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The Reception (in Sociology) of Recent French Social Theorists

Charles Crothers

ABSTRACT
Over the last two decades sociology's theoretical agenda has been highly impacted by a range of influences including the work or a range of recent French theorists. Some of the key sociologically relevant points of Derrida's writings are described and their relative impact on sociology and intellectual life more generally are examined in relation to the broader array of French theorists. The exegetical literature is referenced to identify some of the mechanisms by which some theorists have a more widespread impact, and how different intellectual communities inter-relate with each other.

Over the last two decades, sociology has changed (or at least widened) its theoretical agenda under the impetus of the broader current of thought that sometimes is informally referred to as stemming from the work of "dead Germans and live French". Despite the common usage of this term in everyday sociological parlance, I have been able to find only one documented sighting, and then only to one half in an exhortatory passage about the sociological vision: "Having become initiated … one can also become burned out. The vision fades; everyday life becomes just every day…sociology becomes just life at the office, number crunching or writing reviews on yet another meta-critique on the lives of dead Germans" (Collins, 1998: 3).

Sociology's intellectual foundations, it is widely agreed, were laid down with the work of the triumvirate of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. But post WW1 this 'classical' impetus slowed in Europe and the pace of development was taken over until at least the 1960s or 1970s by American sociologists who tended to have a more empirically-orientated agenda. The more recent 'drivers' have been Continental theorists again – largely French although including some Germans (most notably Habermas, but also Luhmann and Elias) and British (Giddens) – who in turn tend to draw on a range of mainly German writers from the beginning of the 20th century and the end of the previous century. Amongst these influences that of Jacques Derrida was significant.

The reception of Derrida by American literary critics (and by implication sociology) has already been documented in a celebrated article by Michele Lamont (1987). In this article she refers to the broader context within which Derrida's influence is placed. My discussion expands (and to some extent updates) Lamont's account. It follows up Lamont's own injunction: "More studies are needed in order to evaluate to what degree the process of legitimation of Derrida's work is unique and how it differs from other cases" (Lamont, 1987: 616). In particular, I am concerned to endeavour to tease out Derrida's particular contribution from the wider packaging of intellectual work of which his writings were part. To provide such an account requires attention to both the intellectual content, but also to the wider context of the writings of the French social theorists.

In carrying out this analysis I am at some pains to point out that while the reception of ideas does indeed have much to do with the ideas themselves, nevertheless it has also much to do with the social context in which they are produced and diffused. While ideas, or the reception accorded them, cannot merely be 'read off' from their social circumstances, their fate is very much in the hands of their environment.

The current sociological agenda

I begin setting up the problematic of this paper by articulating some current views about what sociology's concerns should be. There are perhaps three main choices. Many sociologists remain locked into the traditional agenda and technology of traditional ('American') sociology. On the other hand, some sociologists have 'defected' to broader social theoretical concerns, with their problematics and language directly dictated by French social theorists. And yet others strive to develop an intermediate posture drawing on both sources.

Anthony Elliott, for example, attempts to develop a broader sociological agenda, suggesting:

Today, theoretical innovation in sociology results from a cross-referencing of disciplinary perspectives, a cross-referencing that scoops up and reconfigures many of the new social theories – poststructuralism, postmodernism, postfeminism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. From this angle, one might reasonably expect to find that an increasing number of sociological practitioners are equally at home with the theoretical departures of Lacan, Lyotard and Derrida as they are familiar with the standpoints of Parsons, Goffman or Gouldner (Elliott, 2003: 1).

To give some of the flavour of his approach it could be said that Elliott, rather than continuing what he sees as the rather negative emphases on identity formation and social norms (i.e. the thesis of subjectification as subjection) inherent in post-structuralism, endeavours to develop a more creative multidimensional social critique "...stressing the creative, intersubjective, recursive and imaginary forms of living together in today's changed cultural conditions" (2003: 7).

Note that the conditions requiring attention are seen as cultural, not social, let alone economic or political. He sees the creative possibilities as arising out of a constructive examination of:

Ulrich Beck's doctrine of the risk society and pervasive individualisation; Anthony Giddens's notions of structuration and routinisation for the rootedness of self-constitution and sociality in our post-traditional age; Cornelius Castoriadis's seminal exploration of the links between the radical imational of the individual self and the social imaginary of culture and history; Jacques Lacan's conception of the symbolic structuring of identity, or cultural interpellation; Jurgen Habermas's ideal of communicative action or of discursive democracy; and Julia Kristeva's reflections on the dual symbolic nature of loss, mourning and melancholia with the political domain (Elliott, 2003: 7).

