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Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Autumn, 1981, Vol. 22, No. 4, Marxism and the Crisis of the World (Autumn, 1981), pp. 456-476

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1207878

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE IN HABERMAS AND BAUDRILLARD

Mark Poster

Since the Second World War Marxist theory has confronted a conjuncture that has proven increasingly recalcitrant to its categories and analysis. Although the mode of production has remained capitalist, and therefore amenable to the critique of political economy, the locus of revolution and social protest has shifted further and further away from the labor process within the most advanced capitalist nations. In the period 1840 to 1880, when Marx searched the world panorama for signs of emancipatory stirrings, his eyes fixed on the English, French, and German factory workers, the proletariat that resisted the harsh discipline of the new labor process. His hopes for the transformation of civil society lay with a class that was becoming or was sure to become the most numerous, the most downtrodden, the most exploited but at the same time the most necessary to modern capitalism.

Marx tended to overlook or at least downplay the more ambiguous features of the situation. The most militant rebels came from two groups that were in transition: the artisans who were losing their independence as they moved into the factories; and the peasants, who came to the factories from the countryside, a world apart from the industrializing cities. The fact that these groups resisted capitalism because of the change in habits it demanded of them rather than because of its intrinsic structure was not highlighted in Marx's thinking. He attributed the revolutionary role of the proletariat to the exploitative structure of the capitalist labor process itself, which progressively impoverished the life circumstances of the workers. For Marx, the impetus to rebel against the new system came directly from the new system; the only response possible for the workers was

Contemporary Literature XXII, 4 0010-7484/81/0004-0456 $1.00/0

to liberate themselves and the world from the conditions of wage labor. As the century wore on and workers' discontent took the form of parties and unions that sought to ameliorate life within the system rather than to overturn it, Marx took little notice.[1]

Historians have posited numerous explanations for the apparent domestication (temporary?) of the working class: better wages, stratification of the labor force, ethnic and regional differences, poor leadership at the party and union levels, changes in the liberal state, and nationalism, among others. Whatever the reason, the working class no longer appeared, by the mid-twentieth century, the standardbearer of revolt. At the same time, other groups rose to prominence as centers of revolution. First the peasants of the Third World, and more recently students, racial and ethnic minorities, women, gays, prisoners, environmentalists all have made legitimate claims as "proletarians," as the group most oppressed by society and most opposed to its continuation in its present form.

Many theoretical questions are posed to Marxism by the shifts in the locus of militancy, but there is one in particular I will address in these pages: did Marx adequately conceptualize the relationship between technology and culture, practice and consciousness, labor and symbolic interaction? It can be argued that Marx's faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class was gained too easily, that he assumed too readily that material hardship and social subjugation were sufficient conditions for revolt. One finds numerous instances in his texts in which the connection between material conditions and communicational practice is drawn too closely. Given a certain structure of work, social agents are expected to produce a certain political outcome.

The issue at stake is not one of the neglect of ideas. In the first thesis on Feuerbach, Marx indicates that he is fully cognizant of the active role of ideas, of the subject as an intentional agent: "[I]n opposition to materialism, the *active* side was developed by idealism . . . ."[2] In addition, historical materialism specified a prominent role for ideology in the process of social analysis. Re-

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[1]See Carol Johnson, "The Problem of Reformism and Marx's Theory of Fetishism," *New Left Review,* No. 119 (1980), pp. 70–96 for a discussion of Marx's failure adequately to theorize the problem of revolutionary consciousness.

[2]Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society,* trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (N. Y.: Anchor, 1967), p. 400.

ligious doctrines and political programs are, in Marx's historical writings, fundamental aspects of the class struggle. The difficulty in Marxist theory is not that consciousness is relegated to the backstage of the historical drama but that the categorial richness and articulation of Marxism subsumes the problems of culture to those of technology. The gap in Marxist theory may be one not of basic principle but of secondary theoretical elaboration. The analysis in Marx of the region of the workplace is subtle, differentiated, complex; the analysis of the culture of the workers is simple, direct, deficient in categorial specification. The critique of political economy explores every turn of the capitalist structure; the critique of cultural politics is general, vague, undeveloped.

The result of this uneven theoretical development is that we know in great detail what the workers did: how they worked, what they were paid, what conditions were responsible for their misery, how these changed, and how they could have changed. But we know very little about the impact of bourgeois ideas and practices upon their lives and political activities; about the way the structure of the workplace facilitated or retarded their communication, about the way the worker's relations with his community, wife, children, relatives, and friends influenced his choices and goals. Marxism provides a coherent general outline of a democratic workplace: the reorganization of labor will eliminate specific deficiencies in the capitalist factory. Whatever conundrums remain concerning the conflict between central planning and worker self-management, between consumer and producer interests, between the requirements of production and the ecological balance with nature, these are secondary problems that can be resolved at the level of practice. Another set of questions is not so easily manageable: what forms of culture are consistent with socialist society? Does the transformation of the technological and social apparatus imply a change in the form of symbolic interaction? Are the meanings associated with capitalist production a target of political strategy?

