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The Screen of (Post)Modern Society: American Sociology and Its Discontents

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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Robert J. Leonard entitled "The Screen of (Post)Modern Society: American Sociology and Its Discontents." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Harry F. Dahms, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Tyler Wall, Kasey Henricks

Accepted for the Council:

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

The Screen of (Post)Modern Society: American Sociology and Its Discontents

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Robert John Leonard
December 2019

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DEDICATION

To the amazing women who have made this journey possible:

My Great Grandmother, Mary, for introducing me to politics at age 9. I highly doubt I would have found my way to sociology any other way.

My Grandmother, Margaret, for being the best mother a person could ask for.

My Partner, Jessica, who moved across the country, twice, to support my silly ambitions. Your unconditional love and support never cease to amaze me.

My Feline, Emelia, for forcing me to take breaks and always making sure that I remember when it is lunch time. You make our house a home.

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I cannot say enough positive things about my committee chair, Dr. Harry Dahms. I am not entirely sure he knew what he signed up for when he agreed to work with me, but I am thankful every day that he continues to support me. I am truly appreciative of the amount of time and energy he has put into reading various drafts of this thesis. When I felt that I could not get this done, it was Dr. Dahms who inspired me to push forward.

I need to thank Thom Bechtold, Nikhil Deb, and Jeffery Wang for their comradery. Much theory was debated, and wine consumed through our many discussions and trips. Good friends are absolutely necessary during this process and I will brag that I have the best. I also want to thank Kyra Martinez and Della Winters for also taking the time to listen when it was apparent that I was frustrated.

I also have to thank Drs. Dan Thomas, Dan Sundblad, and Brian McQueen -- my undergraduate mentors. Without their unwavering tolerance of putting up with me when I showed up to every single office hour, I would not have been graduate school material. Having found something that I truly love and could not imagine doing anything else, there is no possible way to return such an amazing gift.

With all of these thanks, it must be noted that the contents of this thesis are solely mine. Any mistakes, spelling or intellectual, are 100% mine.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is structured around a single observation: Jean Baudrillard is very marginal in American sociology and has become increasingly marginal since his death in 2007. We are living in a social world where the tenets of postmodernism seem more actualized now than they were when first introduced in the 1970s and 1980s. In light of this backdrop, the marginality of Baudrillard is intriguing because he was the only formally trained sociologist associated with French postmodernism. If the postmodernism assessment of the social world is becoming increasingly accurate, should American sociologists not be interested in what the only sociologist associated with this intellectual movement had to say? Exploring the possibilities surrounding Baudrillard's marginality, I argue that it corresponds with and is symptomatic of the decline of the role of theory in sociology. From the vantage point of American sociology, Baudrillard appears to be irrelevant, and his work has to be marginalized, in order to distract from the fact that he and his work ought to be relevant and should be central, given that he illuminates troubling realities that American sociology deems import. I illustrate this by drawing a distinction between what sociology *ought* to do, as characterized by the goals, purposes, and methods that structured the initial formation of sociology as a discipline, and how American sociology *appears*, as defined by a trajectory of practicing sociology that gained increasing prominence and value (in terms of institutional prestige and research dollars) in the 1960s and 1970s. I then partially explicate Baudrillard's theoretical position by focusing on two relatively neglected aspects of his theory, his concepts of symbolic exchange and reversibility. By explicating these concepts, I endeavor to demonstrate how they challenge the practices of contemporary American sociology which largely focuses on reproducing the social system we exist in rather than trying to illuminate the underlying tensions that are driving (post)modern society. I end by explaining how, against most other assessments, Baudrillard qualifies as meeting the tenets for what sociology ought to do. In the face of the impending challenges of critiquing Surveillance Capitalism, Baudrillard provides inspiration for productively facing the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Baudrillard was not an academic philosopher, but he was more of a philosopher than most, being an artist in thought, a prophet of the present, capable of anticipating with a hallucinating precision what shape our world would take in years or decades to come. Contrary to what most believed, he was by far the most realist thinker in our time.

– Sylvere Lotringer (2007) on the death of Baudrillard

No one will read Jean Baudrillard in 50 years, once those who made money off his antics fade. As in show business, so in academe. No fraud survives his enablers.

– Carlin Romano (2007) on the death of Baudrillard

Everything I write is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious. There has never been any real discussion about it. I don't claim to be tremendously serious, but there are nevertheless some philosophically serious things in my work!

– Baudrillard on Baudrillard (in Gane 1993)

In 2016, the United States elected a reality television star (and real-estate mogul) as President. Almost a year-and-a-half later, thirteen Russian nationals were charged with illegal “information warfare” intended to disrupt the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump (Crowley & Nelson 2018). Those Russian nationals were responsible for distributing hundreds of thousands of memes and inaccurate information regarding the presidential election over social media platforms. During the same time frame, a Trump campaign data analytic consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica, was legally harvesting over 50 million Facebook users’ private information that was then used as data for a predictive algorithm which compiled and exhaustive profile of targeted voters to help decide how to best construct and place propaganda to unconsciously manipulate voters political beliefs (Rosenberg, Confessore, and Cadwalladr 2018; Cadwalladr 2018). Overall, leading up to the 2016 election, there were 760 million instances of orchestrated lies being viewed on social media, roughly three for each adult in the United States (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). A major principle of modern political behavior is that voters

are presumed rational enough to make the decision of which candidate aligns closer to their beliefs. Exit polls and surveys are conducted as if what the respondents say is indeed their own belief, presumed to not be manufactured (Erikson and Tedin 2011).

Many of Donald Trump’s supporters believe that climate change is a hoax. More generally, only one-in-six Americans understand that over 90% of climate scientists have concluded that climate change is human-induced (Leiserowitz et. al 2019:4). Originally not qualifying for earlier debates in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary, the former hedge fund manager Tom Steyer qualified for later debates (with more stringent qualification requirements). His net worth of \$1.6 billion makes him wealthier than 99.5% of Americans. While the net worth of Steyer and many other billionaires continues to increase, wages for the average American have remained stagnant or have declined *despite* a continuous increase in productivity (with a decline in taken vacation days), working hours, and cumulative net worth (Bivens et. al. 2014; U.S. Travel Association 2018). To what extent can we claim Modernity to be an era of economic “progress” when that progress disproportionately impacts an increasingly smaller part of the population despite increasing productivity?

More numbers like this can be provided to illustrate the dubious and contradictory nature of claims that we are still in *modernity* as the historical epoch that emerged in the 18th centuries and can be defined as:

a shorthand term for modern society, or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with (1) a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention; (2) a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; (3) a certain range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy. Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society—more technically, a complex of institutions—which, unlike any preceding culture, lives in the future, rather than the past (Giddens 1998:94).

Modernity is represented as the age of reason, science and technological progress, and individual identity, and it resulted from the liberation from traditional social structures and the rise of rationality as they provided opportunities to shape and *create* one's own life, rather than just to live it. People spend their life striving to construct a meaningful or successful life-history. The irony of modernity is that its most highly held values and goal – progress – is an overwhelmingly contradictory project. Can we call the modern age one of “progress” when in the United States, one of the wealthiest nations in the world, over 3 million children are living on less than two dollars a day (Edin & Shaefer 2015)? Are voters voting against their economic self-interest, in line with the tenets of modernity? (Frank 2004; Bartels 2008). Are reality stars qualified to run for President the United States? Is modernity truly rational?

Starting with the assumption that the principles of modernity are in jeopardy of collapsing, this thesis assesses how the sociology of Jean Baudrillard might add additional perspective to American sociology as it tries to understand a social reality after modernity. My intention is not to argue that the tenets of modernity have at the least been disrupted as there is already an established literature on that (for overviews see Agger 2002, Antonio 1998, Best & Kellner 1991, and Huyssen 1984). I am starting from the assumption of modernity is incomplete (Habermas [1985] 1998) and that several of assumptions in sociology relating to modernity are no longer rooted in contemporary social reality. This thesis thus assumes the position of a *postmodern* approach for purposes of observation and diagnosis. As such, this thesis is a critique of what I will later outline as “mainstream” American sociology which seeks to study (post)modern

society by adhering to and applying some principles of modernity, such as the linear notion of progress and, continually developing rational scientific thought (see Seamster & Ray 2018; Mills 1979a, 1979b). It is on the assumption of these principles that positivistic sociology has sought to understand the social world. For sociology to continue to seek to understand the social world, it's tactics and strategies must be reassessed (but this does not imply that all of what sociology is or claims to do is inadequate to study contemporary social reality). By postmodern I refer to the idea that that modern notions and hopes have turned out not to apply. Postmodernism strips modernity of its ideological justification and is founded on the realization that the precepts of modernity are based on are not completely valid. Modernism suggests that people could be the masters of their own faith whereas postmodernism articulates that people have no control over their own faith. In this way, to simplify a complex, contradictory, and highly controversial literature, postmodernism is modernity without illusions (Dandaneau 2001:47)

To narrow my focus, I am not interested in the role of postmodernity in American sociology generally, but will focus on a particular postmodernist, Jean Baudrillard, who I am interested in for two reasons. First, when I first read Baudrillard, I was confused. When I returned to his work later, I began to grasp that he might be more accurate than a lot of contemporary sociology in terms of putting a finger on the problematic features of our contemporary social world. Having only heard Baudrillard mentioned in passing and usually in a manner that involved negative connotations, I started to delve into his works to try to figure out what issues it was intended to address. The second reason is that after

reading about the historical emergence of postmodernism, in which Baudrillard played a key role, I realized that he was the only sociologist associated with the “postmodern” turn in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Not only was he the only sociologist associated with French postmodernism, but he is often referred to as the “high-priest of postmodernism” (Gane 1991:47). Despite this designation, and the mounting evidence of the credibility of postmodernism, since his death in 2007, Baudrillard occupies a marginal space in American sociology.¹ I am not implying that Baudrillard is wholly neglected, nor am I suggesting that Baudrillard is the only marginal sociologist in American sociology, nor the most important marginal sociologist. There are spaces in the United States where we see Baudrillard’s ideas being discussed, such as in the journal *Media, Culture, and Society*, but these spaces are often highly specialized, interdisciplinary, and do not occupy nearly as prestigious of a space in American sociology as journals such as the *American Sociological Review* or the *American Journal of Sociology*, each only publishing two articles with cursory use of Baudrillard’s ideas since his death in 2007 (See Cech 2013, McDonnell 2013, Petev 2013, & Sallaz 2012). There are also European journals easily accessible to American academics that engage Baudrillard and his ideas on a more regular basis, such as *Theory, Culture, and Society*. There is even an *International Baudrillard Studies Journal*. However, despite pockets where Baudrillard’s

