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CLOSING DOWN THE SOCIAL: BAUDRILLARD'S CHALLENGE TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

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Until a few years ago, the work of the French social philosopher Jean Baudrillard was relatively unknown to social scientists in the United States outside a small circle of persons interested in contemporary European cultural criticism. Among American sociologists in particular—apart from those whose first inclination was to view anything emerging from the current intellectual climate in France with some suspicion—the mention of his name was unlikely to produce a response. Today, recent translations into English of a selection of Baudrillard's key texts and interviews are changing this situation somewhat. In 1988 (Baudrillard 1988a), an important compilation of selected writings edited by Mark Poster appeared. And the publication by a major press of his book *America* (1988b)—a diary of critical reflections on his travels in the United States which has a surrealistic resemblance to the work of de Toqueville a century and a half ago—will certainly gain him a wider audience, although its general reception by mainstream sociologists in this country will not, I think, be sympathetic. Nor will Baudrillard's only self-proclaimed sociological work, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983b), which he cites elsewhere as his effort to put an "end to the social, or at least the concept of the social," win him much favor among true believers (cf. Baudrillard 1987, p. 84). The latter will probably dismiss such remarks out of hand. This, however, would be unfortunate for beyond being merely provocative many of Baudrillard's views on contemporary society, culture and social theory are both original and incisive. As a whole they offer an alternative vision of modern life that demands a closer reading.

Baudrillard's relative obscurity among social scientists has, on the other hand, been offset by his rapidly growing popularity in dissident, if typically apolitical, circles in America and abroad. There is more than a

touch of irony in this development. For one who is deeply disaffected by the commodification of images in the modern mass media, Baudrillard has himself become something of a fashionable commodity these days. He has served as an editor and contributor to *ArtForum*, perhaps the most visible, if antiseptic, American periodical that has emerged to document the modern art scene. His ideas appear regularly both in the underground press and in academic journals devoted to cultural politics. And when he appeared some months ago in the pages of *Rolling Stone* one could truly say that Baudrillard had arrived in America.

My purpose here is not to examine the irony of Baudrillard's appeal to the "radical chic" element of American society, except, however, to note that his status as a cultural phenomenon of perhaps passing interest now threatens to overshadow his more lasting contribution to the critique of contemporary social theory. Admittedly this prospect does not appear to concern Baudrillard who, rather than trying to rescue himself from such a fate, self-consciously practices what he and fellow traveler Paul Virilio refer to as an "art of disappearance,"—of creating a "theoretical void" for others to fall into while he himself is "forgotten" (cf. Virilio 1980; Virilio 1983, p. 84; Baudrillard 1987, pp. 128–129). Baudrillard never asks that we take him or his ideas seriously, and in public appearances he seems rather bemused about all the attention he receives.¹

In this essay, I want to bring Baudrillard's theoretical work to the attention of American sociologists who are perhaps

¹ In a brief encounter I once had with Baudrillard, I asked him precisely if he thought his ideas should be taken seriously. He replied no, but with a wink of his eye and a laugh whispered to me to keep it our secret. I had to assume his remark wasn't meant to be serious and don't feel that I am violating a confidence by revealing it here.

unfamiliar with his ideas. My general aim is therefore more expository than critical, although I shall attempt to defuse what I think are some common critical reactions to Baudrillard along the way. This is not to say that his reflections on society and social theory are immune to criticism—far from it. Toward the end of the essay I shall raise some of my own reservations. But I am both familiar and sympathetic with enough of Baudrillard's claims to know that any criticism of his work based on conventional sociological premises is likely to misfire.²

Instead, I want to examine the reasons behind Baudrillard's main challenge to sociologists, that is to say, his rejection of the concept of the social and his subsequent abandonment of sociological analysis and critique. I wish to do so in a manner that locates his work as a response to more traditional concerns of Continental and American social theory, particularly as both a radical intensification and closure of the project of marking society as a legitimate field of scientific investigation—a project which occupied Durkheim at the close of the nineteenth century. In doing this, I must also admit that while my own intention is to expose Baudrillard's thought to a broader audience in the discipline, it is quite likely that Baudrillard himself would remain relatively indifferent to such a project.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE SOCIAL

Although Baudrillard, who at the time of this writing is approaching his sixtieth birthday, holds a chair in sociology at the University of Paris, X (Nanterre)—one of the major sites of student resistance during the events of May 1968—it is clear that he does not now (and perhaps never did) think of himself as a sociologist in any conventional sense:

If I ever dabbled with anything in my theoretical infancy, it was philosophy more

² A special form of critique seems to be required to counter Baudrillard's substantive claims, one that can deal with what has been called the "objective irony," deliberate ambivalence, and even indifference that mark a good portion of his later work. In the last section of this essay, I shall return to this point.

than sociology. I don't think at all in those terms. My point of view is completely metaphysical. If anything, I'm a metaphysician, perhaps a moralist, but certainly not a sociologist. The only "sociological" work I can claim is my effort to put an end to the social, to the concept of the social (Baudrillard 1987, p. 84).

The work Baudrillard refers to in this passage is *In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities . . . or the Death of the Social* (1983b), a collection of four short essays on mass culture, the concept of the social, the electronic media, and terrorism. Baudrillard's notion of the "social" cannot be precisely defined, although the general way in which he employs the term is fairly clear. For reasons essentially having to do with economy of style, he nominalizes the adjectival form of the word as a convenient gloss for an entire range of key terms in the social scientific lexicon—social structure, social relation, social class, social institution, social exchange, social interaction, social theory, etc.—which taken together with related concepts comprise the master discourse on society that has structured Western thought for nearly two hundred years. I shall have more to say on this later.

While I cannot entirely agree with Baudrillard's assessment that *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* is his only text to explore themes with sociological relevance,³ it is the only one that consistently challenges both the possibility and relevance of sociological analysis at any length. In this work, Baudrillard radically denies the possibility of sociology by way of an argument which claims that the social field, i.e., the web of social relationships conceived as the empirical ground and reality principle for a uniquely sociological enterprise, is in the process of collapsing into an undifferentiated and homogenous "mass"⁴—a mass which is itself the product

³ In particular, cf. the collected essays in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), written in the period of the late 60s to early 70s, in which Baudrillard critically examines a number traditional categories in sociology and political economy—social class, use value, ideology, the mass media, etc.