This approach has not been without its critics of course. Mouzelis, for example, suggests that the failure for more technical sociological theory to develop "…has created a void within sociological theory proper ... [which has then] been filled by a marked preoccupation with philosophical issues and theoretical developments in disciplines like linguistics and psychoanalysis" (Mouzelis, 1995: 41).

In a later passage Mouzelis slams home his attack:

Once actors as relatively autonomous agents of social transformation are banned from the analysis (via an exclusive emphasis on disembodied or subjectless practices, codes, signs, simaculra, desire or what have you), one is led to contextless generalizations that are invariably trivial (their triviality often obscured by structuralist jargon) or wrong (in the sense that they only apply in certain conditions which are not and cannot be specified) (Mouzelis, 1995: 65).

Having sketched the current problematics of the discipline, the remainder of this article turns to the question of how this problem-set arose. In particular I attempt to trace the influence of Derrida and other French theorists on this shift in sociology's agenda.

An account of Derrida's key ideas

To provide a summary of Derrida's thinking is difficult, although unfortunately necessary. (This account draws on Lechte, 1994). Derrida's philosophy counterposes complexity, mediation and difference against what he sees as the more prevalent tendencies in the Western tradition of thought of simplicity (attempting to exclude contradictions), homogeneity (of the same substance or order) and present-ness (conscious of itself without any gap to consciousness). These basic principles lie behind some of the major pairs of concepts which constitute Western thought, such as the oppositions: sensible–intelligible; ideal–real; internal–external; fiction–truth; nature–culture; speech–writing; activity–passivity; etc.

These structures of thinking are revealed through a methodological approach of 'deconstruction', which reveals paradoxes and logical aporias. However, this process neither removes these paradoxes and contradictions nor escapes from them. Indeed, and perhaps unfortunately, we have no choice but to continue to use the same concepts and terms, while recognising that the claims are unsustainable. Derrida's enterprise is not just limited to critique but is intended to encourage philosophical creativity.

Difference builds on Saussure's notion of difference in which terms only make sense in relation to other terms. Derrida adds that difference is more than the difference between two identities, and that often terms are both one and the other: e.g. supplement is both surplus and necessary addition. There is a drive towards blurring differences.

Another contrast with Saussure involves suggesting that whereas for Saussure the essence of language is ever-changing living speech, of which writing is necessarily a deformation, Derrida considers that writing (including pictures, print characters and phonetic aspects) is inherently tied up with speaking: indeed, writing is thought to be more 'original' than the presentations it gives rise to.

There are also stylistic aspects. Derrida's work blurs philosophy and creative writing, with many (punning) plays on word sequences. Lamont (1987) in her summary of the key features of Derrida's work points to its packaging/ theoretical trademarking/ branding as 'deconstruction'. (Trademarks of other French social theorists include 'existentialism', 'epistemological break', 'quotidiennete', 'unconscious text', 'mirror stage', 'archaeology', 'schizo-analysis'.) "Derrida has created a theoretical apparatus that is clearly distinct from other philosophical systems. Deconstruction presents a set of 'non-concepts' – to use his term – such as trace, gramme, supplement, hymen, tympan, dissemination, and metaphor that serve to designate the phenomena studied" (Lamont, 1987: 592).

Accounts of Derrida's influence

Derrida's ideas did not prevail merely on their own merit, but their reception was (at least in part) a social process. Lamont explores questions about the way Derrida's work (considered as an example of a 'cultural good') became accepted in both American and French cultural markets.

Lamont points out that while this question has been empirically researched for science, "the sociological study of the legitimation of philosophical, historical and literary theories has been almost completely neglected" (1987: 85). "Intellectual legitimation is defined as the process by which a theory becomes recognized as a part of a field – as something that cannot be ignored by those who define themselves, and are defined, as legitimate participants in the construction of a cognitive field" (1987: 586). Although Lamont's work focuses very heavily on Derrida she also

compares a wider group chosen through elite identification techniques including Althusser, Baudrillard, Chatelet, Deleuze, Derrida, Levinas, Foucault, Lyotard, Ricouer, and Serres, and in her diffusion studies includes Barthes, while pointing out that he is rather more a literary theorist.