¹ Two things are important to note. First, I am not implying that Baudrillard was not marginal prior to his death. There are certainly more citations and references to his work during the course of life, but the overall number remains relatively low compared to other contemporary sociologists. During his life he also occupied a major place in popular culture, with explicit references of him in the Wachowski brother’s 1999 cult classic, *The Matrix*. He also occupied a cult icon status in the American art world with his 1983 publication *Simulations*. Since his death, Baudrillard’s status outside of academia has also drastically declined. Second, while being declared the high-priest of postmodernism, Baudrillard explicitly chose not to self-identify with the intellectual movement.

ideas hold currency, his overall legacy in American sociology remains marginal. I find this interesting because if the assumptions and theories about the social world provided by Baudrillard, specifically, and by postmodernists, generally, were increasingly invalid, one could reasonably suspect those theorists firmly entrenched in the perspective would become increasingly irrelevant. However, a strong case can be made that the tenets of postmodernism are more clearly a part of social reality now than when the perspective started to emerge in the 1980s. What is going on politically in American society today should make sociologists question the extent to which they understand contemporary American society. The United States, exemplar of the rational, free, and modern nation-state, incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. The United States bears weight to an exceptional influence of anti-intellectualism. Purportedly, Obama is a non-citizen covert Muslim (Jouet 2017:64-65); Iraq had “weapons of mass destruction” when George W. Bush ordered the US armed forces to invade that country (Jouet 2017:62); climate change is a “myth” (Jouet 2017:71-73); and there were a number of “enormous” tax increases during the Obama administration (Jouet 2017:70-71). The United States’ populations’ perspective on the world and itself is shaped, in part, by disinformation (Jouet 2017:63). Algorithmic technology as developed and implemented by companies such as Cambridge Analytica seek to manipulate and manufacture political beliefs of voters (Andrews 2018, Kennedy 2018, and Stark 2018). Rather than ask what somebody like Baudrillard could contribute to understanding contemporary American society, American sociology has seemed to double down on the positivist strategies that it has been employing since the 1960s and 1970s to study modern society the very qualities

that some sociologists, such as Jean Baudrillard, seem to think are in jeopardy. My objective in this thesis is not to contend that Baudrillard was “right”, but to use his work as a lens that enables us to pay attention to features of contemporary American society which American sociology otherwise would disregard or neglect. Baudrillard was a trained and practicing sociologist turned critic of sociology, and drawing on his work promises the possibility to get a grasp on sociology that sociology would not be able to achieve from locations within mainstream sociology.² The objective of this thesis, then, is to utilize Baudrillard in order to illuminate conditions that contemporary “mainstream” American sociology refuses to acknowledge, which I elaborate in detail later in the thesis, and reflect upon, in the effort to articulate how sociology might be practiced differently if Baudrillard were to be taken seriously to a greater extent. Thus, this thesis is intended as a contribution to the sociology of sociology. As is true for proponents of any science, including the social sciences, sociologists cannot be expected to constantly be engaged in the practice of questioning their own presuppositions, because there would not be any time for concrete research. My analysis is to take partial responsibility of examining the presuppositions of contemporary American sociology in regard to tools and tactics American sociology utilizes to study the contemporary social world. There are multiple ways and foils one can use to engage in an effort like this. Taking Baudrillard’s work as the primary reference frame, I begin with a review of the literature on how Baudrillard has been received and utilized in social theory and by sociologists. I then establish the

² It is important to stress that Jean Baudrillard’s perspective is not the only one to challenge “mainstream” sociology. there are lots of other theoretical approaches in sociology that do something very similar from a different angle: critical, poststructural, neo-Marxist, feminist, queer, postcolonial, etc.

framework that I am using to assess sociology. I then analyze the contributions of Baudrillard that are especially compatible with sociology regarding the persistent themes sociologists have addressed and are examining. From this discussion I conclude with what sociology could glean from a serious consideration of Baudrillard, sociologist, high-priest of postmodernism.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will be relatively narrow in scope and focus predominately on the representation of and engagement with Baudrillard's ideas in the context of American sociology, in order to situate what sociologists have done with Baudrillard in order to prepare the intervention that I am trying to make, which is to stress what Baudrillard could contribute to contemporary American sociology. During the 1980s and 1990s, a number of sociologists pointed to the relevance of Baudrillard for the study of a wide variety of sociological phenomenon. However, despite calling attention to Baudrillard possibly having relevance to areas of interest in contemporary sociology, most acknowledgements were superficial and took the form of a footnote, or a sentence or two regarding how Baudrillard's work was relevant. Additionally, while Baudrillard was being debated more frequently before his death, he was marginalized in those debates within the larger debate on the role of postmodernism. Thus, while Baudrillard may appear to have been more "relevant" or at least more engaged, it was largely to discredit more radical postmodern approaches in an attempt to validate more moderate postmodern approaches. The consequence of this is that while Baudrillard was getting discussed it was only to discredit him as a more radical postmodernist in an attempt to normalize discussions around less radical "postmodernist" such as Foucault and Derrida. I will provide examples from the literature to illustrate this process. As a consequence, Baudrillard was rarely put into conversation with American sociology and how his ideas may contribute to how American sociologists approach studying the social world. It is the latter point that I am trying to contribute to in this thesis. Though Baudrillard has not

been absent from sociology, this literature review focuses on scholars who productively engaged with Baudrillard. I am not going to engage the literature that starts, categorically, from the premise that postmodernism is wrong and Baudrillard useless to sociology. A catalogue of works has put forth such external critiques³; by contrast, many of the works cited in this literature review are prompted by the need to respond to the literature critiquing postmodernism generally, and often using Baudrillard as the specific example. However, their engagement with Baudrillard was mostly “sacrificial” in the sense that they caricatured him in an attempt to help get more modernist postmodernists more accepted in American sociology (examples below but see Lemert 2005 and Antonio 1991). I will not focus on accounts in disciplines other than sociology and in European sociology that seek to utilize Baudrillard as a productive theorist of contemporary social life in this the literature review, though they will appear elsewhere in this thesis .⁴

Baudrillard in American Sociology: 2008 and Beyond

Baudrillard died in March 2007 and since then there has been a notable decline in engagement with his scholarship in American sociology as discussed above. In reviewing the literature on Baudrillard subsequent to his death, there is very little serious engagement in American sociology. From being mentioned but not cited (de la Fuente 2008), to only receiving a footnote or brief citation in the introduction (Cech 2013; Sallaz

³ *External critique* here is juxtaposed to *immanent critique*. External critiques start from the premise that a particular approach is wrong where immanent critique seeks to understand theories *on their own terms*. (See Stahl 2013; Antonio 1981).

⁴ For example, Best & Kellner (1991), Kellner (1989), Merrin (2005), Pawlett (2007), and especially Mike Gane (1991, 2000). It is also crucial to note, that while theorists outside of American sociology do not make up the bulk of this literature review, I will cite them at various places throughout this thesis because the non-sociological and non-American literature on Baudrillard is, for the most part, quite good in terms of it engaging Baudrillard and postmodernism on their own terms. Additionally, there is a lot more literature on Baudrillard from these other perspectives.

2012), no contemporary articles in American Sociological Association journals reviewed utilized Baudrillard nor his ideas as a significant part of their paper (see also Decoteau 2008, Petev 2013, McDonnell 2013). No searches returned results of serious engagement with his ideas such as *simulation*, *simulacrum*, or *symbolic exchange*. One exception is Hirschle (2014) who assessed how consumption could function as a force of social change. He investigates the extent to which consumption “has contributed to the formation of a specific type of society” (p. 1406), an argument with high affinity to Baudrillard’s earliest work. It is important to note that Jochen Hirschle is not an American sociologist – he is a German sociologist at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. All of the works reviewed since Baudrillard’s death rely on his early works concerning consumption, *The System of Objects* ([1968]2005), and *Consumer Society* ([1970]1998), in addition to his most well-known work *Simulacra and Simulation* ([1981]1994). None of the most contemporary American sociological literature engaged Baudrillard seriously, nor with what I will argue is his most crucial text and the key to understanding his entire project, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* ([1976] 2003). Furthermore, there is no evidence that Baudrillard’s (2008, 2010) books published posthumously were reviewed in American sociology journals. Despite the neglect of Baudrillard in contemporary American sociology, it is important to note that his ideas have been engaged with more outside of American sociology – for example, in rhetoric (Gogan 2017), media studies (Pawlett 2013, Kline 2016, Laist 2015), theology (Walters 2012), and literature (Schuster 2008). In addition to these volumes, major international works on interpreting Baudrillard came out (see geographer Richard G. Smith’s (2010) and English scholar Ryan Bishop’s

(2009) edited volumes). It seems apparent that while Baudrillard is only receives marginal attention in American sociology after his death, that in other disciplines and around the world, the legacy of Baudrillard and engagement with his ideas are significantly more prevalent. This speaks potentially to how sociology operates in the United States that is different from the way sociology operates elsewhere in the world. This will be taken up later in the section that seeks to explicate sociology. To find significant engagement with Baudrillard in American sociology, one has to go further back to when Baudrillard was still alive.

