, French theorists have generally constructed philosophic systems that are reductive and deterministic, making grandiose proclamations, for instance, about how all thought and discourse is conditioned by Western metaphysics (Derrida), or how an episteme structures entire series of discourse without exception (Foucault). They also engage, at a minimum, with an implicit teleology insofar as they always position their discourses as the most advanced and developed in relation to those that preceded them. Finally, if we use the term *totalitarianism* as the communists did when they originally introduced it to criticize the totalizing control of society operative under capitalism, the fact that French theorists reject the socialist alternative makes them apologists for totalitarianism in this precise sense. Who, then, we need to ask, is truly reductivist, deterministic, teleological, totalitarian, etc.? Is it the Marxists, who have often been deeply critical of these trends, both theoretically and practically? Or is it Marxism's petty-bourgeois detractors, who are eager to play to empire and advance their careers by endeavoring to relegate Marxism to the dustbin of history by reductively misrepresenting it?

Aymeric Monville: I'll leave aside the most philistine arguments, found in every gutter, such as the materialism of base instincts, the reduction to monocausalism of the all-powerful economy, which in reality are foreign to Marxism, but somehow set the tone in this atmosphere of academic ignorance of Marx well described by Gabriel. But in France, in general, the "*chic*" argument, used in all the university departments, was to characterize Marxism as "pre-Kantian," taking up Merleau-Ponty's criticism that Marxism was the expression of a naive ontologism and a pre-Kantian gnoseology.⁵ It's true that a vulgar, impoverished Marxism has been able to present examples of "naive realism," but it's precisely not Marx's Marxism, which takes into account the revolution of German idealism and even starts from there. We must take into account, as Marx himself did, that Kantianism obviously contains enormous dead-ends, a retreat, well spotted

by Hegel, in the face of the evidence of the real contradiction, which Kant nonetheless clearly perceived in his pamphlet on negative magnitudes (Georges Gastaud has devoted some fine passages to this in his book *Lumières communes*).⁶ Last but not least, gnoseologism and its Comte-inspired and neopositivist avatars ultimately reveal themselves to be a kind of negative ontology of the hidden being, the absent cause, the inaccessible God.

Lucien Sève has removed certain aporias by showing that in Marx the conceptual form can overcome both idealist nominalism and spiritualist realism by taking its cue from the formation of the concrete and empirical universal, for example money materializing exchange-value and the general form of labor. This dialectic is not, however, a nugget lost in the Marxist river; it lies at the heart of communism insofar as it posits the proletariat as a really existing universal. In Aristotle, the nominalism of Protagoras and the realism of Plato were overtaken by the realization that there is an empirical universal. It was Aristotle, the great biologist, who reflected on the existence of species as the real basis for the classification of living things. Michel Vadée (*Marx penseur du possible*) also draws on Aristotelian *dynamis*, showing that this (ontological) consideration is essential if we are to move beyond nominalist theories of knowledge.⁷

Unfortunately for Sève, he also tended to flee into gnoseologism because he did not see how what he discovered about essence could support an ontological point of view. But above all because his revisionist critique of the dictatorship of the proletariat, at the time of its abandonment by the French Communist Party in 1976, led him to reject the universal laws of the transition from capitalism to socialism. The result is a permanent tangent between the dried-up universality of the categories of dialectical materialism (which leads to the impoverishment of the category of matter) and a flat “singularism” in the political field: the exaltation of “French-style socialism” without socialization, without the dictatorship of the proletariat, without the leading role of the working class. This “Gallo-communism” paves the way for Eurocommunism, which thinks in the same exceptionalist and singularist categories. The rehabilitation of the dialectics of nature, by Georges Gastaud, in his recent book under the same name, published recently but which crowns a lifetime of reflection on the subject, takes up

all this long debate, refutes the objections, and in my opinion allows us to rethink Marxist ontology in all its potential.

JPL: One of the relatively consistent claims made by French theorists is that Marxism failed miserably in practice. What do you make of this assertion?

GR: French theorists, for the most part, have believed the anticommunist propaganda produced in the imperial core, and they have also made their own decisive contribution to it. They have generally thought actually existing socialism to be a reprehensible form of totalitarianism that was to be condemned across the board. Even those who are self-declared Marxists, like Badiou, have been absolutely categorical in their condemnation. “The failure of all socialist and communist experiences in the last century,” Badiou claimed, “had as its consequence that we have not [*sic*] today a great and clear idea of another world.”⁸

The dogmatic adherence of French Theory to imperialist propaganda is one important indication of the deficiencies of its theoretical framework. It is, moreover, one sign among others that the French theorists do not really understand the “knowledge-power” system that produced them and their ideologies, meaning the very system that created French Theory itself. These leading luminaries were duped by very base propaganda, which many of their Marxist contemporaries saw through straightaway. It is thus part of the historical record that they were wrong, and their Marxist critics were right. If you examine the evidentiary basis for their rejection of actually existing socialism, what you find is next to nothing. In general, they simply genuflect to the dominant anticommunist ideology without making a single reference to any of the extant scholarship. However, when they do reference actual sources, these tend to be propaganda products promoted by the capitalist ruling class and their state managers.

If you examine the material history of socialism in the real world, things are turned back right-side up. In the words of Michael Parenti, a contemporary of the French theorists who did, unlike them, engage in a concrete materialist analysis of actually existing socialism:

To say that “socialism doesn’t work” is to overlook the fact that it did. In Eastern Europe, Russia, China, Mongolia, North Korea, and Cuba, revolutionary communism created a life for the mass of people that was far better than the wretched existence they had endured under feudal lords, military bosses, foreign colonizers, and Western capitalists. The end result was a dramatic improvement in living conditions for hundreds of millions of people on a scale never before or since witnessed in history.⁹

In a study published in 1984, which the French theorists could have read if they were serious researchers driven to really understand what socialism looks like in the real world, Shirley Cereseto and Howard Waitzkin crunched the largest body of extant data and reached the same conclusion as Parenti. Relying on World Bank statistics, which could hardly be suspected of pro-communist bias, they used the physical quality of life index (PQLI) to compare capitalist to socialist countries at similar levels of economic development. The PQL is a composite index calculated from infant mortality rate, life expectancy, and literacy rate. This index, developed by the Overseas Development Council, has been further refined and is widely used in transnational research because it provides a general overview of the quality of life for members of a particular society. Cereseto and Waitzkin found that “the socialist countries showed more favorable outcomes than the capitalist countries in nearly all the PQL variables,” and “the more favorable performance of the socialist countries was evident in 22 of 24 comparisons.”¹⁰ In a number of instances, socialist societies outperformed capitalist ones by two to three times. The fact that this has been possible, even though every socialist country—without a single exception—has been under imperialist siege, is truly an extraordinary feat. This does not mean, of course, that there have not been mistakes, setbacks, contradictions, and elements deserving of criticism. Any assessment should be thoroughly dialectical by mapping out, as precisely as possible, successes and disappointments.

However, what failed, in the big picture, was not Marxism or socialism. It was French Theory. It misread material reality. It was incapable of exercising even basic critical media literacy skills by seeing through imperialist propaganda. Most important, it failed to support a project of

global liberation that has lifted up the most oppressed and exploited wretched of the Earth. It is in this precise context that the French theorists so-called anti-humanism needs to be situated. This was not only a theoretical project, which purportedly consisted in calling into question the Cartesian subject, the Marxian humanism of Sartre, and so forth. It has also been an anti-humanist project in the much more overtly political sense: the supercilious condemnation of the humanist struggle, around the world, to improve the lives of millions of human beings by breaking the chains of imperialism. This project of human liberation is what should be denounced in unconditional terms, according to these propagandized Parisian patricians, which brings clearly into view what side they are on: the anti-humanist one, as they themselves say, albeit allegedly for other reasons.

JPL: You are both advocates for reclaiming Marxism from the major tendencies in Western Marxism. What are the limits of Western Marxism, and what are the corresponding strengths of the Marxist tradition that you embrace?