Because Marx assumed that oppression stimulated the workers to contest capitalism he did not theorize about the problems of revolutionary consciousness, language, and symbolic interaction or culture in general. Hence when the sociopolitical developments of the past century did not follow the Marxist trajectory, the framework of historical materialism was put in doubt. The cloth of Marxist theory becomes unravelled as new political movements pull at the threads of the concept of the mode of production. Marxism appears unable

to account for today's oppositional movements; the peasants of China, the Muslims of Iran, the prisoners and prostitutes of France, the women and blacks in the United States, the Basques of Spain and Quebeçois of Canada, the ecologists of Germany, the youth of Britain. If Marxism is to survive as the critical theory of advanced capitalism it must become more than the special theory of the workers' exploitation.

These complaints about Marxist theory cannot be answered with a simple phrase. It will not suffice to follow the example of Stalin and decide by fiat that language must be promoted from the superstructure to the base. Nor can one call for an eclectic expansion of the Marxist paradigm, adding where required some Kant or Weber or Freud. Experiments in this direction have foundered when diverse concepts rub uncomfortably against each other, generating electrostatic sparks rather than theoretical light.[3] Yet there have been substantial efforts by theorists to conceptualize anew the relation of technology and culture within a Marxist framework. In particular the work of Jürgen Habermas in Germany and Jean Baudrillard in France promises to have far-reaching impact on the revival of critical theory.

In the rethinking of Marxism by Habermas and Baudrillard, the common intellectual denominator is the importance given to language as the mediator between technology and culture. In the twentieth century there has arisen a profusion of theories of language upon which to draw: Saussure's structural linguistics, Wittgenstein's theory of language games, the Russian School's formalist linguistics, Bertalanffy's information theory, Searle's theory of speech acts, Bateson's systems theory of communication, Barthes' semiology, Chomsky's theory of generative grammar, Gadamer's hermeneutics, Foucault's analysis of discourse, Derrida's method of deconstruction.

This far from complete list serves to remind one of the variety and richness of recent meditations on language. Given the prominence of the question of language, it is truly surprising that so little effort has been made to account for it: why should so much attention be given to language theory in the twentieth century, especially

[3]See, for example, the long history of the effort to marry the ideas of Freud with those of Marx, e.g., Wilhelm Reich, "Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis" (1929); Reuben Osborn, *Marxism and Psychoanalysis* (1965); Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (1955), etc.

since World War II?[4] One possibility is that language has become more central to social practice. The relation of computer language to the brain, the diffusion of electronic media bringing discourse from around the world into the home, and the spread of bureaucracy through which politics and work rely more than ever on written forms of communication are all examples of new practices that drastically alter and extend the role of language.

In any case, for the purposes of this paper it need only be noted that philosophies of language present a challenge to the critical theory of society. For there is a tendency to argue, explicity or implicitly, that language is prior to or formative of society itself. This position of course cannot be tolerated because it unduly restricts the scope of social theory and often illegitimately constricts the range of possible emancipation from domination. Habermas and Baudrillard, in very different ways, have wrestled with the question of language, subordinating it to and integrating it with critical social theory. In the process they have opened new perspectives on the relation of technology and culture, offering resolutions to the deficiencies of classical Marxism.

In the case of Habermas the shift toward language theory began in the 1968 essay "Technology and Science as 'Ideology,' " in which the Marxist notion of work came under attack.[5] Associated with the Frankfurt School, Habermas was extending a line of thought initiated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). In that book Horkheimer and Adorno attempted to differentiate critical theory from the scientific tradition in which Marx had initiated it.[6] For Horkheimer and Adorno scientific rationality was a means of dominating nature that had also become a means of dominating men. If Enlightenment, from the Greeks to the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century, based its critique of social domination on reason and science, it sustained and nurtured domination in a different form, one that would under capitalism become the source for an insidious form of social domination. Horkheimer and Adorno pleaded for a radical critique of the

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[4]Martin Jay begins to address this question in "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate," unpublished paper delivered at the Cornell University Conference on the Future of Intellectual History, forthcoming from Cornell Univ. Press.

[5]The English version can be found in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics,* trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

[6]*Dialectic of Enlightenment,* trans. John Cumming (N. Y.: Seabury, 1972).

culture of capitalism rooted not in the workplace but in the legitimating ideology of science. Their experience of German Fascism, in which political domination and scientific culture operated in harmony, resulted in their pessimism about the future of the class struggle.