The legitimation process is two-fold, involving the strategies of the producer on the one hand, and the evaluation processes of the audiences on the other. A successful theory requires a 'fit' between the work and the 'markets' interested in it, with various properties of the work (such as its adaptability, and perhaps even its ambiguity) being helpful. Lamont provides an overview:

> …the diffusion of Derrida's work is characterized by three trends: (1) although his work was first targeted to a specialized audience of phenomenologists, it became of interest to several diverse publics in the mid-1960s; (2) concurrently phenomenologists lost interest in Derrida's work; and (3) the diffusion of deconstruction theory decreased significantly in France after a 1972-73 boom, while it increased consistently in the US, attracting mostly literary critics (Lamont, 1987: 602).

In the first place, Derrida's work had to be legitimated in France. In quick summary:

> The diffusion of Derrida's work in France fitted in with accepted French writing styles and addressed classical works, and … was also aided by three of its characteristics: (1) It fitted in with the intellectual culture of specific fractions of the French upper-middle class; (2) its politics appealed to French intellectuals at the end of the 1960s; and (3) it appealed to the professional interests of philosophers by promoting a new image of their field during an institutional legitimacy crisis (Lamont, 1987: 589).

The counterexample she provides is the French analytical philosopher Jacques Bouveresse who attracted little attention (because he abjured the rules of the 'French' game of scholarship).

A feature of France is an Upper Middle Class market keen on sophisticated philosophical or cultural goods: partly as a marker of class status and distinction. With opportune timing, Derrida's work became available just when intellectuals began to become tired of the Marxist rhetoric of the late 1960s. As with related theorists, Derrida's work continued with a focus on power and meaning, but looked at more subtle forms of power than those hit by the heavy-duty Marxian analytical machine. Moreover, at that point philosophy was under the attack of retrenchment by the French government, and the rejuvenation offered by Derrida's work was a useful weapon in philosophy's defence.

Oddly, or at least ironically, for an iconoclast intellectual rebel, there are a series of features of Derrida's career that do much to explain his success that amount to a check-list of desirable social features. Derrida was educated in, and later taught in, several prestigious institutions, and his work was supported by key journals (*Tel Quel* and *Critique*). It received wide coverage by cultural magazines and newspapers. And he attracted disciples who helped to institutionalise his thoughts. By controversially attacking structuralism for being logocentric and giving priority to language, this lead to debates with Foucault which entirely established Derrida's intellectual credentials. By not finishing his higher doctorate (at least, not until later in his career) Derrida exhibited his ability to win without following the 'proper' rules.

However, Derrida's prominence in France had a relatively short 'shelf-life'. To show the extent of the drop in his French popularity Lamont points out that his name did not emerge as a prominent philosopher in *Lire*'s 1981 survey of intellectuals on the topic of who were France's leading intellectuals. One reason given for this fall in attention is that Derrida (unlike Foucault for instance) did not become politically engaged in the then-current issues of the Polish resistance, and the gay and anti-nuclear movements.

Derrida's subsequent reception in the United States was rather different. Lamont claims to show that:

> …the legitimating of Derrida's work in the US was made possible by its adaptation to existing intellectual agenda and by a shift in public from a general audience to a specialized literary one.

> Also Derrida benefited from the concurrent importation of a number of other French authors, which created a market for French interpretive theories (1987: 586).

It is this last point which my paper in particular engages.

Lamont enumerates some other advantages of Derrida's work for its successful reception. Because it attends to literary works this allows conversation with literary critics and therefore a borrowing of their prestige as well as of the prestige of the literary works Derrida examines. Another payoff is its apparent exhaustiveness and ability to 'package': "..on the basis of Derrida's work, American undergrad students in literary criticism currently discuss the logocentrism of the philosophical tradition without having read a single classic of philosophy" (Lamont, 1987: 593). Derrida's final appeal is to construct humanities scholarship as creative and appealing as the sciences (albeit that the reputation of the sciences for creativity has been exaggerated according to critics such as Kuhn).

