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POLISH HUMANITIES, FRENCH THEORY AND THE NEED FOR A STRONG SUBJECT

Abstract

This article explores the reception of French Theory in Poland after 1989. I argue that post-modern tendencies entered the Polish humanities in a distorted form, having travelled via the USA. I propose the hypothesis that the transplantation of the concept of power-knowledge, which was central to the US-American take on Michel Foucault, led to something that I term “the Foucault Effect.” It became entangled in the processes of democratization and political and economic transformation taking place in the 1990s, meaning that on the one hand it “raised consciousness” of power mechanisms, while on the other hand promoting a sense of subjecthood that was a product of power relations and thus was deprived of agency. I argue that regardless of the critique of anthropocentrism that is prevalent in the contemporary humanities, the socio-political situation in the world today demands a return of the strong subject, whose figuration would take into account lessons learned from French Theory.

Key words: French Theory, postmodernism, Poland, political transformation, “the Foucault Effect”, postdependency syndrome, agency, strong subject

French Theory is what US-Americans termed the body of French philosophy of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, the thought of Michel Foucault, the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, and the theory of Julia Kristeva that together was transplanted to North American campuses. It was there during the course of the 1980s and 1990s that these thinkers achieved greater renown than in their own

This article is a translated and revised version of excerpts of my book: Ewa Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna. Krytyczne studium narratywizmu i humanistyki zaangażowanej* [Existential History: A Critical Approach to Narrativism and Emancipatory Humanities] (Warszawa: PWN, 2012), 134–160.

countries. The origins of French Theory can be traced back to the conference ‘The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’, held at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore from 18–21 October 1966. It featured contributions from, among others, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, René Girard, Lucien Goldman and Tzvetana Todorova. The event played a crucial role in shaping the fate of French Theory not only in the US but in the humanities generally. It turned out that by debating on neutral territory, the French scholars were liberated from the national context and rather than of outlining French structuralism to their US-American audience, they instead offered a critique of it that pointed towards new tendencies that later took the form of poststructuralism,¹ which was also termed French Theory or French postmodernism, in the US. As one of the editors of volume *French Theory in America*, Sylvère Lotringer, stated

French Theory is an American creation anyway. The French themselves never conceived it as such, although French philosophers obviously had something to do with it. In France, French theory was considered philosophy, or psychoanalysis, or semiotics, or anthropology, in short any manner of “thinking” (*pensée*) but never referred to as *theory*.²

Subjected to what Jean-Philippe Mathy termed the “pragmatisation of French thought”,³ French Theory soon acquired institutional footholds in centres working in the fields of cultural studies, literary studies, French culture, studies on sexual and ethnic minorities, and visual culture studies. Indeed, it could be argued that “the French came up with the «Theory», and Americans found a way to make something out of it”,⁴ albeit by neutralizing its radicalism while often applying the label of a theory of resistance with the aim of strengthening multiculturalism and political correctness. Theory thus became a mode of social critique that used “the method” of deconstruction.

Among the leading representatives of French Theory were the “Big Seven”, as they were known: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Félix Guattari, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes. There were other French thinkers associated with them, namely Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Louis Althusser, Paul Ricoeur and Bruno Latour (although the latter explicitly distances himself from French Theory). The list of scholars, who represent

¹ At that time, it was manifested in the turn from Hegel to Nietzsche that was already evident in Gilles Deleuze’s book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (French edition, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, 1962), with Nietzsche becoming a point of reference for ideas developed in the postmodernist spirit.

² Sylvère Lotringer, “Doing Theory,” in *French Theory in America*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 125.

³ Jean-Philippe Mathy, “The End of Philosophy and the Pragmatisation of French Thought”, *History of European Ideas* 20, no. 1–3 (1995): 545–551.

⁴ Ioana Uricaru, “Review of François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis*, *SubStance* 35, no. 1 (2006): 153.

diverse (and sometimes contradictory) approaches, reveals that French Theory is hardly a homogenous phenomenon. It is also difficult to point to a common “nationality” among this group of researchers, not only because of the origins of Kristeva and Todorova, but also because French Theory drew in fundamental ways on German philosophy, with the works of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl and Heidegger forming the scholars’ analytical focus. It is thus not by chance that in Alain Renaut and Luc Ferry’s pamphlet/book *La Pensée 68*, Foucault was classified as “*le nietzschéisme français*”, while Derrida was deemed “*l’heideggerianisme français*”.⁵

FRENCH THEORY IN POLAND

French Theory has its own history in Poland that saw it become a cultural and historical fact. The work of the translators and philosophers Bogdan Banasiak and Krzysztof Matuszewski contributed significantly to its popularization and emergence in Polish humanities. They published their translations and commentaries in the journal *Colloquia Communia*. Also important were the writings of Stefan Morawski and the publications of two Americanists based in Silesia, Tadeusz Sławek and Rafał Rachwał. While Banasiak, Matuszewski and Morawski interpreted and commented on the original source texts by the French scholars in the 1980s, Sławek and Rachwał read them through the lens of the US perspective.⁶ French Theory influenced ways of thinking about literature, philosophy, art and society, while concepts including the abject, deconstruction, deterritorialization, *différance*, discourse, *habitus*, hyperreality, intertextuality, *jouissance*, schizoanalysis and “grand narrative” established themselves in the lexicon of Polish humanities. Even though the most important figures of the French 1968 generation were known in Poland, with Polish structuralism and semiotics inspired by the works of Barthes, Lévi-Strauss and Algirdas Julien Greimas, and even though there were attempts in the 1980s at working with French poststructuralist thought (Foucault), from today’s perspective it is clear that the reception of French thought then differed from the approach adopted by the new generation in the 1990s.

Such processes of assimilating knowledge were not unique to Poland. Hence the arguments presented in an article by the Brazilian scholar Juremir Machado Da Silva, with the telling title “The Imperialism of the «French Theory»”, seem familiar to the Polish context, too.