AM: The difference between Western Marxism and “Eastern” Marxism is partly artificial in the sense that it confirms an ideological divergence which, in my opinion, is irrelevant, but it is partly justified in the sense that societies are indeed different on either side of different lines which go from the schism between the Eastern and Western churches to the time of the Iron Curtain.

Gramsci contrasts the West, where revolution required the upstream preparation of the Enlightenment, and the East, which is Caesaropapist in nature, where power, concentrating in itself different elements, political as well as religious or ideological, is taken in one fell swoop, by striking directly at the head. This is still largely true. And there is no reason to blame so-called Western Marxism for concentrating more on the cultural aspects of its revolutionary task.

After that, it is obvious that a very clear dividing line was that of belief in the validity or otherwise of the dialectics of nature. The “East” has always held to an “ontological” conception of Marxism, in which historical and dialectical materialism is a fundamental fact of reality. The “West,” on the other hand, only conceives of dialectics with the appearance of man (in

the wake of Kojève or Sartre), hence a *strictly* “anthropological” conception of Marxism. This divide was reinforced after the Lysenko affair, where, faced with what must be called a fiasco—notably with the “two sciences,” proletarian and bourgeois—Western Marxism preferred to think that it had nothing more to say in the field of science, whereas it should have scientifically analyzed the causes of the error of Lysenkoism, as a researcher whom I have had the honor of publishing, Guillaume Suing, has fortunately done since then (and who has recently been translated into English). To sum up: yes, there is no reason to reject metaphysically the possibility of the heredity of acquired traits, because nothing is fixed in the universe. But we have to be careful when observing phenomena and, for example, it is within the framework of epigenetics that we can observe this at the margins—the disposition, for example, to develop type B diabetes of a descendant of a person who suffered from hunger during the war—within the science of genetics that Lysenko rejected dogmatically. But let us be clear, Marxism must not cede its role as a global philosophy, organizing the whole of knowledge, to liberalism or to the dereliction of Heideggerian being or to religion, etc. Otherwise, it would become a mere adjunct in the human sciences, which opens the way to all sorts of social-democratic manipulations.

GR: The demarcation of Western from Eastern Marxism is, of course, a generalization, but it is ultimately rooted in the different material histories of two regions of the world, one that developed as the imperial core, and the other that was underdeveloped as the colonial or semi-colonial periphery. In the early twentieth century, Lenin astutely diagnosed how the labor aristocracy in the capitalist core had given rise to a non-revolutionary, revisionist version of Marxism that tended to accept colonialism and participation in the inter-imperialist rivalry of the capitalist powers. By midcentury, the socialist project of anti-colonial liberation was quickly spreading in the East, whereas the core Western countries continued to pursue an imperialist agenda, now under U.S. leadership. Unable to simply eliminate Marxism due to its broad public appeal, forces within the U.S. government and ruling class have sought to internationally promote a form of it that is openly hostile to the project of anticolonial liberation. In fact, the foundations of the U.S. capitalist class, supported by the state, have

fostered the development of a theory industry that seeks to monopolize the very meaning of Marxism by imposing its imperial version of it as the global standard. It is this type of Marxism that is usually identified today as Western Marxism. It is affiliated with the Frankfurt School and parallel theoretical trends in Western Europe and the United States, sometimes including the work of explicitly anti-Marxist thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard. Far from summing up the rich and complex histories of Marxism in a particular region of the world, the expression “Western Marxism” therefore refers to a specific type of theoretical discourse promoted in the imperial core.

Within this tradition, there are clearly identifiable trends. If we begin with its theoretical practice, there is a propensity to restrict Marxism to an increasingly limited sphere. As Aymeric mentioned, the analysis of the natural world is usually excluded, in the name of focusing only on the human world. There is also a further limitation of Marxism to the cultural realm as opposed to political economy and the materialist history of the social totality, hence the expression “cultural Marxism,” which is often used to refer to this specific orientation within Western Marxism. In addition to restricting the realm of analysis, Western Marxism also tends to eclectically combine historical materialism with non-Marxist thought, if it be elements from psychoanalysis, phenomenology, existentialism, or canonized thinkers in the Western tradition. Far from being considered a science, Marxism is treated as a discourse that can be enhanced by bourgeois elements, and a premium is placed on its exchange-value as a commodity within the theory industry, not its use-value for the struggles of workers and the oppressed. This is why the most famous Western Marxists—including figures like Adorno, Negri, Badiou, and Žižek—indulge in trendy rhetoric, theoretical obscurantism, bourgeois referentiality, unnecessary neologisms, and idiosyncratic conceptual vocabularies. Far from contributing to a collective project of elucidating and transforming the world, they are first and foremost oriented toward their own brand management within the theory industry. Instead of the primacy of practice, these Western Marxists tend—at least implicitly—to celebrate the primacy of theory, and they are generally disconnected from and even hostile to the global communist movement. Their practical mantra inverts one of Marx’s most famous assertions: “Communists have only *changed* the world, in various ways

(with negative, even disastrous, consequences); the point, however, is to *interpret it!*”

The ideological coordinates of this theoretical practice have generally been anti-totalitarian, and it is remarkable how many of the most visible Western Marxists embrace crass forms of horseshoe theory, asserting that communism in the real world is a form of fascism. They also generally reject Communist Party organizing and socialist state-building projects, indulging instead in imperialist social chauvinism and capitalist accommodation (since there is no *real* alternative).

A series of common themes runs through the work of the Western Marxists. These include defeatism and the general assumption that socialism in the real world has been a cataclysmic failure. At the same time, many Western Marxists fetishize revolts and insurrections, which has led them to embrace populist positions that celebrate unorganized popular movements, very much like anarchists. If there is a solution to the problems they diagnose in capitalism, it does not lie on the terrestrial path of anticolonial, socialist states, but instead in a magical third way irreducible to extant capitalism and socialism. In the most extreme cases, which happen to be rather widespread, messianism intercedes, and the third way becomes a magical stairway to heaven.¹¹

In the contemporary world, Western Marxism might better be described as imperial pseudo-Marxism insofar as it has perverted and transformed a collective science of liberation into a bourgeois commodity with little use-value. After all, it has often had a very negative impact by turning working people off to Marxism because it appears to be an elite discourse that is irrelevant to their struggles. It has also had the pernicious effect, at least within the professional-managerial class stratum that reads these authors, of spreading the virus of anticommunism through what is marketed as a red pill.

For all of these reasons, Marxism in the West needs to be reinvented as a coherent framework of analysis and action dedicated to anticolonial struggle and the building of a real, material alternative to capitalism.

JPL: Why do you consider Marxism to be superior to French Theory?

AM: Historical and dialectical materialism, that is, the philosophical culmination of a movement of which Marx was the main contributor, but which began before and continued after him, makes it possible, first of all, to think about the continuities and ruptures of societies, unlike any form of structuralism or poststructuralism, since this is one of the starting points, or *terminus a quo*, of French Theory. Secondly, and above all, Marxism stands in direct opposition to identitarian logic, which is the *terminus ad quem* of French Theory.

Basically, with the contemporary fascination with difference, rupture, multiplicity, and heterogeneity, French Theory has simply added a pluralizing “s” to good old Eleatism (which can also be found in early Platonism), the conservative logic of identity, or rather of identities, with this plural that serves, in liberalism, to make you pass for tolerant when in fact you divide and conquer. We use identities to better leave the empire in place. The empire could then show that it is rich in its diversity, a bit like reactionary Austria-Hungary before it broke up. Diversity is so much more glamorous than contradiction. Mussolini used the same argument for fascism, which he described as “the church of all heresies.”

Marxism is opposed to identitarian logic, not out of “totalitarianism,” obviously, but because not only is the human being “the totality of social relations,” but also because Marx manages to articulate, beyond the dialectic of being and non-being, a dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, of the universal and the singular. The classic example given by Marx is that of money, which begins as an exchange-value like any other, and which then serves, without ceasing to be a commodity, to symbolize and synthesize exchange, taking it from barter to monetary exchange.

