"But the Emperor has no clothes!"

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard dies in Paris

Stefan Steinberg
17 March 2007

The French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard, died in Paris on March 6, 2007, aged 77. Baudrillard was one of the leading figures in the postmodernist school of thought and exerted considerable influence on French and international intellectual life. In many universities in the Western hemisphere, his books are prominent on the reading lists of those studying sociology and cultural studies. His death has attracted a profusion of obituaries in the Western press that dealt with his life and work in a thoroughly positive fashion. Here, they imply, was a man with something interesting to say.

Typical is a gushing obituary in the German *Die Zeit* newspaper, which notes his "hatred of French egalitarianism," and goes on approvingly to describe Baudrillard as a "reactionary prophet" and "*Apokalyptiker* of the counter-Enlightenment"—i.e., someone preaching the end of the world, who takes up arms against all that is progressive in modern human thought and science. In fact, the largely uncritical reception of Baudrillard's work in the press says a great deal about the current decay of bourgeois public debate and, in particular, the utter degeneration of layers of the former left-leaning intelligentsia over the past three decades.

Others, at least in the past, have been more critical. In their book on the absurdities of the postmodernists, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont make the following comment on a Baudrillard text and its abuse of science: "...the last sentence, though constructed from scientific terminology, is meaningless from a scientific point of view. The text continues in a general crescendo of nonsense...." They conclude: "When all that is said and done, one wonders what would be left of Baudrillard's thought if the verbal veneer covering it were stripped away."

Any serious study of Baudrillard's work inevitably leads to the conclusion that much of his writing is self-indulgent, often contradictory and occasionally utterly obscure. Nevertheless, there is a logical core to his argument, which also provides a basis for his appeal.

Like most of the French postmodernists, Baudrillard was radicalised by the popular movements of students and workers that swept France in 1968. His subsequent intellectual development was then marked by a virulent campaign to put as much distance as possible between him and Marxism. In his later writings—on the basis of his so-called critique of modern capitalist society—he went on to oppose every aspect of scientific and rational investigation associated with the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Baudrillard was born in 1929 in the northern town of Reims, the son of a civil servant and the grandson of peasant farmers. After finishing university, he taught German in a Lycée before completing his doctoral thesis in sociology under the tuition of Henri Lefebvre, a veteran of the French New Left, who had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1958.

Baudrillard became a teaching assistant in September 1966 at Nanterre University in Paris. As the student revolt swept Paris in 1968, Baudrillard sympathised with the radical students at his university and cooperated with the journal *Utopie*, which espoused anarchist theories spiced by quasi-Marxist phraseology.

Following the betrayal of the workers' and student revolts by the French Communist Party, and the ebbing of a wave of radicalism across Europe, Baudrillard joined a growing number of French intellectuals who sought to rapidly ditch their radical pasts.

Utilising the crimes of Stalinism to attack Marxism from the right, former left radicals such as Andre Glucksmann and Henri Bernard Levy took to the political sphere and placed themselves at the service of right-wing forces as part of their campaign against "totalitarianism."

Others such as Baudrillard remained at university and sought to elaborate a theoretical basis for undermining Marxism. In a series of books written in the 1970s, Baudrillard sought to systematically attack the fundamentals of Marxism and the method of historical materialism.

In his books *The Consumer Society* (1970) and, in particular, *The Mirror of Production* (1975), Baudrillard argued that the Marxist emphasis on the primary role of economic factors and production in social development was incapable of adequately explaining both pre-capitalist societies and modern capitalism. According to Baudrillard, both socialism and capitalism remained tied to the concept of commodity production and the Marxist concepts of use and exchange value, which were no longer sufficient to account for modern society. Baudrillard promised a much more radical alternative.

In place of the production process and the analysis of the commodity that stood at the centre of Marx's analysis of capitalism, Baudrillard elevates the role of consumption and the consumer in modern society. He first articulates this theme in his early work of the 1970s, and it then runs like a red thread throughout his entire work.

In his book *The Consumer Society*, for example, Baudrillard makes his case for the primacy of consumption. He writes: "The fundamental problem of contemporary capitalism is no longer" production, but is rather "the contradiction between a virtually unlimited productivity and the need to dispose of the product. It becomes vital for the system at this stage to control not only the mechanism of production, but also consumer demand."

