

## COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

# Back to the Future?

Critic Robert Doran traces the roots of contemporary cultural politics.

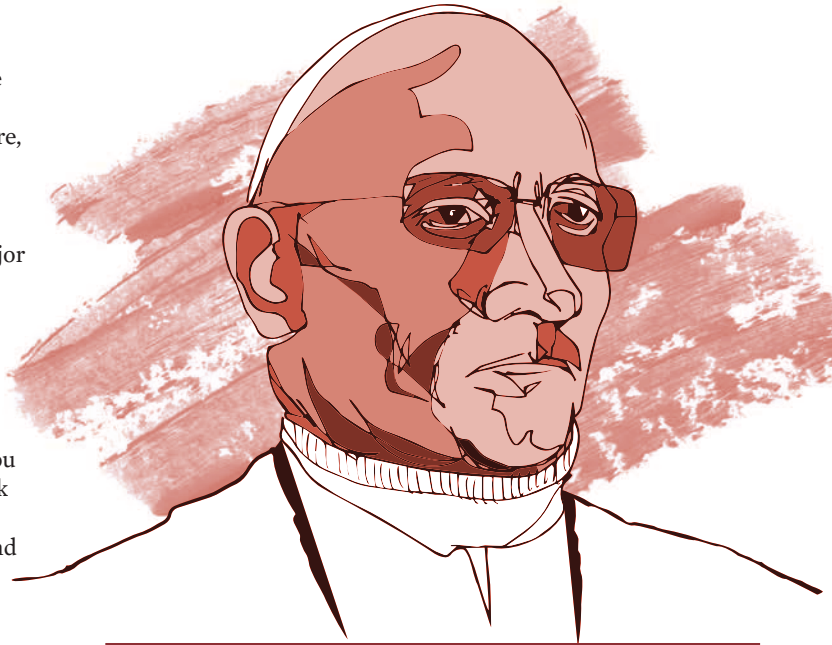
Turned-up collars and acid-washed jeans conjure up the 1980s at a glance. For scholars, the faces of critical theorists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are just as evocative, icons of an intellectual movement that gained momentum through the 1960s and '70s, and then peaked and ebbed in the '80s. But Robert Doran, a professor of French and comparative literature, argues that critical theory has “become synonymous with the ethical and political questions that agitate our times.”

In *The Ethics of Theory: Philosophy, History, Literature* (Bloomsbury, 2017), he investigates how critical theory—a major area of inquiry for humanities scholars and social scientists in the late 20th century—pivoted from a narrow investigation of meaning and text to a broad engagement with culture and politics.

An overview of prominent critical theorists reveals the breadth of their interests. “A lot of people think of theory as a kind of toolbox” for scholarship, he says. “You take this and you take that [mode of analysis]—you take whatever seems to work for you. But these ideas came at a particular time and have a particular meaning. You can’t just take them out of context, and that’s what I try to rectify, to some extent, in this book.”

In his book, Doran explores the influence of several key figures in critical theory. Here’s a look at some of them.

—KATHLEEN MCGARVEY



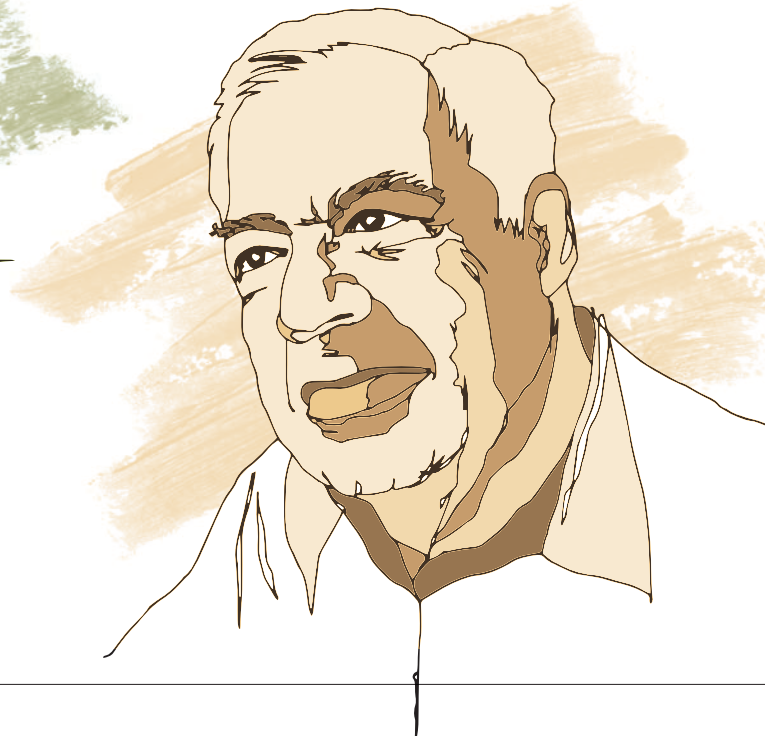
## Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

