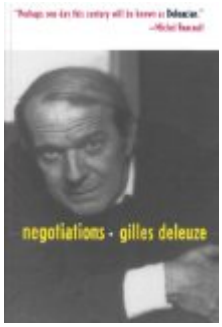
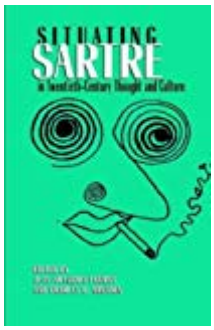
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gilles Deleuze. *Negotiations: 1972-1990 (European Perspectives: a Series in Social Thought and Cultural Ctiticism).* New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. 221 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-07581-7.



Jean-FranÖ§ois Fourny, Charles D. Minahen, eds.. *Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. x + 214 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-16079-1.

Reviewed by Craig Keating

Published on H-France (September, 1998)

Poststructuralism[1] is defined in its essentials by its problematization of the real and by its anti-humanism. It problematizes the real by arguing that statements are not true because they correspond with reality but are so because they come to pass for true according to conditions which are internal to the discourses within which they are made. Reality is not only unimportant for poststructuralism, it is impossible to make statements about it. Poststructuralism's anti-humanism consists in the proposition that individuals are constituted as subjects by social practice grounded in discourse. Two of the troubling consequences of poststructuralism for historians are the idea that History is not in any way a veridical account of the past, nor can it be, and that the human agency which historians often take to be the engine of history is neither original nor authentic.

This disquieting poststructuralist view of the world has come under attack by scholars, occupying a variety of positions on the ideological spectrum, who are committed to a more traditional concept of truth and to the originality of human experience. The intellectual conflict engendered by the rise of poststructuralism began in the 1960s in France, where a Sartrian philosophy and social theory which posited the existance of "***one*** human history with ***one*** truth"[2] had been predominate.

Initially, at least, this was a conflict in which Sartre fared badly. If Sartre remained something akin to the political conscience of France until his death in 1980, his philosophy had long ceased to

have much currency or influence inside or outside the academy. Sartre's thought suffered much the same fate in North America. When Michel Foucault said that Sartre's work was "the magnificent and pathetic effort of a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century"[3], he in many ways summed up the scholarly view of Sartre which would predominate on both sides of the Atlantic until the 1980s. This comment also reveals the vituperative character the conflict between poststructuralists and modernists often assumed, but which would provide an opening for renewed interest in Sartre's work. By the early 1980s, detractors of poststructuralism were relishing older and more recent revelations about the scurrilous interwar and wartime activities of important precursors of the movement such as the Yale literary critic, Paul de Man, and Martin Heidegger, arguably the most important German philosopher of the twentieth century. While not suggesting any causal link here, it is nonetheless true that recent interest in Sartre, however modest in scope, originated contemporaneously with the turn against poststructuralism caused by its suspect political credentials.

Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture, edited by Jean-Francois Fourny and Charles D. Minahen, emerges out of these conflicts. The aim of the work, as Fourny presents it in his introduction, is to redeem Sartre as a way of settling accounts with poststructuralism. "Sartre," Fourny insists, "has much to offer" (pp. 2-3). As he sees it, by situating Sartre the essays in this collection "contribute to rediscovering a thinker who proves to be much more complex than was believed just a few years ago" (p. 9). Moreover, he argues that these essays, while suggesting new directions for political and social theory in the wake of the collapse of an alleged "poststructuralist hegemony" (p. 2), will reveal the extent to which Sartre's work was a fundamental reference point for poststructuralism.

Fourny's introduction is problematic, however, in that he never defines the context in which these essays will situate Sartre (although, one assumes that it is within the broader contours of twentieth-century and contemporary European intellectual history). Nor does he provide any clear details on what exactly it is he believes Sartre has to offer, in what way Sartre appears as more complex than previously assumed, or how exactly Sartre might be seen to be an important reference point for poststructuralism and as a thinker who might rescue contemporary social and political theory from the supposed failures of poststructuralism. Indeed, Fourny never clarifies what it is he takes poststructuralism to be.

