Baudrillard's Marx

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Thesis: This essay is intended to deepen and intensify the radical insight of contemporary poststructuralist theory into the existence of ABSTRACT POWER as the disenchanted locus of the modern project. What follows then is in the way of a great circling around from the semiological deconstructions of Jean Baudrillard to a final deliberation on that strange, but magical, meeting in the Western mind of Marx and Nietzsche. What I want to demonstrate is the presence now of a fantastic rupture in Western consciousness: a rupture which originates in a *political refusal* of the 'referential illusion' at the heart of the modern account; and which results in an *epistemological denial* of the a priori existence of a privileged domain of finalities — labour, sex, use-value, utility. I would like to report that the growing critique of the 'referential illusion' (the *naturalistic* assumption that the big referents of labour, capital, the unconscious are the referents of the REAL) has this limit. It would result simply in a displacement of Western Marxism: a realignment which, while it would abolish the fetishism of the commodity — form (replacing it with the fetishism of the 'sign') and a reduction of power to the play of capital accumulation (replacing it with the new axis of power/ideology), would nevertheless preserve the essential thrust of Marx's *Capital*. I would like to consent to the revisionist (or *cultural*) interpretation of Marxism, which insists that what is required, and this in view of new modes of cultural hegemony in advanced capitalist society, is just a radical inversion of the order of primacy of Marx's ground categories: flipping over *Capital* by theorising the primacy of culture over political economy. But I cannot make this report, and this because Baudrillard and, indeed, the whole corpus of New French Thought — from Deleuze and Lyotard to the early Barthes — have brought us to the edge of a fantastic and elemental discovery. Their discovery is this: it was Nietzsche all along who stood at the beginning and end of *Capital*; and the very recovery of Western Marxism as an adequate account of the darkness within the modern project depends on a reinterpretation of Marx's *Capital* as the imploded, forward side (the side of nihilism in the value-form of seduction) of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*. In this account, *Captital* is disclosed to be a vivid, almost clinical study of the inner workings of modern nihilism. It is a master text on the purely ABSTRACT UNITY which is the epicentre of Western experience and on the non-reality of capital as a 'perspectival appearance', value-form of nihilism in the modern century. It's just this tracing out of the Nietzchean regression in Marx which is the gamble in all of Baudrillard's thought, and which has to be the silent foreground of the critical theory of society today.

Baudrillard and the Fate of Modernity

Jean Baudrillard is the theorist *par excellence* of nihilism as the fate of modernity. Just like the culture which he seeks to describe, Baudrillard's writings are a geometry of signs which deal in absence and lack, and which threaten to unravel in a fantastic explosion of creative energy as they trace the *implosion* of modern experience signified by the signs rising everywhere now of dead labour, dead power, and dead truth. Baudrillard's theoretical discourse may have begun as a critique of the productivist fetish of Marxian political economy (*The Mirror of Production, (1975) For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*) and, indeed, even to the moment of *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, (1976) [1] (which explores the upsurge of the 'symbolic' against the radical semiurgy of the sign), he may have remained an existentialist in the classical French tradition. But what makes Baudrillard really interesting, and what makes

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of his discourse the truth-sayer of the relationship of Marx and Nietzsche, is that he is a tragic philosopher of society as a big sign-system. Baudrillard's writings are a mirrored reflection of the nihilism of the sign-system which they seek to describe. Everywhere in his writings there are traces of disintegration, decadence, exhaustion, and brilliant (because final) flashes of illumination which light the sky of a darkening society. To read Baudrillard's most recent works (from the simulational models of *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* and *Simulacrum* to the deconstructive interpretations of *Oublier Foucault, De la séduction* and *Les stratégies fatales*) is to enter a terroristic universe whose staged communications and abstract codings undergo a massive and feverish redoublement as power, truth, history, capital — the whole arc of 'referential finalities' — prepare to reenter their own simulacra.

This is just to say that Baudrillard is, above all, a theorist of the *cynical commodity*. What makes Baudrillard dangerous, allowing him finally to put Nietzsche into play as the doppelganger of Marx's *Capital,* is that he writes just at that point where the commodity-form, abandoning its historical association with the simulacrum of concrete labour, reveals itself for what it always was: a transparent sign-system which traces out in the curved space of political economy (and then of consumer culture) the implosive, disaccumulative, and seductive cycle of modern power. Just like Adorno and Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and, in fact, writing to confirm French poststructuralism as the philosophical successor to the tragic tradition in critical theory (the tradition of Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Lowenthal), Baudrillard is one thinker who speaks from the dark side of modernity. His is the fully disenchanted world of labour, myth and domination as emblematic signs of modernity.

Baudrillard writes under the dark sign of Nietzsche to this extent. Each of his texts are works of art which seek to arraign the world before poetic consciousness. In Baudrillard's discourse, there is a return to a tragic sense of history, and this because his imagination moves just along that trajectory *where nihilism is both antithetical to and conditional for historical emancipation.* The tragic sense in Baudrillard's thought derives directly from his reflections on our imprisonment in the processed world of abstract power: a power-system which works its effects technically and symbolically; and which is anyway the disappearing locus of a society which has now passed over into its opposite — the cycle of the death of the social and the triumph of culture.

Bauldrillard's Four Refusals

If Baudrillard can be so unsparing in his tragic vision of abstract power as the essence of modernity, this is just because his theoretical agenda includes the following four great refusals of the classical model of sociology: 1) a devalorisation of the social; 2) a rejection of the naturalistic discourse of the historical; 3) a refusal of dialectical reason (in favour of a semiological reduction of the exchange-system to the 'structural law of value'; and 4) a rupture with the normalizing, and hence accumulative, conception of power. Baudrillard's theoretical analysis challenges the logic of 'referential finalities' as the foundation of western consciousness. It does so because all of Baudrillard's thought traces out the *implosion* of modern experience: the contraction and reversal of the big categories of the *real* into a dense, seductive, and entirely nihilistic society of signs.

