

# #20

# SEND YOUR KIDS TO THE JUNGLES OF THEORY: AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE OF THE HUMANITIES CRISIS

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**Abstract** || This article seeks to synthesize two histories of praxis in the American university: the “crisis in the humanities” and the rise and fall of “French Theory”. The former, characterized by declining enrollment and professorial job prospects, has been primarily analyzed as the result of a neoliberal turn (Delbanco, Deresiewicz, Kerr, Menand). Such discussions remain largely divorced from intellectual history work on the transatlantic reception of theoretical schools (Culler, Eagleton, Leitch). By homing in on a subset of Literary Theory, the anachronistically-labeled “French Theory”, I argue these stories should be linked. Contrary to what many polemics contend, the banalization of theory can be seen as a victim, not a cause, of today’s crisis in liberal arts education.

**Keywords** || French Theory | University praxis | Humanities | Literary Theory

**Resumen** || Este artículo busca sintetizar dos historias de praxis en la universidad estadounidense: la «crisis en las humanidades» y el auge y la caída de la «teoría francesa». La primera, caracterizada por la disminución de la matrícula y las perspectivas de empleo académico, ha sido analizada principalmente como el resultado de un giro neoliberal (Delbanco, Deresiewicz, Kerr, Menand). Dichas discusiones permanecen en gran medida separadas del trabajo de historia intelectual sobre la recepción transatlántica de escuelas teóricas (Culler, Eagleton, Leitch). Al enfocarme en un subconjunto de la teoría literaria, anacrónicamente etiquetada «teoría francesa», sostengo que estas historias deberían estar vinculadas. A diferencia de lo que afirman muchas polémicas, la banalización de la teoría puede verse como una víctima y no como una causa de la crisis actual en la educación de artes liberales.

**Palabras clave** || Teoría francesa | Praxis universitaria | Humanidades | Teoría literaria

**Resum** || Aquest article busca sintetitzar dues històries de praxi a la universitat estatunidenca: la «crisi de les humanitats» i l’ascens i la caiguda de la «teoria francesa». La primera, caracteritzada per la disminució de la matrícula i de les expectatives de treball del professorat, s’ha analitzat principalment com a resultat d’un gir neoliberal (Delbanco, Deresiewicz, Kerr, Menand). Aquests debats estan separats de la història intel·lectual que estudia la recepció transatlàntica de les escoles teòriques (Culler, Eagleton, Leitch). Referint-me a un subconjunt de la teoria de la literatura, anacrònicament etiquetada com a «teoria francesa», argumento que aquestes històries han d’estar connectades. Contràriament al que moltes polèmiques sostenen, la banalització de la teoria es pot veure com una víctima, no una causa, de la crisi actual a l’educació de les arts liberals.

**Paraules clau** || Teoria francesa | Praxis universitària | Humanitats | Teoria literària

## 0. Introduction

When William Deresiewicz published “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League,” he stoked new fire into the rather stale discourse on the “crisis of the humanities.”<sup>1</sup> Instead of lamenting low enrollment numbers or waxing poetically on the marvel of books, Deresiewicz took the scathing stance that colleges these days are admitting and cultivating students with superb raw intellect and work ethic, but who lack creative and critical insight. His book *Excellent Sheep* expanded that thesis, tracing a series of administrative policies and pedagogical changes that led to the state of affairs: new admissions standards, the rise of marketable, instrumental knowledge, and a corporate, consumer model of education. Together, these factors reared a student body of extraordinary ovines: dogged, brilliant workers without vision; customers that demand amenities and validation at every step; a generation of the best and the brightest with little interest to be intellectually—or personally—challenged.

To contrast the millennial predicament, Deresiewicz offers a passage from Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Marriage Plot*, which takes place at Brown University in the 1980s (Deresiewicz, 2014: 121-2). Every critic nostalgically holds one decade or era as a personal utopia, yet Deresiewicz’s choice is peculiar. College campuses, at least in the humanities, were marked less in the eighties by tranquility than by disruption, leading many to classify the decade as anti-utopia (Campbell, Kendall).

Those years were the “heyday of semiotics,” when debates on interpretation, critical practice, and the role of the liberal arts were a daily combative fixture in the lives of students and professors alike. In a 1986 *New York Times* article, for instance, Colin Campbell wrote of Yale’s campus: “The estate is choked with new theoretical plants and weird new beasts of criticism, many of them French - as if a tropical French colony, a Paris with snakes, had sprung up from the turf” (Campbell, 1986: SM20). Is this the same time for which Deresiewicz longs? It is difficult to tell. His work digs little into the soil that nurtured those French theoretical plants, preferring to chronicle structural and material changes to undergraduate education, rather than scrutinize intellectual history.

