

From Structuralism to Event Philosophy Philosophy and Social Science in Postwar France

PHI-8710-004

FALL 2008

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Overview

The primary goal of this course will be to understand the major developments in postwar French philosophy by situating them in their larger cultural, social and political context. In order to delimit this vast subject, we will take as our *fil conducteur* (guiding thread) the important relationship between philosophy and the social sciences—most notably anthropology, sociology, and history—in the postwar era. We will begin by looking at a “control group” from an entirely different historical context: the work of the supposed father of French philosophy, René Descartes. After an examination of a series of key issues in Cartesian philosophy (including subjectivity, truth, science, language and the delimitation of human beings from the animal world), we will turn to the role Descartes played in the Foucault/Derrida debate, which clearly illustrates what was at stake in the supposed shift from Structuralism to Poststructuralism. We will explore most notably the way in which Foucault’s break with the hagiographic elevation of philosophic figures beyond their historical contexts was seen as a problem by Derrida, who claimed that Foucault—his former philosophy professor—was unable to truly read philosophic texts. We will thereby situate the Foucault/Derrida debate in the larger cultural context of the struggle between philosophy and the social sciences by examining how Structuralism was, in part, an attempt to merge philosophy with the social sciences (history, in the case of Foucault), whereas the “Poststructuralist” break consisted in rejecting such an undertaking. Against this backdrop, we will then turn to the most recent developments on the French intellectual scene by concentrating on the work of two living philosophers: Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. By focusing on their common attempt to break with their “Poststructuralist” predecessors in the name of a certain form of “Event Philosophy,” we will inquire into the ways in which the relationship between philosophy and the social sciences has evolved over the last 20 or 30 years. More specifically, we will look into how their debate on art can partially be interpreted as a renewal of the Foucault/Derrida controversy, insofar as Rancière’s work on aesthetics is clearly situated in the wake of Foucault and Badiou’s rejection of “historicism” has numerous parallels with Derrida’s work. However, we will also discuss the limitations of such comparisons, most notably by exploring the ground shared by the “philosophers of the event” in the field of politics. This historical overview of contemporary French philosophy from Foucault to

Rancière, which will also include analyses of important figures like Bourdieu and Castoriadis, will go hand in hand with an ongoing methodological investigation into the relationship between philosophy and the social sciences in an attempt to hone tools for a critical theory of society.

REQUIRED MATERIAL AND VISITS

1. Books available in the bookstore (you can use other editions, but the page references I will use in class are to the editions listed below):
 - a. René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Vol. 2. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 (first published 1984).
 - b. François Dosse. *History of Structuralism: The Rising Sign 1945-1966*. Deborah Glassman, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
 - c. Michel Foucault. *History of Madness*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
 - d. Alain Badiou. *Manifesto for Philosophy*. Norman Madarasz, trans. State University of New York Press, 1999.
 - e. Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Gabriel Rockhill, trans. London: Continuum Books, 2004.
2. Essays and articles will be made available to you electronically via WebCT. **It is required that you print them so that you can bring them to every class.** It is highly recommended that you collect them all together in a binder so that you have all of the course readings in one place.

REQUIREMENTS

1. **Attendance and Participation – 15%.** The class will be conducted as a seminar so it will be very important for you to come to class having engaged with the required material. This means taking notes on the readings, preparing informed questions and comments, and frequently re-reading the material. A cursory, passive overview of the material will prove insufficient. For those of you who have acquired (or are in the course of acquiring) the necessary language skills, it is also highly recommended that you consult the original texts, which I will frequently reference in our class discussions.
2. **Response Papers – 30%.** You will be required to write **one paper per class** (1-2 pages, single spaced) that concisely presents and critically responds to the material. You should spend approximately one paragraph outlining the core of the argument, one paragraph engaging in more detail with key issues that relate to the seminar, and a final paragraph raising questions or highlighting passages for discussion. These response papers will act as the foundation for our class discussions. I will ask you to **orally present two of them to the class, and you will receive a grade on your presentation (including your responses to questions).** Since you will not know the date on which you are presenting, it is highly recommended that you prepare each response paper as if you were going to present it. Your overall grade for the response papers will be calculated as follows: 1st oral presentation (1/3rd)

2nd oral presentation (1/3rd) completion of the response papers that you do not present orally (1/3rd). For the response papers that you do not present, you will not receive a specific grade (A, B, C, etc.), but you will get full credit for each assignment completed. This means that if you complete 11 out of 11 response papers for the sessions when you do not present, you will receive an A for this portion of the grade. The grade will be proportionally determined for any number of responses less than 11: 10/11 = 91% (A-), 9/11 = 82% (B-), etc.

3. **Research Presentation – 20%.** You will prepare a 10-minute presentation of your final research project during the last few weeks of class. You should outline your argument and explain what sources you will use to support your thesis. The research presentations will provide us with an opportunity to critically reflect on one another's ongoing projects.
4. **Final Take-Home Exam – 35%.** You will be required to write one 12-page double-spaced research paper. I will discuss the topic in class and provide you with guidelines.

