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French Theory in America

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It was in sometime in the '80s when I heard someone on the radio talking about Clint Eastwood's 1980 movie "Bronco Billy." It is, he said, a "nice little film in which Eastwood deconstructs his 'Dirty Harry' image."

That was probably not the first time the verb "deconstruct" was used casually to describe a piece of pop culture, but it was the first time I had encountered it, and I remember thinking that the age of theory was surely over now that one of its key terms had been appropriated, domesticated and commodified. It had also been used with some precision. What the radio critic meant was that the flinty masculine realism of the "Dirty Harry" movies — it's a hard world and it takes a hard man to deal with its evils — is affectionately parodied in the story of a former New Jersey shoe salesman who dresses and talks like a tough cowboy, but is the good-hearted proprietor of a traveling Wild West show aimed at little children. It's all an act, a confected fable, but so is Dirty Harry; so is everything. If deconstruction was something that an American male icon performed, there was no reason to fear it; truth, reason and the American way were safe.

It turned out, of course, that my conclusion was hasty and premature, for it was in the early '90s that the culture wars went into high gear and the chief target of the neo-conservative side was this theory that I thought had run its course. It became clear that it had a second life, or a second run, as the villain of a cultural melodrama produced and starred in by Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball and other denizens of the right, even as its influence was declining in the academic precincts this crew relentlessly attacked.

It's a great story, full of twists and turns, and now it has been told in extraordinary detail in [a book to be published next month](#): "French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States" (University of Minnesota Press).

The book's author is Francois Cusset, who sets himself the tasks of explaining, first, what all the fuss was about, second, why the specter of French theory made strong men tremble, and third, why there was never really anything to worry about.

Certainly mainstream or centrist intellectuals thought there was a lot to worry about. They agreed with Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, who complained that the ideas coming out of France amounted to a "rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment" even to the point of regarding "science as nothing more than a 'narration' or a 'myth' or a social construction among many others."

This is not quite right; what was involved was less the rejection of the rationalist tradition than an interrogation of its key components: an independent, free-standing, knowing subject, the "I" facing an independent, free-standing world. The problem was how to get the "I" and the world together, how to bridge the gap that separated them ever since the older picture of a universe everywhere filled with the meanings God originates and guarantees had ceased to be compelling to many.

The solution to the problem in the rationalist tradition was to extend man's reasoning powers in order to produce finer and finer descriptions of the natural world, descriptions whose precision could be enhanced by technological innovations (telescopes, microscopes, atom smashers, computers) that were themselves extensions of man's rational capacities. The vision was one of a steady progress with the final result to be a complete and accurate — down to the last detail — account of natural processes.

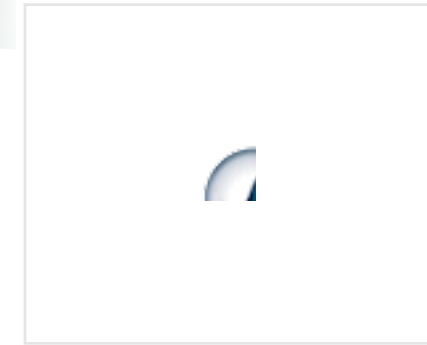
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About Stanley Fish - Think Again

Stanley Fish is the Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor and a professor of law at Florida International University, in Miami, and dean emeritus of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has also taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Johns Hopkins and Duke University. He is the author of 10 books. His new book on higher education, "Save the World On Your Own Time," will be published in 2008.



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