

March 2008

December 31, 2007: Death and the End of an Era?

Charles C. Lemert

Wesleyan University, clemert@wesleyan.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/div2facpubs>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lemert, Charles C., "December 31, 2007: Death and the End of an Era?" (2008). *Division II Faculty Publications*. Paper 89.
<http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/div2facpubs/89>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Sciences at WesScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Division II Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of WesScholar. For more information, please contact dschnaidt@wesleyan.edu, ljohnson@wesleyan.edu.

December 31, 2007
Death and the Endings of an Era?

CHARLES LEMERT

December 31, 2007. On a day when it is common to reflect on the events of the year just ending, some, no doubt, asked if this was the year when an important movement in social theory ended. This, 2007, was the year Jean Baudrillard died. His passing marks the disappearance of the last of the notables of the postwar traditions of French social thought. Only Claude Lévi-Strauss, approaching 100 years, survives Baudrillard, but he has long been silent as a writer.

To be sure, Baudrillard was not the greatest figure in the movement — even allowing that French social thought, as a philosophical dispensation, defied the very idea of greatness. Great or not, so many of its important personages died before their time — Michel Foucault, most strikingly (1984), but also Nicos Poulantzas (1979), Roland Barthes (1980), Jacques Lacan (1981), Michel de Certeau (1986), Louis Althusser (1990) Felix Guattari (1992), Gilles Deleuze (1995), Emmanuel Lévinas (1995), and Jean-François Lyotard (1998). A few died closer to Baudrillard's time — Pierre Bourdieu (2002) and Jacques Derrida (2004). It was not that they were all young in death but that their followers desired more from them and mourned their silences. One marks the incompleteness and idiosyncrasy — the oddball irregularity — of such a list by adding names of others who had little to do with *tout Paris* in the 1960s and after: Erving Goffman (1982), Edward Said (2003), and Richard Rorty (2007) — each of whom engaged the French from the remove of North America. Goffman's absent Self, Said's orientalized English novel, and Rorty's contingent philosophy beyond the mirror of nature were eerily close to French preoccupations in their days. They shared an appreciation for the eclipse of the strongly centred modern culture. Aside from the early translators and heirs of the French in North America, in

the early period after 1968, only Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System, I* (1974), with its indebtedness to Ferdinand Braudel and Fanon, could be described as critical of the centre — a critic working in, if not of, North America.

The French movement had everything to do with the death of an old order and the discovery of loss, mourning, and absences. In the years before his death, Derrida allowed publication of an English language collection of his funeral orations (*The Work of Mourning*, 2001). The collection is apt to the question of endings for reasons other than Derrida's own seriousness about the centrality of death to the work of philosophy — a disposition he took in large part from Lévinas, hence Heidegger. Neither Derrida nor any of the French of this time were strictly devoted to a line. Instead, they took up a philosophical, literary, political, even scientific, attitude that stood them at odds with modernity's prevailing ideology of centres, sources, subjects, ends, and progresses. Derrida's decentring thought — again not a method but an orientation — began with the ubiquity of absence. This, of course, is exactly what made the movement so inscrutable in much of North America, especially those loosely united states of mind to the south that cling still and anxiously to a philosophy of positive truth and a politics of normal progress.

If there is a single starting point for the French philosophy of absences it is neither Heidegger nor Freud, important though they were in the formation of the various divergences within, and characteristic of, the movement. It was, oddly, a thinker whose enduring ideas were something of an afterthought in a small, if distinguished, academic life. Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* comprises the posthumous notes from his course in general linguistics at Geneva from 1906–1911. Gathered by loyal students after his death, Saussure's structural linguistics were literally written from death by a man who, in life, was and remains a missing person. Little is known of his life, except that he spent a number of years in Paris, early in his career, before retiring to his native Geneva. Even the lectures that led to his famous book were an accident — perhaps a later life hobby or an attempt to serve a need in the university. Saussure's early study of syntax in ancient languages was methodologically at the extreme opposite of the school of linguistics he founded.

