

What is – or what is not – contemporary French philosophy, today?

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The question that serves as the title of my lecture,* the question that *motivates* this lecture, is sustained by a negation that is absolutely necessary to the construction of the problematic I aim here to open. For I have found no other means than the ‘labour of the negative’, in the most literal sense, to submit my claim to the order of reasons that has led to the absence in France of chairs of philosophy defined in this way – such that the phrase ‘Contemporary French Philosophy’ be immediately understood, as we currently understand it here in the UK. The theoretical field implied by this phrase invites a problematization of both the philosophical and the contemporary from which a certain French otherness may be deduced. Contemporary French philosophy is *not* simply the philosophy produced in France (or in the French language), by and in the institution of the university, according to a diachronic line whose moments and diversity could be gathered up in a calendrical present/presence, whose variable dimensions stand for the ‘contemporary epoch’.

More generally, and more academically, in the distribution adhered to by the French university system for defining chairs of philosophy, ‘contemporary philosophy’ is wedded to the official chronology of the contemporary used by historians, and it begins in... 1800. This poses a number of amusing problems when it comes to studying Kant, who is split in two by the turning point of the French Revolution, which is said to complete the modern period (opened, as everyone is supposed to know, by the taking of Constantinople). One is thus constrained and forced to adopt, by convention and by consensus, the most philosophical date for the inauguration of the contemporary: that of the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). It is almost unnecessary to say that in an institution whose destiny has long been negotiated between ‘traditionalists’ (privileging the study of the texts of this tradition), theorists of knowledge (with whom the first

generation of French ‘analytic’ philosophers began by allying themselves) and the tenants of moral and political philosophy (the very name is something of a manifesto...), the *most* contemporary French philosophy (in the sense of a philosophical actuality that it will be necessary for us to define better below) is superbly ignored.

The contemporary could, according to a reading heavily guided by the 1970s, also encompass the entirety of twentieth-century French philosophy, but it would analyse less the ‘1900 moment’ or the ‘rupture of the 1930s’ (two objects of recent study) than the passage from the generation of the three Hs (Hegel–Husserl–Heidegger), so-called after 1945, to the generation of the three ‘masters of suspicion: Nietzsche, Marx and Freud.’¹

We must point out straight away that the game and the philosophical stakes of the second half of the twentieth century would make *at least* these six (Germans) intervene – along with several others, pushed back by this analysis into the nineteenth century, before being returned to favour as a somewhat precious and regressively ‘Franco-French’ anomaly. I am thinking here inevitably of Bergson (who published *The Creative Mind* in 1934) and of the conceptual machination that Deleuze was able to extract from him, in order to emphasise the speculative principles of a superior empiricism, shattering the disjunction between the ‘philosophy of life’ and the ‘philosophy of the concept’, whilst singularly complicating the relationship between philosophy and science. One may also recall here the iconoclastic reading of Bergson proposed by Michel Serres in his *Eulogy to Philosophy in the French Language*. Bergson reconstructed an unexpected bridge between the intuitions of the mathematicians Hadamard and Poincaré at the start of the twentieth century and the contemporary theories of chaos, which also infuse the Deleuzo–Guattarian

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plane of immanence. This is a Bergson (not unlike Gabriel Tarde, an author to whom I have applied myself, reinscribing the contemporary debate between philosophy and the social sciences) caught up in the ‘total forgetting of the properly French traditions of the start of the century’, evacuated by the total domination of German thought framed by the background of war (and the century is presented as a *between* of two world wars), which made *logicism* return in mathematics, *determinism* in history and psychology (and also in psychoanalysis), and imposed *dialectics* as the philosophy of war. And so Serres concludes his argument by evoking the ‘obligation to think the tangled multiplicities of the new contingency’, an exigency which appears in real time as an anachronism cut by the thread, if not the iron hand, of history.²

Contemporary French anti-philosophy

It is also possible – and this concerns my own proposal more directly – to make ‘contemporary French philosophy’ begin with the caesura of the postwar period and its traumas (thinking ‘after’ Auschwitz, Stalinism, colonialism), traumas that would give birth to the philosophical generation of the 1960s – animated as it was by the deconstruction of the metaphysics of modern democratic reason implicated or enveloped in the catastrophe. This generation would culminate in ‘68-Thought’, before giving way, after the marketing episode of the New Philosophers of Anti-totalitarianism, with their concepts as big as hollow teeth, in the 1980s (those years which Félix Guattari called the ‘winter years’), to a new generation – I’m citing Alain Renaut – ‘marked by a powerful re-evaluation of the values of intelligibility of modernity and of the democratic idea’. This would (supposedly) allow ‘France’ to rejoin ‘the state of the philosophical and political problematic dominating everywhere else’.³ What has, on the plane of political philosophy in the strict sense, been called ‘New French Thought’ – and which, in reaction to the anti-humanism of 68-Thought, varies in form between a liberal-conservative neo-Tocquevillian paradigm, an allegedly progressive ethics of communication and a republican philosophy of universal human rights – would in this way mark the time of a pacified dialogue between contemporary continental philosophy (at the categorial outset, phenomenological, but more broadly of a hermeneutic spectrum) and the Anglo-Saxon analytic tradition (which, it must be said, has been broadly represented in France by this generation). In this way, in France, the new contemporary French philosophy, the contemporary French philosophy of *today* – I’m still paraphrasing Alain Renaut – would

