

The Place of Marx in Contemporary Thought: The Case of Jean Baudrillard.¹

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I. Introduction

The grand Marxist promise has ended (Baudrillard, 2001b:95).

Marx believed that in economics and its dialectical procedure he found fundamental agency, all he found was what haunts it (Baudrillard, [1976] 1993c:237).²

Marx is still of central importance to class analysis of contemporary society and for many his overall critique of capitalism remains unsurpassed. Yet the impact of Marx on contemporary thought continues to moderate as we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century. One way we can consider the place of Marx in contemporary thought is to assess the place he occupies in the thought of recent major theorists.

This paper examines the place of Marx in Jean Baudrillard's writing (he appears in thirty of Baudrillard's 45 books between 1968 and 2007). Marx's place in Baudrillard is telling of a time in which his work has been subjected to radical criticism and in which Marx is justifiably becoming less central to contemporary thought. Baudrillard is an important barometer to use to consider what has happened to Marx as he was one of the first to begin to seriously challenge Marx's writings. Indeed, the break from Marx(ism) was a significant event in Baudrillard's life which made possible so much of his mature thought. Baudrillard's encounter with Marx, while seldom referred to in contemporary theoretical discussions, is highly indicative of what has happened to Marx in recent years.

This paper examines Baudrillard's writing about Marx(ism) at two levels: 1) Baudrillard's more general challenges to Marx and, 2) his more specific charges concerning Marx's failure to significantly surpass bourgeois analysis. Both contain difficult and interesting lessons especially for those trying to locate Marx's importance in contemporary theory.

II. Baudrillard's General Challenge to Marx

Baudrillard did not believe in the death of Marxist thought. Responding to a question in 1993 he said that Marx's thought "continues to make a difference even though it does not have the impact it once had politically" (1993a:203). As he also told interviewers in 1993 "Marx's analysis was certainly influential upon my work, but I immediately came to question it, became ambivalent about it, and distanced myself from it" (*Ibid.*:20). A decade later he told François L'Yvonnet that his break with Marx came during the writing of the *Mirror of Production* ([1973] 1975) in the early 1970s ([2001] 2004:20). This is correct but a break is certainly detectable in his work theorizing *The System of Objects* ([1968] 1996) and *The Consumer Society* ([1970] 1998). For me Baudrillard evolved as a thinker in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Marx's radical other.

For Baudrillard the general problem with Marx is that time had, in important ways, passed his analysis by. For my part I have no doubt that Baudrillard would have preferred to live in a time when Marx's writings were fresh and new, when he felt politics could have more meaning, and there were more things in which to believe. However, Baudrillard like all of us, had to face the challenges of postmodernity and the revolution of our time which is, he said: "the uncertainty revolution" ([1990] 1993b:43). Baudrillard's assessment of Marx is intricately connected to his own quest to embrace the challenge of radicality in uncertain times. This led Baudrillard to write, what were for Marxists, heretical words in his major work on Marx: "Marx is not in an historical position to speak the truth" (1973] 1975:117). For Baudrillard, Marx was merely the owner of "a perspective" which was resigned to one view concerning the "laws of history and dialectics" (*Ibid.*:162). As early as 1973 Baudrillard [who adopted a political detachment even before May 1968 (see 1993a:74)], wrote that all of Marx's concepts must be questioned ([1973] 1975:21), and that what is required is a critique of the structural limits of Marx's assessment (*Ibid.*:65 ff.).

At a more general level then, Baudrillard's challenge to Marx is that his writing can no longer be taken at face value, as it still was by several thinkers, to explain contemporary society (*Ibid.*:152).³ In this, Marx's thought succumbs to an unavoidable reversibility –

the inversion which is the fate of every theory and critique ([1973] 1975:50). Baudrillard was also among the first to point out that we had already entered a post-Marxist age (1993a:20). For Baudrillard a kind of revolution had taken place in value which Marx's analysis was unable to explain ([1976] 1993c: 6 ff.). What he meant by this is that Marx had focused on "classical" value – the more natural stage of use-value and the commodity stage of exchange value. For Baudrillard value had passed through a structural stage (sign value), and was entering a fractal stage – a point of no reference at all "where value radiates in all directions" ([1990] 1993b:5). As he told Philippe Petit: "we lost use-value, then good old exchange value, obliterated by speculation, and we are currently losing even sign value for an indefinite signalitics" ([1997] 1998b:3-4).

