



TRANSLATIONS / PRZEKŁADY

Paris VIII: 1968–2018

50 years of philosophical commitments

Introduction

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The current issue of this journal will not take the usual format, because the articles published in it do not revolve around a specific subject as such. As the reader will be able to see for themselves, the topics are diverse and varied, but if there is indeed a common denominator amongst all these themes, it is undoubtedly “resistance”. What is thinking, after all, if not creating as much as resisting, or saying “no”? To conceive without anything else would be nothing but empty thinking, while opposing something through saying no is true movement of the mind. The best way for philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century to resist, facing the process of regression that has entered into the public space and the racist obscenity that imposes itself in official speeches, is no longer to be ok with interpreting the world, but merely to become so: especially by multiplying the gestures of openness and the circulation of men and ideas.

It is in this way that we are to understand this anthology of French philosophers, which will focus on the department of philosophy of Paris Vincennes University — Saint-Denis, which, as an avant-garde institution with French university circles was created in May 1968 in response to criticisms levelled

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against traditional university. Built with exceptional speed by the will of Edgar Faure¹ to push out the “leftists” from Paris, the Vincennes University Experimental Center, despite strong opposition from the academic centre of the Sorbonne University, opened its doors on 13 January 1969 on the site of an old military firing range (Hocquenghem, 1980), with “the ambition both to set up a new form of pedagogy, teach new content, develop multidisciplinary and openness to the world, favor user intervention and, lastly, to open up to employees as well as to those not holding a baccalauréat” (Soulié, 1998: 47)².

Michel Foucault presided over the birth of the Vincennes Department of Philosophy and, from the beginning, his candidature for the Chair of Philosophy was supported by Georges Canguilhem. As soon as he was installed upon this chair, he tried to gather around him what was the best in philosophy in France. He first solicited Gilles Deleuze and then contacted Michel Serres, then began to recruit within the younger generation of philosophers from the École Normale Supérieure (Ulm), among the students of Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, especially in the group that had founded the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, a publication of Maoist obedience. In addition to Judith Miller, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, François Regnault and many others were to join the department. Political criteria played an important role in these recruitments, and M. Foucault, in order to counteract the very strong influence of the Maoists within the department, also called on the Trotskyists Henri Weber, Daniel Bensaid and Alain Brossat, as well as Etienne Balibar, a member of the French Communist Party, the libertarians René Schérer and Guy Hocquenghem, and Jean Borreil, the far-left activist, who took part in a rapprochement between peasants and intellectuals. Finally, to play a moderating role in this militant environment, Foucault also called on François Châtelet, known for his pedagogical skills and his unifying qualities. This vanguard was joined a few years later by Gilles Deleuze, then by Jean-François Lyotard who had belonged to the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* founded by Claude Lefort and Cornélius Castoriadis, and who met with a certain degree of apprehension³.

Such recruitment, which made the Vincennes philosophy department one of the most leftist at the university, both among teachers and students, [...] did not fail in reflecting itself on the curricula. Political preoccupations clearly took precedence over academic considerations and the history of philosophy, which usually forms the basis of academic philosophy teaching (Soulié, 1998: 51).

¹ Edgar Faure was General de Gaulle's Minister of Education.

² On this point we can also examine the text by Annie Couëdel “68: Vincennes de ses origines à nos jours” tiré de sa communication “Movimiento estudiantil de 68 en Francia y el desarrollo histórico de la universidad de Paris VIII” lors du Symposio continental: movimientos universitarios en America Latina, siglo XX prononcée à Bogota, 17–19 novembre 1999, http://www.ipt.univ-paris8.fr/hist/Articles/Bogota_nov_99_symposium.pdf (29.10.2018).

³ On this matter we can also examine the article Déotte, 2005: 131.

But beside the teachings, which were essentially centered on politics and institutions, we see the development of a reflection on “desire” and sexuality, notably initiated by Foucault and Deleuze; also the decline of Marxism from the beginning the 1970s was accompanied by a rapid increase in themes centered around the libido.

The program of the Vincennes philosophy department was rather distant from the usual philosophical canon⁴. This led Olivier Guichard, the then Minister of National Education, to denounce, in January 1970, the “Marxist-Leninist” character of the teaching, and to remove the academic validity of the philosophy degrees awarded at Vincennes, to which Foucault was to reply that philosophy should not consist of a simple commentary on “canonical and scholastic” texts, but, on the contrary, should be “a reflection on the contemporary world, and therefore necessarily on politics” (Foucault, 1970: 10). This did not prevent Guichard from suspending the national validity of Vincennes philosophy diplomas, primarily because he did not support the political opinions of the department. That same year, Foucault, after having supported the most extreme practices of the philosophy department by his active presence, left Vincennes for the Collège de France by bowing to the requirements of this prestigious institution. He was replaced by Châtelet, who would have to deal with a sheer drop in student numbers resulting from the loss of national accreditation, and yet despite this, he was to be responsible for ensuring the survival and permanence of this anti-institutional institution. Furthermore, this loss of empowerment would lead to a change in student profile; if they were close, at the inception Vincennes, to those of other universities, despite a high proportion of older activists, those who were to come after were to become closer to the University of Vincennes as a whole: an institution open to students without a *baccalauréat*, workers and foreigners. Moreover, students from other universities, or people from outside, also attended courses at this department to listen to its “tenors”, without the worry of gaining a diploma.

