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FRENCH LETTERS

BRUCE KUKLICK
Department of History, University of Pennsylvania

George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945–1963* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999)

Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Jean-Philippe Mathy, *French Resistance: The French–American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000)

In the 1790s French thinkers fascinated Americans, but for almost 150 years after the Founding, French cultural and intellectual life had a minor impact on the United States. British thought had an *entrée* because of the language, although Americans often poutingly rejected the English. German ideas more slowly made inroads because most American thinkers were not fluent in German, although as the nineteenth century wore on, the fame of German scholarship prompted the reading of Germany's philosophers, especially if they had large reputations in their homeland and were almost unintelligible in translation. But France's influence was negligible.

Americans have regularly embraced European thought for their own culture wars. Attitudes toward the French Revolution and the Terror were often a Rorshach Test about domestic politics. The erudite in the early republic adopted the Scottish Realists, partially to escape the more skeptical empiricism of the English, and then clung to the Scotch to fend off the influence of what was seen as the irreligiosity of the Germans. Emerson and many around him then looked to Kant and some post-Kantians to liberate them from a stultifying American rationalist Unitarianism. The pragmatists appreciated that Kant and Hegel might salvage a spiritual life from some English interpreters of Darwin. Young Turks in the twentieth century studied Bertrand Russell and Rudolph Carnap to fortify their secular vision against the *faux* Protestantism of speculative thought at home.

Overall, American thinkers have often suspected the importation of alien ideas but have often found them useful in one or another battle that has involved the

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definition of an appropriate orientation to the universe. Over the last 200 years, as philosophy has increasingly become an esoteric inquiry pursued formally in the university, these battles have had less social significance. Not much hung on the fact that as a young man in the 1920s Willard Quine mastered Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica*.

After World War II, however, not only did French philosophy make its first entrance on the modern American stage, but it also did so in a way that had ramifications far beyond the American university. It is ironic that France should have achieved its force in American intellectual life only after its time as a great power had decisively passed. The defeat of France in World War II initiated a complicated process that in the second half of the twentieth century would gain French thought more notice in the United States than it previously had had. All the books under review take up this issue, and they do so in a rarified area, the history of ideas. In addition to presenting a coherent account of the Franco-American connection in the second half of the twentieth century, the volumes collectively raise the issue of how to study the interaction of intellectual, cultural, and social history.

Fulton's *Apostles of Sartre* and Cotkin's *Existential America* do not dismiss the history of philosophy in the United States but are more committed to investigating how the wider educated culture of postwar America appropriated continental European ideas. Although the books sometimes slight the American profession of philosophy, the links the authors make between French philosophy and American culture are most worthwhile.

Jean-Paul Sartre emerged as a luminary in the French intellectual world writing on the decadence of the fascist ideology that had engulfed Europe in the 1930s and on the struggle for legitimate political authority that had arisen in the ruins of the continent after the expensive victory over the Germans. By the time the war ended, Sartre was a café intellectual in France, and his "existentialism" became known in the United States. No essential characteristic of human beings guided their lives—"existence preceded essence"—and so people could not take comfort in social pressure or conventions to explain their behavior. This was for Sartre *mauvaise foi*, bad faith, which allowed them to avoid accountability for their decisions. Instead individuals had to recognize that nothing was guaranteed to them, nothing settled or determined. Human nature did not exist, and people had to make themselves into what they were to become. In such circumstances, faced with the inevitable terror of death, authentic individuals accepted responsibility for moral preferences and political commitments. They had a radical freedom of choice that could not be sloughed off.

How did this bleak product of the destructive political extremism of Europe from 1914 to 1945 make its way to America? What space was there in the relatively

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untouched United States, home of the friendly optimism of John Dewey, for this nightmare? Answering questions like these is the burden of *Apostles of Sartre* and *Existential America*. While they emphasize Sartre in the period after World War II—and one translated essay, "Existentialism is a Humanism"—the story in the first instance includes other existentialists such as Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, and extends to a canon of earlier "continental" philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger. But Fulton's and Cotkin's books should appeal to intellectual historians not just because they have a bearing on the transmission of (mainly) French philosophy to the United States, but because the authors also deal with a significant but overlooked topic, the way in which the philosophy penetrated the general culture.