French thought domains the world. Notedly the North American University world. By consequence and contamination, no one is free from French influence. [...] Brazilians

⁵ Alain Renaut, Luc Ferry, *La Pensée 68: Essai Sur L’anti-Humanisme Contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

⁶ See: *French Theory w Polsce [French Theory in Poland]*, ed. by Ewa Domańska and Mirosław Loba (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2010).

therefore, at first, read and valorize North Americans. In the meantime North Americans read and valorize the French. From this, comes the first tragical consequence to Brazilians: we are suffering a second hand influence. We have never been that original. Now, to make things worse, we no longer drink from the original fountain. Trend or ideology?⁷

It would seem, however, that such secondary or second-hand reception, typical of peripheral countries, primarily concerned the assimilation of deconstruction and poststructuralism, whereas the influence of structuralism (in Poland at least) took more direct and far-reaching forms. Within the theory of history, such direct interest in structuralism was manifested in the works of both Jerzy Topolski and Wojciech Wrzosek, as well as later in a subsequent generation of researchers including Maciej Bugajewski (on Paul Ricoeur) and Maria Solarska (on Michel Foucault and French feminist thought). In this article, I am interested in exploring the influence of the US-American take on French Theory, rather than French thought directly. In the 1990s, the US version of French Theory became exceptionally influential, particularly in discussions on postmodernism.

I would like to propose the hypothesis here that the concept of power-knowledge, which was central to the US-American adaptation of Michel Foucault's ideas, was transplanted into the Polish humanities and led to a phenomenon that could be termed "the Foucault effect". It became entangled in the processes of democratization and political-economic transformation taking place in Poland in the 1990s, while also contributing to the popularity of French Theory across the humanities. This can be attributed to the fact that French theory was used as an engaged and prescriptive theory, which led to "raising consciousness" regarding power mechanisms, while also promoting an idea of subjecthood as something produced through power relations and lacking agency. I would argue that this kind of thinking, which involves a "determinism of power" and produces a specific figuration of subjecthood, was important and indeed useful in Poland during the period of "transition between orders" in the late 1980s and 1990s. However, it is not relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century. What I also reflect on here, is whether the introduction of French Theory to Poland served to radicalize Polish intellectuals' activities (likewise in respect of resisting existing conditions) or perhaps instead neutralized them. Unfortunately, what I observe in Polish academia seems to be a neutralization of the potential for resistance: there is a lack of courage and a de-activization of the subject, which perhaps stems from promoting a vision of universities that accords with the general power-knowledge relations that for Foucault were insurmountable as they are constituted by a web of interlocking dependencies. Rather than discuss the power of dominant structures (such as the state and institutions), I will instead outline the abovementioned problems in such a way that can strengthen the subject after it was stripped of its agency and community in the wake of French Theory. I therefore speak of the subject as agent.

⁷ Juremir Machado Da Silva, "The Imperialism of the «French Theory» (about a certain Jean Baudrillard)", *MATRIZES* 1 (2007): 180.

Discussing “The Reception of Postmodernism in Polish Criticism and Journalism”, Grzegorz Wołowiec wrote that the early stages of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s did not attract significant interest in Poland. The situation shifted, he argued, in 1989, when “with the collapse of communism, it began to be asked, whether postmodernism might actually be suited to postcommunism”. And so, Wołowiec continued, postmodernism in the hermeneutic tradition of literary criticism came to offer multi-perspectival reflection on Western civilization, although this tendency started to weaken in the mid-1990s already.⁸ (So, at the point when translations of the “canonical” works of French Theory started to appear in Poland).

As far as Polish translations of works by representatives of structuralist-era French theory are concerned, interest emerged through direct contact with France. This applies to the Polish editions of Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (published as *Mit i znak* – 1970), Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* (published as *Smutek tropików* – 1960), *Le totémisme* (published as *Totemizm* – 1968), *La pensée sauvage* (published as *Mysł nieoswojona* – 1969), and *Anthropologie structurale* (published as *Antropologia strukturalna* – 1970; Michel Foucault’s *L’archéologie du savoir* (published as *Archeologia wiedzy* with a foreword by Jerzy Topolski – 1977), as well as to works from other intellectual traditions, such as Paul Ricoeur’s *Existence et Herméneutique* (published as *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka* – 1975) and later René Girard’s *Le Bouc Emissaire* (published as *Kozioł ofiarny* – 1987); and Foucault’s *Histoire de la folie à l’âge Classique* (published as *Historia szaleństwa w dobie klasycyzmu* – 1987). By contrast, the US-inflected version of poststructuralist French Theory took hold broadly throughout the humanities after the symbolic year of 1989, when much larger numbers of early-career scholars (doctoral or early postdoctoral researchers) started to receive fellowships and grants to travel to the United States. The names Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard became increasingly common in Polish publications. It was in their ideas that the then twenty- and thirty-somethings, many of whom are among the leading Polish intellectuals today, sought an alternative to traditional, often Marxist-inspired, research. Thirsty for new approaches, young humanities scholars lacking access to Western literature, sought out in the USA research questions and theoretical frameworks that would enable them to investigate not only scholarly but also political and existential questions, and in a more satisfying way than was possible with the tools they had been taught in Poland. North American campuses appeared to constitute something of an “intellectual paradise” with their freedom of speech, free-flowing exchange of ideas, and centres that were responsible for shaping the dominant trends and

⁸ Grzegorz Wołowiec, “Recepcja postmodernizmu w polskiej krytyce i publicystyce. Wstępne rozpoznanie” [The Reception of Postmodernism in Polish Literary Criticism and Journalism], *Kultura Współczesna* 3–4 (1996): 11, 13, 17, 18 [11–25], thematic section: “Problemy polskiej recepcji postmodernizmu” [Issues in the Polish reception of postmodernism]. See also: Marek Kwiek, „Polski postmodernizm?” [Polish Postmodernism?], *Kultura Współczesna* 3–4 (1996): 5–10.