give itself the means of ‘rediscovering a place at the heart of a global philosophy which is, in any case, in the process of surmounting its ancient splits and succeeding in its unification’.⁴ Less academic than institutional, this highly *consensual* response to the question ‘what is contemporary French philosophy, today?’ would thus have as its primary characteristic the closing of the parenthesis of 68-Thought. The modalities of this foreclosure have been stated successively in two books that have incontestably translated the forces at work in this period of restoration into philosophical terms and produced long-term effects in the whole of the French academic field.

Published in 1979 by Vincent Descombes, *The Same and the Other: Forty-Five Years of French Philosophy (1933–1978)*, was originally commissioned by a British publisher, and not just any old publisher, but Cambridge University Press, for a series called *Modern European Philosophy*. It was published in English as *Modern French Philosophy*, prefaced by an English philosopher, Alan Montefiore, who restricted himself to recalling the project of the collection: to deepen the dialogue that was establishing itself between the analytic tradition and the European continent. Descombes concluded his opus on the stakes of the ‘so-called’ (*sic*) philosophical discussion thus: ‘in France today’ (that of the 1960s and 1970s), that is to say, in his eyes, in the ‘philosophy that was part of the climate of the time [*dans l’air du temps*], the sovereign subject that one claimed to criticize had been multiplied into a ‘myriad of little underlings each one attached to a perspective’.⁵ Minimally, one could argue, along with Étienne Balibar, that none of the major ‘structuralist’ philosophers limited themselves to disqualifying the subject: on the contrary, all undertook to throw light on this blind spot set up by classical philosophy in a founding position, that is to say, to make the subject pass from a constitutive function to a constituted position. But that is not the determining point – because the question is more political than philosophical. Who does not sense the resonances between Descombes’s critique and the thesis of Daniel Bell on the individualistic hedonism of neo-capitalism (published in French translation in the same year, 1979), along with its French extension, *The Era of the Void* (1983) by Gilles Lipovetsky, which makes 1968 the year of the birth of post-modern individualism? This is a work praised by Luc Ferry as the most illuminating *political-philosophical* analysis of recent years.

Before becoming the Minister of National Education for Universities and Research (2002–04), Luc Ferry had, together with Alain Renaut, been the

author of *French Philosophy of the 60s: An Essay on Anti-Humanism* (1985). This is the second work to which I was alluding. In it, our two accomplices oppose a ‘post-metaphysical humanism’ to what they analyse as a Nietzscheo–Heideggerian critique of the philosophical values of democratic modernity. This humanism endorses the Heideggerian thesis of the completion of metaphysics in an ego-onto-theology (understood as the closure of ‘speculative philosophy’) the better to justify the belated opening of contemporary French philosophy to rationalizing the defence of the conditions of reality (which one may dare to call ‘empirico-transcendental’), conditioning the becoming-adult of the secular democratic universe of Western societies (thus purging it of the cultural relativism which, between ‘race’ and ‘history’, is borne by the critique of ethnocentrism). This cannot work without the transformation of philosophy into a practical philosophy, qualified today by Alain Renaut as ‘applied moral philosophy’, but at the outset largely inspired by the communicational turn of Habermasian thought. As is known, the latter was able to rely on the ‘pragmatic’ version of the post-analytic mutation of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the better to dissolve the last glimmers of Critical Theory in the elucidation of the conditions of universality necessary to every language. Nevertheless, the ‘historicist’ objections of Hegel or the ‘critical’ objections of Horkheimer are still valid against a linguistically reformulated Kantian ethics (i.e. *after* the linguistic turn).

Here again one discovers the dialogue between philosophical cultures matched up by a double condition. It will be enough for me to recall this double condition briefly in order to motivate my principle of negation – that which contemporary French philosophy *is not*, no more today than yesterday – by affirming that which menaces philosophy *tout court* with extinction, today more so than yesterday, on the fortieth anniversary of May 1968, which would have us believe that there is no other alternative than to choose between the ‘ethical turn’ (with a liberal/libertarian connotation) of which the events of May 1968 would have been the secret bearer *in thought*⁶ and the post-philosophical restoration of the most reactionary of Republican ideals. Here and there, between the ruse of reason and a reason with no ruse at all, the disaster for thinking is absolute and the profits as certain as they are complementary from the point of view of universal capitalism and the democratic-economic consensus – a consensus that Jacques Rancière is justified in qualifying as ‘post-democratic’, if democracy is nothing without the mode of subjectivation that

animates *dissensus* – as the ‘refiguration of the field of experience’ of *all*.⁷