Existentialism is, moreover, distinctive in twentieth-century America because it permeated educated society in the face of disdain from many professional philosophers and eventually helped to destroy established paradigms in professional philosophy itself.

The narrower study, *Apostles of Sartre*, meticulously and straightforwardly lays out how Sartre's views were introduced to the literary scene in New York; how they achieved a beachhead in the academy in a spot as improbable as Yale University; how they appealed to and provided jobs for marginal scholars, for example women philosophers; and finally how they were made alluring to thousands of undergraduates. Perhaps most convincing in this story (and in Cotkin's) is the tale of the popularity of such texts as Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism: From Doestoevsky to Sartre* (1956) and William Barrett's *Irrational Man* (1958).

The scope of *Existential America* is broader, and carries on Fulton's narrative past the introduction of Sartre into philosophy departments and into the lives of educated Americans. Cotkin also ranges beyond the postwar period. He contends that existentially inspired themes shaped cultured life from the 1950s onward and, indeed, have affected a long tradition of American thinkers worried about the state of our souls in a meaningless universe. There is some truth to this contention. Cotkin points to Jonathan Edwards, Herman Melville, and William James, for example, as "American existentialists before the fact," and a strain of thought in these thinkers does intimate the fear and trembling associated with the European philosophers of *Existenz*. Only a purist studying the history of ideas would argue that one *cannot* have "existentialists before the fact." Cotkin, I believe, does not get these matters wrong so much as he misplaces his emphases and overlooks a way to make his exploration even more engaging.

It would surely be a mistake to argue that the tormented dimension of Edwards, Melville, and James represents a major thread in American intellectual history. In the twentieth century, if any thinker signifies the United States it is the aforementioned and benign John Dewey, who lacked a dark side. If commentators doubt the role of national cultural style in understanding high philosophy, all

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they need do is compare Dewey to Heidegger; or if James is an American thinker considered to be in torment, measure him against Nietzsche. National differences count in philosophy, and those facets in Edwards *et al.* that Cotkin focuses on are not central to the American story.

After existentialism entered the United States, Edwards, Melville, and James had their existentialist aspect heightened. In the era after World War II, scholarship reinterpreted these men to intensify the troubled side of their lives. Here, I believe, the core book is Perry Miller's *Jonathan Edwards* (1949). Cotkin uses Miller's work on Edwards to intimate the existential edge of American thought long before Sartre wrote. Cotkin overlooks the fact that Miller wrote in an already existentialized intellectual life. The 1950s gave us a more agonized Edwards, Melville, and James; Miller's *Edwards* is an artifact of Sartre's authority in the United States.

Most effective and imaginative is *Existential America*'s exploration of existentialism's wider sway. The treatment of Norman Mailer is most original, although other novelists are also covered. In addition, the book examines cultural creations such as the photography of Robert Frank, and philosophical dread in the American film noir. Cotkin even talks about the films of Woody Allen, but not enough in my opinion. The book closes with an obligatory look at how existentialism shows up in the more literate of the radicals of the 1960s. The Port Huron Statement of 1962, which launched SDS, is redolent with an existentialist idiom, and Cotkin finally tells us how these subjects (in the work of Simone de Beauvoir) define the writing of Betty Friedan.

Both Fulton and Cotkin elucidate the absorption of existentialist ideas into the general culture by citing latent fears of the Cold War and nuclear weapons, by the pressures for conformity in a mass society, and (later) by the revolts of the Vietnam era. These explanations are predictable and unadventurous but nonetheless persuasive, and exhibit the unexamined historical conventions in the United States to which Fulton and Cotkin appeal in their explanation: the social and political world is somehow salient to the intellectual and cultural but not determinative of it.