Thus, in relation to imperial identity politics, Marxism cannot fetishize identities; it shows their articulation, their recomposition. It articulates diversity and universalism. It makes it possible to think of the unification of humanity without the obliteration of cultures, without the pincers between the Robinsonade of the isolated individual and the abstract cosmopolitanism of the other, but in a genuine internationalism.

On the other hand, capitalist “globalization” is accompanied everywhere by a re-feudalization of the world, as Jean Ziegler said, marked by ethnic communitarianism, the proliferation of mafias, obscurantist identity-based withdrawal, and French Theory has been the ideology of a glaciation, a

return to order, that has accompanied this process.¹² Whereas, in concrete terms, Marxism had changed the face of the world through internationalism, French Theory found the most effective argument for the social stratum it addressed: the fashionable [*mondain*] argument. French Theory does not claim to be specifically anti-Marxist, but post-Marxist, a new revolutionary theory. In fact, it is an incredible regression.

So, certainly, Derrida attempted to think about *différence* against a fixed and metaphysical conception of being and the principle of identity, which Hegel and then Marx also rejected, with the emphasis on the Heideggerian ontological difference between Being and being. All this would have merited a dialogue with dialectical materialism for a deconstruction that does not systematically go in the direction of a dematerialization, a derealization, or a fixation on what would only be a moment of the dialectic and ultimately this logic of the “united colors of Benetton” that makes the success of imperial French Theory.

GR: French Theory is, indeed, one of the latest iterations of a longtime enemy of dialectical and historical materialism (DHM), namely metaphysics, which reifies entities that are presumed to be more or less unchangeable, instead of apprehending social phenomena as complex processes that evolve over time and through struggles. Emmanuel Levinas’s conceptualization of the Other would be one clear example, insofar as it is absolutized as a metaphysical entity with a fixed set of attributes (the face, the call, transcendence, etc.), rather than being understood, for instance, as a social being situated in class struggle. Jean-François Lyotard’s theorization of the “differend” would be another obvious instance since he postulates a more or less irreconcilable conflict between different discursive registers, which he calls phrase regimens and genres of discourse. While he leaves open the vague possibility that discursive innovation could overcome certain differends, he primarily focuses on the incommunicability between different worlds of discourse. The other French theorists, though they each use their own idiosyncratic conceptual vocabulary, are equally hostile to dialectics. Instead, they fetishize aporias, claiming that the most sophisticated position to take is to bear witness to the impossibility of resolving them. Implicitly, at least, this reveals their position on the contradiction of class struggle between the ruling class and workers: rather

than trying to resolve it through revolutionary social transformation, it is preferable to bear witness to the absolute impossibility of overcoming it, a position befitting of the imperial petty-bourgeois intelligentsia.

Culturalism, which attempts to explain social phenomena and conflicts through appeals to fixed cultures and conflicts between them, is an outgrowth of metaphysics. It was inherent in the race-based forms of thinking predominant in the nineteenth century, which were squarely rejected by DHM. Fixed identity categories like race—just like cultures, nations, genders, or other such groupings—do not have autonomous explanatory power, meaning that you cannot explain political occurrences by appealing, for instance, to something like the natural behaviors of certain races, cultures, etc. On the contrary, these categories are ideological products of a particular socioeconomic system. Far from there being fixed races, processes of racialization have varied based on the precise evolution of the capitalist system and class struggle. To cite but one of the most famous cases, the Irish came to be seen as white through a process of social ascension related both to their position in class society vis-à-vis other racialized groups and efforts to identify with the least oppressed members of the working class. Identity categories are sites of class struggle, not fixed essences.

U.S.-style identity politics, as Adolph Reed Jr. and others have demonstrated, repackages these anti-dialectical forms of race-based thinking for the multicultural age of neoliberal imperialism. This has primarily been done through a simple change in the positive or negative values attributed to racial—and other—categories. Instead of thinking in racist terms, associating negative characteristics with certain races, identity politics trains us to think in affirmative racial terms, imputing positive traits to particular identities. While this might appear to some to be an improvement, and it arguably is in a certain register, Reed insightfully explains that racist thinking is racist thinking, independently of the values at work. It is unsurprising, then, that an important aspect of French Theory's relevance in the United States has been due to its ability to provide a sophisticated philosophical patina to the regressive race-based thinking of identity politics. It makes the reactionary assumption that people are forever trapped in ideologically constructed identities, which rigorously determine

their thoughts and actions, into a refined and civilized morality based on the recognition of—irremediable—differences.

French Theory is not only ideologically regressive; it is also politically reactionary. The thinkers involved have consistently voiced their stalwart opposition to actually existing socialism, and some of them have been practically committed to overthrowing it. This is a remarkable fact that has largely been obscured due to an extensive academic debate on the lack of political commitment by the so-called postmodernists, which was framed within the logic of liberal ideology. Major figures like Derrida and Foucault were absolutely committed to practical politics, it is just that their commitments were to overthrowing communism. As I detail in a forthcoming book, *French Theory Made in USA*, Derrida was the co-president of the French chapter of the Jan Hus Educational Foundation, which ran anticommunist subversion campaigns in Czechoslovakia, with the financial backing of the Ford Foundation (renowned for working hand in glove with the CIA),¹³ George Soros's Open Society Fund, the Margaret Thatcher Foundation, the United States Information Agency, and the National Endowment for Democracy (which famously does openly what the CIA did covertly, according to its founder).¹⁴ Derrida was directly involved in running illegal seminars in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, where he smuggled in books, money, and materials.

Foucault participated in similar anticommunist operations against the Polish People's Republic, through fundraising, smuggling in money and supplies (on a trip funded by the French government and the European Community), participating in publicity and media campaigns, and speaking out and writing in support of the anticommunist dissident movement. He was one of the most dedicated intellectual supporters of the opposition, along with his close friend and political comrade-in-arms André Glucksmann. He even worked as the treasurer for *Solidarité internationale*, which very likely served as a conduit for CIA money. The Agency quickly became the largest supporter of *Solidarność* and one of its assets in Bonn "gave funds to the Solidarity offices in Paris and Brussels using CIA money masked as foundation donations."¹⁵

French Theory is therefore not only regressive on a theoretical level. It is also regressive on the practical plane because it does not support the real-world transition to socialism. In fact, many French theorists are openly

reactionary in their concrete commitment to fighting *against* the attempt to establish a more egalitarian and sustainable society.

JPL: What do you think are the significant ideological divisions within the tendencies and movements that go under the name of Marxism? What is at stake in marking these divisions and understanding them?

GR: Dialectical and historical materialism (DHM) is a collective tradition of scientifically understanding the world and practically transforming it. Marx, as well as Engels, made foundational contributions to this science, of course, as did Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and many others. It is important to emphasize, however, that the collective science is primary, not the individual thinker or actor. In defending the position that DHM is a science, I do not have in mind the bogeyman of positivistic or objectivist science, as mentioned above. This bugbear has often been used to disingenuously denigrate the scientific ambitions of materialism, particularly by the French theorists who generally embrace a-scientificity as the highest form of sophistication. Marxist science is not only collective, fallibilistic, and practically oriented, but it is also innovative insofar as it needs to both further develop its explanatory and transformative power *and* account for new historical developments.

If we take, as the basis for scientific claims, the primacy of practice, then it is clear that there is one, central tradition of DHM that has proven its ability to improve the real, material world. Within this tradition, there are many rich debates and disagreements, as well as open conflicts and ongoing endeavors to further develop materialism through innovation. In other words, recognizing that it is a science does not mean that it requires conformity to unquestionable dogmas. On the contrary, since its truth claims are ultimately resolved in the practical world of class struggle, what really matters is a dedication to developing a framework of analysis that has the most theoretical and practical power, while always being supple enough to learn from one's mistakes and consider new approaches.

