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Review of “Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought”

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Book Review

Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought, Christopher John Murray, ed. New York and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004. 713 pp., Preface, Alphabetical List of Entries, Thematic List of Entries, Chronology, Entries A to Z, Notes on Contributors, Index. ISBN 1-57958-384-9 \$175.00.

The product of collaboration among 143 international scholars, the *Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought* contains 234 entries, each ranging between 1,000 and 5,000 words on such topics as individual French-speaking thinkers (such as Jean-François Lyotard, Félix Guattari, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Monique Wittig); influential theories and beliefs (“Psychoanalytical Theory,” “Literary Theory and Criticism,” “Marxism”); single or multidisciplinary themes, subjects, genres (“Body,” “Modernism and Postmodernism,” “Catholicism”); social scientific, aesthetic and humanistic fields and sub-fields (“Economics,” “Philosophy of Science,” “Poetry”); contemporary cultural and political sentiments and events (“Historical Survey: 1939-1968,” “La Francophonie,” “Colonial and Postcolonial Experience”), as well as literary and philosophical schools and intellectual life (“Feminism,” “Surrealism,” “Journals and Periodicals,” “French-Jewish Intellectuals”). Moreover, each entry ends with reference to other entries, further reading and, if a person is the topic (which is more than ninety percent the case), with a biography and selected works.

Those who have even a slight familiarity with contemporary French thinkers are aware of the notoriety of their terminology and style. This difficulty can be seen especially in the works of leading members of the literary and philosophical schools and movements such as existentialism, early-structuralism and late-structuralism, to name just a few. In such instances, nearly all of the thinkers vehemently objected to being called an “existentialist” or “structuralist” or “post-modernist,” etc., each wishing to be seen as a unique thinker instead of being labeled as a member of a group, and thus found remedy by either inventing a terminology of his or her own or using common words but with personalized inflection. The *Encyclopedia* has dealt with this difficulty directly. In such cases, the ambiguity is clarified as much as possible, usually in a highly elaborated and substantive manner. Furthermore, the closing of such entries with the thinker’s biography is appropriate, particularly because of the sensible and *à la mode* notion that the ideas, work, and contributions of a thinker are indissolubly related to the personal background and life experiences of that thinker. The sensitivity to and unraveling of the terminology and style, together with the brief biographical account, provide easier access to the ideas of each thinker.

The complex relation of one thinker to others is found particularly in generic entries where major theories, themes and events are discussed. Such entries are focused on topics that have been greatly influenced by French-speaking thinkers, or perceived and expressed from the peculiarly French

perspective. One such entry is “Sexuality,” which is highlighted with the contributions of Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari. These scholars picked up and dismantled the traditional positivistic and pathological methods and practices of sexology by rejecting and replacing notions such as sexual “perversion” and “degeneration” with their own ideas, thus making significant contributions to the pluralization and liberalization of the concepts and theories of sexual identity and behavior in contemporary Western societies. Lacan’s structuralist reworking of the Freudian method, Foucault’s clarification of discourse analysis, and Deleuze-Guattari’s radical critique of psychoanalysis are examples of this shifting attitude, which led to a host of new thoughts and theories in the subject. The transition and development of terminological imports in this entry can be exemplified by its reference to Lacan. The latter’s reworking of Freud’s “desire” and ingenious use of the revolutionary linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and structuralist anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and applying Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel’s master-slave’s antithesis of the Other inspired such renowned feminists as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. Another example is Lacan’s development of the Freudian importance of the penis into the symbolic notion of the phallus, and its further development into the speculative concept of *jouissance*, which became instrumental in the feminism of Irigaray. Kristeva went even further by offering the concept of a nonphallic *jouissance*. In addition to comparing Cixous’ theory of *écriture féminine* (which focuses on the erotic power of the feminine to liberate writing from “linear patriarchal discourse”) with Kristeva’s similar literary interest, the entry also discusses the Marxism of Wittig, with her rejection of the unconscious and the essentialism and biological determinism she sees in the works of Irigaray and Cixous.

While the thematic entries can only scratch the surface of the leading thinkers’ ideas, a more detailed exposition is offered in their individual entries. In addition to the name and thematic entries, the *Encyclopedia*, as indicated earlier, contains historical and intercultural topics. An example is “The Influence of German Thought,” which may satisfy the suspicious and the curious about its extent and depth in French intellectual life. It is remarkable, at any rate, that in spite of the Franco-German political and military conflicts that were at the world’s center-stage throughout the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, French thinkers have shown an unbreakable sense of fascination and indebtedness to the Germans. Anecdotally, the Germans say they keep philosophizing and the French keep grabbing and ruining it. But given the lack of replacement of important German philosophers in the postwar era, where would Continental philosophy be without the French? This entry begins, chronologically, with the 1920s and 1930s when the French—by what has since been typically a series of “unorthodox interpretations” of German philosophy—began to assimilate Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers, to address the practical problems of human life within historical, political, and moral dimensions. These assimilations, which mainly consisted of some varieties of existential phenomenology mixed with Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, lasted until the 1950s reemergence of Hegel and Heidegger, when it became necessary to understand and explain the “alienation” and “betrayal” that had occurred within the French citizenry during the German occupation. The turbulent 1960s necessitated reinterpretations of Marx and Freud, while personal and political uncertainties in French life since the 1970s have turned many intellectuals to Nietzsche. This article also refers to the present interest in Kant’s moral philosophy and in Dilthey’s and Weber’s philosophies of history. Among the most significant offspring of this marriage between German philosophy and French thought are Sartre, Levinas, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, Althusser, Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida. This is only a brief description of this five-page entry! The earthshaking influence of Kojève’s 1933-

1939 Paris lectures on Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" upon such attendees as Breton, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty, Bataille and Klossowski—and its aftershocks in Sartre, de Beauvoir and Irigaray—are also mentioned in this entry.