Baudrillard's elevation of the role of consumption and the consumer in capitalism represents a direct attack on Marx's conception. Marx had maintained an opposite point of view. While acknowledging the fundamental connection between production and consumption, Marx emphasised the decisive role of production.

In the "Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," Chapter 1 of *The Grundrisse*, Marx writes: "The conclusion which follows from this is, not that production, distribution, exchange and

consumption are identical, but that they are links of a single whole, different aspects of one unit. Production is the decisive phase, both with regard to the contradictory aspects of production and with regard to the other phases. The process always starts afresh with production. That exchange and consumption cannot be the decisive elements is obvious; and the same applies to distribution in the sense of distribution of products."

In addition to his emphasis on the primary role of consumption and the consumer, Baudrillard also challenged Marx's analysis of the role of exchange in capitalist society. In the opening chapter of *Capital,* Marx revealed the fundamental contradiction of the commodity as a unity of use and exchange value. Based on his analysis of the nature of exchange, which he reveals to be an "appearance-*form,*" Marx goes on to elaborate the crucial role played by human labour power as the determinant of value. Marx's exploration of the role of exchange in turn exposed the fundamental contradictions at the heart of the capitalist system of production.

Once again, Baudrillard declares he can go one better and introduces a third form of exchange—symbolic exchange in the form of the *sign*. Baudrillard argues that in addition to the satisfaction of human needs, commodities can also provide social status—something of increasing value in modern society. This value is expressed in the form of the sign.

In elevating the notion of the sign and signification, Baudrillard appropriated from the work of other French theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, who in turn drew from the research of the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralists and post-structuralists, such as Lucan and Foucault, declared that reality was encapsulated in language. Reality no longer refers to the existing natural and social world—instead language constitutes the real world, which is reducible to language-signs-symbols.

All of Baudrillard's later work basically revolves around his conception of consumer society and the role of the sign. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s Baudrillard drew from modern communication theorists such as Marshall McLuhan to extend his theory of the sign and signification (later termed "simulacrum") into the "code," which was synonymous with the world of advertising.

In his lecture "On Nihilism" (1980), Baudrillard draws a balance sheet of social development and expounds his case for nihilism as the only viable stance to be adopted by the intellectual in modern society. In so doing, he expresses his kinship with the mainstream of postmodernist thought. Baudrillard describes modernity as the era of Marx and Freud—an era dominated by the "hermeneutics of suspicion"—i.e., Baudrillard's phrase to describe any attempt to develop a historical and scientifically based understanding of the world.

According to Baudrillard in 1980, we are now ("willing") victims in a postmodern world dominated by simulated experience and feelings, and have utterly lost the capacity to comprehend reality.

Baudrillard's "hyper-real" world is dictated by the needs of consumption and dominated by the advertising campaigns and propaganda offensives of businessmen and companies seeking to sell their wares and services. In *Fatal Strategies* he writes*:* "All of advertising and information, all of the entire political class are there to tell us what we want, to tell the masses what they want—and we basically assume this massive transfer of responsibility with joy, because it is simply neither obvious, nor of great interest to know, to will, to have faculties or desires" (p. 97).

Based on his interpretation of the omnipotence of bourgeois media outlets, Baudrillard predicted that the first Gulf War (1991) would not take place. During the course of the war, he maintained it was not really taking place. After its conclusion, he announced that it had not taken place. The appalling suffering endured by hundreds of thousands, as a consequence of the brutal US military offensive against Iraq, is dismissed by Baudrillard with a brush of the hand.

In another text, Baudrillard describes Disneyland as the real America. In his opinion, American society is rushing to adapt and bring itself into line with the utopian vision of Disneyland. Gone are the divisions in a society wracked by enormous social polarisation. For the self-complacent and insulated Baudrillard, there are no poor or unemployed in America. Beneath the verbal veneer of Baudrillard's self proclaimed "ultra-radical" critique of capitalism is the vision of an omnipotent society, largely free of class divisions, able to endlessly increase production and pacify the broad masses of the population through a combination of consumer goods and media and advertising propaganda.