This paper’s primary goal is to do that digging. Those concerned with the critical capacities of today’s undergraduates, I argue, should heed the factors—intellectual, structural, and material as well—that led to the French “colony” on Yale’s and Brown’s “estate.” Beneath Deresiewicz’s story runs a parallel half-century tale of changing fashions in humanist scholarship. It is a tale of crossing and rupture, through which new modes of thinking made their way from France to America in the late sixties.

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## NOTES

1 | A term and phenomenon usually summed up with a single statistic—17.4% of bachelor’s degrees in 1966, just 8% in 2007—the crisis released a deluge of writings: columns, editorials, and polemics composed by lovers of the arts and letters earnestly defending their disciplines. The writers harness everything from empirical data to show that English majors *are* hired to ocular warnings of what an American technocracy would look like without a humanistic moral compass. Some arguments are compelling, others tend toward the wistful or apologetic. Since Deresiewicz’s writing, the crisis discourse has receded from the spotlight. But the statistics in humanities’ decline only continue to roll in, continuous declines in undergraduate enrollment, flowing through to departmental contraction and worsening job prospects for doctoral students. See: “The Trend” on the MLA’s Office of Research Blog. <https://mlaresearch.mla.hcommons.org/2017/06/26/the-decline-in-humanities-majors/>

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Those modes of thinking have been reduced to a series of labels —post-structuralism, anti-humanism, deconstruction, or simply “French Theory”— to refer to the diverse work of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Émile Benveniste, Michel Foucault and hosts of interlocutors and inheritors. Any effort to summarize their contributions to scholarship would be superficial. So, building on François Cusset’s work, I use “French Theory” in a self-acknowledged anachronistic way: to refer not to the content of the theories but rather to the way they were received in the United States.

Re-read from the reception context, “French Theories” are typified by the challenges posed to the core beliefs of modern Western humanism: logic, universality, stable meaning, subject-hood. Such dogma-defying techniques provoked scorn from scholars who felt their pristine “estate” choked, yet that aggressive act is at the core of Deresiewicz’s nostalgia. For while the eighties liberal arts found themselves under brutal scrutiny, they were also flourishing. Humanist enrollment increased for the first time in two decades, as students, like departments, critically examined “universal” values so long taken for granted.

Might there be a connection between these two histories of university praxis: one that reared a generation of excellent sheep, while the other saw the decline of “French Theory”? There is a tendency to see the stories as separate. Theory, by many accounts, found itself buried in charges of nihilism and relativism, became institutionalized or ruined the canon, and meanwhile left the humanities departments in shambles. That story should provoke our suspicion, firstly, because it does little justice to the actual content of the works. The nature of post-structural criticism is to resist ideology and commodification, undermining each reader’s effort to pin down stable meaning—even in the tenet of that criticism. These texts, then, seem designed to impede the excellent sheep from grazing: it’s hard to hoop jump through Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*.

In this paper, I propose a different narrative of the reception and banalization of French Theory in the American university. Conservative critics, I argue, played a role in ossifying the works of diverse continental thinkers into a single ideology, casting the environment of intense intellectual debate as dangerous and counter-productive. This move aligned with a neoliberal, administrative turn in the University that saw students as clients in need of coddling amenities and job-security rather than as learners to be intellectually challenged. Colleges increasingly came to prioritize scientific, marketable knowledge, so Theory’s Marxist-rooted critique of those priorities became not only unmarketable but also threatening to the market project. A parallel emerges then in the flattening of undergraduate psychology and the flattening of the critical methodologies taught in the classroom. The

fall of French Theory and the rise of excellent sheep might intertwine in a single knotted tale of university praxis.

## 1. Sowing the Seeds

In October 1966, Johns Hopkins University hosted “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,” a symposium that gathered prominent French philosophers and thinkers for the first time on American shores (Macksey, 2007: x). The conference was intended to be a showcase of structuralism: a then-radical French theoretical approach that delineated and mapped the associations within a given “structure,” believing that meaning could be found by scrutinizing the codes in, say, a fashion, a novel, a social interaction. In his opening remarks, “Lions and Squares,” Richard Macksey waxed extensively on the history and legacy of the American university, asserting the importance of re-evaluating the academy’s “methods”: the analytic tools used in scholarship and taught to the next generation. French structuralists, in his eyes, had developed a new model of examining culture that could grant much-needed perspective for his American cohorts. To illustrate the point, Macksey constructed an extensive analogy between the conference proceedings and the playing of games like chess. The metaphor cast scholarship not as the stock application of pre-existing methodologies to new materials, but rather as a fluid, changing field. It was a game that takes on new dimensions and new methods as different players come to the table, a structure that analyzes structures. Macksey implied that the French had arrived at a new way to play the game.