The authors devote less time to what was going on in the academy itself, or the complexity of the response in the scholarly world. Fulton presumes that Anglophone philosophy is not worth much and is dreadful stuff. And *Existential America* ignores how the learned study of existentialism became entrenched in philosophy departments in the United States and how the whole sub-discipline of "Continental Philosophy" became part of the academic scene. We find out about the followers of Betty Friedan but not about the industry of Heidegger monographs. And both Cotkin's and Fulton's works silently accept the dismissal by existential Americans of the dominant Anglo-American analytic philosophy. This bothers me, in part because of my lingering attachment to what goes on in

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philosophy departments at places like Harvard, Pittsburgh, and Michigan. But it bothers me more because the authors neglect an opportunity to examine the role of *ressentiment* in intellectual life in the United States; the anti-intellectualism of all stripes of philosophers and their followers; and the social function of the philosophical disciplines in the second half of the twentieth century.

While Fulton and Cotkin cover the period from World War II to Vietnam, Jean-Philippe Mathy's two books concentrate on the period from Vietnam to the present. But Mathy reveals a different sensibility in pursuing the same subject matter. Fulton and Cotkin approach even the history of ideas with little theoretical baggage. Mathy, who tells us that he is "a Frenchman living in the United States" (*Extrême-Occident*, p. 14), would say that the American authors exemplify the empirical bent of Anglo-American thinking. By contrast, Mathy has picked up the theory of the French intellectuals whose writing he studies. Concentrating on the period after the one Fulton and Cotkin cover, and taking the story to the end of the twentieth century, Mathy focuses on how French intellectuals have understood the Idea of America and what this tells us about them. But this description simplifies a complicated set of concerns that range over both books and that mix Mathy's own views as a theoretically minded commentator *and* the views of the philosophers he is examining.

The major concern and the ostensible topic of *Extrême-Occident* is how some French writers have grasped the origins, growth, and meaning of democracy in America. After a running (and competent) start in the nineteenth century, the book surveys the twentieth century more carefully and then closes in on the era following World War II, emphasizing the 1970s and 1980s. Although it covers other issues, *French Resistance* elaborates on the same subject among French writers in the 1990s, carrying forward the analyses of *Extrême-Occident* to the end of the twentieth century.

Mathy shows that both the French left and the French right have been anti-American, although attitudes have changed over the years and although the left has tended to honor Americans who have denounced their native land (as in the 1960s). Mathy also depicts a group from Tocqueville to French Atlanticists thinking about NATO who have criticized the United States more moderately than the diatribes characteristic in the majority perspective shared by left and right. The consistent violent distaste for the United States is the most noteworthy trait of the French at whom Mathy looks. Many pages are spent analyzing Sartre's detestation of the United States, and the suggestion that the United States might become the home for a post-Nazi form of fascism. But Sartre is only one example. Over the years French critics of the United States have denigrated its democratic decadence, which they have linked to the mass production and industrial collectivization brought about by a love affair with technology. An essential American modernity has marginalized high culture and produced a conformist intellectual life. As the

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United States has become a world power, it has imposed its hegemonic capitalist way of life wherever it can, by economic coercion if possible, by violence if necessary. In other cultures the imprint of America has vulgarized the locals, and further diminished the sensitivity of the conqueror.

Mathy wrote both of his books before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center (2001) and the Second Iraq War (2003), and thus for observers of Franco-American relations after this period he valuably demonstrates how rich was the soil in France for germinating poisonous beliefs about the United States.

A second concern in his books acquaints us with the theories of these same thinkers who, in addition to denouncing America, try to understand the world. That is, Mathy has *applied* the theories of Foucault, Derrida, and their more recent followers to explain an important dimension of their writing—the perceptions of these French thinkers of the United States. French theories are used to explain substantive French beliefs.

Mathy treats French intellectuals talking about America as engaging in a form of what Edward Said has called "Orientalism." "The French narrative construction of America" has mixed idealization and demonization, and has comprised a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections (*Extrême-Occident*, pp. 254–6). These writings, says Mathy, tell us more about their authors' position in French life than about the United States. The "textual references" he has collected constitute "what is called today an *intertext*." Repeated complementary descriptions, cannibalizing one another and exhibiting similar structures in the depiction of American life, result in "a complex signifier, a contested textual construct that bears the name 'America'" (ibid., p. 3). The set of shared categories, political commitments, and collective musings give life to "a discursive formation," and the scholar who finds the key to such a formation, while cogitating over many of its instances, is thus freed "from the erudite, scholarly obsession" with exhausting the corpus of the material (ibid., p. 11).

