

**IN  
THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT  
MAJORITIES  
...OR  
THE END OF THE SOCIAL  
  
AND OTHER ESSAYS**

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## **IN THE SHADOW OF THE SILENT MAJORITIES**

Jean Baudrillard

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**JEAN BAUDRILLARD**

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**THE END OF THE SOCIAL**

**AND OTHER ESSAYS**

**Translated by Paul Foss,  
Paul Patton and John Johnston**



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The whole chaotic constellation of the social revolves around that spongy referent, that opaque but equally translucent reality, that nothingness: the masses. A statistical crystal ball, the masses are "swirling with currents and flows," in the image of matter and the natural elements. So at least they are represented to us. They can be "mesmerized," the social envelops them, like static electricity; but most of the time, precisely, they form an earth\*, that is, they absorb all the

\**Translator's Note:* Throughout the text "*la masse*," "*faire masse*" imply a condensation of terms which allows Baudrillard to make a number of central puns and allusions. For not only does *la masse* directly refer to the physical and philosophical sense of "substance" or "matter," it can just as easily mean "the majority" (as in "the mass of workers") or even the electrical usage of an "earth"; hence *faire masse* can simultaneously mean *to form a mass*, *to form an earth* or *to form a majority*.

electricity of the social and political and neutralise it forever. They are neither good conductors of the political, nor good conductors of the social, nor good conductors of meaning in general. Everything flows through them, everything magnetises them, but diffuses throughout them without leaving a trace. And, ultimately, the appeal to the masses has always gone unanswered. They do not radiate; on the contrary, they absorb all radiation from the outlying constellations of State, History, Culture, Meaning. They are inertia, the strength of inertia, the strength of the neutral.

In this sense, the mass is characteristic of our modernity, as a highly implosive phenomenon, irreducible for any traditional theory and practice, even perhaps for any theory and practice at all.

According to their imaginary representation, the masses drift somewhere between passivity and wild spontaneity, but always as a potential energy, a reservoir of the social and of social energy; today a mute referent, tomorrow, when they speak up and cease to be the "silent majority," a protagonist of history — now, in fact, the masses have no history to write, neither



past nor future, they have no virtual energies to release, nor any desire to fulfill: their strength is *actual*, in the present, and sufficient unto itself. It consists in their silence, in their capacity to absorb and neutralise, already superior to any power acting upon them. It is a specific inertial strength, whose effectivity differs from that of all those schemas of production, radiation and expansion according to which our imaginary functions, even in its wish to destroy those same schemas. An unacceptable and unintelligible figure of implosion (is this still a "process"?) — stumbling block to all our systems of meaning, against which they summon all their resistance, and screening, with a renewed outbreak of signification, with a blaze of signifiers, the central collapse of meaning.

The social void is scattered with interstitial objects and crystalline clusters which spin around and coalesce in a cerebral chiaroscuro. So is the mass, an *in vacuo* aggregation of individual particles, refuse of the social and of media impulses: an opaque nebula whose

growing density absorbs all the surrounding energy and light rays, to collapse finally under its own weight. A black hole which engulfs the social.

This is, therefore, exactly the reverse of a "sociological" understanding. Sociology can only depict the expansion of the social and its vicissitudes. It survives only on the positive and definitive hypothesis of the social. The reabsorption, the implosion of the social escapes it. The hypothesis of the death of the social is also that of its own death.

The term "mass" is not a concept. It is a leitmotif of political demagogy, a soft, sticky, lumpenanalytical notion. A good sociology would attempt to surpass it with "more subtle" categories: socio-professional ones, categories of class, cultural status, etc. Wrong: it is by prowling around these soft and acritical notions (like "mana" once was) that one can go further than intelligent critical sociology. Besides, it will be noticed retrospectively that the concepts "class," "social relations," "power," "status," "institution" — and "social" itself — all those too explicit concepts which are the glory of the legitimate sciences, have also

only ever been muddled notions themselves, but notions upon which agreement has nevertheless been reached for mysterious ends: those of preserving a certain code of analysis.

To want to specify the term "mass" is a mistake — it is to provide meaning for that which has none. One says: "the mass of workers." But the mass is never that of the workers, nor of any other social subject or object. The "peasant masses" of old were not in fact masses: only those form a mass who are freed from their symbolic bondage, "released" (only to be caught in infinite "networks") and destined to be no more than the innumerable end points of precisely those same theoretical models which do not succeed in integrating them and which finally only produce them as statistical refuse. The mass is without attribute, predicate, quality, reference. This is its definition, or its radical lack of definition. It has no sociological "reality." It has nothing to do with any *real* population, body or specific social aggregate. Any attempt to qualify it only seeks to transfer it back to sociology and rescue it from

this indistinctness which is not even that of equivalence (the unlimited sum of equivalent individuals:  $1+1+1$  — such is the sociological definition), but that of the *neutral*, that is to say *neither one nor the other* (ne-uter).

There is no longer any polarity between the one and the other in the mass. This is what causes that vacuum and inwardly collapsing effect in all those systems which survive on the separation and distinction of poles (two, or many in more complex systems). This is what makes the circulation of meaning within the mass impossible: it is instantaneously dispersed, like atoms in a void. This is also what makes it impossible for the mass to be *alienated*, since neither the one nor *the other* exist there any longer.

A speechless mass for every hollow spokesman without a past. Admirable conjunction, between those who have nothing to say, and the masses, who do not speak. Ominous emptiness of all discourse. No hysteria or potential fascism, but simulation by precipitation of every lost referential. Black box of every referential, of every uncaptured meaning, of impossible history, of untraceable systems of representation, the mass is what remains when the social has been

completely removed.

Regarding the impossibility of making meaning circulate among the masses, the best example is God. The masses have hardly retained anything but the image of him, never the Idea. They have never been affected by the Idea of God, which has remained a matter for the clergy, nor by anguish over sin and personal salvation. What they have retained is the enchantment of saints and martyrs; the last judgment; the Dance of Death; sorcery; the ceremony and spectacle of the Church; the immanence of ritual — the contrast to the transcendence of the Idea. They were and have remained pagans, in their way, never haunted by the Supreme Authority, but surviving on the small change of images, superstition and the devil. Degraded practices with regard to the spiritual wager of faith? Indeed. It is their particular way, through the banality of rituals and profane simulacra, of refusing the categorical imperative of morality and faith, the sublime imperative of *meaning*, which they have always re-

jected. It isn't that they have not been able to attain the higher enlightenment of religion: they have ignored it. They don't refuse to die for a faith, for a cause, for an idol. What they refuse is transcendence; the uncertainty, the difference, the waiting, the asceticism which constitute the sublime exaction of religion. For the masses, the Kingdom of God has always been already here on earth, in the pagan immanence of images, in the spectacle of it presented by the Church. Fantastic distortion of the religious principle. The masses have absorbed religion by their sorcerous and spectacular manner of practising it.

All the great schemas of reason have suffered the same fate. They have only traced their trajectory, they have only followed the thread of their history along the thin edge of the social stratum bearing meaning (and in particular of the stratum bearing social meaning), and on the whole they have only penetrated into the masses at the cost of their misappropriation, of their radical distortion. So it was with Historical Reason, Political Reason, Cultural Reason, Revolutionary Reason — so even with the very Reason of the Social, the most interesting since this seems inherent to the masses, and appears to

have produced them throughout its evolution. Are the masses the “mirror of the social”? No, they don’t reflect the social, nor are they reflected in the social — it is the mirror of the social which shatters to pieces on them.

Even this image is not right, since it still evokes the idea of a hard substance, of an opaque resistance. Rather, the masses function as a gigantic black hole which inexorably inflects, bends and distorts all energy and light radiation approaching it: an implosive sphere, in which the curvature of spaces accelerates, in which all dimensions curve back on themselves and “involve” to the point of annihilation, leaving in their stead only a sphere of potential engulfment.

### *The Abyss of Meaning*

So it is with information.

Whatever its political, pedagogical, cultural content, the plan is always to get some meaning across, to keep the masses *within reason*; an imperative to produce meaning that takes the form of the constantly repeated imperative to moralise

information: to better inform, to better socialise, to raise the cultural level of the masses, etc. Nonsense: the masses scandalously resist this imperative of rational communication. They are given meaning: they want spectacle. No effort has been able to convert them to the seriousness of the content, nor even to the seriousness of the code. Messages are given to them, they only want some sign, they idolise the play of signs and stereotypes, they idolise any content so long as it resolves itself into a spectacular sequence. What they reject is the "dialectic" of meaning. Nor is anything served by alleging that they are mystified. This is always a hypocritical hypothesis which protects the intellectual complaisance of the producers of meaning: the masses spontaneously aspire to the natural light of reason. This in order to evade the reverse hypothesis, namely that it is in complete "freedom" that the masses oppose their refusal of meaning and their will to spectacle to the ultimatum of meaning. They distrust, as with death, this transparency and this *political* will. They scent the simplifying terror which is behind the ideal hegemony of meaning, and they react in their own way, by reducing all articulate discourse to a single irra-



tional and baseless dimension, where signs lose their meaning and peter out in fascination: the spectacular.

Once again, it is not a question of mystification: it is a question of their own exigencies, of an explicit and positive counter-strategy — the task of absorbing and annihilating culture, knowledge, power, the social. An immemorial task, but one which assumes its full scope today. A deep antagonism which forces the inversion of received scenarios: it is no longer meaning which would be the ideal line of force in our societies, that which eludes it being only waste intended for reabsorption some time or other — on the contrary, it is meaning which is only an ambiguous and inconsequential accident, an effect due to ideal convergence of a perspective space at any given moment (History, Power, etc.) and which, moreover, has only ever really concerned a tiny fraction and superficial layer of our "societies." And this is true of individuals also: we are only episodic conductors of meaning, for in the main, and profoundly, we *form a mass*, living most of the time in panic or haphazardly, above and beyond any meaning.

Now, with this inverse hypothesis, every-

thing changes.

Take one example from a thousand concerning this contempt for meaning, the folklore of silent passivities.

On the night of Klaus Croissant's extradition, the TV transmitted a football match in which France played to qualify for the world cup. Some hundreds of people demonstrated outside la Sante, a few barristers ran to and fro in the night; twenty million people spent their evening glued to the screen. An explosion of popular joy when France won. Consternation and indignation of the illuminati over this scandalous indifference. *La Monde*: "9 pm. At that time the German barrister had already been taken out of la Sante. A few minutes later, Rocheteau scored the first goal." Melodrama of indignation.<sup>1</sup> Not a single query about the mystery of this indifference. One same reason is always invoked: the manipulation of the masses by power, their mystification by football. In any case, this indifference *ought* not to be, hence it has nothing to

tell us. In other words, the "silent majority" is even stripped of its indifference, it has no right even that this be recognised and imputed to it, even this apathy must have been imposed on it by power.

What contempt behind this interpretation! Mystified, the masses are not allowed their own behavior. Occasionally, they are conceded a revolutionary spontaneity by which they glimpse the "rationality of their own desire," that yes, but God protect us from their silence and their inertia. It is exactly this indifference, however, that demands to be analysed in its *positive* brutality, instead of being dismissed as white magic, or as a magic alienation which always turns the multitudes away from their revolutionary vocation.

Moreover, how does it succeed in turning them away? Can one ask questions about the strange fact that, after several revolutions and a century or two of political apprenticeship, in spite of the newspapers, the trade unions, the parties, the intellectuals and all the energy put into educating and mobilising the people, there are still (and it will be exactly the same in ten or twenty years) a thousand persons who stand up and twenty million who remain "passive" — and not

only passive, but who, in all good faith and with glee and without even asking themselves why, frankly prefer a football match to a human and political drama? It is curious that this proven fact has never succeeded in making political analysis shift ground, but on the contrary reinforces it in its vision of an omnipotent, manipulatory power, and a mass prostrate in an unintelligible coma. Now none of this is true, and both the above are a deception: power manipulates nothing, the masses are neither misled nor mystified. Power is only too happy to make football bear a facile responsibility, even to take upon itself the diabolical responsibility for stupefying the masses. This comforts it in its illusion of being power, and leads away from the much more dangerous fact that this indifference of the masses is their true, their only practice, that there is no other ideal of them to imagine, nothing in this to deplore, but everything to analyse as the brute fact of a collective retaliation and of a refusal to participate in the recommended ideals, however enlightened.