Far less disturbed by the gloomy events of the twentieth century than Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas searched for a renewal of radical theory in the critique of science and technology. He traced a line of filiation between Marx's theory of labor and the conservative function of science:

> At the stage of their scientific-technical development . . . the forces of production appear to enter a new constellation with the relations of production. Now they no longer function as the basis of a critique of prevailing legitimations in the interest of political enlightenment, but become instead the basis of legitimation.[7]

The conservative alliance of science and class relations was rooted in structural changes in advanced capitalism. While Horkheimer, Adorno, and even Marcuse stressed the negative prospects implied by these developments, Habermas took them as a sign of an inadequacy in Marx's critical theory. Marx was unable to present a critical evaluation of the legitimating role of science and technology because his theory did not distinguish clearly enough emancipatory action and technique. Marx could not offer an "alternative to existing technology" because his theory of labor was itself scientistic and technical.

Habermas found a way out of the dilemma in a most peculiar fashion. Critical theory was in jeopardy because it had discovered a connection between technology and culture. Technology had become a source of ideology; the successes of the production system transformed it into its own justification; matter was transmuted into ideas. This revelation of critical theory was reversed by Habermas, who located in Max Weber's theory of action the basis for once again separating technology and culture. Weber distinguished between purposive-rational action and value-rational action, a dichotomy that Habermas employed to develop an antinomy between technical action and symbolic interaction. Marx's theory of labor praxis was limited to the former; the ends of social action were given; the

[7] *Toward a Rational Society,* p. 84.

means were geared to produce results in the technically most efficient manner. What was left out or subordinated in Marx's account of work was language, communication, the means through which individuals recognized each other as subjects. Hence Marx was unable to distinguish between science and emancipation.

The problem with Habermas' double theory of action is that it is not properly grounded in critical theory. The new category is simply added on to the old with no "transcendental deduction." Thus Habermas writes, "I shall take as my starting point the fundamental distinction between *work* and *interaction*."[8] But this distinction is neither fundamental nor a starting point. It is instead a conclusion, one that leads to an improper separation of technology and culture. The borrowing of the concept of symbolic interaction from Weber is not enough. It does not explore systematically the metaphysical presuppositions behind Weber's thought and it introduces an artificial, even arbitrary distinction which sets Habermas' thought down a wandering path into the thickets of the notion of the ideal speaking situation. Eventually Habermas will have to reintroduce a transcendental subject that directs his thought not beyond Marx but behind him, back to Kant. Faced with the dilemma of science as ideology, Habermas might have inquired into the rational subject and in that way avoided the subjectivism into which he eventually fell.

After elaborating the distinction between work and symbolic interaction, Habermas attempted to bolster his position by displacing the locus of primary contradiction from the workplace to the public sphere. If the primary "conflict zone" had shifted from the mode of production to the mode of legitimation, the concept of symbolic interaction would provide a basis for a new critical theory. In *Legitimation Crisis* (1973) Habermas presented this argument.[9] The requirement for shifting the gears of Marxism from labor or technical action to communication or cultural interaction could be sustained if it could be shown that the class struggle at the point of production had been displaced by a cultural struggle at the point of legitimation. The question that haunts the pages of *Legitimation Crisis* is this: can the arbitrary grafting of the notion of symbolic inter-

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[8] *Toward A Rational Society*, p. 91.

[9] *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1975). The book was originally published in German in 1973 under the title *Legitimationsprobleme im Spätkapitalismus.*

action to that of work be justified theoretically by an empirical demonstration of a legitimation crisis in advanced capitalism?

According to Habermas a new stage has been reached in the history of capitalism: classical capitalism of the nineteenth century has become "organized capitalism" in the twentieth. In its earlier phase of development the capitalist mode of production attained legitimacy through a functionally autonomous market mechanism. Although some state interference occured, the market, by and large, operated as a separate sphere of action. Class domination therefore was contained within the relations of production. The extraction of surplus value from the workers by the bourgeoisie received whatever legitimacy it had from the nature-like operation of the market. The anonymity of market fluctuations, their quality of being ruled by no one, functioned to mask the class power of the capitalists. In addition the persistence of religious and liberal cultural traditions absorbed some of the shocks of the class struggle. Belief in God and the contract system gave meaning to an otherwise oppressive society.

In the twentieth century, Habermas maintains, all of this changed. The emergence of oligopolistic industries, the trauma of national wars, and the collapse of the market itself all culminated in a new social totality, that of "organized capitalism," in which the state mediated the class struggle, taking over the role of social management previously held by the market. But the displacement of the steering function to the state meant that the class struggle became politicized. From now on social injustice could be contested directly in the public sphere. The flowers of legitimation were hence torn from the ugly reality of class domination. "To the extent that the class relationship has itself been repoliticized and the state has taken over market . . . tasks," Habermas contends, "class domination can no longer take the anonymous form of the law of value" (*Legitimation Crisis,* p. 68).

