# *Introduction*

The intellectual history of postwar France often resembles village life. Most of the important academic institutions – the Sorbonne, the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the Collège de France, the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, even the cafés where Sartre debated with Camus – sit within the same square mile on the left bank of the Seine. This "village" was not only geographically limited. Names recur with surprising regularity: Bachelard, father and daughter, two Merleau-Pontys, as well as numerous Jolys, Lautmans, Pons and Michauds filling up the promotions at the elite centers for higher learning. The founder of *Tel Quel*, Philippe Sollers, married the philosopher Julia Kristeva; Jacques Lacan married Georges Bataille's widow; his daughter married the Lacanian Jacques-Alain Miller. Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Serres, and Jacques Derrida were schoolfriends before they were philosophical interlocutors and then rivals. Everyone knew everyone else. Throughout their careers French intellectuals socialized with each other, went on holiday together, attended parties at each other's homes, corresponded, read the same books, and published in the same journals. Before being a republic of letters, the French intellectual community was a social set.

It has been common to castigate the proponents of a unified field called "French Theory" for being philosophically naïve. "French Theory," it is argued, is a peculiarly American construct that can only be understood as the product of the blinkered enthusiasm of Anglo-Saxon academics for a range of thought they have not properly understood.[1] The manifold theoretical differences between, say, Foucault, Bourdieu, Deleuze, and Derrida are sufficient to scotch any idea that they shared a common program or had similar ideas. But what seems philosophically unsophisticated can be historically plausible. The search for philosophical ties is warranted by the

[1] See for instance François Cusset, *French Theory*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

thick and dense historical connections that recast the manifold debates not as fundamental differences but as the passionate confrontations of the philosophically and socially proximate.

Not only were "French theorists" part of the same community, they also formed what might be called a single generation. The majority of thinkers who have had a significant effect on English-speaking academia were born at approximately the same time. As the final shots of the Second World War rang out, Michel Foucault was eighteen, Jean Baudrillard was sixteen, Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida were fifteen, while Gilles Deleuze was twenty. They all emerged into philosophical consciousness at the height of the existentialist explosion in French philosophy and culture, a philosophical movement unrivalled in its ability to appeal to young students and which initiated a "golden era" in French intellectual history as philosophers wrestled over its legacy. Though often classed as "postmodern," their work a reflection of the social and cultural currents of 1968 and beyond, these intellectuals were formed in the philosophical crucible of the preceding quarter century.

Jacques Derrida is a case in point, participating in virtually every important philosophical movement in postwar France. When existentialism was the order of the day at the close of the Second World War, Derrida aligned himself – though as we shall see, not without some reserve – with Sartre. Then, beginning his philosophical education in the early 1950s, when existentialism had run its course, he embraced the "scholasticism" of the period, the careful rereading of Husserl and Heidegger that marked a collective exorcizing of Sartre from the French academic scene. His readings of Husserl, in particular, brought him into close contact with the French tradition of epistemology, best represented by Jean Cavaillès and Gaston Bachelard. Later, as Derrida began to publish his first essays and books, a new trend emerged that, while challenging the primacy of philosophy, made it relevant to a new and broader audience. Structuralism, one of the first major interdisciplinary movements in postwar French thought, made philosophical readings valuable to scholars across the humanities and social sciences. It was a vehicle that carried Derrida's ideas to the broadest possible audience and allowed him to contribute to debates about Marxism, psychoanalysis, and ethnology. Finally, when he was a young teacher in the mid 1960s, the baby-boomers were intent on reshaping contemporary society and looked to a new generation of scholars for theoretical resources.[2] From

[2] In this way this book covers similar ground to Michele Lamont's article "How to become a Dominant French Philosopher: The Case of Jacques Derrida," in *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 93, no. 3 (November 1987), though it adopts a different methodology.

existentialism to post-structuralism, Derrida's career tracked the development of French philosophy and can stand in metonymically for the intellectual history of the period.

Not only can Derrida's itinerary give us a new perspective on the history of French philosophy, it also brings attention to the academic institutions, practices, and social organizations that were central to French intellectual life. Derrida went to the best schools, passed the right exams, and found jobs in the most prestigious research and teaching institutions. His closely documented life gives us the means to understand what it meant to be a philosopher in postwar France, how intellectual communities were formed, and how institutions and pedagogical structures impacted life and thought. In particular, it reminds us of the central position occupied by the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS), and the small community of philosophers there whose work was disproportionately influential.