In part the notion of discursive formation that derives from the French intellectuals under study and that Mathy exploits to understand them is like the notions of "myth and symbol" popular in American Studies in the United States in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The American practitioners were more literary critics than historians, and believed that in examining great works of American art, or in unpacking the code at work in popular fictions, the scholar might get at the core (and often tormented) values that shaped American life. In both the American and the French cases the insight of the scholar and a focus on textual method replaced empirical research. In contrast to Mathy (and old-fashioned students of American Studies) Fulton and Cotkin are common-sense historians, eschewing theory of any kind and trusting to the accumulation of data to illuminate the topics they have undertaken to explore.

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Moreover, while Mathy explores a discursive formation that saves us from research, he also wants its application to provide more than a series of verbal formulas that exemplify belief about the United States. "The representations" of America are "rooted in the specific social and political history of the French learned classes" but also intend "the object of the representations" (*Extrême-Occident*, p. 38)—the American nation. The intertext or formation or representations are a generalization from the writing of thinkers, but also depend on a (French) social reality, and try to uncover such a reality in the United States. We have a set of ideas that reflect both the underside of the mental world of French philosophers and the connection of this mental world to a material substrate in France. Simultaneously, this set of ideas is about—that is, it aims at—reality in the United States; the intertext tries to get at the truth, the "object."

Mathy next tells us that intertext and object are not separate: "in a sense" America "is" its representations; the collaborative French odium is an integral part of America, even though French social history produced the collaboration. Most important, more than any other nation, America "partakes of this dubious ontological status" (*Extrême-Occident*, pp. 50–51). I infer from this statement that beliefs about France are more clearly manufactured by the "real" France. But America is more a blend of French fantasies (among others) and real life in the United States.

Mathy's theorizing lacks clarity, but I am unsure whether the fault is his or the thinkers he both criticizes and studies. More important, he falters in his attempt to show how the intertext is a product of French social life, and thus whether the ideas have any justification—he does not tell us what the social base is in France that "causes" French beliefs about the United States. One often cannot tell if some view about America emanates from Mathy or some other French thinker, or if it is to be taken as true or as an example of some kind of French projection. Mathy cannot decide whether he is deconstructing French ideas about the United States or validating them. Obviously he wants to say: a little of both. Yet we don't learn which is which. In two books that are appropriately enough filled with amplifying comment, the author's habit of stating the most febrile notions associated with America without appropriate explication makes for trouble.

Some pertinent examples:

- Mathy discusses, as if it were not silly, Julia Kristeva's assertion that "America embodies principles of womanhood: its prehistoric landscapes escape the linearity attributed to masculine (historical) time" (*Extrême-Occident*, p. 195);
- Referring to Alexander Kojève on Hegel, Mathy says, as if it is intelligible, "an extreme aesthetic formalization of self, pure (gratuitous) opposition to the 'given,' is, in the Kojevian perception of postmodernity, the only cultural

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practice now available to human beings, since history, as transformation of the world and moral activity, is totally finished" (ibid., p. 13);

- Similarly, Mathy writes about Baudrillard, who "submits both the Hegelian and Nietzschean readings of America to a double twist. He agrees with the Neo-Hegelians that postmodern America is the consummation of historical time through the resolution of the contradictions between nature and man (technology) as well as between man and man (the disappearance of all meaningful conflicts, the end of ideologies)" (ibid., p. 231).

In *French Resistance*, Mathy is more concerned to get at the truth value of French visions of the United States, and additionally outlines how French views of America really imitate American views of France. There is a "structural homology" between disputes in the United States and France on issues that in both countries are shared passions of intellectuals *and* the public. But these similarities are not only structural: they mimic close connections between the two cultures, in which an American involvement with France balances the French involvement with America (*French Resistance*, pp. 12, 17).