In the first place, there is the veritable watchword for the 1980s’ generation: the announcement of the end of a philosophical (and not doctrinal) history of philosophy, calling into question an authentic opening up of the history of philosophy to a becoming, animated by the excess of philosophy over its own history. The latter is what all French philosophers have practised intensively since the Second World War, between deconstruction and reconstruction, archaeology and



stratigraphy, and not without attacking, much like a Deleuze, a Derrida or a Badiou, the enclosing of its teaching within the disciplinary regime of the university. But for the generation of the 1980s, the discipline of the ‘history of philosophy’ could only escape its analytic/post-analytic condemnation on condition of making itself *both* a form of expression specializing in the most antiquarian form of historiography *and* a form of content based on the most deterministic kind of historicism, flattening the life of concepts and their always singular *dispositifs* onto pre-selected moments cut out from and by the closure of metaphysics, assured of a permanent and outdated identity by a compartmentalized history running in a single direction. But, in truth, the conditions of the exercise of this discipline *after* the closure of metaphysics may be formulated in perfect convergence with its post-analytic practice, as follows:

1. The history of philosophy arises from the duty towards truth in general (as historical truth and scientific exactness).
2. Critique is a response to the duty of probity without any specific relationship to philosophical writing.
3. Specifically philosophical truth only exists in the research into the conditions of thinkability of any problematic fact whatever.

To which one will object by affirming precisely what is denied by this reduction of philosophy to a form of logico-social *expertise*, whose insistent affirmation without any kind of expert mediation could be valid more than ever for French otherness: namely, that the idea of philosophical truth bears within itself the always singular auto-determination of philosophy in the concepts that it creates (beginning with the concept of truth, or the critique to which one submits it). This is supported processually by an idea of ‘system’ abandoning its classic modern form of the ‘systematic totalization of knowledge to the profit of a ‘system of effective intervals and possible displacements’ (according to the highly Foucauldian formulation of Jacques Rancière).⁸ This is a system ontologically invested from the point of view of our actual becomings (the heterogenesis of the Deleuze-System), or by the fidelity to an event subtracted from the rules of the situation (according to the axiomatics of the Badiou-System), or it is submitted to the most systemic *de-ontological* and/or *de-ontologizing* critique (Derrida or Laruelle, Levinas or Henry).

In the second place (and we have anticipated this point by virtue of the logical historicism that supports it), there is above all the declared end of philosophy as a *singular zone of thinking* where ‘concept and creation are related to one another’ (Deleuze): because it is thought as such that is *propositionally* submitted to the intersubjective requirement of *clarity* and to control by *public* criteria without which all consensual possibility of rationality would be lost. We might say that the contemporary French antiphilosophy that we are denouncing here is nothing other than the hexagonal adaptation, inevitably mediated by a Habermasian Germany, of Rorty’s idea that ‘democracy [liberal-parliamentary democracy] is superior to philosophy’.

Yet we should recall its politico-institutional domination, borne as it was by the generation of the 1980s, who had the *power* to make us pass from a situation marked by the resounding statement of Jacques Bouveresse ‘Why I Am So Very Un-French’ to the alarm bells of Jacques Derrida five years later: ‘I believe that the identity of French philosophy has never been put to the test in such a harsh way.’⁹ It is this *French*

philosophical otherness that is returning, in France itself, twenty years later, under the impulse of *French Theory* and the transdisciplinary theoretical practices that it has inspired on the basis of a conceptual ‘transversality’ affirmed (by French protagonists on the margins of the institution out of which they arose) the better to be negated (by the French university). This is so to the point that, in France, a *refreshing* of a style of thought now more than thirty years old can be proposed, a style of thought that has metamorphosed into ‘poststructuralism’, via a practice of concepts (which one re-creates rather than creates) evaluated and reanimated as a function of those other practices with which it interferes.