At the Ecole, philosophy was not only studied but lived; students and teachers attributed philosophical significance to broader social and political trends, while political disputes seeped into academic exchange. In particular, the communist and Christian affiliations of many Normaliens, which structured their social and political lives, demanded the adoption of specific theoretical positions in academic work: communists read Marx and adhered to theories of social and economic determinism, while Christians looked to Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel and emphasized Man's spirituality. Even those students and teachers who, like Derrida, had no direct affiliation to the Catholic circle or the communist cellule were not oblivious to the political and cultural valences attributed to philosophical ideas. Their work too could be classed as ideological or nihilist with all the attendant social consequences. Ideas, which today seem abstract and socially irrelevant, were invested then with great political and cultural meaning. At the ENS it was hard to draw a line between the social and the philosophical.

Derrida's education and philosophical development up until his major publications of 1967 (*Of Grammatology*, *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*) show that he was the product of the wider French intellectual community. Like many of his generation, Derrida was not the protégé of a particular school or movement, but was nourished by several: he was engaged by existentialism, drew on the strengths of phenomenology, and learned from the rigor of structuralism. Though recent studies have tended to regard him as an outsider, based upon his later fractious relationship with mainstream philosophy, until the end of the 1960s at least, institutionally and intellectually he occupied a central position in French intellectual life.

## COMMUNISTS AND CATHOLICS DEBATING MAN

An analysis of Derrida's work in the years preceding 1968 reveals the structural importance of two axes in French intellectual life, which provide the structure for a wide-ranging contextualization of postwar French thought. These axes show why seemingly abstract philosophical work could have value for the most pressing of political questions and provide a framework for analyzing how philosophical quarrels could take on the forms of a political contest or negotiation.

First, throughout this period, and for Derrida in particular, philosophy was interwoven by the dual strands of communist and Christian thought. From Jean-Paul Sartre's response to communist and Christian critics in the 1945 paper "Existentialism Is a Humanism," through the social divide between the Catholic "Talas" and the communist cellule at the ENS in the 1950s, to Louis Althusser's criticism of the religious-leaning Marxist humanism of Roger Garaudy in his 1965 *For Marx*, the "double messianism" of Christian thought and Marxism defined much French philosophy and granted often abstract reasoning political and social value.[3] Marxist thought gained from the prestige of the Communist Party in France, while ironically Christian philosophy benefited from the French secular school system. As we shall see, whatever the laws on the teaching of religion, lycée *professeurs* could still discuss the ontological proof in class, or bring their students' attention to the latest book by Christian philosophers such as Simone Weil or Jacques Maritain. Philosophy classes acted as a haven for religious ideas refused their own disciplinary home.

The second major axis in postwar French philosophy is that which led from humanism to antihumanism. The significance of these terms, as I will argue, was not their philosophical sophistication. Indeed their value arose partly from the fact that nobody really knew exactly what they meant. This vagueness allowed them to reach across political and philosophical divides, including, for short periods, that between the communists and the Christians. In 1945, "humanism" was a label claimed by Marxists like Henri Lefebvre, Catholic personnalists like Emmanuel Mounier, and atheistic existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre. In the 1960s, and in part as a reaction to the success of Sartrean humanism, antihumanism allowed the rapprochement between structuralist Marxism, Christian Heideggerianism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. There was no explicit agreement as to

[3] The phrase "double messianism" comes from the historian Renée Béderida, cited in Jean-Philippe Mochon, "L'Ecole Normale et la politique," unpublished Maîtrise d'Histoire, Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille III (1993), p. 74.

what humanism and antihumanism entailed, and it was for this very reason that they could be clarion calls to political and philosophical alliances.

Derrida too followed broader intellectual trends, shifting away from an early – if critical – humanism to become one of the most vocal proponents of the "end of Man." But, as I will show, Derrida was never so unambiguously antihumanist as has often been suggested, and traces of his earlier humanism show up even in texts from the mid 1960s. Unlike the communists, for whom the antagonism between humanists and antihumanists caused an insuperable rift in Marxist theory, Derrida cleaved closer to the Christians, for whom the humanist assertion of Man's need for God and the antihumanist rejection of the autonomous self were never so dramatically opposed. While Althusser and his students urged the disavowal of humanist ideology to open up the possibility of a Marxist science, Derrida demanded a type of philosophical humility that Christian scholars thought appropriate to our human limitations.