1. The Death of the Social

> A speechless mass for every hollow spokesman without a past. Admirable conjunction, between those who have nothing to say, and the masses, who do not speak. Ominous emptiness of all discourse. No hysteria or potential fascism, but simulation by precipitation of every lost referential. Black box of every referential, of every uncaptured meaning, of impossible history, of untraceable systems of representation, the mass is what remains when the social has been completely removed. Baudrillard (1983b)

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Baudrillard is explicit in his accusation concerning the death of the social and of the loss of the 'referent' of the sociological imagination. It's not so much that sociological discourse, the master paradigm of the contemporary century, has been superseded ;by competing ensembles of *normative* meaning, but, instead, that the privileged position of the social as a positive, and hence normative, referent has suddenly been eclipsed by its own 'implosion' into the density of the mass.

> The social world is scattered with interesting objects and crystalline objects which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an *in vacuo* aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social. Baudrillard (1983b, p 3-4).

Particularly in his writings on the aesthetics of modernity, Baudrillard is concerned with teasing out the rupture in modern discourse represented by the collapse of the normalising, expanding, and positive cycle of the social into its opposite: an implosive and structural order of signs. In this interpretation, the triumph of *signifying culture* means the eclipse of genuine social solidarities (society). Beyond Weber's theory of rationalisation, against Foucault's privileging of 'normalisation', and against Habermas' *dialectical* analysis of (rationalised) system and (communicative) lifeworld, Baudrillard (1981) writes of our *exteriorisation* into the processed world of an advanced 'techno-culture'. This is just that break-point in the symbolic totality where the 'norm' undergoes an inversion into a floating order of signs, where strategies of normalisation are replaced by the 'simulation of the masses' (Baudrillard 1983b, p 3-4), where signification replaces the process of reification, and, finally, where the 'hyperreality' (Bauldrillard 1976) of culture indicates a great dissolution of the space of the social. Baudrillard's (1976) theorisation of the end of sociology as a reality-principle, or what is the same, the exhaustion of the social as a truth-effect of a purely nominalistic power, privileges a violent and implosive perspective on society. 'Violence implosive qui resulte non plus de l'extension d'un système, mais de sa saturation et de sa rétraction, comme il en est des systèmes stellaires' (Baudrillard 1976, p 114-15). [2]

In his key text on aesthetic theory, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities,* Baudrillard (1983b, p68) provides three strategic hypotheses (from minimal and maximal perspectives) about the existence of the 'social' only as a murderous effect, whose uninterrupted energy over two centuries has come from 'deterritorialisation and from concentration in ever more unified agencies'. The *first* hypothesis has it that the social may only refer to the space of a *delusion:* The social has basically never existed. There has never been any 'social relation'. Nothing has every functioned socially. On this inescapable basis of challenge, seduction and death, there has never been anything but *simulation* of the social and the social relation (Baudrillard 1983b, pp 70-71). And if the social is a simulation, then the likely course of events is a 'brutal de-simulation', "a de-simulation which itself captures the style of a challenge (the reverse of capital's challenge of the social and society): a challenge to the belief that capital and power exist according to their own logic — *they have none,* they vanish as apparatuses as soon as the simulation of social space is done" (Baudrillard 1983b, pp 70-71). The *second* hypothesis is the reverse, but parallel, image of the delusional thesis: the social, not as the space of delusion undergoing a 'brutal de-simulation', but the social as *residue,* "expanding throughout history as a 'rational' control of residues, and a rational production of residues" (Baudrillard 1983b, p 73). Baudrillard (1983b, p 77) is explicit about the purely 'excremental' function of the social, about the social as the 'functional ventilation of remainders'. It's just the existence of the social as itself 'remainder' which makes of the social machine 'refuse processing'; a more subtle form of death, indeed the scene of a 'piling up and exorbitant processing of death'.

> In this event, we are even deeper in the social, even deeper in pure excrement, in the fantastic congestion of dead labour, of dead and institutionalized relations within terrorist bureaucracies, of

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dead languages and grammars. Then of course it can no longer be said that the social is dying, since it is already the accumulation of death. In effect we are in a civilisation of the supersocial, and simultaneously in a civilisation of non-degradable, indestructible residue, piling up as the social spreads (Baudrillard 1983b, p 72-73).

The *third* hypothesis speaks only of the end of the 'perspective space of the social'.

The social has not always been a delusion, as in the first hypothesis, nor remainder, as in the second. But precisely, it has only had an end in view, a meaning as power, as work, as capital, from the perspective space of an ideal convergence, 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).

This, then, is the hypothesis of the 'precession of simulacra': the 'ventilation of individuals as terminals of information' in the hyperreal space of simulation.

End of the perspective space of the social. The rational sociality of the contract, dialectical sociality (that of the State and of civil society, of public and private, of the social and the individual) gives way to the sociality of contact, of the circuit and transistorised network of millions of molecules and particles maintained in a random gravitational field, magnetised by the constant circulation and the thousands of tactical combinations which electrify them (Baudrillard 1983b, pp 82-83).

Beyond the classical model of sociology, Baudrillard is a quantum physicist of the processed world of mass communications.

2. **The Refusal of the Historical Subject**

Baudrillard has an implicit, and radical, political agenda. His political critique is directed, not against the already obsolescent perspective space of the social, but in opposition to the transistorised world of the Simulacrum. In the old world of the *social,* an emancipatory politics entailed the production of meaning, the control of individual and collective perspective against a normalizing society which sought to exclude its oppositions. This was the region of power/sacrifice: the site of a great political conflict where the finalities of sex, truth, labour and history were dangerous just to the extent that they represented the hitherto suppressed region of use-value, beyond and forever in opposition to a purely sacrificial politics. In the perspectival space of the *historical,* power could be threatened by speech, by the agency of the emancipatory subject who demanded a rightful inclusion in the contractual space of political economy. The politics of rights depended for its very existence on the valorisation of use-value as a privileged, and universally accessible, field of truth; and on the production of the emancipated historical subject as an object of desire.