approaches in the humanities. Poststructuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism – so simply put, postmodernism with its interest in subjecthood, power-knowledge relations, critiques of metanarratives and its apocalypticism of the end (the end of history, the death of the author, the death of the subject, etc.), offered ideal intellectual nourishment for Polish scholars, for many of whom French theory, which reflected these tendencies, was a point of reference and support in constructing an oppositional consciousness. Thus, the battlefield was clearly defined: on the one side, the old system, “Commies” and politically-tainted faculty still in thrall to old ways of thinking; on the other, “angry young postmodernists” who wanted to change the world and academia by deconstructing its foundations. Postmodernism offered an antidote to communism, while French Theory was the “transformer” of subjecthood that was still battling the problems emerging from the country’s transition.

THEORY AS A PRAXIS OF INTERVENTION

What were the implications of introducing French Theory into Polish humanities (and perhaps, too, Polish culture more broadly)? It can be argued that in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the “postmodernist” French Theory that arrived in Poland by way of North American campuses offered a way of “decolonising the mind”, to draw on the term used by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, while writing about these ideas was a particular way of both demonstrating and practising freedom. As in the US, French Theory in Poland fitted the “crisis of paradigms”. In Poland, this led to a search for alternatives to methods that were to a greater or lesser extent based in a Marxism that was associated with the old system, positivism, analytical philosophy and disciplined structuralism. In a word, then, French Theory offered an instrument of critique, a practical intervention and a way of undermining and deconstructing the foundations of ways of thinking not only about research but also of a certain way of thinking about the world that was based in the old order.

For those who supported the idea of socially engaged intellectuals, French Theory was attractive and appealing, especially as the way it was presented in the US suggested that it promoted the pragmatic application of theories, rather than an abstract understanding of it that was far removed from praxis. There is a certain degree of irony to this given that Polish reservations towards theory were associated with the prescriptive applications of Marxism that determined research directives on how to analyse the past and society. As we know, for Foucault, theory is a praxis, a localized and non-totalizing struggle against power, while Deleuze stated that “a theory is exactly like a box of tools. [...] It must be useful. It must function.”⁹ It is also worth recalling Derrida’s words

⁹ “Intellectuals and Power. A Conversation Between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze,” in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice. Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 208.

on adopting a stance in philosophy: “Deconstruction, I have insisted, is not *neutral*. It *intervenes*”.¹⁰

Here we touch upon an important question regarding the status and role of theory in and of itself: is theory there to determine “research directives”, or is it supposed to be a reflection on a given field of research? The response to this in turn triggers further questions: what are the objectives of contemporary Polish humanities? What research questions are considered important for its future? Which theories and research methods should be promoted in order to meet those objectives? French Theory certainly provides us in Poland with a “space of intellectual experience”, but it is also necessary to ask: what is our “horizon of expectation”, to use Reinhart Koselleck’s terms?

What emerges from the vision of an engaged theory is a vision for a humanities based on it. This would be a practical, performative, active humanities, a humanities of deeds and agency that not only thinks about the world but also changes it, or at least influences the changes taking place in it. It is a paradox that while promoting a vision of humanities and researchers as active agents, the interest in French Theory came to focus on texts, tropes, signs, fleeting and ambivalent meanings, and a subject deprived of essence and coherence, whose death and end was presupposed by this theory. It is ironic that the debates over the relations between politics and academia (i.e. power and knowledge), which were – I believe – fundamental to the transplantation of French Theory to Poland, made reference to Foucault’s findings. Indeed, he analysed the workings of power and attributed knowledge to agents on this subject, without, though, ever suggesting a way of escaping this all-encompassing relationship. Perhaps, then, this approach was actually disempowering?

Was it not the case that French Theory – and this is precisely what US-American Marxists critique it for – transformed specific social problems into discussions about texts, while the idea of conflict became a metaphor and “class, race and sex struggles” were replaced by disagreements between texts? In other words, did the introduction of French Theory into Polish academic circles lead to the political radicalization of scholarly debates, or – paradoxically – did it neutralize them? Particularly interesting in this context is the remark by the postcolonialist scholar Sumit Sarkar, the only person to quit the editorial board of the journal *Subaltern Studies* in protest at the “poststructuralist turn” that also reached the postcolonial school of militant historiography. Sarkar argued that the subaltern studies scholars’ subsequent research “betrayed” their initial ideals by separating theory and empirical studies of the realities of struggle. In his view, poststructuralism and postcolonialism (as a direct avatar it also an direct embodiment of French Theory¹¹) are two research tendencies that resulted not

¹⁰ “Fragment of a letter from Jacques Derrida to Jean-Louis Houdebine. July 15, 1971”, in Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 93.

¹¹ Postcolonialism is considered “a direct avatar” of French Theory by François Cusset, author of the book: François Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co.*

from revolutionary practice but rather from a dearth of revolutionary verve.¹² If we pursue this line of thought, then perhaps we could also argue that intellectuals lacking “revolutionary verve” were involved in the continuation of political transformation after 1989 in Poland, which took place primarily in texts (in scholarly studies, literature and journalism), rather than in political practice. But perhaps the opposite was the case? Maybe French Theory in Poland became a form of intellectual counter-culture at universities, shaping a kind of “oppositional culture” that treated the “margin as a space of radical openness” (bell hooks), with its influences only becoming fully evident once its representatives acquired the status of independent faculty members?