POLICY ON PLAGIARISM

Any form of plagiarism is unacceptable. This includes, but is not limited to, referencing or paraphrasing someone else's ideas without proper citation as well as handing in someone else's work as your own. This also includes using any part of an Internet resource without proper citation. Any assignment that is at all plagiarized will automatically receive an F and, depending on the circumstances, may constitute grounds for failing the course. Moreover, every incident will be reported to the university and could constitute grounds for expulsion. For a good list of resources on what counts as plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarizing see <http://directory.google.com/Top/Reference/Education/Educators/Plagiarism/Prevention/>

POLICY ON E-MAILS AND COMPUTER USE

1. I will try to respond to all e-mails in a reasonable time-frame. As a general rule of thumb, this means that you will get a response within 24 to 48 hours. If you send an e-mail over the weekend or late at night, do not expect to receive a response back immediately, even if you deem it to be an emergency.
2. In general, I will not provide my lecture notes or other material that you could have obtained in class. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to obtain this material.
3. **No computers** will be allowed in the classroom unless you obtain explicit consent.

POLICY ON GRADE CHANGES, LATE WORK AND ABSENCES

1. I will not change grades based on oral negotiation. If you feel that I have overlooked something in my grading policy, please submit a detailed written explanation of what has been overlooked along with the graded copy of your work.
2. **No late work will be accepted.** You will only be able to make up for late

- work in the most extreme cases, and preferably when you have let me know ahead of time that you have a serious extra-curricular problem. Since a "lost paper" does not constitute a valid excuse in the computer age, **always back up your work.**
3. If you absolutely have to miss class for an excusable reason, please let me know ahead of time.

PROGRAM (subject to change)

INTRODUCTION: MAPPING POSTWAR FRENCH THOUGHT

- August 26** Alain Badiou. "The Adventure of French Philosophy."
Pierre Bourdieu. "The Philosophical Institution."
François Dosse. *History of Structuralism* (Introduction, Chapters 1, 2).

SECTION I

CARTESIANSIM IN CONTEXT

- September 2** Albert William Levi. *Philosophy as Social Expression* (selection).
René Descartes. *Meditations* (Translator's Preface and First, Second and Third Meditations).*

SECTION II: STRUCTURALISM AND "POSTSTRUCTURALISM"

- September 9** François Dosse. *History of Structuralism* (Chapters 6, 7, 12, 18).
Michel Foucault. *History of Madness* (Part 1, concentrate on "The Great Confinement").*
- September 16** Michel Foucault. *History of Madness* (Part 1, concentrate on "The Great Confinement").
Michel Foucault. "Madness, the Absence of an Œuvre" (Appendix I in *History of Madness*).
Michel Foucault. "On the Archeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle" and "Madness and Society."*
- September 23** Jacques Derrida. "Cogito and the History of Madness."*
September 30 Jacques Derrida. "Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva" (selection from *Positions*).*
Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco. *For What Tomorrow...* (selection).
François Dosse. *History of Structuralism* (Chapters 34, 36, 37, 38).
- October 7** Michel Foucault. "My Body, This Paper, This Fire" and "Reply to Derrida" (Appendices II and III in *History of Madness*).*
Jacques Derrida. "'To Do Justice to Freud': The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis."

* Text for response paper.

Optional Reading: Gabriel Rockhill. "Le Droit de la philosophie et les faits de l'histoire." *Le Portique* (e-portique 5 - 2007, Recherches) URL: <http://leportique.revues.org/document1473.html>.

SECTION III: EVENT PHILOSOPHY

- October 21** Cornelius Castoriadis. "Preface" and "Marxism and Revolutionary Theory" (selection from *The Imaginary Institution of Society*).*
- October 28** Gabriel Rockhill. "Recent Developments in Aesthetics: Badiou, Rancière and Their Interlocutors."
Alain Badiou. *Manifesto for Philosophy* (chapters 1-4).*
Optional Reading: Etienne Balibar. "The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy" (selection from *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*).
- November 4** Alain Badiou. *Manifesto for Philosophy* (chapters 5-11).*
- November 11** Alain Badiou. "The Lessons of Jacques Rancière: Knowledge and Power After the Storm."*
Alain Badiou. *Metapolitics* (selection)
- November 18** Gabriel Rockhill. "The Silent Revolution."
Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Translator's Introduction, "Foreword," "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics" and "Artistic Regimes...").*
- November 25** Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics* ("Mechanical Arts...," "Is History a Form of Fiction?," "On Art and Work" and the Interview for the English Edition*).
- December 2** Jacques Rancière. "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes."
Jacques Rancière. "Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-Aesthetics" (selection from *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*).*
- December 9**