We could discuss the intra-philosophical interest of this ‘Fresh Theory’ to which I am referring (with its three hefty tomes published since 2005, at a sustained annual pace, along with the multiplication of seminars to which they have given rise),¹⁰ but not its value as a general symptom. The return of the repressed is manifest here in the form of what has been called, not without reason, an *over-politicized* image of contemporary thinking, philosophically associated with the Event-World of 1968. ‘Poststructuralism’, an improbable philosophical notion from a continental point of view, *historically* signifies 68-Thought – that is to say, post-68-Thought – in the paradoxical sense that it was only able to make the critical and clinical effects of 1968 reverberate for structuralism, the thinking of difference, and for thought *tout court*, by the deterritorialization of philosophy that had preceded the singular political experience of May 1968. This was a deterritorialization as much of the self-identity of philosophy, with regard to the schema of the experience of modern Reason, defined as it is by a thread stretched out between a subject and an object (or indeed in the revolution of the one around the other), as it was of its new relationship to a (non-philosophical) outside. Because this outside was working philosophy from within to the point of renewing its very meaning, it showed that philosophy, in the space of its contingencies, was not limited to the repertoire of recognizably philosophical questions, and that it could no longer simply abstract from a distribution of discourses sedimented by the existing distribution of power. Here, French philosophy discovered itself to be the *contemporary* of the putting-back-into-play of politics, by a direct problematization of the relationship between life and thought, which would go on radicalizing itself under the sign of May and would alone be able both ‘prospectively’ and ‘retroactively’ to give meaning to the notion of 68-Thought. Failing this, the notion of such a thought remains more operative for its

detractors than for the actors of an aftereffect (*après-coup*) whose multiple circulations are too numerous to be reunited positively under the unifying label of a school of thought.

So, I must define this deterritorialization of the subjective and objective identity of philosophy, which bears within itself the *contemporary French* otherness affirmed by the ‘long’ generation of philosophy before 1968 – an otherness which thus passes through the 1960s before crystallizing in 68-Thought, and which continued to develop beyond this first plane of immanence and its institutionalized exhaustion in France, in subsequent processes, in terms of *resistance* (otherness resists because resistance of inside and of outside thought is, in a philosophical and non-philosophical sense, ‘primary’) and *persistence* (that is, of ‘re-insistence’): *the persistence of a force for rupture and experimentation*. ‘Persistence’ is the word proposed by Peter Hallward in his Introduction to the 2003 special issue of *Angelaki* entitled ‘French Philosophy Today’. But such persistence is precisely difficult in France for the generation that came afterwards (from the selection and definition of the topic of a thesis, and the choice of a supervisor, both of which open up or close down the possibility of a university career even before it has started...). It can only be opposed to the *academic ‘transistence’* of the reception of French thought in the Anglo-Saxon world and abroad more generally (our ‘finest export’), wherein under the guise of *French Theory* it is directly or indirectly hybridized and ‘trans-nationalized’. It has also been remarked that, in any case, the French generation of 1968 or post-1968 has only ever produced ‘underlings of variable talent and more or less original followers’ of the generation before 1968, as result of the ‘priority given to the political dimension’ in the form of a ‘critical orthodoxy’ – the oxymoron here is *de rigueur*. In short, ‘intellectually speaking, the generation of 1968 [children included] do not possess a distinct identity.’¹¹

It is this affirmation that I wish to take up again here and develop in the direction of a brief genealogical elucidation of the *persistence of a contemporary philosophical otherness* for which ‘contemporary French philosophy’ up to today offers the proof, such that this otherness can and should be *philosophically* defined. This will be the occasion for a final and most philosophical variation of the figure of negation that haunts my discourse on ‘What is NOT Contemporary French Philosophy, Today?’ Here, ‘today’ designates a hyper-contemporary time that aims to shelter the difference of the now in the dialogue between continental and Anglo-American philosophical cultures, long

opposed according to the division of the philosophical world into two blocs, the phenomenological and the analytic, at long last reconciled from both theoretical and practical points of view, as the adult image of contemporary thought.

The historical novel of philosophical formations

And yet... by following the principle of the deterritorialization of the discipline taken by a French philosophy rupturing the articulation of the subject–object reference (invested in opposed and hence complementary senses by the two traditions issuing from Husserl and Frege), the same story can be told very differently – to the point that twentieth-century philosophy would find a properly contemporary orientation, irreducible to its situation at the junction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in radical excess with regard to the chiasmus that makes us evoke the ‘phenomenology’ of the failure of logical formalism and the ‘analysis’ of the rupture of phenomenological intentionality in its Husserlian guise.