Over the course of the conference, however, the very rules of that structuralist game lost their foundation. Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” is most credited with this event. In the paper, Derrida traced a series of Western myths that relied on what he calls a “center”: a point that orients and organizes the rest of society (Derrida, 1970: 248). The Platonic forms are a center of one philosophical system; God has been the Western world’s most famous one. These centers are like the rules of chess outlined by Macksey—they dictate the objective, fixed rules of the game—and Derrida argued that they were historically contingent, arbitrary through and through. Academics and lay-men alike spend their lives trying to “decipher a truth or an origin” at the center, though there is none to be found (Derrida, 1970: 264).

Seen in retrospect, Derrida’s paper has the appearance of dismantling the structuralist approach in a flash, simply by asking what “center” its techniques presumed to uncover. So the essay is often credited with defining the field of post-structuralism: the philosophical, then

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literary, movement that denied the validity of structures based on Derrida's rupture of the center (Cusset, 2003: 31). After the conference, Derrida went on to publish three books in a single year—*Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Writing and Difference*—whose theoretical strength continued to shake the academy and its established modes of criticism (Leitch, 1988: 267). Twenty years later, he would reflect on the conference proceedings saying, "something happened there which would have the value of a theoretical event, or an event within theory, or more likely the advent of a new theoretical institutional sense of 'theory'" (Derrida, 1990: 80). The conference was, then, an unprecedented "event" both in the structuralist discipline and in the broader academic sphere. It was far from singularly responsible for bringing French post-structural theory to the American academy, but it signaled a sea-change in the transferal process. But what made that process successful?

Strong intellectual ties, of course, had existed before between the nations. Older French exports of surrealism, existentialism, and "new history" established a precedent of Americans looking to Paris for "exotic" new ways to understand the human condition (Cusset, 2003: 26). But the cultural context of America in the sixties made the nation particularly receptive to the new vogues in French philosophy. It was an anti-authoritarian moment, where leftist youth craved tools to unseat traditional hierarchies (Cusset, 2003; Gann and Duignan: 1995). This was the decade of Vietnam protests, of black power, of early feminist liberation, of the New Left (Van der Poel, 1999: 12). On campuses, youth groups—most famously the Students for Democratic Society (SDS)—fought for increased representation in politics as well as pedagogy. SDS's manifesto, the 1962 Port Huron statement, bemoaned how "the actual intellectual effect of the college experience is hardly distinguishable from that of any other communications channel—say, a television set—passing on the stock truths of the day" (Flacks and Lichtenstein, 2005: 245). Traditional modes of learning, the statement asserted, reinforced social norms and hierarchies, and SDS called for a university that would teach ways to question those hierarchies. Those demands resonate strongly with Deresiewicz's anxieties fifty years later. In *Excellent Sheep*, he calls those "stock truths" Platonic "doxa"—pre-existing logic passed down without critical inquiry—and his primary fear is that ovine students passively accept doxa rather than challenge them like their SDS predecessors. That the Port Huron statement asked the academy to "reinsert theory and idealism where too often reign confusion and political barter" marked 1962 as primed for the arrival of a French Theory that would disrupt the "stock truths," the Platonic doxa, of the day (Flacks and Lichtenstein, 2005: 283).

Those stock truths were first and foremost shattered in Literature departments. Though speakers at the Hopkins conference taught

and wrote philosophy at their own institutions, their writings crossed disciplines as they crossed the Atlantic —finding new homes in the way Americans read literary texts (Cusset, 2003: 76). This transfer was due, in part, to a frustration with the dominant mode of reading at the time: New Criticism. Founded in the thirties by a group of Southern scholars seeking to re-assert an aesthetic quality of literature beyond ideology, New Criticism preached the importance of de-contextualized close-reading (Clausen, 1997). Scholars and students alike were told to eschew historical information and writer biography, to focus fully on the formalist intricacies within a text: how its interplay of images, rhetoric, and other devices contributed to a unified, perfect work of art. After three decades of comfortable reign in high schools and Universities, though, New Criticism began to grate on its followers: it was Anglophilic, narrow, and stale —particularly given the political context and changing student demographics of the sixties (Said, 1999: 143; Eagleton, 2008).