Baudrillard in American Sociology: Pre-2008

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was no denying that postmodernism exerted a tremendous influence on American academic culture (Cusset [2003]2008). Within this, Baudrillard was overwhelming associated with postmodernism (Kellner 1989; Best & Kellner 1989; Poster 1975). In a review of major French intellectuals, Lamont found Baudrillard to be one of the top ten influential contemporary French philosophers (p. 587). There is no doubt that sociologists saw the potential relevance of Baudrillard for several sociologically relevant areas including the media (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sassons 1992, Grindstaff & Turow 2006), the complications of the self and identity in late capitalism or postmodernity (Callero 2003, Cerulo 1997, Fine 1993, Orrange 2003), economic consumption (Zukin and Maguire 2004), criminology (Ferrell 1999), sociology of Knowledge and sociology (Swidler and Arditi 1994, Camic and Gross 1998; Pescosolido and Rubin 2000; Antonio 1989), sociology of sports (Washington and Karen 2001), and art (Clignet 1979). While there was more engagement with Baudrillard

explicitly, with a few exceptions, it was only slightly more substantive than the literature that was published after his death. For example, Callero (2003) takes the time to explicate how postmodernism, as represented by Baudrillard, might complicate taken-for-granted ways of understanding the self. He writes, “the idea that individuals are in possession of a core, rational, unitary self, endowed with an essential nature and an independent consciousness, is simply a political artifact of the European Enlightenment” (p. 117). These ideals are now under fire. “Whether we are moving toward a culture that places greater authority and truth in online relations and onscreen images, as suggested by Baudrillard and other postmodernists, is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is clear that understanding the role of nonhuman apparatuses in the construction of the self is an emerging and important topic of study” (p. 127). While not fully accepting the call from postmodernist and poststructuralist theorist that the “self” is dead, Callero none the less explores the implication of the idea and acknowledges that postmodernism might be on to something. Furthermore, other sociologists recognize that theorists, such as Baudrillard, have been hardly read in the United States (Zukin and Maguire 2004).

The bulk of the literature reviewed that incorporates Baudrillard, is concerned with a broader discussion of the relevance of postmodernism to sociology. For example, Cerulo (1997) writes that:

the postmodern-identity scholar deconstructs established identity categories and their accompanying rhetoric in an effort to explore the full range of “being.” Works in this tradition call into question models that equate discourse with truth; they expose the ways in which discourse objectified as truth both forms and sustains collective definitions, social arrangements, and hierarchies of power (p. 391).

Cerulo identifies Baudrillard, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard as the postmodernist that are influential for identity scholars, but this is the fullest extent to which she engages with

Baudrillard directly – in the broad strokes on postmodernism. When Baudrillard does get invoked in the context of postmodernism, he is often quickly pushed to the side as the author focuses on other scholars, notably Foucault or Derrida (For example, see Allardt 1989, Cerulo 1997, Swidler and Arditi 1994).

When scholars do engage in Baudrillard directly and in detail, it is often to debate the relevancy of one's interpretation of a particular text of Baudrillard. These literatures, while helpful if one wants to know how tense the interpretations of semiotic analysis can get, it is not very useful for assessing the utility of Baudrillard for assessing contemporary society or American sociology. These debates are more about the scholars writing the papers rather than the theorists they are writing about (for example of such a debate see Gottdiener 1985, 1986a, 1986b Denzin 1987, and Bogard 1987). This sort of debate inflates the citations and academic references to Baudrillard but contributes very little to understand of the utility of Baudrillard or his relationship to sociology.

Additionally, there was a special issue dedicated to postmodernism in *Sociology Theory* (Volume 9, No. 2 in 1991) which prompted a series of responses in Volume 10, No 2. In this special issue, where the foremost experts on postmodernism write explicitly on postmodernism and sociology, the conventionally accepted exemplar of postmodernism and only “postmodern” sociologist, Jean Baudrillard or his ideas, are only mentioned in three of six articles (mentioned in Seidman 1991a, 1991b, and Antonio 1991; not mentioned in Alexander 1991, Lemert 1991, and Richardson 1991) and a total of twelve times (eight times in one article, by Antonio 1991). In the six responses to the special issue, three incorporate Baudrillard's ideas (Antonio 1992, Bogard 1992, and Richardson

1992) whereas the other half make no mention of Baudrillard or his contributions (Rogers 1992, Lemert 1992, and Seidman 1992). As Bogard (1992) suggests, the blanket adoption of several approaches under one umbrella perspective is problematic. “This is in fact what the tired and increasingly passé term postmodernism accomplishes: it reduces a field of multiple, heterogeneous discourses to homogeneous use-values, ready to be pressed into the service of a crusade (Bogard 1992:241). My position is that the engagement of postmodernism generally has detracted from explicit engagement with Jean Baudrillard. Furthermore, the engagement various complicated theorist under the label of postmodernism has led to debating particular types of postmodernism rather than the merits of individual “postmodern” theorists in understanding the social world and the implications they raise for how we study the social world.

Toward, teasing out the nuance between various iterations of postmodernism, Lemert (1995, 2005) has developed a popular typology. To Lemert, the three positions that can be conceptualized as “postmodern” are: radical postmodernism, radical modernism, and strategic postmodernism. Radical postmodernism is the most radical of the postmodern positions and typified by Jean Baudrillard. Radical postmodernism “consider modernity a thing of the past because it believes the present situation is, again, hyperreal” (Lemert 2005:36). Radical modernism considers that the “sad effects of totalization” that has accompanied contemporary culture is “a *social* failure under certain historical conditions, but not as an inherent flaw of modernity itself” (p. 40).⁵

⁵ Interestingly, elsewhere, Lemert has qualified Baudrillard’s position as a radical postmodernist. In Lemert (1994), he suggests that the “later writings of Baudrillard” represent radical postmodernism. He does not say what constitutes later Baudrillard.

Representative of this approach, according to Lemert, is the Frankfurt School. Strategic postmodernism represents those thinkers commonly associated with radical postmodernists despite having an alternative way in “the way they attack the totalizing aspects of modernist essentialism – that is, in the way they wage war on totality” (p. 44). Strategic postmodernists believe that “modernity is too clever, too subtle in its workings, for anyone to be able to criticize it from the point of view of its own ideas” (p. 53). Proponents of this third position are Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan.

In my review of the literature, it seems that the way Baudrillard has been selectively utilized and hardly extensively or on his own terms is driven by political ambitions. In the 1980s and 1990s there was a sustained effort to incorporate postmodernism as a legitimate perspective in sociology (Cusset 2008). At the same time, there was a sustained effort to discredit postmodernism (see Gross & Levitt 1994, Sokal & Bricmont ([1997] 1999), Callinicos 1991). Baudrillard has been presented and positioned as a radical postmodernist and often critiqued on that very premise yet the same scholars will hold up radical modernist and strategic postmodernist as a more appropriate alternative for incorporation into sociological discourse. In other words, the lack of acceptance of Baudrillard in American sociology may be in part to the intentional posturing of him as the radical postmodernist that is not representative of the majority of postmodern approaches. As such, a disregard of Baudrillard is not inherently a disregard of postmodernism.

For example, take the following analysis from Robert J. Antonio.

The highly enthusiastic receptions accorded these fresh social theories [postmodern approaches] expose the insularity of sociological theory. In response, many sociologists completely ignore the new approaches while they preach the virtues of disciplinary work. Others have taken regrettably

defensive postures, attempting to close professional ranks against growing numbers of dangerous. [...] Without abandoning our own disciplinary resources, sociological theorists ought to engage and learn from the new approaches rather than branding them as cheap imitations of sociology or dismissing them entirely. Most importantly, we ought to reflect more critically on our own [...] Yet the hyperbolic claims and the parodies of standard academese by radical postmodernists dramatize the present cultural crisis and assault the blasé attitudes that go with our cozy and contradictory professional existences. Moreover, regardless of their relentless attacks on the totalizing tendencies of modern theory, postmodernist portrayals of epochal change and sweeping cultural disintegration revive the big discourse of the classical tradition. Their radical perspectivism, however, cannot sustain the style of pragmatic social theory that Seidman advocates and that I believe is needed more than ever in these times (1991:161).

Postmodernism, therefore, is a necessary approach that we should consider seriously *but* do not be detracted by the exaggeration of the radical postmodernists. Curiously, there is often talk of multiple radical postmodernists but I have only seen Baudrillard mentioned as an explicit example (for example see Antonio 1989 & Lemert 1994).⁶ There is no denying that scholars during the 1980s and 1990s found the potential value of postmodern generally also so some extent, Baudrillard. Agger (1991) suggests that “[...] critical theory, postmodernism, and poststructuralism attune working empiricists to the ways in which their own analytical and literary practices encode and conceal value positions that need to be brought to light” (p. 122). In particular Baudrillard’s postmodernism “offer valuable contributions to the sociological study of discourses, potentially enriching a wide range of sociological subfield” (p. 124). However, it is the more “moderate” of these critical perspectives that have been central in the literature. My goal in this thesis is to position Baudrillard explicitly at the center of a postmodern critique of sociology except I am engaging with Baudrillard on his own terms. As Robert J. Antonio, who warns us to be skeptical of the radical postmodernist, warns us elsewhere, “the difference between extreme and moderate positions [of postmodernism]

⁶ Lyotard usually gets classified as potentially falling under all radical or strategic postmodernism pending how one interprets him (Lemert 2005).

may be less than modern theorists wish to admit (Antonio 2000:50). In light of this literature review, I want to posit the following interventions.

- (1) The bulk of the literature addresses Baudrillard in the context of postmodernism and then discusses postmodernism in the context of social theory. In moving from the first step to the second, Baudrillard often gets lost or pushed out for being too radical and therefore is not used much in talking about the compatibility between postmodernism and sociology and social theory. This is presumably because Baudrillard is viewed as not compatible with sociology. I disagree and want to make a constructive critique of American sociology by utilizing Baudrillard.
- (2) In the literature reviewed, very little discussion stems from Baudrillard's ([1976] 1993) monograph *Symbolic Exchange in Death*. I argue later on that *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is a book that must be understood and accounted for if one is to fully understand the trajectory of Baudrillard's thought. *Symbolic Exchange in Death* was not translated until 1993 so it is likely that many of authors cited here were unfamiliar with this text at the time when much of the literature cited was written.
- (3) Very little of the literature directly engages the practices of American sociology. This is my predominant focus. What can *Baudrillard*, not postmodernism tell us about American sociology and what lessons might sociology learn from Baudrillard.