THE LIMITS OF FRENCH THEORY

As a participant of various seminars in anthropology, archaeology, literary studies, philosophy, sociology and art theory in the 1990s at the University of California – Berkeley, Cornell University and Stanford University, I was most fascinated by the mantra based on Foucault’s words that was repeated in various classes: “power produces knowledge” ... “power and knowledge directly imply one another” ... “history is the discourse of power”. This mantra is, of course, a US product because it is the North American reading of Foucault (obsessed by sex and violence) that made power-knowledge relations the central idea of Foucault’s theory.¹³ This theory was used to reveal the mechanisms of power, the problem of exclusion and discrimination, to define victims and oppressors, with Foucault appointed leader of the struggle for justice for the oppressed and silenced minorities.

It was only years later that I realized what made these slogans so persuasive. Indeed, they had exerted significant influence on my interest in the entanglements of the theory of history and historiography with questions of power, politics and ideology. Firstly, then, French Theory in the US was often sold in the form of catchy quotes, marketing slogans and condensed excerpts of texts published in user-friendly student readers that tended to simplify sophisticated arguments (not to mention English-language translations of French texts that

Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States, transl. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 141.

¹² Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 83–83 and 106–107.

¹³ Foucault himself wrote that “it is not power, but the subject, that is the general theme of my research.” Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, in *The Essential Foucault. Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 127. On the other hand, it is possible to trace different stages in the history of Foucault’s thought, where the focus is on different themes. Thus, in the 1970s in *Discipline and Punish*, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he focused on the question of power, while in the early 1980s, the question of subjecthood prevails in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

themselves were part of the process of adapting the theory to US demands by selecting specific aspects of theory and certain concepts that translators happened to think were important); secondly, these theories were served up in such a form that they appeared to be practical, i.e. they helped to understand contemporary realities; thirdly, they were not conservative but critical and encouraged change. In the US-American take on them, questions of agency focused on the “weak subject” who was weak in terms of adaptability and elasticity, which were traits required to fulfil the US ideal of being “self-made”. This was evident in slogans such as “it doesn’t matter who you are, all that matters is who you will be” and those that seem to say: “the system needs you” (where the system is understood not as the dominant system of power but as a system of building oppositional structures) and “you can change something too” (hence the exceptional success of the Wachowskis’ *The Matrix* movie that was based on Foucault’s ideas). I think that François Cusset, author of the book *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, is very much right in arguing that “in a country where the only thing that counts is the ‘application to education’ in order always ‘to substitute, insofar as possible, doing for learning’ (as Hannah Arendt observed), the question becomes whether deconstruction can be taken up for practical purposes, whether it is usable and capable of multiple applications.”¹⁴ The emphasis on practical use and applicability also reached Poland. As in the United States, the deconstruction of truth, objectivity, metanarratives and reason was translated directly into the critique of these concepts through the lens of “race, class, gender”, as theory was employed in the service of identity politics, questions of multiculturalism, political correctness, human rights, and so forth. Intentionally or not, in this context, too, Foucault became the theorist of “resisting subjects”.

At this point, however, a certain problem emerges that points towards the limitations of Foucault’s theory (particularly where it should serve as a point of reference for political struggles conducted by various “oppressed groups”), namely: “the agency question (or problem) in Foucault”, as it is often described. Firstly, his understanding of a subject’s agency (and the subject in general as being produced at the nexus of power-knowledge relations) does not make the subject an agent of revolutionary struggle; secondly, as Foucault wrote, resistance can never be located outside relations to power, which means that his ideas are fairly deterministic.¹⁵ As an aside, I would argue that the performative turn that has taken place in contemporary humanities, bringing with it interest in the

¹⁴ Cusset, *French Theory*, 120. See Stanley Fish’s review of this book, which led to passionate debate in hundreds of blog posts. Stanley Fish, “French Theory in America.” *New York Times* blog “Think Again”, April 6, 2008, <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/06/french-theory-in-america> (accessed: 24.01.2021).

¹⁵ Foucault has been criticized by scholars working on minorities and postcolonialism for his inability to transcend power relations and for his limited conception of resistance strategies. “If, as Seyla Benhabib puts it, «for Foucault every act of resistance is but another manifestation of an omni-present discourse-power complex», then how can power possibly be resisted?”, asks Nealon. Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault. Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 96.

question of agency (not only of people but also of things), is a response and reaction to the “Foucault effect” with its deterministic notion of power. This is an exceptionally important element not only of Foucault’s theory, but of French Theory in general, which should be explored when considering its historical implications and the role it played, and indeed continues to play, in Poland: the figure of the elastic and weak subject was ideal during the transformation period but, as ethnic studies and postcolonial studies have shown, the idea of the weak subject cannot function effectively in communities and groups that have already achieved independence. This also applies to concepts related to collective subjecthood, such as diaspora, hybrids, and border/land communities that were intended to prevent universalization and essentialization. Ella Shohat has noted that denying agents/communities an “essence” turns them into weak subjects that are often susceptible to neocolonial manipulations and incapable of resistance and survival.¹⁶ Studies on Foucault published after 2000 in the US seem to stress such tropes that support today’s efforts both escape totalizing ideas of power-knowledge and to ensure “the return of the strong subject” who would then be located outside mechanisms of power. More recent scholarship also offers reflections on biopower (which, paradoxically, brings us back to our starting point, although the very act of drawing attention to the need to move away from the idea of the subject as determined by power-knowledge relations is in itself significant).¹⁷

THE FOUCAULT EFFECT

The fading fascination with French Theory in the United States became evident in the mid-1990s already, with the passing of some of its leading representatives (Deleuze 1995, Lyotard 1998, Derrida 2004, and Baudrillard 2007) contributing to this trend. The turn towards theory and texts, which prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s primarily thanks to the expansion of French theory, was replaced by a turn away from theory and towards empiricism and materiality, as became evident in the late 1990s and confirmed with the symbolic date of 9/11. French thinkers faced increasing criticism for their Eurocentrism, elitism, favouring impotent subjects, fetishizing language, their obsession with the subject *le féminin*, where a hidden Catholicism became evident, and for their “pathological metaphors” of the end, death, apocalypse and ruins.¹⁸ In 2003, Didier Éribon,

¹⁶ Ella Shohat, “Notes on the «Post-Colonial».” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 109–110.