In fact, there is nothing original in such theories. A similar assault on the foundations of Marxism was already undertaken in the twentieth century by leading members of the German Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno, who wrote of the advent of a society of "total integration," and Herbert Marcuse, who wrote of a "one-dimensional society."

Baudrillard, however, is more explicit than the members of the Frankfurt School in his rejection of the broad masses of the population. In his book *Fatal Strategies* (1985), Baudrillard sneeringly derides the masses, who, he claims, in their brute, animal fashion are complicit in the strategy of the ruling elite: "They (the masses) are not at all an object of oppression and manipulation.... Atonal amorphous, abysmal, they exercise a passive and opaque sovereignty; they say nothing, but subtly, perhaps like animals in their brute indifference" (p. 94) "... the masses know that they are nothing and they have no desire to know. The masses know they are powerless, and they don't want power" (p. 98).

Freed by his own approach from the slightest obligation to any sort of integrity to social analysis or historical introspection, Baudrillard wilfully ignores the roles of political parties, tendencies and leaderships, preferring in these passages to give rein to his "playful" idiosyncrasy. If the masses exercise "sovereignty," they cannot at the same time be "powerless," but Baudrillard is oblivious of such contradictions in his own writing under conditions where so few of his contemporaries are prepared to point out that "the emperor has no clothes."

What does remain in these passages is Baudrillard's contempt, revulsion and fear of the masses—sentiments shared by broad layers of former radicals who have been able to make highly remunerative careers during the past decades.

Baudrillard's thoroughly cynical vision of the world, based on his rejection of Marxism and the principles of enlightened thought, have been welcomed and appropriated by right-wing forces. A number of Baudrillard's books have been published by the publishing house owned by the right-wing *nouveau philosophe* Bernard Henri Levy, and in the late 1980s, Baudrillard contributed to the *Krisis* journal of the French *Nouvelle Droite (New Right).*

Nevertheless Baudrillard's elevation to a "guru" of modern capitalism would have been impossible without the continuous promotion of his work by such nominally "left" newspapers and journals as the British Stalinist magazine *Marxism Today*, the French daily *Liberation* and the *New Left Review.*

In fact, along with his postmodernist fellow-thinkers, Baudrillard's intellectual development can only be understood as a product of the long drawn-out degeneration of postwar Stalinism. Virtually every major figure associated with either French postmodernist trends of thought or the right-wing *nouveaux philosophes* spent some time inside, or at least sympathised with, either Stalinist/Maoist or other forms of left radical organisations in the 1960s.

Although many intellectuals, such as Baudrillard's mentor, Henri Lefebvre, were repulsed by the betrayals of the Comintern-led Communist parties in the 1950s (the Algerian crisis, the Soviet invasion of Hungary) and 1960s (the bloody Soviet repression in Czechoslovakia and the betrayal of the French mass movement in 1968), French Stalinism

constituted the ideological framework for the activities of many prominent intellectuals in the postwar period and increased its influence in French universities in the 1950s and 1960s

In the 1960s, a concerted ideological attack on Marxism was launched inside the French Communist Party by CP central committee member and the party's leading intellectual, Louis Althusser. His revision of historical materialism was instrumental in the emergence of structuralist theorists who maintained that other factors, such as psychology or the distribution of power, were more important for the understanding of capitalist society than economic factors.

After the Second World War, the man regarded by many as the grandfather or "pope" of postmodernism—Jean-Francois Lyotard—joined first of all the left radical organisation Socialism or Barbarism before breaking with it in 1964 to form his own organisation around a magazine called *Workers Power*. In 1966, he then broke with left politics altogether to concentrate on establishing the foundations for postmodernism.

It is from precisely this milieu, under conditions in which Stalinist dogma had blunted critical thought for decades, that figures such as Baudrillard could emerge and gain such influence in universities (and media editorial boards). The pervasive and negative influence of postmodernism and the work of thinkers such as Baudrillard are both an expression and a product of the complete degeneration of a broad layer of former radicals influenced by Stalinism.

The careful historical clarification of this process is fundamental for the revival of socialist ideas amongst broad layers of students and workers.