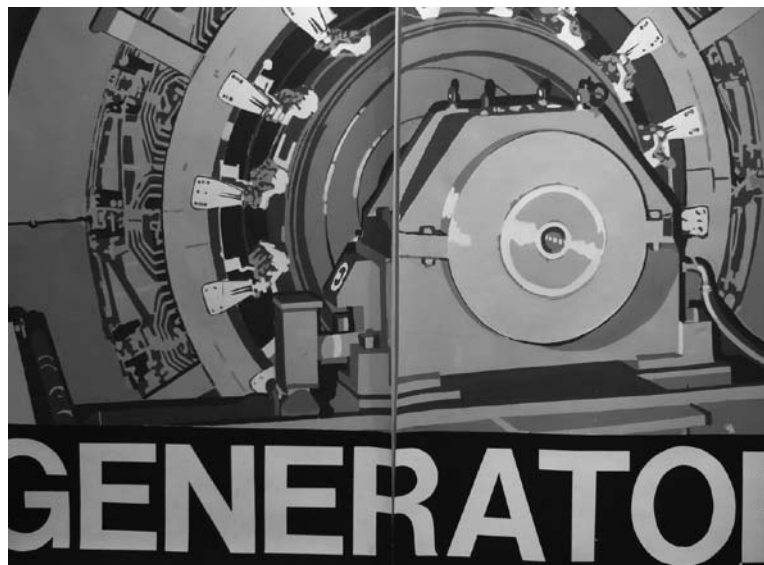
The first point to make with regard to the renewed dialogue between the positivist and phenomenological traditions, characterizing an international philosophical community and a global academic philosophy in which French philosophy is at last taking part, is that this dialogue makes the examination of the historical novel of their formation the order of the day. It is a story oriented by the ‘race for reference’, for the objectivity of reference (exterior in relation to representation), supporting the project of a philosophy providing the object in the element of meaning (or ‘sense’). For it is really this *finishing of Kantianism* (in the two senses of the word ‘finishing’, which also presides over the divergences between the two traditions) – Kantianism understood here as the making explicit of the relationship between the subject and the object in a theory of knowledge – that would determine the inaugural constitution of twentieth-century philosophy. This is a constitution that needed to ‘claim the rights of the empirical at the level of the transcendental’ (following Foucault’s expression in *The Order of Things*) in order to accomplish the destiny of philosophy as a ‘rigorous science’ (according to Husserl’s guiding expression) and to realize scientific rationality as the generative telos of a new humanity (according to the tropisms of positivistic intentionality/anti-intentionality).

‘To claim the rights of the empirical at the level of the transcendental’ means *either* that one tries to reduce all transcendental reflection to the analysis of the formalisms of the object and to the project to

formalize the concrete, *or* that one seeks to uncover the grounds of possibility for all formalism, and the implicit horizon of all empirical contents, in transcendental subjectivity. An ‘empirical’ description of the transcendental or a ‘transcendental’ prescription of the empirical: it goes without saying that the ‘transcendental’ emerges from these disjoined coherences profoundly disfigured. However, to the extent that the reference remains here that of an object *ad extra*, which founds a common although diversely shared realist ambition, the notion of ‘phenomenological positivism’ given primacy by Merleau-Ponty could be a valid expression for a properly French critique engaged with this disjunction, and included in the same episteme. In this way too, Merleau-Ponty’s critique could have been informed, at the two extremes of the philosophical spectrum – the existential and the epistemological – by Immanuel Levinas and Jean Cavaillès.

Merleau-Ponty’s critique could have been informed by Levinas’s texts on Husserl and Heidegger, which condition the discovery and understanding of phenomenology in France in the 1930s (beginning with Sartre and Blanchot), starting out from Husserl’s critique of objectifying representation. This led – in Levinas’s *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology* (1930) – to the ‘minoring’ of the concept of reduction by virtue of the link between intuition and ‘all the vital forces defining the concrete existence of man’, confronted, in those zones of non-intentional opacity named sensibility or affectivity, with the *enigma of the invisible* constitutive of the ‘phenomenon’ – so many themes announcing the anti-Husserlian, Heideggerian and non-Heideggerian turning of French phenomenology. However, his critique could also have been informed by the critique of logicism attached to the name of Jean Cavaillès, a major philosopher and member of the Resistance, who was executed by the Nazis. During the years of World War II, Cavaillès denounced the *void of a radical abstraction* leading the scientific transformation of the philosophy of the positivists back to the bitterly contested aporia of neo-Kantianism. By eliminating predication anchored in apperception and the categorization of the sensory datum, the register of quantification, by definition, effectively leaves the precept of evidence and the return to things themselves with nothing to do. But then it is the *phenomeno-logical* distance that renders problematic those philosophies that appealed

to the arguments either for analysis or for foundation in order to cross that distance. Recent attempts to refound cognitivism in the Husserlian *noema* are no exception to the aporia that was posed by Cavaillès in a fashion that was as rigorous as it was brutal. It is worth recalling that for the philosophical generation of the 1960s, who recognized themselves in the programme of a philosophy of the concept, this aporia effectively expressed and denounced the real logic of a *purely logical grammar* that cannot condition transcendental subjectivity without fissuring *a priori* its constituting power. ‘If transcendental logic truly founds logic, there is no absolute logic (that is to say, no logic regulating absolute subjective activity). If there is an absolute logic it can only draw its authority from itself and so is not transcendental.’ From this Cavaillès deduced that ‘if, by separating transcendental consciousness from a consciousness inserted in the world, the *epokhe* takes away from logical empiricism and from psychologism their naïve and slightly aggressive qualities, *they remain*



*subsequent to the development of phenomenology.*¹² Or, as Dominique Lecourt puts it, in its rupture with the psychologism of traditional logic ‘the Husserlian doctrine in its turn comes up against major difficulties which, in the final analysis, are the exact replica of those that logical positivists had endeavoured to circumvent.’¹³ This lesson, we know, will preside over the anti-Husserlian/anti-*Krisis* tone of the last part of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*.