In the new conjuncture legitimation, not exploitation became the central contradiction. Every social battle would now have to be justified administratively, by the state. But this is precisely what the state cannot do: "There is no administrative production of meaning" (p. 70). Cultural beliefs, Habermas asserts, persist through the force of tradition: they rise and fall without planning or intention. Hence the state must resort to "manipulation" and "advertising techniques" in a losing struggle to maintain the legitimacy and cultural value of the social system. Under organized capitalism economic crises are played out not in the class struggle but in the

arena of administrative legitimation. With each crisis the state loses a little more of its credibility and more pressure is placed on the cultural underpinnings of individual motivation. Scarcities no longer exist in consumer goods but in "meaning" (p. 73). And in the end, when the process has come full circle, production can only be justified by consumption: "The less the cultural system is capable of producing adequate motivations for politics, the educational system, and the occupational system, the more must scarce meaning be replaced by consumable values" (p. 93). When the state relies upon consumerism to justify itself, a dangerous dialectic has been instituted in which economic crises become cultural catastrophes.

Although Habermas' analysis of advanced capitalism has a ring of authenticity it cannot sustain the flaws in the notion of symbolic interaction, if that is to be considered the basis of a renewed Marxist theory. Too much conceptual weight is removed from the labor process and heaped upon communicational praxis. Habermas must have realized this because since the appearance of *Legitimation Crisis* he has struggled to elaborate a more satisfactory notion of symbolic interaction. He has ransacked the theoretical attic to locate a position outside Marxism that could assist him in his task. He turned to systems theory, Piaget's developmental psychology, hermeneutics, various linguistic theories, Parsonian sociology, and ordinary language theory, among others. His provisional conclusions were published in English in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*.[10]

Habermas treats the question of language theory as an aspect of critical social theory. He rejects in turn (1) Chomsky's theory of generative grammer since that grounds language in an asocial notion of human nature; (2) Saussurean linguistics since that removes the study of language from active social subjects and treats it as a purely formal, objective phenomena; and (3) Austin's speech act theory since that provides no basis to evaluate critically the situation of the speaker. To account for language or symbolic interaction from the point of view of critical social theory Habermas develops the notion of the ideal speaking situation. Speaking is an effort to communicate and this implies for Habermas that what the speaker says is comprehensible, that what the speaker states is true, that the speaker is sincere, and that the utterance fits into the normative context. On the

[10]*Communication and the Evolution of Society,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1979) from the original German texts of 1976, *Sprachpragmatik und Philosophie* and *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus.*

basis of these criteria language becomes available for analysis in terms of the distortions introduced into speech by social modes of domination.

Habermas is aware that few if any conversations meet the criteria of the ideal speaking situation. Nevertheless, he argues for the apodicticity of his concept: "No matter how the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding may be deformed, the design of an ideal speech situation is necessarily implied with the structure of potential speech; for every speech, even that of intentional deception, is oriented towards the idea of truth."[11] In other words, "truth, freedom and justice" are inseparable tools of linguistic analysis. Habermas is maintaining, in a somewhat Kantian manner, that the ideal speaking situation is a necessary condition for the comprehension of any utterance. The degree to which speech fails to meet the criteria of the ideal speaking situation signifies not an individual's failure to communicate but social oppression, ultimately the class struggle.

There are many difficulties with the notion of the ideal speaking situation. To begin with, one might ask if it is possible to evaluate empirically a given conversation according to Habermas' criteria. In the flow of interchanges between a husband and a wife, as for example in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* the levels of distortion are so complex that untangling "the truth" and analyzing the structures of domination might be impossible. In fact, the concept of the ideal speaking situation implies a God-like epistemological vantage point from which the foibles of everyday confusions could be sorted out. But let us set aside the empirical problems and agree with Habermas that deviations from the ideal speaking situation "increase correspondingly to the varying degrees of repression which characterize the institutional system within a given society; and that, in turn, the degree of repression depends on the developmental stage of the productive forces and on the organization of authority . . ."[12] If that is so, another difficulty arises: the analysis of symbolic interaction remains a direct reflection of the mode of production and we are back to where we began, with the problem of labor.

Habermas sought to extract the notion of the ideal speaking situation from the grip of the economic structure by arguing that

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[11]Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence," in *Recent Sociology No. 2: Patterns of Communicative Behavior,* ed. Hans Peter Dreitzel (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1970), p. 144. This text is a translation of "Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz."

[12]"Communicative Competence," p. 146.

"communicative competence" is itself an historical phenomenon. The ability of speakers to meet the ideal criteria thus depends not only on the levels of repression introduced by the mode of production but on the stage of "moral development" of the individual. Communication is viewed as an evolutionary phenomenon in its own right, one that depends on issues of socialization and personality development.

Habermas contends that "the species learns not only in the dimension of technically useful knowledge decisive for the development of productive forces but also in the dimension of moral-practical consciousness decisive for structures of interaction."[13] Just as there is progress in the evolution of modes of production, so there are criteria, provided for the most part by Piaget, by which to evaluate communicative competence. During stage one an "imperativist mode of communication" is predominant; there ensues the era of "propositionally differentiated speech"; finally we arrive at an epoch, presumably our own, in which speech is "argumentative" and fully subject to the criteria of the ideal speaking situation. Changes from one stage to the next are made possible, according to Habermas, by general changes in social organization.[14] The implication of Habermas' argument is that in the next stage of social organization, the one beyond capitalism, communicative competence will enable and social freedom will allow the realization of the ideal speaking situation. This position has led Habermas, to the chagrin of the radical left in Germany, to argue for a "public sphere" in which open debate would provide the conditions for qualitative social change.