With Baudrillard, it's just the opposite. His political theory begins with a refusal of the privileged position of the *historical subject,* and, what's more, with an immediate negation of the question of historical emancipation itself. Baudrillard's is not the *sociological* perspective of disciplinary power in a normalising society (Foucault) nor the *hermeneutical* interpretation of science and technology as 'glassy, background ideology' (Habermas). [3] In this theorisation, there is no purely perspectival space of the 'panoptic' (*Oublier Foucault*) nor free zone of 'universal pragmatics'. [4] Baudrillard's political analysis represents such a radical departure from both the sociology of knowledge and theorisations of power/norm just because his thought explores the brutal processes of dehistoricisation and desocialisation which structure the new communicative order of a signifying culture. In the new continent of modern culture: the relevant political collectivity is the 'mass media as simulacra'; the exchange-principle involves purely abstract and hyper-symbolic diffusions of information; and what's at stake is the 'maximal production of meaning' and the 'maximal production of words' for constituted historical subjects who are both condition *and* effect of the order of simulacra (Baudrillard 1983b)

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Now, Baudrillard's world is that of the electronic mass media, and specifically, of television. His nomination of television as a privileged simulacrum is strategic: television has the unreal existence of an imagic sign-system in which may be read the inverted and implosive logic of the cultural machine. The 'nebulous hyperreality' of the masses; 'stage communications' as the modus vivendi of the power system; the 'explosion of information' and the 'implosion of meaning' as the keynote of mass communications; a massive circularity of all poles in which 'sender is receiver'; an irreversible medium of communication without response: such are the *strategic* consequences of *television as society.* In a brilliant essay, 'The Implosion of Meaning in the Media', Baudrillard (1983b, p 105-6) has this to say of the mass media and power.

> Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence done to meaning, and in the fascination which results? Is it the media which induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses which divert the media into spectacles? Mogadish Stammheim: the media are made the vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but, simultaneously, in the most total ambiguity, they propagate the brutal fascination of the terrorist act. They are themselves terrorists, to the extent to which they work through fascination . . . The media carry meaning and non-sense, they manipulate in every sense simultaneously. The process cannot be controlled, for the media convey the simulation internal to the system and the simulation destructive of the system according to a logic that is absolutely Moebian and circular — and this is exactly what it is like. There is no alternative to it, no logical resolution. Only a logical *exacerbation* and a catastrophic resolution.

Baudrillard's (1983b, p 96) refusal of the *reality* of processed history is based on this hypothesis: the new information of the electronic mass media is 'directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it'. Information, far from producing an 'accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus-value of meaning homologous to the economic plus-value which results from the accelerated rotation of capital', implies the destruction of *any* coherent meaning-system. Confronted with this situation of the 'double-bind' in which the medium is the real world and the 'real' world has about it all of the irrealism of the information society, Baudrillard (1983b, p 107) hypothesises two political alternatives. *First,* there is 'resistance as subject', the response of the autonomous historical subject who assumes the unilaterally valorised and positive line of resistance of 'liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution . . . (as somehow) valuable and subversive'. But Baudrillard (1983b, p 108) is entirely realistic concerning how the 'liberating claims of subjecthood' respond to the imperatives of the information order of mass media:

> To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this reflects the system's previous phase, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the system's current argument is the maximisation of the word and the maximal production of meaning. Thus the strategic refusal is that of a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word — or of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception.

Against the emancipatory claims of historical subjecthood, Baudrillard (1983b, p 108) proposes the more radical alternative of 'resistance-as-object' as the line of political resistance most appropriate to the simulacrum. To a system which represents a great convergence of *power and seduction,* and which is entirely cynical in its devalorisation of meaning, the relevant and perhaps only political response is that of *ironic detachment.*

> This is the resistance of the masses: it is equivalent to sending back to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting, like a mirror, meaning without absorbing it. This strategy (if one can still speak of strategy) prevails today because it was ushered in by that phase of the system (Baudrillard 1983b, p 108-9).

Baudrillard thus privileges the position of the 'punk generation': this new generation of rebels which signals its knowledge of its certain doom by a *hyperconformist simulation* (in fashion,

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language, and lifestyle) represents just that moment of refraction where the simulational logic of the sytem is turned, ironically and neutrally, back against the system Baudrillard (1983b, p 108-9) is a *new wave* political theorist just because he, more than most, has understood that in a system 'whose imperative is the over-production and regeneration of meaning and speech', all the social movements which 'bet on liberation, emancipation, the resurrection of the subject of history, of the group, of speech as a raising of consciousness, indeed of a 'seizure of the unconscious' of subjects and of the masses' *are acting fully in accordance with the political logic of the system.*

3. The Nomination of Power/Seduction

> This universal fascination with power in its exercise and its theory is so intense because it is a fascination with a *dead* power characterised by a simultaneous 'resurrection effect,' in an obscene and parodic mode, of all the forms of power already seen — exactly like sex in pornography (Baudrillard 1977b).

Jean Baudrillard (1980, p 110) dwells on the existence now of a 'dead power', of a power which owes its seduction to the 'imminence of the death of all the great referents' and to the violence which is exacerbated by their last, desperate attempts at representation. This is a power, not on its expanding and symbolic side (the side of a *political and representational* theory of power), but on its reverse side: the side of symbolic reversal, just where power affirms itself as void, as something dead.

> Power did not always consider itself as power, and the secret of the great politicians was to know that power *does not exist.* To know that it is only a perspectival space of simulation, as was the pictorial space of the Renaissance, and that if power seduces, it is precisely — what the naive realists of politics still never understand — because it undergoes a metamorphosis into signs and is invented on the basis of signs . . . Power is truly sovereign when it grasps this secret and confronts itself with that very challenge. When it ceases to do so and pretends to find a truth, a substance, or a representation (in the will of the people, etc.), then it loses its sovereignty, allowing others to hurl back the challenge of its own life or death, until it dies in effect at the hands of that infatuation with itself, that imaginary concept of itself, and that superstitious belief in itself as a substance; it dies as well when it fails to recognise (*méconnaissance*) itself as a void, or as something reversible in death. At one time leaders were killed when they lost that secret (Baudrillard 1980, p 109-9).