Another topic that may be of interest, especially to the American reader, is "French Thought in the United States." In retrospect, it is staggering that French ideas, culture and civilization that had such a significant influence on the Founding Fathers of America, that the writings of the *philosophes* that were so crucial to the drafting of the United States Constitution, that eighteenth-century French positivism that was so inspiring for the American behaviorists and other social scientists, were soon to be forgotten and displaced by alienation and rejection by the American academia. The French, likewise, have been very critical of what they consider America's distaste for intellectualism, excessive greed for profit, commercialism, and shallow materialism. The question is, why or how did this deep divide happen? To answer, one should first understand that, philosophically and politically, the French are more critical, more radical, and more subversive. In addition to the French fascination with Marxism and occasional flirtation with Bolshevism and Maoism, there are two major areas in the contemporary academic fields that, according to this entry, the American "reluctance" (mildly put) to engage is most visible. First, in the philosophy of language, while Americans consider language as a tool to analyze the world, the French perceive the world as a construct of language. In their view, language does not simply express reality, it creates it. Of course, some Anglo-American philosophers have in fact considered this matter. In response to Cartesian dualism, Gilbert Ryle, for example, has stated that this dichotomy is due merely to the existing mentalistic and physicalistic imports of words, and nothing more. Similarly, Wittgenstein once said that his world is his language. However, this is as far as such criticisms go, without even touching on the depth to which this phenomenon can shape one's world. In contrast to this, as developed and represented by Foucault's "*discourse*, and discursive practices," the recognition of representational forms as the preconscious coercive forces that are constructed to control the thinking subject is so deep that it not only makes linguistic analysis useless, but it in fact turns the traditional philosophy of language upside down. Second, and perhaps more disturbing, is the deconstruction of psychology and psychoanalysis by Lacan who, by benefiting from the structural linguistics of Saussure, argued that the unconscious, similar to language, operates by fluctuating puzzling signs, and must therefore be analyzed as such (which means analyzing with meaninglessness the meaningless). These radical developments are extremely threatening to the presumptions of middle-of-the-road philosophy and psychology departments in the United States. Worse still, while Anglo-American philosophy relies on the distinction between truth and value, the French echo and reecho the Nietzschean idea that truth itself is a value.

This entry recognizes the threat of the French structuralist/poststructuralist radical critique of language and psychology to the conservative foundations of American epistemology and ethics that, ironically in the manner of Descartes, still seek "clear and distinct" ideas. The result has simply been to shut the door on French philosophy (notwithstanding Foucault's early 1980s and Derrida's 1966 and 1990s visitations in America). The irony is that instinctual, unconscious fear and aversion exist in philosophy and psychology departments. The article correctly states that in the United States French philosophy is taught primarily in French and comparative literature departments. The Foucauldian usage of Nietzsche's "genealogy" and "power" may be quite fitting for this problem, for those in control have interest primarily in the preservation and procreation of their own kind. The fact that of 143 contributors of this chiefly philosophical encyclopedia, only 13 are from

philosophy programs (and these mostly from foreign universities) is neither accidental nor the fault of its general editor, but is due only to the gross under population of French philosophy positions. If *genuine* philosophizing today is taking place almost exclusively in Paris, then American philosophy students are the unfortunate starving dieters of their worried academic culture.

Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought easily excels in all the basic requirements of an encyclopedic work—in scope, range of specialists, level of detail in each entry, interaction of multiple entries, steadiness of style, and excellence of scholarship across the board. The only noticeable problem that it has is, unfortunately, on its cover: the word “*Modern*” in its title suggests the period from Descartes (known as the founder of Modern Philosophy) to the end of the nineteenth century. This is obviously not the intended scope of this excellent work. So this reviewer dares to suggest “*Contemporary*” instead, to conform to the terminological divisions of the history of philosophy.

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The Encyclopedia's approximately 240 entries fall into two categories: those on individuals (which make up the bulk of the book) and those on themes, concepts, and historical background. The entries on individuals provide a clear and informative account of a thinker's ideas, influence, and critical reception. The articles emphasize the relationship between such ideas and the social, historical, and cultural life of modern France, and each includes a separate paragraph of biographical information, a list of selected works, and suggestions for further reading. Encyclopedia of Modern Fr has been added to your Cart. Add to Cart. Buy Now. Buy Used. \$75.85. & FREE Shipping. Used: Very Good | Details. Editorial Reviews. Review. "Highly recommended. For all reference collections, especially at academic institutions supporting strong French departments." - - Choice. Product details. Hardcover: 748 pages. Publisher: Routledge; 1 edition (February 12, 2004). Language: English. ISBN-10: 1579583849.