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Obituary

Dominique Lecourt (February 5th, 1944 – May 1st, 2022)

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Dominique Lecourt, a French philosopher and historian of sciences and medicine, passed away on May 1st at 78. Lecourt, an emeritus professor at the *Université Paris Cité*, France, leaves a body of work as voluminous as it is impactful, which formed generations of researchers and guaranteed him, during his lifetime, a prestigious place in the history of contemporary French philosophy. Those who, like us, readers and collaborators of Transversal, are dedicated to the historiography of the sciences know that it is impossible to understand the history of historical epistemology, its definition as an intellectual affiliation, its circulation and reception outside France without referring to Dominique Lecourt's work.

In the mid-1960s, Lecourt was a student of Louis Althusser. The author of *Pour Marx* (1965) was close to Georges Canguilhem and had defended his master's thesis on Hegel under the guidance of Gaston Bachelard. Althusser borrowed the notions of “rupture” and “epistemological break” from Bachelard to legitimize his “scientific” reading of Marx's work. Althusser insisted that his students should be familiar with the work of the author of *Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique*. However, not being able to direct master's dissertations at the *École Normale Supérieure*, he recommended that Lecourt look for Canguilhem at the Sorbonne, with whom he began working in 1967.

Lecourt became internationally recognized after the publication, in 1969, of his master's thesis entitled *L'Épistémologie Historique de Gaston Bachelard*, which had a preface by Canguilhem and was quickly translated into several languages. At the age of 25, it fell to Lecourt to introduce the term *historical epistemology* to the non-French-speaking world. His small book added historical epistemology to the context of debates in history and philosophy of science that revolved around the texts of authors such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Paul Feyerabend.

Following that publication and its translations, Lecourt was frequently called upon to explain the French proposal for interaction between history and philosophy of science, which he initially understood as a good disciple of Althusser. In 1971, he published “La Historia Epistemologica de Georges Canguilhem” as a preface to the Argentine translation of *Le Normal et le Pathologique*. Lecourt's text, also translated into other languages, was decisive in establishing the Bachelard-Canguilhem affiliation in the historiography of sciences. “Gaston Bachelard's epistemology was historical; Georges Canguilhem's history of sciences is epistemological. Two ways of announcing the revolutionary unity that both institute between epistemology and history of science” (Lecourt 1971, XI).

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Also, in this preface, Lecourt explains that he aims to clarify for Spanish-speaking readers what, from a distance, might seem a “paradox”, the encounter between the history of sciences and the theoretical concerns of the “Marxist-Leninist philosophers grouped around Louis Althusser”. This text marks the beginning of particular history in Latin America that must be written as an adventure. The definitions of scientific knowledge and practices proposed by Bachelard and Canguilhem have since then been accepted by many Marxist-oriented researchers who took part quite directly in the struggle against dictatorial regimes on this continent. “As if the question of the foundation of rationality could not be dissociated from the interrogation of the actual conditions of its existence”, to recover a classic formulation of Foucault (2000, 357). It was especially noticeable in the reform of Social Medicine and in the construction of the field of Collective Health in the South American continent, where Canguilhem’s work circulated with more intensity.

Following that first book, Lecourt published other important works on French epistemology and historiography of science, notably: *Bachelard, Épistémologie, Textes Choisis* (1971), *Pour une Critique de l'Épistémologie. Bachelard, Canguilhem, Foucault* (1972) and *Bachelard, le Jour et la Nuit* (1974). It was in the process of publishing the latter that he heard an essential piece of advice from Canguilhem: “from then on, no longer to write about the work of others, but rather to produce my works about which I would have the good fortune or misfortune that others would write. This brief remark has remained engraved in my memory. It took me more than thirty years to transgress this prohibition” (Lecourt 2008, 107).

This advice shows the birth of an authorial work dedicated to themes that remain incredibly - and even frighteningly - current, dealing with ideological aspects (no longer determined by Althusser’s lessons) of the relationship between science and technology in Western societies. Lecourt’s authorial works extends from the famous Lyssenko affair, which he addressed in *Lyssenko, Histoire Réelle d'une "Science Proletarienne"* (1976), through scientific thinking clouded by the spiritual darkness of creationism, in *L'Amérique entre la Bible et Darwin* (1992), to technophobia and our collective and subjective mode of relating to the future and progress, as in *Contre la peur* (1982), *Humain Post-Humain* (2003) and *L'Âge de la Peur: Science, Éthique et Société* (2009).

Lecourt’s work is also characterized by a humanizing and civilizing conception of science, which was that of Bachelard. Lecourt held important public positions in education and science and remained engaged in disseminating knowledge. He was the founder of the *Institut Diderot*, the *Collège International de Philosophie* and the *Centre Georges Canguilhem*, and director of important collections at the PUF, such as the “Nouvelle encyclopédie Diderot” and the “Science, Histoire et Société”, as well as others aimed at the general public, such as “Questions de science”, by Hachette. It is also worth mentioning his encyclopedic vocation, which led him to coordinate the publication of the *Encyclopédie des sciences* (1998), the *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et Philosophie des Sciences* (1999), and the *Dictionnaire de la Pensée Médicale* (2004).

We can say that very few works have helped, literally crossing oceans, to carry an ethos, define a movement of ideas, and consolidate a mode of reading that is as much of the texts as the position of their objects in the world. It is undoubtedly Dominique Lecourt’s case. As we have seen in the various demonstrations in France since the first week of May, his loss is felt by many who were able to closely follow his intellectual work and political actions, which were not always so easy to distinguish. But it is also greatly regretted by those who, from very-very far away, without ever knowing him except through his books, learned valuable and lasting lessons from him.

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