Situating Baudrillard in Postmodernity

Postmodernism represents the blanket categorization of varying theoretical arguments that came to fruition in the 1970s and 1980s as the realization that formative concepts and ideas that played a key role in the development of the social sciences and also inform how everyday individuals situate themselves in society were not as cooked up as social scientists and theorists then had thought they were (Cusset 2008; Lotringer & Cohen 2001). Categories of gender, race, sexuality, progress, and others seriously were called into questions (Lash 1989; Best & Kellner 1991; Seidman 2017). However recent the “postmodern revolution,” the ideas put forth by postmodernists, refer back to 19th century thinkers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (Callinicos 2007).⁷ The term itself first appear in 1939 (Toynbee [1939] 1962).⁸ Scholars have described postmodernity as the period that came after modernity. It is often thought of specifically as a different type of culturally (symbolically) coded reality that follows modernity and is consonant with post-industrialization (Lyotard [1979] 1984). As such, we should not expect to clearly distinguish when modernity stops, and post-modernity begins. Fredric Jameson (1991) argues that while not necessarily distinguishable from modernity, postmodernity is the *cultural logic* of late capitalism and that “postmodernism is the substitute for the sixties and the compensations for their political failure” (p. xvi). To David Harvey (1990), postmodernity is also a response to the 1960s but rather than a cultural response, it is an

⁷ While Nietzsche is not the definitive source of inspiration for “postmodern” or “post-structuralist” thinkers he is arguably the most important in terms of establishing a theoretical tradition different from the other traditions co-existing alongside “postmodernism.” Nietzsche is the key theoretical source that differentiates “postmodernism”.

⁸ Postmodernism had appeared earlier in references in to artistic and literary movement, but Toynbee is the first to write of postmodernism as a new historical moment.

economic response that led to a proliferation of financialization and “the annihilation of space through time”, or globalization (p. 205). Postmodernity is a wholly new period but rather reflects a mutation in capitalism. To Jameson (1991), there are a number of identifying features of postmodernity that separate it enough from modernity to justify a new periodization. It is the proliferation of a cultural logic of late capitalism throughout all facets of social life that result in and marks the success of the commodification over everything. This commodification has resulted in the loss of depth for most commodities leading to a proliferation of kitsch, superficiality, and depthlessness (p. 5-8).

Theorists such as Baudrillard have outlined characterizations of consequences that result from human existence in postmodernity. With postmodernity we have a loss of history. As Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) writes: “history is our lost referential, that is to say our myth [...]. The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation” (p. 43). By this, he is referring to our losing historical temporality. History is not gone forever with the inability to distinguish between the present and history but is increasingly difficult to discern. This is the consequence of the recycling of history into the media that re-illustrates and fabricates the history. In a society driven by the logic of capital, we recreate history and bring it into the contemporary in a neat package intended to be sold and consumed. As a consequence, history is lost in the sense that it stays with us everywhere we go and is rewritten in the name of capital. The loss of history is often facilitated by the mediatization of society. Mediatization refers to the “meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are increasingly shaped by mediating

technology and media organizations” (Livingstone 2009:3). This process has blurred the line between the real and perceived reality. It separates us from the real while seeking to reproduce it. The resulting hyperreality, as Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) coins it, is the inability for our consciousness to separate reality from the simulation of reality.⁹ Another characteristic of postmodernity is the proliferation of kitsch, mass-marketed products, and the rise of consumer society (Baudrillard [1970] 1998). Our thinking and behavior have been subsumed by a culture of consumption. Perhaps the most significant contribution of Baudrillard to the description of the postmodern condition is that of *simulacra* and *simulation*. Simulation is our inability to distinguish where reality stops, and the representation of reality begins. The simulacrum is “never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard [1981] 1994:1). Simulacra is when truth (or the real) is depicted by either copies of the original (copies depicting the real) or where there is just copies with no original in existence.

Baudrillard ([1981] 1994) describes three phases of simulacra that constitute his development of modern society. In the first phase, there is the counterfeiting of the image with real. This stage is associated the pre-modern period and while there are images, they are recognized as place markers for the real. We can still clearly distinguish between the real and the simulation. The second phase comes as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Mass production facilitates a break down between our ability to distinguish between the image and representation. Reality becomes masked and misrepresented

⁹ While this is particularly powerful to explain the perversion and loss of history through film, it can also be applied (as it is in this proposal) to the mediation of our experience of “nature,” through replications of “nature” such as Dollywood or the necessity of certain gear that can be purchased at Bass Pro Shop.

through things such as photography and ideology and commodities begin to replace the authority of the original (Benjamin 2008). It is becoming increasingly difficult to access the real, but it is still possible. The third phase, the precession of simulacra, is when social constructs saturate our lives and render meaning meaningless. Representation trumps and determines the real and no distinction can be made between the two. Simulation no longer exist, just simulacrum. This is associated with the postmodern age (Baudrillard [1981] 1994).

CHAPTER 3: FRAMING SOCIOLOGY AND ITS INTENTIONS

In this section, a distinction is drawn between what sociology *ought to be* and how sociology currently *appears in the early 21st century in the United States*. Sociology, generally, refers to the study of modern society. I begin by explicating the socio-historical, cultural, and political conditions that led to the necessity of a science of modern society and then position “mainstream” American sociology today in relations to the type of scholarship that resembles how the early sociologists studies the social world. I draw this distinction by using a small sample of sociologists who write about sociology as a self-reflexive practice regarding the discipline. However, before doing so, it is necessary to acknowledge the difficulty in addressing a segment of sociology as “mainstream.” What is “mainstream” and what makes a part of sociology qualified as “mainstream.” This is particularly challenging since sociology is a dynamic and frequently changing discipline in addition to being a discipline represented by a multiplicity of varying and competing perspectives. Discussions of “mainstream” sociology emerged in the 1970s as tensions between competing groups of sociologists for a decreasing amount of resources came to a head (Calhoun & VanAntwerpen 2007). There is no coincidence that this occurred during the early moments of neoliberalism. The 1960s expansion of the university brought a lot of promise for funds and jobs as the number of doctoral sociologists greatly increased. Between the 1970s and 1990s, there was not enough jobs, especially research-based tenure track positions, for the vast number of trained sociologists. The vast number of sociologists led to the growth of the discipline and the rapid expansion of American Sociological Association subfields while

at the same time leading to the normalization of a hierarchy where certain elite university and public flagship campuses received a vast majority of available funds (Calhoun and VanAntwerpen 2007). As such, two conceptualizations of “mainstream” sociology were used during this time.

Under these conditions, hierarchy was renewed and intensified, ironically making the concept of the mainstream even more significant but also making clear that it could have at least two meanings (whose distinction was implicit in the original invocations). On the one hand, “mainstream” was the “core,” the direction of the future, the heart of the discipline, to which “stars” contributed “cutting-edge” research (to mix a number of metaphors frequently mixed in departmental personnel committees). On the other hand, “mainstream” might have meant the direction in which the majority moved, the source of the waves that occasionally rocked the boat of the ASR when insurgents thought it should represent the whole field more (Calhoun & VanAntwerpen:370).

That is, “mainstream” was defined differently by those who felt they were not represented in the bureaucratic and institutionalized form of sociology and those who felt that they made up the bureaucratic and institutionalized form that represented the progress and direction of sociology.

There is no doubt that sociology became a much more entrenched bureaucracy and institutionalized within the broader government structure of the United States. The National Science Foundation established the Social Science Division in 1960, allocating \$3.5 million for research projects. In the same year, the American Sociological Association relocated to Washington DC and hired a full-time congressional lobbyist. During this time, funding from corporate foundations increased to \$41 million by 1980, and federal grants exploded from \$30 million to \$424 million (Feagin, Vera, and Ducey 2015). The consequences of this have been outlined by others and worth citing at length.

Large bureaucracies developed under the auspices of private foundations and at the federal government level to fund social science research, and these agencies helped develop large research institutes at selected universities. This governmental underwriting of research fed the growing emphasis on advance survey and statistical methods and on social scientists as research entrepreneurs. To facilitate this funding, many sociologists put of protective clothing of “hard

scientists” who, like physical scientist, accented quantitative methods of research. Apparently, a majority of the sociologists who sought the new funding from government agencies or private foundations made a conscious attempt not to research controversial social issues. The instrumental-positivism tradition became dominant, with its emphasis on advanced statistical methods, on variables, on demographic and survey techniques, and on the *unimportance* of assessing domain assumptions of using critical social theories [...] One underlying assumption of much of this research was an optimistic image of US society as relatively fair and open. [...] Large-scale federal and corporate funding brought major PhD-granting departments into prominence. Today, these powerful research departments often disproportionately control major sociological publication sources such as the *American Sociological Review*, and thus can act as gatekeepers for much sociological research and debate (Feagin, Vera, and Ducey 2015:87).

It is was this emerging and increasingly dominant mode of inquiry through productive (progress) orientated statistical analysis that, in part led Baudrillard to become a critic of sociology, especially *American* sociology. In an interview, Baudrillard says that after 1968, he “undertook a radical critique of American sociology” and that his problem is that “it is postulated within sociology that there *is* a society, that there *is* a ‘social’ which is evident, and that you need do no more than conduct quantitative studies, statistical research, etc.” (Mele & Titmarsh 1993:81). As will be discussed in the analysis of Baudrillard’s work, after May 1968, he shifted gears towards a radical critique of the systemic logic of modern society, which he thought contemporary American sociology was complicit in perpetuating. For now, I want to stress the distinctions between this bureaucratic “mainstream” sociology that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and how sociological research was conducted during the emergence of the discipline and by those sociologists who are pushed toward the edges of the discipline as they adhere to those initial principles. It is important to keep in mind that the target for “mainstream” sociology constantly changes and that the literature I am engaging in critiques this form of sociology between the 1990s and the early 2000s. It is my overall argument in this thesis that the marginality of Baudrillard can be explained in part by attempting to

explain the discrepancy between how sociology appears and what it ought to be.

Furthermore, Baudrillard will later be utilized to demonstrate, in part, how this gap exists.

The Context of Sociology and What it Ought to Do

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment emerged as particular form of social thought that “worked to combined reason with empirical research on the model of Newtonian science” (Ritzer 2010: 219). It is common to associate Newtonian science with the shift in the foundation of scientific knowledge from an authority/religion-based model to a method of systematic inquiry (scientific method) but this process was already significantly underway way in Italy, driven by the 1632 publication of *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* by Galileo which was the first time a major scientific text was published in a language widely accessible by the broader public. However, it is much more common to place sociology as rooted in the French and Scottish Enlightenment (Callinicos 2007).