What is at stake in the masses lies elsewhere. We might as well take note and recognise that any hope of revolution, the whole promise of the social and of social change has only been able to function up till now thanks to this dodging of the issue, this fantastic denial. We might as well begin again, as Freud did in the psychic order,<sup>2</sup> from this remainder, from this blind sediment, from this waste or refuse of meaning, from this unanalysed and perhaps unanalysable fact (there is a good reason why such a Copernican Revolution has never been undertaken in the political universe: it is the whole political order that is in danger of paying the price).

### *Rise and Fall of the Political*

The political and the social seem inseparable to us, twin constellations, since at least the French Revolution, under the sign (determinant or not) of the economic. But for us today, this undoubtedly is only true of their simultaneous decline.

When the political emerged during the Renaissance from the religious and ecclesiastic spheres, to win reknown with Machiavelli, it was at first only a pure game of signs, a pure strategy which was not burdened with any social or historical "truth," but, on the contrary, played on the absence of truth (as did later the worldly strategy of the Jesuits on the absence of God). To begin with, the political space belonged to the same order as that of Renaissance mechanical theatre, or of perspective space in painting, which were invented at the same time. Its form was that of a game, not of a system of representation — semiurgy and strategy, not ideology — its function was one of virtuosity, not of truth (hence the game, subtle and a corollary to this, of Balthazar Gracian in *Homme de Cour*). The cynicism and immorality of Machiavellian politics lay there: not as the vulgar understanding has it in the unscrupulous usage of means, but in the offhand disregard for ends. Now, as Nietzsche well knew, it is in this disregard for a social, psychological, historical truth, in this exercise of simulacra as such, that the maximum of political energy is found, where the political is a game and is not yet given a reason.

It is since the eighteenth century, and particularly since the Revolution, that the political has taken a decisive turn. It took upon itself a social reference, the social invested it. At the same time, it entered into representation, its performance became dominated by representative mechanisms (theatre pursued a parallel fate: it became a representative theatre — likewise for perspective space: machinery at the start, it became the place where a truth of space and of representation was inscribed). The political scene became that of the evocation of a fundamental signified: the people, the will of the people, etc. It no longer worked on signs alone, but on meaning; henceforth summoned to best signify the real it expressed, summoned to become transparent, to moralise itself and to respond to the social ideal of good representation. For a long time, nevertheless, a balance came into play between the proper sphere of the political and the forces reflected in it: the social, the historical, the economic. Undoubtedly this balance corresponds to the golden age of bourgeois represen-

tative systems (constitutionality: eighteenth-century England, the United States of America, the France of bourgeois revolutions, the Europe of 1848).

It is with marxist thought, in its successive developments, that the end of the political and of its particular energy was inaugurated. Here began the absolute hegemony of the social and the economic, and the compulsion, on the part of the political, to become the legislative, institutional, executive mirror of the social. The autonomy of the political was inversely proportional to the growing hegemony of the social.

Liberal thought always thrives on a kind of nostalgic dialectic between the two, but socialist thought, revolutionary thought openly postulates a dissolution of the political at some point in history, in the final transparency of the social.

The social won. But, at this point of generalisation, of saturation, where it is no more than the zero degree of the political, at this point of absolute reference, of omnipresence and diffraction in all the interstices of physical and mental space, what becomes of the social itself? It is the sign of its end: the energy of the social is reversed, its



specificity is lost, its historical quality and its ideality vanish in favour of a configuration where not only the political becomes volatilised, but where the social itself no longer has any name. Anonymous. THE MASS. THE MASSES.

### *The Silent Majority*

The dwindling of the political from a pure strategic arrangement to a system of representation, then to the present scenario of neo-figuration, where the system continues under the same manifold signs but where these no longer represent anything and no longer have their "equivalent" in a "reality" or a real social substance: there is no longer any political investiture because there is no longer even any social referent of the classical kind (a people, a class, a proletariat, objective conditions) to lend force to effective political signs. Quite simply, there is no longer any social signified to give force to a political signifier.

*The only referent which still functions is that of the silent majority. All contemporary*

systems function on this nebulous entity, on this floating substance whose existence is no longer social, but statistical, and whose only mode of appearance is that of the survey. A simulation on the horizon of the social, or rather on whose horizon the social has already disappeared.

That the silent majority (or the masses) is an imaginary referent does not mean they don't exist. It means that *their representation is no longer possible*. The masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation. They don't express themselves, they are surveyed. They don't reflect upon themselves, they are tested. The referendum (and the media are a constant referendum of directed questions and answers) has been substituted for the political referent. Now polls, tests, the referendum, media are devices which no longer belong to a dimension of representations, but to one of simulation. They no longer have a referent in view, but a model. Here, revolution in relation to the devices of classical sociality (of which elections, institutions, the instances of representation, and even of repression, still form a part) is complete: in all this, social meaning still flows

between one pole and another, in a dialectical structure which allows for a political stake and contradictions.

Everything changes with the device of simulation. In the couple "silent majority/survey" for example, there is no longer any pole nor any differential term, hence no electricity of the social either: it is short-circuited by the confusing of poles, in a total circularity of signalling (exactly as is the case with molecular communication and with the substance it informs in DNA and the genetic code). This is the ideal form of simulation: collapse of poles, orbital circulation of models (this is also the matrix of every implosive process).

Bombarded with stimuli, messages and tests, the masses are simply an opaque, blind stratum, like those clusters of stellar gas known only through analysis of their light spectrum — radiation spectrum equivalent to statistics and surveys — but precisely: it can no longer be a question of expression or representation, but only of the simulation of an ever inexpressible and unexpressed social. This is the meaning of

their silence. But this silence is paradoxical — it isn't a silence which does not speak, it is a silence which *refuses to be spoken for in its name*. And in this sense, far from being a form of alienation, it is an absolute weapon.

No one can be said to represent the silent majority, and that is its revenge. The masses are no longer an authority to which one might refer as one formerly referred to class or to the people. Withdrawn into their silence, they are no longer (a) *subject* (especially not to — or of — history), hence they can no longer be spoken for, articulated, represented, nor pass through the political "mirror stage" and the cycle of imaginary identifications. One sees what strength results from this: no longer being (a) subject, *they can no longer be alienated* — neither in their own language (they have none), nor in any other which would pretend to speak for them. The end of revolutionary convictions. For these have always speculated on the possibility of the masses, or the proletariat, denying themselves as such. But the mass is not a place of negativity or explosion, it is a place of absorption and implosion.

Inaccessible to schemas of liberation, revolution and historicity; this is its mode of defense, its

particular mode of retaliation. Model of simulation and imaginary referent for use by a phantom political class which now no longer knows what kind of "power" it wields over it, the mass is at the same time the death, the end of this political process thought to rule over it. And into it is engulfed the political as will and representation.

The strategy of power has long seemed founded on the apathy of the masses. The more passive they were, the more secure it was. But this logic is only characteristic of the bureaucratic and centralist phase of power. And it is this which today turns against it: the inertia it has fostered becomes the sign of its own death. That is why it seeks to reverse its strategies: from passivity to participation, from silence to speech. But it is too late. The threshold of the "critical mass," that of the involution of the social through inertia, is exceeded.<sup>3</sup>

Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, organisationally, sexually, in participation, in festival, in free speech, etc. The spectre must be exorcised, it must pronounce its name. Nothing shows more dramatically that the only genuine problem today is the silence of the mass, the

silence of the silent majority.

All reserves are exhausted in maintaining this mass in controlled emulsion and in preventing it from falling back into its panic-inducing inertia and its silence. No longer being under the reign of will or representation, it falls under the province of diagnosis, or divination pure and simple — whence the universal reign of information and statistics: we must auscultate it, sound it out, unearth some oracle from within it. Whence the mania for seduction, solicitude and all the sollicitation surrounding it. Whence prediction by resonance, the effects of forecasting and of an illusory mass outlook: "The French people think . . . The majority of Germans disapprove . . . All England thrilled to the birth of the Prince . . . etc." — a mirror held out for an ever blind, ever absent recognition.

Whence that bombardment of signs which the mass is thought to re-echo. It is interrogated by converging waves, by light or linguistic stimuli, exactly like distant stars or nuclei bombarded with particles in a cyclotron. Information is exactly this. Not a mode of communication or

of meaning, but a mode of constant emulsion, of input-output and of controlled chain reactions, exactly as in atomic simulation chambers. We must free the "energy" of the mass in order to fabricate the "social."

But it is a contradictory process, for information and security, in all their forms, instead of intensifying or creating the "social relation," are on the contrary entropic processes, modalities of the end of the social.

It is thought that the masses may be structured by injecting them with information, their captive social energy is believed to be released by means of information and messages (today it is no longer the institutional grid as such, rather it is the quantity of information and the degree of media exposure which measures socialisation). Quite the contrary. Instead of transforming the mass into energy, information produces even more mass. Instead of informing as it claims, instead of giving form and structure, information neutralises even further the "social field"; more and more it creates an inert mass impermeable to the classical institutions of the social, and to the very contents of information. Today, replacing the fission of symbolic structures by the social

and its rational violence, is the fission of the social itself by the "irrational" violence of media and information — the final result being precisely an atomised, nuclearised, molecularised mass, the result of two centuries of accelerated socialisation and which brings it irremediably to an end.

The mass is only mass because its social energy has already frozen. It is a cold reservoir, capable of absorbing and neutralising any hot energy. It resembles those half-dead systems into which more energy is injected than is withdrawn, those paid-out deposits exorbitantly maintained in a state of artificial exploitation.

Immense energy is expended in mitigating the tendentially declining rate of political investment and the absolute fragility of the social principle of reality, in maintaining this simulation of the social and in preventing it from totally imploding. And the system risks being swallowed up by it.

Basically, what goes for commodities also goes for meaning. For a long time capital only



had to produce goods; consumption ran by itself. Today it is necessary to produce consumers, to produce demand, and this production is infinitely more costly than that of goods (for the most part, and above all since 1929, the social arose out of this crisis of demand: the production of demand largely overlaps the production of the social itself).<sup>4</sup> For a long time it was enough for power to produce meaning (political, ideological, cultural, sexual), and the demand followed; it absorbed supply and still surpassed it. Meaning was in short supply, and all the revolutionaries offered themselves to produce still more. Today, everything has changed: no longer is meaning in short supply, it is produced everywhere, in ever increasing quantities — it is demand which is weakening. And it is the *production of this demand for meaning* which has become crucial for the system. Without this demand for, without this susceptibility to, without this minimal participation in meaning, power is nothing but an empty simulacrum and an isolated effect of perspective. Here, too, the production of demand is infinitely more costly than the production of meaning itself. Beyond a certain point, it is impossible, all the energy mustered by the system

will no longer be enough. The demand for objects and for services can always be artificially produced, at a high, but accessible cost; the system has proved this. The desire for meaning, when it is in short supply, and the desire for reality, when it is weakening everywhere, cannot be made good and together threaten total ruin.

The mass absorbs all the social energy, but no longer refracts it. It absorbs every sign and every meaning, but no longer reflects them. It absorbs all messages and digests them. For every question put to it, it sends back a tautological and circular response.<sup>5</sup> It never participates. Inundated by flows and tests, it *forms a mass or earth*; it is happy to be a good conductor of flows, but of any flow, a good conductor of information, but of any information, a good conductor of norms, but of any norm, and thereby to reflect the social in its absolute transparency, to give place only to the effects of power and of the social, the latter like constellations fluctuating around this imperceptible nucleus.

The mass is dumb like beasts, and its silence is equal to the silence of beasts. Despite having been surveyed to death (and the constant solicitation, the information, to which it is submitted is

equivalent to experimental torture on laboratory animals), it says neither whether the truth is to the left or to the right, nor whether it prefers revolution or repression. It is without truth and without reason. It has been attributed with every arbitrary remark. It is without conscience and without unconscious.

This silence is unbearable. It is the unknown of the political equation, the unknown which annuls every political equation. Everybody questions it, but never as silence, always to make it speak. But the inertial strength of the masses is unfathomable: literally, no "sounding" or survey will cause it to become evident, since their effect is to blanket it out. A silence which topples the political and the social into the hyperreality with which we associate it. For if the political seeks to "pick up" the masses in a social echo or simulation chamber (the media, information), it is the masses who in return become a huge echo or simulation chamber of the social. Manipulation has never existed. The game is played on both sides, with the same weapons, and who can say which is winning today: the simulation power

performs on the masses, or the inverse simulation held out by the masses for power to be swallowed up in.