Oublier Foucault is Baudrillard's accusation against a purely representational theory of power. In this writing there is traced out a great figurative movement in which power, abandoning its association with force relations, agency, structure, and distributional vectors, coils around and presents itself as an empty cycle of exchange, reversible, seductive as 'challenge', and entirely relational. Baudrillard's theorisation of power as a sign, and consequently as a relational and optical term, is as close as any modern writer has come to Nietzsche's (1968, p 199) dark meaning in *The Will to Power* when he suggested that power exists now only as a 'persepctival appearance'. For Nietzsche then, as for Baudrillard (1980, p 109-111) now, power is a 'sign of that which never was': power exists only in the *simulated* mode of an abstract unity imposed on experience. Like all *symbolic media* before it, power has value only in exchange, and then only in the value-form of vicarious effectors (sex, money, status, etc). And Baudrillard, following Nietzsche, has one other critical insight. That which drives power on, making it so seductive as a purely symbolic media, is *not* the expanding and accumulative side of power: the side of consumption *par excellence.* No, Power's secret lies in its intimate entanglement with death. It's just the existence of power as a challenge unto death, as a simulation of exactly nothing, which is the secret of the modern fascination with power. What Nietzsche described as the 'will to will' (the abstract nucleus of a *simulational* model of power), Baudrillard denotes power as 'challenge'. This is power, then, *without* a reality-principle.

In Baudrillard's estimation, Foucault's error was his almost nostalgic desire for power with a

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limiting term. In *Oublier Foucault,* Baudrillard notes that Foucault misinterprets the purely relational quality of modern power, just because he wished to tame power by closing the distance between power and its referents. The sociological vision of a normalising society, or even of the closed space of the panoptic, is not dangerous: it's just the positive space where power surrenders its non-existence as 'challenge' and incorporates itself without a murmur of dissent into the valorised order of finalities (politics, sexuality, commodities). For Baudrillard, the dark side of power, the site where power is made dangerous once again, is just at that moment of reversal and cancellation when power, exploding beyond its *historical* signification by an order of referentialities, announces itself as a simulacrum and says that to accept its 'challenge' is to enter a vortex of nothingness. It's just this *nihilistic* expression of power that Baudrillard theorises; and not the positive order of representationality associated with *sociological* power (power/norm), *economic power* (power/commodity), or *political* power (power/sovereignty). Baudrillard's relational theorisation of power negates the affirmative order of reason, only in order to recover the mythic origins of power. This is why, perhaps, Baudrillard can relativise Foucault's writings on the modern discourse of power/sexuality as the already obsolescent description of an area that is 'now in the process of collapsing entirely'. [6]

> But what if Foucault spoke so well to us concerning power — and let us not forget it in *real* objective terms which cover manifold diffractions but nonetheless do not question the objective point of view one has about them, and concerning power which is pulverised but whose *reality principle* is nonetheless not questioned — only because power is dead? Not merely impossible to locate because of dissemination, but dissolved purely and simply in a manner that still escapes us, dissolved by reversal, cancellation, or made hyperreal through simulation (who knows?) (Baudrillard 1980, p 98).

In Baudrillard's (1980, p 105) world, power is always haunted by an 'imaginary catastrophe' at its centre: the dilation of power now, after centuries of expansion, into a 'single pure sign — the sign of the social whose density crushes us'. And if the 'redoubled simulation' of power as it passes into its own simulacrum means the imminent death of all the great referents then it may also signify that fascism is the precursor of a purely relational power. 'As the violent reactivation of a form of power that despairs of its rational foundations, as the violent reactivation of the social in a society that despairs of its own rational and contractual foundations, fascism is nevertheless the only fascinating modern form of power' (Baudrillard 1980, p 110). And fascism's secret? It's just this:

> Fascist power is then the only form which was able to reenact the ritual prestige of death, but in an already posthumous and phony mode, a mode of one-upmanship and *mise-en-scène,* and in an *aesthetic* mode — as Benjamin clearly saw — that was no longer truly sacrificial.

For Baudrillard (1980, p 110), fascism could remain the 'only fascinating modern form of power' because it occupied that space in the cycle of power where politics in its sacrificial mode passes over, and instantaneously so, into the distinctly modern (cynical) region of power and seduction. And if fascism had about it an *'already nostalgic* obscenity and violence'(Baudrillard 1980, p 110), if it was already passé as soon as it appeared in history, then this may only indicate why fascism remains the emblematic sign of modern power. 'An eternal inner simulation of power, which is never already (*jamais déjà*) anything but the sign of what it was' (Baudrillard 1980, p 110).

4. The Eclipse of the Commodity-Form

> As the functional and terrorist organisation of the control of meaning under the sign of the positivity of value, signification is in some ways akin to the notion of reification. It is the locus of an elemental objectivication that reverberates through the amplified system of signs up to the level of the social and political terrorism of the bracketing of meaning. All the repressive and reductive strategies of power systems are already present in the internal logic of the sign, as well as those of exchange value and political economy (Baudrillard 1981).