What is known about Saussure's absence at the beginnings of the French social theories that may have ended with Baudrillard is found on the pages of *Course in General Linguistics*. Here, two ideas of astonishing influence are clearly traceable to Durkheim and Marx. Saussure's claim that the meaning of signs (including spoken words) is founded in a social contract in a linguistic community is almost pure Durkheim. Saus-

sure's linguistic contract is a social bond without which there is no meaning, hence no community. By distinguishing words and natural things, he established the idea that meaning derives from a social arbitrary, not from the order of things in themselves.

The second powerful idea is Saussure's proposal for semiotics as a general science of social values. As with Durkheim in respect to the social bond, there are passages that could be a paraphrase of Marx in *Capital I*, where he shows how economic values arise in the articulation of a social exchange of commodities similar in value but different in kind (that is: commodities quantitatively equivalent but qualitatively different). Saussure's theory of signifying values in human communication depends on an articulated sign (or sound) that signifies without revealing the entire sense of the language itself which, in speech performances, cannot be and is not present. For Marx, the performance of commodity exchanges, especially those involving reification in a monetary system, depends on a common, but unconsciously competent, grasp of the whole system, including the hidden modes of production, that are absent in the market place.

Though almost no one in the post-World War II French traditions took Saussure at face value, these two concepts set the terms of that movement's many internal divergences — all of which came together, ultimately, on the principle that was also central to Freud, Marx, Saussure, even Durkheim. Among things social, realities are never what they appear to be. Sense is performance of an absent, therefore, inscrutable competence; social things are facts, as Durkheim thought, but facts that cannot be recognized outside the influence of the community from which we derive, as he argued in *Elementary Forms* (1912), our ability to think from social, not mental, life. This was the central argument among the French, beginning with Lévi-Strauss's 1940s experiments with a structural anthropology based on Saussure's ideas modified slightly by those of Roman Jakobson — with whom Lévi-Strauss had found refuge at the New School for Social Research during World War II. Yet, when Lévi-Strauss ascended to the Collège de France in 1959 he paid homage, above all others, to Durkheim.

When, in 1966, Derrida announced the break with structuralism in "Structure, Sign, and Play" (published in *Writing and Difference*, 1967), he took his departure from Saussure and Lévi-Strauss — accusing both of attachment, in spite of themselves, to a positive philosophy of presences. Then began the developments commonly referred to as poststructuralism. Like so many attempts to define a departure at a distance, the label does not get at the nature of these new French movements. They were "post" structuralist in the sense of attacking certain ideas; but they

were, themselves, structuralist in the sense of remaining true to the foundational (or postfoundational) principles of Saussure's language theory. Of this there is no better example than Roland Barthes, the brilliantly inventive literary theorist, who, in one of his earliest writings, *Elements of Semiology* (1964), proposed a programmatic outline of structural semiotics that was, if anything, more formalist than even Lévi-Strauss's early formal structuralisms. Yet, this was after his remarkable collection of cultural critiques, *Mythologies* (1957), which were neither stiff nor formal. Barthes was, above all else, a man of letters and it was his devotion to the poetry of language that led him from a popular commentary on professional wrestling to a systematic analysis of the codes behind the fashion system to, in time, books like *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). This contained many of the themes that prompted some to recognize him as an early queer theorist — at least to the extent that he embraced sexual pleasure as an element in cultural life and its interpretation.

From another point of view, the intercourse between structuralist and so-called poststructuralist ideas can be seen in the influence of Jacques Lacan's reconsideration of Freud's thinking on the unconscious as a repository of discourse that invents the ego and its other in one and the same moment. This is the perverse, but necessary, bond of the psyche as both present to consciousness and absent to the other-within — the unconscious. Lacan's writings — not to mention his methods of psychoanalytic intervention — were also drawn from ideas that the missing person, Saussure, developed, in Geneva, early in the 1900s — about the same time that Freud, in Vienna, was establishing his psychoanalysis in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). One cannot help but note that the missing link among Durkheim, Saussure, and Marx was an explicit theory of the unconscious as the psychic apparatus whereby human mind — whether individual or collective (an uncertain point in Freud) — transposes the unthinkable elements in conscious life into the perverse language of dreams.