If one studies the material history of the world socialist movement, outside of the propagandistic parameters set by the imperial superstructure, I do not think there can be any doubt about the center of gravity of the tradition I am describing, which we might refer to as anti-imperialist

Marxism. It is this form of dialectical and historical materialist analysis that has clearly elucidated the international dynamics of capitalism, which has underdeveloped the majority of the planet in order to develop the imperial core and, most importantly, line the pockets of its ruling class. It has also undertaken to right this wrong via revolutionary socialist state-building projects that have successfully broken the chains of imperialism.

There have been many revisionist attempts to, in the words of Lenin, gut this tradition of its revolutionary core. Indeed, the dominant forms of Western Marxism that we were discussing are thoroughly revisionist in this sense. Openly rejecting Marxism's material manifestation in the real world, they have orchestrated a theoreticist retreat to the supposed mind of Marx. In certain cases, they have even disingenuously laid claim à la Marcuse to an authentic Marxism, which was purportedly perverted by those who successfully used it to change reality, rather than simply interpret it. This version of revisionist Marxism, like the others, has been a major weapon of ideological class warfare against the tradition upheld by Lenin. This is why it has been directly supported by some of the most powerful elements of the capitalist ruling class as well as the propaganda agencies—also known as intelligence services—of imperialist states, as I have detailed in my book *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?*¹⁶ This form of revisionist Marxism seeks to domesticate and commercialize it, transforming it into one more form of trendy theory circulating in the marketplace of ideas, rather than allow it to be taken up as a weapon for waging war on the commodification of the world.

AM: German social democracy repudiated Marxism at the Bad Godesberg Congress in 1959. It allowed the Communist Party to be banned in the Federal Republic of Germany. Previously, it had announced its position with Bernstein and revisionism. So, there was a clear process in this country: there was Marxism, it was suppressed and then abandoned.

On the contrary, everything is still much vaguer in France. We ended up with a Socialist Party that could clearly be defined as the party of those who absolutely do not want socialism. In the end, there are always people on the left and people on the right, but I see in this reassuring distinction a certain lightness, a certain superficiality. In terms of mass influence, Marxism has not had a very great impact in France. Of course, it came after the Paris

Commune, which missed the boat because of the influence of Proudhon and Blanqui. It was finally embodied in Guesdism, but Guesde himself became a collaborator of imperialism (minister in 1914). And all this is masked by the fact that there is indeed a French socialism, predating Marx, moreover, regarded with disdain. All this encourages eclecticism. And I can already imagine that our present book will not be understood as a necessary clarification of incompatible doctrines, but as a narcissism of the small differences of people on the left who want to stand out from their peers.

In reality, we need to draw some unambiguous conclusions. France may have been the country of “left-wing Nietzscheanism,” but it is also the country of “right-wing Marxism,” where anything can be said about what you imagine Marxism to be.

JPL: Could you discuss how the struggle to define the Marxist tradition has played itself out in the publishing industry and the academy?

AM: France is the country of *The Black Book of Communism*, which has been spread all over the world. I’m struck by the antinomy with Latin America, where the powers that be often give left-wing intellectuals a bone to gnaw on at the university. In France, the university fights Marxism, in a rather subtle way, but it fights it. Or worse, the intellectual bourgeoisie doesn’t even realize that it’s fighting it, but it quietly exercises its class hegemony. And when it’s on the left, it’s obviously more or less French-theoretical.

GR: I am currently completing a trilogy titled *The Intellectual World War*, which engages in a detailed analysis of the political economy of knowledge production. It examines, more specifically, the academic sector of the imperialist superstructure, or what we might call the intellectual apparatus, meaning the entire system of theoretical production, circulation, and consumption. This apparatus includes the university system and publishing industry, as well as the mass media, think tanks, culture industries, and more. What I have found in my research is that the imperial intellectual apparatus, when it has not been able to destroy or completely sideline Marxist theory, has more or less systematically promoted forms of compatible Marxianism, meaning a version of Marxism—like the Western

and cultural Marxism we discussed above—that is compatible with capitalism because it eschews any real-world alternative.

As a matter of fact, one aspect of the intellectual world war waged by the capitalist ruling class and its managers has been to try to take ownership over Marxism, making it into a commodifiable theory that is not a threat to the dominion of capital. The Rockefeller interests actually funded a Marxism-Leninism Project, which created international networks of intellectuals and institutions dedicated to a common enterprise of promoting a so-called authentic Marxism over and against its supposed perversions in the Soviet Union.¹⁷ This project included lavish funding—millions of dollars if one adjusts for inflation—for publications, international conferences, dissertation research, scholarly exchanges and meetings, and a research program in New York. Marcuse was one of the major players in this endeavor, and his disciple Bernard Morris ran a parallel project in the U.S. State Department (where Marcuse had worked with him for years). It was within this framework that the future author of *One-Dimensional Man* was funded by the Rockefellers to spend a long sojourn in Paris, where he was hosted by the 6th Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études. He was “entrusted with the mission of drawing the Marxists among France’s intellectuals into the Western camp without them having to give up their Marxism.”¹⁸ It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Marcuse played, at least at the time, the role of the well-paid piper of Western Marxism.

This should make it clear, then, that the tendency to reject anti-imperialist Marxism, which is dedicated to socialism in the real world, in favor of an intellectualized Marxianism, is not at all a threat to the capitalist system. On the contrary, the archival record demonstrates that so-called Western or cultural Marxism has been promoted by some of the most powerful robber barons and the leading imperialist state.

JPL: What is the relationship between Marxism and actually existing socialism?

AM: Yes, at this stage of the book, readers will legitimately ask the question “What is to be done?” and will no doubt expect us to tell them to join the ranks of triumphant Marxism-Leninism and all will be well. This view of things leads us, of course, to consider the other side of the coin: Marxism as

a kind of promise that has not always been kept. And we know that, especially in the West, there is an identitarian paradigm (to return to a category of French Theory), of Trotskyist origin in this case, but which goes beyond this framework to adopt the structure of a Westernist posture, the eternal parable of the betrayal of the revolution, the eternal little phrase that comes back into the mouth of the intellectual who judges history. And we all know Deleuze's phrase "all revolutions fail." That is a doctrine that worked a great deal in Anglo-Saxon countries in the first instance, but also to some extent in France, because it was based on a puritanical and preachy baseline that, it has to be said, has little to do with the scientific attitude of Marxism. So, I'll take things completely the other way around, using a borderline case to show the weakness of this paradigm.

I have noticed that, in China, Marxism has obvious effects and has brought China to its current position. It has turned it into a bulwark in defense of international law, the UN Charter, and financial support for a Russia threatened by NATO on its doorstep. Despite the temptation of a great NEP, the Chinese are becoming a formidable competitor to the United States, but it cannot abandon Marxism without completely destabilizing the country. And this is an undeniable victory for Marx.

Rather than lecturing the Chinese and asking them to be more Marxist, the task of an intellectual is to show the extent to which the Chinese cannot offload the task of carrying Marxism, whether they like it or not. Loyalty is essential, without constraint. It's a bit like when a couple realizes that they have to bring up children and that it's not morality that imposes conjugality, it's a practical necessity. The strength of Marxism in the nineteenth century was that it brought socialism out of value judgments and showed its necessity, recognizing the rose in the cross of the present, as Hegel said, reconciling with reality or, as the German translation allows, reaffiliating with effectivity (*Versöhnung mit der Wirklichkeit*).

GR: The whole point of dialectical and historical materialist analysis is to change the world, not simply interpret it. In spite of all of the imperialist slander and propaganda, this is precisely what has happened: the development of DHM, as a weapon of class struggle for the global socialist movement, led to state-building projects that successfully broke the chains of imperialism. They have all taken on specific forms, and they have

sometimes been beset by deep contradictions, but the fundamental orientation is largely the same: the value produced by workers should not be stolen by owners but should instead, in some way, be used to improve their shared world and increase their self-determination. Actually existing socialism is thus the practical manifestation of DHM. It is what we might refer to as living Marxism, or Marxism instantiated in the material world.

