

American Intellectuals: The Love-Hate Relationship with *les Penseurs Français*

By *Didier Eribon*

Translated from the French by Chong-Min Hong

HOW IS A FRENCH READER LIKE MYSELF supposed to translate a word like “eros killers”? The “*tue-l'amour*”? And that fine, slightly outdated, word “ninnies”? The “*niais*”? Or “*nigauds*”? Anyone interested in understanding what is written these days in America about French intellectuals will have to find precise equivalents for such terms. These expressions, in fact, are taken from Camille Paglia's book *Sex, Art and American Culture*. This essayist displays an unbridled imagination and an astonishing appetite for insult when the subject at hand is the fight against the “French invasion” and those “prophets” worshiped in her country's universities: Lacan, Foucault, Derrida ...

Her book is one of such violence, and her style is one of such vulgarity that it is indeed difficult to cite—and translate into a language like French—several passages. It is an uninterrupted torrent of imprecations and eruptions, directed at French thinkers and directed against their disciples in the United States: American professors and students—the “ignoramuses,” the “snobs” and the “weak and anxious personalities.” “We didn't need Derrida,” she says, for “we had Jimi Hendrix” whose psychedelic guitar already offered the experience of “deconstruction.” Lacan is “a tyrant who must be driven from our shores.” As for Foucault, he is “one of the dullest, most frigid, and most constipated theorists of sex ever.” Paglia proclaims loudly and strongly that she prefers Jeanne Moreau, who knew how to incarnate the glamour, incandescent eroticism, and eternal mystery of the woman and who is ignored by the “totalitarian and misogynist” theories of Foucault. And she adds that for her, the big French name that begins with D is not Derrida ... but rather Deneuve.

One will have understood: all this is not worth very much. And one hardly needs to be “misogynist” in order to roll in the aisles with laughter upon reading her wild flights of fancy. But in fact, all this is not that funny. This delirious opusculum has been met with enormous success in American bookstores, and a newspaper as serious as the *New York Times* has published a long pre-publication excerpt from it under the evocative title “Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants, and other Academics.”

One could say on behalf of the French thinkers that this is the price to be paid for their glory, that it is the reverse side of their extraordinary influence.

DIDIER ERIBON IS *Lettres* editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, France's leading intellectual weekly, in which a version of this review originally appeared. He is author (with Claude Lévi-Strauss) of *De Près et de Loin*. The English translation of his critical biography Michel Foucault has just been published in paperback by Harvard University Press. This article © 1993 Le Nouvel Observateur.

BOOKS REVIEWED

Sex, Art and American Culture by Camille Paglia, Vintage Books. 338 pages.

Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956 by Tony Judt, University of California Press. 348 pages.

The Passion of Michel Foucault by James Miller, Simon and Schuster. 492 pages.

“Are the Americans discovering just today that Sartre was a fellow traveller of the Communist Party? Have they forgotten it? Or does this pamphlet perhaps appear at just the right time to reinforce the offensive led by Camille Paglia on other fronts?”

Each month one sees the appearance of numerous books on Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Bourdieu, Deleuze, Lyotard ... An enormous volume which indexes all the writings by and about Jacques Derrida just came out: 890 pages. An anthology of articles commenting on his work was published at the same time. Not to mention volume of excerpts from his books ... Derrida is undoubtedly the most cited intellectual in the world. Foucault's books have never been so widely read and commented upon. His work, interrupted by death, is survived by the innumerable research projects which he inspires in all domains. It is indeed rare to read a work in history or in the social sciences that does not refer to him.

A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* described Derrida as the “most controversial philosopher in the world” ... “the most controversial” means the most famous, the most commented upon, and hence, the most attacked. It has been twenty-five years since the French began their invasion on American campuses, and for twenty five years they have encountered furious resistance. Nothing new under the American sun? What is new perhaps is the breadth, the harangue of attacks and exacerbations of intellectual patriotism which are expressed today. The recipe seems infallible: in order to be applauded by the great American newspapers, one need only to attack French thought. Other considerations such as substance or form do not make much of a difference.

The reception accorded to the book by Tony Judt, an Oxford professor who teaches in New York, about the “imperfect past” of the French intellectuals between 1944 and 1956 offers an edifying example. No fewer than four pages of the *New York Review of Books* was devoted to this work. To tell us what? That Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, the journal *Esprit* and so many others were pro-communist and supported the Soviet Union. What news! Are the Americans discovering just today that Sartre was a fellow traveller of the Communist Party? Have they forgotten it? Or does this pamphlet perhaps appear at just the right time to reinforce the offensive led by Camille Paglia on other fronts?

IT IS NEVERTHELESS IMPOSSIBLE TO COMPARE Camille Paglia and Tony Judt by the same standards. The latter's work has a much more serious air. It presents itself as a work of a historical character and, to a certain point, it is effective. It offers a good record of what was written in French magazines during the cold war about the Soviet Union. But alas, Tony Judt does not avoid a certain amount of unfortunate slippage when he touches on works of philosophy, for example, when he writes that the opposition in existential philosophy between *le moi* and *l'autre* or the famous phrase *l'enfer, c'est les autres* are only “subtile expressions” (!) of the political opposition traced by Sartre between Moscow and the United States ... It is truly a shame that this “historian,” carried away by his denunciatory passion, did not realize that Sartre's philosophical texts on this question are clearly prior to his political engagement.

