

## THE IMPLOSION OF MODERNITY & THE RISE OF CONSUMPTION

“Nineteenth-century civilization has collapsed .. The end of this venture has come in our time; it closes a distinct stage in the history of industrial civilization.” (Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, pp. 3-5)

“Whatever the accidents, the compromises, the concessions and the political adventures, whatever the technical, economic, or even social changes which history brings us, our society is still a bourgeois society.” (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 137)

“The technical life-order which came into being for the supply of the needs of the masses did at the outset preserve these real worlds of human creatures, by furnishing them with commodities .. Cast adrift in this way, lacking all sense of historical continuity with past or future, man cannot remain man. The universalization of the life-order threatens to reduce the life of the real man in a real world to mere functioning.” (Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, p. 42)

“Even though the individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. In an unjust state of life, the impotence and pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them.” (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. xiv-xv)

“I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object. It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky .. one of those objects from another universe .. the *Déesse* is *first and foremost* a new *Nautilus*” (Roland Barthes, ‘The New Citroën’, *Mythologies*, p. 88)

“Our urban civilization is witness to an ever-accelerating procession of generations of products, appliances and gadgets by comparison with which mankind appears to be a remarkably stable species.” (Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, p. 3)

“We are no longer in the finalistic, historical or providential vision, which was the vision of a world of progress and production. The final illusion of history, the final utopia of time no longer exists .. ” (Jean Baudrillard, ‘The End of the Millennium Or the Countdown’, speech at the ICA, May 08, 1997)

## **Introduction/statement of problem**

- *The 'culture' of late-modernity*
- *From ceaseless accumulation to ceaseless consumption*
- *Baudrillard contra Foucault?*
- *The implosion of modernity*
- *Radical transparency/radical otherness*

As we said the week before last, what this session is about is the break within modernity. This break corresponds with the move beyond ascetism to *fetishism*. How was it possible to move from *ceaseless accumulation* to *ceaseless consumption*? What does this mean for the system of positivities that is at one and the same 'the grid' within which action is possible and recognisable? In other words, what does the rise of consumption mean for *biopower*, and its political use? Given that capitalist modernity was - as we find in Weber - built upon the renunciation of extravagance, can we say that the rise of the political economy of consumption above that of the political economy of production<sup>1</sup>, in some way heralds a threshold within modernity itself?

If in the last session we aimed to move toward an understanding of how capitalism has come to define our existence, we may say that in this session we must come to an understanding as to how consumption has come to define the parameters of our *lives*. Consumption, and its political technologies (primarily 'the media', and 'advertising'), is therefore perhaps *the* most fundamental - and blatantly obvious - way in which biopower has mutated from its origins in the military, in the police, in the asylum and the prison. Our societies have *been* carceral, but the control tower is now the *moving image* of the commodity. Just wait until that moving image itself becomes the commodity (simulation)! That is the subject of next week's adventure .. but let's begin with the rise in history of the object ..

## **The 'culture' of late-modernity**

During the late 1940's and 1950's, many thinkers became increasingly aware that something

---

<sup>1</sup> here there is an important distinction to be made between production and productionism. Production, in the sense used in this equation, relates to the physical making of objects. It seems to me that productionism is something different, rather analogous to Weber's 'spirit', or 'ethic' of capitalism. The question to ask is how does this spirit make the transition in the 20th century from being the motor of production itself, to becoming invested in consumption as the main motor of production. The relationship between production and consumption seems to change, with consumption becoming a new form of productionism (i.e., the spirit, or ethic, which allows 'economy' to function). Consumption - in this sense - fits in well to the genealogy of the self-regulating market society (set out in Polanyi), to which the welfare state was a temporary block. The anomaly is that the consumer society was born in the period not of laissez-faire capitalism, but Keynesian demand management (one of my favourite biopolitical phrases!). Perhaps there is a clue here. However we map that genealogy, it seems certain that though the logic might be for a return to 19th century asceticism (having stabilised the world with the consumptionist-welfare state, it then disappears), consumption emerges in this century, perhaps to the surprise of political technicians, as the form, par excellence, of governmentality.

quite different from 'industrial modernity' was emerging. This realisation, which drew strength from the long standing social critiques of Marx, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Weber can be seen earlier (particularly in the works of Simmel, Jaspers, Mumford and Veblen<sup>2</sup>), but got an extra boost following the war (and in reaction to it) in the works of Walter Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1960s - in relation to student dissent and the manifest rise of the commodity - many of these earlier critiques were rediscovered (especially Benjamin), becoming the basis of a *new radical cultural critique* that ran parallel to Sartrean marxism and existentialism that otherwise dominated this era. This new radical cultural critique can be found in particular in the writings of the 'situationists' (inspired by Benjamin<sup>4</sup> and Lefebvre<sup>5</sup>), of which Baudrillard, Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard were on the fringes.<sup>6</sup> The 'situationists' include: Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and Michel de Certeau.<sup>7</sup>