This does not mean, of course, that everything that has presented itself under the banner of socialism is to be celebrated across the board. As Domenico Losurdo has insightfully demonstrated, actually existing socialism is a practical process of learning. There is no blueprint for it, and there is not a perfect theory of how to implement it. Every form of socialism has had to advance through trial and error, and there have been enormous setbacks and mistakes along the way. From a dialectical and historical materialist vantage point, this makes perfect sense. When you are charting uncharted territory, and there is not a perfect theoretical map for how to proceed, you will need to undertake experiments and learn from them. The primary guide, in this process, is practice. Being open to learning and self-critique is thus essential to this entire process.

Now that we are over one hundred years into experiments in developing the preliminary stages of socialism, there is a lot that we can learn from these practical realities. A significant aspect of contemporary dialectical and historical materialism consists, then, in studying and drawing lessons from what has been done, while also identifying what remains to be accomplished. One aspect that is particularly important, in my opinion, is to recognize that socialism is emerging through a dialectical process, meaning that it can only really be understood in relationship to the dominant capitalist system. Socialism does not spring forth, fully formed, from the forehead of Marx or any other thinker. It emerges through collective struggle in a world dominated by imperialism. This is why, in the words of Michael Parenti, we have only had forms of socialism that are under siege, never socialism set free. This is a feature of every single form of socialism in the imperialist world, and this goes a long way to explaining one of the attributes of socialism—so-called authoritarianism—that has been widely criticized. If socialists do not establish a strong state that can maintain self-determination and contain anticommunist subversion, then they will be crushed. Far from having autonomously chosen to have a robust,

centralized government, they have had it imposed from the outside as a necessary condition of their existence. This does not mean, of course, that there might not be pertinent criticisms of certain actions or tendencies.

Another significant feature, which a dialectical approach helps us apprehend, is that socialism has sometimes had to tactically retreat from some of its goals in order to advance toward its strategic objective. Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) is one of the most famous examples because it allowed capitalist investment in the Soviet Union in order to develop the productive forces. Many cried foul at the time, claiming that Lenin was turning his back on the communist project. On the contrary, he knew full well that sometimes you have to take one step backward in order to make a leap forward, and that is precisely what he had in mind. In a situation where it was absolutely necessary to develop the productive forces but there was not a large capitalist class that could provide the required investment, it had to be sought outside of the USSR. This was a tactical decision, however, not a strategic reorientation. Deng Xiaoping did something similar with the reform and opening up in China, although this process has been much longer for a number of reasons. The same is true of Vietnam's Đổi Mới or reform process.

In addition to learning from all of the practical experiments in actually existing socialism, DHM can contribute to them by proposing innovative solutions to the various problems encountered. One of the most interesting developments that I am aware of in contemporary Chinese Marxism, for instance, is the school of innovative Marxism. As the name itself suggests, the goal is to further advance Marxism in order to solve practical problems and assist actually existing socialism in moving to the next level. *China's Economic Dialectic* by Cheng Enfu is a good example because it provides a sober and rigorous assessment of contemporary China, without avoiding criticism, while also making suggestions and proposals for how to overcome certain problems.^{[19](#)}

JPL: Since dialectical and historical materialism is not only dedicated to understanding the world, but also changing it, how would you describe the current state of global class struggle? In the heyday of the neoliberal era, many proclaimed once again the death of Marxism and the end of socialism. Today, however, China continues its meteoric rise, and the

capitalist world is beset by many crises. Where do things stand, practically speaking, in your opinion?

GR: The neoliberal counter-revolution has sought to eliminate the socialist alternative and integrate the entire world into a global framework of imperialist domination. In spite of some early successes, it has encountered at least two serious impediments. One is an unwillingness on the part of so many countries to accept a subservient status (the resurgent anticolonial orientation across the Sahel region in Africa is a great example). In the contemporary conjuncture, there are thus many signs of a multipolar world, rather than a global pyramid with the leading imperialist countries situated at the top. The other is the continued construction of socialism in a number of countries around the world. China is obviously of the utmost importance due to its size, its incredible growth, and its increasing prominence on the global stage.

Most Western Marxists have maintained that China simply went capitalist with the reform and opening up. This is a very undialectical assessment. Rather than mapping out in detail the specific, material changes that occurred under Deng Xiaoping, Western Marxists have generally operated on the all-or-nothing assumption that China was either completely socialist—according to a pure idea of what socialism is supposed to be—or absolutely capitalist. However, Chinese history is composed of complex processes that need to be detailed as meticulously as possible. For instance, the reform and opening up was a very gradual process, which took place in specific locations and particular sectors based on an explicit recognition of the primacy of practice. The strategy, meaning the overall goal, was not to make China capitalist, as can be seen, for instance, in the fact that the towering heights of the economy are still controlled by the state and that the state itself is squarely in the hands of the Communist Party. On the contrary, the reform and opening up was a tactic grounded in a socialist strategy of developing the productive forces and fostering technology transfer. Whatever criticisms one might have, the specific, Chinese path to socialism has obviously been successful in attaining the goals just mentioned. In the contemporary world, China is a socialist powerhouse that offers a very different model of development.

Moreover, China is one of the international leaders in breaking the historical chains of imperialism and constructing an alternative world order. It has, in this endeavor, allied with countries around the world invested in national development outside of the dominant imperial framework. It has long been dedicated to promoting peace among nations, and it is quickly emerging as a global leader in developing an environmental civilization.²⁰ Opposed to these efforts are the imperial countries, led by the United States. Their model has been the dominant one, but there are many signs that it is running out of steam.

In this context, the revitalization of Marxism is of the greatest importance. Due to the enormous setback of the destruction of Soviet-style socialism, as well as the decades of triumphalist anticommunist propaganda, the time is ripe for demonstrating the superiority of dialectical and historical materialism. For people truly interested in solving the problems faced by humanity and the planet, there is a rich collective tradition that we need to learn from and continue building.

AM: What is certain is that the union of France and the United States forms a large part of this fluctuating entity that is the West, and that it is an illusion to believe that it is the center of the world. Just look at the map of the countries that decided to apply sanctions against Russia following the special military operation in February 2022: North America, Europe minus Serbia, then the “strategically Western” countries, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand. The rest of the world abstained. Previously, many South American countries aligned themselves with the United States on this sort of thing, and French-speaking African countries did the same for France. The world is being split in two, the world is changing focus. Marxism, a form of thought forged—not by chance—at the confluence of the German, French, and English traditions of thought, still plays a key role. It is certainly the culmination of Western philosophy, but its vocation is to go beyond that framework. General Giap, who led the Vietnamese Army, showed Marxism’s power of worldmaking when he uttered what is probably the most profound sentence ever uttered by a Marxist: “The Americans are waging war on us with science; we are waging war on them scientifically.”

CONCLUSION

The Ultimate Stakes of Class Struggle in Theory

Jennifer Ponce de León: We have discussed the various ways in which French Theory is an ideological product of the imperial core that obscures material reality and disorients people politically, highlighting that this is precisely one of the reasons why it has been so widely promoted by powerful forces in the capitalist world. You have both juxtaposed to the ideology of French Theory the tradition of dialectical and historical materialism, explaining its theoretical and practical superiority, and highlighting that this has been proven by material history. In bringing our conversation to a close, I want to ask both of you to explain the fundamental stakes of class struggle in theory, particularly regarding the battle that we've been discussing between French Theory and Marxism. Why is such an ideological confrontation important, and why should it be waged today? Why dedicate time and energy to a *Requiem for French Theory*, instead of—for instance—simply ignoring it?

Gabriel Rockhill: We are living in the end times, which Georges Gastaud has theorized as the age of exterminism. If it be imperialist warfare verging on a nuclear apocalypse, the brutal intensification of capitalist social murder, or the catastrophic decimation of the planet, the stakes of class struggle have arguably never been higher. It is a question of life or death for the species and even the biosphere. This is no longer—if it ever was—a time to indulge in the theoretical games of the petty-bourgeois

intelligentsia. It is a time to call the latter out for what they are and engage in serious ideological warfare.