The confrontation with this great audience disparity, which demanded an ability to follow the courses of a “liberated” philosophy instead of the traditional academic path, was not without its educational implications. Not having to prepare their students for *agrégation* recruitment competitions, teachers were able to develop an affinity education with their position in the field of academic philosophy. In *Vincennes ou le désir d’apprendre* (Châtelet, 1979: 126–129),

⁴ To gain an idea of what the Vincennes University was at this time, we advise readers to watch a short film compiled from original archive materials: *Vingt scènes à Vincennes*, film n°&b de Patrice Besnard / Laboratoire VAO / UFR Arts 2009 / Durée 63mn, *Extraits de films et documents réalisés par Marielle Burkhalter, Yolande Robveille, Annie Couëdel, le Service des Moyens Audiovisuels / 1974–1980*, <http://www.archives-video.univ-paris8.fr/video.php?recordID=101> (29.10.2018).

Châtelet defends a non-hierarchical and non-progressive pedagogical model by bringing together students of all levels and all disciplines, in other words, he defends a non-bureaucratic model, which one can better understand by referring to the typical French system where the crux was to pass the *agrégation*⁵ in philosophy that (re)produces the professional philosophers. It did not matter to him that the participants had to merely learn from philosophy, they equally had to practice it because philosophy is above everything living, and being alive, it cannot be something centered on itself. In this sense, for Châtelet philosophy will be only alive and strong in allying itself with other fields of thought and creation, including singular practices. This question of philosophy fits into a much larger question of culture, i.e., the way one has to educate oneself throughout one's life by oneself through the pleasure that one can have with knowledge. This right to culture is strongly linked to university and what we want it to become, it is in this, for Châtelet, that university must be truly a place of culture rather than of profitability. This is also why university must teach cognition rather than knowledge, the know-how that is now promoted in our societies and that impacts on culture as a whole.

This notion on the teaching of philosophy recalls Deleuze when he said he understood that if philosophy needed a philosophical understanding, by concepts, it also needed one, not philosophical, by percepts and affects. By thus opposing the non-philosophical understanding by the percepts and affects of his students, to the professionals of the discipline suspected of remaining strictly philosophical, "by concepts", purely academic, Deleuze on the one hand places life, the sensible, and the external uses of philosophy, while on the other, the concept or "excess of knowledge", suspected of killing "the living in philosophy" (Soulié, 1998: 61). He explains this opposition by means of Spinoza, who is for him the most philosophical philosopher and, paradoxically, the one who speaks the most to non-philosophers, whereas the "conceptual" understanding of the professional of the discipline, whom the historian of philosophy is par excellence, is obviously insufficient, because it is "the excess of knowledge" that comes to kill "the living in philosophy" in him. It is clear that here, Deleuze criticizes the academic orthodoxy of the high priests of the Sorbonne who lock themselves into the compilation of esoteric knowledge and the tasks of reproduction of the university body (Soulié, 1998: 61).

It is in this spirit that the International College of Philosophy was founded in 1983, at the initiative of François Châtelet, Jean-Pierre Faye, Jacques Derrida and Dominique Lecourt, as another place for philosophy, and which, like the offshoot of the Philosophy Department at Vincennes, would also have to maintain a living philosophy that must not remain self-centered.

⁵ A high-level competitive examination for the recruitment of teachers in France.

The same goes for the philosophy department of Paris VIII, despite the changes made in the 1980s in connection with the university's last year on the Vincennes site, before all its buildings were razed to the last stone at Jacques Chirac's initiative, and the university was transferred to Saint-Denis, a poor northern suburb of Paris (Robveille, 2004)⁶. This transformation is also due to the ageing statutory teaching body and the evolution of the educational policy of the department, which made repeated requests to the ministry for a standardization of the philosophy curriculum and a return to national diplomas. Added to this are the evolution of the students, as well as the ideological situation of the 1980s, marked by the decline of leftism and the consequences of the economic crisis. This was to accelerate again from 1985 with the death of Châtelet and several retirements, including that of Deleuze. In this connection Charles Soulier emphasizes what the National Committee of Paris VIII wrote on this subject:

From an intellectual and spiritual point of view, philosophy at Paris VIII is at a crossroads: to find a new spirit, or normalize and become a Department of Philosophy like any other. For the culture of the country, it is not useless to have a place where the spirit breathes (Comité national d'évaluation, 1988: 73, quoted by Soulié, 1998: 64).