### *Neither Subject Nor Object*

The mass realises that paradox of being both an object of simulation (it only exists at the point of convergence of all the media waves which depict it) and a subject of simulation, capable of refracting all the models and of emulating them by hypersimulation (its hyperconformity, an immanent form of humour).

The mass realises that paradox of not being a subject, a group-subject, but of not being an object either. Every effort to make a subject of it (real or mythical) runs head on into the glaring impossibility of an autonomous change in consciousness. Every effort to make an object of it, to treat and analyse it as brute matter, according to objective laws, runs head on into the contrary fact that it is impossible to manipulate the masses in any determinate way, or to understand them in terms of elements, relations, structures and wholes. All manipulation plunges, gets sucked into the mass, absorbed, distorted, reversibilised.

It is impossible to know where it goes; most likely it goes round and round in an endless cycle, foiling every intention on the part of the manipulators. No analysis would know how to contain this diffuse, decentered, Brownian, molecular reality: the notion of object vanishes just as "matter," in the ultimate analysis, vanishes on the horizon of microphysics — it is impossible to comprehend the latter as object once that infinitesimal point is reached where the subject of observation is himself annulled. No more object of knowledge, no more subject of knowledge.

The mass brings about the same insoluble boundary situation in the field of the "social". No longer is it objectifiable (in political terms: no longer is it representable), and it annuls any subject who would claim to comprehend it (in political terms: it annuls anybody who would claim to represent it). Only surveys and statistics (like the law of large numbers and the calculus of probabilities in mathematical physics) can account for it, but one knows that this incantation, this meteoric ritual of statistics and surveys has

no real object, especially not the masses whom it is thought to express. It simply simulates an elusive object, but whose absence is nevertheless intolerable. It "produces" it in the form of anticipated responses, of circular signals which seem to circumscribe its existence and to bear witness to its will. Floating signs — such are surveys — instantaneous signs, intended for manipulation, and whose conclusions can be interchanged. Everybody knows the profound indeterminateness which rules over statistics (the calculus of probabilities or large numbers also correspond to an indeterminateness themselves, to a "Plimsoll line" of the concept of matter, to which again hardly any notion of "objective law" corresponds).

Besides, it is not certain that the procedures of scientific experimentation in the so-called exact sciences have much more truthfulness than surveys and statistics. In any discipline whatsoever, the coded, controlled, "objective" form of inquiry only allows for this circular type of truth, from which the very object aimed at is excluded. In any case, it is possible to think that the uncertainty surrounding this enterprise of the objective determination of the world remains total and that

even matter and the inanimate, when summoned to respond, in the various sciences of nature, in the same terms and according to the same procedures as the masses and "social" beings in statistics and surveys, also send back the same conforming signals, the same coded responses, with the same exasperating, endless conformity, only to better escape, in the last instance, exactly like the masses, any definition as object.

There would thus be a fantastic irony about "matter," and every object of science, just as there is a fantastic irony about the masses in their muteness, or in their statistical discourse so conforming to the questions put to them, akin to the eternal irony of femininity of which Hegel speaks — the irony of a false fidelity, of an excessive fidelity to the law, an ultimately impenetrable simulation of passivity and obedience, and which annuls in return the law governing them, in accordance with the immortal example of Soldier Schweik.

From this would follow, in the literal sense, a *pataphysics* or science of imaginary solutions, a science of the simulation or hypersimulation of

an exact, true, objective world, with its universal laws, including the delirium of those who interpret it according to these laws. The masses and their involuntary humor would introduce us to a pataphysics of the social which ultimately would relieve us of all that cumbersome metaphysics of the social.

This contradicts all received views of the process of truth, but perhaps the latter is only an illusion of judgment. The scientist cannot believe that matter, or living beings, do not respond "objectively" to the questions he puts, or that they respond to them *too* objectively for his questions to be sound. This hypothesis alone seems absurd and unthinkable to him. He will never accept it. He will never leave the enchanted and simulated circle of his enquiry.

The same hypothesis applies everywhere, the same *axiom of credibility*. The adman cannot but believe that people believe in it — however, slightly, that is, that a minimal probability exists of the message reaching its goal and being decoded according to its meaning. Any principle of uncertainty is excluded. If it turned out that the refractive index of this message in the recipient were nil, advertising would instantly collapse. It



only surveys on that belief which it accords itself (this is the same wager as that of science about the objectivity of the world) and which it doesn't try too hard to verify, in terror that the contrary hypothesis might also be true, namely that the great majority of advertising messages never reach their destination, that the viewing public no longer differentiates between the contents, which are refracted in the void. The medium alone functions as an atmospheric effect and acts as spectacle and fascination. THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE, McLuhan prophesied: a formula characteristic of the present phase, the "cool" phase of the whole mass media culture, that of a freezing, neutralisation of every message in a vacuous ether. That of a glaciation of meaning. Critical thought judges and chooses, it produces differences, it is by selection that it presides over meaning. The masses, on the other hand, do not choose, they do not produce differences but a lack of differentiation — they retain a fascination for the medium which they prefer to the critical exigencies of the message. For fascination is not dependent on meaning, it is proportional to the disaffection of meaning. It is obtained by neutralising the message in favour of the medium, by

neutralising the idea of favour of the idol, by neutralising the truth in favour of the simulacrum. It is at this level that the media function. Fascination is their law, and their specific violence, a massive violence denying communication by meaning in favour of another mode of communication. Which one?

For us an untenable hypothesis: that it may be possible to communicate *outside the medium of meaning*, that the very intensity of communication may be proportional to the reabsorption of meaning and to its collapse. For it is not meaning or the increase of meaning which gives tremendous pleasure, but its neutralisation which fascinates (cf. Witz, the operation of wit, in *L'Echange Symbolique et la Mort*). And not by some death drive, which implies that life is still on the side of meaning, but quite simply by defiance, by an allergy to reference, to the message, to the code and to every category of the linguistic enterprise, by a repudiation of all this in favor of imploding the sign in fascination (no longer any signifier or signified: absorption of the poles of signification). None of the guardians of meaning

can understand this: the whole morality of meaning rises up against fascination.

The political sphere also only survives by a credibility hypothesis, namely that the masses are permeable to action and to discourse, that they hold an opinion, that they are present behind the surveys and statistics. It is at this price alone that the political class can still believe that it speaks and that it is politically heard. Even though the political has long been the agent of nothing but spectacle on the screen of private life. Digested as a form of entertainment, half-sports, half-games (see the winning ticket in American elections, or election evenings on radio or TV); like those old comedies of manners, at once both fascinating and ludicrous. For some time now, the electoral game has been akin to TV game shows in the consciousness of the people. The latter, who have always served as alibi and as supernumerary on the political stage, avenge themselves by treating as a *theatrical* performance the political scene and its actors. The people have become a *public*. It is the football match or film or cartoon which serve as models for their perception of the political sphere. The people even enjoy day to day, like a home movie, the fluctuations of

their own opinions in the daily opinion polls. Nothing in all this engages any responsibility. At no time are the masses politically or historically engaged in a conscious manner. They have only ever done so out of perversity, in complete irresponsibility. Nor is this a flight from politics, but rather the effect of an implacable antagonism between the class (caste?) which bears the social the political, culture—master of time and history, and the un(in)formed, residual, senseless mass. The former continually seeks to perfect the reign of meaning, to invest, to saturate the field of the social, the other continually distorts every effect of meaning, neutralises or diminishes them. In this confrontation, the winner is not at all the one you might think.

This can be seen in the shift in value from history to the humdrum, from the public sphere to the private sphere. Up till the 60's, history leads on the downbeat: the private, the ordinary is only the dark side of the political sphere. At best a dialectic plays between the two, and it is to be hoped that one day the ordinary, like the individual, will shine over history, in the universal. But

in the meantime, the withdrawal of the masses into their domestic sphere, their refuge from history, politics and the universal, and their absorption into an idiotic humdrum existence of consumption is only to be lamented (happily they work, which preserves for them an "objective" historical status, while awaiting a change in consciousness). Today, there is a reversal of the downbeat and the upbeat: one begins to foresee that ordinary life, men in their banality, could well not be the insignificant side of history — better: that withdrawing into the private could well be *a direct defiance of the political*, a form of actively resisting political manipulation. The roles are reversed: it is the banality of life, everyday life, everything formerly branded as petit-bourgeois, abject and apolitical (including sex) which becomes the downbeat, with history and the political unfolding their abstract eventuality elsewhere.

A staggering hypothesis. The depoliticised masses would not be this side of the political, but beyond it. The private, the unnamable, the ordinary, the insignificant, petty wiles, petty perversions etc., would not be this side of representation, but beyond it. In their "naive" practice

(and without having waited for analysis of the "end of the political"), the masses would sentence the political to annihilation, they would be spontaneously transpolitical like they are translinguistic in their language.

But take care! Out of this private and asocial universe, which does not enter into a dialectic of representation and of transcendence towards the universal, out of this involutive sphere which is opposed to all revolution from the top and refuses to play the game, some would like to make a new source of revolutionary energy (in particular in its sexual and desire version). They would like to give it meaning and to reinstate it in its very banality, as historical negativity. Exaltation of micro-desires, small differences, unconscious practices, anonymous marginalities. Final somersault of the intellectuals to exalt insignificance, to promote non-sense into the order of sense. And to transfer it back to political reason. Banality, inertia, apoliticism used to be fascist; they are in the process of becoming revolutionary — without changing meaning, without ceasing to have meaning. Micro-revolution of banality, transpolitics of desire — one more trick of the "liberationists". The denial

of meaning has no meaning.

### *From Resistance to Hyperconformity*

The emergence of silent majorities must be located within the entire cycle of historical resistance to the social. Resistance to work of course, but also resistance to medicine, resistance to schooling, resistance to security, resistance to information. Official history only records the uninterrupted progress of the social, relegating to the obscurity reserved for former cultures, as barbarous relics, everything not coinciding with this glorious advent. In fact, contrary to what one might believe (that the social has definitely won, that its movement is irreversible, that consensus *upon* the social is total), resistance to the social in all its forms has progressed *even more rapidly than the social*. It has merely taken other forms than the primitive and violent ones which were subsequently absorbed (the social is alive and well, thank you, only idiots run away from writing and vaccination and the benefits of security). Those frontal resistances still corres-

ponded to an equally frontal and violent period of socialisation, and came from traditional groups seeking to preserve their own culture, their original cultures. It was not the mass in them which resisted, but, on the contrary, differentiated structures, in opposition to the homogeneous and abstract model of the social.

This type of resistance can still be discovered in the "two-step flow of communication" which American sociology has analysed: the mass does not at all constitute a passive receiving structure for media messages, whether they be political, cultural or advertising. Microgroups and individuals, far from taking their cue from a uniform and imposed decoding, decode messages in their own way. They intercept them (through leaders) and transpose them (second level), contrasting the dominant code with their own particular sub-codes, finally recycling everything passing into their own cycle, exactly like primitive natives recycle western money in their symbolic circulation (the Siane of New Guinea) or like the Corsicans recycle universal suffrage and elections in their clan rivalry strategies. This *ruse* is universal: it is a way of redirecting, of absorbing, of victoriously salvaging the material dif-



fused by the dominant culture. It is this which also governs the "magic" usage of the doctor and medicine among the "underdeveloped" masses. Commonly reduced to an antiquated and irrational mentality, we should read in this, on the contrary, an offensive practice, a redirection by excess, an unanalysed but conscious rejection "without knowing it" of the profound devastation wreaked by rational medicine.

But this is still the feat of groups traditionally structured by identity and significance. Quite different is the refusal of socialisation which comes *from the mass*; from an innumerable, unnamable and anonymous group, whose strength comes from its very deconstruction and inertia. Thus, in the case of the media, traditional resistance consists of reinterpreting messages according to the group's own code and for its own ends. The masses, on the contrary, accept everything and redirect everything *en bloc* into the spectacular, without requiring any other code, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an

indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination.

