

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*. New York: Berg, 2005, 213 p.

This book gathers, deepens and extends Baudrillard's thought of the past two decades and may well enjoy a similar relationship with sociology as has C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination*. It is a book likely to be ignored by leading sociologists of the day, yet one that will be remembered as having served a death sentence upon the discipline as it was once known.

Baudrillard engages with our loss of passion for reality and truth which have not ended because of a lack of them, but rather, "it is the excess of reality that makes us stop believing in it" (19). Our condition (which has long made Baudrillard very uncomfortable) involves the technical saturation of life in what he terms Integral Reality: "the perpetrating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is 'liberated,' everything comes to fruition and has a meaning..." (17). We are fundamentalists of a reality that is now disappearing into virtual reality whereby we find the disintegration of the reality principle itself. The debate about meaning and truth which has been deepening for twenty years in the academy here finds a Nietzschean philosophy brought forward into the contemporary: truth is merely illusion that we do not yet realize to be illusion. Baudrillard is a contemporary philosopher for whom meaning, truth or the real, can only appear along a local horizon as partial objects. This makes him a very seductive object for a new generation.

At the centre of our interaction with the world rests not reality, but images and appearances (which reality hides behind). The image, bound neither to truth nor reality, is something that Baudrillard believes affects us directly "below the level of representation at the level of intuition, of perception" (91). Images are bound to nothing but appearance, and with the forcing of the whole of the "real" into the visual, human beings move from being simply victims of images to transforming themselves into images (identity-image, image politics). The ultimate violence done to the image, including the image of humanity perfected through genetics, takes place in the computer. No one seems more aware of the experiment humanity is conducting on itself, to see if anything human can survive, than Baudrillard.

The proliferation of media, live (real-time) streams, and reality shows (the confusion of existence and its double), has caused the event to become “undecided and virtual” (75). One thinks of how most people today “know” an historical figure like Napoleon or an event like the Holocaust (through movies and television). When events, historical or current, are fed through the same media processors that do not question the illegality of the American led invasion of Iraq, or who were duped by the faked massacre at Timisoara in the 1980s, they enter into a place of uncertainty – a place where things are radically different from what they were. This poses dramatic problems for disciplines based in moral judgment (such as the vast majority of sociology as practiced today – a hot sociology of politics, morality, criticism and decidability – at a time when our mediated existence renders impossible value judgment with certainty).

Interactivity surrounds us on all sides: videos, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, Virtual Reality. Certainly we will all soon tire of carrying cell phones, laptops and I-pods (already our essential electronic prosthetics outnumber our hands) and strap on our wearable computers as developed for us by our academic colleague Steven Mann. Surely we will then realize that the purpose of introducing these technologies as individual components was simply to make us yearn for the collective super-prosthetic the wearable computer represents. These are not, however, tools of resistance for Baudrillard as they are for Mann, but rather the means through which we are reduced to mere integrated circuits of the system. As our laptops auto-correct our typos today, Baudrillard wonders when, after we are all circuits in the system, our thoughts will be auto-corrected? We face a much deeper problem than faced by the protagonists in the recent film *Minority Report*.

Sociologists are very reluctant to take Baudrillard seriously for the same reason an earlier sociology was fearful of Mills: he puts the life of the discipline, as it is known to its power brokers, at risk.

The most famous passage in Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* runs:

Nowadays people often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct. What ordinary people are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieu, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel (Mills, 14).

Mills was not searching for the easiest solution – thousands of functionalists following Parsons were providing that as Mills tidily pointed out. Today, Baudrillard also resists the easy solution:

The hypothesis of objective reality exerts such a hold on our minds only because it is by far the easiest solution. ...The exact hypothesis is that man is born unfree, that the world is born untrue, non-objective, non-rational. But this radical hypothesis is definitely beyond proof, unverifiable and, in a sense, unbearable. Hence the success of the opposite hypothesis, of the easiest hypothesis. ...Despairing of confronting otherness, seduction, the dual relation of destiny, we invent the easiest solution: freedom. ...Despairing of confronting uncertainty and radical illusion, we invent the easiest solution: reality. ...Despairing of an aim, salvation or an ideal, we invent for ourselves the easiest solution: happiness. ...Being incapable of accepting thought (the idea that the world thinks us, the intelligence of evil), we invent the easiest solution, the technical solution: artificial intelligence. ...Against all sovereign hypotheses are ranged the easiest solutions. And all the easiest solutions lead to catastrophe. Against the hypothesis of uncertainty: the illusion of truth and reality. Against the hypothesis of destiny: the illusion of freedom. Against the hypothesis of evil: the illusion of misfortune. Against the hypothesis of becoming: the illusion of change (47-49).

The moment one takes Baudrillard seriously, everything is at risk because the question of transcendence appears for the final time on the horizon. Sociology, especially its Marxist and feminist variants, those most abused and ungrateful of philosophy's children, perform the task of keeping transcendence alive in academic discourse on a daily basis. Baudrillard's point, and it is a very serious one, is that with everything now exposed to transparency, this is precisely why there is no more transcendence. Baudrillard doesn't like this any more than the rest of us, but he feels we have to face it. It is no wonder why Marxist and feminist sociology (is it not striking how deeply committed both are to the Law and to the real?), like the vast machine of philosophy, are so wary of Baudrillard. He has pointed out that their intellectual lives are at stake. Baudrillard points to their death as Mills once frightened functionalists.

Baudrillard, then, is the imagination's last chance. Sociology has taken the idea of imagination and forced it, as it does all of its concepts, to serve power – the powers that be in sociology as well as others. Sociology eventually learned to take Mills seriously as the generations changed. Does Baudrillard face the same prospect among sociologists today (and members of other disciplines as his challenge goes beyond any one discipline)? Mills was once employed to kill sociology in order to save it – is this to be Baudrillard's fate? Let us hope his influence is even more catastrophic – as we enter into the transdisciplinary – for all of our sakes. As precious as sociology has become, our task is now to achieve escape velocity from it as from all disciplines. Baudrillard may well help a new generation pass through sociology as Mills once helped a previous one pass through its time of transition. The time is especially ripe as the powers that be in sociology are once again paying little attention.

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