⁴ "Mass" is another of Baudrillard's terms which is impossible to define precisely. He does claim, although not always consistently, that he is not referring to the conventional meaning of the term in critical social

of a social process yet can no longer be identified with any particular social subject or object (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 5). What remains of the social field today, if anything, is for Baudrillard purely simulated, in part the outcome of a cultural leveling effect created by the rapid deployment of modern information technologies. The result, claims Baudrillard, is that the foundational terms of sociology—"society," the "social," and the "social relationship"—can no longer serve any purpose since they no longer serve to designate or analyze anything. Sociology has become at best superfluous and at worst irrelevant for understanding the contemporary fragmentation of the social field, a fragmentation which absorbs any sociological attempt to recapture or restore the meaning it once might have had:

... if the social is both destroyed by what produces it (the media, information) and reabsorbed by what it produces (the masses), it follows that its definition is empty, and that this term which serves as universal alibi for every discourse, no longer analyses anything, no longer designates anything. Not only is it superfluous and useless ... it conceals that it is only abstraction and residue, or even simply an *effect* of the social, a simulation and an illusion (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 66).

Further,

Sociology can only depict the expansion of the social and its vicissitudes. It survives only on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 4).

I shall deal with Baudrillard's "hypothesis"

theory, viz., the working classes. Similar to his use of "the social," "mass" often functions as a gloss, and occasionally as a punning device, for a number of related concepts within the social sciences—mass culture, mass society, etc. The primary connotation of the term, however, appears to be physical, as when Baudrillard speaks elliptically of the "black hole" of the mass which absorbs all the energy of the social. The images Baudrillard often wishes to convey with the term are those of randomness, implosiveness, fragmentation, and entropy. Distinguishing between all these different possible senses requires, needless to say, close attention to context.

of the death of the social at greater length below. For now, I shall only note that passages like this—and there are many of them interspersed throughout this text and others—are almost certain to discourage a great number of American sociologists from reading any further. Baudrillard's style, particularly that which characterizes most of his work after 1976, presents the first and most difficult obstacle for anyone more accustomed to the somewhat dry linguistic conventions of Anglo-American social theory. Rarely does he take the time to define his terms—the social, mass, disappearance, etc.—with any degree of precision or construct detailed arguments in support of his position. His mode of expression, which generally reflects current practice in French post-structuralist thought, is intentionally elliptical, declarative, replete with poetic allusions, and marked by abrupt transitions. As Mark Poster (1988, p. 7) has noted, Baudrillard has a tendency to simply proclaim his insights and make light of apparently contradictory conclusions which can be drawn from his remarks. I would add, however, he does this intentionally, with full awareness of what he is doing.

Perhaps these are serious criticisms, but we need to move beyond them as they do little to advance our understanding of Baudrillard's overall project. A close reading of Baudrillard's texts immediately reveals both his theoretical sophistication and the value of his contribution to the current discourse on the culture of modern post-industrial societies. Baudrillard's reflections on the contemporary atomization and leveling of social life are deeply rooted in a long tradition of social and critical theory. Without claiming to minimize either the originality of his ideas or substantive differences among critical sociological perspectives, his work resonates with themes that run parallel to more than a century of social thought on the negative impacts of Western modernization—from Marx's critique of alienation and commodification, through Durkheim's study of anomie, Weber's "iron cage" of bureaucracy and the disenchantment of the modern world, Adorno's fragmentation of culture, Habermas's colonization of the

lifeworld, Foucault's end of Man, and Bataille's notions of a general economy of excess and the contemporary devaluation of inner experience. At the same time, however, Baudrillard breaks away from the productivist and subjectivist imagery which infuses much of this critical tradition (Baudrillard 1975; 1988a, pp. 128–132) in favor of an analysis of the circulation of signs and “consumption of meaning” which accompanies the historical development of the modern mass media (cf. Baudrillard 1968, pp. 255ff.; 1981, pp. 29–62, 143–163, 164–185; 1983b, pp. 95–109; 1988a: pp. 29–56, 1988c, pp. 11–27). Although others before him have focused critically on the role of the popular media and its truncation of meaningful experience (cf. Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1987, pp. 120–167), Baudrillard has abandoned theoretical critique of the culture industry—in both its neo-Marxist and subjectivist forms—for a complete, if metaphysical, immersion in the object of critique. Today, Baudrillard's writing on the media reflects more his seduction by the asociality and meaninglessness of a modern world rendered “hyperreal” through televised images—news events, advertising, documentaries and sit-coms—than a concern for exposing the social forces of production hidden under the ideology of the mass culture industry.⁵ Simultaneously, he rejects that tradition of critical theory which translates the problem of modernity into a language of the desiring subject. With

Baudrillard, an analysis of the object which seduces has displaced not only the analysis of desire, but the entire battery of subjective concepts—need, lack, and want—to which it has been tied at one time or another. An adequate grasp of the cultural dynamics of post-industrial society is no longer achievable through a critique of production or desire. For Baudrillard, what is required for this is an understanding of seduction and its subversive logic:

Seduction is the world's elementary dynamic. Gods and men were not separated by the moral chasm of religion: they continually played the game of mutual seduction; the symbolic equilibrium of the world is founded on these relations of seduction and playfulness. All this has changed significantly for us, at least in appearance. For what has happened to good and evil, to the true and the false, to all these great distinctions which we need to decipher and make sense of our world? All these terms, torn asunder at the cost of unbounded energy, are ready at a moment to extinguish one another, and collapse *to our greatest joy*. Seduction hurls them against one another, and unites them beyond meaning, in a paroxysm of intensity and joy (Baudrillard 1988c, p. 59).