Though by its very rationale this new cultural politics was diffuse and fragmented (split between radical anarchism and Maoist marxism), all those involved - in one way or another - were trying to come to terms with the continued existence of capitalist/bourgeois society - indeed the passing of 'capitalist modernity' into the very soul of man:

“Whatever the accidents, the compromises, the concessions and the political adventures, whatever the technical, economic, or even social changes which history brings us, our society is still a bourgeois society. I am not forgetting that since 1789, in France, several types of bourgeoisie have succeeded one another in power; but the status - a certain regime of ownership, a certain order, a certain ideology - remains at a deeper level .. As an ideological fact, it completely disappears: the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic man to mental man .. This anonymity of the bourgeoisie becomes ven more marked when one passes from bourgeois culture proper to its derived vulgarized and applied forms, to what one could call public philosophy, that which sustains everyday life, civil ceremonials, secular rites, in short the unwritten norms of interrelationships in a bourgeois society.”  
(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 137-40)

---

<sup>2</sup> though the latter two barely had any critical reception on the continent, and so - for the large part - were not usually seen as part of the same kind genre.

<sup>3</sup> associated with the Institute of Social Research, Frankfurt. Other prominent member of this circle include: Karl Wittfogel, Friedrich Pollock, Franz Neumann, Gerhard Meyer, Kurt Mandelbaum, and Leo Lowenthal.

<sup>4</sup> principally his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', but also his work on modernity more generally (e.g., *One-Way Street*, 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire', and 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'). See: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Fontana, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Semiotext(e), 1988), Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Vintage, 1993), and Jean-François Lyotard, *Driftworks* (Semiotext(e), 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Zone, 1994), *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Pirate Press, -), Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Left Bank Books, 1983), *The Book of Pleasures* (Pending Press, 1983), Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984). See also: Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: the Situationist International in a postmodern age* (Routledge, 1992).

In particular, thinkers like Jean Baudrillard tried to understand this continuity in itself, and in relation to obvious revolutionary changes within what he termed ‘the system of objects’. The world was being remade, but bourgeois society was surviving ..

- *what is our relation to objects?*
- *what is our relation to technology?*<sup>8</sup>
- *how are people made regular in the age of consumption?*

### From ceaseless accumulation to ceaseless consumption

- *Are these really in tension .. ?*<sup>9</sup> *The ‘problem’ is merely one of their relation and repose (recognised by the very earliest political economists, from Ricardo and Malthus, Mill and von Mises, and beyond ..*
- *The consumer-as-sovereign emerged as a natural extension of the ascendant market:*

“Within market society the working of the price mechanism makes the consumers supreme. They determine through the prices they pay and through the amount of their purchases both the quantity and quality of production. They determine directly the prices of consumer’s goods and all material factors of production and the wages of all hands employed.

In that endless rotating mechanism (i.e., a market society) the entrepreneurs and capitalists are the servants of the consumers. The consumers are the masters, to whose whims the entrepreneurs and capitalists must adjust their investments and methods of production. The market chooses the entrepreneurs and capitalists and removes them as soon as they prove failures. The market is a democracy in which every penny gives a right to vote and where voting is repeated every day.” (Ludwig von Mises, quoted in: *The New Encyclopædia Britannica, Vol X, 1975, p. 847*)

- *Consumption as ideology:*

“It is an illusion to reduce the dominant culture to its inventive core: there is also a bourgeois culture which consists of consumption alone. The whole of France is steeped in this anonymous ideology: our press, our films, our theatre, our pulp literature, our rituals, our Justice, our diplomacy, our conversations, our remarks about the weather, a murder trial, a touching wedding, the cooking we dream of, the garments we wear, everything, in everyday life, is dependent

---

<sup>8</sup> Heidegger’s, *The Question Concerning Technology* is invaluable here, and was widely read by continental philosophers/cultural critics in the postwar period.