The utopianism of Habermas' political position is rooted in the subjectivism of his theory. If speech is distorted systematically by social repression it is not likely that open debate in the public sphere would eliminate that distortion. Such an ideal speaking situation would still be subject to the general forms of repression. Even in the context of "the legitimation crisis" it is difficult to see how the distortions can be eliminated, for Habermas' version of critical theory depends upon an unjustified view of the subject as "ideally" truthful. But the pressure to be truthful does not necessarily produce the truth; it might just as well lead to more elaborate lies or self-deceptions. In the end Habermas' theory leads to a demand for an ideal

[13] *Communication and the Evolution of Society,* p. 148.

[14] Habermas provides examples of this in *Communication,* p. 112.

speaking situation which is not adequately based on an analysis of the structure of communication in everyday life. To attain that sort of analysis one must posit language as an objective phenomenon, at least provisionally, and carry out an investigation of it that renders it intelligible socially and historically. This is the direction of the work of Jean Baudrillard, who frees critical theory from an unwarranted dependence on evaluating the subjectivity of social participants by which the analysis of culture is divorced from that of technology.

Baudrillard's early works, *Le Système des objets* (1968) and *La Société de consommation* (1970) took their inspiration from the problematics of the critique of everyday life developed by Baudrillard's teacher Henri Lefebvre and from Roland Barthes' semiology.[15] Under advanced capitalism, Baudrillard maintained, consumerism had come to dominate the various aspects of everyday life. At this stage of his thinking Baudrillard was happy to place the regional analysis of consumption within the broader Marxist critique of capitalism. The experience of the events of May 1968 had dramatized changes in the structure of capitalism, such as the importance of everyday life, that required analysis and critique. Where Baudrillard differed from traditional Marxism was in his use of semiological theory[16] to make intelligible in a new way the features of consumerism.

Like Habermas, Baudrillard was unwilling to accept language theory—in this case structuralist semiology—in its dominant versions. Saussure's structural linguistics, as employed by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Barthes, enables the investigator to examine phenomena at a new level of complexity. An object can be dissected into its binary oppositions, revealing a play of rules and patterns of formation, without resorting to a concept of consiousness or subjectivity. Social experience is open to analysis at a level of internal articulation: myths, kinship systems, fashion magazines, consumer objects each constitute a structured world of meaning that derives its intelligibility from its likeness to language. Yet the use of structural linguistics in social theory bears a certain cost: the formalism of lin-

[15]See Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World,* trans. Sacha Rabinovich (N. Y.: Harper Torchbook, 1971) and *Le language et la société* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (N. Y.: Hill and Wang, 1972) and *Système de la mode* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967).

[16]Semiology may be defined as the study of all social meanings, not just those inherent in language.

guistics, when carried over into social science, implies a dehistoricization and a weakening of critical powers. Structural linguistics mandates that phenomena be studied synchronically, outside time, and without reference to normative evaluations.

Baudrillard was probably the first thinker in France to attempt to employ semiology both historically and critically. The thesis of *Consumer Society* was that in advanced capitalism a new structure of meanings had emerged whose effectiveness was based on a logic of differentiation that was subject to analysis only by a semiological theory. "The social logic of consumption," Baudrillard wrote, "is not at all that of the individual appropriation of the use value of goods and services . . . it is not a logic of satisfaction. It is a logic of the production and manipulation of social signifiers."[17] But Marxism missed its analytical boat if it rested with demonstrating that capitalism generated these signifiers to manipulate the masses into unwanted acts of consumption.[18] The point was rather that the signifiers themselves, not the products, had become objects of consumption that drew their power and fascination from being structured into a code. The code, in turn, could be deciphered not by the logic of capital but by the logic of semiology.

Baudrillard's analysis of consumption was thus fully historical because it subordinated semiology to critical theory: the production of commodities had entered a new stage that was accompanied by a new structure of signs, a new linguistic apparatus. Once this new structure of meanings was analyzed semiologically, revealing its structured code, an argument could be developed that radical change must focus on the code, develop a practice to dismantle it and a strategy to create a new order of symbolic exchange with a new system of signs. Baudrillard's intent was double: to revise semiology so that its formalism and ahistoricity were tamed to the needs of critical theory; and to revise Marxism so that its productivism was tamed to the needs of cultural criticism. The result would be a new critical theory that captured the interdependence of technology and culture, production and symbolic exchange.

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[17]Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) pp. 78–79. In Saussure's theory of structural linguistics signs are composed of signifiers or words and signifieds or mental images. Emphasis is placed on the relations of the signifiers, whose connection to signifieds and referents is virtually ignored.

[18]For an example of that type of analysis see Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (N. Y.: McGraw Hill, 1976).

