Matters of Time provides an unorthodox array of perspectives on materialist thought and representation in twentieth-century French intellectual culture. Time is figured as the quintessential revolutionary concept, through key historical moments from Jean Jaurès’ orientation of the socialists at the turn of the century to the inter-generational conflict and politicization of everyday life in May ’68. Essays on dialectics and theories of teleological progress are placed side by side with accounts of the existential turn in Marxist thought in France. Contributions on Heidegger and Sartre inject meditations on human mortality into considerations of a new politics of finitude. The volume also emphasizes the inseparability of aesthetic and political thought for the French avant-gardes: chapters on Sade, Artaud and Jarry place Marx’s theories of production and commodity fetishism into contact with bodily abjection. The manipulation of time in cinema and matter in painting are examined as a testament to the twentieth century as a period of continuing experimental tension between form and signification. Generational futurity is explored through Genet’s spatial representations of filiation and Verlaine’s proto-ecological attunement to nature.

The volume as a whole constructs a necessarily fragmented timeline of the breaks, tensions and antagonisms in twentieth-century French thought, culture and politics, with particular focus on questions of late capitalism and political, intellectual and aesthetic progress and regress.

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Matters of Time
Modern French Identities

Edited by Peter Collier

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Matters of Time

Material Temporalities in Twentieth-Century French Culture
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Introduction: Materialist Temporalities
After the End of History

Finding one of its structural markers in the repeated refrain of The End of History, it becomes clear that the twentieth century was never meant to end. From its very beginning, this span of 100 years was shot through with political and aesthetic vanguards seeking to create a new man or a new society to fulfil the teleological aspirations of progress bequeathed to it from the nineteenth century.

In France, the key figure theorizing these historical developments was Alexandre Kojève. His lecture courses on Hegel’s Phénoménologie d’esprit, held from 1933 to 1939 and published as Introduction à la lecture de Hegel (1947), was attended by, amongst others, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Aron and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The profound influence of these seminal lectures spread beyond this generation, stretching at least to Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. This is how Kojève conceptualized ‘la fin du Temps humain ou de l’Histoire’ during the 1930s:

En fait, la fin du Temps humain ou de l’Histoire, c’est-à-dire l’anéantissement définitif de l’Homme proprement dit ou de l’Individu libre et historique, signifie tout simplement la cessation de l’Action au sens fort du terme. Ce qui veut dire pratiquement:
– la disparition des guerres et des révolutions sanglantes. Et encore la disparition de la Philosophie; car l’Homme ne changeant plus essentiellement lui-même, il n’y a plus de raison de changer les principes (vrais) qui sont à la base de sa connaissance du Monde et de soi. Mais tout le reste peut se maintenir indéfiniment; l’art, l’amour, le jeu, etc., etc.; bref, tout ce qui rend l’Homme heureux. ¹

Kojève here emphasizes that the end of history involves also ‘la disparition de la Philosophie’ – or, by implication, the end of the work of philosophy; work is replaced by ‘l’art, l’amour, le jeu’ and ‘etc., etc.’: ‘bref, tout ce qui rend l’Homme heureux’. If work and the work of philosophy – hence the work of dialectics – have ceased, then the end of history might be thought of as a systemic realization of a state after dialectics. Referring to Kojève as ‘X.’, Bataille writes ‘X. imaginait proche la solution révolutionnaire du communisme’. Unambiguously, for Kojève in the 1930s dialectics was the motor to bring about the end of history; to bring about communism. Retrospectively, however, Bataille adds that Kojève wrongly placed his faith in communism, given ‘les vingt ans qui devaient suivre’. Bataille seems to refer both to the distortion of the communist dream in the repressive Stalinist state, and to the National-Socialists’ attempt to arrest history – metaphorically for a thousand years – by installing a Tausendjähriges Reich. The various kinds of horror unleashed by these projects significantly undermined the hopes of the early 1930s.