Baudrillard also noted, contra Marx, that "capital has not lurched from one crisis to another as he predicted" ([2000] 2002:23). In Baudrillard's assessment, Marx was turned away from radical exigency (as were many 19th century thinkers), by the need he felt to devise historical laws ([1973] 1975:161). Marx had adopted a law of necessity and the idea of perpetual transcendence according to Baudrillard (*Ibid.*:61). History is thus transhistoricized by Marx (universalized) as the class struggle and the mode of production is projected into all of history (*Ibid.*:47, 67). This mindset, combined with a belief in dialectics, allows Marx to fabricate labour power and production into the equivalent of historical reason working itself out ([1976] 1993c:12). In Marx then, Baudrillard finds the negativity of labour lost as it has been raised to an absolute value ([1973] 1975:34) and so, within Marx's writing, labour becomes an ideological concept (*Ibid.*:43). Marx also, says Baudrillard, "eliminates the analysis of ideological labour" ([1972] 1981:89) and, in the end, leaves us with an enigma which Baudrillard expresses in the devastating question: "how is surplus value born?" ([1973] 1975:26 ff.).

For Baudrillard, Marx constructed a theory which is "irredeemably partial" ([1972] 1981:165) lacking a truly "radical analysis of labour and production" ([1973] 1975:21-51). Among the most vital of these "general-level" problems Baudrillard had with Marx is that "ideological priority is given to exchange value" (*Ibid.*:24). Marx thus fails to conceive of social wealth being founded by other than labour and production (*Ibid.*:29

ff.). Marx's writing is thus incapable of doing that which it promises – theorizing total social practice (*Ibid.*:152) and is entirely incapable of “responding to a social process that far exceeds material production” (such as contemporary mass media) ([1972] 1981:165-66). Baudrillard thus radically departs with Marx in developing his own understanding of the importance of symbolic exchange.

For Baudrillard symbolic exchange concerns reversibility – the fact that all systems eventually break down as the result of their own success – which operates at a radically different level than Marx's understanding of exchange value ([1973] 1975:51). It is not dialectics that will end capitalism for Baudrillard, but capitalism itself that will end capitalism. As for dialectics, in our time of hypertelia, proliferation, and indeterminacy, they are finished for Baudrillard (1993a:91; and [1976] 1993c:59). Transcendence, that most urgent Marxist concept, is no longer a viable according to Baudrillard ([1999] 2001:51). For Baudrillard, the world no longer had a chance of escape into an upper realm of Truth, God, the Law, or the Idea, but merely the lower reaches of immanence ([1987] 1990b:86). This is precisely what makes our time so unbearable to so many in Baudrillard's assessment (2005:25).

Baudrillard also questions the place of freedom in Marx's analysis. He says that for Marx, freedom is based on the domination of nature (a very capitalist idea) ([1973] 1975:67), and that Marx makes a promise of liberation out of what is (and has repeatedly been shown to be since Marx's time) “a process of repression” (*Ibid.*:154). What happens with Marx, and Marxists who follow him, is that a great irony occurs – those who seek to revolutionize class struggle actually put an end to it “burying it under a theoretical project” ([1977] 1987:13). It is this very contingent, determinist, universalized theoretical project – ideologically committed to productivism via labour and man's [sic] command of nature, that leads us, in Baudrillard's assessment, to the deeper and more specific problem with Marx: his failure to provide an alternative to productivist capitalism ([1972] 1981:90).

III. Baudrillard on Marx's Failure to Provide An Alternative To Capitalism

Baudrillard ultimately finds Marx able to offer a thoroughgoing critic of capitalism in his own time but one which lacks the kind of radicality we need today. And, even in his analysis of his own time, Marx is further charged with misunderstanding those capitalist formations ([1973] 1975:93-109). To be precise, it is, in Baudrillard's terms, the "production of the production system" which escapes Marx (*Ibid.*:66). Baudrillard has a very good point here as in Marx there is a constant assumption (it is intrinsic to his understanding of labour and nature), that production is taken for granted – what is wrong is merely how it is organized. So, Baudrillard quite rightly gets to the core of some very important implications of Marx's thought – especially the obvious fact (to everyone but Marxists), that production (as a form) is not subjected by Marx to radical analysis (*Ibid.*:20). Baudrillard says that Marx has kind of "theoretical allergy to everything that isn't material production and productive labour" ([1972] 1981:167 ff.). Marx's theory is, for Baudrillard, one that "analyzes the social field that it produces" ([1976] 1993c:221-22).

