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Article

Figurations of French Critical Theory[1]

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Abstract: In this brief article, I merely present a schematic presentation of the "figurations" of French critical theory. I rehearse the historical and institutional circumstances of French academia that produced progressive thinkers, such as, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, inter alia. I, then, highlight the privileged position of philosophy in French society and how such privilege nurtured the culture of social and political critique and praxis in France. The influence of G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche on French intellectuals is given relative attention. Moreover, I identify Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche as the link between French critical theory and the Frankfurt School. Towards the end, I argue that French critical theorists share with their Frankfurt counterparts the normative assumptions of critical theory laid out by Max Horkheimer in the 1930s: the anthropological, the practical, and the emancipative.

Keywords: Critical theory, Frankfurt School, French philosophy, theory and praxis

No philosophy happens in a vacuum. It is only in this sense that we are able to speak about French philosophy—for it is a tradition that emerges out of the historical and institutional circumstances of France. We may describe the development of French philosophy to be between "orthodox" and "unorthodoxy," that is, between dogma and iconoclasm. It is interesting to note the irony that we usually associate French thought with the progressive ideas of the likes of Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean Hyppolite, Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and Quentin Meillassoux—to name a few—while oblivious to the fact that these so-called radically progressive thinkers are actually products of an extremely rigorous academic tradition in France. It is not

[1] By figurations I mean "characteristics" or "features" or, in music, the "structure of a musical piece."

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surprising that contemporary Continental philosophy is dominated by French thinkers and, equally not accidental, that these thinkers come from either the *École normale supérieure* (ENS) or the *Université de Paris* (Sorbonne). Even before entering the university, young French students will experience the "privileged status of philosophy" in France for they are introduced to the history of philosophy early on during their *lycée* years.[2] However, philosophy does not stop in the classroom: philosophical discussions are engrained in public conversations—for instance, Radio France has a weekly show, *Les vendredis de la philosophie*, where issues on classical and contemporary philosophy and their relation to society are discussed.[3] Unlike in most countries, philosophy is not unusual in French culture—rather, it has a wide public following and philosophers are treated with high regard. In other words, in France, philosophers can wear their own hats.

But while this cultural rootedness of philosophy has produced the most radical and brilliant French thinkers, it is no secret among these intellectuals that they are products of a "centralized" or "standardized" educational structure with a "high degree of homogeneity."[4] Ironically, in France, while philosophy is a public discourse, the job description of a "philosopher" is profoundly elitist; while in other countries, such as the Philippines, this privilege is enjoyed by lawyers, medical doctors, and clergymen, but not philosophers. The culmination of a French student's institutional education is the *agrégation*—a very competitive civil exam taken by those who intend to apply for university teaching positions in public high schools and universities.[5] This is similar to the German *Habilitationsschrift*, where students are required to write a second dissertation that qualifies them for university teaching. The difference is that the French *agrégation* is a set of standardized exams in the form of essays and oral presentations. It is through this rigorous process that students become particularly well-versed in the history of philosophy, so they become, first and foremost, historians of philosophy (like Deleuze); and they become steep in the writings of Greek philosophers down to the most modern, depending on the period.[6] As such, those who study philosophy imbibe the culture of engaging with the "rich vocabularies of the past,"[7] building on these vocabularies and developing their own original philosophical ways of thinking.

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[2] See Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Ibid*., 8.

[5] *Ibid*., 12.

[6] Cf. Alan Shrift, "The Effects of the Agrégation de Philosophie on Twentieth-Century French Philosophy," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46 (2008), 449–474.

[7] Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 9.

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Interestingly, as Gary Gutting notes, the characteristically elitist French system, while steep in the tradition of textual canons in philosophy, was not contented with closed cultic discipleships, but, rather, encouraged those who are taking the *agrégation* to become independent thinkers in their own right.[8] "Philosophical creativity" was, therefore, common among the most brilliant of students. Such philosophical creativity was enhanced by the exposure of students "to figures and approaches that were far from popular but maintained a presence primarily through the pedagogical force of a great teacher."[9] Moreover, students were also exposed to disciplines outside philosophy, for example literature, history, psychology, physics, and mathematics. As a result, students trained in the French system had an in-depth knowledge of the history of philosophy and a wider grasp of culture.[10]

As an enterprise, philosophy has a peculiar place in French society. As mentioned, philosophers are highly regarded by the public and, as such, they are expected to demonstrate certain positions on contemporary social and political issues. The true litmus test for theory is society itself. It does not come as a surprise that the theoretical works, for example, of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, and Rancière are actively engaged in political questions. This tendency is not unusual in French academia, especially in the writings of philosophers. In a very concrete manner, the French educational system bred not only historians of philosophy and metaphysicians, but, more importantly, political theorists and commentators who demonstrated—either explicitly or implicitly—the marriage between theory and praxis. In this sense, much of French philosophy is essentially social and political philosophy. Deleuze, himself, describes philosophy as a "tool box" of ideas from which we could pick up concepts to make sense of the perplexing social world.[11] Meanwhile, Foucault attempted to expose the relationship between power and social order, and through his historical-theoretical work he was able to show the oppressive tendency of power relations and how these relations are subtly imbedded in our social imaginary.[12] Even Derrida, who was the least politically active of the three, did say that philosophy "has a

[8] *Ibid*., 12.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] *Ibid*., 13.