It has always been thought — this is the very ideology of the mass media — that it is the media which envelop the masses. The secret of manipulation has been sought in a frantic semiology of the mass media. But it has been overlooked, in this naive logic of communication, that *the masses are a stronger medium than all the media*, that it is the former who envelop and absorb the latter — or at least there is no priority of one over the other. The mass and the media are one single process. Mass(age) is the message.

So it is with movies, whose inventors initially dreamed of a rational, documentary, *social* medium, but which very quickly and permanently swung towards the imaginary.

So it is with technology, science, and knowledge. Condemned to a “magical” practice and to a “spectacular” consumption. So it is with consumption itself. To their amazement, economists have never been able to rationalise consumption, the seriousness of their “theory of need” and the general consensus upon the discourse of utility

being taken for granted. But this is because the practice of the masses very quickly had nothing (or perhaps never had anything) to do with needs. They have turned consumption into a dimension of status and prestige, of useless keeping up with the Joneses or simulation, of potlatch which surpassed use value in every way. A desperate attempt has been made from all sides (official propaganda, consumer societies, ecologues and sociologues) to instil into them sensible spending and functional calculation in matters of consumption, but it is hopeless. For it is by sign/value and the frantic stake in sign/value (which economists, even when they try to integrate it as a variable, have always seen as upsetting economic reason), that *the masses block the economy*, resist the "objective" imperative of needs and the rational balancing of behaviors and ends. Sign/value against use value, this is already a distortion of political economy. And let it not be said that all this ultimately profits exchange value, that is to say the system. For if the system does well out of this game, and even encourages it (the masses "alienated" in gadgets, etc.), this isn't the main thing, and what this slipping, this skidding initiates in the long term — already initiates — is

the end of the economic, cut off from all its rational definitions by the excessive, magic, spectacular, fraudulent and nearly parodic use the masses put it to. An asocial use, resistant to all pedagogies, to all socialist education — an aberrant use whereby the masses (us, you, everybody) have already crossed over to the other side of political economy. They haven't waited for future revolutions nor theories which claim to "liberate" them by a "dialectical" movement. They know that there is no liberation, and that a system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. "You want us to consume — O.K., let's consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose."

So it is with medicine: frontal resistance (which hasn't disappeared everywhere) has been replaced by a more subtle form of subversion; an excessive, uncontrollable consumption of medicine, a panicked conformity to health injunctions. A fantastic escalation in medical consumption which completely corrupts the social objectives and finalities of medicine. What better way to abolish it? At present, doctors, manipu-

lated much more than they manipulate, no longer know what they are doing, what they are. "Give us more treatment, doctors, medication, security, health — more, ever further, keep it coming . . . !" The masses alienated in medicine? Not at all: they are in the process of ruining its institution, of making Social Security explode, of putting the social itself in danger by craving always more of it, as with commodities. What greater mockery can there be than this craving for the *social* as an item of *individual* consumption, submitted to an ever-escalating supply and demand? A parody and a paradox: it is by their very inertia in the ways of the social laid out for them that the masses go beyond its logic and its limits, and destroy its whole edifice. A destructive hypersimulation, a destructive hyperconformity (as in the case of Beaubourg, analysed elsewhere<sup>6</sup>) that has all the appearance of a victorious challenge — no one can measure the strength of this challenge, of the reversion exerted on the whole system. There lies the genuine stake today, in this underhand, inescapable confrontation between the silent majority and the social imposed on them, in this hypersimulation reduplicating simulation and exterminating it according to its

own logic — not in any class struggle nor in the molecular hodge-podge of desire-breaching minorities.

### *Mass and Terrorism*

We are therefore at the paradoxical point where the masses refuse the baptism of the social, which is also that of meaning and liberty. Let us not make them into a new and glorious reference. For one thing, they don't exist. But note that all power silently flounders on this silent majority, which is neither an entity nor a sociological reality, but the shadow cast by power, its sinking vortex, its form of absorption. A nebulous fluid, shifting, conforming, far too conforming to every solicitation and with a hyperreal conformity which is the extreme form of non-participation: such is the present calamity of power. Such is also the calamity of revolution. For this implusive mass, by definition, will never explode and every revolutionary promise will implode into it as well. In consequence, what is to be done with these masses? They are the leitmotif of every discourse; they are the obsession of every social

project; but all run aground on them, for all remain rooted in the classical definition of the masses, which is that of an eschatological faith in the social and its fulfillment. Now, the masses *aren't* the social, they are the reversion of any social and of any socialism. Enough theorists have criticised meaning, denounced the traps of liberty and the mystifications of the political, radically censured rationality and every form of representation; however, when the masses wander through meaning, the political, representation, history, ideology, with a somnambulant strength of denial, when they realise here and now everything which the most radical critics have been able to envisage, then the latter know not what to make of it, and persist in dreaming of a future revolution — a critical revolution, a revolution of prestige, that of the social, that of desire. This revolution by involution is not theirs: it is not critical-explosive, it is implosive and blind. It proceeds by inertia, and not from a new and joyous negativity. It is silent and involutive — exactly the reverse of all speech making and consciousness raising. It has no meaning. It has nothing to say to us.

Indeed the only phenomenon which may be in a relation of affinity with it, with these masses such that the final vicissitude of the social and its death is at stake, is terrorism. Nothing is more "cut off from the masses" than terrorism. Power may well try to set the one against the other, but nothing is more strange, more familiar either, than their convergence in denying the social and in refusing meaning. For terrorism claims to really aim at capital (global imperialism, etc.) but it mistakes its enemy, and in doing so it aims at its true enemy, which is the social. Present-day terrorism aims at the social in response to the terrorism of the social. It aims at the social such as it is produced today — the orbital, interstitial, nuclear, tissual network of control and security, which invests us on all sides and produces us, all of us, as a silent majority. A hyperreal, imperceptible sociality, no longer operating by law and repression, but by the infiltration of models, no longer by violence, but by deterrence/persuasion — to that terrorism responds by an *equally hyperreal* act, caught up from the outset in concentric waves of media and of fascination,



dedicated from the outset not to any representation or consciousness, but to a mental downgrading by contiguity, fascination and panic, not to reflection or to the logic of cause and effect, but to a chain reaction by contagion — senseless and indeterminate like the system it combats, into which it insinuates itself rather like a point of maximum and infinitesimal implosion — a non-explosive, non-historical, non-political terrorism: implosive, crystallising, earth-shattering — and for that matter a homologue deep down, of the silence and inertia of the masses.

Terrorism does not aim at making anything speak, at resuscitating or mobilising anything; it has no revolutionary consequences (in this regard, it is rather a complete counter-performance, for which it is violently reproached, but that isn't its game); it aims at the masses in their silence, a silence mesmerised by information; it aims at that white magic of the social encircling us, that of information, of simulation, of deterrence, of anonymous and random control, in order to precipitate its death by accentuating it. It aims at that white magic of social abstraction by the black magic of a still greater, more anonymous, arbitrary and hazardous abstraction: that of the terrorist act.

It is the only non-representative act. In this regard it has an affinity with the masses, who are the only non-representable reality. This is definitely not to say that terrorism would *represent* the silence and the not-said of the masses, that it would violently express their passive resistance. It is simply to say: there is no equivalent to the blind, non-representative, senseless character of the terrorist act, but the blind, senseless and unrepresentational behavior of the masses. What they do have in common is that they are the most radical, most intense contemporary form of the denial of the whole representative system. That is all. No one really knows what relation can be established between two elements that are outside representation, this is a problem of which our epistemology of knowledge permits no resolution, since it always postulates the medium of a subject and of a language, the medium of a representation. We are really only acquainted with representative series, we know little about analogical, affinitive, im-mediatised, non-reference series and other systems. Undoubtedly something very substantial passes between them (the masses and terrorism) which we would seek in vain in the

historical precedents of representative systems (assembly/people, party/proletariat, minorities-marginals/groupuscules...). And just as a positive social energy passes between the two poles of any representative system, it could be said that between the masses and terrorism, between these two non-poles of a non-representative system, also passes an energy, but a *reverse energy*, an energy not of social accumulation and transformation, but of social dispersal, of dispersion of the social, of absorption and annulment of the political.

It cannot be said that it is the "age of the silent majority" which "produces" terrorism. It is the simultaneity of the two which is staggering, and noteworthy. Whether or not one accepts its brutality, it alone truly marks the end of the political and of the social. It alone betrays this reality of a violent implosion of all our systems of representation.

Terrorism does not at all aim at unmasking the repressive character of the State (that is the provocative negativity of groupuscules, who find in this a last chance to be representative in the eyes of the masses). It propagates, by its own non-representativity, and by chain reaction (not by

remonstration and consciousness raising) the apparent non-representativity of all power. Here is its subversion: it precipitates non-representation by injecting it in infinitesimal but very concentrated doses.

Its fundamental violence is to deny all the institutions of representation (unions, organised movements, conscious "political" struggle, etc.), including those who play at solidarity with it, for solidarity is still a way of constituting it as model, as emblem, and hence of assigning it to representation. ("They died for us, their action was not wasted . . .") Any means will do to impose meaning, to disregard how far terrorism is without legitimacy, without political consequences, without any historical continuity. Its only "ripples" are precisely not an historical flow but its story, its shock wave in the media. This story no more belongs to an objective and informative order than terrorism does to the political order. Both are elsewhere, in an order which is neither of meaning nor of representation — mythical perhaps, simulacrum undoubtedly.

The other aspect of terrorist violence is its

disclaiming of any determination and of any quality. In this sense, we must distinguish terrorism from "banditry" and commando action. The latter is an act of war aimed at a determinate enemy (blowing up a train, hurling a bomb into the opposing party's headquarters, etc.). The other is dependent on traditional criminal violence (a bank hold-up, sequestration in exchange for ransom, etc.) All these actions have an economic or martial "objective". Present-day terrorism, initiated by the taking of hostages and the game of postponed death, no longer has any objectives (if it claims to have any, they are ridiculous, or unachievable, and in any case, this is quite the most ineffective method of attaining them), nor any determinate enemy. Do the Palestinians strike at Israel by means of intermediary hostages? No, it is through Israel-as intermediary that they strike at a mythical, or not even mythical, anonymous, undifferentiated enemy; a kind of omnipresent global social order, whenever, whoever, down to the last of the "innocents." Terrorism is this: it is novel, and insoluble, only because it strikes wherever, whenever, whoever; otherwise it would only be ransom or a military commando act. *Its blindness is the exact*

*replica of the system's absolute lack of differentiation.* For some time the system has no longer separated ends from means, tormentors from victims. In its deadly and indiscriminate taking of hostages, terrorism strikes at precisely the most characteristic product of the whole system: the anonymous and perfectly undifferentiated individual, the term substitutable for any other. Paradoxically, it seems that the innocent pay the crime of being nothing, of being lotless, of having been dispossessed of their name by an equally anonymous system whose purest incarnation they then become. They are the end products of the social, of a now globalised abstract sociality. It is in this sense, in the sense in which they are precisely *anybody*, that they are the predestined victims of terrorism.

It is in this sense, or rather in this defiance of sense, that the terrorist act is akin to the natural catastrophe. There is no difference between an earthquake in Guatemala and the hijacking of a Lufthansa Boeing with three hundred passengers on board, between the "natural" intervention and

the "human" terrorist intervention. Nature is terrorist, as is the abrupt failure of the whole technological system: the great New York black-outs ('65 and '77) create more wonderful terrorist situations than the true ones, dream situations. Better: these great technological accidents, like great natural accidents, illustrate the possibility of a radical *subjectless* subversion. The power failure of '77 in New York could have been instigated by a very organised terrorist group; that would have changed nothing in its objective outcome. The same acts of violence, of pillage, the same undermining, the same suspension of the "social" order would have ensued from it. This signifies that terrorism is not a step of violence, but is everywhere in the normality of the social, such that from one moment to the next it can be transfigured into an inverse, absurd, uncontrollable reality. The natural catastrophe acts in this sense and so, paradoxically, it becomes the *mythical expression* of the catastrophe of the social. Or rather the natural catastrophe being a meaningless, non-representative vicissitude par excellence (unless representative of God, which is why the person in charge of Continental Edison was able to speak of God and his intervention during the last New

York blackout), it becomes a kind of symptom or violent incarnation of the state of the social, namely of its catastrophe and of the collapse of every representation supporting it.  
it.