The evolution of the staff of the Philosophy Department of Paris VIII highlights the limits of an attempt to emancipate academic philosophy teaching from the constraints of faculty reproduction. The audience on which this type of institution can count is only marginal because while the teachers belonging to the traditional academic community can rely on

a bureaucratically guaranteed clientele, it is different for the avant-garde teachers, who must first and foremost rely on their charisma and cannot fail to be more sensitive to the demands of a fluctuating public more open to intellectual fashions (Soulié, 1998: 69).

The department was taken over and directed from 1988 to 2010 by Jacques Poulain who, before that, had taught for nearly twenty years in Montreal where he also worked on meeting the main philosophical traditions of French, German and English by building a discussion network with philosophers aware of the limits of these traditions. He was also program director of the International College of Philosophy from 1985 to 1992, which allowed him to organize international discussions on the philosophy of language. In the same spirit,

⁶ Cf. *A la recherche des bergers de Vincennes. Vicennis et Vicennis ego*, Color film directed by Yolande Robveille in June 2004 on the website of the University of Vincennes in the wood of the same name, Duration 16mn, *University Paris 8 Vincennes — Saint-Denis, Restoration and conformation: Patrice Besnard / Labo VAO / 2010*, <http://www.archives-video.univ-paris8.fr/video.php?recordID=121> (29.10.2018).

he encouraged dialogues between European and Middle Eastern philosophers with the support of Fathi Triki, Christoph Wulf, Hans Jörg Sandkühler, before conceiving the phenomenon of transculturality to accompany, in a philosophical approach, the “economic globalization and the acceleration of population movements” (Cany, 2013: 5), in a transcultural dialogue where each culture must be able to propose “to make its values exist among other cultures” (Cany, 2013: 5). This idea of transculturality is to put creativity to the forefront in order to conceive a resistance through the arts as a force of opposition to world capitalism, which tries to reduce everything to the economy and profitability, and to impose on art and culture the status of only being vulgar consumer goods. Despite “the liberal pressure of its integration into the market, university, through mobility, has found a place for critical reflection and discussion where freedom of thought can unfold” (Cany, 2013: 5).

It is also in the sense of an opening that we are to read the compilation of texts chosen from the collection *Cahiers critiques de philosophie*⁷, compiled by Bruno Cany and published by Hermann and the Department of Philosophy of Paris VIII, beginning with Jean-François Lyotard’s text, *Règles et paradoxes*, which appeared accompanied with *Appendice svelte* in the first issue of the magazine *Babylone*, in the winter of 1982–1983, under the title *Règles et paradoxes & Appendice svelte*. Lyotard defines some terms important in his eyes, starting with that of “Postmodern”, which he describes above all as a state of mind to mark his difference in the relationship with the problematic of meaning, underlining that the new does not have to provide an answer to the problematic of meaning, unlike the modernity that has always sought to give a response, both political and philosophical, through the “great stories”. Throughout its text, the author will endeavor to demonstrate that these stories are no longer credible and not sufficient to ensure, as they claimed, a political, social and cultural link for a large part of the world’s contemporary societies. Lyotard pursues his reasoning by considering that scientific or artistic work should produce works necessarily strange and at first incomprehensible or not communicable, the function of which exclusively consists of experimenting with the rules. The problem is similar with politics, when we think that the exchange of sentences must obey certain rules, whereas on the contrary, there exists, for Lyotard, an incontestable opacity in the language, which we should defend against the attempt to reduce the latter to a mere market unit of information.

This text is followed by Cornélius Castoriadis’s *Les conditions du nouveau en philosophie*, which is an unprecedented transcription of a seminar given at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 1989; it introduces major

⁷ Indeed, in addition to a large number of philosophers from Paris VIII, this journal opens its pages to people from other disciplines and universities and, if it is important, of multiple nationalities, whether Congolese, American, German, Gabonese, Polish, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Lithuanian, Finnish, Cameroonian, Japanese, Brazilian, and so on.

points of Castoriadis' thought on autonomy and human creation. To do this, he starts from the problem of "novelty", showing that the new is what allows the opening of what is closed, and that this opening is intrinsically linked to the questioning, the interrogation and the capacity for deliberation, of which autonomy consists. There is, however, no question of individual quality because autonomy always has, a profoundly institutional dimension for the author; it concerns the organization of any social-historical world and a certain ontological structure of the being. The new — conditioned in the narrow intertwining of its social-historical conditioning, is thus what breaks and alters the closing of this organization, hence creating new relations between the individual and the institution, the instituted and the instituting.