In the US, structuralism had prepared the ground for deconstruction. Derrida's writings became available at a point where US literary criticism was in some crisis because of the delegitimation of 'new criticism' and the need to have more theory-based approaches to retain sufficient academic prestige. In particular, Derrida's work was accepted in prestigious university departments (Yale, Cornell, Johns Hopkins) and outpourings on Derrida permeated through key journals and also in the form of books. Key disciples (such as Paul de Man and more generally the 'Yale group' used Derrida's work to overcome some of their individual differences and to create a collective project, which became known as the Yale school. But, there was not much public penetration of Derrida's work (compared to Barthes and Foucault) and nor was there much take-up in US philosophy (since Derrida's work was limited by its lack of analytical approach). The US writers (in several important books) presented the incoming French writers as a package: despite the somewhat weak similarities amongst their work. However, in turn these differences amongst the French theorists then allowed debate to flourish on what these differences might be.

Beyond the importation of French theorists into the US, Derrida apparently has had a limited impact in Britain, in comparison to the better reception there of Barthes and Foucault. Lamont suggests more generally that, "…Derrida's diffusion is especially weak in countries where there is a strong leftist tradition among intellectuals". In turn, several similar accounts have played off the mantra of "The Making of …" introduced by Lamont. Clegg (1992) examined the process by which Anthony Giddens acquired a substantial international reputation as a premier British social theorist by showing that his work follows established canons in the explication of classical theory, and also that the reception of his work has been aided by its focus on a particularly British concern of class relations. McLaughlin (1998) shows that growing recognition of Fromm's work was fostered entirely by those factors identified by Lamont, but that his fall was largely effected by hostility from theory sects. "…Fromm's insistence on simultaneously challenging Marxist, Freudian, sociological and political orthodoxies damaged his ability to forge coalitions in support of his work" (1998: 236). Fromm was also disadvantaged as his work appealed only to marginal scholars who had little motivation to defend his theories. He had no institutional base outside of his Mexico residence. McLaughlin concludes that (in addition to the factors which Lamont covers) it is necessary in understanding legitimation processes to study the role of orthodoxies and revisionism within intellectual movements (and their ties to wider social movements).

Another line of development of Lamont's analysis is to provide a deeper account of the French situation in which so much recent theorising has emerged. Lemert (1981) also provides a brilliant portrait of the French intellectual scene in order to provide a platform against which the work of French social theorists might be read. Lemert argues that the infrastructure for French theorising is laid down in the school-room.

Traditional French education is built around the mastery of the great texts of French culture – their memorization, their *explication,* their emulation in the pupil's writing. Pupils who succeed in

French schools are those who have most perfectly demonstrated a brilliant and compelling literary and oral style, the standard for which is France's literary culture (1981: 4).

This foundation leads to an emphasis on the key importance of style. Although individual flair is nuanced it inescapably draws attention to the 'normalien' mode – brilliant, confident, articulate. Individuality is an expression of the collectivity.

The French intellectual scene is very centred on Paris: including café as a literary and artistic locus. There is significant tendency for the development of a patron system in which strong leaders dominate. Publishing series are each controlled by a star. More interestingly, Lemert argues that there is a collapse of the semantic distance between reading and writing. There is a studied neglect of the Anglo-Saxon empiricist practice of the footnote through which intellectual influences are studiously documented. And yet French theory writing is saturated with very close links to the work of other writers: little is hidden to the local audience. Intense social interaction accompanies the density of inter-textuality in the writing.

On the other hand, Elliott surprisingly documents the fleeting path-crossings of Lacan and Derrida. They only met twice in their life-times. The first was in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University, which was "…an encounter … marked by anxiousness, driven by intellectual competition and the struggle for academic fame" (2003: 78).

Broader packagings

Having described the social matrix out of which the work of French theorists emanates, I now attend to several discussions in which the work of Derrida is located with typologies of French theory.

Lechte (1994) provides an (implicit) empirical account in the cross-referencing evident in each of the accounts of the top fifty theorists covered in his book. He indicates that Derrida is variously linked to Joyce, Laclau, Levi-Strauss and Saussure. However, the data on linkages he supplies needs to be seen within the wider picture of the overall network structure of influences over the recent period.