“French Theory,” on the other hand, was perceived to be politically charged and dynamic, treating each text with intense critique rather than universal admiration. It challenged the rules of New Criticism’s game with their own methods. For close reading methods was still used to work diligently through texts, but in the pursuit of disruption rather than unity (Cusset, 2003: 58). What began in English and Literature departments soon seeped into film theory, legal studies, and theology. Feminist poststructural theorists like Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Julia Kristeva, applied the deconstructive toolkit to the category of gender (Tandon, 2008). It would be reductive to present their work as a soteriological import of “French Feminism,” but it undoubtedly provided a source of inspiration for American feminist movements and women’s studies departments from the early seventies (Cusset, 2003: 145; Van der Poel, 1999: 20). Less clear is the relation between “French Theory” and the canon wars of the subsequent decades: the relative merit of the set of classic works that all well-educated liberal arts students were supposed to know. Deconstructive thinkers worked on canonical texts, but their mode of critique could also be applied to the arbitrary construction of the canon: to debates of identity politics and representation, of who selected the works and what power structures might motivate those selections (Said, 1999). Take Roland Barthes’s diagnoses on the death of the author and the replacement of the closed work with the open text. These notions lend themselves well to the radical expansion of a text in cultural studies, to the notion that urban graffiti deserves a dissertation as much as *The Odyssey* (Leitch, 1988: 390).<sup>2</sup>

These ripples from the initial Johns Hopkins conference took almost two decades to come to fruition, as materials were slowly translated and French academics took up residence in American universities.

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## NOTES

2 | These trends were, by no means, the uni-directional result of French Theory’s arrival on American shores. They were inspired by other continental thinkers, by home-grown intellectual movements, by changing demographics and voices in American universities, amongst a host of other factors. Yet some causal links are evident, and the general alignment of the theoretical principles and structural departmental changes indicates a stronger coherence between the two than we might be inclined to think.

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But the very elements of the discourse that empowered students and created a dynamic environment of debate had already incubated its downfall. By the eighties, an aggressive conservative backlash arrived, bemoaning the loss of the Western canon, nostalgic for a time of certainty and fixed rules in the scholarly game of chess. Most accounts, like Campbell's, depict the eighties as a messy, thorny era: a time when students wandered aimlessly amidst different ideologies, growing nihilistic and confused. Yet that same decade is the one Deresiewicz deems, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the golden age of the liberal arts. For the thorniness of theoretical debate is exactly what humanist students, like those in SDS, crave: the chance to challenging the challengers, a dynamic environment to question their doxa. In this disparity lurks the crux of my argument: that the tale of theory has been muddied by the shepherds of today's excellent sheep.

## 2. Ideology and Nihilism: The Shepherd's Tale

Jacques Derrida's 2004 obituary is a text prime for his own deconstructive reading. Titled "Abstruse Theorist Dies at 74," it depicts Derrida with the full force of the anti-theory aughts. Derrida's "method," the obituary explains, was "robbing texts — whether literature, history or philosophy— of truthfulness, absolute meaning and permanence," as if the philosopher were a wicked thief, sneaking into the American university to abscond with its treasure chest of "meaning" (Kendall, 2004). His actual claim was less pernicious if more radical: that there was no treasure chest to begin with. The obituary continues, "The concept was eventually applied to the whole gamut of arts and social sciences, including linguistics, anthropology, political science, even architecture," casting Derridean thought as a stock "concept" or "method" that could be packaged and "applied" with ease to any material so desired (Kendall, 2004).

This is the common narrative told of French Theory. Supporters claim the work was perverted and ossified the moment it arrived on American shores, while detractors argue it debased the pristine truth previously held by American scholars. Cusset falls into the first camp, Kendall the second. In Cusset's account, when Foucault's nuanced mappings of power arrived in a pragmatic, politically-charged American context, they coalesced into a methodology, a technique to unmask specific instances of power (Cusset, 2003: 279). A similar fate befell Derrida, the thinking goes, and his "deconstruction" was reduced to a blunt instrument that could be directly applied to any text. "Body that is, gets changed into concept. Poetry is changed into analytical theory," bemoans Nicole Ward Jouve when she speaks of Helene Cixous's multi-faceted work (Jouve, 104: 1999). These

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claims are clearly reductive —we need only cite the writings of Barbara Johnson or the continued work of Peggy Kamuf and Elissa Marder for evidence of a nuanced American reception of Derrida's and Cixous's thought. Yet the thesis remains, from both defendants and detractors, that the intentionally-slippery positions of French theorists coalesced into a more rational doxa in America.

Two interpretations of these complaints seem possible: Either this is the fate of all nuanced insights or there were specific conditions in America that encouraged their reduction. Is the United States a place where subtlety and ambiguity perish, where philosophical intricacies are collapsed into a political agenda?