French Theory is part of a much broader intellectual world war aimed at discrediting dialectical and historical materialism, as well as actually existing socialism. It has had an expansive and deep influence, including within the Marxist intelligentsia around the world and, most importantly, progressive organizing. For those of us who know this tradition from the inside, we have a responsibility to clarify its function within international class struggle, in order to both defend Marxism against its reductive dismissals and to go on the offensive by demonstrating the power of dialectical and historical materialism. As an innovative, collective, practical science of liberation, we can draw on it and further develop its tools to understand and transform the world before it is too late.

Aymeric Monville: To conclude, I'd like to mention a very inspiring U.S.-American game—because contrary to what you might think, there are lots of things that interest me in your country!—and that game is poker. Marxism and French Theory can evolve in two separate spheres, giving the impression that we're not evolving in the same world, or even that we don't belong to the same world (since French Theory is also based on Bourdieusian “distinction”). But there comes a time when you have to lay your cards on the table and compare. It's up to readers to have the last word, as referees. Put simply, that's the rule: at some point you have to lay your cards on the same table, because there is only one game, one table, one world. Monism is indeed the basis of materialism, isn't it?

Notes

1. The recording of this event is available via the Critical Theory Workshop's video archive, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVyaUkj-b58&t=800s>. The book in question is Aymeric Monville, *Neocapitalism According to Michel Clouscard: An Introduction*, trans. Philippe Gendrault, foreword by Gabriel Rockhill (Madison, WI: Iskra Books, 2023).

Introduction: French Theory in the Intellectual Cold War

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2. Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy*, 9; Cusset, *French Theory*, 30.
3. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 98–99; Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969); Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 262–63, 305–6.
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6. Gabriel Rockhill, Foreword in Aymeric Monville, *Neocapitalism According to Michel Clouscard* (Madison, WI: Iskra Books, 2023), xxi–xli; Andrew Glass, "LBJ Confers with 'The Wise Men,' March 25, 1968," *Politico*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/03/25/this-day-in-politics-march-25-1968-477991>.
7. Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999), 381–82; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 135, 241–42; Rock-hill, Foreword, in Monville, *Neocapitalism According to Michel Clouscard*, xxxvii–xxxviii; Peter Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 104–8; Sarah Miller Harris, *The CIA and the*

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8. Leslie, “Robert Macksey and the Humanities Center,” 933; Patrick Iber, “The Spy Who Funded Me: Revisiting the Congress for Cultural Freedom,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 11, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-spy-who-funded-me-revisiting-the-congress-for-cultural-freedom/>.
9. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy*, 247–65.
10. Gilles Deleuze, quoted in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, “The Space Between-1971,” in Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy*, x; Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1–22.
11. Macksey and Donato, “The Space Between-1971,” xii.
12. Goldmann, in Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy*, 148. Goldmann was best known as an advocate of socialist humanism. See Lucien Goldmann, *Power and Humanism* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman Books, 1974); Lucien Goldmann, “Socialism and Humanism,” in *Socialist Humanism*, ed. Erich Fromm (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 40–52.
13. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii–xxiv.
14. Foucault might be seen as an exception to this. However, his analysis was generally opposed to any kind of longitudinal history, and to notions of historical breaks. He relied on methods that he characterized as “archaeological” and “genealogical,” the latter in a Nietzschean sense. In line with Nietzsche, he explicitly counter-posed genealogy to history, seeing the former as a perspective that “rejects the metahistorical development of ideal significations.” See Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 140.
15. Frank R. Ankersmit, “Historiography and Postmodernism,” *History and Theory* 28, no. 2 (1989): 142, 149–50; John H. Zammito, “Ankersmit’s Postmodernist Historiography: The Hyperbole of Opacity,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (October 1998): 330–46; Deleuze, *Foucault*, xiii; John Bellamy Foster, “Afterword: In Defense of History,” in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 185–87.
16. Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 247–49; Macksey and Donato, “The Space Between-1971,” xii; Dishari Neogy, “Deconstruction of the Conceptual ‘Centre’ as a Post-Modern Phenomenon,” *International Journal of English Research* 7, no. 6 (2021): 1–3.
17. Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969).
18. Gabriel Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia: Historical Commodity Fetishism and Ideological Rollback,” *Monthly Review* 75, no. 2 (June 2023): 19–49.
19. The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in Zillah Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press,

1979), 362–72.

20. Fredric Jameson, *The Years of Theory: Postwar French Thought to the Present* (London: Verso, 2024), 15–19. The following discussion of French Theory generally follows Jameson’s periodization but giving it a more definite chronological ordering and filling it in with some additional details.
21. Ibid., 17.
22. Ibid.
23. See the comments on the Annales School of the CIA in Office of European Analysis, Central Intelligence Agency, *France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals: A Research Paper* (December 1985).
24. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975).
25. Ketī Chukhrov, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (Minneapolis: e-flux/University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 20.
26. Jameson, *The Years of French Theory*, 18–19, 435–36, 445. The shifts in French Theory in the late 1980s were well diagnosed in George Ross, “Intellectuals Against the Left: The Case of France,” in *The Retreat of the Intellectuals: The Socialist Register, 1990* (London: Merlin Press, 1990): 201–27.
27. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75–80; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54–55; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Graham Harman, *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
28. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2014): 225–48; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 9–12; Timothy Morton, *Humankind* (London: Verso, 2019), 59–69 ; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiv–xv, 1–4; John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s Critique of Enlightenment Humanism,” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 8 (January 2023): 10–12.
29. Office of European Analysis, Central Intelligence Agency, *France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals*.
30. Gabriel Rockhill, Foreword, in Monville, *Neocapitalism According to Michel Clouscard*, xiv.
31. On the “fourfold retreat” see John Bellamy Foster and Gabriel Rockhill, “Western Marxism and Imperialism: A Dialogue,” *Monthly Review* 76, no. 10 (March 2025): 1–29.
32. The influence of French Theory can be seen in postcolonial and decolonial discourses quite widely, including the so-called Modernity/Coloniality School, and even forms of Afropessimism.
33. Bruno Latour, “Love Your Monsters,” Breakthrough Institute, February 14, 2012, thebreakthrough.org; Foster, “Marx’s Critique of Enlightenment Humanism,” 7–13. The classic critique of irrationalism is Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980).
34. Slavoj Žižek, “Where Is the Rift?: Marx, Lacan, Capitalism, and Ecology,” *Res Publica* 23, no. 3 (2020): 375–85; Slavoj Žižek interviewed by Tyler Cohen, “Slavoj Žižek on His Stubborn Attachment to Communism,” *Conversations with Tyler*, Episode 84 (January 8, 2020); Foster, “The New Irrationalism,” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 9 (February 2023): 19–21; Gabriel Rockhill, “Capitalism’s Court Jester: Slavoj Žižek,” *Counterpunch*, January 2, 2023, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/01/02/capitalisms-court-jester-slavoj-zizek/>.
35. On the complex theoretical relations here see Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 52–83.

36. Gavin Arnall, *Subterranean Fanon: An Underground Theory of Radical Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 18–33. For a coherent analysis of Fanon’s dialectical worldview see Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
37. Joseph Needham, *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 13, 27; Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, vol. 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989, 2009).
38. Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024). For an example of how a self-identified post-structuralist-postcolonialist thinker sought to charge Marxism with Eurocentrism, while focusing almost exclusively on the narrow Western Marxist tradition see Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies* (London: Routledge, 2004).
39. Simin Fadaee, *Global Marxism: Decolonisation and Revolutionary Politics* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 2024), 22–23.
40. Gregory Jones-Katz, “The World Still Needs French Theory. Postmodernism Is Dead. Long Live Postmodernism,” *Foreign Policy* (October 4, 2024), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/10/04/fredric-jameson-french-theory-postmodernism-literature-globalization/>. Jones-Katz includes the ritual “end of Marxism” in his article, but his insistence on the need of French Theory in the age of globalization and the partial rise of the Global South presents the opposite meaning, of *the specter of Communism* still present, still to be combatted, if in a different form.