## DERRIDA AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

One of the central claims of my study, which I discuss at length in the first part of this book, is that Derrida's thought can be understood within the context of French Christian philosophy. The emphasis on religious thought may not be entirely unexpected. Scholars have recognized for over a decade that Derrida's philosophy provides powerful resources for considering religious questions.[4] Responding to his later texts after the so-called "religious turn" in the 1980s, John Caputo has described Derrida's "messianicity without messianism," Richard Kearney has proposed an ethical poetics of religion, while Hent de Vries has looked to the reciprocal implications of philosophy and religion to develop a sophisticated deconstructive theology.[5] Through a close study of Derrida's early unpublished essays and courses, however, I show that these religious themes can be traced back to Derrida's first philosophical writings. Religious thought was not a new interest for the middle-aged Derrida, but rather the milieu in which deconstruction first developed.

[4] Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," in Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 155.

[5] John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and his *Religion and Violence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). Caputo's phrase comes from Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge," in Gil Anidjar, ed., *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 56.

What is more surprising is that deconstruction drew on *Christian* sources. Traditional presentations of Derrida's philosophy cast him as a "Jewish" philosopher. The claim has been picked up in much of the secondary literature, and developed often with great finesse and sophistication.[6] But, the desire to understand deconstruction through reference to a lost or effaced Jewish consciousness, whatever validity it may have, ignores another better-documented genealogy. Derrida, by his own admission, only read the Talmud late in life, but he did read Christian philosophical texts while at school.[7] Several of the themes and questions in Derrida's philosophy that have been attributed to a latent Judaism can equally be found in the type of Catholic thought to which the young Derrida turned, especially the works of Simone Weil, Gabriel Marcel, and René le Senne. It is without a doubt significant that Weil converted from Judaism and Marcel embraced the Catholic faith late in life. But the confusion of labels should make us wary of claiming certain philosophical theses as the exclusive property of particular religious groups. Though one can distinguish "Christian" and "Jewish" philosophy, such modifiers do not restrict the scope or influence of ideas to particular individuals or groups, especially, as we shall see, for a tradition of theistic existentialism that displayed a marked skepticism to all forms of determined and institutionalized dogma; a Jewish Derrida would not necessarily consider all Christian thought beyond the pale.

In highlighting Derrida's engagement with Christian thought, therefore, I do not intend to substitute one religious identity for another. The fact that Derrida drew on Christian philosophy does not make his philosophy doctrinally "Christian," and it in no way implies that Derrida

[6] See for an analysis of Derrida's relationship to Judaism and Jewishness, Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lauwrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); Gideon Ofrat, *The Jewish Derrida*, trans. Peretz Kidron (Syracuse University Press, 2001); Martin Srajek, *In the Margins of Deconstruction: Jewish Conceptions of Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998); or Andrew König, *Splitterflüsse* (Stuttgart: Merz & Solitude, 2006); and with greater sophistication Joseph Cohen, ed., *Judéités: Questions pour Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Galilée, 2003); Hélène Cixous, *Un Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif* (Paris: Galilée, 2001); Dana Hollander, *Exemplarity and Chosenness* (Stanford University Press, 2008). For a compact statement of Derrida's own use of the terms "Jewish," "Judaism," and "the last of the Jews," see his interview in Elisabeth Weber, *Questioning Judaism*, trans. R. Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 40–58. Derrida's use of this Jewish identity to destabilize traditional identity politics has been a major theme in much of the secondary literature.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Points: Interviews 1974–1994* trans. Peggy Kamus (Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 80. Further, as Derrida has asserted on other occasions while adding important caveats that are equally valid here, "deconstruction's link with Christianity is more apparent, more literal than with other religions." Yvonne Sherwood, ed., *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 33.

accepted Christian doctrines personally; we should beware of mistaking philosophical genealogy for religious identity. Rather, I want to show how Derrida's thought developed lines of argument that emerged at a particular moment in French intellectual history, ones proffered predominantly by self-confessed Christian thinkers, but which cannot be restricted to them. Derrida turned to Christian thought, not because it was Christian, but because, in France, it offered the most valuable resources for criticizing Sartre's atheistic existentialism.