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If Baudrillard can be so radical in his theorisations of the death of the social the dilation of the historical subject, and the appearance of a cynical power, then it's only because his thought revolves around a fundamental discovery concerning the strategic relationship between the 'structural law of value' and the 'simulacrum' as the dynamic locus of the logic of modernity. [7] Theoretical inquiry sometimes undergoes fundamental transformations, not only in response to criticisms *within* its discursive limits, but also as a reflex of abrupt and complete shifts in the constitution of the 'object' of theoretical analysis — the domain of social experience itself. Baudrillard's (1981, pp 146-47) theoretical agenda begins and ends just at that moment of a great epistemic divide in the deep, structural logic of social action (and consciousness): a rupture of the 'object' of theoretical inquiry in which the reality-principle of the 'referential' order of experience — *production* as the dominant (material) scheme of the industrial order — gives way to *simulation* as the dominant scheme of an order regulated by the 'code' (and thus by the 'logic of signification), and where, in fact, the 'loi marchande de la valeur' is replaced by the *structural law of value.* Expressed in its social formulation, Baudrillard challenges the realism of the concept of the social just because he wishes to counterpose: 1) a communicational scheme of 'radical semiurgy' [8] to the theory of normalisation, 2) the 'logic of signification' to the incription of normative as the (reductive) strategy of meaning for the cultural apparatus; and, 3) the sign to the norm. Formulated with reference to the scheme of production, Baudrillard theorises the logic of the sign as the emblematic expression in consumer culture of the commodity-form. It's Baudrillard's thesis that it is to the great contestation in the order of signs, to the abstract, semiurgical, fungible, and reductive 'logic of signification', that we must look if we are to develop a *realistic* account of the intracation of political economy and society (see Levin 1984; Wernick 1984).

The emergence of the sign as the locus of the real indicates, and decisively so, that the post-structuralist preoccupation with the *semiurgical* operations of consumer culture, with the *cultural semiotics* of the exchange-system in political economy, and with the *self-referential* language of signifier/signified as the 'mirror of production', form a strictly critical response to the sudden dilation of the productivist scheme of the industrial order into its opposite. Baudrillard's description of the sign as the dynamic (and disappearing) centre of post-modern culture is free-floating, randomised, tautological, and homologous. The discourse of the sign begins just at that point where the expansive and representational world of the commodity-form dilates suddenly into the implosive and purely figurative scheme of the sign-form. Now, Baudrillard's specific contribution to post-structuralist discourse (and, for example, his most important advance beyond the structural linguistics of Saussure and beyond the critical sociology of Claude Lefort) is his radical diagnosis of the *sign* as the purest and most intensive expression possible of the heteronomy of the purely abstract quality of the commodity-form prophecied by Marx's *Capital.* Rather than situate the sign-form in opposition to the commodity-form (which would only entail the privileging of cultural discourse over political economy), Baudrillard accomplishes a much more spectacular, and dangerous, theorisation. His challenge to the now obsolete representational order of the commodity-form is this: in the *productivist* scheme of acculation, the theory of commodification sought to preserve use-value as a privileged referent against the abstraction, fungibility, and randomisation at the centre of the capitalist exchange-system. In the *simulational* scheme of advanced capitalist society, use-value and exchange-value conflate into mirrored aspects of a single process of abstract, semiological reproduction or, what's the same, the classical poles of signifier and signified dilate into a single structural homology at the nucleus of the logic of the sign. Baudrillard's challenge is then to strip away the subjectivity of use-value (the referential chain of signifieds) from critical cultural analysis, and to examine the purely relational and objective scheme of 'free floating' and 'semiurgical' objects. This, then, is a theory of commodification fully relative to the system of advanced capitalism. In Baudrillard's simulational model, the sign is the dark, and until now, hidden side

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of the commodity-form: the dark side which can *only* appear when the commodity is in eclipse as a referent of the *real*.

That Baudrillard has developed a 'logic of signification' (*The Mirror of Production, Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*) relevant to the simulational model at the centre of commodification in advanced capitalist society, only means that he has succeeded in teasing out the existence of the sign as *the basic structural logic of the commodity-form* and, what is more, in deciphering the sign as dead power. Consequently, what makes Baudrillard genuinely original is this: in his theorisation the sign — complete with its 'structural law of value', and its 'simulated models' — does not stand in fateful opposition to Marx's *Capital,* but, rather, represents its perfect completion. Baudrillard may be the last and best of all the Marxists just because he has broken the code of the commodity-form in modern culture. And he has accomplished this task, not by recuperating the referential signifiers of the commodity-form (there is *no* privileging of needs or labour here) but by undertaking a radically deconstructive strategy of thought. Anti-romantic and anti-subjectivist, Baudrillard teases out the 'referential illusion' at the heart of the purely *structuralist* logic of the system of advanced capitalism. In his estimation, modern culture has this *implosive* characteristic: use-value and exchange-value are stripped of their antinomic (and thus autonomous) status; and are transformed into endlessly refracted (and random) points in an aimless cycle of exchange which, being semiurgical and mirror-like, traces out the path of disintegration and regression *par excellence* in contemporary experience.

The theoretical implication is clear. After Baudrillard, *Capital* can only be read as a brilliant exploration of Nietzsche's grisly image of a nihilistic culture. Baudrillard remembers Marx by resituating *Capital* as an historically specific study of the modern (capitalist) phase of the genealogy of Western nihilism.

Marx/Nietzsche

> Le tourniquet de la répresentation y devient fou, mais d'une folie implosive, qui, loin d'être excentrique, louche vers le centre, vers sa propre répétition en abyme (Baudrillard 1976).
>
> A born leveller, and a cynic . . . (Marx 1954)

Jean Baudrillard is then the magician of Western Marxism. Just when we thought that the 'object' of *Capital* was about to disappear through the vanishing-point of the now obsolescent mercantilist law of value, Baudrillard has done the impossible. In a lightning-quick reversal of effects, he has managed to radicalise *Capital,* and to make Marx dangerous once more. And he has done this by the simple strategy of teasing out the Nietzsche in Marx's 'circuit of capital', by showing that only a slight trompe l'œil separates Marx's famous 'fetishism of the commodity-form' from Nietzsche's equally infamous 'will to power'. After Baudrillard, it has been impossible not to confront the political and theoretical conclusions which follow from reflecting upon *Capital* as the reverse, but parallel, image of *The Will to Power.* Not the will to power which exists on its *historical* side: the side of the psychology of sacrifice. That's the old and boring nihilism: its Christian expression with its 'sickliness' (Nietzsche) of a disembodied power in which everything is sublimated in favour of the theological norms of 'virtue, goodliness, and beauty' (Kroker 1984). No, the sacrificial side of the will to power is finally finished. And why? Because no one cares anymore about sanctity, for the same reason that accumulation is no longer taken seriously. We are on the down-side now of the will to power: the side of a cynical, infinite regress into disaccumulation, disintegration, and darkness. *Capital* makes its appearance as the master text of the will to power on its down-side: the side of power/seduction without limit. *Capital* is an exploration in depth of the purely *structuralist* phase of the will to power: that phase in which a general psychology of seduction combines with this new 'emotional combination' — *conscience-liquidation and the narcissistic ego.*

