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Review of French Intellectual Nobility: Institutional and Symbolic Transformations in the Post-Sartrian Era by Niilo Kauppi

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French Intellectual Nobility: Institutional and Symbolic Transformations in the Post-Sartrian Era. By Niilo Kauppi. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. Pp. xii+204. \$21.95 (paper).

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In the mid-1970s, I spent a year in Paris. Each morning, I took my youngest child, then just two years old, to a bilingual nursery school. Each morning, we waited for bus 69, which stopped at the corner of Rue Saint Jacques and Rue des Ecoles. Each morning, bright and early, Michel Foucault walked past us on the way to the Collège de France. I never spoke to him, but I could have. Needless to say, others did. Such is life for the intellectual nobility in France. One is constantly at risk of a personal encounter with one's admirers or enemies.

Among many of the interesting observations in *French Intellectual Nobility*, a small but well-packed book, Niilo Kauppi reminds us that the French in particular do their intellectual work under conditions utterly different from those in other places, especially places like America, where it is entirely possible to say whatever one wants about another's ideas and to speak under the illusion (and it is an illusion) that the potential enemy will never confront us face-to-face. In France, only the foolish believe they will never encounter an intellectual opponent at the bus stop, in a cafe, or at the cafeteria of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

As a result, French intellectuals must always do their public work with an eye on their personal, even private, lives. Kauppi, for example, points out that the writings of his teacher, Pierre Bourdieu, are sometimes double voiced, as though "the narrator, the individual with a body, is separated from the narrator's sociological identity" (p. 94). Those who have not submitted themselves to long years of patient exposure to French writing and thinking are typically (and understandably) annoyed upon reading Bourdieu, Lacan, Foucault, or Derrida. Foucault is regularly criticized for failing to name and cite his references. Derrida, it need not be said, is famous for his play with words and names. Lacan's ultimately simple ideas are lodged in dreamlike abstractions. And it is surely true that Bourdieu's writing is very hard on English and American readers who are accustomed to more plainspoken discourse.

French Intellectual Nobility, though it has numerous and serious academic aims, ultimately succeeds mostly for its ability to introduce the reader to many interesting sociological facts accounting for the remarkable and globally important transformation of French culture and thinking since the days, just after the Second World War, when Jean Paul Sartre was the symbolic embodiment of what the rest of the world recognized as a French intellectual. Specifically, the book's focus is upon "the sociohistorical conditions for the production of theory in the French intellectual field in the post-Sartrian era, roughly since the end of the 1950s" (p. 4). Its author, Niilo Kauppi, is a research fellow at the Academy of Finland, which fact alone well suits him to the task. The Finnish people speak a language in the Finn-Urgic group that spreads from Norway and Finland in the west to Siberia in the east. They, thus, think in a tongue that bears little natural affinity to the languages of world domination and are accustomed to learning the discursive ways of others. Kauppi, for example, in addition to his obvious fluency in English, was educated in French as well. This allows for his interest in and grasp of his subject—

and for his ability to interpret the French to English speakers. The book is organized into three sections: (1) The French Intellectual Habitus and Literary Culture, (2) The Rise of Structural Constructivism and Semiology, and (3) Iconoclasm and Parody: The Literary Avant-Garde against Sartre. In each instance, the influence of Bourdieu is apparent—most especially in the longer second part, which is principally an interpretation of Bourdieu's distinctive sociology. Kauppi's argument is, roughly, that upon the decline of Sartrian existentialism there arose, as we know, a structuralist correction. As important as Le'vi-Strauss and Foucault were to this correction and the boost it gave to the human sciences in France, the chief problem with French structuralism and poststructuralism was its lack of an explicit method for the analysis of social institutions. The claim is made that Bourdieu's idea of the habitus (borrowed from Durkheim, Norbert Elias, and Erwin Panofsky) has provided just that "missing link" (p. 5). There is much to be said for this argument, even if its importance may well be lost on English and American readers more accustomed to the near opposite sociological deficiency: an institutional analysis that only recently has begun to consider cultural and symbolic matters.

Bourdieu himself is famously edgy about unauthorized interpretations of his ideas. Whether he approves of this one by a former student, I cannot say. I found it thorough and generally reliable, even though it sometimes states its case rather too formalistically (as when Bourdieu's use of the concept *capital* is presented as though it might be an economic, as distinct from metaphoric, usage). Yet, I have no doubt that readers who are not already familiar with Bourdieu and the French in general could learn quite a lot from this book, especially in its informative explanation of the place of social theorists like Le'vi-Strauss and Bourdieu in the larger field of French culture. The third section, for example, offers an interesting, if somewhat tangential, discussion of the Tel Quel group. This book is packed with curiosities. Kauppi reports (p. 128), for example, that between 1981 and 1989 Bourdieu's ranking (by the French) among France's most influential intellectuals rose from thirty-sixth to ninth. This was the period during which Roland Barthes, Lacan, and Foucault died. The implication is that, with their deaths, Bourdieu's ideas rose to provide the missing institutional link the earlier structuralist or semiological thinkers underplayed. This is an idea well worth entertaining. Experts on French intellectual history will not learn much new from *French Intellectual Nobility*, and they will surely quibble here and there with details. But those new, or relatively new, to the subject might well be entertained and informed.