Nevertheless, this Christian background provides new means for understanding the stakes of deconstruction. I show that what has been interpreted as a "skeptical" element in Derrida's philosophy was closely allied with a Pascalian philosophical tradition that challenged the pretensions of human thought. Just as Derrida would later confront texts with marginal moments that conflicted with their most basic presuppositions, Christian existentialists confronted the categories of our understanding with existence in all its complexity to show that no human philosophical system could fully grasp the richness of experience. Both looked for "scandals" that discredited human claims to philosophical authority.[8] For these thinkers, we could never have but the most obscure idea of God, who was only an aspiration or a promise, accessed through the blindness of an uncertain and dangerous faith rather than revealed through the light of knowledge. Consequently, any dogmatic assertion of divine immediacy (or absence) was ultimately hubristic and had to be refused.

Given the importance of religious themes in Derrida's early thought, the question is no longer what incited the emergence of these questions in the "religious turn" of the 1980s, but rather what kept them out of sight until then. The time period is suggestive. For the twenty years following 1964, when Derrida taught at the Ecole Normale Supérieure under the watchful eye of Louis Althusser, explicitly religious themes were almost entirely absent from his work.

In the second part of this book, I relate how Derrida, returning as a teacher to the ENS, had to engage with Althusser and his newly politicized students and make his work relevant for them. First and foremost, this entailed an adoption of the terms and categories of structuralism. The reformulation of Derrida's ideas in structuralist language was ultimately resistant to his earlier religious thought. Derrida no longer hoped to disrupt idolatrous ontotheologies by asserting the "difference" between

[8] See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 283; and Etienne Borne, *Le Problème du mal* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958), p. 10.

the divine idea and its earthly manifestations. Instead this difference was equated with the Saussurean difference between signifiers that produced linguistic meaning. Recast as the play of signifiers, Derrida's "*différance*" in the late 1960s presented the "theological," not as the cause, but as "a determined moment in the total movement of the trace."[9] It is for this reason that contemporary philosophers interested in the connection between deconstruction and religion have tended to avoid Derrida's work from this period and have criticized the first reception of deconstruction in America that it informed.[10]

The "turn" in Derrida's thought makes sense of recent conflicting voices, like that of Martin Hägglund, who has argued that not only was Derrida an atheist in refusing God, but he was radically atheist – a term ironically also used by Caputo[11] – in his rejection of the desire for the infinite and the "absolutely immune."[12] The desire for immortality, shared according to Hägglund by believers and vulgar atheists alike, was the true target of Derrida's deconstruction. Hägglund argues that Derrida's thought implies a positive affirmation of our finitude and mortality, which is the condition of any desire or affirmation at all.[13]

A history of Derrida's thought, sensitive to both the traditions in which he participated and the change of his thought over time, suggests that Hägglund cannot be right about Derrida's radical atheism. But in recognizing the essential role of spacing and *différance* in the key texts from 1967, Hägglund does draw attention to the reformulation of Derrida's thought that complicated his appeal to religion and makes the misreading of his atheism understandable. Further, Hägglund's work encourages us to be careful in our analysis of Derrida's use of religious thought. Though his work was nourished by religious philosophy, the religious resources that Derrida relied upon were used to destabilize the thought of Man, not to construct a thought of the divine. For this reason, the religious genealogy of Derrida's thought can never be the ground for a simple rejection – or indeed embrace – of deconstruction. Even at his most religious, Derrida's appeal to the resources of a Christian tradition always arose from an

[9] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 47. Of course, the theological is not God, and, like the Christian Heideggerians, Derrida was always resistant to their identification.

[10] See de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, pp. 23–8 and Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 233.

[11] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 62 citing Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le Nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 103.

[12] Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford University Press, 2008).

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

internal critique of secular thought. Derrida probed first Sartre's existentialism, then a phenomenology of science, and finally Althusser's Spinozist Marxism, and for internal reasons found them all wanting. God was an axiom Derrida could do without; his anti-foundationalism was consonant with a religious tradition criticizing human arrogance, but he never proposed substituting a final religious ground.