François Châtelet's text *Brouillon pour une introduction à l'étude de l'Etat savant*, was first published in the PUF in 1985 in *Mélanges Gandillac. L'art des confins*, under the direction of Lyotard and Annie Cazenave. Against those who criticize rationality for the evils of the times (state violence, individual and collective alienation, the exhaustion of natural resources), Châtelet decides to sketch a genealogy of the mechanisms underlying the relation between State and Knowledge, through calling "Knowing State" the general configuration of these mechanisms. Now it turns out that this notion does not designate a State possessing objective and progressive knowledge, but the way in which the powers operate a unifying and transparent idea of reason, in order to model the movements of what it calls "Social matter". The author observes that it is not enough to claim a "supplement of the soul" from the State, nor to complain about the eternal decadence of civilization, that it is not enough either to believe that this salvation will come, after a correction of the state of things, from science, as *mathesis universalis*, Marxist or not. The real simulation lies in the pretention to a unique Knowledge, to being a single Master on the part of the state apparatus. Pretention of transparency between Knowledge and State; the State and Society; sciences, skills and technology. In short, between this what comes from politics and what is implied by knowledge. Alleged transparency which, despite everything, would allow us to glimpse its nakedness, through the fatal effects of the learned state, which in turn would be nothing but the grandeur of its weakness.

Driss Bellahcène's text *La piété dangereuse* refers, in turn, more specifically to the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, which has emerged in the contemporary Arab-Muslim world, presenting itself as faithful to the orthodox tradition while by excess, violence and literalism it betrays the substance of Islam, which established itself as a bearer of moderation and a peaceful relationship between faith and society. The author proposes to unmask the way in which the class of the "new ulemas" manipulates religious texts, placing them within partial and ahistorical interpretations. By relying on Nietzschean philosophical concepts to analyze this fundamentalism, it appears that the tension

and fanaticism of fundamentalists appear as a reactive form which denotes the violent refusal of the established order and, especially, the negation of life. In addition to analyzing the symptoms of fundamentalism, Bellahcène proposes to renew the dialogue with the theologico-philosophical tradition of Islam to eradicate this phenomenon, and to escape the dogmatic enclosure imposed by the manipulators of the sacred.

In his article *Le bonheur n'est pas une partie de plaisir*, Alain Brossat begins by exposing Adorno's "reversed" perspective to the philosophical tradition of ancient Greece. Indeed, it is no longer a question for him to follow a kind of harmony that would constitute "the horizon of the quest for happiness", but to live in the truth and the critical spirit, in order to settle down in a dys-harmony to deny any kind of "happiness", because the latter became a damaged commodity by reconciling the subject to the world of merchandise and alienating it to fetishes. But Brossat also shows us how Adorno passes from this concept of reversal to that of the negative affect of resentment. He suggests we go beyond the cliché that has become today the adornian "hint". To do this, Brossat attempts a critical approach to the relationship that exists between the general biopolitical conditions of the life of social subjects and the idea of happiness in today's world, notably by critically analyzing certain surveys that tend to make happiness the subject of knowledge which proves to be measurable, but disconnecting it from the social, political and historical realities of the societies concerned. In doing so, Brossat shows us that these investigations do not tell us anything about the conditions of happiness in our societies, nor does the famous IQ enlighten us about human intelligence. Hence, he proposes that philosophy reconnects with the program of an archaeology of knowledge on this question of happiness, by returning to a condition of happiness that would invent a possible and fragile form of happiness for the conditions of the present where the latter would be associated with the extraordinary and the unexpected.

Finally through the texts we can see, presented in a non-chronological way in this collection, that if there is no doubt that a change has taken place between the origin of University Paris VIII and today, the spirit of the beginning is always present in the engagement of teachers and researchers of this university; we will prove it mainly with the text entitled *Pour une déclaration universelle d'indépendance des universités* signed by Group XVII, against the Universities Reform Law (law LRU) which was implemented by the government of President Sarkozy. However, on this point, we can only agree with what Poulain wrote in 2009 about this law LRU, stating that:

the neoliberal dirigisme that presides over this hunt for premiums and the application of speculative *benchmarking*, academics condemn in advance the autonomy of universities and that of academics [...] to the sterility of thought (Poulain, 2009: 216).

But his program is destined to fail because it:

can only have the opposite effect of the one we were looking for: to make every teacher flee from this machine based on the perpetual competition of purely quantitative classification and valuation of individuals (Poulain, 2009: 216).

Moreover no one has waited for the evaluations and classifications of academics to discover the truths updated in France in the twentieth century by means of the human sciences, philosophy, the arts and the sciences of communication, nor to validate them internationally as such by adopting them. It is thus by means of true university autonomy: simultaneously rendering them the recognition of the conditions of their creativity and the aim of their own finality, through promoting the use of a critical judgment, and not by a classification for the individual values accounting of teachers and researchers, that a university can be at service in the formation of man.

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