Referring to a trajectory of thought from Kojève through Bataille to Derrida, Christopher Nealon comments critically on what he considers a conflation in French theory of: 1) work in the sense of labour; and 2) work in the sense of the philosophical work of the dialectic. Nealon writes, considering Derrida’s Bataille essay ‘From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve’: ‘Philosophy, as the essay unfolds, is “work itself” in the sense that it is a set of operations that compel work, that force the negative to produce meaning and knowledge, and that bustles about breathlessly as it mistakenly thinks it is achieving “knowledge” in the process. “Philosophy” – that is, Hegelian philosophy, Aufhebung, the dialectic – “philosophy”, in this allegory, is a bourgeois’; Christopher Nealon, The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 12–13. Nealon seems to imply that if philosophy is the bourgeoisie, the reality of actual conflicts of labour are made irrelevant in self-perpetuating deconstructive readings against philosophy. Yet the overlap of work and the work of philosophy – as dialectical forms of mediation with matter – does already seem given in Hegel’s master–slave dialectic. The question of whether Bataillean and subsequent post-structuralist oppositions to that system are sufficiently acute in their understanding of the structural politics of capitalism is further addressed below.

The 1950s as the end of discourses of the end of history? Far from it. Chastened by the experience of the war, Bataille endorsed the Marshall Plan, which inaugurated Europe’s economic dependence on America, and Kojève transitioned from believing in communist solutions to believing in the solutions of Western liberal democracy, becoming its bureaucratic functionary. He worked for ‘the French ministry of foreign economic relations and became an architect of the European Community and the GATT system of liberalized trade’; avoiding radical circles, he ‘despised the student rebels of the 1960s’. A witness to the events of May, he would not live to see De Gaulle’s restoration and rappel à l’ordre: Kojève passed away on 4 June 1968. Yet once over this last eruption of revolutionary élan, the liberal capitalism Kojève had helped to construct went from strength to strength, and following the collapse of the USSR from 1989, it finally appeared to know no major obstacles to its global ambitions. Symptomatically, Professor Robert Howse, the source of above account of Kojève’s post-war trajectory, is also a ‘frequent consultant or adviser to government agencies and international organizations such as the OECD, the World Bank, UNCTAD, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Law Commission of Canada and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’, as the biography on his NYU profile states. Kojève’s march through the institutions continued apace, and famously was consecrated when in 1992 Francis Fukuyama presented liberal democracy as *The End of History and the Last Man*. Rather than communism, it was free market capitalism that would provide the teleological end of mankind’s historical progress and the conditions for global peace. Luckily for us, in Kojève’s terms, ‘tout ce qui rend l’Homme heureux’ could now simply be bought! Fukuyama’s account obviously smacks of neo-conservative propaganda, especially given his association with the RAND Corporation think-tank, funded in part

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by the US State department and acting as an official advisor to its armed forces. Yet such triumphalism only articulates crudely and without inhibition the belief that implicitly informs governments across Europe, as well as the EU framework itself: that liberal democracy and free trade capitalism are the best possible systems of global governance, and must never be overthrown. Brutal as this seems, it is also a widely shared belief, even amongst the left: as in the oft-cited quotation, it is now ‘easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagining the end of capitalism’? Fin de partie.

A publication entitled Matters of Time: Material Temporalities in Twentieth-Century French Culture makes sense only insofar as it can develop a conceptual understanding of the twentieth century that goes beyond its descriptive demarcation of a particular sequence of years. The End of History as the century’s refrain conveys simultaneously a strong sense of what was specific to the century and emphasizes that the attempt here is not at all to think of it as a century that is self-contained: it relies heavily on earlier dialectical and teleological trajectories, which made the idea that history could be completed thinkable as such. The centuries preceding it bleed into the twentieth century and, in turn, we might say the twentieth century leaks and bleeds backwards into the centuries preceding it; as history continues, as our lives go on, it is continuously necessary, in a kind of historiographical hermeneutic circle, to re-adjust our understanding not only of what is happening in the present or what could happen in the future, but also of what has happened in the past. To put it polemically: the Holocaust was a massive influence on Darwin. Furthermore, the twentieth century’s oscillations between movements of revolutionary enthusiasm and moments of crisis, reaction, terror or stasis were experienced intellectually and aesthetically as well as historically: one need only think of the artistic avant-gardes before the war, and the intellectual ‘fellow travellers’ such as Sartre after, to gauge the cultural manifestations of such political stakes. This volume attempts, then, to present a ‘meteorology of the times’, taking the measure of moments of confidence and crisis within the context of the