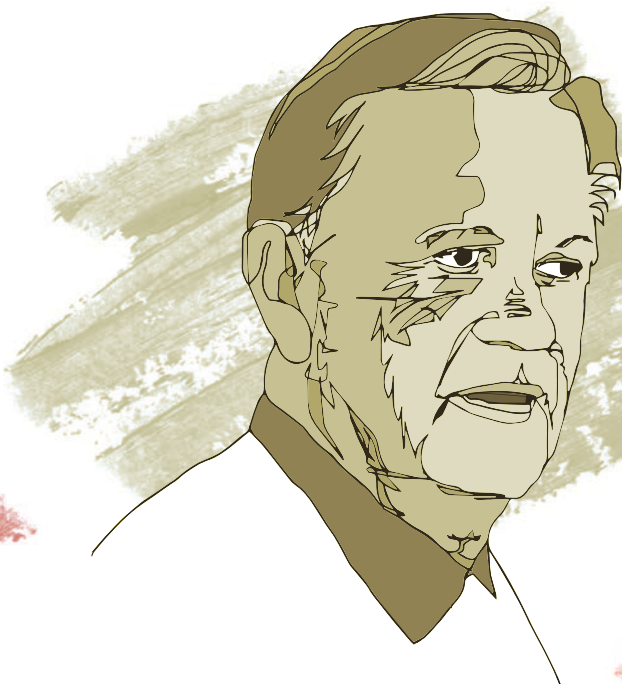
An important figure for structuralist and poststructuralist thought, French philosopher and historian of ideas Foucault investigated the ways in which seemingly scientific thought actually expressed socially contingent commitments. Among his best-known works are *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the three-volume *History of Sexuality* (1976–1984).



## Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)

An academic superstar whose fame carried him even into popular culture, French-Algerian philosopher Derrida was the primary founder of deconstruction, a method of critical analysis rooted in the instability of meaning in a text. The most influential of his many works is *Of Grammatology* (1967).





### Hayden White (1928–)

The author of *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), American theorist of history White argues that history writing is in kinship with literature—both rely on the art of narrative for meaning. White is currently a professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz, having recently retired from the position of professor of comparative literature at Stanford University. White was a member of the University of Rochester faculty from 1958 to 1968.

### Gayatri Spivak (1942–)

Deconstructionist Spivak translated Derrida's *Of Grammatology* into English, with a deeply influential introductory essay, in 1976. Now a professor of English and the cofounder of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University, Spivak was born and raised in India before earning her doctorate in comparative literature at Cornell. She helped to create the field of postcolonial studies with her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"; other works include *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) and *Other Asias* (2005). She's also the author, with Judith Butler, of *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007).



### Judith Butler (1956–)

In her most famous book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), philosopher Butler argues that gender is performative, created by speech and behavior whose repetition gives the impression of an underlying nature. A member of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, Butler is also the author of several books, including *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), and *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012).

### Richard Rorty (1931–2007)

American pragmatist philosopher Rorty is best known for his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). He rejected the concerns of traditional analytic philosophy—a philosophical movement based on applying principles of logic—and, like other critical theorists, argued that philosophy and science can't claim access to a reality unmediated by language and perception. Other major works by Rorty include *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989).

