

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN BAUDRILLARD and MARC GUILLAUME. *Radical Alterity*. Translated by Ames Hodges. New York: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2008, 165 p.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD and ENRIQUE VALIENTE NOAILLES. *Exiles From Dialogue*. Translated by Chris Turner. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007, 142 p.

With the death of Baudrillard (March 2007) the translation of his work into English is coming to an end. These two titles will be followed by only one more (*Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, Seagull Press, April, 2009).

Radical Alterity is a fascinating dialogue between two wise and provocative thinkers. Radical alterity – the Other viewed as one who does not want to be understood and will not be understood – is regarded by both Guillaume and Baudrillard as an endangered conceptual species. On one side, the Other is hounded by conservatives operating under the guise of multiculturalism which seeks to turn all Others into the same under a regime of assimilation. From a more well meaning, but no less dangerous approach, come those who would replace “Otherness” with “difference.” Difference undermines and ultimately destroys Otherness – the hard (radical) variety that is most resistant to assimilation.

Alterity is understood by Guillaume and Baudrillard as a masterpiece in peril and they look for it everywhere. Against the grain of techno-scientific cultures they wonder if the concept of alterity isn't missing from the discussion of artificial intelligence and communication. On the level of the individual both refuse to be duped by notions of shared identity and close similarity with Others. For Baudrillard one never becomes an insider in any group, especially those to which one belongs. We have long enough problematized “identity” to know that no one is exempt from foreignness. Their conversation on this point reminded me of the British painter Francis Bacon (d. 1993) who frequently placed an abstract swirl in the face of a sitter – including his self-portraits. For Bacon this mark represented the unknowable aspect of everyone – including the self (see Gerry Coulter, “Overcoming the Epistemological Break: Francis Bacon and Jean Baudrillard and the Intersections of Art and Theory,” *Euro Art Magazine*, Number 5, Winter 2007):

<http://www.euroartmagazine.com/new/?issue=6&page=1&content=140>

Being external is an expression of alterity and there is no better example of it than Baudrillard's passage through French academe and sociology. Eternal incomprehensibility also fits Baudrillard's understanding that thought should

seek poetic (not empirical) resolution. Why are we so interested in conquering the Other if not to incorporate him/her into our system? Quantitative social thought seeks to know the Other, to quantify the Other, to possess social “DNA” the way corporations seek to collect everyone’s genetic DNA. The position of radical alterity is not interested in knowing the world but in enhancing its enigmaticalness. This is the truly radical position today and we find very little of it in our system or in sociology. Yet it is the among the greatest weapons against globalism.

Baudrillard and Guillaume are two striking examples of system failure – of a system’s failure to integrate everyone despite the presence of comprehensive regimes of education and mass persuasion. Their dialogue is a powerful reminder of how far sociological thought has drifted from radicality. All of Baudrillard’s books contain hope and this book’s fatal and tragic hope is staked in valuing Otherness. Value the Otherness of the human vs. machine and system, the Otherness of Other people, and the Otherness of animals. Sociologists might take much from this approach and perhaps even become Other from sociology – seeking a wider horizon of thought than many have allowed themselves for some time. Baudrillard and Guillaume offer a xenophilic respect for Otherness that serves as a foil to xenophobia. In the strong spirit of xenophilia that which is foreign is valued precisely for what allows it to be, and remain, foreign.

Exiles From Dialogue consists of sixteen short chapters in which two friends (Baudrillard and Noailles) challenge each other and the history of thought in a penetrating conversation. It is a lesson in how radical thinkers operate when they do not labour under the weight of humanism. Among Baudrillard’s challenges has long been that we be more humane than humanist. We are constantly reminded by their conversation about how much we gave up in abandoning our former contract with metaphysics in favour of a pact with things. The replacement of spiritual transcendence with efforts at earthly perfection (which underwrites modernity) is also the basis of how disciplines like sociology came to replace philosophy and religion (part of an overall shift from upward focused transcendence to a downward focused transcendence) (37). Noailles and Baudrillard favour a longer view which understands the deficiencies of both metaphysical and object focused worlds. Together they posit that a significant part of our problem today is that we take appearances (behind which reality hides) for the Real. Reality, like God, exists only if you believe in it.