8 For a further discussion of this term, see Adrian May’s chapter in this volume.
emphatic conception of the twentieth century delineated above. Through the twists and turns of the period, it will explore confluences and contrasts between a series of writers, artists, thinkers and events in the context of the development of late capitalism, and hopefully provide some new orientations for a properly materialist thought.

Matters of time: in colloquial speech, it is time and space which are normally uttered in one breath. So much so that these two parameters are often taken as one undifferentiated unity: we are never without either. Politically, however, one could be tempted to make a crude opposition between the two: time is a key concept for socialist thought, revolutionary eruptions and Hegelian dialectics. As Alexandra Paulin-Booth puts it in the opening chapter here, for the left time is an ‘ideological battleground’. On the other hand, in an interview from 2005, Peter Sloterdijk argues, with a tone of woundedness, that in the ‘theory landscape’ there has been a ‘voluntary spatial blindness’. Whilst ‘temporal problems were seen as progressive and cool, the questions of space were thought to be old-fashioned and conservative, a matter for old men and shabby imperialists’. Space, then, can come to stand for a certain political conservatism, especially when tied to ideas of the fixity of national borders, the need to protect our eternally green and pleasant lands (Albion, or la France profonde), and so in addition the desire to keep others at bay. One can see why Sloterdijk is defensive in response to such depictions: his emphasis on rational, calculated self-creation (the self-made man), coupled with a depiction of humans living in small, self-contained immunized Bubbles (2011), has led him to be accused of being ‘the liberal conservative enfant terrible of contemporary German thought’.10

Sloterdijk (often nevertheless labelled the ‘most French of the German philosophers’) also refers explicitly here to the fate of structuralism as a spatial mode of thought that subsequently became associated with repressive, conservative values. In her seminal account of French

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10 Slavoj Žižek, Living in the End of Times (London: Verso, 2010), 236.
culture in the 1950s and 1960s, Kristin Ross polemically argues that rather than providing a radical challenge to contemporary modes of thinking, structuralism retrospectively appears to have been complicit with establishing the hegemonic ideological victory of late capitalism. In her account, ‘[c]apitalist modernization presents itself as timeless because it dissolves beginning and end, in the historical sense, into an ongoing, naturalized process, one whose uninterrupted rhythm is provided by a regular and unchanging world devoid of class conflict.’ Once again, we encounter capitalism as the motor for producing the end of history: in joyfully static movement, we are accelerating our BMWs on our day off. Guy Debord would vigorously agree: rather than a historical, temporal progression, ‘pseudo-cyclical time is the time of consumption of modern economic survival. Preferably, citizens should content themselves with a routine of professional labour and leisurely consumption without end, with the result that ‘daily life continues to be deprived of decision and remains bound, no longer to the natural order, but to the pseudo-nature developed in alienated labour’.

As Ross continues, at the very moment when France was transitioning into ‘American-style mass culture’, structuralism was also promoting ‘the dissolution of the event and of diachronic agency’. Effacing temporal relations, the spatiality of structuralist thought described things as they have eternally been, without providing for the possibilities of change: ‘Rather than theorizing the liquidation of the historical, structuralism enacted and legitimated that liquidation.’ No past, no future: structuralism implied an endless capitalist present.