[11] See Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1877), 208.

[12] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

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political significance"[13]—however, this only became explicit in his more mature engagements with the ideas of Karl Marx, the politics of friendship, and the concept of justice.

One figure who was instrumental in the intellectual development of Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida was the Hegelian scholar Jean Hyppolite, whose *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* was influential on a generation of young students both in ENS and the Sorbonne. For these students, the orientation towards the relationship between thinking and history was reinforced by Hyppolite's lectures on Hegel.[14] Hyppolite, moreover, emphasized Hegel's philosophy of history that attempted to study the underlying meaning of the historical process.[15] Although this preoccupation with Hegel was already found in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. The difference is that Sartre's reading of Hegel was still haunted by his existentialist humanism, a tendency that Deleuze abhorred despite his admiration for Sartre. Meanwhile, Hyppolite's interpretation veered away from an over-emphasis on human consciousness and, instead, emphasized the historical aspect of Hegel's philosophy.[16] This latter reading was more attractive to the young Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida who were contemplating on the possibility of a philosophy of history that decentralizes the view that the subject is the center of the universe. Instead, they were attracted to the relationship between history and political action. Hyppolite's "historical commentary" on Hegel goes as far as claiming that Marx was simply commenting on *Phenomenology of the Spirit* when he wrote the *1844 Manuscripts*.[17]

Louis Athusser's structuralist reading of Marx was also crucial in the intellectual development of French philosophy in the 1960s, specifically on Foucault and Derrida, but more indirectly on Deleuze. Once again, beyond the existentialist reading of Sartre, Althusser provided, like Hyppolite, an interpretation of Marx that did not revolve around the subject. This entailed, for Althusser, a critique of all aspects of Marxism previously conceived. This includes a movement away from the humanist Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* to the more mature *Das Kapital*, where Althusser located a structuralist

[13] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 111.

[14] See Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's* Phenomenology of the Spirit, trans. by Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

[15] See Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction à la Philosophie de l'Histoire de Hegel* (Paris: Editions Marcel Rivière et cie, 1968).

[16] See Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 22–23.

[17] Jean Hyppolite, *Studies on Marx and Hegel*, trans. by John O'Neill (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), vi-vii. Also see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964).

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explanation of modes of production.[18] This, I believe, is diametrically opposed to how the Frankfurt School critical theorists treated Marx—via a return to the *1844 Manuscripts*, specifically to the theory and critique of alienation.[19] Unlike the proponents of the Frankfurt School, Foucault and Deleuze did not focus on the theory of alienation, instead, their theoretical critique of social pathologies follows the direction of a critique of relations of power (Foucault), the increasing complexification of societal structures (Deleuze).

However, more than Hegel and Marx, it was Friedrich Nietzsche who had the most profound influence on French philosophy of the 1960s. However, the Nietzschean engagements of Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida seem to be manifestations of their oedipal relationship with Hegel. According to Gutting, Nietzsche was, for them, a way to develop an anti-Hegelian stance.[20] Nietzsche was pivotal in Foucault's development of a genealogical method, an alternative to Hegel's dialectical materialism, that aims to overcome the metaphysical sway of origins and, instead, emphasizes the role of chance in history.[21] For his part, Deleuze wrote the ingenious *Nietzsche and Philosophy* where he offers alternative interpretations of Nietzschean ideas of power, force, values, etc. Deleuze begrudgingly claims that the "Hegelian themes present in the work as the enemy against which it fights."[22] Meanwhile, Derrida engages in a close reading of Nietzsche, one that is demonstrative of the deconstructive approach that shows, for instance, the "undecidability" of meaning in Nietzsche's writings. Derrida describes the experience of reading Nietzsche as one of "*impouvoir*" or powerlessness—what this shows is the circuitous character of writing and reading that inevitably presumes a bravado of "presence" that always fails to keep its promise of certitude. The peculiarity of Nietzsche's own text is that it reveals

[18] See Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), 47–52.

[19] For instance, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno dramatize the dialectic between "external nature" and "inner nature" resulting in the domination of the former by the latter. Such domination alienates us from our original "mimetic" encounter with nature. See *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (California: Standford University Press, 2002), 24–25. Meanwhile, Erich Fromm discusses extensively Marx's theory of alienation in *Marx's Concept of Man* (London: Continuum, 2004), 37–48.

[20] Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 84.