Lacan's most widely read essay is "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the 'I' [read 'Ego'] Function" (1949). Louis Althusser's 1970 essay, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," reformulates Lacan's psychoanalytic notion that, early in infancy, the child, upon viewing herself in a mirror, sees a self more grand and overpowering than so small a creature could possibly be. To the degree that Lacan's theory has been criticized by psychoanalysts, Althusser's use of it has been given a pass. Althusser's interpretation, when applied to the modern state as itself a dream-machine for an ideology of state power, became a staple of cultural studies which, in many different versions, attempted to wed Marx and Freud on terms more pliable and less classically philosophical than the same project among the German critical theorists.

Though Theodor Adorno and Lacan do not quite meet in Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) they do converge in ways that illustrate how the postwar sympathies of Europeans displaced by Fascism were comparable. Where Adorno and Horkheimer mused in very rationalist terms about the limitations of the Enlightenment under the influence of modernizing mass cultures, the French, after 1966, set to work beyond the Enlightenment. By contrast, among those in the German line, only Walter Benjamin managed to outrun the Kantian straight-jacket — and this less by philosophical disposition than by the intensity of his, as we North Americans might call them, empirical studies. Nothing by his friend Adorno is quite like Benjamin's *Arcades* project (1982), which is not a book so much as a series of tension-laden sketches of the fatal flaws at the foundation of modern commercial capitalism.

The difference between the Germans and the French is small, one might say, but it is still disputed today among proponents of Foucault and Derrida against those of Habermas. In fact, Habermas's all but explicit loathing of Foucault in his 1981 dismissal of him as a "young conservative" lent ammunition to a variety of complaints about Foucault, most notably in the United States; among others, Nancy Fraser's well-known, if poorly informed, *Unruly Practices* (1989). Fraser's feminist critical theory argued that Foucault was wrong, dead wrong, on power because he did not allow for a transcending principle of critique within the spheres of knowledge or politics. In the United States, where Europeans are still largely read through secondary interpretations, many on the German side of the divide used writers like Fraser as a guide to Foucault much the same way that cultural critics wanting to preserve a Marxist line used Althusser as a guide to Lacan. Still, apart from the lazy reading habits of many in the United States, this contrast is instructive for the way, in spite of itself, it illustrates just how incommensurable the French and German traditions were in themselves and in their reception in the Anglophone world.

In many ways, the dispute between the inheritors of the French line and those loyal to the German neorationalist critical theories is a variant of the central dispute within late modern political culture early in the 2000s. The Left mimics its counterpart in the aggressions of the cultural Right against anything Left. It is plain that neither side has settled accounts with the other; perhaps, neither can.

On the one side, the French, there has been a complex attempt to rethink the terms and conditions of modernity itself. This was the principal, and crucial, point of departure with which Foucault and Derrida will forever be associated. As Derrida called into question the power of the centre in the voice of interior meaning and subjectivity, so Foucault, after

overcoming the implicit structuralism of his early books — *The Order of Things* (1966) and *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) — turned abruptly to a subtler version of his ideas on power, bio-politics, resistances, sexualities, and governmentality in his later works. Beginning with the *History of Sexuality I* (1976), much as Barthes transposed himself in later works, Foucault reformulated the principle of the modern subject, as the one subjugated by capitalist disciplinary methods, into a theory of biopolitics that permitted, even when it did not provide, the possibility of transforming man, the universal subject of modernity, into a hybridized biocreature at once subjected and resisting. His offhand remark that “where there is power there is resistance” signals what might have come to pass had he not been struck down by AIDS in 1984.