### *Implosive Systems, Explosive Systems*

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 (fascination is the extreme intensity of the *neutral*). 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.

Implosion is not necessarily a catastrophic process. In a subdued and controlled form, it has even been the main secret of primitive and tradi-



tional societies. Not expansive or centrifugal configurations, but centripetal ones: singular pluralities never directed towards the universal, but centered about a cyclic process — ritual — and tending to “involve” in a non-representative, unauthoritarian process; without any disjunctive polarity, yet without caving in on themselves either (save undoubtedly for certain implosive processes which are inexplicable to us, like the collapse of the Toltec, Olmec, Mayan cultures, nothing of which is known any more, and whose pyramidal empires disappeared without a trace, without any visible catastrophe, as though suddenly abandoned, without any apparent cause, without any external violence). Thus primitive societies have survived by a *controlled implosion* — they died as soon as they ceased to control this process, and switched over to one of explosion (demography, or uncontrollable surplus production, a process of uncontrollable expansion, or quite simply when colonisation violently initiated them into the expansive and centrifugal norm of Western systems).

Conversely, our “modern” civilisations have existed on a base of expansion and explosion at all levels, under the sign of universalised

commerce, of economic and philosophical investments, under the sign of universal law and conquest. Undoubtedly even they have known how to survive, for a time at least, on a *controlled explosion*, on a liberation of subdued and progressive energy, and this was the golden age of their culture. But, 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 which extol expanding systems, is archaic, regressive or nostalgic. Including all those who want to free libidinal energies, plural energies, fragmentary intensities, etc. The "molecular revolution" only represents the final stage of "liberation of energy" (or of proliferation of segments, etc.) up to the in-

finitesimal boundaries of the field of expansion which has been that of our culture. The infinitesimal attempt of desire succeeding the infinite attempt of capital. The molecular solution succeeding the molar investment of spaces and the social. The final sparks of the explosive system, the final attempt to still control an energy of confines, or to shrink the confines of energy (our fundamental leitmotif) so as to save the principle of expansion and of liberation.

But 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. There are traces of the latter, of various attempts to control new impulses which are anti-universalist, anti-representative, tribal, centripetal, etc.: communes, ecology, ZPG, drugs — all of these undoubtedly belong to this order. But we must not delude ourselves about a smooth transition. It is doomed to be short lived and to fail. There has been no balanced transition from implosive systems to explosive systems: this has always happened violently, and there is every chance that our passage towards implosion may also be violent and catastrophic.







### *. . . Or the End of the Social*

The social is not a clear and unequivocal process. Do modern societies correspond to a process of socialisation or to one of progressive desocialisation? Everything depends on one's understanding of the term and none of these is fixed; all are reversible. Thus the institutions which have sign-posted the "advance of the social" (urbanisation, concentration, production, work, medicine, education, social security, insurance, etc.) including capital, which was undoubtedly the most effective socialisation medium of all, could be said to produce and destroy the social in one and the same movement.

If the social is formed out of abstract instances which are laid down one after the other on the ruins of the symbolic and ceremonial edifice of former societies, then these institutions produce more and more of them. But at

the same time they consecrate that ravenous, all-consuming abstraction which perhaps devours precisely the "essential marrow" of the social. From that point of view, it could be said that the social regresses to the same degree as its institutions develop.

The process accelerates and reaches its maximal extent with mass media and information. Media, *all* media, information, *all* information, act in two directions: outwardly they produce more of the social, inwardly they neutralise social relations and the social itself.

But then, if the social is both destroyed by what produces it (the media, information) and reabsorbed by what it produces (the masses), it follows that its definition is empty, and that this term which serves as universal alibi for every discourse, no longer analyses anything, no longer designates anything. Not only is it superfluous and useless — wherever it appears it conceals something else: defiance, death, seduction, ritual, repetition — it conceals that it is only abstraction and residue, or even simply an *effect* of the social, a simulation and an illusion.

Even the term "social relation" is enigmatic? What is a "social relation," what is the "produc-



tion of social relations?" Here everything is spurious. Is the social instantaneously, and as if by definition, a "relation," which already presupposes a serious abstraction and a rational algebra of the social — or else is it something different from what the term "relation" neatly rationalises? Does the "social relation" perhaps exist *for something different*, namely for what it destroys? Does it perhaps ratify, perhaps inaugurate the end of the social?

The "social sciences" came to consecrate this obviousness and agelessness of the social. But we must change our tune. There were *societies without the social*, just as there were societies without history. Networks of symbolic ties were precisely neither "relational" nor "social." At the other extreme, our "society" is perhaps in the process of putting an end to the social, of burying the social beneath a simulation of the social. There are many ways for it to die — as many as there are definitions. Perhaps the social will have had only an ephemeral existence, in the narrow gap between the symbolic formations and our "society" where it is dying. Before, there is not yet

any social; after, there is no longer any. Only "sociology" can seem to testify to its agelessness, and the supreme gibberish of the "social sciences" will still echo it long after its disappearance.

For two centuries now, the uninterrupted energy of the social has come from deterritorialisation and from concentration in ever more unified agencies. A centralised perspective space which orientates everything inserted into it by simple convergence along the "line of flight" towards infinity (in effect, the social, like space and time, opens up a perspective towards infinity). The social can only be defined from this panoptic point of view.

But let us not forget that this perspective space (in painting and architecture as in politics or the economy) is only one simulation model among others, and that it is characterised only by the fact that it gives rise to effects of truth, of objectivity, unknown and unheard of in the other models. Perhaps, even this is only a *delusion*? In which case everything that has been contrived and staged in this "comedy of errors" of the social has never had any deep significance. Ultimately, things have never functioned socially, but symbolically, magically, irrationally, etc. Which im-

plies the formula: capital is a *defiance* of society. That is to say that this perspective, this panoptic machine, this machine of truth, of rationality, of productivity which is capital, is without objective finality, without reason: it is above all a violence, and this violence is perpetrated by the social on the social, but basically it is not a social machine, it doesn't care a damn about capital or likewise about the social in their equally interdependent and antagonistic definition. This is to say, once more, that there is no contract, no contract is ever exchanged between distinct agencies according to the law — that is all sound and fury — there are only ever stakes, defiances, that is to say something which does not proceed via a "social relation."

(Defiance is not a dialectic, nor a confrontation between respective poles, or terms, in an extended structure. It is a process of *extermination* of the structural position of each *term*, of the subject position of each of the antagonists, and in particular of the one who hurls the challenge: because of this it even abandons any contractual

position which might give rise to a "relation." Exchange of value is no longer its logic. Its logic abandons positions of value and positions of meaning. The protagonist of defiance is always in a suicidal position, but it is a triumphant suicide: it is by the destruction of value, the destruction of meaning (one's own, their own) that the other is forced into a never equivalent, ever escalating response. Defiance always comes from that which has no meaning, no name, no identity — it is a defiance of meaning, of power, of truth, of their existing as such, of their pretending to exist as such. Only this *reversion* can put an end to power, to meaning, to value, and never any *relation* of force, however favorable it is, since the letter re-enters into a polar, binary, structural relation, which re-creates by definition a new space of meaning and of power.<sup>7)</sup>

Here several hypotheses are possible:

1.— *The social has basically never existed.* There never has been any "social relation." Nothing has ever functioned socially. On this inescapable basis of challenge, seduction and

death, there has never been anything but *simulation* of the social and the social relation. In which case, there is no point dreaming about a “real” sociality, a hidden sociality, an ideal socialist: this just hypostatizes a simulacrum. If the social is a simulation, the only likely turn of events is that of a brutal *de-simulation* — the social ceasing to take itself as a space of reference and to play the game, and putting an end at last to power, to the effect of power and to the mirror of the social which perpetuates it. A de-simulation which itself captures the style of a challenge (the reverse of capital’s challenge of the social and society): a challenge to the belief that capital and power exist according to their own logic — *they have none*, they vanish as apparatuses as soon as the simulation of social space is undone.<sup>8</sup> This is really what we are seeing today: the disintegration of the whole idea of the social, the consumption and involution of the social, the breakdown of the social simulacrum, a genuine defiance of the constructive and productive approach to the social which dominates us. All quite suddenly, as if the social had never existed. A breakdown which has all the features of a catastrophe, not an evolution or revolution. No longer a “crisis” of the social,

but the reabsorption of its system. Without having anything to do with those marginal defections (of the mad, women, druggies, delinquents), which, on the contrary, supply new energy to the failing social. This reabsorption process can no longer be resocialised. Like a ghost at dawn, its principle of reality and of social rationality simply fades away.

2.— *The social has really existed, it exists even more and more*, it invests everything, it alone exists. Far from being volatilised, it is the social which triumphs; the reality of the social is imposed everywhere. But, contrary to the antiquated idea which makes the social into an objective progress of mankind, everything which escapes it being only residue, it is possible to envisage that *the social itself is only residue*, and that, if it has triumphed in the real, it is precisely as such. Litter piling up from the symbolic order as it blows around, it is the social as remainder which has assumed real force and which is soon to be universal.<sup>9</sup> Here is a more subtle form of death.

In this event, we are really even deeper in the social, even deeper in pure excrement, in the fan-

tastic congestion of dead labor, of dead and institutionalised relations within terrorist bureaucracies, of dead languages and grammars (the very term "relation" already has something dead about it, something about death to it).

Then of course it can no longer be said that the social is dying, *since it is already the accumulation of death*. In effect we are in a civilisation of the supersocial, and simultaneously in a civilisation of non-degradable, indestructible residue, piling up as the social spreads.

Waste and recycling: such would be the social in the image of a production whose cycle has long escaped the "social" finalities to become a completely described spiral nebula, rotating and expanding with every "revolution" it makes. Thus one sees the social expanding throughout history as a "rational" control of residues, and a rational *production* of residues.

1544 saw the opening of the first great poor-house in Paris: vagrants, lunatics, the sick, everyone not integrated by the group and discarded as remainders were taken in charge under the emerging sign of the social. This was extended

to the dimensions of National Assistance in the nineteenth century, then Social Security in the twentieth century. Proportional to the reinforcement of social reason, it is the whole community which soon becomes residual and hence, by one more spiral, the social which piles up. When the remainders reach the dimensions of the whole of society, one has a perfect socialisation.<sup>10</sup> Everybody is completely excluded and taken in charge, completely disintegrated and socialised.

Symbolic integration is replaced by a functional integration, functional institutions take charge of the residue from symbolic disintegration — a social agency appears where there was none, nor even any name for it. "Social relations" fester, proliferate, grow proportionately richer with this disintegration. And the social sciences cap it off. Whence the piquancy of an expression like: "the responsibility of society vis-a-vis its underprivileged members," when we know the "social" is precisely the agency which arises from this dereliction.

Whence the interest of *Le Monde's* "Society" column where paradoxically only immigrants,



delinquents, women, etc. appear: precisely those who have not been socialised; the social "case" being analogous to the pathological case. Pockets to be absorbed, segments which the social isolates the more it spreads. Designated as *refuse* on the horizon of the social, they thus fall under its jurisdiction and are fated to find their place in a widening sociality. It is on these *remainders* that the social machine starts up again and finds support for a new extension. But what happens when everybody is socialised? Then the machine stops, the dynamic is reversed, and it is *the whole social system which becomes residue*. As the social progressively gets rid of all of its residue, it becomes residual itself. By placing residual categories under the rubric "Society," the social *designates itself as remainder*.

Now what becomes of the rationality of the social, of the contract and of the social relation if the social, instead of appearing as original structure, appears as refuse, and refuses processing? If the social is only remains, it is no longer the scene of a positive process or history, it is simply the scene of a piling up and exorbitant processing of

death. It no longer makes any sense, since it is there for something else, in despair of anything else: it is excremental. Without any ideal perspective. For remains are the transcendence of nothingness, they are what is irreconcilable in death, and on them can only be founded a politics of death. Reclusion or preclusion. Under the sign of productive reason, the social has been above all the space of a great Reclusion — under the sign of simulation and deterrence it has become the space of a great Preclusion. But perhaps that is already no longer a “social” space.