Nor do the essays in this collection substantiate the claims advanced by Fourny in his introduction. This is not to detract from the quality of the essays. Most are interesting and insightful. A case in point is Marie-Paule Ha's critique of Sartre's 1948 essay "Orphee noir," which served as the introduction to an anthology of African poetry. Ha focuses on Sartre's use of the concept of a "black Essence" or "black soul" which had been suppressed by the socialization of Africans into colonial society but which was manifest in contemporary African poetry. Ha quite properly points out the contradictory status of the notion of a "black Essence" (which Africans might recapture through an autochthonous literature) in the work of a man whose whole philosophical system rests on the formula "existence precedes essence." As well, Rhiannon Goldthorpe's analysis of Sartre's screenplay for John Huston's 1964 film, *Freud: The Secret Passion*, reveals his links to the *Verstehen* (understanding) tradition in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social theory (a tradition which "seeks to understand social and psychological phenomena in terms of distinctively human intentions or meanings" [p. 14]). To this extent, Goldthorpe argues, Sartre's work perpetuates, to a degree, that of the existentialist psychol-

ogist and philosopher Karl Jaspers and the philosopher of history Wilhelm Dilthey.

But most essays, here, do not move very far beyond a biographical or critical treatment of Sartre, neither of which might contribute to the task of situating Sartre's work in the context of recent intellectual history. Moreover, given that Fourny suggests the real importance of Sartre is to suggest new directions in social and political analysis in a post-poststructuralist world, readers may be surprised at the inordinate attention paid in these essays to Sartre, the literary figure, as opposed to Sartre, the philosopher and social theorist. Sartre was a major figure in both realms and any treatment of Sartre must take this circumstance into consideration. But if the basic premise of this collection, as Fourny presents it, is to be sustained, then Sartre's philosophy and social theory ought to have been the predominant focus here.

These criticisms do not apply to Philip Wood's essay, "A Revisionary Account of the Apotheosis and Demise of Philosophy of the Subject: Hegel, Sartre, Heidegger, Structuralism, and Poststructuralism." As its title suggests, Wood sets the question of subjectivity in Sartre's work in a broad intellectual context. He argues convincingly that while Sartre's structuralist successors succeeded in advancing a philosophy without a human subject, they remained proponents of a philosophy of the subject (what Heidegger called a ***sub-iectum***, "that which underlies, or is the ***ground*** of beings, entities, or that which is" [p. 167]). For example, Louis Althusser, a structuralist Marxist philosopher and E. P. Thompson's ***bete noire*** in ***The Poverty of Theory***, argued that everything at the superstructural level of society (which is to say culture, ideology and, in particularly, the human conscious and unconscious), although it might have a relative autonomy, was determined by the "economic in the last instance." Thus, the economic base of society plays the same role in Althusser's social theory as the free human agent in Sartre's. To paraphrase Althusser, for Sartre one can explain all of society in the formula: the free individual in the last instance. What elevates Sartre to a superior rank as a thinker, as compared to the structuralists, argues Wood, is that he was aware of the consequences of this reliance on a philosophy of the subject and pursued them lucidly to their conclusion. These consequences are apparent in ***The Critique of Dialectical Reason***. Here Sartre argued both for the fundamental freedom of individuals and for the structural and historical determinations which make them what they are. This contradiction at the heart of Sartre's philosophy leads Wood, despite his laudatory comments about Sartre, to describe the ***Critique of Dialectical Reason*** as a "colossal wreck" (p. 187).

One might quibble with Wood's assessment of Sartre as a superior thinker, since the ***Critique of Dialectical Reason*** marked the end of his work as a philosopher (despite the fact that he would live another twenty years and that even by his own admission fundamental questions had been left unanswered in this work). Yet one must applaud Wood for writing a fascinating essay which offers more insight on where and how to situate Sartre than the rest of the essays combined. As well, his evenhanded treatment of poststructuralism stands in stark contrast to many other essays in this work. This is especially true of Fourny's introduction, where he implicates poststructuralism, at a moral level, in the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities by its association with the philosophical anti-subjectivism of Heidegger and de Man and their links to Nazism and fascism. Such attacks strike me as strained and venomous, and they stand in the way of the laudable task to which this book is devoted.

Ultimately, this collection fails to reveal what Sartre has to offer to contemporary thought. Rather, as Wood points out, whatever Sartre's rank as a thinker compared with his contemporaries or successors, his philosophy is very much a ***huis clos***. Thus, while those with a keen interest

in Sartre's thought will find these essays useful, those who are looking for a discussion of the contemporary theoretical value of his work or for a discussion of his place in twentieth-century intellectual history will be disappointed.