Baudrillard believes that an analysis of seduction, which requires a shift in theoretical perspective from subject to object, enables us to more adequately comprehend the cultural dynamic of late capitalist societies, i.e., the obscene fascination with consumer goods, media images, and speed. For Baudrillard, contemporary culture is marked by its preference for extremes. We no longer live in a moral order dominated by the dialectical opposition of values but by the demand for value intensification. Truth is no longer opposed to falsity, reality to appearance, the beautiful to the ugly, nor the social to the antisocial. What fascinates modern man, and what finds its support in the hi-tech, digitalized world of post-industrial consumer society, is electronic simulation (television, which for us has become more true than the true; computer models, more real than the real), fashion (more beautiful than the beautiful), catastrophe (more eventful than the event) and the experience of fragmentation and indeterminacy itself (“the mass”—more social

⁵ Baudrillard's early works dating from the 1960s do represent an attempt to extend Marx's critique of the commodity form to the exchange of signs within a system of social discrimination and prestige (cf. Baudrillard 1981, pp. 29–62, 130–142, 143–163). He sets out to accomplish this through the development of a systematic theory of consumption and its logic in class societies, calling to mind Thorstien Veblen's seminal analysis of the leisure class. Nevertheless, in these essays Baudrillard rejects both the functionalist overtones in neo-Marxian theory which persist from Marx's own reification of the category of use-value and the conventional structuralist analysis of the sign which derives originally from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and which arbitrarily separates the latter into two distinct poles, signifier and signified. For Baudrillard, both Marxism and structuralism are implicated in and supportive—i.e., they become “alibis”—of the very cultural logic they attempt to comprehend and critique.

than the social) (Baudrillard 1988a, pp. 185–188). The ecstatic fascination with extremes, Baudrillard argues, marks the essential immorality and wasteful excess of a culture caught up in the delirium of random change and saturated with information to the point of implosion, where sexuality spirals into pornography, vision into obscenity, and the sense of history and tradition is lost in the intoxication of the moment. However, even as the pace of contemporary culture speeds up, the paradoxical price of this acceleration is an increasing sense of entropy, stasis, and the accumulation of waste—the faster we go, the less it seems we go anywhere. For Baudrillard, the reaction to all this is a frenzied attempt to redeem a use-value and a meaning for a mode of life (work, communication) that has been rendered both useless and meaningless. He compares the trajectory of present society with the irreversible growth of a cancerous cell in which all attempts to control the process of decay only result in intensifying it until the hypertrophy of culture and social life finally exhausts itself, collapsing from its own weight and inertia—the death of the Social (and one might add the Political and the Historical) along with the great meta-narratives which have supported them throughout the course of Western modernization (Baudrillard 1988a, p. 189; cf. also Lyotard 1984).

Given Baudrillard's claim about the irreversibility of this dynamic, his declarations on the present trajectory of consumer society are essentially fatalistic. His fatalism, however, never lapses into simple pessimism or passive nihilism. Armed with a Nietzschean *amor fati* and succumbing to his own logic of seduction, Baudrillard revels in the very process which, by his own admission, he sees as so deadly.

This ambivalent attitude to the present, which seems on the surface to preclude any form of active political resistance, has been the major source of Baudrillard's hostile reception from a number of critics who might otherwise be sympathetic to his view of late capitalist economies. To this must be added his notable turn away from neo-Marxist forms of critique with the publication of his book *The Mirror of Production* (1975), which cleanly severed him from the

political agenda of the new left. At times, he has taken what appear to be overtly conservative positions—his remarks on the nuclear arms race, for instance, often sound similar to those made by the supporters of deterrence policies over the last forty years—that nuclear armaments and the threat of mutual annihilation by the super-powers have made war less likely. Yet, in fact, Baudrillard is making a claim here that is anything but supportive of a half century of Cold War escalation in the name of deterrence, policies which from all indications now seem to have reached a crucial turning point. Rather, he voices his concern that de-escalation of the nuclear arms race (a popular position today in conservative as well as left-liberal political circles) will only re-establish a setting for war by redeeming a use-value for these weapons which at present they no longer have (Baudrillard 1988a, p. 190–191). Because Baudrillard takes such positions, it is easier to understand how leftist critics like Jurgen Habermas have been able to mislabel as “conservative” the anti-modernist movement in France,⁶ with some justification might claim Baudrillard as a member (Habermas 1981, pp. 13–14). These debates have been fully aired in other places, and although I shall note my disagreement with Habermas's assessment, it is not my intention to address this argument further here (cf. Huyssen 1984; Huyssen 1982; Jameson 1984; Habermas 1984; Habermas 1987; Ross 1985; Rorty 1985; Fraser 1985; Fraser 1984; Foster 1984). Baudrillard's apparent fascination with a civilization he sees spiraling out of control is ironic but expresses no satisfaction with the current state of affairs other than that ambivalent thrill of anticipation which might be derived from the promise of its immanent collapse.

THE DEATH OF THE SOCIAL

Baudrillard therefore does not mourn the disappearance of the social; he is not, to

⁶ A movement which in fact has more internal differences than similarities but has been associated with the works of Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, and others having more or less direct links to the events in Paris during May 1968.

borrow an image from Michel Foucault, a "sad" militant, (i.e., one who confronts the nihilism of modern life passively and without a keen sense of irony and humor) (Foucault 1977, p. xiii). Rather, he takes the end of the social as his point of departure, invigorated by what he calls the "desert-like" ambience of contemporary mass culture, particularly in the United States, which, he notes, in a very real sense represents an achieved Utopia in the eyes of itself and much of the world (Baudrillard 1988b, pp. 75ff). For Baudrillard, traditional Marxian and neo-Marxist theories of class divisions in capitalist economies are useless for analyzing modern information-based societies where consumerism and cheap pleasures blunt the development of radical consciousness. The potential for revolutionary change—and it is clear that Baudrillard no longer holds out any hope for revolution of the Marxist variety in the West—must be located within radically changed conditions which today border on mass political indifference. Conventional critical concepts, he claims, are inadequate for illuminating these conditions. In any case, there is nothing at all to be gained by looking back nor, for that matter, to the future. The focus of analysis, rather, must remain rigorously fixed on the present.