Cusset, at least, seems to think so. Homing in on the idea of "parataxis" —composition through short, pithy lines and quotations— he argues that American readers tended to isolate minor details from French works, to take those fragments out of context and apply them to their political agendas. These collectors invented "French Theory" and harnessed the paratactic creation to their own ends, quickly departing from the original philosophy. Edward Said echoes this point saying, "Transatlantic readers, by and large, seized on the words as if they were magic wands by which to transform the humdrum scholastic readings into eye-catching theoretical 'texts'" (Said, 1999: 146). Quotations like Derrida's "il n'y a pas de hors-texte," for him, became paratactic aberrations, false magic wands. Said's charge is surprising, though, given that his canonical essay "Traveling Theory" accepts the tendency for ideas to shift as they circulate without holding an ethical standard to purity. Yet when reflecting on the French post-structuralists, Said, like Cusset and many others, displays a nostalgia for a primal moment of theory's birth, for a mythic time when Derrida's or Foucault's ideas were fully their own, not yet "common nouns" or even common names.

Primal moments, however, tend to exist rarely if at all, and it does little good to bemoan the idea that a body of theory inspired various interpretations and offshoots. Cusset implies that Americans were too enthralled with Derrida, too willing to take a fragment of his text and flippantly apply it. Yet broad application is precisely what nurtured Campbell's thorny, heterogeneous "jungle," so we'd have to look elsewhere to explain the coalescence into a single principle.

The ossification of "French Theory" into ideology, I want to propose, might have less to do with its liberal inheritors than its conservative detractors. Indeed, it was from the pamphlets of Roger Kimball and Dinesh D'Souza to the products of the Rand Corporation, that the idea emerged that these thinkers could be subsumed into a single doctrine (Cusset, 2003: xvii-iii). Cusset reads this process as legitimizing French Theory in a way liberals, with their mixed

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approaches, had struggled to do, but that unification also simplified the writers' subtleties, fashioning their works into a single, easy target for disparagement. Anti-doxa became doxa.

For the very process of reduction opens "French Theory" to charges and mockeries of nihilism and relativism. According to this thinking, if there were no center to a given structure, then neither scholar nor citizen could presume to uncover any meaning in their studies or their lives. Rather than questioning the rules of the chess games, theory is thus presented as the mere rejection of all rules (Cusset, 2003: 46). Reducing the writings of so many continental thinkers to a single idea of "relativism" made them easy fodder for that charge—an attack most famously performed in the Sokal hoax in 1996. Alan Sokal, a physics professor at New York University, submitted a nonsense article to *Social Text* that argued quantum gravity was a mere social and linguistic construct. Sokal used the article's acceptance at the journal to launch a vicious attack against post-structuralism. Any journal that would accept his gobbledygook had become relativist to the point of absurdity.

The charge of relativism acquired a political slant by associating French Theory with anti-semitism. Several of the continental movement's leading thinkers, most famously Paul de Man, as well as the intellectual forerunner Martin Heidegger, were charged with Nazi-collaboration (Cusset, 2003: 2-3). These scandals, while certainly meriting scrutiny, cast the corpus of work as intrinsically and uniformly anti-semitic. Theory's inherent nihilism, the thinking went, both led to and was informed by an ideology that justified even the most atrocious actions like the Holocaust. Two brief examples: Jeffrey Mehlman called post-structural thought "a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration during World War II" and Peter Lennon, in a 1992 piece for *The Guardian*, wrote "Borrowing Derrida's logic one could deconstruct Mein Kampf to reveal that [Adolf Hitler] was in conflict with anti-Semitism" (Lehman, 1988: 63; Kendall, 2004). If leftist Americans saw deconstruction as a way to disrupt traditional hierarchies, conservatives charged it with doing that too successfully: with reducing the world to a single, de-centered plane—a realm without ethics that would have sanctioned the Holocaust.

The offspring of the Johns Hopkins conference, according to these critiques, could be crystalized into a single principle that had corrupted the youth from the seventies on, feeding their radical rabble-rousing, while depriving them of a traditional, good-humanist education. Books furthering this idea flourished in the eighties and early nineties. William Bennet's *To Reclaim a Legacy* declared a state of emergency in which radicals had stolen the "legacy" of humanistic inquiry, much like Derrida's obituary cast him as "robbing" the academy. Later polemics from Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* to

Alain Finkielkraut's *The Defeat of the Mind* to David Lhemman's *Signs of the Times* solidified the apocalyptic idea that America had lost its wits to the continental imports. Bruno Latour summed up the perspective well when he charged Sokal with casting France as "another Colombia, a country of dealers who produce hard drugs — derridium, lacanium— that American graduate students are unable to resist any more than they resist crack" (Latour, 1997). Distilling each thinker to a pill form allowed critics like Sokal and Bennet to disparage that pill as corruptive and nihilistic —and to discard it with a single rhetorical flourish.