It is from the point of view of this administration of refuse that the social can appear today for what it really is: a right, a need, a service, a use value pure and simple. No longer a conflictual, political structure: but a welcoming structure. The limit of the economist value of the social as use value is in effect its ecologist value as *niche*. The proper use of the social as one of the ways of balancing the exchanges between the individual and his environment, the social as functional ecosystem, homeostasis and superbiology of the species — no longer even a structure, but a substance: the cordial and high protein anonymity of a nutritious substance. A kind of foetal

security space helping everywhere to relieve the difficulties of living, providing everywhere for the quality of life, like comprehensive insurance, the equivalent of a wasted life; a degraded form of lubricating, insuring, passifying and permissive sociality; the lowest form of social energy: that of an environmental, behavioral utility. Such is the face of the social for us — its entropic form — the other face of its death.

[ *EXCURSUS: The Social, or  
The Functional Ventilation of Remainders* ]

[The social exists to look after the soaking up of excess wealth which, redistributed to all and sundry, would ruin the social order, would create an intolerably utopian situation.

This reversion of wealth, of all wealth, which formerly was effected by sacrifice which left no room for any accumulation of remainders, is intolerable to our societies. It is by this very fact that they are “societies” — in the sense that they always produce a surplus, remainders — whether it be demographic, economic, or linguistic — and that these remainders must be cleared up (never sacrificed, that is too dangerous: but purely and

simply got rid of).

The social exists on the double basis of the production of remainders and their eradication.

If all wealth were sacrificed, people would lose a sense of the real. If all wealth became disposable, people would lose a sense of the useful and the useless. *The social exists to take care of the useless consumption of remainders so that individuals can be assigned to the useful management of their lives.*

Use and use value constitute a fundamental ethics. But it exists only in a simulation of shortage and calculation. If all wealth was redistributed, of itself this would abolish use value (the same goes for death: if death was redistributed, *brought forward*, of itself this would abolish life as use value). It would suddenly and brutally become clear that use value is only a cruel and disillusioning moral convention, which presupposes a functional calculation in all things. But it dominates us all and, intoxicated as we are by the phantasm of use value, we could not bear this *catastrophe* of reversing wealth and of reversing death. It is not that everything should be reversed; just that the remainder should be. And the social is what takes

care of remainders.

Up till now the car and the house, and various "commodities" have somehow or other succeeded in soaking up the disposable physical and mental capacities of individuals. What would happen if all disposable wealth was redistributed amongst them? Quite simply, the bottom would drop out of their lives — they would lose the fabric and even tempo of a well-tempered economy, lose a sense of self-interest and of purpose. A brutal disequilibrium of the value system would result (a sudden influx of cash is the most rapid and the most radical way to ruin a currency). Or else, as in the affluent society, they would be reduced to a pathological multiplication of use value (3,4,*n* cars) where in any case this dissipates into a hyper-real functionalism.

All surplus is capable of ruining the system of equivalences, if it is disproportionately poured back into it, and of driving our *mental* system of equivalences to despair at the same time.<sup>11</sup> Hence there is a kind of wisdom in the institution of the social as a matrix preventing the growth and reversion of wealth, as a medium for its controlled squandering.

In a society incapable of total reversion and

committed to use value, there is a kind of intelligence and wisdom in the institution of the social and of its "objective" wastefulness: prestige operations, Concorde, the moon, missiles, satellites, even public works and Social Security in their absurd one-upmanship. An implicit understanding of the stupidity and the limits of use value. The true artlessness is that of socialists and humanists of every shade who want all wealth to be redistributed and that there should be no useless expenditure, etc. Socialism, the champion of use value, the champion of the use value of the social, reveals a total misunderstanding of the social. It believes that the social can become the optimal collective management of the use value of men and things.

But the social is never that. Despite any socialist longing, it is insane, uncontrollable, a monstrous protuberance, which expends, which destroys, without any thought to optimal management. And it is precisely *in this way* that it is functional, that it fulfils its role (despite what idealists may cry). This is, to maintain *a contrario* the principle of use value, to save the reality principle by the roundabout but objective route of wastefulness. The social manufactures this priva-

tion necessary to the distinction between good and evil, and to the whole moral order in general — a privation absent from the “first affluent societies” described by Marshall Sahlins. This is what socialism does not see and why, by wanting to abolish this privation and insisting on a generalised access to wealth, it puts an end to the social while believing that it is heightening it.

From this point of view the problem of the death of the social is simple: the social dies from an extension of use value which is equivalent to its extermination. When everything, including the social, becomes use value, it is a world become inert, where the reverse of what Marx dreamed occurs. He dreamed of the economic being reabsorbed into a (transfigured) social; what is happening to us is the social being reabsorbed into a (banalised) political economy: administration pure and simple.

It is the *wrong use of wealth* which saves a society. Nothing has changed since Mandeville and his *Fable of the Bees*. And socialism can do nothing to prevent it. The whole of political economy has been invented to dissolve this paradox, this maleficent ambiguity of the social functioning. But it has always come to grief, by a

sort of secondary functionality. Or else, it is in the process of succeeding and, after having seen the abolition of the political and its dilution in the social, we are in the process of seeing the reabsorption of the social back into the economic — an economy even more political, and lacking in "hubris," an economy of extravagance and excess which would still characterise the capitalist age.]

3.— *The social has well and truly existed, but does not exist any more.* It has existed as coherent space, as reality principle: the social relation, the production of social relations, the social as dynamic abstraction, scene of conflicts and historical contradictions, the social as structure and as stake, as strategy and as ideal — all this has had an end in view, all this has meant something. The social has not always been a delusion, as in the first hypothesis, nor remainder, as in the second. But precisely, it has only had an end in view, a meaning as power, as work, as capital, from the perspective space of a rational distribution, from the finalised space of an ideal convergence, which is also that of production — in short, in the narrow gap of second-



order simulacra, and, absorbed into third-order simulacra, it is dying.

End of the perspective space of the social. The rational sociality of the contract, dialectical sociality (that of the State and of civil society, of public and private, of the social and the individual) gives way to the sociality of contact, of the circuit and transistorised network of millions of molecules and particles maintained in a random gravitational field, magnetised by the constant circulation and the thousands of tactical combinations which electrify them. But is it still a question of the *socius*? Where is sociality in Los Angeles? And where will it be later on, in a future generation (for Los Angeles is still that of TV, movies, the telephone and the automobile), that of a total dissemination, of a ventilation of individuals as terminals of information, in an even more measurable — not convergent, but connected — space: a space of connection? The social only exists in a perspective space, it dies in the space of simulation, which is also a space of deterrence.

The space of simulation confuses the real

with the model. There is no longer any critical and speculative distance between the real and the rational. There is no longer really even any projection of models in the real (which is still equivalent to the substitution of the map for the territory in Borges), but an in-the-field, here-and-now transfiguration of the real into model. A fantastic short-circuit: the real is hyperrealised. Neither realised, nor idealised: but hyperrealised. The hyperreal is the abolition of the real not by violent destruction, but by its assumption, elevation to the strength of the model. Anticipation, deterrence, preventive transfiguration, etc.: the model acts as a sphere of absorption of the real.

That is clear in some of its subtle, tenuous, imperceptible features, by which the real appears as more true than the true, as too real to be true. The task of all media and information today is to produce this real, this extra real (interviews, live coverage, movies, TV-truth, etc.). There is too much of it, we fall into obscenity and porn. As in porn, a kind of zoom takes us too near the real, which never existed and only ever came into view at *a certain distance*. Deterrence of all real poten-

tiality, deterrence by meticulous reduplication, by macroscopic hyperfidelity, by accelerated recycling, by saturation and obscenity, by abolition of the distance between the real and its representation, by implosion of the differentiated poles between which flowed the energy of the real: this hyperreality puts an end to the system of the real, it puts an end to the real as referential by exalting it as model.

It also puts an end to the social in the same way. The social, if it existed with second-order simulacra, no longer even has the opportunity to be produced with third-order ones: from the beginning it is trapped in its own "blown up" and desperate staging, in its own obscenity. Signs of this hyperrealisation of the social, signs of its reduplication and its anticipated fulfillment are everywhere. The transparency of the social relation is flaunted, signified, consumed everywhere. The history of the social will never have had time to lead to revolution: it will have been outstripped by signs of the social and of revolution. The social will never have had time to lead to socialism, it will have been short-circuited by the hypersocial, by the hyperreality of the social (but perhaps socialism is no more than this?). Thus the

proletariat will not have even had time to deny itself as such: the concept of class will have dissolved well before, into some parodic, extended double, like "the mass of workers" or simply into a retrospective simulation of the proletariat. Thus, even before political economy leads to its dialectical overthrow, to the resolution of all needs and to the optimal organisation of things, before it would have been able to see whether there was any basis to all that, it will have been captivated by hyperreality of the economy (the stepping up of production, the precession of the production of demand before that of goods, the indefinite scenario of crisis).

Nothing has come to the end of its history, or will henceforth any more, for nothing escapes this precession of simulacra. And the social itself has died before having given up its secret.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless let us tenderly recall the unbelievable naivety of social and socialist thinking, for thus having been able to reify as universal and to elevate as ideal of transparency such a totally ambiguous and contradictory — worse, such a residual or imaginary — worse, such an already abolished in its very simulation — "reality": the social.

## NOTES

1. This is akin to the bitterness of the extreme-left, and its "intelligent" cynicism towards the silent majority. *Charlie-Hebdo* for instance: "The silent majority doesn't give a damn about anything, provided that it snoozes through the evening in its slippers. . . Mind you, if the silent majority keeps its trap shut, it is because when all is said and done, it makes the law. It lives well, it eats well, it works just as much as is necessary. What it asks of its leaders is to be fathered and secured just enough, with a little daily dose of imaginary danger."

2. There the analogy with Freud ends, for his radical act results in a hypothesis, that of repression and the unconscious, which again opens up the possibility, widely exploited since then, of producing meaning, of reintegrating desire and the unconscious in the partition of meaning. A symphony concertante, in which the relentless reversion of meaning enters the well-tempered scenario of desire, in the shadow of a repression which opens up the reverse possibility of liberation. Whence comes the fact that the liberation of desire could so easily take over from the political revolution, making good the failure of meaning instead of deepening it. Now it is not at

all a question of discovering a new interpretation of the masses in terms of libidinal economy (the conformity or "fascism" of the masses reduced to a latent structure, to an obscure desire for power and for repression which would possibly feed off a primary repression or death drive). Such is the only alternative today to the failing marxist analysis. But it is the same, with one more twist. Formerly the destiny of revolution held back by sexual bondage was palmed off on the masses (Reich); today it is a desire for alienation and for bondage, or else a kind of ordinary microfascism as incomprehensible as their virtual drive for liberation. There is no desire for fascism and for power any more than there is for revolution. Last hope: that the masses have an unconscious or a desire, which would allow their recathexis as bearer, or instrument of meaning. Desire, reinvented everywhere, is only the referential of political despair. And the strategy of desire, after having been tried out in the marketing industry, is today polished up further in its revolutionary promotion in the masses.

3. The notion of "critical mass," usually associated with the process of nuclear *explosion*, is reapplied here with reference to nuclear *implosion*. What we are witnessing in the domain of the social and of the political, with the *involuntary* phenomenon of the masses and the silent majority, is a kind of inverse explosion by the force of inertia — this also has its point of no return.

4. It is no longer even a question of the production of the social, for then socialism, indeed capitalism itself

would be equal to the task. In fact, everything changes with the precession of the production of demand before that of goods. Their logical relationship (between production and consumption) is broken, and we move into a totally different order, which is no longer that of either production, or consumption, but that of the simulation of both, thanks to the inversion of the process. At present, it is no longer a question of a "real" crisis of capital, a crisis Attali thinks can be treated by a little extra social or socialism, but of quite a different mechanism, the hyper-real, which no longer has anything to do with either capital or the social.

5. Same configuration as for black holes. Veritable stellar tombs, their field of gravity is so huge that even light is trapped, satellised, then absorbed in them. They are, therefore, regions in space from which *no information* can come. Their discovery and their being taken into consideration therefore imply a kind of overturning of every traditional science and knowledge procedure. While the latter is always based on information, the message, the positive signal (some "meaning"), conveyed by a medium (waves or light), here something different appears whose meaning or mystery revolves around *the absence of information*. That no longer transmits, that no longer responds. A revolution of the same order comes into play with the taking into consideration of the masses.