It is interesting to note, at the very least, that at the end of his critical traversing in and of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty reached the same conclusion, whilst making the point that because reflexive philosophy, in the trajectory that led from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Husserlian phenomenology, ‘to grasp the thing in itself immediately, [it] falls back into subjectivity

– And ... conversely, because it is haunted by being for us, does not grasp it and grasps only the thing “in itself”, in signification.’¹⁴ From this, it can be deduced that phenomenology is itself a *naïve ontology* in so far as in it one starts from the distinction between consciousness and object. Hence it was not enough to dissolve every form of representationalism in a requirement of referentiality, semantically and tautologically (i.e. analytically) reinforced by the Fregean functional-linguistic turn, in order to escape it most effectively. It is in its understanding of this that the distance taken by *The Visible and the Invisible* with regard to the texts that precede it is marked, indebted as they were to the realism and the transcendental psychologism of Husserlian phenomenology. This led Merleau-Ponty to announce the ‘necessity of return to ontology’ wherein ‘ontology would be the elaboration of notions that must replace that of transcendental subjectivity, those of subject, object, meaning.’¹⁵

On the cusp of the 1960s, Merleau-Ponty laid out a field of research whose *condition of reality* – in all the diversity of procedures and the multiplicity of discordances it would induce – was to extract philosophy from the magic triangle of Critique–Logical Positivism–Transcendental Phenomenology, a Bermuda Triangle in which it had for the most part breathed ever since the nineteenth century. Its realization, however, had to deal with the reality of the *critical* observation set out by Merleau-Ponty (‘the crisis has never been so radical’, he stated),¹⁶ along with the multiple and contradictory necessities borne by reopening the question of ontology under a Heideggerian influence *twisted* so as to grasp a highly improbable nexus between the ‘philosophy of structure’ and the analysis of the ‘flesh of the world’ – against Sartre’s *Transcendence of the Ego*. (In his 1937 article, Sartre had tied down the *impersonal field* of the transcendental in the auto-unification of an ‘absolute consciousness’.) We know how it will turn out: it is ontology that will have its ‘presence of Being’ *deconstructed* by Derrida; *un-said* (*dé-dite*) as *Otherwise than Being* by Levinas; and *un-done* by the ‘action of the structure’ in the cross-over between Marxism and Lacanianism (Althusser’s epistemological circle). Because the critical distance from the transcendental-phenomenological and analytic-positivist traditions was not equally maintained, it was possible for some to respond to the question ‘what is contemporary philosophy, today?’ by opposing (with the more and more frequent possibility of combinations) post-analytic Anglo-Saxon philosophy to a post-phenomenological French phil-

osophy. I will only remark that post-analytic and post-phenomenological philosophies (taking the latter in the rigorous sense of those philosophies at work *since Husserl but against Husserl*) are all worked on by a strange principle of telescoping between two traditionally antinomic positions: *positivism and scepticism* in the case of Austin, Searle, Cavell and what has been called the ‘sceptico-positivist becoming’ of the analysis of language;¹⁷ *immanence and transcendence* in the case of those philosophers who have invested the sites that, despite himself, Husserl had opened up beyond constitutable objectivity, so as to investigate them in the name of a ‘donation’ that, thanks to Heidegger, had turned out to be ‘absolute’ (*absolute Gegebenheit*), with the suspension of the appearance of phenomenality proper to being in its pure presentness-to-hand (*vorhanden*). This can be rendered, according to the formula of Jean-Luc Marion: *so much reduction, so much donation*.¹⁸

Divested of its metaphysical ambiguity, the principle of principles stated by Husserl can in this way escape from the aporias of descriptive phenomenology by virtue of a reduction to the originary. This reduction permits the elaboration of a ‘new apophansis’ of the *otherwise than being*, by positing the donation-revelation of a phenomenality that is not phenomenalized in the world but in itself, in the ‘invisible’ and the ‘unseen’. In this way, by subordinating ontology as a regional instance to phenomenology in the pure form of its deconstruction (which is not without its echoes with the Derridean project), French post-phenomenology inevitably developed a manner of *negative phenomenology* which renews the thinking of the divine Absolute that had presided, in Husserl himself, over the ultimate development of immanence in an ‘auto-transcendence’. (Merleau-Ponty denounced this ‘theology’ of consciousness which led Husserl back to the ‘threshold of dialectical philosophy’.¹⁹) In this way, there would be less a turning, a *theological détournement of French phenomenology*, than there would be an *auto-comprehension of the returning of immanence to the call of the primordial transcendence*, which had never stopped haunting phenomenology. Thus, despite the apparently antithetical character of the philosophies of Michel Henry (an ontology of immanence purified of all outside) and Emmanuel Levinas (an ethics of absolute transcendence), faith would be conceived identically as the last resort of a post-historical time, in which it becomes *practically* indifferent whether one thinks of immanence as the foundation and the revelation of transcendence or of transcendence as the calling of immanence: the

religious *pathos* of phenomenology... ‘The reversal of values had to go so far’, concluded Deleuze at the end of his reflection on the labour of the ‘mole of the transcendent within immanence itself’: ‘we are no longer satisfied with thinking immanence as immanent to a transcendent; *we want to think transcendence within the immanence, and it is from immanence that a breach is expected.*’²⁰