If Derrida's obituary is any metric, the strategy, be it intentional or not, was certainly successful. After four decades of revolutionary contribution to the American intellectual and scholarly scene, the philosopher was eulogized for touting a stock "concept" that was "confusing" but capable of being widely "applied" —and of being associated with Nazi collaborators. A subtler effect can be seen in the way certain arguments asserting the continued relevance of "Theory" themselves focus on its institutionalized, watered-down form (Lodge, 2004; Cusset, 2003: 267). In doing so, they deal with "Theory" in the terms the conservative corpus had cast it.<sup>3</sup>

Some would see this as the natural fate of theories: They enter the intellectual scene as radical, but are, slowly or quickly, co-opted by their inheritors. They become ideologies, lose their original fervor, and are slowly institutionalized into the academy. Yet that passive story does little justice to the works, which enact the constant resistance of stable meaning. We can best reconstruct this quality by returning to the words of the thinkers themselves. Barbara Johnson wrote, "Perhaps the death of deconstruction [was] inescapable because deconstruction makes it impossible to ground thinking in any simple concept of 'life,'" arguing that her inherited mode of thought refused to articulate a "simple concept" (Johnson, 1994: 19). Derrida noted a similar idea in "The Time is Out of Joint," claiming that deconstruction has always been dying and could never become a fixed methodology (Derrida, 1995).

That these thinkers tend to turn on each other, complicating and challenge each previous post-structural claim, reiterates the idea that this theoretical praxis cannot arrive at a fixed destination. For instance, in the famous "Purloined Letter" case, Johnson deconstructed Derrida deconstructing Lacan deconstructing Edgar Allan Poe, showing that the mode of thought tends to engender future readings. Theirs is a corpus that cannot help but undo itself, always leaving doxa open to theoretical plants grown not just by teachers but also by students. Jonathan Culler took up the point to counter charges of nihilism, saying:

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## NOTES

3 | It's important to note that French Theory endured its share of criticism from the left as well. Campbell notes that deconstruction was often charged with being an elitist, bourgeois game, feigning political relevance while living fancifully in a world of textual nuance.

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The humanities, however, often seem touched with the belief that a theory which asserts the ultimate indeterminacy of meaning makes all effort pointless. The fact that such assertions emerge from discussions that propose numerous particular determinations of meaning, specific interpretations of passages and texts, should cast doubts upon an impetuous nihilism (Culler, 1982: 133).

Herein lies the most compelling defense of continental theory's multi-faceted, non-relativistic nature. The impulse, by conservatives and liberals alike, to see French imports as a single tool or ideology ignores the way those very imports constantly propose "numerous particular determinations of meaning." One need look only to the furious outpouring of scholarly material that worked with the "indeterminacy of meaning" to see that post-structural and deconstructive ideas did not halt the process of inquiry. Indeed, their ruptures and questions led to the flourishing debates that Deresiewicz recounts nostalgically through Eugenides' novel.

To unify these thinkers into a single relativistic polemic would seem to be an infeasible task. But perhaps the flattening succeeded because it aligned with the broader structural changes to American university systems, the ones motivated to tear out the academy's thorns to prepare the pasture for excellent sheep.

### 3. Flattening the Grazing Fields

The flattening and de-thorning process, one might argue, reflects an American tradition as old as apple pie: to cast aesthetics as pragmatics, to privilege machines, commodities, and industry. In that sense, the slow rise of instrument knowledge in American colleges has been timeless, or at least a trend traceable to the nineteenth century. Already in 1828, Yale felt threatened enough by a pragmatic and materialistic America to published a manifesto defending the value of the liberal arts (Zakaria, 2015). Their fears would only be confirmed, when in 1876, Johns Hopkins opened as the first "research university" in the United States; styled after the German institution, its primary business was producing marketable knowledge rather than instilling values into undergraduates (Deresiewicz, 2014: 60).