¹⁷ These themes are explored in, for example, Nealon’s book *Foucault Beyond Foucault* and by Eric Paras in *Foucault 2.0. Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other Press, 2006). Paras emphasizes particularly that the courses that Foucault taught in 1979 and 1980 at Collège de France show that his thinking was moving towards the idea of a “strong” subject (p. 102).

¹⁸ See: Jean-Philippe Mathy, “French Theory in the United States,” in Jean-Philippe Mathy, *French Resistance. The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 46ff.

who was known for his biography of Foucault,¹⁹ taught at course at UC Berkeley titled “The Seventies Revisited”, where he presented French Theory as part of a fashion for things retro, offering a summary of its main ideas and significance for contemporary research. In the past decade, criticism and revision of French Theory has been normalized and neutralized, with research on the subject institutionalized while representatives of the field have become classics, with their texts now part of the canon.

As I mentioned above, we have been impacted by “the Foucault effect”, which is a series of unfavourable and disempowering consequences resulting from the overinterpretation of a deterministic and totalizing vision of power and concept of power-knowledge relations that were adapted for US realities. Of course, this phenomenon is symptomatic of many thinkers who are considered the founding fathers of various research approaches and trends. Thus it is possible to speak not only of “the Foucault effect”, but also of “the Freud effect”, or indeed “the Girard effect”, all of which relate to theories that create a certain totalizing vision of the world and a mode that involves providing explanation through the prisms of structuring categories that organize the world, such as power, knowledge, violence, unconsciousness, etc. Thus, if we can be convinced that people are driven by complexes and desires, for example, or that we live in a world ruled by power-knowledge relations, then it is difficult to abandon such visions of the world because they are models that organize the way we think about the world, meaning that in some sense it is rendered predictable and therefore safe. I believe that it is worthwhile seeking out research material that undermines such theories and thus encourages us to avoid saying “yes” (“yes, things certainly are like Freud, Girard, Foucault wrote”) but instead leads us to find that “no, things are not (always) like that”.

“The Foucault Effect” is also rooted in the fact that while the representatives of French Theory laid bare the foundations of modern thought and knowledge production, they ultimately failed to offer a basis (or hope of one) for a new paradigm. They showed how the system works, but not a way out of it. French Theory was necessary and useful as an intervention, critique and contestation of the dominant ways of thinking and conducting research in the 1980s, and as such it also acquired the status of a form of social critique. The tendencies that emerged on the back of French Theory are interventionist, critical, insurrectional and militant (militant history, militant anthropology), but they are not “construc-

¹⁹ Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, transl. Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), French edition – 1989. There are many books and articles that discuss and summarize the impact French Theory has had on US-American culture and academia. Beyond Cusset’s *French Theory* and Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen’s edited volume *French Theory in America* mentioned above, other notable works included: *Hatred of Capitalism. A Semiotext(e) Reader*, ed. by Chris Kraus and Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001); Jonathan Culler, “French Theory Revisited,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 8, no. 1 (2014): 4–13, theme issue: French Theory (here French Theory in China is discussed); Jason Demers, *The American Politics of French Theory. Derrida, Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault in Translation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

tive". French Theory taught a critical approach to texts, as well as suspicion and resistance towards established conventions, yet the path from criticizing and undermining traditions in the humanities towards creating a critical humanities is long and challenging. I therefore have the impression, it bears repeating, that French Theory might offer lessons in how to lay bare and undermine foundations, but it does not offer lessons in how to build new approaches that might emerge from such critique. Following the all too necessary and indeed refreshing "revisionism" of French Theory, what we need now, I would argue, is not just to borrow and adapt foreign approaches and theories, but to develop our own capabilities in this area, with international ideas providing inspiration but not ready-made tools. Aren't such borrowings and adaptations indeed a form of self-colonization? While we were able to use French Theory in the 1980s and 1990s to "decolonize our minds", it is time now for Polish ideas to contribute to the development of humanities around the world. One step towards this involves returning to the problem posed at the outset of this article: how can research questions be formulated that we consider important for the future and how can we outline effective objectives for humanities scholarship. (Of course, even presenting the problem in this way presupposes that scholarship should be useful, although it is not, of course, economic relevance that I have in mind here. Certainly, there will be a great number of scholars who will continue to state that the basic aim of research is searching for the truth.²⁰)

Drawing on my reflections on French Theory, I would like to outline two chief priorities for Polish humanities that also present a challenge for Polish scholars' work in the field of the theory of history: 1. I consider the main priority to be Poland's intellectual deprovincialization. I think that the time for necessary borrowings, which emerged in part from a lack of access to the latest scholarship, is long gone. It is now time to create our own intellectual tradition of theoretical thought that would complement global tendencies in the humanities, while also supplementing it with original contributions. In light of this, I have wondered why Polish scholars are marked by a certain impotence when it comes to creating their own theoretical conceptions. Why is it that Poland does not generally produce "founding fathers (or mothers) of discourses"? My hypothesis would be that historians demonstrate a dislike of theory as a result of the legacies of the one true theory for analysing everything that was, in the past, Marxism (this is related to the fears that theories are at the same time ideologies that are necessarily either revolutionary or conservative). Thus, there is a lasting separation of theory and praxis (either there are theorists of history, or practicing historians, with a few notable exceptions among scholars mainly in economic and social history who manage to combine both). The second objective: 2. to move away from treating theory as a ready-made toolbox to be applied

²⁰ See: Andrzej Białas, "Złudzenie użyteczności sterowanej" [The Illusion of Guided Utility], in *Polskie nauki humanistyczne i społeczne w nowym stuleciu, w nowej Europie* [Polish Humanities and Social Sciences in a New Century, in a New Europe] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2006), 19–20.

in analyses of research material. In addition to this, it is necessary to reunite theory and praxis.