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Now, Baudrillard's hard lesson is this: read *Capital* as a brilliant recitative of the perfect nihilism at work in *The Will to Power*. This is a type of nihilism which functions under the language of the 'sign'; which works to transform all of the 'big numbers of the real' (Baudrillard) — capital, labour, utility, use-value — into 'perspectival appearances' (Nietzsche) which, even at the moment of their inception, are already on a downward, implosive spiral. *Capital* is a tragic reflection on the nihilism in the western mind. This because the 'commodity-form' with its 'double metamorphosis into signs', with its 'howling circuit of capital', with its constant 'pumping out' of the sphere of living, concrete labour into ABSTRACT LABOUR; this theorisation of dead money, dead labour, dead society (images which race past one another and then explode like reality-flashes on their way to a final, convulsive moment of exhaustion): all of these are just the detritus of the modern age. They are the imploded, forward side of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*.

Baudrillard is instructive to this extent. The nihilism in western culture which reached its (saintly) apex in the sickly psychology of sacrifice in Christian metaphysics, with its fetishism of conscience-recuperation and self-crucifixion, and then (supposedly) vanished as the psychological locus of the modern mind, didn't in fact, go away. Marx's *Capital* has an almost geographical importance in tracing the genealogy of nihilism in the modern project. This text exists (at first) as an infinitesimal, dark spot on the furthest horizon of the western mind: a distant nova which, in a fantastic explosion of energy, suddenly expands as the exchange principle spreads out.[11] *Capital* becomes *the* text of the modern century just when the imperfect nihilism of the psychology of sacrifice passes over into its opposite: the perfect (cynical) nihilism of the psychology of seduction. And what makes *Capital* such a compelling account of the 'value-form' of modern nihilism is just this: Marx stumbled upon the basic formula, and this in structural and not historical terms, for the functioning of nihilism in modern experience. When Marx (1954, p 77) said in his classic essay, 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof', that the commodity abounds in 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties', that it is 'magical' and 'alchemical', and that 'to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world', then we should take him seriously. For the commodity-form is, in fact, only a modern (material) formulation of a more ancient (metaphysical) principle. The commodity-form, this nucleus of the capitalist cycle of exchange, is *morphologically identical* (although driven on by the charisma of a different reality-effect: accumulation not grace) to the old Christian doctrine of the trinity. Not the doctrine of the trinity as an expression of theology: for the trinity is no more the 'reflex' of God than the 'circuit of capital' is the reflex of economy. But, instead, the trinity as the *fundamental metaphysical code* for the operation of the 'will to will' as the nucleus of western experience. Long before the commodity disappeared into the void of its own simulacra, the doctrine of the trinity expressed perfectly the 'structural law of value' at the centre of power and truth. This is just to say that the trinitarian formulation is the precursor of the sign. And this with its 'semantic cancellation' to a language of no nation; with its presentation of its antinomic terms (Father and son) as contingent effects; and with its reduction of living, embodied experience to an empty cycle of exchange, a '*degree-zero* in western consciousness. Now, just to the extent that the Christian expression of the will to power deployed 'God' as a reality-effect, disguising the inner, surrealistic slide in the circuit of grace; to that same extent, the 'circuit of capital' with its commodity-form undergoing an endless 'double metamorphosis' also deploys *accumulation* (consumption/production) as a reality-flash. There is something else going on in the 'fetishism of the commodity-form' and that's our incarceration in the discourse of a fully abstract (disembodied) power.

Nietzsche knew that nihilism would be forced to operate in the language of value: indeed, 'value-form' was his expression for the purely fictitious, cynical power at the centre of western experience. This was why Nietzsche (1968, p 276) always insisted that nihilism is

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about the 'projection of the conditions of (our) preservation into predicates of existence'. Marx also recognised that the commodity-form (expressed in the purely antinomic terms of: use-value/exchange value; labour for consumption/labour for production) produced a fully *abstract and random power*. In 'Machinery and Modern Industry', Marx was, in fact, a precursor of McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* in his description of the processing of workers in the industrial simulacrum. McLuhan (1964, p 56) may have noted that (our) relation to the technostructure was that of the 'sex organs of the machine world'; but Marx (1954, p 399) preceded him in speaking thus of the *dead power* at work in the factory system of production.

> Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman. But it is only in the factory system that this inversion acquires technical and palpable reality. By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry living, labour-power.

But what Marx missed in his chilling, and almost demonic, portrayal of 'dead labour' and what Baudrillard has discovered is just this: *the commodity-form is not antinomic but trinitarian*. There is also a silent *third-term* in the production of dead labour, cynical power, and dead capital, and that's the silent presence of the 'will to will' (Nietzsche) as the *abstract unity* which coordinates the antinomies of *living* labour does not exist outside of exchange; and the dynamic principle of the capitalist exchange-process is that it traces and retraces the same cycle of accumulation and disintegration which Nietzsche (1968, p 546) once described as the 'eternal recurrence'.

> Value therefore now becomes value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital. It comes out of circulation, enters into it again, preserves and multiplies itself within its circuit, comes back out of it with expanded bulk, and begins the same round ever afresh (Marx 1954, p 153).