Except that this breach comes from *the radical philosophical im-possibility* manifested by phenomenology with each new attempt to think donation as more originally unconditional in an endlessly expanding metaphorization, which by exhaustion and *reductio ad absurdum* brings the metaphysical and post-metaphysical Odyssey of transcendence in immanence full circle. Thus, French post-phenomenology demonstrates in its *negative* way the actuality and the necessity for new images of *non-post* (phenomenological/analytic/modern) thinking which configure, more and more frequently *from abroad*, the *reality* of ‘contemporary French philosophy’.

68-Thought

As ‘multiple’ as it may be, the first characteristic of this thinking is never to have compromised on the question of the immanence on which its *materialist* consistency and contemporaneity depend. It is for indissociably philosophical and political reasons that the ‘movement’ of May 1968 (in the long period of its retro-actions, still bitterly disputed today) crystallized for ‘subjects’ no longer sustained by a consciousness of self or any mention of an ‘object’, but rather *subjectivized* in a *constructive* relationship to a non-transcendent outside. The stake of this outside is the ‘event’ as the condition of reality of the production of the new. A non-transcendent outside: this is, of course, the point that conditions philosophies as different as those of a Foucault, a Badiou, a Deleuze or a Rancière – with their differences overlapping in the understanding of a falsely common notion that determines so many ‘thoughts of the event’ as ‘thoughts of immanence’.

I want to name and rename this thought ‘68-Thought’ because I *also persist* in thinking that it is distributed across a spectrum whose arc of forces unfolds, materially and ideally, between the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze (with Félix Guattari too) and Alain Badiou.²¹ Between these two, the absolute antagonism of thinking is motivated both openly and more secretly by what of 1968 is still an event for contemporary philosophy. (To fully convince yourself that this is the case, you have only to read the Preface of Alain Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*,²² where he dramatizes the opposition between

a ‘democratic materialism’ – whose progressive reverse takes the name ‘minoritarianism’ from Deleuze – and ‘the materialist dialectic’.) For Deleuze and Badiou share the decision to draw the consequences of a double philosophical impossibility: the impossibility of phenomenology, definitively ‘reduced’ to the archi-aesthetic of its ‘religious’ unthought; and the impossibility of logicism as the calculating disposition in which thought no longer thinks, and a rupture with the linguistic turn (the oscillation between positivism and scepticism, the calculus of propositions and the pragmatics of culture on which the linguistic turn runs aground demonstrates this). All this is carried out from the point of view of an ontology equally distinguished from any Heideggerian or hermeneutic conception, in order to develop an *immanent thinking of the multiple* that invests to their contemporary extremes of coherence the two major paradigms in which it operates: the ‘vitalist’ paradigm of open multiplicities and the ‘set theoretical’ paradigm of the pure multiple.

Now, it is still the thought of 68 that will constrain each of these systems to confront its constitutive limit: the pure expressionism of the becomings of the world of which the event is the immanent consequence, for Deleuze; and the pure constructivism of a subtraction from the world of which the event is the immanent principle, qua exception to its becoming, for Badiou. Historically overdetermined by the encounter with Guattari in the aftermath of 1968, for Deleuze it will be the constructivism of a denaturalized desire, of a desire-machine, of desiring-machines, which will assemble (*par agencements*) the expression–selection of the forces of the world by ‘cuts’ and ‘connections’ of fluxes so as to extract ‘revolutionary-becomings’. To respond on the terrain of the world to the proclaimed bio-materialism of the multitudes, Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds* will for its part apply itself to defining a logic of appearing that gives up the rigid opposition between event and situation (mediatized by a mysterious – but necessary – ‘nomination’) so as to express the existential nuances of a transformation placed in the present of a being-there-in-the-world by the subjectivating incorporation to the exception of a truth...

