

LA FRAGILITÉ DES LIMITES

Une lecture de la critique de la modernité chez Alain Finkielkraut

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Akademisk avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i franska vid Göteborgs universitet, som med tillstånd av humanistiska fakultetens dekanus kommer att offentligens försvaras onsdagen den 13 december 2023, kl. 09.00, i sal C350, Humanisten, Renströmsgatan 6, Göteborg



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

Abstract

Ph.D. dissertation at University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2023

Title *La Fragilité des Limites – une lecture de la critique de la modernité chez Alain Finkielkraut*

English title *The Fragility of Limits, a reading of Alain Finkielkraut's critique of modernity*

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Language: French, with a Swedish summary

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Keywords: Finkielkraut, modernity, limits, literature, critique of modernity Common world, Human Plurality, egalitarianism, private-public, particularism, universalism

ISBN 978-91-8069-516-9 (print); 978-91-8069-515-2 (pdf)

For over forty years Alain Finkielkraut has been part of debates that have structured, and sometimes divided, public and intellectual life in France. He is an intellectual who arouses controversy, disapproval and admiration. The aim of this thesis is to go beyond these normative considerations and propose a hermeneutic analysis of his work. We argue that the question of limits is a constant feature of his thinking, and his conception of limits is crucial for understanding his critique of modernity. Limits, in their temporal and spatial dimensions, structure the relationship between the Old and the New, ensure the durability of the *Common World*, and delineate the public and the private sphere, thus ensuring both the separation and the bond between the Peoples of the common world. For this reason, Part I identifies limits in their various forms in Finkielkraut's thought and focuses on his “negative” critique and sheds light on how his conception of limits shapes his critique of the contemporary world. Part II looks at Finkielkraut's vision of literature, which the philosopher sees as a counterweight to ideology. We show that literature constitutes for him both an epistemological and an ethical exploration. The *epistemological exploration* refers to the idea that literature is a source of knowledge: the knowledge of the particular and the unforeseeable, specific to the human condition. It differs from the common philosophical concept in that it is not aimed at the general but at individual lives. The *ethical exploration* of, and through, literature means that it enables us to move beyond subjectivity and understand other experiences, thereby broadening the horizon of understanding. In this sense, we identify how the novel, in its Finkielkrautian conception, offers the possibility of accounting for the plurality of human beings. Part III focuses on Finkielkraut's “positive critique” and highlights what Finkielkraut advocates as necessary for the human condition, a human condition that he believes depends on both the Old and the New, on an alliance between universalism and particularism, and on the combination of freedom and culture.