It's just this fantastic 'inversion' of the order of experience; this 'satellisation of the real'; the 'semantic reduction' of living labour-power through a 'semiological cancellation' to the general universal equivalent of dead money (Baudrillard 1976, 1979); this fetishism of the sign: which drives on *Capital* and makes of it a bitter description of the contemporary, 'fictitious' form of the will to power.

Marx was a romantic in the tragic tradition just to this extent. Against the demonic thrust of *Capital,* against our obliteration in the abstract medium of the 'instruments of production', he wished to preserve a privileged space of freedom in concrete, living labour, in use-value with a vertical axis, in something REAL. But Nietzsche (1968, p 415) was the more grimly realistic. He said of the 'slandered instincts' that they could not be preserved in our plunge downwards into the simulation of the social. Marx's 'living labour' is the economic analogue of Nietzsche's 'slandered instincts'. But against Nietzsche's conclusions concerning the cancellation of the REAL at work in the cycle of an ABSTRACT POWER that was always only a perspectival simulation; Marx wished to preserve the ontological autonomy of labour. Everything in *Capital* is perfectly down-beat on the abstract disembodiment of labour: its exhaustion in its present 'pumped out' form; its decadence as only another instance of a 'condition of survival projected into a predicate of being'; its location as the (utopian) criticism which volatilises the scheme of production. But Marx compromised, and this fatefully. Against the theoretical momentum of *Capital* as a brilliant vivisection of nihilism (not operating in the perfectly *relational* language of seduction), Marx went, instead, for a *naturalistic* interpretation of labour. It's just Marx's 'compromise', his blindspot on the existence of the commodity form only as an 'ABSTRACT UNITY' giving a certain coherence to experience, that makes of Marx, just like Kant, a 'great delayer'.[12] At the very last moment, *Capital* transforms itself into its opposite: a dogmatic, because antinomic, defense of the deep

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categories of the capitalist episteme which, in any event, can only save itself from (our) knowledge of the darkness within by legitimating representational logic, and the 'referential illusion' which is everywhere now. In making of labour a referential finality, Marx was the brilliant perpetrator and then victim of a sign-crime.

• • • • • •

Marx wrote during the ascendant of capitalism. Baudrillard writes when everyone, most of all the capitalists riding Marx's 'serpent of gold', know that capital cannot save us, nor labour either. We are deep into Nietzsche's cycle of the 'in vain'. But it's not mean streets this time but fat city. In the Middle Ages, the down-side of the cycle of cynical power, the time of the most intense disenchantment with the psychology of sacrifice, went under the sign of *acedia*. As every Catholic prelate knew at that time, the sin of *acedia* meant a sudden loss of the will to go on; a mutiny, under the sign of death, of the living body against a cynical power (see Weinstein 1982). Well, Baudrillard tells us this much: we're deep in the cycle of acedia again and the certain sign of its presence is just what Barthes (1982) has described in *The Empire of Signs* as the contagion of 'panic boredom' which spreads out everywhere.[13] It's panic boredom, not fear, which is after all the psychological fuel for the 'howling spirit of revenge' which operates now as the emotional combinatorial of the modern system. Consequently, while Marx may have analysed capitalism in its bull phase; Baudrillard is just the inverse. His thought begins with the instant inversion of the 'circuit of capital' into a cycle of disintegration, exhaustion, and decadence. This is the decade of 'viciousness for fun'. The search is now on for a desperate revival of the real: REAL PEOPLE, REAL VALUES, REAL SEX. But as Baudrillard would say, if there is today such a desperate fascination with the REAL, then that's just because we live with the terrible knowledge that the real does not exist anymore; or more precisely, that the REAL appears to us now only as a vast and seductive simulation. And if, in the popular nihilism of the '80s the slogan which leads on the (simulated) discovery of the real is 'Go for it', then this just indicates that there is nothing left to go for; that we live now in full awareness of Nietzsche's accusation of the 'in vain' as the sign of modern existence.

Indeed, between the timne of Marx and Baudrillard, there is brought to a grisly conclusion two types of nihilism. Marx's 'circuit of capital' produces as its psychological fall-out Nietzsche's 'last men'. In *Time as History,* the Canadian philosopher George Grant (1969) said that 'last men' are everywhere now in Europe and North America. These are the inhabitants (Baudrillard's 'silent majorities') of the modern order who 'want their comforts in pleasure and entertainment', but who can never experience, and intensely so, the agony of Nietzsche's abyss because 'they have never learned to despise themselves' (Grant 1969, p 33). What is this, then, but a psychological read-out of the burghers of the factory system? The psychology of the 'last men' alternates between the poles of a 'howling spirit of revenge' and the happy consciousness of consumer culture. They are pragmatists just because they have learned to love deeply, and so need deeply as their very principle of programmation, the seductive strategies of consumer culture. However, over and beyond the 'silent majorities' of last men, Baudrillard points to the existence now of the other, more advanced, version of modern nihilism: the 'perfect nihilist'. Occupants of the command posts of advanced capitalist society, perfect nihilists ride, as their principle of being, the hurricane of the downward spiral of the 'circuit of capital'. These are the bionic beings (part-sign/part body) who act, and perhaps only can act, in full knowledge of cynical power and cynical history. Indeed, the political method of the 'perfect nihilists' is to embrace cynicism itself as a strategy of command. More aware than the 'last men' of consumer culture of Nietzsche's legacy to us of 'freedom in a universe indifferent to our purposes', the perfect nihilists would always prefer to will cynically than not to will at all (Grant 1969, P 36). Baudrillard's world of the

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simulacrum is just this: the perfect freedom of remaking the world in a universe which provides no purpose to our willing.