<sup>9</sup> what I find seductive is Virilio’s rediscovery of ‘binaries’ (e.g., that the railroad was designed with the derailment in mind). All the more strange then, Weber’s ‘protestant ethic’: wasn’t ‘accumulation’ invented with consumption in mind?

on the representation which the bourgeoisie *has and makes us have* of the relations between man and the world.” (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 140)

“The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry. The old experience of the movie-goer, who sees the world outside as an extension of the film he has just left .. is now the producer’s guideline .. Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies.” (Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 126)

### **Baudrillard contra Foucault?**

- *Forget Foucault?*- the standard line is that in some sense or another Baudrillard (et.al.) mark a radical break with Foucault, and the more classical scholars. I would suggest, however, that Baudrillard - less overtaken as he is with the informational revolution of the late 20thC - is in essence pursuing a very similar philosophical project to Foucault<sup>10</sup> ..
- *Baudrillard’s addition - and why people have argued that his project is set up in opposition to Foucault’s - is rooted in the concept of the **simulacrum**:*

“Discourse is discourse, but the operations, strategies, and schemes played out there are real: the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, the masturbating child, the oedipal family .. But Foucault cannot tell us anything about the simulating machines that double each one of these ‘original’ machines, about the great simulating mechanism which winds all these devices into a wider spiral .. He does not see the frenzied semiurgy that has taken hold of the simulacrum .. The same goes for *Discipline and Punish*, with its theory of discipline, of the ‘panoptic’ and of ‘transparence’. A magisterial but obsolete theory.” (Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, pp. 15-6)

---

<sup>10</sup> the secondary sources can be very misleading here. For example, in their introduction to *Forget Baudrillard?*, Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner write: “In his infamous squib, *Oublier Foucault*, Baudrillard goes further than anywhere else in his writing to disassociate himself from prevailing trans in social thought. Foucault is remorselessly attacked for giving misplaced concreteness to the concepts of power and repression .. ” (p. xiii), they continue. Even Mike Gane - who otherwise is an incisive commentator on Foucault and Baudrillard - makes the fatal mistake in, *Baudrillard: Critical and Fatal Theory*, of assuming ‘power’ in the Foucauldian sense to be repressive: “Certainly the major divergence and break between the two came with Foucault’s analysis of power and discipline, which from Baudrillard’s point of view marked the complete abandonment of Foucault’s major project, and received the sharp critique: ‘Forget Foucault!’” (p. 41). So beware. In my own opinion, Baudrillard clearly takes up and runs with the torch set alight by Foucault. He even says as much in a personal reflection in *Cool Memories*, where he describes in stunning, astute and moving detail the paradoxes of Foucault own place in philosophical and discursive history: “To forget him was to render him a service; adulation was a disservice.” How could it be clearer?

## The implosion of modernity

- *Implosion as the zenith of speed ..*

“The point of the matter of speed-up by wheel, road, and paper is the extension of power in an ever more homogeneous and uniform space. Thus, the real potential of the Roman technology of was not realised until printing had given road and wheel a much greater speed than that of Roman vortex. Yet the speed-up of electronic age is as disrupting for literate, lineal, and Western man as the Roman paper routes were for tribal villagers. Our speed-up today is not a slow explosion outward from the centre to margins but an instant implosion and an interfusion of space and functions. Our specialist and fragmented civilization of centre-margin structure is suddenly experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole. This is the world of the global village.” (Marshall McLuhan, *Reflections on and by Marshall McLuhan: Forward through the rearview mirror*, p. 62)

- *The question is: what radical transformations follow from the rise of the object as something to be consumed? It is clear that the production/consumptive economy brings with it a whole series new dynamics (the consumption of consumers; production for the sake of - and only for - consumption), but what are the deeper implications of consumption and objects themselves as **modes of communication**? How does the rise of the object alter the space/time complex within which bodies move, and recognise others?*
- *For Baudrillard the world has entered a phase of catastrophic implosion: only what he calls ‘fatal strategies’ have any hope in altering its course (either by accelerating the collapse, or subverting it by perverting it) ..*
- *For Baudrillard - like McLuhan (in some respects at least) - implosion is essentially linked to the consumption ethic of late-modernity:*

“In their triangular affinity, the masses, the media and terrorism describe the presently prevailing process of implosion. The whole process is affected by a violence which is only just beginning, an orbital and nuclear violence of intake and fascination, a violence of the void .. For us today, implosion can only be violent and catastrophic because it comes from the *failure* of the system of explosion and of organised expansion which has predominated in the West now for a few centuries.” (Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majority*, p. 58)

- *yet, as Baudrillard is quick to point out, implosion is not catastrophic **in itself**. Primitive societies - those that resisted expansion - were/are (in Baudrillard’s terms) characterised by a ‘controlled implosion’; a process that once unleashed only then*

*becomes destructive ..*

- *this is an interesting thesis - in terms of the broad themes that we have tried to set out during the past 10 weeks:*

1) *the birth and multiplication of man*  
2) *the development of political technologies able to channel the energies of the multitudes (biopower)*  
3) *the slow disappearance of man in the face of carceral/dromocratic (capitalist) modernity .. the idealised state - the 'disappeared individual'?*<sup>11</sup>

