



Code: from information theory to French theory (Book review)

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Code: from information theory to French theory

Geoghegan, Bernard Dionysius

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This book takes the reader on a fascinating journey that begins with the intellectual landscapes of early cybernetics and ends with those of contemporary digital humanities and social media studies. French structuralism and its reception in the US as “French Theory” (Cusset, 2008) is an intermediate step in this journey. This work is an edited version of the doctoral dissertation of its author, Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, a Reader in the History and Theory of Digital Media at King’s College London. The text is a successful genealogy of scientific knowledge in the Foucauldian sense, as it examines the influence of economic capital, particularly philanthropic donations from organisations like the Rockefeller Foundation and the Macy Foundation, on the origin of cybernetics. The book emphasises the influence of this science on psychiatry, linguistics, and other human sciences in the US and in Europe. In fact, the primary strength of *Code* lies in its ability to reconstruct the historical connections between cybernetics and structuralism through the mediation of The mathematical theory of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949) and information theory. As this latter approach is an essential component of information science’s knowledge base, this book is relevant to anyone interested in information research.

The way I have read it, this work is a history of science text with a purpose similar to the classic reference on the topic, *The cybernetics group* by Heims (1991). However, the specific strength of Geoghegan’s work compared with Heims’s monograph is its exploration of the historical relationship between American and French social science. The trustworthiness of Geoghegan’s analysis is bolstered by *Code*’s lengthy bibliography, its sheer quantity of sources mentioned in the endnotes, and the choice of archival material discussed and photographically reproduced for the reader’s benefit. Fascinating and novel is the description of a “cultural Marshall Plan” after World War II, through which the French structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss and other European intellectuals received the support of philanthropic organisations on the other side of the Atlantic. Great attention to detail is also paid when the author portrays other figures, besides Levi-Strauss,

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such as Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, Roman Jakobson, Marcel Mauss, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan. The book is a must-read if one is interested in the intellectual biography of these intellectuals.

In the Introduction, the book is presented as “a somewhat classical exercise of critical theory” in the sense that it aims to reveal the power relations that structure the construction of a system of knowledge” (p. 4). The knowledge in question is information theory’s interpretation of communication as the domain of messages conveyed through codes. Chapter One explores the historical origin of one discipline that has capitalised on conceptualising information as “Shannon information,” namely, cybernetics. Chapter Two focuses on anthropology and psychiatry and turns from the anthropological work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead to its development in psychiatry as the family therapy of the Palo Alto Group—Chapter Three shifts then to linguistics. Chapters Four and Five are, in my view, the most relevant for understanding the relationship between information theory in the US and structuralism on the other side of the Atlantic, in particular, through the influence of Jakobson’s linguistics and the thought of two “French connections:” Lévi-Strauss and Lacan. Regarding Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and the other structuralists that are discussed at length in the book, it could be added that a subtitle *From information theory to structuralism* would have worked better, in my opinion, than *From information theory to French theory* since the book is concerned far more with structuralists than with other names more closely associated with French Theory, for instance, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze. Moreover, the book’s content does not support the aspect of “reception in the US” that goes with the term French Theory (Cusset, 2008). One might wonder if marketing reasons dictated the choice of the title, as sometimes is the case.

Like a good crime novel where the murderer is revealed at the end of the book, it is only in the last chapter that the real intent of the book and its audience are disclosed. Even if this work will enthrall those concerned by the history of either information theory or structuralism (or both), it is, in the end, a genealogy of the field of digital humanities. The reference in the last chapter to Franco Moretti’s concept of distant reading is illuminating in this regard (p. 174). The emphasis on the digital humanities, which is clearer only at the very end, might encourage one to reread the book from the beginning, as I did with great pleasure. The book is not, however, an easy read as it sometimes still has the heavy style of the PhD thesis format more than an editorial product suitable for a broader audience.

Even if the text’s efforts to emphasise the connections between economic power and cultural phenomena are commendable, I sometimes felt that the tone was too polemic and that Geoghegan understated the progressive nature of the thought of some of the scholars he discusses. I am thinking, in particular, of Bateson, who is depicted too emphatically as an anthropologist who takes the side of the colonisers. His role in the development of ecological thinking and the critique of consumerism is not discussed apart from a quick remark to Bateson as “a guru of ecological thinking” (p. 55). The politically progressive nature of cybernetic research is not explored either, and the whole movement is treated as technocratic and politically conservative. In contrast to this claim, an example of the clearly progressive nature of some cybernetic research comes to mind: the collaboration between Stafford Beer and Salvador Allende’s government in Chile. That happened, of course, before Pinochet’s dictatorship managed to terminate both Allende’s government and life and thus also Beer’s Project Cybersyn (Beer, 2002). In other words, sometimes,

the reader may feel that the accusation of “scientism” oversimplifies an otherwise deep analysis. I found the same tendency in Geoghegan’s quick reference to Martin Heidegger, which discharges his thought as an expression of National Socialism (p. 176). The relationship between Heidegger and Nazi Germany is indeed complex, as discussed at length by Pierre Bourdieu (1991).

Finally, this work is overall intellectually well-conceived and aesthetically pleasing, with tantalising images and an overall graphic profile into which much effort has been put. Although fond of e-books, for once, I am glad to possess the print version (courtesy of Duke Press).

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