* * * * * *

This is just to say that Baudrillard has succeeded, where many others have failed, in deciphering the 'social hieroglyphics' of the commodity-form. He has done so in two ways. First, he has discovered the 'pure sign' to be the essence and secret destiny of the commodity-form. And second, he has disclosed that if the 'fetishism of the sign' indicates the spreading out of the exchange-process in western experience (one that is semiurgical, random, abstract, and tautological), then this is only because at the (analogical) centre of the sign is the 'structural law of value', and if we tear away, at the nucleus of the structural formulation of value-exchange (hidden away under the refuse of price, abstract labour, and surplus-value) is Nietzsche's 'will to will'. What else could Baudrillard have meant in *The Mirror of Production* by the co-referentiality of signifier/signified than that at the very centre of the cycle of capital accumulation was a fantastic surrealistic reversal. Baudrillard has revealed the existence of the 'will to will' as the third term, the abstract unity, which makes of the mirror of production a totality, and which lends the fiction of *Capital,* the 'double-metamorphosis' of the commodity-form, a certain abstract coherency.

* * * * * *

It's not so difficult to determine that Marx and Nietzsche shared a deep and common affinity in meditating upon the historical (Christian) and materialistic (capitalist) expressions of the will to power. Both Nietzsche and Marx always focussed on the main event: the unreal inversion of modern experience into an abstract unity, a unity which depended for its very (non)existence on the preservation of the 'referential illusion' at the heart of western experience. What is puzzling though, and I think the really radical question today, is why the exponents of Western Marxism and, in particular, critical sociology are so repulsed by Nietzsche's pessimism? Surely it cannot be a problem of political practice: even Sartre said that political practice in the modern century must begin, and perhaps can *only* begin, with unrelieved pessimism: the determination to think without illusions and to develop a realism of concepts on the basis of understanding cynical power. If Baudrillard's deconstructive image of the simulacrum, and his great refusals of the referential categories of history, society, and normalising power, accurately indicate a fundamental rupture in the objective constitution of advanced capitalism, then Nietzsche's 'pessimism' (which is really the method of 'perspectival' understanding) becomes an entirely *realistic* strategy for exploring twentieth-century experience. In this event, the interpretation of advanced capitalist society under the sign of nihilism is *the* basic condition for human emancipation as well as for the recovery of the tragic sense of critical theory.

But if it is not a question of the realism of political practice, then might it be that the hostility of Marxist sociology for Nietzsche has its origins in Nietzsche's position as the stalking horse of Marx's great compromise. Marx insisted that concrete labour, the historical side of use-value and an emanciptory production, be taken out of play; and preserved as a privileged ontology against the ablation of *Capital.* But Nietzsche's 'accusation' and his intimation of 'doom' for Marxist sociology was just this: in the modern century there are no longer *any* privileged finalities. The 'horizon has been wiped clean' and not just of the finality of god (on the *metaphysical* side of the will to power), but also of capital, labour, democracy, and utility, of all the 'referents' of the real (on the *productivist* side of the will to power).

It's just Nietzsche's accusation (against a cynical history) and his poetic (of an embodied power) which are the fateful questions forming the locus of the critique of the 'referential

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illusion'. And it's exactly at this point that there begins the Nietzschean regression in Marx's *Capital*. It's the sign of Nietzsche which haunts *Capital* now; and which promises to return us, beyond Marx and Nietzsche, to the question, once again, of myth and enlightenment (Habermas 1982).

Notes

[1] Jean Baudrillard's, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* represents a great rupture in Baudrillard's intellectual discourse. Until this text, Baudrillard had counterposed the symbolic domain as a counter-movement to the abstract sphere of the sign. After this writing, Baudrillard is resigned to the loss of the symbol as an upsurge against the *simulational* model of experience. This text, then, marks the moment when Baudrillard breaks with the tradition of French existentialism.

[2] 'C'est l'euphorie même de la simulation qui se veut abolition de la cause et de l'effet, de l'origine et de la fin, à quoi elle substitue le redoublement'. (Baudrillard 1976, pp 114-115).

[3] Baudrillard's refusal of the 'perspectival space of the social' is aimed directly at Foucault's theorisation of the closed space of the 'panoptic'. Baudrillard's closing of the ring of signifier/signified or, what is the same, his theorisation of simulacra in conjunction with the structural law of value breaks directly with Habermas' hermeneutical interpretation of ideology.

[4] Against Habermas *and* Foucault, Baudrillard theorises a non-representational and non-figurative *spatialized* universe.

[5] F.Nietzsche (1968, p 199), *The Will to Power,* 'The *subject* is only a fiction: the ego of which one speaks when one censures egoism does not exist at all'.

[6] 'Only now Foucault does not see that power is dying (even infinitesimal power), that it is not just pulverized but pulverulent, that it is undermined by a reversal and tormented by a reversibility and a death which cannot appear in the genealogical process alone' (Baudrillard 1980, p 100).

[7] For Baudrillard's most careful theorisation of the three orders of value, see particularly Chapter II, L'Ordre des Simulacres (pp 75-128) and Chapter III, 'La Mode ou la Féerie du Code' (pp 129-151), in *Léchange symbolique et la mort.*

[8] In other words, everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production, even innovation and transgression, is immediately produced as sign and exchange value (relational value of the sign). (Baudrillard 1981, p 87).

[9] 'Nous en sommes là aujourd'hui: dans l'indécidabilité, à l'ère des *théories flottantes* comme des monnaies flottantes.' (Baudrillard 1976, p 21)

[10] As Marx (1954, p 92) says of the purely *cynical* existence of the commodity-form: 'In this sense every commodity is a symbol, since, in so far as it has value, it is only the material envelope of the human labour spent upon it'

[11] Marx (1954, p 92) also says 'In proportion as exchange bursts its local bonds, and the value of commodities more and more expands into an embodiment of human labour in the abstract, in the same proportion the character of money attaches itself to commodities that are by Nature fitted to perform the social function of a universal equivalent'.

[12] This, at least, was Nietzsche's description of Kant's compromise in seeking to recuperate *truth and morality.*

[13] For Barthes, 'panic boredom' was psychological fall-out on an *atopic* society.

[14] For a brilliant and fully tragic account of the modern meaning of Nietzsche's nihilism, see George Grant's *Time as History* (1969).

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