6. *L'effet Beaubourg*, Paris, 1977 (Ed. Galilee).

7. The same goes for seduction. If sex and sexuality, such as the sexual revolution turns them into, are really a mode of exchange and production of sexual relations, seduction on the other hand is contrary to exchange, and close to challenge. Sexuality has precisely become a "sexual relation," it can be talked about in these already rationalised terms of value and exchange, only by ignoring any form of seduction — just as the social only becomes a "social relation" when it has lost any symbolic dimension.

8. But defying the social can take the reverse form of a renewed outbreak of the social simulacrum, of social demand, of demand *for* the social. An exacerbated, compulsive hyperconformity, a much more pressing demand for the social as norm and as discourse.

9. See, in *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, the three levels of residue: value in the economic order, phantasm in the psychic order, signification in the linguistic order. So one should also add here the residual status of the social in the . . . social order.

10. See the case of the Guayaki or the Tupi-Guarani: whenever such residue appears, it is drained off by messianic leaders into the Atlantic, in the form of eschatological movements, which purge the group of its "social" residue. Not only political power (Clastres) but even the social is averted as disintegrated/disintegrating agency.

11. This system of equivalences is not necessarily



linked to the political economy of capital. The equilibrium between work and its remuneration, between merit and enjoyment, is perhaps, beyond any bourgeois ethic, a measure of oneself, and a form of resistance. Should something come your way without equivalent, the blessing may be mixed. Holderlin's madness came to him from this prodigality of the Gods, from this grace of the Gods which overwhelms you and becomes fatal if it can't be redeemed or counterbalanced by some human equivalence, from the earth, from toil. Here there is a sort of law which has nothing to do with bourgeois ethics. More familiar to us, witness the fatal disorder in people overexposed to wealth and to good fortune — thus those customers in a large store who were offered to help themselves to anything they wanted: pandemonium broke out. Or again those wine growers to whom the State offered more money to pull out their vines than they could get by working them. They were much more destructured by this unexpected subsidy than by any traditional exploitation of their labor power.

12. Fourth hypothesis: *The implosion of the social into the masses*. This hypothesis is akin to hypothesis 3 (simulation/deterrence/implosion) in another form. It is developed in the main text.



**THE  
IMPLOSION  
OF  
MEANING  
IN THE  
MEDIA**



We are in a universe where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning. Consider three hypotheses:

1.— Either information produces meaning (a negentropic factor), but doesn't succeed in compensating for the brutal loss of signification in every domain. The reinjection of message and content by means of the media is vain, since meaning is devoured and lost more rapidly than it is reinjected. In this case, appeal has to be made to a productivity at the base in order to relieve the failing media. This is the whole ideology of free speech, of the media subdivided into innumerable individual cells of transmission, indeed "anti-media" (CB radios, etc.).

2.— Or information has nothing to do with signification. It is something else, an operational model of another order, outside of meaning and

the circulation of meaning properly speaking. This is the hypothesis of Shannon: a sphere of information that is purely instrumental, a technical medium implying no end purpose of meaning, and thus which must not itself be implicated in a value judgement. A kind of code, perhaps like the genetic code: it is what it is, it functions as it does; meaning is something else, coming afterwards in some way, as in Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity*. In this case, there would simply be no significant relation between the inflation of information and the deflation of meaning.

3.— Or rather the contrary: there is a rigorous and necessary correlation between the two, to the extent that information is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media.

The third hypothesis is the most interesting, although it goes against the grain of all accepted opinion. Everywhere socialization is measured according to exposure through media messages. Those who are under-exposed to the media are virtually asocial or desocialized. Everywhere in-

formation is reputed to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus-value of meaning homologous to the economic plus-value which results from the accelerated rotation of capital. Information is given as creative of communication, and even if the wastage is enormous a general consensus would have it that there is in the total nonetheless a surplus of meaning, which is redistributed in all the interstices of the social fabric — just as a consensus would have it that material production, despite its dysfunctions and irrationalities, nevertheless leads to an excess of wealth and social finality. We are all accomplices in this myth. It is the alpha and omega of our modernity, without which the credibility of our social organization would collapse. Yet *the fact is that it is collapsing*, and for this very reason. Just where we think that information is producing meaning, it is doing the exact opposite.

Information devours its own contents; it devours communication and the social, and for two reasons:

1. Instead of causing communication, it ex-

*hausts itself in the act* of staging the communication; instead of producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. It is a gigantic process of simulation with which we are very familiar. The non-directed interview, speech, listeners who telephone in, participation at all levels, blackmail through speech — all say: "It's your concern, you are the event, etc." More and more information is invaded by this sort of phantom content, this homeopathic graft, this awakened dream of communication. It is a circular set-up in which the desire of the audience is put on stage, an anti-theater of communication, which, as we know, is never anything but the recycling "in the negative" of traditional institutions, the integrated circuit of the negative. Immense energies are deployed in order to keep this simulacre standing upright, and to avoid the brutal de-simulation which would confront us with the obvious reality of a radical loss of meaning.

It is useless to wonder if it is the loss of communication which causes this escalation in the simulacre, or if it is the simulacre which is there first, with its dissuasive finality, since it short-circuits in advance all possibility of communication (precession of the model which puts an end to



the real). It is useless to wonder which is the first term. There is none, it is a circular process — that of simulation, that of the hyperreal: a hyperreality of communication and of meaning, more real than the real. Hence the real is abolished.

Thus communication as well as *the social* functions as a closed circuit, as a lure — to which is attached the force of a myth. The belief and the faith in information attached to this tautological proof give the system itself, by doubling its signs, an unlocatable reality.

But this belief may be thought to be as ambiguous as the one attached to myths in archaic societies. One both believes and doesn't believe. The question is simply not posed. "I know very well, but all the same. . . ." A sort of inverted simulation corresponds in the masses, in each one of us, to this simulation of meaning and of communication in which this system encloses us. To the tautology of the system the masses have responded with ambivalence; to dissuasion they have responded with disaffection, and an always enigmatic belief. The myth exists, but one must guard against thinking that people believe in it. That is the trap of critical thought, which can

only be exercised given the naivete and the stupidity of the masses as a presupposition.

2. Behind this exacerbated staging of communication, the mass media, with its pressure of information, carries out an irresistible destruction of the social.

Thus information dissolves meaning and the social into a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total entropy.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the media do not bring about socialization, but just the opposite: the implosion of the social in the masses. And this is only the macroscopic extension of the *implosion of meaning* at the microscopic level of the sign. The latter is to be analyzed starting from McLuhan's formula *the medium is the message*, the consequences of which are far from being exhausted.

Its meaning is that all the contents of meaning are absorbed in the dominant form of the medium. The medium alone makes the event — and does this whatever the contents, whether conformist or subversive. A serious problem for

all counter-information, pirate radios, anti-media, etc. But there is something even more serious, which McLuhan himself did not make clear. For beyond this neutralization of all content, one could still hope to manipulate the medium in its form, and to transform the real by utilizing the impact of the medium as form. With all content nullified, perhaps there is still a revolutionary and subversive use-value of the *medium as such*. Yet — and this is where McLuhan's formula at its extreme limit leads — there is not only the implosion of the message in the medium; in the same movement there is the implosion of the medium itself in the real, *the implosion of the medium and the real* in a sort of nebulous hyperreality where even the definition and the distinct action of the medium are no longer distinguishable.

Even the "traditional status" of the media themselves, characteristic of our modernity, is put into question. McLuhan's formula, *the medium is the message*, which is the key formula of the era of simulation (the medium is the message — the sender is the receiver — the circularity of all poles — the end of panoptic and perspectival space — such is the alpha and omega of *our* modernity),

this very formula must be envisaged at its limit, where, after all contents and messages have been volatilized in the medium, it is the medium itself which is volatilized as such. At bottom, it is still the message which lends credibility to the medium, and which gives to the medium its distinct and determined status as intermediary of communication. Without a message, the medium also falls into that indefinite state characteristic of all our great systems of judgement and value. A single *model*, whose efficacy is *immediacy*, simultaneously generates the message, the medium, and the "real."

In short, *the medium is the message* signifies not only the end of the message, but also the end of the medium. There are no longer media in the literal sense of the term (I am talking above all about the electronic mass media) — that is to say, a power mediating between one reality and another, between one state of the real and another — neither in content nor in form. Strictly speaking, this is what implosion signifies: the absorption of one pole into another, the short-circuit between poles of every differential system of meaning, the effacement of terms and of

distinct oppositions, and thus that of the medium and the real. Hence the impossibility of any mediation, of any dialectical intervention between the two or from one to the other, circularity of all media effects. Hence the impossibility of a sense (meaning), in the literal sense of a unilateral vector which leads from one pole to another. This critical — but original — situation must be thought through to the very end; it is the only one we are left with. It is useless to dream of a revolution through content or through form, since the medium and the real are now in a single nebulous state whose truth is undecipherable.

The fact of this implosion of contents, of absorption of meaning, of the evanescence of the medium itself, of the re-absorption of the whole dialectic of communication in a total circularity of the model, of the implosion of the social in the masses, can appear catastrophic and hopeless. But it is only so in regard to the idealism that dominates our whole vision of information. We all live by a fanatical idealism of meaning and communication, by an idealism of communication through meaning, and, in this perspective, it is very much *a catastrophe of meaning* which lies in wait for us.

But it must be seen that the term "catastrophe" has this "catastrophic" meaning of the end and annihilation only in a linear vision of accumulation and productive finality that the system imposes on us. Etymologically, the term only signifies the curvature, the winding down to the bottom of a cycle leading to what can be called the "horizon of the event," to the horizon of meaning, beyond which we cannot go. Beyond it, nothing takes place *that has meaning for us* — but it suffices to exceed this ultimatum of meaning in order that catastrophe itself no longer appear as the last, nihilistic day of reckoning, such as it functions in our current collective fantasy.

Beyond meaning, there is fascination, which results from the neutralization and implosion of meaning. Beyond the horizon of the social, there are the masses, which result from the neutralization and implosion of the social.

The essential thing today is to evaluate this double challenge — the defiance of meaning by the masses and their silence (which is not at all a passive resistance) — and the defiance of meaning which comes from the media and its fascination. In regard to this challenge all the marginal and alternative attempts to resuscitate meaning

are secondary.

Evidently there is a paradox in this inextricable conjunction of the masses and the media: is it the media that neutralizes meaning and that produces the "unformed" (or informed) mass, or is it the mass that victoriously resists the media by diverting or absorbing all the messages which it produces without responding to them? Some time ago, in "Requiem for the Media," I analyzed (and condemned) the media as the institution of an irreversible model of communication *without response*. But today? This absence of response can be understood as a counter-strategy of the masses themselves in their encounter with power, and no longer at all as a strategy of power. What then?

Are the mass media on the side of power in the manipulation of the masses, or are they on the side of the masses in the liquidation of meaning, in the violence done to meaning and in the fascination that results? Is it the media which induce fascination in the masses, or is it the masses which divert the media into spectacle? Mogadishu Stammheim: the media are made the

vehicle of the moral condemnation of terrorism and of the exploitation of fear for political ends, but, simultaneously, in the most total ambiguity, they propagate the brutal fascination of the terrorist act. They are themselves terrorists, to the extent to which they work through fascination (cf. Umberto Eco on this eternal moral dilemma: how not to speak of terrorism, how to find a *good use* for the media? *There is none* ). The media carry meaning and non-sense; they manipulate in every sense simultaneously. The process cannot be controlled, for the media convey the simulation internal to the system and the simulation destructive of the system according to a logic that is absolutely Moebian and circular — and this is exactly what it is like. There is no alternative to it, no logical resolution. Only a logical *exacerbation* and a catastrophic resolution.