If, for Baudrillard, the critical concepts of the left have lost their utility, this applies even more to the concept of "the social." As a theoretical construct, it reveals nothing essential about present conditions while concealing the very absence of sociality in mass "society." Baudrillard claims that the "social" has never admitted of an exact theoretical formulation. Its abstract depiction—whether in terms of communication, labor, exchange, ideology, power, or value—is neither clear nor unequivocal. Nor are the more concrete sociological categories for which Baudrillard employs "the social" as a kind of shorthand expression—class, status, institution—any less conceptually muddled. Their historical significance is always reversible. For instance, it is equally correct to say that the growth of modern institutions and structured inequalities has contributed as much to the destruction of social relations as

to their expansion (Baudrillard 1983b, pp. 65–66).

In *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, Baudrillard suggests three "hypotheses" to account for the end of the social (as both master discourse and historical event). These are not hypotheses in the conventionally accepted sense of that term; they are not, in other words, propositions capable of being tested by an appeal to positive facts about society. Baudrillard has never subscribed to a verificationist/positivist model of truth which supports the production of objective knowledge in the social sciences. Rather, he adopts a radical perspectivism having some resemblance to phenomenological methods of inquiry—his "hypotheses" function on the order of imaginary examples designed to support the possibility of his claim that the social realm (society, the social relation) has disappeared. No hypothesis can claim more "truth" than another since everything depends on one's perspective understanding of the "social," the meaning of which cannot be fixed. For Baudrillard, the diversity of perspectives on the social opens a number of strategic options for explaining its mode of disappearance. Thus, his first hypothesis claims that the social has never existed, and that the concept of the social has never been more than a simulation, a delusion. His second hypothesis posits an "ecological" limit at which the productive extension of social relations exhausts (in effect, kills) itself in the piling up of dead labor, dead languages, and "terrorist bureaucracies." His final hypothesis claims that the social has become a model of itself, a pure "simulacrum" no longer distinct from the reality it claims to represent (what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreality" of the social). Since none of these is likely to be intuitively clear to the majority of sociologists, I will briefly examine each in the context of more traditional debates within the discipline.

Three Hypotheses

- 1) *The social has basically never existed.* There has never been any "social relation." Nothing has ever functioned socially. . . . there has never been anything but *simulation*

of the social and the social relation. In which case there is no point dreaming about a "real" sociality . . . this just hypostatizes a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1983b, pp. 70–71).

It is possible, according to Baudrillard, that what social science takes for granted as the factual status of society and the social relation has never been anything more than a simulation and a delusion. For Baudrillard, the term "simulation" describes an essential dynamic element of modern mass cultures. Abstractly, it refers to the reproduction (model, copy, map) of a state of affairs which simultaneously masks the absence of the state of affairs it claims to represent (cf. Baudrillard 1983a, pp. 11ff.). A simulation makes a claim to be something it is not, distinguishing it from simple feigning or dissimulation, which by contrast claims not to be something it in fact is. Confining himself to the cultural level of analysis, Baudrillard provides a number of interesting and creative examples of simulation: "staged" television documentaries, computer models, cheap imitation consumer goods, pop art (à la Warhol), Disneyland, the traveling King Tut exhibit, wilderness "preserves," etc., and while there are many others throughout Baudrillard's work, I shall leave it to the reader's imagination and a perusal of his texts to come up with more.

As we have come to expect from Baudrillard, however, the matter is more complicated. There are two distinct types of simulation for Baudrillard.⁷ In the first type, the reality principle which makes possible a distinction between a state of affairs—notwithstanding its absence—and its representation remains intact. In the second type the reality principle itself dis-

appears; simulation winds up "mistaking" reality with its reproduction. Better, rather than simple reproduction (or even reduplication), what is involved in later stages of simulation is the perfect substitution of signs of the real for the real itself—the real, in other words, in simulation is elevated to the status of a copy without an original.⁸

In claiming that the "social" is simulated—that its reality principle is now somehow placed in doubt—Baudrillard raises an issue that has some affinity with the old reification debate in the social sciences.

The challenge to the reification of the concept of the "social"—or, more accurately, "society"—was sounded no sooner than an objective realm of social facts in need of scientific investigation was posited by the founders of sociology in the nineteenth century. Although Comte is often given credit here, it was Durkheim who, in *Rules of Sociological Method*, most systematically developed the position that sociology must have "an object all its own," a "reality which is not in the domain of the other sciences." The possibility of the whole of sociology, he claimed, was given in "our fundamental principle, the objective reality of social facts (faits sociaux)" (Durkheim [1985] 1950, p. 19). Durkheim directed sociological attention to a variety of empirical phenomena which might qualify as social facts—population distributions and movements, channels of communication, forms of habitation, institutionalized norms, currents of opinion, and collective representations ("the ways a group conceives of itself in relation to the objects which affect it"). Social facts, for Durkheim, taken together constituted both a moral order existing independently from

⁷ These two types of simulation correspond to specific historical phases which mark a difference in the logic and function of "images." For Baudrillard, it is the third phase which inaugurates the space of simulation proper, while the fourth marks its perfection.

" . . . the successive phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of a basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1983a, p. 11).

⁸ When Krushchev came to America thirty years ago, one thing he most desired to see was Disneyland, which had become something of a stereotyped image of the American way of life for foreign visitors. Perhaps the best way of understanding Baudrillard is to say that, for him, America is Disneyland (childish, fantastic, imaginary, hyperreal): "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of the 'real' America, which is Disneyland. . . [the latter] presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of . . . simulation (Baudrillard 1983a, p. 25).

and external to individuals, and an objective order open to empirical social research. Facts of this kind, he claimed, could not adequately be explained by reference to individual states of consciousness—only other social facts could fulfill this function. The concept of “society,” as every student of Durkheim has memorized, refers to a self-enclosed system, a reality *sui generis*, generating itself out of itself and capable of exercising a moral constraint on individual behaviour (Durkheim [1985] 1950, p. 19).