A series of connected faults, I believe, weakens this line of reasoning. The book operates on the assumption that some intertexts can be trusted—one can read off the ideas of the masses in the United States from the ideas of a tiny elite in France or the United States, that we can easily move from intellectual history to cultural history. In this case, Mathy generalizes from his concentration on two elements of postwar Franco-American history: the previously cited fury of Sartre with the United States, and French–American theoretical affairs of the past twenty years. These are indeed important phenomena. But Mathy is far more oriented to the mental world of French thinkers than to the United States. Contrast his treatment of Sartre in America to that of Fulton and Cotkin: *Apostles of Sartre* and *Existential America* barely mention Sartre's rage, which is trivial in their calculation of Sartre's import. American intellectuals and then, ultimately, moviegoers didn't care much about what Sartre thought of them; his thoughts about the world and our anxiety-ridden place were intriguing. By contrast, Mathy does not mention "Existentialism as a Humanism"; nor does he expound on how the United States took up existentialist belief. He does presume that Sartre's distaste is based on the insight of genius into wide empirical truth.

In talking about French theorists after Sartre, *French Resistance* first appraises these ideas and those of their admirers in the United States, exploring the French intellectual migration to the United States; that is, he considers in a later period the question that Fulton and Cotkin have addressed in an earlier period. Indeed, Mathy's first chapter, recycled from an earlier essay, contributes to the scholarly debate over the value of this thinking. The author highlights opposition to structuralism, deconstruction, and their variants in the United States, but also

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attends to how American pragmatist intellectuals such as Richard Rorty gravitated to the French philosophy. Overall Mathy comments fair-mindedly and parses the notions correctly.

More important, however, Mathy is committed to the view that the reputation of theory is relevant to a thick cultural relation, that it signals some kind of popular link between the United States and France: cultural history can be derived from a correct appreciation of intellectual history. Theory, of course, was pertinent in the limited realm of higher academics in the humanities and softer social sciences. But it had far less currency than Sartre's existentialism. Mathy is so engaged with his French ideas and their elevated world that he does not see that, at least in the United States, the obsession with some French thinkers in part of the university system does not tell us much about the impact of France on America.

Mathy wants to discriminate and to distinguish an abstract history of ideas from a cultural tie that richly connects both societies (*French Resistance*, pp. 31, 34), but he inevitably extrapolates a Franco-American bond from something like an examination of "how some of the most recent historiography of France in the English language has popularized a view of the French mind as utterly unable to conceive of a tolerant pluralistic post-imperial society" (*French Resistance*, p. 25). Not to mention "a special issue of PMLA devoted to the emerging field of colonial discourse analysis" (ibid., p. 44), or "many French and Anglo-American conceptions of gender relations as well as brands of feminist theory" (ibid., p. 49), or the "fundamental opposition between the voluntaristic moral and philosophical idealism of the French Enlightenment and the immanentist historicism that is at the core of Anglo-American liberalism" (ibid., p. 91). Much more compelling is that Mathy repeatedly states that fewer and fewer students bother to take French at all as a language, and are decidedly indifferent to French cultural studies (ibid., pp. 11, 120–22).

As I see it, there is little connection. It is not more than a cliché to note that Americans don't think much about the outside world. France does not mean much to them now, one way or another. We know that there is Paris and the Eiffel Tower; the French have fancy cooking; teenagers know particularly about their kisses. What else? When the American government calls attention to French hostility, or when the French rub the American nose in their anger, there is a bellow of irritation in the United States, of the sort that occurred in the period of the Second Iraq War. But for the most part Americans have not been concerned with the French for the last thirty years in the realms Mathy depicts.

At the end of 1993 Major League Baseball sent Lenny Dykstra, the star center fielder of the Philadelphia Phillies, on a goodwill tour of Europe. The Phillies had appeared in the World Series that year, and *Sports Illustrated* wrote up the tour. On the trip from Paris to Amsterdam, Dykstra reflected on Europe:

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"Now Paris is France. But London, that's just London, right? It's just London." Theories may help us if we want to learn how French and American culture, in the anthropological sense, connect. But there is no easy way to go from what the chattering classes think to what Dykstra and his French equivalents think. A necessary condition of doing cultural history is sustained empirical research about what non-intellectuals make of cultures not their own.

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