This specific challenge leads Baudrillard to a series of insights concerning Marx, which were for a time in the 1970's and 1980's, distinctive to him as a theorist. Baudrillard's radical challenge to Marx is that his perspective suffers (along with a commitment to productivism and over-determination of man as producer) ([1973] 1975:31-32), the same humanist virus which bourgeois thought shares (*Ibid.*:49). Marx's very analysis, despite itself, is charged by Baudrillard with "assisting the cunning of capital", "contributing to the capitalist mythology", and "reproducing the system of political economy" ([1973] 1975:31; and [1972] 1981:134). In its commitment to continued productivism (after the revolution), Marxism finds itself ironically in the same position as bourgeois economics ([1972] 1981:115). By centering itself (from the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 (1977) onwards) on "man's productive vocation" ([1973] 1975:36), Marx's assessment of capitalist society succumbs to a dialectic and Christian ethic which produces a critique which is not radical, but rather, plays a key role in reproducing the existing system of political economy (*Ibid.*:36-37). It is difficult to argue with Baudrillard on this point as

every single authority which attempted to bring about a revolution based on Marx's ideas did indeed reproduce a state-capitalist version of capitalist political economy (*Ibid.*:67). Beyond this devastating problem, Baudrillard says that Marx was unable to foresee "that capital would, in the face of an immanent threat to its existence, launch itself into an orbit beyond the relations of production, and political contradictions, to make itself autonomous, to totalize the world in its own image" ([1990] 1993b:10). Baudrillard refers to this as our contemporary transeconomic condition "where classical economics gets lost in pure speculation" (2000:52).

For Baudrillard then, Marx makes the mistake of attempting to offer a radical critique of political economy in the form of political economy ([1973] 1975:50). Marx does not produce a radical alternative to productivism – but merely the "socialist" mirror of capitalist production (*Ibid.*:152). Marx's illusion, and all writing ultimately succumbs to illusion for Baudrillard, is that he believed in the "possibility of revolution within the system" ([1976] 1993c:35). This leaves us with the difficult fact that Marx's theory, when we cut it to the bone as Baudrillard does, "never stopped being on the side of capitalism" (2001b:95). This is because Marx's thought "retains concepts which depend on the metaphysics of market economy" ([1973] 1975:59). This is why Baudrillard was able to go beyond Marx and to find, in places like California (or France), a form of revised Marxism functioning as advanced capitalism ([1986] 1988:46). Marx and his followers were thus never able to go beyond capitalism (some form of state capitalism based on productivism) and a range of neo-Christian and humanist understandings of labour. In our contemporary times Baudrillard finds those who were to be the heroes of the revolution turned into the silent but tired anti-heroes of consumption ([1970] 1998:182).

IV. Conclusion

Among the insights we gain from Baudrillard's writings on Marx is that capital (its historical function) produces the social. In this Marx was right. But when the objective determinations of capital lose their force, Baudrillard correctly points out: "the social will

not overcome capital according to some dialectical movement”. This means that, for Baudrillard, the Left is dying “of the same causes as power” (2001b:97). This is also why Left and Right are becoming less useable as analytic categories and why many have become dissatisfied with or indifferent to them.

If we take Baudrillard’s understanding of Marx to its logical conclusions we arrive at some provocative challenges. The Left for example, despite itself, is never really anything more than a prosthesis of the right (*Ibid.*) All the Left can do now, especially in the age of ecological-correctness, is play the sad role of “setting up models of pacified socialization” ([1976] 1993c:173). This has become, pathetically, the fate of several progressive groups (including some who are unionists, feminists, and environmentalists) especially those who seek to revive public morality by pitifully begging on bended knee before the Law. Others merely remain “stuck in denunciation” ([2000] 2002:206). As much as the Left persists at all it does so in many ways as a last vestige of Marx – defunct and “spontaneously doing the work of the right” ([1981] 1994:16).

Another implication of our post-Marx(ist) condition is that we are left with a circumstance in which “people are no longer fighting alienation but a kind of dispossession” ([1997] 1998:19). In Baudrillard’s terms this means that we are no longer combating the spectre of alienation, but that of hyper-reality ([1995] 1996:66). Baudrillard did not like our contemporary condition but he did his best to thrive as a thinker and a writer while coming to grips with its radical uncertainty. Writing for himself, beyond the political, after any possibility of transcendence, was his post-Marxist politics. As he said with such heart rendering poignancy for a man of his generation: “there are no children of May” (2001b:74). And so Baudrillard leaves us to ask “Who are we?” and “where are we going?” largely without Marx.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper appears as “Маркс Бодрийяра” (“Baudrillard’s Marx”) in Russian translation in the Russian journal *Khora: The Journal of Modern and Comparative Foreign Philosophy*. 2009, Volume 2: 84-88. ISSN: 2070-805x. Also available as a PDF document (in Russian) at: <http://www.jkhora.nard.ru/2009-02-06.pdf>

² The date of original publication of Baudrillard’s books in French appears in square brackets throughout this paper.

³ Baudrillard notes elsewhere that Marx also offers a distorted view of primitive societies ([1976] 1993:140; and [1973] 1975:49 ff.).