In the United States, the pragmatist and interactionist schools of sociology brought the most systematic charges of reification against Durkheim and his disciples’ suggestion of an objective realm of social facts. Some of these charges we now know were overblown; Durkheim, in his own time, was already conscious that others might accuse him of hypostasizing society and denied, albeit with recourse to often ambiguous assumptions, that this was necessarily implied in his theoretical system (cf. Durkheim [1893] 1933, p. 350). These issues are by now too familiar to require further mention here, except to note that even in its critique of reification, the interactionist school itself never intended to abandon, at least in principle, the reality of society, which would have amounted to jeopardizing its own claim to be an empirical science (cf. Blumer 1969, pp. 47–49). Rather, it claimed only that social relations in the form of meaningful symbolic exchanges were *productive* of social reality, and that the latter was best understood as a process, and not simply as a collection of brute facts given to empirical sociological analysis. That social relations (as communicative encounters or symbolic interaction) might themselves be simulated, and thus in some sense unreal, is something that could not be taken seriously by the interactionist school without radically undermining its own foundations.

For Baudrillard, on the other hand, if the social (including now the social relation) has never existed, (i.e., has never been anything more than a simulation, the reality principle of the social is itself undermined. The likely reaction to such an event, claims Baudrillard, is a “brutal de-simulation”—a catastrophic disintegration of the idea

(ideology) of the social coupled with a frenzied yet ultimately hopeless attempt to redeem a meaning for it. This, Baudrillard believes, is what we are witnessing today—a general awareness that the social realm is, and has always been, only a delusion. It is an awareness that is impossible to express in sociological terms because it takes the form of a silent indifference on the part of the masses to the offering of any social meaning, an indifference which he nevertheless claims to be a “genuine [form of] defiance of the . . . productive approach to the social which dominates us” (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 71). For Baudrillard, modern sociology, interactionist or otherwise, in principle has no conceptual tools for understanding the modern collapse of the social. In vain it seeks to impart a social significance to that which has lost all meaning or, more radically, never had a meaning. If French sociology through the work of Durkheim and his followers can be credited with the opening of the social to scientific analysis, and interactionism with a sympathetic account of its production, Baudrillard marks the moment of its absolute closure.⁹ The social does not, has never, existed. “Like a ghost at dawn, its principle of reality . . . simply fades away” (Baudrillard 1983b p. 72).

But, one might argue, if the social (or the concept of the social) never existed, then logically it cannot “disappear.” Baudrillard agrees that this is entirely possible (cf. Baudrillard 1987, p. 122), in which case he claims we must consider a second possibility.

⁹ Baudrillard develops his thesis on the non-existence of the social in contrast to Marcel Mauss’s idea of a “total social fact” (cf. Mauss [1925] 1967, p. 76). Mauss himself was a student of Durkheim, and his theories on gift exchange in primitive cultures were often exploited by members of the College of Sociology in France during the 1940s, particularly Georges Bataille. The latter’s work had a profound influence not only on Baudrillard but among a number of post-structuralist thinkers, especially his notion of an economy of excess (cf. Bataille [1967] 1988), a theme which reemerges in Baudrillard’s second hypothesis below. Baudrillard’s ideas do not seem quite so radical when placed in this context. At least, an historical and intellectual link between the early French sociologists and anthropologists, their disciples in the mid-twentieth century, and the work of Baudrillard is not so tenuous as one might initially suppose.

2) *The social has really existed, it exists even more and more . . . it alone exists.* But, contrary to the antiquated idea which makes the social into an objective progress of mankind, everything which escapes it being only residue, it is possible to envisage that *the social is itself only residue*, and that, if it has triumphed in the real, it is precisely as such. In this event, we are really even deeper in the social . . . in the fantastic congestion of dead labor, of dead and institutionalized relations within terrorist bureaucracies, of dead languages and grammars . . . (Baudrillard 1983b pp. 72–73).

Perhaps, after all, Durkheim was right—only the social truly exists. All experience would thus be *social* experience, all being *social* being. Durkheim's writings are, in fact, ambiguous on this point. In marking out sociology as a separate branch of scientific knowledge, he is ready to concede that social facts constitute only one sphere of objective reality among others. At other times, however, his transcendental and polemical style of writing lead him to totalize the social. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* categories of space, time, causality, logic, sacred and secular are all given social origins (Durkheim [1915] 1965, pp. 23f., 22f., 31ff., 236ff., 410f.). In passages that often match the intensity and scope of his vision, Durkheim sometimes appears to elevate society to the status of a self-reflecting and infinite deity—a first principle that completely saturates and organizes the field of possible experience leaving no remainder.

Perhaps because of this tendency to totalize the social, Durkheim's theoretical works themselves serve as useful examples of the historical extension and progressive rationalization of social relations which marked his own time. In this sense, these works align him intellectually, if neither philosophically nor politically, with a tradition of critical thought preoccupied with the effects of an increasingly administered world extending from Marx through Weber to the Frankfurt school.¹⁰

¹⁰ To forestall any misunderstanding, I claim here no more than a formal similarity in terms of the problem of modernity and the related issue of Western rationalization which others have identified as the essential concern of social theory (cf., for example,

Up to a point beyond which his break with the critical tradition becomes apparent, it is useful to read Baudrillard as addressing some of these same concerns. Here, the end of the social is portrayed in terms of the virtual suffocation of society in an economy of excess production, wasteful expenditure, and death. In his second hypothesis Baudrillard draws upon the Marxian image of capitalist society as the accumulation of dead—commodified, objectified—labor: the surplus of consumer goods, the decaying architecture of American cities, dangerous technologies. Weber's (1958) dark vision of the "iron cage" of modern life is radically intensified in the image of "terrorist bureaucracies" (from the human "hostages" of the welfare state to state-sponsored acts of violence against innocent populations). From cultural Marxism he reconstructs a black poetic image of dead language (language crystallized as object and commodity—advertising logos, binary logics, television talk shows, cultural linguistics, operationalism, technocratic jargon, trash novels). Here, Baudrillard claims, is a "more subtle form of death" for the social. The concept of a "social relationship" itself, he remarks, has something of the ring of death about it—it expands at the same rate that it produces and recycles (consumes) waste and "residue" (Baudrillard 1983b, pp. 73, 77ff.).