*?) and now, **the reversal** of the whole process: from expansion to implosion; decolonisation replaces imperialism; mass society is replaced by consumer society; population increases are reversed with more effective population control .. modernity gives way to -? .. biopower gives way to -?*

- *But how does Baudrillard explain this 'reversal'?*<sup>12</sup>
- *For Baudrillard, implosion is a function of the **completion** (in other words the 'success') of the Western project:*

“ .. according to a process of boom and acceleration, this explosive process has become uncontrollable, it has acquired a fatal speed or amplitude, or rather it has reached the limits of the universal, it has saturated the field of possible expansion and, just as primitive societies were ravaged by explosion for not knowing how to curb the implosive process any longer, so our culture begins to be ravaged by implosion for not having known how to curb and equilibrate the explosive process.

Implosion is inevitable, and every effort to save the principles of reality, of accumulation, of universality, the principles of evolution

---

<sup>11</sup> this question of disappearance is a difficult one in relation to Foucault. On the one hand Foucault was clearly talking of the consumption of bodies in history (the passing of 'life' into the realm of political intervention; 'the process of history's destruction of the body'). In this sense, as Baudrillard, in *Cool Memories*, recognises: “ .. what are the writings of .. Foucault but a philosophy of disappearance? The obliteration of the human .. the death of the subject .. ” (p. 160) On the other hand, visibility, is clearly Foucault's keyword for modernity (en-light-enment). On the one hand, biopower clearly aims (whether in the prison, the hospital, the factory, the workhouse, or asylum) to obliterate dark spaces, and to subject the body to the 'empire of the gaze'. On the other hand, biopower - it would seem - takes that visible body and looks through it. The physical body effectively disappears before the gaze, while at the same time the soul of its carrier disappears before the automata of 'society' itself. So overall, we have a picture of disappearance effected through visibility, or alternatively, disappearance effected through the penetration of light. Think of this in relation to Virilio's concern with vision, and Baudrillard's concern with radical transparency, and we see again the common themes linking Foucault, Baudrillard and Virilio, despite the misreadings of prominent commentators.

<sup>12</sup> I use that word in scare quotes because - of course - Baudrillard takes 'implosion' as almost the 'logic' of the Western world, rather than a radical break that somehow set the world on a different path.

which extol expanding systems, is archaic, regressive or nostalgic .. nothing will halt the implosive process, and the only remaining alternative is between a violent or catastrophic implosion, and a smooth implosion, an implosion in slow motion.” (Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majority*, p. 58)<sup>13</sup>

- *the implosion of the media - of meaning<sup>14</sup>, has for Baudrillard the gravest consequence for Occidental history .. its taken us right out of modernity .. faced by that crisis, we have even left history .. paralysed, unable to move forward ..*

“How can we jump over our shadows when we no longer have one? How can we pass out of the century (not to speak of the millennium) if we do not make up our minds to put an end to it, engaged as we are in an indefinite work of mourning for all the incidents, ideologies and violence which have marked it? The remorse that has been expressed, and the - more or less hypocritical - commemorations and recantations give the impression that we are trying to run the events of the century back through the filter of memory, not in order to find a meaning for them - they have clearly lost that en route - but in order to whitewash them, to launder them. Laundering is the prime activity of this fin de siècle - the laundering of a dirty history, of dirty money, of corrupt consciences, of the polluted planet - the cleansing of memory being indissolubly linked to the -hygienic - cleansing of the environment or to the - racial and ethnic - cleansing of populations. We are turning away from history 'in progress', with none of the problems it poses having been resolved, and plunging into a regressive history, in the nostalgic hope of making a politically correct one out of it. And in this retrospective, necrospective obsession, we are losing any chance of things coming to their term. This is why I advanced the idea that the Year 2000 would not take place. Quite simply because the history of this century has already come to an end, because we are reliving it interminably and because, therefore, metaphorically speaking, we shall never pass on into the future. Our millenarianism - for we are, all the same, on the eve of a millenarian dateline - is a millenarianism with no tomorrow. Whereas the coming of the Year 1000, even though it was experienced with dread, was a prelude to parousia and to the advent of the Kingdom of God, and hence the prelude to an infinite promise, the point of reckoning which stands before us is a closed, involuted one. All we have left of the millenarian dateline is the countdown to it. For this century - which can do nothing more than count the seconds separating it from its end without either being able, or really wanting, to measure up to that end - the digital clock on the Beaubourg Centre showing the countdown in millions of seconds is the perfect symbol. It illustrates the reversal of the whole of our modernity's relation to time.” (Jean Baudrillard, ‘The

---

<sup>13</sup> again, the similarities with McLuhan are striking.