In a 1970 essay, “Theatrum Philosophicum,” Foucault said of his contemporary and friend Gilles Deleuze “perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian.” This was the year Foucault ascended to his Chair at the Collège de France, and the years of his international fame. The remark was made two years before Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972). Their sequel, *Thousand Plateaus* (1980), did not appear in English until 1987. Although Foucault was referring to Deleuze’s early work as an innovative, but still quite legible, philosopher, he may have been right about the claim, if not the century.

Early in the twenty-first century, there are signs that the French dispensation in social and philosophical thought lives on. Though we shall see just how long, and in what form, it survives, it is evident that Deleuze’s and Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus* has established itself as the masterwork for the current situation. Their post-argumentative argument in that book embraces, but goes beyond, the earlier theories of capitalism as a desiring machine. Like *Anti-Oedipus*, it is a book that cannot be read page-by-page and certainly not in one or several sequential sittings. Yet, through the thicket, two related but distinct ideas emerge. The first, of course, is that of the rhizome — a figure meant to contain, all at once, the uncertain hybrid nature of the bio-politics of truth. The rhizome is the underground tangle of roots and branches that overwhelm the tap root of arboreal knowledge — knowing that grows from a root and blossoms into lovely above-ground truths.

Even if one takes the rhizome simply as a figure of speech (and it is very much more than that), the figure signals two things — both consistent with the earlier French movements and their limits and provocations. The first is the notion that modernity’s idealistic culture of knowledge as immaterial, essential, and visible is dead on the vine. To view knowledge and power rhizomatically, as a system of hidden roots moving in all dir-

ections below the surface of visible fruits without a single tap root, is to affirm the material, anything but essential and positive, principles of the culture. This, though expressed differently, is entirely in keeping with the post-structuralist aspect of the French theories. But there is another aspect to the Deleuzian shift — one entirely consistent with, yet beyond, other aspects of the movement.

More than anyone, Foucault made biopolitics a word of the day. The idea was present even in his early works on the histories of mental illness, the clinic, social sciences, and the prison. However, biopolitics came to the fore in the incomplete and largely abandoned project announced in *History of Sexuality, I*. Here, he summed up the archaeologies and genealogies of knowledges by rooting the terms of theory of power/knowledge in capitalism's intention to control the biologies of human reproduction and labour, securing the superficially liberal ideology that capital accumulation was what it was not — a nonviolent form of universal human progress. Thereafter, biopolitics moved tangentially into studies of care of the self, of governmentality, and of sexualities. Foucault died in 1984 of AIDS, victim of the life-threatening infection that, by the nature of its origins in sex of various kinds, drug use, and generic human carelessness with respect to the lives of others, was necessarily and unforgivingly political.

Foucault was not alone in these concerns. Derrida, Barthes, Deleuze, Lacan, among others, converged on a critique of the modern Centre as an obliteration of the ideology of a good, apparent, and peaceful culture of progress. Once the grip of the universal human Subject is questioned, then theory must, even against its will, turn to life itself; thus to sex and sexualities, to pleasures and pains, and, at the end, to the death of the body. After 1984, it would appear to the casual secondary reader that Derrida, for example, and Foucault were separated, in the latter's death, from their earlier shared convictions. But, in retrospect, nearly a quarter century later, what Derrida took up is what Foucault was perhaps moving toward. Once the ideological condom meant to keep the purity of modern ideals from the diseases of animal fluids was breached, then much more than the Subject and its entailments lost immunity to power. Power is about biopolitics, because, biopolitics is about death. Modern liberal culture was the pretense that the corruptions of the body will, in time, be healed. The theory of progress and growth is, in effect, a secular faith in a resurrection without a crucifixion.

Deleuze's rhizome was a kind of theoretical surd — a necessary emptiness where truths could only be dug at, watered, and pursued; a garden that never blooms beside a pool spoiled by pestilences no amount of chlorination can hold off. This has led to the latest, and most remarkable,

series of adventures in the attempt to come to terms with the innovations of the French in and around 1968.