The Enlightenment intellectuals established a foundation of thinking that integrated real-world observations with reason and this set the stage for sociology as a discipline to emerge. Furthermore, it is from the Enlightenment that social problems of modernity arose, and it was understanding these problems and processes that was of interest to classical sociology. In France the Enlightenment centered on individual liberty and religious tolerance. This transition from the “the divine right of kings” to “the consent of the governed” ultimately resulted in the French Revolution from which emerged Auguste Comte who formulated a *social physics* as the highest form of science (Seidman 2017). Although he was born the year after Comte’s death, Emile Durkheim

legitimized sociology in France. Durkheim utilized some of the frameworks of Comte's work by arguing social disorder produced by social change could be mediated through social reform. Furthermore, he identified sociology as the discipline that could study the external and coercive structures influencing the lives of those who live within that society. Durkheim linked social facts to individual behaviors and argued that as the collective conscience decreased, there would be an increase in social pathologies (Ritzer 2010).

In Scotland, there was a similar intellectual movement that was dubious of irrational authority and advocated that it be rejected, and human reason should flourish. The intellectual life in Scotland during the Enlightenment was significantly more advanced than elsewhere because it already had an advanced network of printing presses, libraries, and universities. Furthermore, in 1701 Scotland had become the first constitutional monarchy (Callinicos 2007). Significant figures of the Scottish Enlightenment were David Hume and Adam Smith among others. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* became a central book used by those to support a market economy. It also served as one of the dialectical tensions that Karl Marx wrote in response to. (1776 [2003]).

As a result of the Enlightenment, we can place classical social theory as emerging in the early 19th century to study the social forces and structures that resulted from the Enlightenment. In particular, the Enlightenment led to a questioning and rejection of tradition. It prioritized a faith in progress (and subsequently rationalization), a transition from feudalism to capitalism, industrialization, secularization, a rise in individualism,

among many other characteristics that we use to define our lives today (Foucault 1977; Giddens 1971). The impacts of modernity are such that there is not an aspect of our life not impacted by it. The emergence of modernity and subsequent rise in capitalism created a significant shift in the theories needed to make sense of our world. The earliest theorists of modern society tried to make sense of this transition and understand its impacts, such as income distribution, access to privileges, etc. Essentially, sociology emerged when it realized that modernization came with all of these negative consequences that jeopardized modernity. The social theorists of the 19th and early 20th century were predominantly concerned with, from a variety of perspectives, the decline of feudal society and the transformation and emergence of industrial capitalism (Vidich 1991).

Taking the time to describe the historical conditions that led to the emergence of sociology as a discipline is important because it illustrates that the original theorists of modern society were predominantly interested in attempting to “understand and directly conceive of the fundamental facts of social life in specific societies and civilizations” (Vidich 1991:519). *Sociology is fundamentally a historically embedded effort to uncover the underlying patterns and processes that orient social beings toward their social environment, all while understanding that the researcher is embedded into the social world they are studying.* From this formulation of sociology, I want to make four distinctions between what sociology *ought* to be and what it *appears* to be in the early 21st century in the United States.

1. Sociology ought to be historically embedded but appears largely to be ahistorical.

2. Sociology ought to be interested in uncovering underlying patterns and processes that shape social life, but it appears to be interested only in the surface level manifestation of those underlying processes.
3. Sociology ought to understand theory as research but appears to distinctly separate theory from research.
4. The sociologist is embedded into and a product of the social world they study but appears to present themselves as value-free.

Each of these distinctions will be briefly addressed. The aim is to only illustrate a discrepancy between what should be desired and what actually occurs in sociology today. There are other ways one could draw these distinctions and certainly not all expressions of sociology today exhibit an extreme discrepancy between what sociology ought to be and how it appears today. The objective is to put forth a frame of reference, that is necessarily abstracted from the minutiae of reality, that can serve as a way to assess Baudrillard's marginality.

One of the defining features of modern society is that it is a dynamic system, meaning that the social reality we exist in is constantly changing (Dahms 2002). As a consequence, theories of modern society are embedded in time and space and this needs to be acknowledged and addressed when one is reading and working with theories of society. Despite the dynamic nature of modern society, many of the methods that sociologists employ are "implicitly static" (Dahms 2002:288) and fail to account for and anticipate modern society as something that evolves and transforms over time in a way

the renders previous accounts of reality as solely historical. The consequences of this type of sociology are grave.

[...] sociology as the science of modern society will not live up to its purpose of revealing underlying tendencies unless sociologists are willing to ponder their pervasiveness, and the directions [of] those tendencies. Tracking change as it occurs also must not be a purpose in itself; it is a necessary precondition for assessments of apparent directions taken, in relation to the possibility of alternative trajectories of social, political, cultural, and economic development. (Dahms 2002:312).

The theories that represent the emergence of sociology were attempts to understand the *changes* taking place in the social world *as the individual theorists encountered them*.

Each theorist understood that they were historically embedded as they were trying to explain what they encountered. “Social theory has been a continuous attempt to find patterns and meanings that might help clarify, interpret, order, and understand the maze of events which from the perception from the laymen would otherwise be incomprehensible” (Vidich 1991: 521). The historical embeddedness of these theories creates complications when applying them to contemporary social phenomenon. By uncritically adopting former theories, it becomes difficult to grasp how contemporary modern society is *different* from the time when the theory was originally developed. As such, formalized “theory testing” is very limiting in the extent to which sociology can explain developments in the social world.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of an ahistorical sociology is that consequences that stem from neglecting how the researcher, and institution of sociology is submerged in time and space. If the purpose of modern society as a dynamic system is to maintain order to the extent necessary continue functioning, then it is essential to understand the implications this has for the state of sociology. It is necessary to

acknowledge that there is a consistency between the way society is structured and the way our individual identities are structured. By ignoring the socio-historical context the sociologist is embedded in, the sociologist does not address “the issue of whether and how prevailing norms and values are reconcilable with societal transformations currently occurring, approaches in each discipline follow a trajectory of “progress” according to priorities that mostly tend to be the function of agendas and designs carried over from the discipline’s very own past (Dahms 2008:11-12). Rather than understanding underlying logics and processes, sociologists are content with describing the manifestation of these processes in the form of surface level phenomenon. In this way, contemporary sociology often provides only a mirror reflection of modern society rather than engage in the logics that drive the surface processes. When studying a particular phenomenon, it is necessary to ask what is being observed when studying said phenomenon but also the sociologist must ask what any observation *fails* to observe (Luhmann 1994). The point here is that there is a logic guiding modern society and no one from within modern society is inherently free from adhering to and being complicit with that logic. As such, sociology must be actively aware that this is the case and continuously exercise reflexivity and refuse to allow sociological research to be structured in accordance to those totalizing logics.

Significant in the understand of sociology put forward was the lack of separation between theory and research. The theories that we associate with classical social theorist, such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, are the generalization that they came to as a consequence of their research. In the process of studying their social world and individual experiences,

classical social theorists developed hypotheses that were guided by their investigation into substantive problems. The formulation of successive hypotheses driven by specific substantive problems were ultimately formulated into a world view. In this way, the theory *was* the research. “The validity of such theory and research is not measurable by any scientific method. We accept its validity if the interpretation and analysis ring true to us as an explanation of the operations of a social order (Vidich 1991:520). Only after the fact did later sociologist separate theory from methods and research. This mode of studying the social world is opposed to the contemporary emphasis on “theory-driven” research where the theory a researcher chooses to utilize is selected prior to hypothesis formation and this seeks what data is used and what methods are to be applied. The research is then assessed on the validity and consistency between the theory, data, and methods, and not on studying the social world *directly*. This is the dominant mode of conducting sociological research today and how research gets presented in Intro to Sociology and Research Methods texts. In one of the most popular sociology textbooks, *Introduction to Sociology* (Giddens et. al 2014), the theory and methods chapters are separated. The methods chapter begins with stating the sociology is “a science unlike the natural science” (p. 30) but upon further reading it becomes clear that the only reason sociology is unlike the natural science is because “the social scientists more so than the natural scientists, there is more of an acknowledgement that the investigator is a crucial part of the world she studies, and cannot necessarily divorce herself from it” (p. 31). Other than this, the process by which sociologist study world is remarkably similar to that of the natural science. The components of the research process for Giddens et. all (2014)

is (1) defining the research problem, (2) reviewing the literature, (3) formulating a hypothesis, (4) selecting a research design, (5) carrying out the research, (6) interpreting the results, and (7) reporting the research findings (p. 31-32). This process is considered to be a considerable advancement beyond the “armchair speculation” (p. 33) of the classical social theorists. What sociology desperately needed was not “theoretical speculation” but “facts and data” (p. 33). This natural scientific inspiration for research extends well beyond introductory books and into the standard structure of academic journal articles where theory is presented in the background or literature review section and the methods and “real” data are presented in entirely separate section. There is little room in the way that academic research is structured to allow for theory as a mode of analysis and method of research. This problem with the contemporary relationship between theory and methods goes beyond just semantic. The power of sociology lies in telling about the social world. The essence of sociology lies in an interpretative and creative analysis that is irreducible to a formula such as the natural scientific method. “This is why sociology has been referred to not as a scientific method, but as a form of ‘imagination’ (C. Wright Mills), as a ‘form of consciousness’ (Peter Berger) or even as an ‘art form’ (Robert Nisbet)” (Vidich 1991:522). Furthermore, the separation of theory and methods can lead to treating the conditions of whatever theory as being utilized as being static, where the method is used to assess the accuracy of the theory. However, when the “theory” is utilized to select the method and data, rather than engaging with social reality, the researcher is reflecting the very structuring of society itself. In this way, sociological research is an expression of modern society rather than seeking to illuminate

it's guiding processes. Research is "solved" when reality conforms to a preconceived theory (Vidich 1991). The utilization of theory as a background a "framing device" deduces the real world without necessarily requiring the researcher to engage the real world directly.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Prior to attempting to engage in an “analysis” of Baudrillard’s thought for the sake of understanding what American sociology might be able to glean from his ideas, it is necessary to first cover briefly how one might want to approach reading Baudrillard and where one might want to start. Baudrillard is often thought of being a predominant writer of books and newspaper articles. Most of his “academic” works came in the form of over a dozen books. However, to think of Baudrillard as a writer of books is to misunderstand the nature of his work and how one might attempt to engage with it. Yes, Baudrillard produced a lot of books but in these books, there were no chapters but rather essays. As Adorno (1984) reminds us, the essay is a form of writing that exists between science and art.

Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done. The essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, *as creatio ex nihilo* (p. 152).

It is also important to note that the posthumous publications of his essays (and conference papers) were compiled by editors and translators, not Baudrillard. It is never suggested in translator comments if these essays were finalized by Baudrillard and ready for publication or if the compiled essays were intended to go together and that Baudrillard had not intended other essays to also be included.