The System of Objects and *Consumer Society* carried out these goals by demonstrating the advantages of semiology over the Marxist concept of needs in the analysis of consumerism. If commodities are conceptualized as deriving their value from labor and their use from need, the extraordinary expansion of consumerism since World War II remains a mystery. Why would workers exhaust themselves in labor only to purchase the dubious products that capitalism places on the market? According to Marx, human needs are not fixed, but alter with changes in the mode of production. If that is true, capitalism has successfully instituted an infinite cycle of production and consumption. But Marx's analysis overlooked, according to Baudrillard, the function of social exchange. Limited to the metaphor of production in the analysis of social practice, Marx missed the force of the social exchange of meanings that envelope commodities in a nonproductivist logic. If, on the other hand, society were seen as a system of symbolic exchange, the power of the code would reveal its force.

Under advanced capitalism, Baudrillard contends, the masses are controlled not only by the need to labor in order to survive but by the need to exchange symbolic differences.[19] Individuals receive their identity in relation to others not primarily from their type of work but from the meanings they consume. Taking his cue from Veblen and certain anthropological theories, Baudrillard asserts the importance of commodities as social signifiers, not as material objects. But he avoids the dangers of such theories of emulation by rooting his analysis firmly in the soil of the current social epoch. The shift from the primacy of production to the primacy of exchange has been facilitated by the development of new technologies, such as radio and television. The cultural significance of these technologies is that they emit a single message and constitute a new code: "the message of the consumption of the message."[20] The new media transform the structure of language, of symbolic exchange, creating the conditions in which the new code of consumerism can emerge.

From the vantage point of semiology, the new code is easy enough to decipher. An ad for Pepsi-Cola, for example, pictures a community of all ages, sexes, and races enjoying a drink together. The message is clear if subliminal: to drink Pepsi-Cola is not so much to consume a carbonated beverage as to consume a meaning, a

[19] *La Société de consommation,* p. 134.
[20] *La Société de consommation,* p. 188.

sign, that of community.[21] In this ad, a value that capitalism destroys (community) is returned to society through the ad. In another example, the code operates not as utopian realization but as pressure to conform. Brut cologne is associated with aggressive manhood. Again, to use the product is to consume the meaning, in this case a stereotype of masculinity. The implication of the ad is that those who do not use Brut will not be manly, losing out in the game of sexual conquest.

Although opposite in their strategy, both ads illustrate the mechanism of the code. The product itself is not of primary interest; it must be sold by grafting onto it a set of meanings that have no inherent connection with the product. The set of meanings, subject to semiological analysis, becomes the dominant aspect of consumption. Unlike Habermas, who sees meanings as scarce in advanced capitalism, Baudrillard discovers a profusion of meaning in the system of consumption. This difference in the two thinkers speaks to the relative value of their sources: the elitist pessimism of the Frankfurt school, which, failing to find "authentic" values in mass society, rejects popular culture out of hand, and the semiology employed by Baudrillard, which grants the validity of popular culture long enough to carry out a trenchant analysis of it.

In *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (1972) Baudrillard endeavored to correlate systematically his critical semiology with Marx's critique of political economy. Still remaining within Marxist framework, at least nominally, he tested the general principles of Marx's analysis of the commodity with that of semiology's analysis of the sign. Just as Marx decomposed the commodity into use value and exchange value, so semiology deciphered the sign as signified and signifier. Baudrillard discovered a homology between the sign and the commodity: the signifier is to exchange value what the signified is to use value.[22] The parallelism at the formal level, however, masks a certain misrecognition or ideology which is the effect both of the structuralist concept of the sign and the Marxist notion of the commodity.

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[21]For numerous examples of analyses of ads see Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978).

[22]For more extensive elaborations of this sort of homological analysis see Jean-Joseph Goux, *Economie et symbolique: Freud, Marx* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1973) and Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978).

The structuralist concept of the sign naturalizes or universalizes what is in fact, according to Baudrillard, a historically based semiological formation. The sign, split off from the referent and intelligible only at the level of the relation of signifier to signifier, is actually a drastic reduction of the symbolic. In a universe of symbols, signifier, signified, and referent are integrated in acts of communication. Symbols are characterized by an ambivalence of meaning as they are exchanged from one person to another. The sign, on the contrary, is full, positive, univocal.[23] It is not an inevitable truth about language, but a product of a specific semiological epoch. Programmed by industry and bureaucracy, the sign is part of the strategy of power (*Pour une critique,* p. 91). Removed from the web of mutual reciprocity, the sign is a unilateral message, a communication without a response (p. 138). Signs are made possible by the new technologies of the media in which signifiers flash by potential consumers. Once signifiers have been separated and abstracted in this way, floating free, so to speak, in communicational space, they can be attached to particular commodities by the arbitrary whim of advertisers. Thus a new structure of meaning is instituted that collaborates with the requirements of advanced capitalism.