The most important of these is Giorgio Agamben's re-covering of Aristotle's idea of bare life — that, to put it crudely, life is lived always at the margins of existence. Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) has rapidly become what, earlier, Foucault's *History of Sexuality, I was* — a primal text to which reference must be made. (This, of course, is a status fraught with the danger that it will be read secondarily and superficially so that the reader can, as we sociologists say and do, "cite" it — as if, after all this time, any work apt to this world can be merely cited.)

Agamben makes two moves at once — the one drawn from Aristotle, bare life; the other drawn from Carl Schmitt's early writings on state power as the power legally to abandon the law. It is the legal right of the state, and the state only, to interject exceptions to the rule of law in the name of the survival of the state, the very being of which the state alone has the right to define. With this we are back in the realm of bio-politics. It is a sphere not easily defined because, since about 1991, the primacy of state power is called into question by forces said to be cultural and economic, when in fact they are biological. These are the forces gathered uneasily under the expression "globalization." Whatever is meant by this polysemantic term, what the defenders of the modern will not admit is that globalizing force ultimately put bare life, hence death, on the periodic table of social orders.

As Jean-Luc Nancy put it in *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2002), the encounter with global realities is an encounter with the death of the universal City — with Rome, in particular, but also with the very idea of the city as a locus of culture, productivity, and progress; hence, also with bare life. Against Rome — the Rome both of the Empire and of Christendom — we must today juxtapose not Singapore, Hong Kong, or Seoul, certainly not New York or Paris, perhaps not even Beijing, but Lagos, Mumbai, Shenzhen, and Sao Paolo. These new global cities may be centres of finance or culture, but they are also targets for the masses of human migrants seeking to escape rural misery for the slim chance of survival. They live in floating encampments, refugee camps, biddonvilles, maquiladoras that sprawl, without evident end, on the toxic borders of agglomerations defined only by crowding and risk that is, somehow, different in intensity from the misery of impoverished, depleted, strife-torn countrysides. We are not, now, talking of rural idiocy. These agglomerations of humanity are mostly about death as the sacred frame for the bare life of those seeking, against all odds, to live.

Guantanamo is now the universal exemplar of the state of exception whereby the state, abandoning law, creates or invites the global reduction of humanity to the terms of bare life. The ideal of the good life haunts the migratory chains that link those who survive for a time to the villages of their ancient mothers and the dreams of well-being they can pursue only by leaving behind whatever good they had once known, or thought they could know.

Yes, I know. In the eve of a New Year I too feel the inscrutability of these ideas. I too sit, as you do some evenings, in relative comfort looking out on a world I would rather think is not coming my way. Baudrillard is dead. The French are dead. So will we all be one day. Mourning, as Derrida following Lévinas, said so often, is the work of coming to terms with the absences that, in the end, are the only clues there are of the only truth there is. We who can read in these times were, by definition, brought up in a faith culture, taught to believe that what is cannot be because what ought to be is primal and exhaustive reality. The whole of modern culture was, or is (if you prefer), a dream — an inverted distortion of the facts of bare life that life can only be lived as if we were dying, as of course we are. The modern state, such as it is, takes cynical advantage of our innocence, which is nothing more than our wish to be more than we can be, which ultimately is to live forever.

What might this New Year's Eve mediation say to those of us who value sociology? This is hard to say. The conditions of global biological violence are so terrible that the older, classical sociology, that entailed an occularcentric "looking at" the world to define and describe its orders, must go the way of the field's root term. There really never was anything that could be securely stipulated as "society."

The idea of *social* life was always an ontogenic recapitulation of our phylogenetic origins as those who live, just barely, by our genius for survival. Call what we do and value what you will, *sociology* by whatever name was always meant to be the kind of knowledge that first and foremost studies the mysteries of life together; and these, in the end, are nothing more than the mystifying fact of life that when the wolves hover and cry, we hold each other around fires that we know will one day die out for want of a renewable fuel.