It is also important to note where one might start with reading Baudrillard. Having been a productive scholar, Baudrillard published continuously over his nearly 40-year academic career. His ideas certainly evolved over time and he pushed some ideas further and decided to drop some from his analysis. So where exactly does one start with reading

Baudrillard? There are three sensible places that one may choose to jump into Baudrillard's thought.

(1) *Simulacra and Simulation* ([1981] 1994): *Simulacra and Simulation* is perhaps the most common entry point into Baudrillard's thought (and often the only exposure to Baudrillard for many who are required to read him). The concepts of *simulacrum* and *simulation* are perhaps the most famous and remembered of Baudrillard's contributions. This is likely due to the book being shown in the Wachowski's cult classic 1999 film, *The Matrix*. Additionally, Baudrillard became a popular icon in the art world with his 1983 English publication *Simulations*. A significant amount of contemporary analysis utilizing Baudrillard in any substantial way limits the discussion of him to *simulations* and the *simulacrum*. Indeed, an understanding of *simulation* is essential to an understanding of Baudrillard but limiting the discussion to just his texts on *simulation* obscures how the term is incorporated into a broader theory of social change. Furthermore, using these texts as a starting point is the equivalent of jumping directly into the middle of a social theory which, in my experience, easily leads to confusion or a misunderstanding in the broader guiding objective. In the grand scheme of Baudrillard, *simulation* is only the mechanism through which "social change" occurs and *simulacrum* is the ultimate manifestation of *simulation*.

(2) *Symbolic Exchange and Death* ([1976] 1993): *Symbolic Exchange and Death* has been described as Baudrillard's "most important book" and the "scaffolding" for

everything that came after (Gane 1993:VIII)). In the aftermath of the failed revolutions in the 1960s, and especially May 1968 in France, Baudrillard and others began to distance themselves from Marxist orientated analyses. Up until 1972, Baudrillard worked within a clearly identifiable Marxist framework. Baudrillard began to distance himself with his 1973 polemic against Marx, *The Mirror of Production*. The following volume, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, then put forth more explicitly Baudrillard's post-Marxist theoretical agenda.

(3) *The Ecstasy of Communication* ([1987] 2007). *The Ecstasy of Communication* is Baudrillard's habilitation (*Habilitation a Diriger des Recherches*) which is the highest academic qualification in France. The habilitation is meant to be a text that summarizes the intellectual work of an academic from when they obtained their PhD. *The Ecstasy of Communication* does summarize major themes of Baudrillard's earliest work but then indicated the direction he plans to go next. It is in this text where we first see Baudrillard explicitly explore the potential ramifications of the code, ceaseless communication and information. This intuitive assessment predates mainstream use of the cell phone and internet.¹⁰ *The Ecstasy of Communication* provides a glimpse at Baudrillard's evolution in thinking over time and provides an indication of where he is going to go. However, in *Ecstasy of Communication* Baudrillard shows more explicitly the

¹⁰ January 1, 1983 is considered the official birthdate of the internet. The "world wide web" as we know it, went live in 1991. In 1983, Motorola first started releasing a series of cellular phones called DynaTec. However, these phones were incredibly expensive, selling in 1984 for \$3,995 (\$9,634) in 2018. While *Ecstasy of Communication* was published in France in 1987, it is likely that Baudrillard wrote his habilitation near the end of the 1970s, early 1980s.

influence of psychoanalysis and German materialism on his thought, making it more difficult for those unfamiliar with those traditions to understand.

Despite these three legitimate and sensical entry points into Baudrillard's thought, I want to begin with an infrequently cited article, *Modernity* ([1985] 1987). In this essay, Baudrillard outlines his understanding of what Modernity is and how Modernity emerged. In the context of the potential for a sociological contribution from and the utility of Baudrillard to sociology, understanding how Baudrillard situates the emergence of Modernity, which gave rise to the necessity of a "science" such as sociology as the study of *modern* society, is necessary. From his outlining of Modernity, it is clear to see the presences of key concepts that structure a uniquely modern moment, and how those concepts manifest in his overall *oeuvre*. In choosing to start with his essay on Modernity to explicate the theoretical underpinnings of his *oeuvre*, it is clear that there are more crucial theoretical concepts, such as *symbolic exchange* and *reversibility*, that occupy central spaces in Baudrillard thought. The intention here is to not outline the entirety of Baudrillard's theory but rather to isolate and explicate a couple central concepts of his thought that are absent in mainstream contemporary sociology and how these concepts complicate the appearance of sociology in the United States today.

Baudrillard on Modernity

To Baudrillard ([1985] 1987), Modernity is "neither a sociological concept, nor a political concept, nor exactly a historical concept" (p. 63) Rather:

"It is a characteristic mode of civilization, which opposes itself to tradition, that is to say, to all other anterior or traditional cultures: confronting the geographic and symbolic diversity of the latter, modernity imposes itself throughout the world as a homogeneous unity, irradiating from the Occident" (p. 63).

Baudrillard is indicating a number of things with this statement. First, Modernity is not an *analytical concept*. As such, “there can be no laws of modernity [...] only traits” (p. 63). Furthermore, there is no theory of Modernity but “only a logic of modernity and an ideology” (p. 63). Baudrillard is also suggesting that Modernity is in some ways no different than Tradition in that it is both myth and reality.

[Modernity] acts as an ideational force and principle ideology, sublimating the contradictions of history in the effects of civilization. *It makes crisis a value*, a contradictory morality. Thus, as an idea in which a whole civilization recognizes itself, modernity assumes a regulatory cultural function and thereby surreptitiously rejoins tradition (p. 64, emphasis in original).

The most truncated definition of Modernity that can be gleaned from Baudrillard’s writing is that it is a “historical and polemic structure of change and of crisis” (p. 64) that emerged starting in 16th century Europe and “acquires its full meaning in the 19th century” (p. 64). The genesis of Modernity lies earliest in the cultural transformations following the Dark Ages: the invention of printing, Galileo’s discoveries, and Renaissance humanism. Furthermore, Modernity was ushered in by the Reformation and its counterpart, the Council of Trent. To Baudrillard the cultural transformations ushered in by Modernity are important as the dominant mode of civilization “becomes concrete at the level of custom, style of life, and the quotidian” (p. 63). Beyond the commonly understood reality of Modernity as ushering in rational, scientific, and political changes, Modernity is also “the play of signs, customs, and cultures which translates these structural changes at the level of ritual and social habitus”¹¹ (p. 65).

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the philosophical tenants of individualistic and modern rational thought became entrenched. Furthermore, there was the rise of the

¹¹ With the mention of habitus, we see the influence of Bourdieu (a committee member for Baudrillard’s dissertation).

political structures that became characteristic of modernity, such as a centralized state and new administrative techniques. Applied technology emerged as a consequence of the foundation of physical and natural science. These new scientific endeavors, in addition to the arts, became increasingly secularized. At this point Modernity has yet to become a way of life but has become linked to the of progress. Baudrillard identifies this as the “liberal bourgeois tonality” that ideologically marks Modernity.

With the revolutions of the late 18th century, the world saw the ushering in of the “modern, centralized, and democratic bourgeois State, that nation with its constitutional system, in political and bureaucratic organization” (p. 65). It was during the following century that the continual progress of science developed the “rational division of industrial world” and introduced dimensions of “permanent change, of destruction of customs and traditional culture” into the social world (p. 65). Modernity became fully entrenched following massive urban concentration and “the gigantic development of the means of communication and information” (p. 65). As such, Modernity came into full existence

as a social practice and way of life articulated on change and innovation - but also on anxiety, instability, continual mobilization, shifting subjectivity, tension, crisis - and as an ideal representation or mythology (p. 65-66).

To Baudrillard, it was with the advent of the term Modernity, by Baudelaire in 1850, that marks the moment when modern society “realizes itself as such [and begins to] think itself in terms of modernity” (p. 65). It is at this moment where Modernity “becomes a transcendent value, a cultural model, a morality - a myth of reference present everywhere, and concealing in part the historical structures and contradictions which gave birth to it” (p. 66).

Baudrillard outlines four logics of Modernity: (1) techno-scientific, (2) political, (3) psychological, and (4) temporal. The techno-scientific logic refers to the incredible expansion of scientific, rational, and technical thought that led to the development of the modern means of production and it is regulated and managed. Modernity is the era of productivity, which Baudrillard defines as “an intensification of human labor and of human domination over nature, both reduced to the status of productive forces and to the schemas of efficacy and maximal output” (p. 66). In the mid-to-late 20th century, Baudrillard (along with others) questioned whether or not production had been supplanted by consumption. Not necessarily a revolution regarding the dominance of production, there had at the least been a signification “mutation” (p. 66) in modern society where we have passed “from a civilization of work and progress to a civilization of consumption and leisure” (p. 66). However, the change is not radical because it “does not change the productivity finality, the chronometric cutting up of time, the forward-looking and operational imperatives which remain the fundamental coordinates of the modern ethic of the productive society” (p. 66).

The political logic of Modernity is the “abstract transcendence of the State, under the sign of the Constitution, and the formal status of the individual, under the sign of private property” (p. 66). Political systems are no longer defined by as an “integrated hierarchy of personal relations” (p. 67). Baudrillard suggests that the abstract centralized State might be “the essential dimension” of modernity. As Modernity has become more fully entrenched, the bureaucratic State exhibits a larger hegemony over modern life. All fields become an extension of political economy which “invests [in] all sectors of life,

mobilizing them to its own advantage, rationalizing them in its image” (p. 66). However, Baudrillard warns that the “bureaucratic saturation of social and individual life” (p. 66) are becoming so entrenched that it risks the stability of the hegemonic constraint of the state.

The psychological logic of Modernity is the emergence of the autonomous and rational individual that is devoid of the “magic, religious, symbolic consensus of traditional (communal) society” (p. 67). The emergence and intensification of the individual has made people increasingly likely to be drawn into the “network of media, organizations, and institutions, which give rise to his modern alienation, abstraction, loss of identity in work and leisure, incommunicability, etc., which a whole system of personalization through objects and signs is intended to compensate” (p. 67).