[21] Cf. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 76–100. It is interestingly ironic that the original French version of this essay appeared in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (1971), a collection of tribute essays to his Hegelian teacher.

[22] Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (London: Continuum, 2002), 162. My view, however, is that Deleuze is more anti-Hyppolite than anti-Hegel.

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this undecidability as opposed of obfuscating it which is a radical movement away from the Hegelian promise of Absolute Spirit.[23]

The profound influence of the three figures briefly outlined above—Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche—is something that French critical theory shares with the Frankfurt School tradition. In spite of the uneasiness that Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse had with the teleological tendency of the Hegelian system, they, nevertheless, had a "magnetic attraction"[24] to the philosophy of Hegel—as they were especially receptive to Hegel's idea of the dialectic. This interest was further intensified by the publication of Georg Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* in 1923 which became influential on the first generation Frankfurt School, especially Lukacs' Hegelian interpretation of Marx which focuses on the dialectical development of proletarian consciousness.[25] In the case of Horkheimer, this influence figures clearly in his early works, specifically in his lecture on the history of German Idealism where he presents a materialist reading of the development of modern philosophy from Kant to Hegel, with the development of bourgeois society as the subtext.[26] Meanwhile, Adorno's engagement with Hegel was more pronounced after the Second World War. Similar to Horkheimer, Adorno's reading of Hegel is profoundly materialist. However, unlike Horkheimer who sought to expose the inherent materialist motivation of Hegel's philosophy, Adorno's interpretation of Hegel is informed by a critique of contemporary society: the focus is whether Hegel "has any meaning for the present … what the present means in the face of Hegel."[27] As such, Adorno's approach forces Hegel to contend with the current state of things in contemporary society and, in effect, also presents a critique of the Hegelian system. For his part, Marcuse offers a comprehensive account of both Hegel and Marx in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, where Marcuse demonstrates that "Hegel's basic concepts are hostile to the tendencies that have led into Fascist theory and practice."[28] Moreover,

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[23] See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. by Barbara Harlow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

[24] James Gordon Finlayson, "Hegel and the Frankfurt School," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. by Dean Moyar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 719.

[25] See Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1971), 46–82.

[26] See Max Horkheimer, "Vorlesung über die Geschichte der deutschen idealistischen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Volume 10 (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1990), 12–165.

[27] Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), 1.

[28] Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1955), vii.

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Marcuse emphasizes the anthropological dimension, as opposed to a pure metaphysical interpretation, of Hegel's dialectic: "the material strivings for a free and rational order of life … the 'unreasonable' reality has to be altered until it comes into conformity with reason."[29] Through this anthropological reading, Marcuse is able to bring to light the materialist as well as the revolutionary aspects of Hegel's philosophy.

Aside from sharing key foundational philosophical influences, it may be argued that French critical theorists also share fundamental normative assumptions with their German counterpart. I think that Horkheimer's conception of critical theory, derived from his writings in the 1930s, aptly captures the concerns of Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida. Firstly, both French critical theory and the Frankfurt School are concerned with the critique of social reality. Both traditions see that we inhabit an environment that is largely mediated by human intervention—that we create our own "historical way of life in its totality,"[30] a profoundly Hegelian assumption. Therefore, critical theory is aware that our human aspirations and practices are imbedded within the social structures we have invented. Secondly, the ethico-practical assumption of the Frankfurt School, the emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice,[31] is also present, albeit implicitly, in the writings of the French critical theorists. This is the pre-political assumption of critical theory, that all human beings—regardless of race, gender, religion, culture, and political orientation—struggle to be free. Hence, freedom is a universal practical assumption. Thirdly, although once again more implicitly compared to the Frankfurt School, given their deep sense of social justice, French critical theorists decentralize the role of the proletariat. Like their Frankfurt counterparts, they view the emancipative impulse as plural and not confined to proletarian sensibilities.[32] As such, given the pre-political demand for social freedom, both German and French critical theory recognize the emancipatory potential of any social group.

It must be noted that it would be misleading to assume that Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida are the only thinkers that comprise French critical theory. The Hegelian-Marxist-Nietzschean influence and the three normative assumptions—anthropological, practical, and emancipative—outlined above are, arguably, present too in the critical writings of other French thinkers, such as, Althusser, Badiou, Balibar, Lacan, Lyotard, Meillassoux, Rancière, and Ricoeur, inter alia. The only main difference between the German and French variants of critical theory is that the former were an organized group

[29] *Ibid*., 5–6.

[30] Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 244.

[31] See *ibid*., 242–46.

[32] See *ibid*., 242, 213–214.

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of intellectuals from various academic institutions under the roof of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, while the latter were less organized, somewhat autarchic, individual thinkers who were trained under a singular academic system. Perhaps, this difference in training and organization also profoundly informed their styles of philosophizing: since, despite sharing commonalities in intellectual heritage and theoretical-normative assumptions, their respective philosophical writing styles are palpably distinct from one another.

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