There is no doubt that humanities in Poland has been irrevocably changed by the fact that it is now co-created by scholars who have studied French Theory and experienced US-American campuses. There are many aspects of French Theory that have been transplanted to Polish humanities and which fitted perfectly with the political-economic transformation that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. These elements include the creation of space for dialogue between theory and practice,²¹ addressing questions related to subjecthood (including identity politics and issues of national, religious and sexual minorities, while political correctness also reached Poland, as evident in the term *Cygan* [Gypsy] being replaced by *Roma*). They are also evident not so much in the shift away from metanarratives but rather in the efforts to reveal the threats posed by totalizing tendencies (evident not only in communist ideology, but also in the Christian “metanarrative”). The question of power-knowledge also found fertile ground in Poland and, more recently, French Theory has proven useful in research on Poland’s post-dependency syndrome, on memory (Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur), on political attitudes (Jacques Rancière), biopower (Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, the latter reaching Poland via the US), universalism and ontology (Alain Badiou), and on materiality, thing studies and technoscience (Bruno Latour).

French Theory has become deeply embedded not only in how we think about scholarship but also in university structures and in curricula. Various centres and chairs of cultural studies, gender studies, comparative literature, popular culture have emerged in Poland, while there is growing pressure to conduct interdisciplinary research, which has also gained greater acceptance. There are also courses and lecture series on postcolonial studies. The influence of French Theory has also become evident in the post-Solidarity dynamism of Polish intellectuals’ socio-political activism in relation to feminist movements, gay rights and hybrid borderland cultures. In Poland, we learned from Foucault that freedom (like power) is a praxis that is not possessed but performed.

At some point, however, I felt overpowered by thinking about power-knowledge relations, about oppression, victims, marginalization and exclusion. We are all victims of the “Foucault effect”, which has formatted our thinking so that we conceive of the world in terms of power-knowledge without offering any hope of escaping a world ruled by power relations. I will therefore pose the question: what has theory done to us? And what has Foucault done to us? I am not arguing, of course, that he is not important or that the power-knowledge nexus is not important, just as I am not negating the significance of victims’ discourse or discussions about various forms of oppression. I am wondering, though, how to position these questions within a different interpretive and

²¹ Cusset states that “if French theory managed to take root in the United States, it was because there was a fundamental interest in theory rather than in France itself.” Cusset, *French Theory*, 273.

theoretical framework, and how to employ different analytical categories; in a word, then: how to transcend power-knowledge? Is the declaration that everything is political not as deterministic as stating that everything is discourse or text? Is there not something absurd about the “spiral of power”, whereby each emancipation is followed by another (albeit different) wave of repression unleashed by previous victims?

“Foucault go home!” “Forget Foucault”, I would say, noting on the one hand to the tendency of French Theory to retreat to France, while on the other hand pointing towards Jean Baudrillard’s famous essay.²² As I have outlined above, it is not a matter of declaring that Foucault (and French Theory) are unimportant or uninspiring, but rather of stating that they are by now part of the history of humanities. The heretic has long since become a classic. What is important, however, is to historicize French Theory in the context of how it functioned in the specific socio-political conditions of US realities. Rather than applying instrumentally to Polish research material the ways of thinking and interpretive frameworks offered by this theory, it would be worthwhile moving away from them. There is still much work to be done, however, on developing a Polish theory of the humanities that would treat Western thought as a source of inspiration, rather than a toolbox that offers ready-made analyses and interpretations of Polish source materials.

TOWARDS A STRONG SUBJECT

Since the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, an event that put a symbolic end to postmodernism, researchers attentions have shifted away from humans and towards subjecthood and the unintentional agency of animals, plants, things and the environment. This shift from the human to the non-human has, I would argue, displaced or perhaps masked frustrations stemming from the feeling that the changes taking place in politics, academia and private life are increasingly experienced as something resulting from powerlessness rather than from actual actions. Constructivism, post-structuralism, anti-essentialist narrativism, anti-fundamentalism and the affirmation of the liquid subject constituted through discourse or power-knowledge relations, have denied the agency of the subject. But avant-garde trends in the humanities are seeking to restore this agency. Paradoxically, this is something that often emerges in critiques of anthropocentrism and discussions of the Anthropocene, both of which recognize humans’ power to bring about change on the geological and planetary scales, while being powerless to effect political change.

In the wake of postmodernist voices declaring the death or end of the subject, the current tendencies that reveal the growing totalitarian inclinations of various

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault & Forget Baudrillard, an Interview with Sylvère Lotringer* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), 2nd edition. 2007 (French edition: *Oublier Foucault*. Paris: Galilée, 1977).

systems of power, coupled with increasing controls, regularization and standardization, it would seem pertinent today to rethink the possibility of (re)constructing the idea of the strong subject – not in the sense of a homogenous, stable, unchanging particularity, but one endowed, on the one hand, with diverse essence and, on the other, a sense of solidarity. In light of the changes taking place in the world (including new acts of genocide and mass murder, terrorism – including state terrorism, violations of human rights, the crisis of democracy, the use of torture, the pressures of global capitalism, biopolitics, biotechnological progress, environmental catastrophe, climate change, and intensifying natural disasters), the humanities cannot afford to promote the idea of a weak subject and fragmented society, while exalting in the figure of the victim. It is necessary to strengthen the sense of the potential agency of the subject and community in the face of systems that seek to subjugate them and the abovementioned phenomena that force the subject to adorn a protective layer of armour that enables it to survive limit situations.