Marx's concept of the commodity never attains this level of analysis. He neglects the process of transformation by which exchange value becomes a sign (p. 129). Because the conceptual apparatus of Marxism is modeled on production and labor, it cannot make intelligible "the social labor of producing signs," (p. 132) which is based on a different logic. The circulation of signs itself produces surplus value, one based not on profit but on legitimacy (p. 140). At this time, Baudrillard was content to argue that his analysis of the message was parallel to Marx's analysis of the commodity. Just at the point where Marxism became "ideological" because it could not decode the semiology of the commodity, Baudrillard stepped in to enrich and improve upon historical materialism, updating it to the circumstances of advanced capitalism.

Hints of a coming break with Marx were nonetheless present in *Pour une critique*. The point of divergence with Marx centered on the question of the logic of production versus the logic of exchange, the materiality of commodities versus the ideality of the sign. In rejecting the structuralist separation of the sign from the world,

[23] *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) p. 181.

Baudrillard argued that the world "is only the effect of the sign" (p. 185). If individuals consumed meanings rather than products, the center piece of social theory was symbolic exchange, not the production of goods. Value was created, therefore, not in the labor process but in the communicational structure. In *Pour une critique,* Baudrillard's emphasis was on revising Marx rather than supplanting him but the seeds of post-Marxist critical theory were already planted.

The break with Marx came only a year later with the publication of *The Mirror of Production.* Here Baudrillard presented in no uncertain terms his critique of the notion of labor, systematically deconstructing the apparatus of the critique of political economy:

> A specter haunts the revolutionary imagination: the phantom of production. Everywhere it sustains an unbridled romanticism of productivity. The critical theory of the *mode* of production does not touch the *principle* of production. All the concepts it articulates describe only the dialectical and historical genealogy of the *contents* of production, leaving production as a *form* intact.[24]

The Marxist concept of labor, Baudrillard proposes, is too close to the liberal notion of *homo economicus* to provide a radical critique of political economy. Like the liberals, Marx reduces practice to labor and society to production. Marx discovered in use value the radical basis for the critique of the liberal notion of exchange value. The labor that goes into the commodity constitutes for Marx its true worth, not the amount for which it is exchanged. The notion of exchange value reduces all labor to one level; it obscures concrete differences between human acts, Marx complains.

Baudrillard responds that to uncover the human essence of labor behind the capitalist shroud of exchange value is not enough. Marxism only "convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labor power; hence it censors the much more radical hypothesis that they do not have to be the labor power, the 'unalienable' power of creating value by their labor" (*Mirror,* p. 9). Like liberalism, Marx conceptualized the social field in the mirror of production, presenting back to capitalism its own image, only in an inverted form. A radical critique must rather locate the field that is obscured by liberals and Marxists alike—that of symbolic exchange.

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[24] *The Mirror of Production,* trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975) p. 17.

Baudrillard locates the point at which Marxist theory becomes complicit with capitalist productivism by reviewing the stages of the relation of production and exchange presented by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. During stage one, before capitalism, production was for use by the producers and only the surplus was exchanged. In stage two, that of classical capitalism, all production by industry was exchanged. In stage three, fully developed capitalism, not only industrial production, but everything—"virtue, love, knowledge, consciousness"—is placed on the market for possible exchange (*Mirror,* p. 119). Marx views the spread of capitalist principles beyond the area of production as a "corruption" or a time of "universal venality." For Marx, stage three involves the reflection of the base in the superstructure, a secondary effect of the mode of production. Thus the basic shift for him is from stage one to stage two, stage three being conceived only as the logical working out of the system, its general extension to all social relations.

In his critique Baudrillard wavers not between supplementing Marx and rejecting him but between rejecting him only for the analysis of stage three or rejecting him for the entire genealogy of capitalism. In the weaker critique Baudrillard argues that Marx obscures the significance of the shift to stage three because of his productivist metaphor. Social exchange in stage three, from the semiological perspective outlined above, reveals a structurally new type of domination generated by the code or the sign, a type of domination that cannot be made intelligible through the concept of production. In this case, Marxism becomes inadequate as a critical theory only with the advent of the sign as the general principle of communication. In the stronger critique Baudrillard maintains that the sign and the commodity arose together at the beginning of the process of the birth of capitalism and that the critique of the political economy of the sign is more radical than the critique of political economy from the outset. As a critical category, the mode of signification should perhaps take precedence over the mode of production.