With one qualification. We are face to face with this system, in a double situation, an insoluble “double bind” exactly like children face to face with the adult universe. They are simultaneously summoned to behave like autonomous subjects,



responsible, free, and conscious, and as submissive objects, inert, obedient, and conforming. The child resists on all levels, and to a contradictory demand he also responds with a double strategy. To the demand to be an object, he opposes all the practices of disobedience, revolt, emancipation; in short, a total claim to subjecthood. To the demand to be a subject, he opposes just as stubbornly and efficaciously with an object's resistance, that is to say, in exactly the opposite manner: infantilism, hyperconformism, a total dependence, passivity, idiocy. Neither of the two strategies has more objective value than the other. The resistance-as-subject is today unilaterally valorized and held as positive — just as in the political sphere only the practices of liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution as a political subject are taken to be valuable and subversive. But this is to ignore the equal or perhaps even superior impact, of all the practices-as-object — the renunciation of the position of subject and of meaning — exactly the practices of the masses — which we bury and forget under the contemptuous terms of alienation and passivity. The liberating practices respond to *one* of the aspects of the system, to the

constant ultimatum to make of ourselves pure objects, but they don't respond at all to the other demand, which is to constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate ourselves, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, produce, decide, speak, participate, play the game — a form of blackmail and ultimatum just as serious as the other, probably even more serious today. To a system whose argument is oppression and repression, the strategic resistance is the liberating claim of subjecthood. But this reflects rather the system's previous phase, and even if we are still confronted with it, it is no longer the strategic terrain: the system's current argument is the maximization of the word and the maximal production of meaning. Thus the strategic resistance is that of a refusal of meaning and a refusal of the word — or of the hyperconformist simulation of the very mechanisms of the system, which is a form of refusal and of non-reception.

This is the resistance of the masses: it is equivalent to sending back to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting, like a mirror, meaning without absorbing it. This strategy (if one can still speak of strategy) prevails today,

because it was ushered in by that phase of the system.

A mistake concerning strategy is a serious matter. All the movements which only bet on liberation, emancipation, the resurrection of the subject of history, of the group, of speech as a raising of consciousness, indeed of a "seizure of the unconscious" of subjects and of the masses, do not see that they are acting in accordance with the system, whose imperative today is the overproduction and regeneration of meaning and speech.

### NOTES

1. Here we have discussed information only in the social register of communication. But it would be fascinating to consider the hypothesis within the framework of the *cybernetic* theory of communication. There also, the fundamental thesis would have it that information would be synonymous with negentropy, the resistance to entropy, and an excess of meaning and of organization. But it would be fitting to pose the opposite hypothesis: INFORMATION = ENTROPY. For example: the information or knowledge about a system or an event that can be obtained is already a form of neutraliza-

tion and of entropy of this system. (This applies to the sciences in general and to the human and social sciences in particular.) The information in which an event is reflected or through which it is diffused is already a degraded form of the event. One would not hesitate to analyze the intervention of the media in May 1968 in this sense. The extension given to the student action permitted the general strike, but the latter was precisely a black box which neutralized the original virulence of the movement. The very amplification was a mortal trap and not a positive extension. Distrust the universalization of struggles through information. Distrust campaigns of solidarity at every level, this solidarity that is both electronic and worldwide. Every strategy of the universalization of differences is an entropic strategy of the system.

**OUR  
THEATER  
OF  
CRUELTY**



## *I. Mogadishu*

In the terrorist act there is a simultaneous power of death and simulation which it is intolerable to see confused with the "morbid taste of death," and with the frenzy of the "morbid" and the "spectacular." Dead or living, it is elsewhere that terrorism wins out. At least by this single fact: it alone makes the event, and thus returns the whole "political" order to its nullity. And the media, all while orchestrating the victory of order, only cause the evidence for the opposite to reverberate: to wit, that terrorism is burying the political order.

The media are terrorists in their own fashion, working continually to produce (good) sense, but, at the same time, violently

defeating it by arousing everywhere a fascination without scruples, that is to say, a paralysis of meaning, to the profit of a single scenario.

Terrorism is not violent in itself; only the spectacle it unleashes is truly violent. It is our Theater of Cruelty, the only one that remains to us, perhaps equal in every respect to that of Artaud or to that of the Renaissance, and extraordinary in that it brings together *the spectacular and the challenge at their highest points*. It is at the same time a model of simulation, a micro-model flashing with a minimally real event and a maximal echo chamber, like a crystal thrown into an unstable solution or an experimental matrix, an insoluble equation which makes all the variables appear suddenly. Not a real event, but a condensed narrative, a flash, a scenario — that is to say, that which opposes to every event said to be real the purest form of the spectacular — and a ritual, or that which, of all possible events, opposes to the political and historical model or order the purest symbolic form of challenge.

A strange mixture of the symbolic and the spectacular, of challenge and simulation. This



paradoxical configuration is the only original form of our time, and subversive because insoluble. There is neither victory nor defeat: no sense can be made of an event which is irremediably spectacular, or irremediably symbolic. Everything in terrorism is ambivalent and reversible: death, the media, violence, victory. Who plays into the other's hands? Death itself is undefinable: the death of the terrorists is equivalent to that of the hostages; they are substitutable. In spite of all the efforts to set them into radical opposition, fascination allows no distinction to be made, and rightly so, for power finally does not make any either, but settles its accounts with everyone, and buries Baader and Schleyer together at Stuttgart in its incapacity to unravel the deaths and rediscover the fine dividing line, the distinctive and valid oppositions which are the secret of law and order. Nor is it possible to reclaim a positive use for the media, or a transparency of repression: the repressive act traverses the same unforeseeable spiral as the terrorist act; no one knows where it will stop, nor all the setbacks and reversals that will ensue. There is no distinction possible between the spectacular and the symbolic, no distinction possible between the "crime"

and the "repression." *It is this uncontrollable eruption of reversibility that is the true victory of terrorism.*

This victory lies not at all in the fact of imposing a negotiation and forcing a government to capitulate. Besides, the objective — most of the time to liberate imprisoned comrades — is typically a zero sum equation. The stakes are elsewhere. And if power wins out at the level of the objective, it loses at the level of the real stakes. It loses its political definition, and is forced to accept, all the while trying to thwart, this reversibility of all the actors in the same process. Terrorists, killers, hostages, leaders, spectators, public opinion — there is no more innocence in a system which has no meaning. No tragedy either (in spite of the ideology of the Baader group itself, and the pedagogy of the terrorist model on a world-wide scale). The force of the terrorists comes to them precisely from the fact that they have no logic. The others do: it is quick, effective, flawless, without scruples; it is why they "win." If the terrorists had one, they would not make the errors that they do, but they would no longer be terrorists. To demand that they be at the same time illogical, which gives them their power, and

logical tacticians, which would make them successful, is absurd — again a fantasy of synthesis, and of defense on our part, which allows us to recuperate ourselves in the fury of defeat.

Hence the stupidity and the obscenity of all that is reported about the terrorists: everywhere the wish to palm off meaning on them, to exterminate them with meaning, which is more effective than the bullets of specialized commandoes (and all the while subjecting them elsewhere, in the prisons, to sensory deprivation). It is still this rage for meaning which makes us, with the best will in the world, treat them like idiots incapable of going all the way and blowing up the airplane and the passengers, which makes us want them not to have "won."

Not only have they not won, but they have encouraged inordinately the sacred union of all the world forces of repression; they have reinforced the political order, etc. — let's go all the way — they have killed their Stammheim\* comrades, since if they had not launched and then botched up this operation, the others would still be living. But all this participates in the same conspiracy of meaning, which amounts to setting an

action in contradiction with itself (here to ends that were not desired, or according to a logic which was not its own). Strangulation.

## *II. Stammheim*

The insoluble polemic on the manner in which Baader and his comrades died is itself obscene, and for the same reason: there is an equal obscenity in wanting to forcibly impose meaning on the hijackers' act and in wanting to restore Baader's death to the order of factual reality. Principle of meaning as principle of truth: there you have the real life blood of State terrorism.

It is to believe that the German government's strategy attains perfection in a single blow: not only does it link together in an almost improvised manner the bungled taking of hostages with the immediately subsequent liquidation of the prisoners who disturbed it, but does so in such a way (coarse, equivocal, incoherent) that it traps everyone in the hysterical search for truth, which is the best way to abolish the symbolic futility of this death.

The hijackers made so many errors at Mogadishu that one can only think that they

were done "on purpose." They have finally attained their objective obliquely, which was the challenge of their own death, the latter summing up the virtual one of all the hostages, and more radically still, that of the power which kills them. For it absolutely must be repeated that the stakes are not to beat power on its own ground, but to oppose another political order of force. One knows nothing about terrorism if one does not see that it is not a question of real violence, nor of opposing one violence to another (which, owing to their disproportion, is absurd, and besides, all *real* violence, like real order in general, is always on the side of power), but to oppose to the *full* violence and to the *full* order a clearly superior model of extermination and virulence operating through emptiness.

The secret is to oppose to the order of the real an absolutely imaginary realm, absolutely ineffectual at the level of reality, but whose implosive energy absorbs everything real and all the violence of real power which founders there. Such a model is no longer of the order of transgression: repression and transgression are of the

old order of the law, that is to say, of the order of a real *system* in expansion. In such a system, all that comes into contradiction with it, including the violence of its opposite, only makes the expansion accelerate. Here, the virulence comes from the implosion — and the death of the terrorists (or of the hostages) is of this implosive order: the abolition of value, of meaning, of the real, at a determined point. This point can be infinitesimal, and yet provokes a suction, an absorption, a gigantic convection, as could be seen at Mogadishu. Around this tiny point, the whole system of the real condenses, is tetanized, and launches all its anti-bodies. It becomes so dense that it goes beyond its own laws of equilibrium and involutes in its own over-effectiveness. At bottom, the profound tactic of simulation (for it's very much a matter of simulation in the terrorist model, and not of real death) is to provoke an excess of reality, and *to make the system collapse under an excess of reality.*

If it is possible then to think that the high-jackers have acted purposefully in order to meet their death, this kind of paradoxical death which

shines intensely for a moment before falling back into the real, it is possible to think inversely that the German government itself did not commit so many errors in the Baader affair except towards a well defined end (even without desiring it). It was able to stage Baader's death neatly — he did not do it. Far from seeing there a secondary episode, it must be seen as the *key* to the situation. By sowing this doubt, this deliberate ambiguity concerning the facts, it insured that the truth about this death, and not the death itself, became fascinating. Everyone exhausted himself in argument and in attempts at clarification — clarifications reinforced by the theatricality of the event which acts as a gigantic dissuasion of the terrorists' execution — everyone, and above all the revolutionaries who wanted strongly to have it that Baader had been "assassinated." They too were vultures of the truth. What's the bloody difference, anyway — suicides or victims of liquidation? The difference, of course, is that if they were liquidated and it can be proven, then the masses, guided by the truth of the facts, would know that the German State is fascist, and would mobilize in order to wreak revenge. What a load of rubbish. A death is romantic or it is not. And

in the latter case, there is no need for revenge; it is of the imaginary order. What non-sense to fall back into the reality of a contract of revenge and equivalence! The avengers are worth the moralists: always evaluate the price, and have the just price paid. It matters little that the "reality" of this death (the truth about . . .) is stolen from you, since it is not of the order of the real, and therein lies its force. You are the one who depreciates it by wanting to institute it as a fact, as capital with the value of death, and to exhaust it in death, whereas this death at full price, not liquidated in the equivalence of meaning and vengeance, opens a cycle of vertigo in which the system itself can only come to be implicated in the end, or brutally, through its own death. Against this vertiginous death the system defends itself by setting in place an inverse cycle — a recycling of the truth against the insoluble cycle of death. Such is the inspired manoeuvre of the German government, which consists in delivering through its "calculated" errors an unfinished product, an unrecoverable truth. Thus everyone will exhaust himself finishing the work, and going to the end of the truth. A subtle incitement to self-management. It is content to produce an event in-



volving death; others will put the finishing touches on the job. The truth. Even among the very ones who revolt at Baader's death, no one sees through this trap, and all function with the same automatism on the fringe of open complicity which all intelligent power contrives to spread around its decisions.

Far from harming him, the flaws of Stammheim stem from a strategy of simulation by the German State which alone would merit analysis and denunciation. A strategy of sacred union, and not at all moral, against the terrorist violence, but, much more profoundly, *a sacred union in the production of truth*, of the facts, of the real. Even if this truth explodes (if in fifteen years it is finally established that Baader was coldly liquidated), it will hardly be a scandal. No power will be frightened by it; if necessary, the crew of leaders will be changed. The price of the truth for power is superficial. On the other hand, the benefits of general mobilization, dissuasion, pacification and mental socialization obtained through this crystalization of the truth are immense. A smart operation, under which Baader's death threatens to be buried definitively. □