The temporal logic of Modernity refers to the specific mode of temporality that came into existence as a consequence of Modernity. This historical specific temporality is defined by three dimensions: chronometric, linear, and historic. The *chronometric* dimension refers to “time, which is measured, and by which one measures ones activities” (p. 67). It belongs to the “imperative of productivity” and also “regulates ‘free’ time and leisure” (p. 67). The *linear* dimension refers to the absence of any cyclical notion of time in Modernity. Central to the narrative of progress is a past-present-future timeline that consists of a “supposed origin and end” (p. 67). The *historic* dimension refers to how “history has become the dominant instance of modernity” (p. 67). To Baudrillard, the manifestation of a new temporality is of great importance. The implications he draws from this are worth citing at length.

As measurable, irreversible, chronometric succession or dialectical becoming, modernity has secreted an entirely new temporality. This is a crucial feature of modernity - an image of its contradictions. But at the interior of this time, which is indefinite, and no longer knows any eternity, one thing distinguishes modernity: it always wants to be 'contemporary,' i.e. ., it seeks global simultaneity. After first privileging the dimension of progress and the future, it seems to confound itself more and more today with the present, the immediate, the everyday – the reverse, pure and simple, of historical duration [durée] (p. 66-67).

Another key component of Modernity to Baudrillard is that it is not dialectical but paradoxical. Modernity is observed as “destruction and change, but also ambiguity, compromise, [and] amalgamation” (p. 70). This is most observable for Baudrillard when looking at how modernization and colonialization impacts the Global South.

Modernization, the utilization of Modernity as ideology to justify colonialization projects, entails destroying traditional ways of life, systems of power, and understandings of the world in favor of “modern” institutions. In the absence of political and industrial revolutions it is often the mass media and the ideological justifications of Modernity that are first invested in the Global South. Baudrillard notes, however that the adverse side of this is that “modernity has its own characteristic political repercussion: it accelerates the destruction of the indigenous way of life and precipitates social demands for change” (p. 69). To Baudrillard, “traditional systems offer the strongest resistance to change and the modern structures intertwine with these forces through the most curious compromises” (p. 68-69). Modernity emerges in context of a resurgence of tradition. Baudrillard’s example for this is how Algerian peasants “reactivated traditional political mechanisms as a demand for progress, in order to protest the lagging spread [...] of the instruments and signs of modernity” (p. 72). The significance of this to Baudrillard is that Modernity does not emerge as a dialectic of rupture and scholars must utilize an approach that recognizes Modernity as partially a dynamic of amalgamation. The dialectics of rupture

are partially rooted in Modernity as an ideological process when in reality are both the “locus of emergence of factors or rupture and as a compromise solution with respect to factors of order and tradition” (p. 70). In fact, one could suggest that the mobility modernity implies at all levels (social, geographic, professional, etc.) “only defines *the portion of change tolerable to the system*, without essentially changing it” (p. 70). The actual logics that took hold which describe Modernity are objective historical factors of modernity but do not constitute modernity in themselves. Rather, Modernity, “is the denial of these structural changes, at least as their reinterpretation in terms of cultural style, mentality, way of life, everydayness” (p. 71). There is nothing inherent about science in technologies that are by themselves modern, but rather the *effects* of them are modern. Modernity is founded on the historic emergence of science but “lives only at the level of the *myth* of science” (p. 71). While Modernity did usher in certain changes, the language of Modernity refers to how we ideologically justify the present moment. Utilizing the language of Modernity in sociological analysis can be problematic because it always refers to the ideological justification of a certain set of logics that emerged that pushed human society into a different mode of existence. To Baudrillard, Modernity is not rationality nor individual autonomy but those are rather the “*reactionary* exaltation of a subjectivity threatened everywhere by the homogenization of social life” (p. 71). Modernity is not a “dialectic of history” but rather the “permanent play of the present moment” (p. 71). Modernity hinges on revolution (industrial, technological, political, etc.) but is not a revolution. The “revolutions” of Modernity are a “permanent revolution of *forms*, in the *play* of change” (p. 71), but the foundational structuring logic of modern

society remains. While Modernity is conceived as a system rooted in a “revolutionary” spirit, it seeks revolution and change only to the extent necessary to create a world in its image.

Unpacking Baudrillard

In approaching Baudrillard sociologically through his essay on Modernity, it is clear that there are similarities and a degree of compatibility between what Baudrillard articulates as the emergence and characteristics of Modernity and standard narratives that one finds in sociology textbooks, journal articles, monographs, etc. To an anecdotal extent this demonstrates that Baudrillard is to some degree compatible with how sociology approaches studying the social world. However, similarities and compatibility aside, there are some important differences where Baudrillard deviates from standard depictions of Modernity. Palpable throughout Baudrillard’s essay is a tension between traditional and modern societies rather than a progressive succession of the former by the latter. This tension is rooted in a distinction made by Baudrillard throughout of traditional societies being organized around the symbolic and nonlinearity where modern societies are organized around signs and linearity. This tension is felt throughout the entirety of Baudrillard work but only becomes formalized as a theoretical agenda with the publication of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* ([1976] 1993). Even in his earliest work, *The System of Objects* ([1968] 2005) and *The Consumer Society* ([1970] 1998), he is engaged explicitly with one side of this tension: semiotic exchange.¹² My objective is not to show how this tension between symbolic exchange and semiotic exchange is central

¹² In these earliest works, he also dealt with symbolic exchange but in much less detail.

throughout Baudrillard thought but rather how this tension illuminates an alternative set of implications for sociology that are currently not being addressed.

The Historical Context of Baudrillard

The historical context of Baudrillard's writing on symbolic exchange is important. It was published in 1976 and was part of a movement away from traditional Marxist analysis. In the wake of the socially and politically failed 1968 revolution, French theorists began to rethink the relationship between social forces, capitalism, and even revolution itself. In this way, May of 1968 was not a failure but provided the impetus for French theorists to go beyond Marx. It was considered by many to be dubious at best and impossible at worst to instill consciousness in the workers anymore because the workers were not organized in such a way that class could persevere. This was in part the consequence of a series of economic changes that took place in the 1960s. Historically, factory labor was the central location for organizing class struggle that ultimately sought a proletarian revolution. However, with the advent of organizational strategies and technologies that supplanted large swaths of factory labor, traditional modes of struggle and organizing evaporated. Italian scholars referred at the time to this mutation of capitalism as post-Fordism. Baudrillard ([1976] 1993) referred to it as "the end of production" (p. 8). The transition from a period (Fordism) defined by the rationalization of relations of production to one defined by a total transformation in relations of production was marked by several characteristics that challenged the traditional Marxist narrative. Post-Fordism is marked by the replacement of living work by the machine (notably the assembly line). Additionally, a reversal occurred where workers who were

once excluded from society in the factory transitioned into a social environment where workers were freed from the factory, but the entire society became a social factory. This transition has been identified as the emergence of “consumer society” ([1970] 1998). This transition represents a shift in how the bulk of surplus value is extracted. It is no longer extracted predominately from workers themselves in a relation of production but rather from society at-large where workers are “positively” exploited by being turned into happy consumers. All of this was accompanied by an explosion in media culture. There was tension in social theory at the time regarding the liberating potential of the media. Baudrillard sided with the Situationist (see Debord ([1967] 1983) that one-way communication (for example, from a television to a consumer) did not allow any type of response so therefore it forbid any real communication. However, Baudrillard did not think one could reclaim one’s consciousness because it was impossible to instill consciousness into workers anymore (Baudrillard [1972] 2019:178-188). So rather than try to fight for the recovery of some kind of collective consciousness, as the Situationists did, Baudrillard opted to attack the logic of the system.

The Systemic Logic in Baudrillard

Baudrillard’s understanding of the logic of the system is defined by the displacement and erosion of symbolic exchange by semiotic exchange, despite symbolic exchange never truly going away. Through this erosion, a reversal takes place. In symbolic exchange, “what cannot be symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for the group” ([1976] 1993:131) whereas, in semiotic exchange (which defines Modernity), “everything which is symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for

the dominant order” ([1976] 1993:188). The *symbolic* is first defined by Baudrillard ([1976] 1993) as “neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a ‘structure’, but an act of exchange and *a social relation which puts an end to the real* which resolves the real, and at the same time, puts, an end to the opposition between the real and imaginary” (p. 133). There are several important implications in this definition. First, the symbolic is both an action and a *form* of exchange, it is an *act* of exchange and an act of *exchange*. Above all, the symbolic is a *social relation* which challenges a conception of reality and imaginary as being oppositional to one another. Reality in this instance refers not to the material world but rather a *conceptual system*. In Baudrillard’s words:

[R]eality is but a concept, or a principle, and by reality I mean the whole system of values connected with this principle. The Real as such implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, continuity and rationality. No real without these elements, without an objective configuration of discourse. And its disappearing is the dislocation of this whole constellation (Baudrillard 2000:63).

Baudrillard’s understanding of symbolic exchange comes from his reading and studying of pre-modern societies. While there is great variation across these societies, they largely institutionalized various forms of exchange rooted in rituals and mythology that had a drastically different value structure than what we assume as “value” in “reality” under capitalism. In capitalist Modernity, value “has a unidirectional sense, whereas it passes from one point to another according to a system of equivalence” (Baudrillard [2000] 2003:15). In Modernity, commodities are evaluated in terms of “how much is it worth” and we do so on the basis of *oppositions*: good and evil, beautiful and ugly, etc. Modern society is concerned with the unidirectional (linear) flow of positive value. “From the outset, use-value and exchange-value – and the dialectic established between the two – appeared to me to be a rational construction that postulates the

possibility of balancing out value, of finding a general equivalent for it which is capable of exhausting meanings and accounting for an exchange” (Baudrillard [2000] 2003:9). This structural understanding of value is characteristic of semiotic exchange. Baudrillard ([1972] 2019) critique is largely directed at Althusserian structural Marxism that posits ideology as “an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.), which expresses and masks the contradictions at the ‘base’” (p. 146). Rather, to Baudrillard ([1972] 2019), “ideology is actually *that very form* that traverses both the production of signs and material production” (p. 146). What Baudrillard is suggesting is that any distinction between the economic and ideological is inherently artificial and does not address the ideological *form*, but only content. As such, consumption in the present moment is defined as “*the state where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture) are produced as commodities*” (Baudrillard [1972] 2019:151). In the post-Fordist era, the commodity has become fused with the commodity-sign form. As such, the meaning of commodities had fundamentally changed.