Yet in the second half of the twentieth century, a series of more radical reforms took place. The rise of instrumental knowledge emerged, in part, from a national shift to research during World War II and that accelerated during the Cold War, as governments continually saw the academies as factories where knowledge could be forged into tools (and weapons) for the country and its corporations. In *The Marketplace of Ideas*, Louis Menand points out how this post-Sputnik focus on scientific research coincided with a conception of "human

capital,” an idea coined by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz that saw students and professors as economic actors producing a return on investment (Menand, 2010: 66-7). The result was that faculty, even at liberal arts colleges, focused increasingly on research instead of teaching: Between 1960 and 1990, their instruction hours halved and federal grants quadrupled (Kerr, 1995: 83). Even liberal arts colleges, Andrew Delbanco argues, came to value “technology transfer: scientific investigation, often sponsored directly by corporations, that is capable of being parlayed into profit” (Delbanco, 2012: 68).

If administrative choices discouraged rebellious or unmarketable thought, increased demands on applicants and enrollees cultivated a pasture so full of hoops that critical notions had less time and space to germinate. The process began, Deresiewicz argues, the moment that the Ivy Leagues approved more “meritocratic” admissions standards in the sixties. Even as they first opened their restrictive premises to a more diverse population,<sup>4</sup> these standards forced applicants to style themselves as excellent sheep: to dazzle admissions committees, to tack on a litany of accomplishments, to perform for others, rather than from personal conviction or interest.<sup>5</sup> The implementation of US College rankings in 1983 was the nail in the coffin: A select group of institutions acquired a prestige above all others, and those schools were incentivized to demand more of the applicants—and then to reject as many as possible—in order to keep their rank on the list. Thus emerges the excellent sheep: “a large number of very smart, completely confused graduates. Kids who have ample mental horsepower, an incredible work ethic and no idea what to do next” (Deresiewicz, 2014: 20). Ovine undergraduates blindly climbing up rankings defined by others, with little interest in the thorny knots of post-structuralism that, of use for the SDS, might have challenged the very validity of those rankings.

This tale of subdued, excellent sheep—anxious of administrative backlash and too busy to reflect on their actions—might seem to cast students as entirely disempowered. Yet by many accounts, undergraduates have grown increasingly empowered, only less as critical thinkers and more as customers. The myth of meritocracy means the excellent sheep are caked with validation, trained to believe they deserve perfect grades and salaries: not for having done rigorous intellectual work, but simply for having raced through the hoops (Delbanco, 2012: 135). One result is pervasive grade inflation, what Deresiewicz calls a “non-aggression pact” in which students and teachers give each other corresponding high marks to avoid conflict and keep all parties satisfied. In 1960, the average GPA at private universities was 2.5; in 1990 it was 3.1, and by 2007 it had risen to 3.3 (Deresiewicz, 2014: 65). In a recent national survey, 61% of students thought professors treated them frequently “like a colleague/peer”; 8% encountered “negative feedback about their

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## NOTES

4 | A clearly positive development that many, like Deresiewicz and Kors, tend to glaze over or not fully address with their rose-colored glasses for older eras. Shifts in admissions standards were not inherently reductive—in fact they had many good intentions and effects—but aspects of those changes did contribute to the flattening of the student intellectual experience. Neither blind nostalgia nor self-congratulatory optimism tells the full story here.

5 | The great irony of these demands is that they hardly made the academy any more meritocratic: Metrics like SAT scores and extra-curricular achievements, Deresiewicz argues, continued to select for the privileged, while old policies like legacy and athlete preference continued as before. Their main effect, then, was simply to demand more of applicants, to summon an increasing number of hoops.

academic work” (Bauerlein, 2015). Another is the rise of amenities on college campuses. With administrative bloating came scores of campus centers, social spaces, coffee shops, and other features that turned colleges<sup>6</sup> into service-filled summer camps. In Deresiewicz’s terms, students have become customers to be “pandered” to rather than “challenged” or taught.

The combined effects of instrumental knowledge, validated hoop jumping, and a love for expensive amenities can be distilled with a few additional statistics collected by Deresiewicz. Economics grew from the most popular major at three of the top ten universities and top ten liberal arts colleges in 1995, to between eight and fourteen out of the twenty; in 2010 half of Harvard graduates went into finance and consulting, while a quarter of Princeton graduates entered finance alone (Deresiewicz, 2014: 17). In 1971, 73% of incoming freshman thought it was essential or very important to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life,” while only 37% said the same of being “very well off financially.” In 2011, the numbers had flipped to 47% and 80% respectively (Deresiewicz, 2014: 79). Understanding the academy through the lens of “human capital,” it seemed, selected for two qualities: quantifiable knowledge produced by a research-oriented faculty and good job prospects with high salaries for well-paying customers. Self-scrutiny through humanistic inquiry did not fit the bill—let alone post-structural scrutiny of the nature of truth and subject-hood—and so arrived the crisis of the liberal arts: low humanities enrollments in research-oriented academies as students turned to marketable disciplines.