Another empirical account is supplied by Bourdieu (1990) who investigated the patterning amongst French intellectuals (inter alia) in his *Homo Academicus*. Several relevant analyses are presented, but perhaps the most pointed for present purposes appears in Appendix 4 (page 276). As with other diagrams he provides, Bourdieu sees the French intellectual scene as structured along two quite different dimensions, contrasting scientific with 'social' competence. Science and arts scholars tend to have higher scientific standing compared to the more privileged backgrounds of academics in law and medicine. So, not surprisingly, Derrida appears (alongside Bourdieu himself but also Lois Althusser, and Francois Bourricaud) in the bottom left-hand quadrant representing those intellectuals who have developed important intellectual alternatives from a slender power-base within the system. In his commentary, Bourdieu briefly canvasses the difficulties that many prominent French intellectuals (including Derrida) have had in relation to their academic establishment. This point needs to be added to Lemert's analysis.

Choi (2004) argues that postmodernism is part of an aesthetic challenge to social theory. In the 1970s post-structuralism superseded and engaged with structuralism. It drew on the anti-enlightenment tradition, especially Nietzsche's attacks on Western philosophy. Its development was also related to the changes in capitalism towards the post-industrial, consumer, spectacle society, symbolised vividly by the 1968 student protest events. Earlier Western philosophy had relied on a metaphysics of presence, involving dichotomies and the prioritising of one (the positive) over the 'other' (e.g. good before evil). However: "This textual post-structuralism conceives that there is nothing outside language. Beyond the text there are only more texts and traces of texts" (Choi, 2004: 59). The all-embracing nature of language is not challenged but everything is seen as textualised.

According to Choi, examples include "Lacan's notion of the real, Foucault's notion of power, Lyotards' notion of the figural, Deleuze and Guatarri's notion of desire" (60).

However, a second phase in post-structuralism deconstructs the textual/non-textual dichotomy, and rails against the imperialism of the signifier, displacing the signifier. This is a more material approach. The earlier phase of post-structuralism did not cover social aspects: "Derrida, Foucault and Lacan do not develop an analysis of postmodern forms of society or culture. Their works concentrate mainly on epistemological issues" (Choi, 2004: 60). But in the second phase the earlier ideas were then taken up by postmodernism. In Choi's terminology "poststructuralist post-modern social theory" utilises poststructuralism for explaining and investigating ontology, epistemology and ethics/politics in western societies since World War 2. Deconstruction and related approach move on from dissecting culture to examining society. The social has become like a language, and the approach is centred on the aesthetic. The approach is similar to the earlier phase: structured contradictions in western societies (such as social class) are denied, and rather, relations of consumption are seen as basic. There are clearly implications for how the work of these two phases has then been used. The writings of the first phase were picked up by the humanities, whereas "…the social sciences has paid more attention to the second phase of the post-structuralism…" (Choi, 2004: 63)

However, some commentators would critique this easy assumption. Benhabib (2002) attempts to probe into the diffuse and elusive cognitive heart of postmodernism by suggesting that:

> …(it) heralded the end of history, understood as a cumulative, progressive, coherent sequence; postmodernism announced the end of man and reduced the anthropological subject to a vanishing face in the sand, a disappearing signifier, a fractured, centerless creature. Postmodernism trumpeted the end of philosophy and of master narratives of justification and legitimation (344).

But she goes on to suggest that:

> …there are distinctions between postmodernism and poststructuralism. While the former designates a movement with wide currency in many different fields, the latter refers to a specific moment in the evolution of high theory, in the European – but particularly French – context, at which point the Marxist and psychoanalytical paradigms as well as the models of Claude Levi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure, which dominated French theory construction from the early sixties onward, came to an end (2002: 344).

She cites some commentators (Judith Butler and Chantal Mouffe) as being:

> …correct in remarking that one should not lump together Michel Foucault, J-F Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, as if they all represented the same philosophical traditions. Nonetheless, each of these thinkers, in different ways, contributed to the set of cultural sensibilities that we associated in the 1980s with the term 'postmodernism' (Benhabib, 2002: 345, 346).