But rigor does not seem to be Judt's fundamental concern. At the end of 200 pages, the historian abandons rather quickly the mask of serious work and transforms himself into a pamphleteer. It does not suffice for him to affirm that Sartre was always wrong. Above all, Judt wants to show that

contemporary French thought, that which is prospering in the United States, is the heir of all these errors. And here he violently attacks Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu and several others, whom he describes as “the second generation of post-war French thinkers.” In what sense does he give such a definition? If it is supposed to be a chronological account, it is incontestably true. But if it is supposed to be a philosophical account, it is radically false, since these thinkers formulated their work precisely by tearing themselves away from the influences of existentialism, phenomenology and Marxism which were dominant in France during the 50’s and the beginning of the 60’s. But Judt seems to totally ignore the last thirty years. And as he is incapable of discussing the works, he instead casts dubious diatribes against the persons who wrote them. Judt is indignant at the success which French intellectuals meet “from London to Los Angeles,” but his grievances are essentially of a political nature. He does not discuss the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, he doesn’t critique *Of Grammatology*, rather, he reproaches French intellectuals for not religiously admiring the American model of liberalism.

THE POLITICAL stakes of these polemics are decisive: the war directed against French thought is also, often enough, a civil war that pits Americans against each other with neoconservatives on the one side and the democratic left on the other (this is, of course, much simplified, for there are also purely theoretical controversies).

The attacks led by the conservative camp recently found their ammunition in the autobiography of Louis Althusser and, just two months ago, in the sulphurous work by James Miller on Michel Foucault. The actual point of departure for James Miller’s inquiry in *The Passion of Michel Foucault* was as follows: Did Foucault knowingly transmit the AIDS virus to some of his sexual partners in San Francisco? Since this extremely philosophical investigation proved for Miller to be fruitless, he modified his project. Miller undertook the task of explaining the philosopher’s entire life and all of his works by his fascination with sadomasochism and with death. Hence we have here ludicrous example of those “American biographies” which are supposed to reproduce the “totality” of a person and his or her work. It is no longer a biography, it becomes a Hollywood product.



“Miller’s interpretive obsession often leads him into stupefying conclusions. When Foucault describes the torture of Damiens at the beginning of Discipline and Punish, it is clearly not, as Miller describes it, out of sadomasochistic nostalgia for an epoch in which the condemned were massacred in a public area.”

Miller describes at length Foucault’s *soirées* in the most hard-core of San Francisco “S-M” bars, the discovery of LSD in Death Valley and other practices of pleasure which attracted Foucault toward California. Such reports are not scandalous in and of themselves. These chapters are in fact the most interesting in the book, since they show us the true Foucault during his life in America. What is scandalous—and ridiculous—is the determination to interpret all the contents of his works with these biographical data. Miller tracks the images of death and of sadism that haunts the texts of Foucault. This brings out several interesting and enlightening ideas on the writings devoted to literature or on the role played by Sade, Bataille, Blanchot, and Klossowski in the most erudite mechanisms of *Madness and Civilization* or *The Order of Things*.

But Miller’s interpretive obsession often leads him into stupefying conclusions. When Foucault describes the torture of Damiens at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish*, it is clearly not, as Miller describes it, out of sadomasochistic nostalgia for an epoch in which the condemned were massacred in a public area. In that book, Foucault wishes to construct a “history of the present,” that is to say, a genealogy of contemporary institutions: the prison and the penal code. If he conjures up *l’éclat des supplices*, it is not because he misses it, but rather because he wants to show what foundation of historical reality produces the rupture which installed in us the idea of a chastisement which improves at the same time that it punishes.

ONE COULD MULTIPLY THE EXAMPLES OF THIS type found in Miller’s book. But what is even more gravely serious is that since its appearance, one can no longer count the numbers of articles which have made an allusion to the sadomasochism of Foucault in order to discount Foucault’s work and Foucault himself. One thinks of the accusations previously leveled against Rousseau: why should one read *The Social Contract*—a work whose author abandoned his own children? Today, some Americans ask, why read *Archaeology of Knowledge* when the book is only a pathological expression of unrestrained sexuality?

One university academic has even written that such a revelation made the “Paul de Man Affair” seem like a simple picnic in comparison. When one remembers what the de Man affair actually was, one is left open-mouthed in astonishment. Paul de Man is that celebrated literary critic at Yale of whom it was discovered several years ago that he had collaborated with a pro-Nazi journal in Belgium during his youth. It is simply ridiculous and irresponsible to hold that certain sadomasochistic practices in homosexual bars are more serious than sympathies for Nazism. The “S-M” bars of San Francisco, like those elsewhere, are only for consenting adults: one is not taken there by force, no crime is committed.

But the moralism and conservatism of certain Americans were not going to miss such a beautiful occasion to prosecute and disqualify one of the outstanding figures of French culture and critical thought. φ