The tendency to give priority to symbolic exchanges rather than labor is found in the recent work of both Baudrillard and Habermas.[25] The question of whether they have strayed too far from traditional Marxism cannot be answered within the scope of this essay. What can be said is that both have enlarged the scope of critical

[25]See Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) and *A l'ombre des majorités silencieuses, ou la fin du social* (Paris: Utopie, 1978).

theory to encompass the phenomenon of language and that both have placed technology in a closer relationship with culture than Marx did. The mode of signification becomes as central to critical theory as the mode of production. The ideal speaking situation for Habermas and symbolic exchange for Baudrillard become the new basis of revolutionary theory. The problem of transforming the mode of production must share the attention of criticism with the problem of transforming the world of meaning, culture, and language. By taking critical theory in this direction both Habermas and Baudrillard provide a ground for incorporating into the revolutionary perspective a locus of radicality outside the workplace. Women, minorities, gays, criminals, all the oppressed subcultures, may now take part in the process of social transformation on a footing equal to that of the proletariat. Although neither Baudrillard nor Habermas systematically addresses the question of the relation of these subgroups to the mode of signification, there is the clear implication in their thought that this issue is high on the agenda of critical theory.

Although the similarities in direction of the ideas of Baudrillard and Habermas are striking, there remain fundamental differences between them. These divergences can be clarified by comparing their relationship to the Left of the late 1960s. In Germany Habermas became a focus of criticism by the New Left, who saw his notion of a public sphere as insufficiently radical. For his part Habermas viewed the students as bourgeois children protesting paternal authority and sexual repression.[26] The significance of their revolt was that they forced into public attention areas of life that hitherto had remained private. They had successfully broken through the shell of bourgeois ideology revealing the absence of democracy throughout society. In the advanced societies the main problem, however, was that of technology and its undemocratic character. Here the issue could be resolved only through resort to an ideal speaking situation. The problem was one "of setting into motion a politically effective discussion that rationally brings the social potential constituted by technical knowledge and ability into a defined and controlled relation to our practical knowledge and will . . . . Our only hope for the rationalization of the power structure lies in conditions that favor political power for thought developing through dialogue."[27] The issue for

[26] *Toward a Rational Society,* p. 37.
[27] *Toward a Rational Society,* p. 61.

Habermas was one of creating an institutional framework for undistorted communication. He posited the need for a new subjective basis for rationality; the ideal speaking situation would produce a rational society. While appealing to honored and ancient cultural imperatives, Habermas' prescriptions do not go much beyond the contours of the Enlightenment.

Baudrillard was far more enthusiastic than Habermas about the radicalism of the late 1960s. May 1968 was for him an apocalyptic smashing of the repressive code. Against the monologue of the TV, May 1968 presented a festival of symbolic exchange. The streets and walls of Paris shouted down the abstract murmurs of the sign. A new mode of signification was realized in everyday life, if only briefly.[28] The seemingly unconquerable power of the code dissolved in a volley of chatter from students and workers. The new mode of signification was created not through the dialectical maneuvers of the class struggle but in a simple explosion of expressive communication. Like graffiti, the force of symbolic exchange erupted in the semiological field in a sudden burst of meaning. The events of May 1968 confirmed for Baudrillard the poverty of the Marxist notion of revolution. It shattered in one brilliant display of semiological fireworks the notion of the party with its intellectuals, its theory, its cadre, its careful organization and strategy, its duplication of the bourgeois world that it would supplant. The theory of symbolic exchange in Baudrillard's version thus implies a very different world from that of Habermas. The new mode of signification depends not on a new notion of the subject or a new realization of rationality. It denotes instead a new structure of communication in which signifiers would be generated directly in the course of exchange, connected closely to both signified and referent.

Although Baudrillard's critical semiology permits a deeper analysis of the communication structure of advanced capitalism than that of Habermas and avoids undue reliance on concepts of the subject and rationality, it too misses, finally, a satisfactory resolution of a theory of technology and culture. The danger in Baudrillard's notion of the code is that it accepts too easily the omnipotence of the semiological structure; it totalizes too quickly the pattern of communication that it reveals. As opposed to Habermas' subjectivism, Baudrillard's analysis errs in the direction of objectivism. In his view floating signifiers pervade the social space without adequate recogni-

[28] *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe,* p. 218.

tion or theoretical account of the continuous disruptions of it by subjects. Baudrillard convincingly theorizes one side of the question—the emission of the signals—but the reception of the signals remains beyond the ken of his semiology. For reception is also an act and it is one that is discontinuous with emission, especially during the epoch of the sign. Revolt against the sign takes place not only in the exceptional collective outburst, such as that of May 1968. Protest and transgression are repeated daily by women who refuse to douse themselves in seductive perfumes, by gays who overtly display their threatening sexuality, by prisoners who do not accept the discipline of the panopticon, by workers who sabotage the smooth flow of the production line, by everyone who draws a line through or erases or marks over the imperatives of the code.

If critical semiology enables critical theory to make intelligible the domination inherent in the mode of signification, it displaces the locus of revolt, failing to present a theory of subjectivity that would account for the gaps and fissures within the system. When Baudrillard argues that escape from the code is found only in death, when meaning finally is not reincorporated into the nightmare of signs, it becomes plain that his objectivism has led to a retreat to a distant desert. Nonetheless, Habermas and, more especially, Baudrillard have carried critical theory far beyond the boundaries of the mode of production to a more fertile theoretical field in which a resolution of the question of technology and culture can be pursued.

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