For this reason, I have my doubts regarding sometimes “blind” critique of anthropocentrism that provides the grounding for new trends in the humanities. My scepticism is aroused by the rather one-dimensional approach to anthropocentrism – as if there were neither multiple manifestations of it (epistemic, ontological, ethnic, conceptual anthropocentrism; weak and strong anthropocentrism, narrow and broad anthropocentrism) nor regional, religious and spiritual variations of it. I am, of course, aware of the necessity of abandoning both species chauvinism and the instrumental treatment of non-human lifeforms, the environment and resources. But reducing anthropocentrism to species chauvinism constitutes unwarranted reductionism. Furthermore, my location as a scholar in East-Central Europe, where being human meant struggling for recognition as a subject under the dehumanizing conditions of the totalitarian systems of Nazism and Stalinism, leads me to consistently consider the extent to which, to what end, and in which contexts it would be relevant and ethically responsible to advocate transcending anthropocentrism, and what the consequences of making such a move could be.

I thus disagree with the archaeologist John Robb, whose reflections on the subject of agency led him to argue that “[i]n many ways, therefore, we are beyond agency; we have learned what we can from the concept and can move on. However, it is worth retaining the concept in our field’s discursive consciousness.”²³ The move to go “beyond agency” would be a step in the wrong direction given the current socio-political situation that demands the strengthening of both individual and collective subjects. I thus share Chris Pearson’s view that “human agency, intentionality and responsibility should remain key com-

²³ John Robb, “Beyond Agency,” *World Archaeology* 42, no. 4 (2010): 515. The broad interest across the humanities in the question of agency was also reflected in the theory of history that, among other things, explored the relations between the influence of postmodernism’s focus on language and conceptions of agency in historical research. For more on this subject, see the special issue of *History and Theory*: “Agency After Postmodernism” 4, no. 4 (2001).

ponents of history”, while also agreeing with his argument that it is necessary to abandon social history’s model of agency, which is inherently linked to resistance.²⁴

It is thus worth considering whether the particular focus on resistance might actually be a symptom of a weakening of belief in the agency of the subject, whose only potential act towards power, following this view, is to resist it (which ultimately strengthens power). Is this perhaps why today it is resistance, rather than rebellion (let alone revolutions) that are most commonly discussed?²⁵ In his important book *Critical Resistance*, David Couzens Hoy understands resistance as both an act of rejection and an active deed. He differentiates “passive” *resistance to* domination, i.e. something that is effectively inscribed into power mechanisms and constitutes a predictable response to oppression, thus essentially cooperating with oppressive forces, and active, emancipatory *resistance for*, which he terms critical resistance. In the first case (*resistance to*), we say “no” without having a vision for desirable changes, while in the second case (*resistance for*), we also say “yes”, affirming particular changes forming part of a familiar programme.²⁶ Emancipatory resistance, which we can call rebellion here, gives individuals (and communities) at least a temporary (situational) foundation and point of reference for seeking definition and empowerment. As far as the individual is concerned, following Albert Camus, it could be argued that rebellion enables the discovery of the foundations of the “self” that were suppressed, hidden and silenced under oppressive conditions. Rebellion can thus lead to the subject becoming whole and finding peace with him/herself. This cannot be achieved, however, without strategic essentialism. Camus is thus right to state: “Why rebel if there is nothing permanent in oneself worth preserving?”²⁷

²⁴ Chris Pearson, “Beyond «Resistance»: Rethinking Nonhuman Agency for a «More-than-Human» World.” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22, no. 5 (2015): 719. The need to disentangle the concepts of humanity, agency and resistance was expressed by scholars working on human agency quite a long time ago. Laura M. Ahearn in 2001 claims that “[f]or anthropologists in particular, it is important to avoid treating agency as a synonym for free will or resistance.” Laura M. Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 130.

²⁵ The discussions in the humanities regarding the collapse of the ideology of revolution and the turn away from revolution towards revolt refer to works including those by Julia Kristeva. Drawing on Sigmund Freud, she proposed several figurations of revolt in her book *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: revolt as the transgression of prohibition, as repetition, working-through, working out, and as displacement, combinatives, games*. Kristeva had some doubts as to the potential of revolt. She argued that Power (the crisis of Power) and the law, which the revolt was to overcome, no longer existed. What remained was the spectacle and performance. Her analysis led to the idea that it is necessary to reconsider “the culture of revolt” and revolt itself as a factor serving to stabilize the subject. Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt. The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 16.

²⁶ David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance. From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2005), 1–9.

²⁷ Albert Camus, *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt*, transl. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 16.

This is why efforts to (re)construct the idea of a strong subject should, crucially, begin by moving away from the tendency to reduce agency to resistance and by neutralizing the idea that individual and collective subjecthood should be constructed along either psychoanalytic lines, which consider traumatic events the foundation of subjecthood,²⁸ or Marxist lines, which emphasize the role played by experiences of oppression. It is evident that such approaches tend to strengthen the system, rather than undermine it. What is most important to collective and individual subjecthood, I would argue, is the life force of self-regeneration, which enables becoming and revival, as well as beginning anew, resilience and critical hope.

What is also important to the project of (re)constructing a strong subject is rethinking ideas of essence and essentialism (as well as substance) within this new context. I am a neo-essentialist, yet I have no intention of declaring here supposed truths about “eternal and unchanging” human nature or about the biological essence of being a woman or man that results in them being ascribed particular gender roles. The sense of essentialism that I propose here assumes a need for essence (looking to the future, it could be stated: an even stronger essence that is perhaps even of a different nature to the kind that has been posited in existing concepts of subjecthood) but without any absolutist claims. It is thus *a particular* essence, one that is created in specific situations and relations (meaning that it is relational). This kind of essence is changeable but even so possesses the potential to “solidify” subjecthood.²⁹ It transcends cultural determinism, recognizing on the one hand the biological aspects of subjecthood, while on the other hand emphasizing the role of self-creation – thus coming close to Sartre’s existentialism. The individual is, after all, rooted in

