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REVIEW

Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault* [1976], translated by Nicole Dufrense, introduction and interview by Sylvère Lotringer (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2007), ISBN: 978-1584350415

It was bold, to say the least, when in 1976 Jean Baudrillard sent his essay *Forget Foucault* to *Critique* where Foucault was an editor. Like a latter-day Zarathustra, Baudrillard pronounces not God, but what's just as shocking, *reality* dead; a murder of the real. The crime, he would later claim, was *almost* perfect.¹ Almost perfect, except that the play of appearances betrays the secret: that there is nothing behind the play of appearances. These now familiar, yet still unsettling, motifs of Baudrillard's thought come to the fore in this biting, brilliant and bitter indictment of Foucault the man and name for a body of thought that in 1976 had achieved the respect of the French Academy and the intellectual avant-garde. *Critique* rejected the essay thereby securing for Baudrillard a *succès de scandale*.

I will suggest that the essay can be understood at two levels: as a critique of critique and as a polemic against critique. Marx, I believe, haunts both as the unnamed counter-force to the then newly emergent poststructuralist rhetoric of resistance in the form of energy, circulation, flow... desire.

In 1976, "Foucault" was already a name for radical modes of historical analysis: "archaeology" and "genealogy." In Foucault's name, History became a matter and problem of discourse and representation. Power, in turn, was seen as a discourse-effect. Because discourse is de-centered and circulatory, the model of power and thus its critique now turned on notions of dispersal, diffusion and flow over and against the prior model of power as a fixed entity—the sovereign center—of historical, social, and political reality.

Baudrillard takes this Foucauldian premise as his starting point. The appearance of discourse on the scene of history necessitates, thinks Baudrillard, a new theoretical economy that, like the loss of the gold standard in the monetary economy, must presume the dissolution of the concept of reality, or more precisely the *reality-principle*, as the foundational principle and guarantor of any and all critical and historiographic production. In this respect, Baudrillard takes Foucault's elaborate historical narratives as symptomatic of the solely *symbolic* status of historical reality for us today. Baudrillard writes: "if it is possible to... talk with such definitive understanding about power, sexuality, the body, and discipline, even down to their most delicate metamorphoses, it is because at some point *all this here and now is over with*." (30)

¹ See Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, translated by Chris Turner (London, New York: Verso, 1996).

History is now in "a state of simulation." (72) The texture and beauty of Foucault's writing—a beauty that Baudrillard describes as being "too beautiful to be true" (30)—is what betrays this simulacral dimension. "Foucault's is not... a discourse of truth but a mythic discourse in the strong sense of the word, and I secretly believe that it has no illusions about the effect of truth it produces." (30) What the truth-effects of Foucault's discourse produces, as all discourse does, are forms of power: it "is a mirror of the powers it describes." (30) Thus, Foucault's historiography is charged with ultimately mythologizing power into a truth, or we could say, a reality. The very process of critique thus inflates the sphere of power—a power that for Baudrillard is solely the power or power's appearance. The acknowledgment of this complicity with power, however, "is what is missing in those who follow in Foucault's footsteps." (30) The Foucauldians "pass right by this mythic arrangement to end up with the truth, nothing but the truth." (30)

What is needed, according to Baudrillard, is to expose not the truth of power's reality, but the truth of its simulation. "Foucault unmasks all the final or causal illusions concerning power, but he does not tell us anything *concerning the simulacrum of power itself*." (50) It is this order of the simulacrum of power—that Baudrillard announces as the contemporary crisis for critical resistance.

[A]fter a ceaseless expansion of several centuries [power] is brutally exploding [and consequently]... the sphere of power [and desire] is in the process of contracting from a star of first magnitude to a red dwarf, and then to black hole absorbing all the substance of the real. (59)

Puffed up and valorized by organs like *Critique*, the sphere of simulacral power ceaselessly expands. "Do you think that power, economy, sex—all the real's big numbers would have stood up one single instant without a fascination to support them?" (54) Critique dignifies power's claim on reality, which in turn legitimates the continuance of critique. Power and critique are thus trapped, for Baudrillard, in an unending, self-regenerating, tautological spiral whose very movement perpetuates the reality-principle upon which the dialectic feeds.