An altogether better job of situating a major French intellectual is provided by Gilles Deleuze in his *Negotiations*, a collection of interviews given by him between 1972 and 1990. Deleuze, a professor at University of Paris, Vincennes, until his death in 1995, was a leading philosopher in the development of poststructuralism and postmodernism and was closely associated with Foucault, who was a friend as well as a kindred intellectual spirit. The collection is a useful guide to Deleuze's thought from the publication, along with Felix Guattari, of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the first volume of *Anti-Oedipus*, to *What is Philosophy?*, once again, co-authored with Guattari. As Deleuze himself remarks, these works are "heavy going" (p. 7). These interviews, with such knowledgeable interlocutors as Didier Eribon (author of *Michel Foucault*), Francois Ewald (a former student of Foucault's), and Raymond Bellour (a literary and cultural journalist who has been conducting such interviews since the 1960s), make these difficult works much more accessible.

Martin Joughin's superlative translation very much aids in making this book a success. He preserves the relaxed atmosphere of these interviews and Deleuze's witty and engaging style. His "Translator's Notes," too, are an invaluable contribution. Befitting such an enterprise, Joughin discusses the logic behind certain aspects of his translation and how certain terms are translated differently in other works. But many of his notes go beyond such discussions and constitute short essays which either further expand upon important "Deleuzoguatarrian" concepts or add important historical context to the issues discussed in these interviews.

The collection sensibly divides Deleuze's work into five periods--his *Anti-Oedipus*, his two volumes on the cinema, his interpretation of Foucault, his *What is Philosophy?*, and his politics. While each section provides insight into Deleuze's conceptual innovations within each period, more importantly Deleuze shows how conceptual innovations are built upon or related to one another. Out of such reflections emerges the logic of Deleuze's project as a whole and this book comes to constitute an intellectual biography of sorts.

Indeed, Deleuze not only elucidates his own thought, but situates it in relation to the major figures of Western philosophy since Rene Descartes. Prior to 1972 Deleuze had published studies of David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Benedict Spinoza and would later publish one on Gottfried Leibniz. His continued reflection on these figures is given voice in these interviews and he also specifies his relation to such contemporary figures as Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and the linguists Emile Benveniste and Louis Hjelmslev (important influences in the development of structuralism). As these interviews make plain, Deleuze's relation to these thinkers is not one of influence. Rather, he reads them in light of his own very original philosophical trajectory. The Deleuzian concept which best captures this trajectory is the rhizome, a root which grows on a horizontal plane, irregularly producing shoots above and roots below. For Deleuze the rhizome is an "image of thought" (p. 149) in the same way as the tree of knowledge. But whereas the tree of knowledge signifies a unitary system with diverse branches, the rhizome signifies the uncertain, horizontal development of thought, "semi-aleatory" and mutative. It is on this basis that Deleuze sees philosophy not so much as the progressive development of a knowledge of truth, but rather an experience in which truth as an end ceaselessly recedes before us and the concepts which articulate our knowledge of truth are not stepping stones along a path but points of departure for a thought which develops in uncertain directions. As Leibniz put it, "you think you've got to port, but then find yourself thrown back out

onto the open sea" (p. 94). This image of thought explains his affinity for Foucault, whose "thought's constantly developing new dimensions that are never contained in what came before" (p. 94).

At the end of the day readers will more profitably read Deleuze's interviews than the essays devoted to Sartre. While many of the essays in this collection are interesting, they do not, with a couple of notable exceptions, provide insights into Sartre's life and thought which would be useful to the general reader. And this collection certainly does not bear out the lofty claims made for it by Fourny. While readers will find some difficulty in acclimatizing themselves to Deleuze's idiosyncratic philosophical style and to the Deleuzian neologisms he uses, it is a collection, which, because it is based on interviews for a broad audience, is a useful overview for anyone interested in familiarizing themselves with his thought. It is also, in its own way, an informative work in intellectual biography.

Notes

[1]. "Poststructuralism" refers, here, to the closely related, though distinct, movements of structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. This usage, though somewhat infelicitous, conforms to that in Fourny and Minahen.

[2]. Jean-Paul Sartre (trans. by Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathon Ree), ***The Critique of Dialectical Reason*** vol. 1. ***Theory of Practical Ensembles***, (London, 1976), p. 69.

[3]. Michel Foucault, "L'homme, est-il mort?: un entretien avec Michel Foucault," ***Arts et Loisirs***, 38, 15 June 1966, p. 8.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://www.uakron.edu/hfrance/

Citation: Craig Keating. Review of Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations: 1972-1990 (European Perspectives: a Series in Social Thought and Cultural Ctiticism).* ; Fourny, Jean-FranÖ§ois; Minahen, Charles D., eds. *Situating Sartre in Twentieth-Century Thought and Culture.* H-France, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2354