#### 4. Excavating the Jungle

Synthesizing the capitalist, scientist, and administrative turns of the academy in the eighties, then, offers a different narrative for the rise and fall of Johns Hopkins’ 1966 continental imports. Their demise in a culture increasingly focused on instrumental knowledge and the cult of scientific worship is hardly surprising, yet something more insidious seems at play than casual evanescence. “French Theory,” I contend, posed two intellectual threats to these new colleges for ovine customers. First, the works were not easily commodified into pragmatic, marketable knowledge. Second, they challenged the validity and merit of that knowledge, threatening to sow the seeds for a theoretical jungle into clean pasture.

A key, oft-forgotten aspect of those seeds is the strong Marxist foundation on which French thinkers operated: their commitment to material concerns. This tenet, according to Cusset, was precisely what made French theorists non-relativistic, for the thinkers “denounced”

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#### NOTES

6 | American colleges, to be clear. The amenity-filled nature displays a distinctly United States sensibility toward commodities and consumerism—and its all-included residential college system is, unpredictably, found nowhere else in the world.

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the “praise of the new virtual, global, financial capitalism” that emerges in a neoliberal space exempt from ethics (Cusset, 2003: xvi). Yet, ironically, the theory found itself transferred to high art galleries and denied its Marxist origins, commodified into the very capital it resisted (Cusset, 2003: xiv; Jouve, 1999: 99). Might its decline be caused not by the necessary fate of theories, nor by their own ruining of disciplinary positivism, but rather to their incompatibility with new college pastures for excellent sheep?

After all, Derrida’s shot at the false “center” in these pastures might well have served as the humanists’ best weapon against instrumental encroachment. Yet to stand their ground against capitalist logic and administrative shepherding, humanists often adopted the same flattening tools and flattened values. Writers like Bennet and Bloom maintained that continental imports ruptured the canon and dismantled the marketable knowledge the humanities could have provided —positions serving their own political ends. Contemporary editorials appeal to the pragmatic virtues of writing for corporate job searches, and humanists increasingly borrow scientific techniques (Rothman, 2014). This is not the first time these patterns have emerged; New Criticism and structuralism, for instance, borrowed scientific methods and terms to justify their practice (Eagleton, 2008). Rather than denouncing technocracy, humanists tend to embrace its doctrine as their salvation.

Were the late eighties truly any different? Campbell’s *New York Times* piece might seem to convey a conservative nostalgia for a time without the complications of theorists like J. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. Indeed, colorful lines like “Some fear the jungle also shields a guerrilla camp from which armed nihilists have been launching raids on the academic countryside” resonate with Latour’s depiction of Sokal: an invasive group of “armed nihilists” is portrayed as crossing the Atlantic to destroy the idyllic “house of literature” that was Yale academia. Yet as the article progresses, he displays a sense of respect for the beasts of criticism, working patiently, if often sardonically, with the cerebral claims. The very fact that a feature-length *New York Times* piece would be published detailing the nuances of deconstruction, Marxism, and feminist critique, demonstrates just how far removed today’s intellectual climate is from the late eighties. Evidently, it was a time when subtleties in scholarly debates demanded national attention. A professor in the piece even requests anonymity when defining a “text,” so strong is his fear of public backlash for imprecise language.

In “Reimagining the Humanities: Proposals for a New Century,” David Bell argues that the vibrancy of those percolating theories, the fascination with “new theoretical plants” actually played a significant role in the field’s health (Bell, 2010). That this health came at the

same time as the conservative backlash to French Theory is itself not surprising, for those debates, too, could be seen as thorns within the dense jungle of criticism. Humanists seeking shelter in the “sturdy” values of science, might be tempted to see an academic thicket as negative: too messy, too relativistic, unable to create marketable knowledge. But that thicket is the same as Eugenides’ Brown University: an environment nurturing critical thinking and challenging doxa. Numerical evidence supports the point. While the seventies saw a decrease in the number of humanities undergraduates, their forces rose in the late eighties and early nineties, just when the clean estates were most covered in French imports (Silbey, 2013).

That era, then, could hardly be deemed a crisis point for the humanities—and if it was, only in the etymological origin of crisis as crossroads: a crossroads of ideologies and questions. As faculty, students, and others worried by Deresiewicz’s diagnosis look for ways to reform the pastures of today’s colleges, they would do well to examine what plants were torn out, which critical beasts domesticated. They would do well to excavate, and perhaps embrace, the theoretical jungle.

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