<sup>14</sup> a phenomena Baudrillard relates to the nature of ‘the mass’: the mass as a black hole into which images, meanings, words and things collapse ..

End of the Millennium Or the Countdown', speech at the ICA, May 08, 1997)

### Radical transparency/radical otherness

- *Identity annihilated .. Radical transparency, for Baudrillard, is almost 'structural' (though he would almost certainly reject the suggestion). Disappearance as the endpoint of Western modernity .. and man?*

“If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility .. were to cause them to crumble .. then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 387)

“Ours is rather like the situation of the man who has lost his shadow: either he has become transparent, and the light passes right through him or, alternatively, he is lit from all angles, overexposed and defenceless against all sources of light. We are similarly exposed on all sides to the glare of technology, images and information, without any way of refracting their rays; and we are doomed in consequence to a whitewashing of all activity .. ” (Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, p. 44)
- *The disappearance of community ..*

“In the eighties, as we transfer our whole being to the data bank, privacy will become a ghost or echo of its former self and what remains of community will disappear.” (Marshall McLuhan, *Reflections on and by Marshall McLuhan: Forward through the rearview mirror*, p. 94)
- *For Baudrillard, we have moved (it would seem) beyond the realm of political intervention. As he himself says:*

“Such a theory of control by means of a gaze that objectifies, even when it is pulverized into micro-devices, is passé. With the simulation device we are no doubt as far from the strategy of transparency as the latter is from the immediate, symbolic operation of punishment which Foucault himself describes.” (Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, p 16)
- *What Baudrillard puts in the place of 'power' (and its technology of transparency), is seduction, with its power of disappearance ..*
- *What quite he means by that is open to debate, but clearly he has problems with the*

*whole question of power (and desire) in Foucault, and others*<sup>15</sup> *It is worth quoting again at length:*

“With Foucault, we always brush against political determination in its last instance. One form dominates and is deffracted into the models characteristic of the prison, the military, the asylum, and disciplinary action. This form is no longer rooted in ordinary relations of production (these, on the contrary are modelled after it); this form seems to find its procedural system within itself - and this represents enormous progress over the illusion of *establishing* power in a substance of production or of desire. Foucault unmasks all the final or causal illusions concerning power, but he does not tell us anything *concerning the simulacrum of power itself*. Power is an irreversible principle of organization because it fabricates the real (always more and more of the real) .. What Foucault does not see is that power is never there and that its institution, like the institution of spatial perspective versus ‘real’ space in the Renaissance, is only a simulation of perspective - it is no more reality than economic accumulation - and what a tremendous trap that is.” (Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, p 16)<sup>16</sup>

- *Baudrillard seem intent to argue that power does not exist in its reversibility*<sup>17</sup>: *that is the dream of power as imagined by reason! What we must think of is seduction*<sup>18</sup> ..
- *what do we make of all this? ..*

consumption • disappearance • pataphysics • the object • fatal strategy • illusion of the world • seduction • hyperreality • simulacra, simulation • ‘the object comes alive’ • radical evil ...

---

<sup>15</sup> though his theory of seduction would seem critically informed by Deleuzian/Guattarian theory, in *Forget Foucault*, he takes several swipes at them also .. “Seduction .. does not partake of the real order. It never belongs to the order of force or to force relations.” *Forget Foucault*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> though in this last sentence Baudrillard is making a point about accumulation and death (a very profound point that he goes on to make), he is also referring (at least in part) to his work *The Mirror of Production*, in which he argues that Marxism will never be a revolutionary project because first, it has taken as given the idea that man must work, and that second - having taken economic accumulation as given - defines the ‘workers revolution’ as the necessary release of productive energies, energies that until now have been shackled by the bourgeoisie. Marx’s revolution then is the mirror of production as the freed proletariat end up doing exactly what the bourgeoisie want them to do: work. This thesis gives a real sense of seriousness to Baudrillard’s throwaway quip: “Generations of peasants worked hard all their lives; we owe it to them to make up for their expenditure with our own idleness.” Again, this would seem to parallel Foucault’s own concern ‘not to be governed’, and especially his later work on ‘police science’, which - of course - is all about the emergence of the work ethic (before, as the precondition of, the productionist ethic). See: *Madness and Civilization*, pp. 54-7.

<sup>17</sup> “ .. no power seduces by that reversibility which haunts it .. ” *Forget Foucault*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> yet on the very next page: “Seduction is stronger than power because it is a reversible and mortal process .. ” *Forget Foucault*, p. 45.