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Features

Jean Baudrillard;Obituary;The Register

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**Jean Baudrillard**, social theorist and writer, was born on June 20, 1929. He died after a long illness on March 6, 2007, aged 77

Postmodernist provocateur and cultural theorist who blamed consumerism for destroying reality

Jean Baudrillard was a leading French social theorist. His prolific writings - more than 50 books -and his status for many years as a cult figure among students of postmodern theory established him as one of the most celebrated and provocative French thinkers to emerge in the 1960s.

His interests ranged from anthropology to modern literature, film, art and photography, and he adopted many different styles of writing, from essay to poetry, from monograph to aphorism. Though not always clearly understood, his writing was influential across a broad range of disciplines that included literature, sociology, culture and media, and philosophy.

He was also an important influence on artists and writers -the novelist J. G.

Ballard held that he was the most important French thinker of the past 20 years.

Jean Baudrillard was born in 1929 in Rheims, where he attended the lycee. His education was interrupted when, in the crucial year of preparation for entry into higher education, he abandoned his studies and, in his own words, "ran away" a la Rimbaud. He eventually returned to education, however, and spent ten years teaching German in provincial lycees.

In the 1960s he became a leading translator of German literary and philosophical works into French, while at the same time undertaking studies in sociology and preparing a thesis -influenced by the ideas of Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes -which would allow him to take up a university position.

This he did at Nanterre in 1966, when left-leaning intellectuals were being increasingly radicalised in the wave of anti-bourgeois agitation that characterised the 1960s. His key publications begin from 1968. He continued to teach and to research in Paris until his withdrawal from academia in 1987.

Thereafter he spent much time travelling and lecturing throughout the world and developing his talent as a photographer -his work was shown in several exhibitions.

Baudrillard's career as a social theorist began with two substantial studies of affluent, modern society: *The System of Objects* (1968) and *The Consumer Society* (1970). These were followed by *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), in which sociology, semiology and Marxist economic theory were combined.

At the high point of the influence of Marxism in France Baudrillard thus contributed, against the more orthodox styles of Marxism, a recognition that a profound shift had taken place with the development of consumerism. His two studies of consumerism charted the emergence of a society dominated not by commodities as such, but by objects now consumed more and more for their image, or as he called it, their "sign-value".

This transition to a system characterised by what he called "saturation" and "obesity", among other categories of his invention, made analyses based on scarcity, need, function and proletarian revolt redundant. It was soon clear to him that Marxism, like socialism, was part of the system it sought to overcome.

What distinguished Baudrillard's response therefore was his search for a way of analysing modern societies that still remained radical. He sought at this period for a way of theorising which went beyond all the various forms of critical Marxism, developing some of the ideas and critiques of Marxism advanced by thinkers of the Frankfurt School, such as Herbert Marcuse. Baudrillard became - and remained -an "ultra" and increasingly he was regarded as an outsider.

During the rest of his intellectual career, Baudrillard developed a radical new theoretical position, which had its basis increasingly not in sociology but anthropology. He had long taken an interest in primitive social movements and he had translated important studies on this theme in the 1960s.

His chief statement of his new ideas was presented in a substantial study, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). The characteristic form of analysis from this point was not to apply structural techniques to the analysis of society, but to apply what he conceived as the fundamental categories and poetic symbolic logics of primitive societies to the advanced societies and what he called their semiotic cultures.

He also began to experiment with different styles of writing that included poetry, aphorism and journal, and to break away from the idea of writing with pure academic objectivity.

Thus it became clear with essays on topics such as fate, seduction, evil, illusion and symbolic exchange, that he was attempting to produce a new kind of theory that was quite different from Marxist theory. He called his new mode "fatal", in contrast to critical theory, and his volume *Fatal Strategies* (1983) marked another turning point in his intellectual career.

His series of volumes containing his more personal writings he called *Cool Memories* (1990-2000). These included many different kinds of fragmentary elements, from the most childish jottings to carefully observed comments on places or events. Towards the end of the 1980s he also began to develop the idea that a new post-consumer transition was taking place in the West which required another radical reconstruction of theory.

Perhaps his most notorious short essays -those on war, notably *The Gulf War Did not Take Place* (1991) -were a fruit of this new awareness: Baudrillard predicted that no war is possible in the advanced West. This is not because of its political or social form but primarily because of the virtualisation of Western culture.

His writing in the 1990s was focused on what he saw as the fundamental revolution in Western culture - the very rapid and profound shifts towards a radical uncertainty, brought about by the introduction of information technology.

Baudrillard was one of the first sociologists to have written on simulation and "hyperreality" -a realm created by entertainment, communication and information technologies which is more pleasurable and "real" than ordinary life -at the moment that these concepts were beginning to play a significant role in theoretical analyses of contemporary culture and society.

The celebrity of Baudrillard's writing was clear in the successful and stylish sci-fi film *The Matrix* (1999) in which there was a visual reference to his 1981 essay on simulacra and simulation.

Opposition, Baudrillard came to assert, could only now be realised in the form of singularities that could in principle never be absorbed into Western cultures.

Ultimately, his writing became unclassifiable, a kind of singularity itself. His own project, nihilism and hermetic language were unique, lending themselves neither to codification nor to being organised into a coherent doctrine.

As his intellectual career developed he disassociated himself from the academic world, particularly the social sciences. He also became a critic of the main forms of Western politics and culture, stigmatising the doctrines of democracy and human rights as alibis for increased western penetration, globalisation, and elimination of other cultures (paradoxically after having virtualised its own).

Such radicalism was not accepted by the conventional Left because it rejected all forms of political correctness, socialism, feminism and democratisation.

In person Baudrillard was modest and relaxed, and he preserved an unfailing curiosity about the human dimension and the environment of the modern world.

He was twice married and had two children by his first marriage.

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