François Châtelet and the Spatial Turn in French Marxist Thought

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The paper

The present paper reconstructs the intellectual constellation around the philosopher François Châtelet in order to retrace the emergence of a spatial turn in French thought in the 1970s. Initially close to neo-Hegelianism and following a galvanising encounter with the writings of Louis Althusser in the mid-1960s, Châtelet grew increasingly frustrated with the epistemological and political strictures of philosophy of history. The ethnological work of his friend Pierre Clastres took on considerable importance, as it simultaneously challenged the state-centred vision of the Hegelians and the Marxist emphasis on the interplay between the various modes of production. With Yves Lacoste, a geographer and colleague of his at the University of Vincennes, Châtelet urged a spatial reorientation of philosophy and a better appreciation of the political potential of geography. These endeavours culminated in the founding of the geography journal Hérodote in 1976, which rapidly gained popularity in French intellectual circles. Finally, it will be shown how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari integrated the geographical vision of Hérodote into their philosophical project, abandoning the “universal history” of Anti-Oedipus in favour of the geographical conception of political thought that animated A Thousand Plateaus and critically engaged Carl Schmitt’s The Nomos of the Earth.