²⁸ It is worth considering at this point the effects of the humanities of traumatophilia that often comes to the defence of victims. Andreas Huyssen associates the emergence of the discourse of trauma with the subject losing faith in his/her agency (the belief that she/he exerts influence on realities and the course of events). This, in turn, he argues, is connected to the decline of the utopian dimensions of politics. Huyssen thus terms the trauma discourse of the 1990s “the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism.” (Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 8.) I perceive in the promotion of trauma discourse a threat not only to the subject but also to the idea of democracy in general. Democracy, after all, is based in the idea of participation and the belief that particular individuals and communities (by participating, for example, in elections, protests against the authorities, etc.) are capable of influencing the course of events. What this presupposes, then, is a subject who is active and influences changes. What vision of the future does the traumatocentric perspective offer? Does it not in fact bind us to the gothic aura of postmodernism with its apocalyptic visions of the end and death, while also affirming the negativity that manifests itself in the prevalence of concepts such as trauma, victim, void, silence and absence (and more recently, in the context of discussions of the Anthropocene, catastrophe and apocalypse)? Does it not thus favour a vision of a subject that is incapable of surviving limit situations and resisting oppressive systems, while also undermining the vision of the world that many of us still believe in?

²⁹ While I am happy to employ the concept of “strategic essentialism,” as developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Uma Narayan, the numerous voices criticising this stance mean that it is necessary to apply it cautiously. See: Emily S. Lee, “The Epistemology of the Question of Authenticity, in Place of Strategic Essentialism,” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 258–279.

both culture and biology,³⁰ as well as in him/herself. These three aspects are, of course, closely entwined and they should be mutually balanced when considering the idea of endowing the subject with agency. Likewise, I am not inclined to draw on arguments stemming from constructivism in order to undermine the necessity of the search for foundations. Noting the critique of fundamentalism outlined by, among others, Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish, it is worth considering which “stabilizers” and points of reference we require in order to construct our own subjecthood (and to conduct research): do they not include autonomous individuality, God, ancestors’ spirits, goodness, love, science, reason and justice?³¹ Even if what I propose here is effectively the subject-in-making and the “relational” subject, cultural constructivism, with its slogans of fluidity and constant historicization, can nevertheless be useful during a period of relative stabilization of the subject. But for many, cultural constructivism is insufficient during times of crisis and catastrophe. What is required in such situations is both elasticity and a solid foundation that enables the individual to reconstruct themselves.

There is absolutely no intention in the above to glorify the kind of strong subject associated with the “superman”, to affirm the cult of leadership, the survival of the fittest and the alienation of those who are weaker, or any other similar such ideas. Equally, it is not my intention to neutralize the role of the state in providing welfare in favour of the idea of subjects fending for themselves. What I am wary of, though, is the idea of tolerating or promoting the idea of a demanding, egocentric subject who has no interest in working on improving him/herself while also proving incapable of making sacrifices for others. The sense of educating and shaping subjecthood proposed here (with an emphasis on self-discipline and overcoming individual weaknesses) is based, on the one hand, on the idea of the “virtue epistemology”, and, on the other hand, on developing empathy and empathetic relations with others. In employing the concept of empathy, what I have in mind is not only the ability, long-since established in psychology, to sense the feelings and emotional states of other people (such as joy, sadness, and pain), but – first and foremost – the mirror neurons that neurobiologists in 2010 discovered exist in the human minds (having already established their presence in chimpanzees). These mirror neurons enable the recognition and “reading” of another person’s emotions.³² This dis-

³⁰ I would suggest that it is not worthwhile reviving the constructivist argument that “nature is also culture” and that genes are a cultural construct because such thinking is quite simply fruitless and does nothing to create diverse theories of human subjecthood of the kind that, I believe, we need right now.

³¹ See: Stanley Fish, “Anti-Foundationalism, Theory Hope, and the Teaching of Composition,” in Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary & Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 342–355.

³² Roy Mukamel, Arne D. Ekstrom, Jonas, Kaplan, Marco Iacoboni, Itzhac Fried, “Single-Neuron Responses in Humans During Execution and Observation of Actions,” *Current Biology* 20, no. 8 (2010): 750–756; Pier Francesco Ferrari, Giacomo Rizzolatti, “Mirror Neuron Research: the Past and the Future,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences* vol. 369, 1644 20130169

covery is of fundamental significance to ways of conceiving morality and the ability to shape it. Because mimicry of another person's gestures and emotions plays a key role in this, then imitating positive actions by others and situations involving direct contact with another person acquire greater importance. Empathy can prevent aggression and conflict while encouraging altruism, making it an essential element of survival. As a species, as researchers have shown, we are neurobiologically programmed to create bonds; what is important, however, is to ensure the neurons are triggered appropriately. And this is where education and nurturing comes into play. For individuals today, it is empathy, rather than trauma, that is fundamental to the construction of subjecthood (perhaps even forming its core?). What I have in mind here is not the familiar motto of the "community of suffering" but a general principle of organic sympathy towards various lifeforms. The maturity of the human individual can be measured by the extent of its empathy: the more empathetic a person is towards others (both human and non-human), the more mature he/she is. This maturity also enables responsible decisions, based on empathetic consciousness, to be taken. Aware of what joy or suffering brings others, the individual knows which actions are to be encouraged and which avoided. In a word, to be human means to be a *homo empathicus*.³³

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(2014): 1–4. Daniel Goleman reflects on "social intelligence" and about mirror neurons that connect people, although this ultimately concerns both primates and birds. As an aside, it is also worth mentioning that this opens up interesting ideas that are present in indigenous knowledge on animals and on other non-human lifeforms that can offer lessons to humans. Daniel Goleman, *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights* (Northampton, MA: More Than Sound, 2011).

³³ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization. The Race to Global Consciousness in a World of Crisis* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 9ff. See also: Thomas A. Kohut, *Empathy and the Historical Understanding of the Human Past* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

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