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Derek Robbins, "French Post-War Social Theory. International Knowledge Transfer". Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012, 216 pp.

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## Book reviews

### **Derek Robbins, *French Post-War Social Theory. International Knowledge Transfer*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012, 216 pp.**

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French intellectuals of the post-war era have had a decisive influence on the international theoretical debate in the social sciences and humanities. Derek Robbins' *French Post-War Social Theory* pays homage to a few key thinkers from France – Raymond Aron, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Pierre Bourdieu – with a special focus on their biographical and historical contexts as well as their reception in Great Britain.

It is important to note what this volume is about and what it is not about. Its title notwithstanding, the book does not aim at a systematic and integrated account of social theory in France. It does not survey the more general tendencies in the French social sciences or in social philosophy (which would include many other figures such as Touraine, Boudon, Latour, Callon, Thévenot, Boltanski in sociology or Badiou, Balibar, Rancière, Rosanvallon in political philosophy). Nor does it apply a theoretical framework (such as Bourdieu's field theory of symbolic production) to the production and circulation of ideas in France as is suggested in the introduction. Rather, it gives a rather immanent account of the oeuvres of five theorists which are discussed in their historical and political contexts. It consists of five chapters, each on one theorist with a biographical account, a strictly chronological presentation of the oeuvre and then a quick mapping of its reception in Great Britain.

As a collection of both valuable and readable excerpts and an extended bibliography, the book is certainly a good start for students of this seminal chapter of intellectual life in France. I find particularly helpful Robbins' comprehensive and well-informed accounts of less known facets such as Aron's huge output of political essays, Althusser's early interest in Montesquieu and Lyotard's background in phenomenology. Giving the book a rigorous, but also somewhat descriptive look, the chapters are subdivided into decades (1950-1960, 1960-1970, etc.) in which major works of the theorists or their commentators were published. All chapters begin with quick biographical overviews. However, concerning Foucault and Althusser, Robbins' biographical sketches may not reveal a great deal of insight if you know the respective biographies by Eribon and Boutang. At the end of each chapter, Robbins sketches the theorist's reception in the UK, which may remind certain limits of his "method." By focusing on how individuals from one field take up the work of individuals from another field, one learns little about the broader stakes involved in the production and reception of theoretical ideas in the French or British academic and intellectual fields. A more structural ("Bourdieuian") perspective could have counterbalanced this impression.

More generally speaking, I would have welcomed a discussion on whether these thinkers can be labelled as social theorists given that Althusser and Lyotard always insisted on being philosophers, Foucault hardly ever cited anybody from sociology of the political sciences and Aron often preferred to critically follow the events of the day over more conceptual ambitions. Especially in France, many commentators (not least of

whom Bourdieu himself, to whom the book is dedicated) have observed a deep cleavage between the social sciences and philosophy. It may have been interesting to reflect on these latent disciplinary and many other lines of conflicts which make it difficult to situate figures with a long-standing interest in the empirical study of historical and social matters as Bourdieu and Foucault on the same par as Althusser and Lyotard, who aim at more ontological questions.

As Robbins states in the introduction [p. 3], the book should be seen as the “free-standing documentation” of a larger book project which, as Robbins emphasizes, still needs to be realized – namely a comparative study on “the social and political conditions of production and reception” of social theory in Great Britain and France. Such a book could indeed go beyond a great-thinkers approach and deal with questions which Robbins has started to work on: What are the structural lines of division between various fields, disciplines and schools? What are the audiences, markets, circles etc. where these theorists have left their trace? What is the role of educational, political and other institutions in the production of theoretical ideas in France? Therefore, as a conclusion, by convincingly making the case for putting social theory from France in its context, *French Post-War Social Theory* can be seen as a first, readable and useful step toward more comparative work that needs to be done on the history of ideas in France and Great Britain.

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