Baudrillard claims that the social is both an excuse for and the victim of its own expansion. The modern growth and penetration of rational administration into the sphere of everyday life finds its own ideological support (what Baudrillard refers to as an "alibi") in the reference to society itself. Socialized medicine, social security, social welfare, social democracy, socialism—everyone is taken in and cared for under the sign of the social. Baudrillard depicts the historical trajectory of the social as both one of the production and administration of nonintegrated and "pathological" cases—the social expands through a process which first designates a

Habermass 1984, pp. 4ff.). Obviously, the substantive differences between Durkheim and, say, members of the Frankfurt school are very great.

"remainder," then places it under its own jurisdiction. Baudrillard writes that as early as 1544, when the first poorhouses opened in Paris, one can find evidence of an emerging drive to extend the sphere of social relations to residual groups on the margins of society—to socialize the sick, the insane, the destitute, delinquents, to normalize and institutionalize society's relations with what lies outside its boundaries (the remainder). In much the same fashion as Durkheim, Baudrillard totalizes the social. The present, he claims, serves as testimony to a perfect socialization; the social expanded to infinity. The process, however, has nothing to do with nineteenth century ideas about progress, humanity or enlightenment. Rather, for Baudrillard it is nothing short of a catastrophe. At the very moment of totalization, the social (which survives and grows only through its capacity to generate and administer to marginal elements) reverts back on itself and designates itself as remainder. In Baudrillard's Möbius-like world, the social now seeks to find a social utility and social function for the very waste which it has produced and which defines its essence. To give a meaning to wasted lives (which now includes everyone), to assign a use-value to what has been rendered useless (society as a whole)—that, for Baudrillard, "is the face of the social for us—its entropic form—the other face of its death" (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 77).

All this, however invites a third hypothesis:

3) *The social has well and truly existed, but it does not exist any more.* It has existed as coherent space, as reality principle [the social relation, the social as structure, as dynamic abstraction, as scene of history] . . . , all this has only had an end in view, a meaning as power, as work, as capital, from the perspective space of a rational distribution . . . , which is also that of production—in short, in the narrow gap of second-order simulacra, and absorbed into third-order simulacra, it is dying (Baudrillard 1983b, pp. 82–83).

Baudrillard claims in this hypothesis that the great organizing principle, the grand

narrative of the Social which found its support and justification in ideas of the rational contract, civil society, progress, power, production—that all this may have pointed to something that once existed, but exists no longer. The age of the perspective of the social (coinciding roughly with that ill-defined period known as modernity), through which history could be assigned a telos and thereby an objective meaning, is over. It has "disappeared" in the historical movement which marks a shift in the function of the sign of the social from ideology to simulation proper (second to third order simulacrum).¹¹ In entering the phase of simulation, the reality principle on which the concept of the social is grounded undergoes a process of radical transformation and disintegration. The "social" becomes a detached sign whose only function, other than endlessly signifying itself, is to conceal the *absence* of anything that might qualify as a "social reality" or "socius." In simulation, the concept of the social merely hides the fact that the social no longer exists. For Baudrillard, the effect of simulation has been to close off forever the possibility of an ideological critique of social theory, precisely because such a critique cannot itself break free from the assumption of the reality principle of the social. For Baudrillard, the existence of a *socius*, the critico-empirical postulate of a social order founded on symbolic reciprocity and companionship, is no longer even properly a question (cf. Williams 1976, p. 291). Where, he asks, is sociality to be found in Los Angeles (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 83)? If anything, what confronts the theorist today is a sociality which mimics a mere model of itself—a culture hooked into and cynically living the ideal of its own electronic image, which is not properly speaking a distortion or a delusion (an ideology) as in his first hypothesis, or a "residue" as in his second, but rather, as Baudrillard terms it, a *hyperrealism* and a *hypersociality* (in which what is artificial is indistinguishable from what is real, and mass "society" has absorbed all the energy

¹¹ Cf. note 7.

of the social). Here one finds the “cool paradise” and primitive, mythological ambience of America which fascinates Baudrillard in his travels across the United States: a modern, urbanized ritual of waste and excess set surrealistically against the monumental flatness of the desert landscapes of the American West. In the United States, Baudrillard reads into every image a hyperreal fragmentation of life that hangs together more by random contact and surface electricity than rational contract or relations of production—no longer Durkheim’s organic solidarity grounded in an individualist morality, but more on the order of Marshall McLuhan’s global village (yet without the latter’s technological optimism); a perfectly integrated society which now functions as the model of itself, but which is no longer strictly speaking a “society” at all.

What Baudrillard claims in hypothesizing the disappearance of the perspective of the social is not only the loss of a goal and meaning for history or the hyperrealism of modern life. It suggests that the discourse of the social sciences itself (in both its critical and “objective” forms) cannot fulfill the task of a theoretical description of the present, i.e., of a hypersociality which only simulates the bonds of the social relation. Baudrillard does not hesitate to embrace the implications of this; he abandons social theory. In spite of this radical move, it would be a mistake to characterize him simply as an anti-sociologist. At this juncture, Baudrillard simply leaves sociological discourse behind as one leaves behind what is no longer of any use to orient oneself in the world—no bitterness, no regrets, no apologies or promises. To follow him, one must open oneself to the possibility that what began in the eighteenth century as a project to realize the Utopian ideal of a perfect society, and which in the nineteenth century was bequeathed to the scientific engineers of sociology, has indeed issued in a kind of modern nonsocial paradise—a Utopia of “personalized” consumption, leisure, and artificial comforts (cf. Baudrillard 1988b, pp. 10ff.). But, writes Baudrillard, it is a paradise in which

“a very slight modification, a change of just a few degrees, would suffice to make it seem like hell” (Baudrillard 1988b, p. 46).