Preface: A Transatlantic Exchange

1. What started as a Summer School has evolved into an alternative educational platform called the Critical Theory Workshop / Atelier de Théorie Critique (<https://criticaltheoryworkshop.com>). The three authors of this book first met at the CTW/ATC’s 2023 Summer School in Paris.
2. See the following bilingual edition: René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques: Objections et réponses, suivies de quatre lettres*, ed. Jean-Marie Beyssade and Michelle Beyssade (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 58–59.
3. See Gabriel Rockhill, *Logique de l’histoire: Pour une analytique des pratiques philosophiques* (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2010), 199–356.
4. For a detailed analysis of Foucault’s misreading of Nietzsche, see Gabriel Rockhill, “Foucault, Genealogy, Counter-History,” *Theory & Event* 23/1 (January 2020): 85–119. Foucault’s interpretation of Immanuel Kant suffers from similar problems, as I have argued in *Logique de l’histoire*, 363–84.
5. See, for instance, Gabriel Rockhill, “Démocratie moderne et révolution esthétique: Quelques réflexions sur la causalité historique,” in *La philosophie déplacée: Autour de Jacques Rancière*, ed. Laurence Cornu and Patrice Vermeren, Actes du Colloque du Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle (Paris: Horlieu Editions, 2006), 335–49.
6. Reprinted in this collection: Pierre Vilar, *Une histoire en construction: Approche marxiste et problématiques conjoncturelles* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1982).
7. Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966), 274.

- [8.](#) Daniel Arasse, *Histoires de peintures* (Paris : Denoël, 2004), 154–55. Note that the sadly too early departed Daniel Arasse nevertheless found this anachronism “extraordinarily productive.”
- [9.](#) See Michel Clouscard, *Néo-fascisme et idéologie du désir* (Paris: Mouton, 1973; repr. Éditions Delga, 2013). The English translation of this book is forthcoming in the AIM book series. On Clouscard, also see Aymeric Monville, *Neocapitalism According to Michel Clouscard: An Introduction*, trans. Philippe Gendrault, foreword by Gabriel Rockhill (Madison, WI: Iskra Books, 2023).
- [10.](#) It is symptomatic, for example, that Alain Badiou finds it necessary to support his argument by presenting himself—not without reason—as the heir to the “French philosophical moment” of the 1960s. One of his books, *Petit panthéon portatif* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), is a eulogy of such disparate thinkers as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Sartre, and Lyotard. On the other hand, it is striking to see how Clouscard systematically opposed all of those thinkers without exception throughout his work. Whether we agree with it or not, this Clouscardian critique appears today to be the only radical Marxist critique of what was later to be called “’68 thought.”

Part I: Requiem for French Theory

1. See Gabriel Rockhill, *The Intellectual World War: Marxism versus the Imperial Theory Industry*, vol. 1: *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2025).
2. *La Pensée* is a theoretical review of the French Communist Party with which, incidentally, I was involved with for seven years as editor-in-chief.
3. The reader will allow me to quote the entire text here, which is one of the most beautiful ever written in French: “You place confidence in the actual state of society without reflecting that this state is subject to inevitable revolutions, and that it is impossible to foresee or to prevent that which may confront your children. The great become small, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes a subject. Are the blows of Fortune so rare that you can count on being exempt from them? We are approaching a state of crisis and a century of revolutions. Who can answer to you for what you will then become? Whatever men have made, men may destroy; there are no ineffaceable characters save those which Nature impresses, and Nature makes neither princes, nor millionaires, nor lords. What, then, will that satrap do in his fallen state whom you have educated only for grandeur? What will that extortioner do in his poverty who knows how to live only on gold? What will that pompous imbecile do, deprived of everything, who can make no use of himself, and who employs his existence only in what is foreign to himself? Happy he who then knows how to turn away from the station which he quits, and can remain a man in spite of Fortune! Praise as much as you will that conquered king who, in his fury, would be buried under the ruins of his throne: for myself I despise him. I see that he owes his existence solely to his crown, and that if he were not king he would be nothing at all. But he who loses his crown and does without it, is then superior to it. From the rank of king, which a craven, a villain, or a madman might occupy as well, he ascends to the state of man which so few men know how to fill.” *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile or Treatise on Education*, trans. William H. Payne (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1892), Book III.
4. See *Quand la CIA infiltrait la culture* (ARTE/ZDF, 2006), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58QTcf_mFag and Sartre’s FBI file, obtained through a Freedom of Information Act Request.
5. See Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); as well as Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000).
6. For more details, see Gabriel Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia: Historical Commodity Fetishism and Ideological Rollback,” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (June 2023): 19–49.
7. See Bourdieu’s Preface to Brigitte Mazon, *Aux origines de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales: Le rôle du mécénat américain (1920–1960)* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988).
8. Mazon, *Aux origines de l’École des Hautes Études*, 154.
9. For more details, see my Foreword to Aymeric Monville’s *Neocapitalism according to Michel Clouscard*, trans. Philippe Gendrault (Madison, WI: Iskra Books, 2023).
10. The same is ultimately true for Sartre, who was also integrated into Western Marxism, albeit for slightly different reasons than Althusser.
11. Adolph Reed, Jr., *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: New Press, 2000), xiii.

- [12.](#) See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).
- [13.](#) Kathleen Maclay, “Judith Butler Wins Mellon Award,” *UC Berkely News*, March 19, 2009, https://newsarchive.berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2009/03/19_butler.shtml.
- [14.](#) See <https://criticaltheoryconsortium.org/about/>.
- [15.](#) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 263.
- [16.](#) Saunders revealed that, during the period 1963–66, “CIA funding was involved in nearly half of the grants made [by foundations] in the field of international activities.” *The Cultural Cold War*, 135.
- [17.](#) This discussion is available via the CTW’s video archive, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVyaUkj-b58&t=800s>.
- [18.](#) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 42.
- [19.](#) See, for instance, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 36–37.
- [20.](#) John Bellamy Foster, “The New Irrationalism,” *Monthly Review*, Vol. 74, No. 9 (February 2023).
- [21.](#) Evelyn Barish, *The Double Life of Paul De Man* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 356.
- [22.](#) Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xix.
- [23.](#) Jacques Derrida, *Pardonner: L’impardonnable et l’imprescriptible* (Paris: Éditions de L’Herne, 2005), 32.
- [24.](#) *Ibid.*, 30.
- [25.](#) Cited in *ibid.*, 28.
- [26.](#) Alain Badiou, “Que peut la philosophie pour la politique?” *L’Humanité*, May 24, 2008.
- [27.](#) *Ibid.*
- [28.](#) Slavoj Žižek, “Il ne s’agit pas de réhabiliter le communisme, mais de repenser tout, à nouveau,” *Libération*, June 26, 2008.
- [29.](#) Trofim Denissovitch Lysenko (1898–1976) was a Soviet agricultural technician and scientist. He was at the origin of a scientific genetic theory, “Mithourinian genetics,” which he promoted during the Stalinist period in the Soviet Union, where in 1948 it achieved the status of exclusive official theory, opposed to “bourgeois science.” Lysenko asserted the incompatibility of genetics with Marxism. These theories were characterized by an obvious dogmatism that did great harm to the image of the international communist movement. Nevertheless, biological researchers such as Guillaume Suing are able nowadays to integrate Lysenko into the advances and failures of science: “Even with regard to Lysenko’s most ‘absurd’ theory, opposed to classical genetics, which holds that heredity passes through random mutations secondarily selected by the environment, the famous ‘heredity of traits acquired by habit,’ it is today’s biologists who are putting it back on the agenda under the euphemistic title of epigenetics. When it comes to finding an alternative to the increasingly incriminating pesticides, isn’t it more than urgent to recognize a plant’s ability to transmit hereditary resistance to a given stress or parasite over several generations? Ironically, it was Western geneticists themselves, so vilified by the ‘proletarian agronomist’ of yore, who launched this profound revolution in biology, shattering all the mechanistic dogmas of formal genetics and capitalist agronomy alike, and seeking to find an alternative to intensive agriculture, which was

truly dangerous and deadly, for nature and man alike.” Guillaume Suing, “Lyssenko, un imposteur?,” *Investig’action*, May 10, 2016.