The purpose of thought is not to verify the real in empirical discourse but rather, to challenge it into disappearance. Against 2500 years of philosophy which has sought to ask why is there something rather than nothing, Baudrillard and Noailles posit that thought should focus on why there is nothing rather than something. Such a philosophical starting point allows both to seek a poetic resolution of the world. Here theory is understood as challenge where thought can only abolish itself. Thought must be able to operate with an infinite spectrum available to it (142).

The conversation moves quickly from religion (which has been replaced by a vengeful techno-science in the newest version of our Last Judgment), to cloning and the promise of immortality (understood here as suicide in slow motion), to

economics (now that generalized speculation has taken over only the nothing circulates), to an overall assessment that by running away from Death our system merely rushes to its appointment with it – not unlike the story of the soldier in the Samarkand story Baudrillard told in *Seduction*:

Consider the story of the soldier who meets Death at a crossing of the marketplace, and he believes he saw him make a menacing gesture in his direction. He rushes to the king's palace and asks the king for his best horse in order that he might flee during the night far from Death, as far as Samarkand. Upon which the king summons Death to the palace and reproaches him for having frightened one of his best servants. "I didn't mean to frighten him. It was just that I was surprised to see this soldier here, when we had a rendez-vous tomorrow in Samarkand."

Jean Baudrillard (1990 [1979]: 72) *Seduction*. Translated by Brian Singer. Montreal: New World Perspectives.

The challenge embraced by this book is to take what you are given and to give back more. For Baudrillard this means taking a world that is given to us enigmatic and unintelligible and giving it back even more enigmatic and more unintelligible. Thinking with Baudrillard is like walking over the surface of a Moebius strip in which the reverse becomes the obverse and the positive becomes the negative. Dialectics are replaced by a kind of curving or involution of the world into itself (23). The challenge for thought then is to create a new pact with the poetic in complicity not with the Real, but with appearances. Since Nietzsche we have understood that Truth is merely an illusion which we will eventually come to know as such. For social thought this means that all theory is fiction. Yet so much social thought still lives in a world of disillusion under an epistemological break. This break relegates all non-"scientific" knowledge to some prehistory of knowledge. Theory, like any art form, can never settle for being made into a means for counting. Theory is a way of proceeding against all systems.

What price do we pay when we ignore approaches such as appear in these two books? One thing we do is to act in complicity with the system. There is no truly radical sociology today because even those who are not turning to the state seeking more regulation (as some feminisms do) are arguing (still) for Other forms of productivist models (some late version of socio-Marxism). The challenge to sociology emerging from these books is to think against the system which entails asking sociology to work against its own system maintenance tendencies.

These books demand that we face our two possible futures: In the first the current system crumbles into a form of chaos we have not witnessed in centuries. The system complicity of most sociology sees this as something to be avoided and therefore sociologists seek to repair our damaged socio-economy. Productivism never had better friends than Karl Marx or sociology's new repository of hope, Barack Obama. In another scenario the current system will succeed in building a techno-scientific world glittering with advanced technologies. We would then live out our lives in total security (is this what people talking about ending

terrorism are dreaming of?). By avoiding collapse we could enter into a utopian world of protection and security, the global village as gated community. Computers could generate the models of lives which would become as predictable as the weather – a world in which evil, all negative events, disease, and uncertainty are removed. Of course it would all be very politically correct – the vision of assimilation realized. Social scientists might even realize their secret dream of replacing the police. For Baudrillard this second scenario is a world of distilled and slow death for an adaptive and thoughtful species. That most sociologists fear system failure more than system success is telling.

Stanislaw Lec's notion that death resists us, but in the end gives in, also applies to systems. In these books Baudrillard, Guillaume and Noailles show us, by example, how far disciplined social thought (sociology and the rest of them) is from radicality. Both books point to poetic lands of radical alterity, Otherness, and eternal incomprehensibility far from the safe shores of empiricism and difference. Here, seeking a more poetic resolution, we find three exiles from the mundane dialogues which currently organize most of academe. These books operate like travel guides to places where radical thought is valued. In today's academic culture these are subversive books but the lands they describe are right under our feet.

The revolution has already taken place and the time for rebellion is now past but subversion goes on. Is sociology interested in subversion or merely system maintenance? If the answer is subversion, then there are many powerful concepts in these books.

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