Ross’s account provides one confluence, and one contrast, with our account of Kojève’s trajectory. She confirms the rise of the cadre, the bureaucratic functionary Kojève would become. The transition to

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14 Ibid. 177.
American liberalism required a new form of management, one predicated on 'the hygienic language of technique and efficiency.'\textsuperscript{15} In 1947, the new École nationale d’administration opened its doors, training the new state employee encouraged to think in terms of statistics, targets and regulations: this ‘bureaucratic growth’ meant that institutions ‘no longer put humans first.’\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{mess} of daily life was cleansed from the administrative apparatus. Ross compares this technical dematerialization with the theorization of the new ‘Structural man’, who was nothing but ‘a disembodied creature, a set of mental processes’: ‘Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it in view of creating the general intelligibility underlying the object; he creates the object’s simulacrum.’\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, this historical moment was also characterized by a compulsive desire to erase the traces of abject materiality and dirty bodies. Attempting to distance itself from its troubled past, newly modernized France witnessed the ubiquitous display of ‘clean bodies’ in the avalanche of soap and detergent commercials flooding the media; these were implicitly placed in opposition to the bodies found in the colonies, structurally abjected as dirty, swarthy, dark, black, unclean. Modern France had no room for the complications of its colonial adventures, and its newfound obsession with cleanliness corresponded with a desire to bury the unhygienic traces of its past, censoring the worst coverage of its ‘dirty war’ in Algeria. Rather than communism or fascism, however, here it had been imperial capitalism that had produced these abjected remainders.

In an intellectual reaction, the 1960s attempted to inject \textit{matter} back into spatial abstractions. Whether dialecticizing transgressive desire to create works provoking a cultural revolution (\textit{Tel Quel}), or assembling micro-political desiring machines to overturn the oedipal territorialization of traditional, conservative values (Deleuze and Guattari), the irruptive potential of matter was pitted against the rigidly conceptual. For a moment, works such as Deleuze and Guattari’s \textit{Anti-Œdipe} (1972),

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 176.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 177.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 161.
\end{itemize}
Lyotard’s *Économie libidinale* (1974) and Baudrillard’s *L’Échange symbolique et la mort* (1976) seemed brimming with revolutionary potential. Concurrently, Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord were turning to material experiences of urban existence to romanticize and politicize everyday life, and the neo-avant-gardes turned either to the manipulation of materiality against mimetic representation, or to organizing eruptive situations, happenings which would disrupt the causal unfolding of time. Matter, then, had rendered space a field of revolutionary potential, rather than a vacuous and immunological bubble. Yet, just as with structuralism, capitalism soon caught up with this newly material post-structuralism: as Boltanski and Chiapello analyse in *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (1999), the language of neo-liberal management was taken straight from Deleuze and Guattari’s toolbox, and the libidinal desires of the newly liberated youth were cleaned up, plastic-wrapped and sold back to them, blunting the radical edge of counter-culture and signalling, once again, the end of avant-garde struggles. In retrospect, capitalism was less shaken than reinforced by the radical novelty of the 1960s. Its ahistorical celebration of matter now seems hopelessly naïve, Lyotard subsequently calling *Économie libidinale* his ‘evil’ book.18 The absence of a genuinely historical or temporal dialecticization of matter proved to be its undoing: the materialism of the 1960s was, put simply, far too joyful, and too little critical. Such a lack is well worth bearing in mind when considering the raft of ‘New Materialisms’ resurging today, which often take texts from this period as their starting point.19

In the 1930s, Bataille had perhaps been more acute. In his incomplete draft letter to Kojève from 1937, Bataille writes: ‘J’imagine que ma vie – ou son avortement, mieux encore, la blessure ouverte qu’est ma vie – à elle seule constitue la réfutation du système fermé de Hegel’.20 The claim is that

18 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 2. Noy’s text provides an excellent account of this period, and the failures of the ‘accelerationist’ moment of thinkers such as Lyotard and Deleuze.

19 For more on ‘New Materialism’ see Jennifer Johnson’s chapter in this volume.