SOCIAL THEORY AND RESISTANCE

Baudrillard’s hypotheses cannot be said to derive from a theory of the social (or society). Perhaps it is better to say they derive from a theory of the present in which the productive energy of the social has been completely absorbed into the mass. But what has happened to theory itself in this process? What significant transformations has it undergone and what traditional functions has it been forced to abandon? Baudrillard is typically ambivalent—which is to say he responds with a range of possibilities—when it comes to these questions. Each of his short commentaries on theory approach the topic differently, and each in a fractured style that continually works at cross purposes with itself. On different occasions, he refers to theory as, among other things, a “mode” of disappearance, as a “challenge” to the real, as seduction, as a “fatal strategy,” and as simulation (cf. Baudrillard 1987, pp. 122–135; 1988a, p. 198; 1988c, pp. 98ff.). Given such opaque images, it comes as no surprise when Baudrillard himself admits to never having adequately formulated his own position on the question of the function of theory (Baudrillard 1987, p. 125).

Despite their halting and uncertain expression, Baudrillard’s reflections on theory are the key to understanding his reasons for adopting a deliberately provocative style of writing. Theory, he holds, no longer functions as a representation or mirror of the real, but rather must be the discursive intensification of its object, a wresting and seduction of the object from its conditions in order to make it stand out in a kind of “over-existence which is incompatible with that of the real” (Baudrillard 1988c, p. 98). For Baudrillard, this calls for a kind of stylistic excess or, as he terms it, “theoretical violence”—a hyperbolic and ecstatic analysis whose function is to be as “extreme” as the object itself. In the

intensification of writing which for Baudrillard becomes something of a perverse and "evil" game in which the stakes are continually raised (cf. Baudrillard 1988d), theory renounces its distance and merges with its object:¹²

[Theory] must become excessive and sacrificial to speak about excess and sacrifice. It must become simulation if it speaks about simulation, and deploy the same strategy as its object. If it speaks about seduction, theory must become seducer, and deploy the same stratagems. . . . And thus it becomes its very object (Baudrillard 1988c, p. 98).

For Baudrillard, the "fatal strategy" of theory (if indeed it can be called a strategy) is that it must continually destroy itself in the process of realizing itself in its object, i.e., in becoming an event in the very universe it describes. This endless auto-destruction of theory has nothing in common with the classical method of critical dialectics which attempts to transform both itself and its object in revolutionary praxis. Although a superficial reading of Baudrillard will discover a number of "theoretical" concepts which, judging from their general tone, are highly critical of contemporary mass culture, he nevertheless claims to have abandoned conventional forms of theoretical critique, particularly those embedded in the master discourse on society which function dialectically by negating their object. For Baudrillard, the function of theory is not negation—he doubts that theory in any way can annihilate or substantially transform the existing state of affairs. But neither does he believe that theory can simply reconcile in some positive sense what is real with the ideality of theory (Baudrillard 1988c, p. 99; 1987, p. 124). For Baudrillard, "the real"

¹² I do not think it would be reading too much into Baudrillard to say that for him the ultimate stakes in the game of theory with its object are the rules of the game itself. As I shall note below, Baudrillard believes the object is always victorious in this game, i.e., its maneuvers always outpace those of theory, which can do no more than attempt keep up: ". . . things happen in a such a way that they are always absolutely ahead of us All that theory can do is be rigorous enough to cut itself off from any system of reference, so that it will at least be current, on the scale of what it wishes to describe" (Baudrillard 1987, p. 131).

does not exist,¹³ at least in the conventional sense as an objective state of things that could enter into a relation of correspondence or exchange with theory in such a way that theory could transform the world. Rather, "the real," if it can be given a positive sense at all (and Baudrillard is quite ambiguous on this point), is "the insurmountable limit of theory . . . the point at which theory can do nothing" (Baudrillard 1987, p. 125).

Baudrillard notes with some sympathy George Bataille's conception of social science as a "virulent myth," a *challenge* to the very nature of the social and society—a challenge, so to speak, for society to exist in a way that is incompatible and irreconcilable with its own principle of reality (Baudrillard 1987, pp. 122–123; cf. Bataille [1967] 1985). But "the social" is properly speaking no longer the object of Baudrillard's challenge. It has, in fact, "disappeared." To be consistent with his demand that theory keep pace with its object; that object, in the present context, can be nothing other than the fragmented pieces of mass culture itself, i.e., the residual that remains after having absorbed the positive energy of the social. What, then, comprises Baudrillard's theoretical strategy in the face of an object which consumes the social? It is not, as I have suggested above, simply to become "anti-theoretical." Instead, theory must take up the same strategy as its object, and this means that it must reduplicate and intensify, without necessarily valorizing, the modern "strategy" of the mass—a strategy of hyperconformity¹⁴ and *indiffer-*

¹³ Although Baudrillard believes a resolution of the philosophic ambiguity between existence and being is not possible, his reflections on the relation between theory and reality bear the mark of a phenomenological reduction in which all existence claims are bracketed by the analyst. His claim that the real does not exist should not, I believe, be taken to have any more significance than a simple refusal, for methodological reasons, to take a position on the factual status of reality (cf. Baudrillard 1987, p. 125).

¹⁴ The hyperconformity of the masses: "You want us to consume—O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose" (Baudrillard 1983b, p. 46). Here is perhaps the most controversial feature of Baudrillard's "social" analysis and the one most difficult for traditional critical theorists to accept, that conformity

ence (and ultimately, if I read Baudrillard correctly, of silence), the fatal strategy of resistance offered by the masses to all social forms of meaning and domination, which is to say to the world itself:

... if the world is fatal, let us be more fatal than it. If it is indifferent, let us be more indifferent. We must conquer the world and seduce it through an indifference that is at least equal to the world's (Baudrillard 1988c, p. 101).