- [30.](#) See, for instance, Georges Gastaud, *Dialectique de la nature: Vers un grand rebond?* (Paris: Éditions Delga, 2024).
- [31.](#) See Gabriel Rockhill, “Capitalism’s Court Jester: Slavoj Žižek,” *CounterPunch*, January 2, 2023.
- [32.](#) See Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia.”
- [33.](#) André Malraux, Speech delivered at the Palais des Sports in Paris, in the name of the association “Pour la V^e République,” December 15, 1965.
- [34.](#) Michel Clouscard, *Néo-fascisme et idéologie du désir* (Paris: Éditions Delga, 2017), 130. The English translation of this book is forthcoming in the Critical Theory Workshop’s Studies in AIM book series published by Brill and Iskra Books.
- [35.](#) See François Dosse, *L’histoire en miettes: Des ‘Annales’ à la ‘nouvelle histoire’* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1987).
- [36.](#) See Mazon, *Aux origines de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, 126–30.
- [37.](#) Directorate of Intelligence, “France: Defection of the Leftist Intellectuals,” A Research Paper, December 1, 1985, the CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86s00588r000300380001-5>, 6.
- [38.](#) Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 177.
- [39.](#) See Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia.”
- [40.](#) Foucault, who was in Tunisia during most of the uprising, did attend one public mobilization in France, apparently more as a spectator. In any case, he did not come out publicly in support of the movement.
- [41.](#) See Rockhill, “The Myth of 1968 Thought and the French Intelligentsia.”
- [42.](#) For more details, see Aymeric Monville, *Misère du nietzschéisme de gauche* (Brussels: Aden, 2007). This book was reprinted by Éditions Delga in Paris in 2023 and will soon be published in English in the Critical Theory Workshop’s Studies in AIM book series with Brill and Iskra Books.
- [43.](#) See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2011*, ed. Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 170: “I cannot construct finished or plausible sentences using the expression *social class*. I don’t really know what *social class* means.”
- [44.](#) Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983), 32.
- [45.](#) Paul Valéry, “Disillusionment,” 1919, <http://historymuse.net/readings/ValeryDISILLUSIONMENT.htm>.
- [46.](#) Interview with Alain Veinstein, *France Culture*, December 17, 2001.
- [47.](#) See Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La Pensée 68: Essai sur l’anti-humanisme contemporain* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988).
- [48.](#) Cornelius Castoriadis, *La Montée de l’insignifiance* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 39.
- [49.](#) Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: An Analytic History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1992), 73.
- [50.](#) Ibid.
- [51.](#) Ibid., 147.
- [52.](#) Ibid., 152.
- [53.](#) Ibid., 191.

- [54.](#) See, for instance, Adolph Reed Jr., *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000).
- [55.](#) See Domenico Losurdo, *Class Struggle: A Political and Philosophical History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- [56.](#) Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969). See Vol. 1, 52–53 and Vol. 2, 265–66.
- [57.](#) See Walter Rodney, *Decolonial Marxism: Essays from the Pan-African Revolution* (London: Verso, 2022). On Western Marxism, see Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism: How It Was Born, How It Died, How It Can Be Reborn*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024).
- [58.](#) Louis Pinto, “Pour une sociologie des intellectuels de luxe,” *Savoir/Agir*, No. 47 (2019).
- [59.](#) For a critique of Fraser and other contemporary critical theorists along these lines, see Gabriel Rockhill, “Critical and Revolutionary Theory,” *Domination and Emancipation: Remaking Critique*, ed. Daniel Benson (London: Roman & Littlefield International, 2021).
- [60.](#) See some of the talks and discussions Jennifer Ponce de León has participated in, which are available via the Critical Theory Workshop’s video archive, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaSk50CvziZn3Lmb6V-vAA>.
- [61.](#) Whereas the *labor aristocracy* refers to the most privileged segment of the global working class, the *intellectual labor aristocracy* denotes the elite stratum within the world’s intelligentsia. On this topic, see Rockhill, *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?*

Part II: Toward a Revitalization of Marxism

1. Michel Foucault and Duccio Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 104.
2. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*, Vol. 3: 1976–1979 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), 279.
3. Foucault and Trombadori, *Remarks on Marx*, 104.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Gnoseology is the part of philosophy that deals with the origin, foundations and limits of knowledge. A gnoseological approach, typical of Immanuel Kant's, first asks the question of what we can know, before investigating reality. An ontological approach, on the other hand, first asks the question of the materiality on which thought rests. In French Marxism, a major controversy has arisen between Lucien Sève's gnoseological approach and Georges Gastaud's ontological approach. The former focuses on the role of the mind's reflection of material data, while the latter sees this reflection as a moment of matter in motion (see *La Pensée*, no. 275, May 1990).
6. See Georges Gastaud, *Lumières communes: Traité de philosophie à la lumière du matérialisme dialectique*, 5 vols. (Paris: Éditions Delga, Paris, 2016).
7. See Michel Vadée, *Marx penseur du possible* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1992).
8. This interview is available in two parts online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPCCNmE7b9g> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpH5GTTIZ3k>.
9. Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts & Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 1997), 85. Also see Michael Parenti, "Reflections on the Overthrow of Communism," recorded lecture, <https://archive.org/details/ReflectionOnTheOverthrowOfCommunismNLSubtitlesDutch>.
10. Shirley Cereseto and Howard Waitzkin, "Capitalism, Socialism, and the Physical Quality of Life," *International Journal of Health Services* 16, no. 4 (1986): 648.
11. See Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism: How It Was Born, How It Died, How It Can Be Reborn*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024).
12. In his book *L'empire de la honte* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2005), UN Special Rapporteur Jean Ziegler describes how the peoples of the Southern Hemisphere are being cut off by large transcontinental corporations, contributing to a re-feudalization of the world. He sees two weapons of mass destruction at work in this process: debt and hunger. Through debt, states abdicate their sovereignty; through the hunger that follows, people agonize and renounce freedom.
13. Among many other sources, see James Petras, "The Ford Foundation and the CIA: A Documented Case of Philanthropic Collaboration with the Secret Police," *The James Petras Website* (blog), December 15, 2001, <https://petras.lahaine.org/the-fordfoundation-and-the-cia-a-documented-case-of-philanthropiccollaboration-with-the-secret-police/>.
14. See Gabriel Rockhill, *The Intellectual World War: Marxism versus the Imperial Theory Industry*, vol. 2: *French Theory Made in USA* (New York: Monthly Review Press, forthcoming).
15. Seth G. Jones, *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 171.
16. See Gabriel Rockhill, *The Intellectual World War: Marxism versus the Imperial Theory Industry*, vol. 1: *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (New York: Monthly Review

Press, 2025).

- [17.](#) See the files available on the Marxism-Leninism Project at the Rockefeller Archive Center in Sleepy Hollow, New York and Tim B. Müller, *Krieger und Gelehrte: Herbert Marcuse und die Denksysteme im Kalten Krieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2011).
- [18.](#) Müller, *Krieger und Gelehrte*, 523. Also see Ioana Popa, “International Construction of Area Studies in France during the Cold War: Insights from the École Pratique Des Hautes Études 6th Section,” *History of the Human Sciences* 29, no. 4–5 (2016).
- [19.](#) See Cheng Enfu, *China’s Economic Dialectic: The Original Aspiration of Reform*, Foreword by John Bellamy Foster (New York: International Publishers, 2021).
- [20.](#) See, for instance, the discussion of China in John Bellamy Foster, *The Dialectics of Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2024).

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