## DERRIDA AND HISTORY

This book is the first detailed archival and contextual study of Derrida's philosophy, and many commentators might regard its very approach as a betrayal of his ideas.[14] For them, in its assumptions and methodology history is intrinsically biased against deconstruction. In the words of one critic, "Derrida refused . . . to become part of history."[15] Further, put off by Derrida's critical writings on archives, scholars have shied away from his own carefully preserved papers.[16] Indeed this assumed hostility between history and deconstruction explains why, over a third of a century after the first books appeared on Derrida's work, there has been no sustained treatment of Derrida's archives, nor a rigorous attempt at historical contextualization.[17]

This opposition to history has expressed itself in two forms: the resistance to the idea of historical change, and a reticence in reading Derrida's philosophy within the broader context of French intellectual history. Several scholars have asserted that Derrida's thought has been remarkably constant over his career, and they refuse to subject his work to historicizing narratives. Geoffrey Bennington suggests that there was no change between the supposedly "philosophical" works of the 1960s and the "literary" work

[14] Benoît Peeters's magisterial biography, *Derrida* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), appeared as I was putting the final touches to this book. His work draws on similar sources to mine but he reads them for different purposes, emphasizing the personal and the private, and their impact on Derrida's work. As such my book and his provide different but, I hope, complementary accounts of Derrida's early years. This book also builds on the ground-breaking work of Allan Megill in his *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[15] David Bates, "Crisis between the Wars: Derrida and the Origins of Undecidability," *Representations* (Spring 2005). See also Mark Bevir, Jill Hargis, and Sara Rushing, eds., *Histories of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Introduction, pp. 1–24; and more recently Warren Breckman, "Times of Theory: On Writing the History of French Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (July 2010), pp. 339–61.

[16] See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[17] See also the antipathy from historians, amongst others, Carolyn Steedman, "Something She Called a Fever: Derrida, Michelet and Dust," *The American Historical Review* (October, 2001); or Richard Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), pp. 81–2. For a sophisticated account of the attempts to sideline deconstructively informed histories see Judith Surkis, "When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy," forthcoming in the *American Historical Review*.

later on, that Derrida's work cannot be divided into "styles or periods."[18] Where some attempt at periodization and a sensitivity to change has arisen in the scholarship, it has often been confined by the limited and ironically (as we shall see) Althusserian attempt to read a divide between the "late" and the "early" Derrida, demarcated by "religious," "ethical," or "political" turns.[19] We have a Hobson's choice between two stable forms, marked by a break, or a consistency over forty years of writing and publishing. Neither provides a useful account of historical change.

Similar hesitations can be seen with respect to contextualization. Derrida often attested to his status as an outsider, rejected by the philosophical establishment, a claim that many scholars have taken at face value. The limited contextual accounts of Derrida's thought have often concentrated on his Algerian or Jewish background, reiterating his own narrative of exclusion from the French mainstream.[20] In this way, the attempts to contextualize Derrida have strangely served to decontextualize him. But, as I will elaborate more fully later, with limited sources to appraise the impact of Derrida's Algerian past or Jewish heritage, such forms of contextualization rely predominantly on a one-sided conceptualization of Sephardic Jewish identity. Where they do appeal to Derrida's own work, it is only to his pronouncements in the 1980s and beyond, and we should treat such autobiographical writings with caution, especially when they serve to bolster the myth Derrida carefully constructed of his own relationship to the French mainstream.

The resistance to contextualization also seeks legitimation in Derrida's deconstructive philosophy. As several commentators have noted, Derrida's concept of writing describes the process of decontextualization: unlike speech, writing can do without the presence of the author and be readable in another time and place. Since it is the defining property of writing that it can forgo this presence, the desire to return to its "point of origin" smacks of unhealthy nostalgia. To yearn for the lost fullness of a contextual moment as the guarantor of sense is to remain beholden to the "metaphysics of presence."[21]

[18] Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 13.

[19] See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992); Peng Cheah ed. *Derrida and the Time of the Political* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009). Though I write on the "young Derrida," I emphasize neither a profound opposition to the "old Derrida," nor an essential unity to his early writings.

[20] See Robert Young, *White Mythologies* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and the two recent biographies by Jason Powell and David Mikics.

[21] See Peter Gordon's remarks about Heidegger and Derrida at the end of his "Hammer without a Master," in Bevir, ed., *Histories of Postmodernism*, p. 125.