However, this polarization of the contemporary philosophical field, placed under the political sign of a constitutive relation to the necessities of the present, also inevitably signifies the *reactivation* and *over-problematization* of the relationship between philosophy and its ‘sensible’ other, which can no longer be simply said under the category of the ‘aesthetic’. This is because there is indeed *Discontent in Aesthetics*, as Rancière’s appraisal has it²³ – for philosophical

reasons that animate the tension between the contraries of the *aesthetic* (making sensible insensible forces in a constructivist installation: Deleuze and Guattari) and the *inaesthetic* (the transformation of the sensory into the event of the idea: Badiou); but also by virtue of the sensible and conceptual ‘dis-identification’ of contemporary art. There is the risk that the latter finishes by projecting art *before* philosophy. For is it not to contemporary art that it falls today to invent, in a *spectacular* fashion, counter-narratives of the relationship between life and thought, through the restaging of a sensibility knotted to the thinkable and to the words to say it? Such a claim would validate that very descriptive-genealogical allure of contemporary art, taken up here by Deleuzo-Rancièrian formulae that had originally aimed to express the immanence of philosophy to the description of the possibilities of a life that assures being of what (there) is to (be) sense(d) and to be thought. These are formulae that Badiou denounces to better identify art by the univocity of its most modernist of names, subtracted from the *mélange of genres*. To complete the regression: it remains only for us to mention the phenomenology of art that exhausted itself in celebrating the ‘absence opened’ in the visible/invisible ‘gift/donation of the sensible’ of the work of art – right up to Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Contemporary philosophy ‘after’ contemporary art. This programme of research, which could *become* mine for ‘historico-speculative’ reasons that Peter Osborne would explain better than (but doubtless differently from) me, is not inscribed ‘on the edge of the void’ but on the extreme border and in a still very virtual zone of contemporary French philosophy – even when it is politically and ontologically redefined as I have tried to do today. Which is all the more reason to conclude that it concerns one of the most ‘active’ stakes for a *de-nationalized* and *in-disciplined* contemporary philosophy, such as that promoted by this Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy. With a contemporaneity that is never ‘given’ – but that has always to be constructed to express what *matters*.

Based on a translation by Andrew Goffey

Notes

1. Cf. Frédéric Worms, ed., *Le Moment 1900 en philosophie*, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Paris, 2004; Frédéric Nef, *Le formalisme en question: le tournant des années trente*, J. Vrin, Paris, 1998; Claude Imbert, ‘Le temps de Cavaillès’, *Annali de la scuola normale di Pisa*, 2003; Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Marx, Freud’ (1967), in *Dits et Écrits*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, vol. 1, pp. 564–74.

2. Michel Serres, *Éloge de la philosophie en langue française*, Flammarion, Paris, 1997, pp. 195–221.
3. Alain Renaut, ‘La question de la démocratie dans la philosophie française’, in Jean-François Mattei, ed., *Philosopher en français*, PUF, Paris, 2001, p. 373.
4. Ibid., p. 385.
5. Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l’autre. Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)*, Minuit, Paris, 1979, p. 218; *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, p. 187, translation amended.
6. Cf. Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May ‘68 and Contemporary French Thought*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal and London, 2007.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, ch. 5.
8. Jacques Rancière, ‘La philosophie en déplacement’, in Marianne Alphant, ed., *La Vocation philosophique*, Bayard, Paris, 2004, p. 16.
9. Jacques Bouveresse, ‘Why I am so very unFrench’, in A. Montefiore, ed., *Philosophy in France Today*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 9–33; Jacques Derrida, ‘A quoi pensent les philosophes?’, *Autrement* 102, 1988, p. 37.
10. *Fresh Theory*, vols I, II, III, ed. Mark Halizart and Christophe Kihm, Leo Scheer, Paris, 2005, 2006, 2007.
11. Marcel Gauchet, ‘Bilan d’une génération’, *Le Débat* 149, March–April 2008.
12. Jean Cavaillès, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* (1947), Vrin, Paris, 1976, pp. 65–6.
13. Dominique Lecourt, *L’Ordre et les jeux: Le positivisme logique en question*, Grasset, Paris, 1981, p. 225.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), trans. Alphonso Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1968, p. 199 (Working Notes, 4 June 1959).
15. Ibid., pp. 165, 167 (Working Notes, January 1959).
16. Ibid., p. 165 (Working Notes, January 1959).
17. Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel, *Référence et autoréférence: Étude sur le thème de la mort de la philosophie dans la pensée contemporaine*, Vrin, Paris, 2005, p. 82.
18. Jean-Luc Marion, *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, PUF, Paris, 1989, p. 303.
19. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955), trans. Joseph Bien, Heinemann, London, 1973, p. 138 n78 (*Les Aventures de la dialectique*, p. 202 n1).
20. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp. 46–7.
21. I wrote *that* nearly fifteen years ago in a very official report on ‘Contemporary French Philosophy’, at the request of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. See *Philosophie contemporaine en France*, with C. Descamps et J. Benoist, Publications du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, 1994; augmented version in *De l’impossibilité de la phénoménologie. Sur la philosophie française contemporaine*, Vrin, Paris, 1995.
22. Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. A. Toscano, Continuum, London and New York, 2009, p. 2.
23. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004), trans. Steven Corcoran, Polity, Cambridge, 2009.