For sociologists who have accepted the humanist premises of their discipline, such a project will appear as the height of irrationality and irresponsibility, and we can imagine their incredulity: Can Baudrillard really be serious about this? Is it rational to think that mass indifference, if this indeed truly characterizes the climate of modern culture, is a form of resistance which itself must be met with indifference? And if so, to what conceivable end? How can one remain indifferent to a world full of poverty, racism, and other forms of social injustice? Wouldn't this only make matters worse, or at best allow these problems to continue to fester? Doesn't Baudrillard, rather than creating theoretical possibilities for "conquering" a world which has become indifferent, in truth only succeed in making both himself and theory indifferent to, and thus at the mercy of, all possibilities?

Baudrillard himself does not address, let alone ask, these kinds of questions, and rightly so, because they identify indifference with passive nihilism or a lack of caring, neither of which is intended in Baudrillard's meaning of the term. Baudrillard's indifference, I shall suggest, is of an altogether different type, and I can think of no better way of describing it other than as a *positive* indifference, a kind of stoic posture that invites attack by "playing dead." What he proposes is not passivity, but an *active* strategy designed to lure its opponent into making a self-defeating move, in effect turning the opponent's own force into a weapon against it.¹⁵ Contrary to

(albeit of an excessive and hyperreal type) can be a form of resistance.

¹⁵ We might, alternatively, call this a "martial arts" strategy of resistance. Baudrillard quotes Foucault in this context: "As in judo, the best answer to an

what a literal reading of Baudrillard might infer, indifference does not signify an uncaring attitude, nor is it inauthentic (that is, Baudrillard is not just espousing a position he in fact does not hold). Rather, his indifference is an ironic—and, one might add, tragic—response to a world which he believes has closed off virtually all other forms of resistance. For Baudrillard, care, however highly we value this virtue, is sacrificed in order to oppose an enemy for whom care no longer has any meaning. At best, one can only challenge the present order—the simulated order—with a *simulated* indifference. Only such a strategy manages to avoid, for the time being at least, the overwhelming capacity of this order to coopt the power of resistance for its own ends.

Baudrillard knows clearly enough that all this is a fatal game, i.e., a game that we momentarily delude ourselves into thinking can be won. In fact, his strategy only allows him to retain enough composure to prepare for the next attack. As long as he has the energy to retain the appearance of indifference, he can still play the game. But inevitably this game is lost. For Baudrillard, the strategy of resistance—his own and that of the mass—reduces to a paradox. It is a *struggle* against destiny, against cooptation and "forced identification" with the hypertrophied culture of information, consumption, and simulation (cf. Baudrillard 1988a, p. 213). But it is also a *recognition* of destiny, of the inevitability of being seduced and ultimately overwhelmed by this very culture (Baudrillard 1988a, pp. 163–165).

In reading Baudrillard in this way, what I find most difficult to accept is not his suggestion that indifference (or hyperconformity) can function as a form of resistance. Certainly this idea is intriguing enough to merit further exploration. Rather, what disturbs me is his belief that an *entire* tradition of social theorizing and critique is incapable of refining or modifying its tactics to challenge the present order of things. Are we to believe, for instance, that the philosophies of praxis, of

adversary is not to retreat, but to go along with it, turning it to one's own advantage, as a resting point for the next phase" (Baudrillard 1987, p. 65).

community organization, collective non-violent resistance, etc.—notwithstanding their grounding in various conceptions of the “social”—have exhausted all of their possibilities? Not only does such an assertion appear to me as recklessly premature, but I would argue that Baudrillard’s own position is unthinkable unless set against the background of these traditions.

More importantly, I would argue that a number of more recent theoretical perspectives in the social sciences have yet to be fully explored for their potential as forms of resistance. I am thinking particularly here about ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, the sociology of emotions, and the various branches of feminist sociology—all of which, it seems to me, have great and still largely untapped possibilities for disrupting the coopting power of mass mediational society. Too much remains to be done in these areas to reject them out of hand simply because they are rooted in a conception of social life.

At a deeper level, I would have to ask Baudrillard what real difference it makes whether the adversary one confronts is called “the social” or something else; or, for that matter, whether the theoretical weapons one employs against the adversary are “sociological”—or something else? In a simulated order, where the conventional rules of reference governing the use of language have supposedly collapsed, does it matter what name is given to the enemy? On what possible grounds are we permitted to make the distinction between social and mass phenomena? And since no strategy of resistance can postpone failure indefinitely, why not use all available means that can be found in the struggle against this enemy? In any event, according to Baudrillard himself, “one disappears.” I think Baudrillard dismisses an entire tradition of thought at the very point when it would seem that what is needed, by his own depiction of the ultimately overwhelming effects of mass culture, is anything we can get our hands on. His “indifference,” given the nature of the adversary he faces, should be extended to the choice of weapon.

Early in the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte had a clear vision of the role of social

theory in changing the social order. Its purpose was to devise a plan for restructuring society—one that would steer society successfully between the twin evils of despotism and anarchy (Comte 1832). This plan, he argued, was to be the collective product of a morally refined and broadly educated social-scientific elite. At the end of the nineteenth century, Durkheim retained many vestiges of this Comtean faith (now stripped of its elitist tone), believing that sociological truths about society could be applied in the political realm to support the goal of social change, which in Durkheim’s own case was a socialist State (cf. Lukes 1985, pp. 320–327). This heritage of social research informing social change, which marks not only French but virtually all sociological traditions in one form or another, has disappeared from the work of Baudrillard in a movement which has denied the social basis of contemporary society and thus society itself. If I have understood Baudrillard correctly, the call for social change in the present can no longer expect any assistance from social theory. Certainly, on an intellectual level at least, one can appreciate Baudrillard’s claim that the social, in the traditional sense of that term, is disappearing, and that new and creative strategies of resistance are called for in the present. Undoubtedly, theory must remain flexible enough to challenge new conditions. But theoretical flexibility is not enhanced by simply discarding the theoretical tradition. Baudrillard, of all persons, should know that theoretical change has much in common with the cycles of fashion—what’s old today is new tomorrow. If Baudrillard’s challenge reduces, in the face of contemporary culture, to the simple question “why do sociology?”, perhaps the answer is to be prepared for the day when the social reappears.

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