Baudrillard not only critiques the state of critique in 1976, but also the model of intellectual resistance it prescribes. Here he also takes aim at Deleuze—seeing a suspect "collusion" between Foucauldian models of power and Deleuzian models of desire. "Foucault... has helped establish a systematic notion of power along the same operational lines as desire, just as Deleuze established a notion of desire along the lines of future forms of power." (36) Resistance in the Foucauldian/Deleuzian body-politic is to take the form of novel, ceaseless territorializing and deterritorializing fluxes, continuous and polymorphous investments and divestments: a pulsing flow of libidinal, revolutionary desire is to sweep across and liberate social, psychical, sexual, and ultimately, political economies. For Baudrillard, however, this scheme can do nothing more than replicate and expand the logic of Capital.

This compulsion toward liquidity, flow, and an accelerated circulation of what is psychic, sexual or pertaining to the body is the exact replica of the force which rules market value: capital must circulate, gravity and any fixed point must disappear, the chain of investments

and reinvestments must never stop; value must radiate endlessly and in every direction. (39-40)

Opposing this critical strategy, Baudrillard points to the *unreality* of money today, we might say its virtuality, as a sign of the virtuality of the power/resistance social economy. To recognize the virtual of Capital is, then, the starting point, thinks Baudrillard, for rethinking resistance as well.

This secret of power's lack of existence that the great politicians shared also belongs to the great bankers, who know that money is nothing, that money does not exist; and it also belonged to the great theologians and the inquisitors who knew that God does not exist, that God is dead. (64)

From the transcendental political theology of Christendom to the immanence of liberalism, to economic determinism, there corresponds, Baudrillard asserts, a "secret" history of the unreality of God, political power, and money. Like a massive conspiracy perpetrated on history itself, the unreality of power (in all its forms) has neither been openly acknowledged by power-elites, but more problematically it has never been acknowledged by its critics. Considering that the essay was intended for the readership of *Critique*, Baudrillard's gesture amounts to a critique of critique, which, if it had been published in *Critique*, would have been the irony of ironies.

While the irony is profound, the philosophical aim of the work—as a critique of critique—seems to run amuck in a crucial sense. If by *Forget Foucault* Baudrillard means "forget critique," then what are we to make of Baudrillard's critique of reality? Does not Baudrillard's critique of reality do precisely what he accuses Foucault of doing with respect to power and Deleuze with respect to desire? Does not Baudrillard's critique of reality re-establish, if only negatively, the philosophical claim of reality all over again; and as such does not his thought still operate within the horizon of the reality-principle, polemically spinning its wheels?

Perhaps this apparent inconsistency is only an inconsistency insofar as it is solely critique that Baudrillard is doing. I would suggest that in addition to a critique of critique, Baudrillard is engaged in a *polemic* against critique. For Baudrillard is nothing if not polemical, and the aims of polemic and of critique belong to different orders of thought though they can, as they do in his essay, intersect.

Polemic is not mere discussion. It is impassioned. A polemic, as its ancient Greek root meaning, *polemikos* denotes, is war-like. It does not seek to reach common ground. Its aim is to overcome the opponent—to *forget* him. This fall from critique into polemic is not simply, or not only, a fall from philosophical grace into sophistry. It is a fall into the beauty of writing; into a writing enriched by polemic, paradox, and irony—a writing marked by what Baudrillard describes (in his interview with with Sylvère Lotringer included as an appendix and ironically titled, "Forget Baudrillard"), as a "giddiness." (82-83)

It is unfortunate that this "giddiness" at times overwhelms what is, I believe, an incisive and urgent call to rethink the Foucauldian/Deleuzian belief in the revolutionary potential and potency of unbridled desire, liquidity, spontaneity, novelty, and ceaseless flow. Bau-

drillard rightly asks: Is this not also the language of capital? "Desire is never far from capital," (55) Baudrillard writes, and Baudrillard, one might say, is never far from Marx. Perhaps *Forget Foucault*, then, is a covert call for a return to Marx; a Marx for us today after the murder of the real and the collapse of critique.

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