Butler is more blunt. She portrays the usual characterisation of post-modernism as involving arguments such as that "the subject is dead" and suggests that these characterisations "…are variously imputed to postmodernism or poststructuralism, which are conflated with each other and sometimes conflated with deconstruction, and sometimes understood as an indiscriminant assemblage of French feminism, deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foucaultian analysis, Rorty's conversationalism and cultural studies" (Butler, 1992: 3).

Deconstructing American (and other) characterisations of postmodernism, Butler provides an insider story that is full of rather more 'fear and loathing' suggesting that outsiders do not know that:

> …Lacanian psychoanalysis in France positions itself officially against post-structuralism, that Kristeva denounces postmodernism, that Foucaultians rarely relate to Derrideans, that Cixous and Irigaray are fundamentally opposed, and that only a tenuous connection between French feminism and deconstruction exist between Cixous and Derrida, although a certain affinity in textual practises is to be found between Derrida and Irigaray (Butler, 1992:4).

Her final remark is that the work of Lyotard – who champions the term postmodern – "...is … seriously at odds with that of Derrida who does not affirm the notion of 'the post-modern'" (Butler, 1992: 5).

Mouffe is rather more gently concerned merely to debunk the conflation between postmodernism and poststructuralism.

> If by postmodernism one wants to designate only the very specific form that such a critique takes in authors such as Lyotard and Baudrillard, there is absolutely no justification for putting in that category people like Derrida, Lacan or Foucault, as has generally been the case (1992: 370).

Rather, she wishes to pull together as anti-essentialists "...the work of actors as different as Derrida, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Dewey, Gadamer, Lacan, Foucault, Freud and others" (1992: 371).

Elliott packages the postmodern impulse as one involving what he euphemistically terms 'interdisciplinary studies':

> The suggestive blending of linguistics, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis that has unfolded in modern European thought over the last twenty or so years has accorded a fundamental role to language in the constitution of both personal life and social relations; the study of language has in turn included investigation of identity in terms of discursive rules and linguistic codes as well as the uses of talk in the concrete activities of day to day life (Elliott, 2003: 1).

However, he sees problems in linking new approaches with sociology's traditional agenda as I have indicated above.

Effects of Derrida and other French theorists

It is all very well for commentators to classify: how do writers see the differential importance of and the linkages amongst French social theorists?

In order to get some grasp on the 'French effect' I examined, in the on-line *National Bibliographic Database* (National Library of New Zealand, 2005), the books recorded as having been written by each of the main authors of the last few decades, and the books registered (through the relevant 'subject heading') as being about them: often a "critics and commentaries" subject entry). The *NBD* includes not only all books housed in New Zealand's main libraries but also a wide range of books which are contemporaneously published. Searches were conducted by keyword for the 'books about' column, or on author name for the 'books by' column, or by double keyword for the 'Books including reference to Derrida' column. The *NBD's* coverage is wide enough to be all but definitive. Indeed, this source has a strong tendency to over-estimate the volume of book material published as simultaneous publishing, re-editions, translations etc. all count as extra 'books'.

Author (listed alphabetically)	Books About…	Books By…	Books about … also including keyword reference to Derrida
Post-modernism	311	XX	10
Post-structuralism	131	XX	7
Adorno	220	158	7
Althusser	53	48	0
Bachelard	45	64	0
Bakhtin	174	51	0
Barthes	110	148	3

Baudrillard	40	110	1
Beneviste	6	0	0
Bourdieu	91	119	0
Derrida	**330**	**212**	**XX**
Dumezil	13	48	0
Elias	41	34	0
Foucault	436	169	16
Giddens	24	95	0
Habermas	254	116	3
Irigaray	31	53	1
Kristeva	50	91	3
Lacan	385	41	8
Laclau	5	14	0
Levinas	239	79	20
Levi-Strauss	97	63	22
Lyotard	51	76	4
Touraine	6	40	0

Source: Data drawn from the NLNZ's National Bibliographic Database (see description in text). XX=empty cell. March, 2005.

Conclusion

Although Derrida's intellectual work has spawned much debate, it is also to a considerable extent an artefact of the circumstances of the times. Social factors common to both Derrida and other French social theorists of his time affected the production of their work and its reception. While there is an 'emergent' effect grouping the work of various French theorists and which has provided them with a collective impetus, nevertheless not only does each theorist have a separate trajectory in disciplinary and national configurations, but different parts of their overall oeuvre undoubtedly has separable paths.

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