Baudrillard’s interest in the object lied not in the actual material object but rather how the objects spoke to one another in a system of signs. Baudrillard’s position in response to what had been post-Fordism is that consumption was a much more important component of political economy than it had been in the past. What had emerged is a pattern of consumption where consumers were much less interested in the material objects but what the object represented in relation to other objects. As such, to Baudrillard ([2000] 2003), objects “referred to a world less real than the apparent omnipotence of consumption and

profit might have led us to believe” (p. 3). As such, any analysis of political economy must take place at the abstracted level of signs. The consequence of this is that Marx’s analysis of the commodity form needs to be pushed further. Whereas Marx contrasted use-value with exchange-value, Baudrillard suggests that it really is symbolic exchange that should be contrasted with commodity exchange ([1976] 1993).

Through the breakdown of symbolic relationships, a semiotic sign is born. Baudrillard’s concern is that our entire way of life today consists of the systematic manipulation and consumption of signs and that “symbolic exchange is no longer the organizing principle of modernity society” (Baudrillard [1976] 1993:1). In other words, what is significant to Baudrillard is that value in Modernity is radically different from previous conceptions of value which were based on reciprocity and reversibility. Symbolic exchange, for Baudrillard, is where exchange is bound to and actualized in human activity, mediating, a real relationship or a directly experienced situation. We can think of this in relation to Durkheim’s sacred and Marcel Mauss’s ([1950] 1990) gift exchange. For Durkheim ([1915] 1965), the celebration of the sacred results in the raising of the individual above himself which leads to a powerful “state of effervescence. For Mauss, gift giving was a system of practices, based on the group, the cycle, obligation, and loss that predates capitalism. This gift giving encompassed and drew together the entire social, cultural, and religious life in a system of total benefits that was the primary determinant of the society. The gift has a dual character of positive communication and agonistic confrontation. It is based on a challenge to the other that necessitates a personal response, staking one’s own humanity in a cyclical struggle for recognition and

supremacy. Baudrillard ([2000] 2003) defines symbolic exchange later in his life as the “the strategic site where all the modalities of value flow together towards what I would term a blind zone, in which everything is called into question again” (p. 15). Baudrillard utilizes this definition to illustrate that symbolic exchange should be conceived of starkly against commodity exchange. Acknowledging that it is perhaps dubbed utopian, it “has been a living concept in many other culture” ([2000] 2003:15) and Baudrillard even suggests that it remains, perhaps, at the foundation of Modernity.

And indeed, isn't everything always decided at the level of a symbolic exchange – that is to say, at a level that goes far beyond the rational commerce of things or bodies as we practice it today? In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, I would be quite willing to believe that there has never been any economy in the rational scientific sense in which we understand it, that symbolic exchange has always been at the radical base of things, and that it is on that level that things are decided (p. 17).

To Baudrillard, it is not about a return to “traditional” or pre-modern ways of life but rather that we live in an era defined by a radically different set of myths (an irreversible, linear system) and treat this system as “real” thus justifying the denial of an alternative understanding of how the exchange can and does function. We exist, universally, in exchange whether it be commodity or symbolic exchange. In the economic system in which we exist, value is not exchangeable. Where is value excluded? What is positive is on the side of life, what is negative is on the side of death. Death is afforded no meaning nor value. Life would be better without death! However, to Baudrillard, life and death are characterized by *reversibility*, not opposition. The notion of reversibility challenges the legitimacy of value. Enlightenment downplayed reversion, something that has occupied western thought for a long time. To Baudrillard ([2004] 2005), “reversibility is the fundamental rule” (p. 41). Reversibility functions, in part, as Baudrillard’s response to linear notions of time and progress in modernity and reflect, in part, the social relations

societies defined by symbolic exchange. To Baudrillard, reversibility refers to how systems have a built-in ability to undermine themselves and oscillate between the values that Modernity treats as oppositional (for example, dis-order rather than order/disorder). As such, systems are always at the risk of undermining themselves by their very functioning. At the foundation of this dualism is good and evil. To Baudrillard ([2000] 2003), we position them against each other dialectically in such a way that “morality is possible – that is to say, in such a way that we can opt for the one or the other” (p. 82). For example, doctors create antibiotics that lead to more dangerous and resistant disease. Baudrillard describes how the United States rose to global power on the image of its superiority and it was the images (Abu Ghraib) that called out the contradictory nature of how the United States failed its simulated promise to bring democracy and peace to the Middle East. (Baudrillard 2005). What reversibility demonstrates is the Modern myth of time, production, and history. Reversibility also complicates the relationship between cause and effect because in a linear, rational, and Modernity-based system, “strategies should be clear, based on a linearity of causes and effects.” However in a much more randomized and chaotic university “one can know where the effects of the effects will end” (Baudrillard [2000] 2003:34). For example, Baudrillard ([2000] 2003) discusses a judge who rules against a prevalent tendency toward corruption in business or campaign finance. Such behavior should be condemned, and the judge condemns it. A judge condemning a political candidate for violating an oath of office is of the same degree. However, by helping build the image of a “clean” America, America “benefits from an enhanced moral power to exploit the rest of the world” (p. 34). As such, “it is only

superficially that we can read the action of the judges as opposed conflictually to the political class. In a way, they are, rather, the generators of its legitimacy – even though the problem or its corruption is far from being resolved” (p. 34). Is it even possible to fully eliminate corruption? Is it preferable to take money that would go to funding arms deals to reduce world poverty? To Baudrillard we should not draw a “hasty conclusion” since “the money being taken out of the commodity circuit, it ‘could’ be redirected [toward having] a country disappears beneath a blanket of concrete” (p. 35). Is such a trade-off preferable from the perspective of “good” or “evil”? Less important is the answer than realizing that our hands are somewhat tied when trying to call something totally good or evil. “This, of course, is a profoundly disastrous – and entirely uncomfortable – situation for the rational mind” (p. 35). To a certain degree we have to accept and play with both. In the Judeo-Christian ethic of Modernity, the good and its opposite, evil – only one should be sought. In Baudrillard’s analysis, both are fundamental and not inherent positive or negative and we should approach them with a degree of ambivalence. The consequences of this for analysis are grave because

“there is nothing to show we really have that choice, on account of a perverse reversibility which means that, most of the time, all attempts to do good produce evil in the medium or long term. And, indeed, the opposite exists where evil leads to good. So, there are totally contingent, totally fluctuating effects of good and evil, to the point where it is illusory to consider the two principles separately and think there is a possible choice between them based on some kind of moral reason” (Baudrillard [2000] 2003:86).

Conclusion: Baudrillard and American Sociology

This thesis sought to assess the utility of Jean Baudrillard to American sociology in the context of his neglect. Baudrillard is neglected, in part, by the fact that his theories force the mainstream of American sociology to reconsider the way they study (post)modern society. That is, Baudrillard is neglected because he seeks to illuminate that which is

more comfortable remaining hidden. However, to conduct “comfortable” analysis is not what sociology is intended. To reiterate the earlier distinctions between what American sociology “ought” to and how American sociology “appears” it is clear that Baudrillard occupies the aspirational side of sociological analysis. The distinctions are:

1. Sociology ought to be historically embedded but appears largely to be ahistorical.
2. Sociology ought to be interested in uncovering underlying patterns and processes that shape social life, but it appears to be interested only in the surface level manifestation of those underlying processes.
3. Sociology ought to understand theory as research but appears to distinctly separate theory from research.
4. The sociologist is embedded into and a product of the social world they study but appears to present themselves as value-free.

Baudrillard is a largely historically-rooted intellectual. His theoretical body responded to major transitions taking place. When the tenets traditional Marxism came into question with the emergence of a new mutation of capitalism, Baudrillard responded by reformulating his earlier work (and refuting some of it) and advancing new ideas. While he does not buy into metanarrative, he maintains that there are underlying logics that drive the process of (post)Modernity. To Baudrillard, those underlying logics are so crucial that they distort the surface level reality that manifests from those underlying logics. Furthermore, Baudrillard did not segment theory from research but rather theorizing the (post)modern world and pushing arguments to the extreme is closely

intertwined as his research. As such, one cannot really take concepts from Baudrillard and apply to them to individual case studies because Baudrillard, to a much greater extent, exhibits theory as analysis and research and it entails a particular way of thinking about the social world that cannot be segmented off. Furthermore, the reality of value-free social science research, to Baudrillard, could not be further from the truth. Rather, value permeates everything, and it is often an ideologically justifying value. Value is universal and the sociologist must understand not only that, but that value should be approached with ambivalence. Baudrillard raises grave implications for American sociology. When we write journal articles or grant applications, we are often required or at least expected to justify the project by listing the research's "broader impacts" or "policy implications." This language is usually laden with positive value toward changing the world for the better. It should be clear from the above discussion that policy implications should never be assumed, nor broader impacts be taken for granted as positive. There is a liberal-democratic ideology that permeates American sociology and obscures part of the reality that sociologist must realize. Baudrillard is neglected in American sociology for the very reason that illuminated the obscured. What gave raise to Baudrillard is, in part, a scholar willing to reflect critically on the world in which he was living in and writing about during a time of transformation. Such critical reflection on our social world is necessary if sociologists are to come to terms with the logics that seek to enslave us. Society appears to be on the brink of such another shift. Increasingly, scholars are identifying a new age of capitalism – "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2019) and/or "digital capitalism" (Fuchs 2019). To take *surveillance capitalism*, it is defined as:

1. A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales; 2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification; 3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; 4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy; 5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth; 6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy; 7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty; 8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty (Zuboff 2019:VIII)

This is the challenge that faces contemporary American sociology -- to understand a world and a logic that seeks to make the world in its' interest, in an increasingly complicated and discreet way. This is the reversibility that Baudrillard talked about – the oscillation between good and evil. The internet, digital media, and world wide web that opened the doors to global communication and knowledges has unleashed its hideous “other,” the algorithm. The use of algorithmic technology to manipulate and reconstruct the way people think and behave is not new with the election of Donald Trump. Rather, it has existed under the radar for over two decades and the election only shined a “spotlight on these settled practices to which the world had already become accustomed” (Zuboff 2019:510). The continued shift of sociology methodologically is totally in-line with the systemic logic of surveillance capitalism. The rise of big-data and computational analysis when accompanied with making data publicly available plays directly into the feeding of these complex predictive algorithms. Rather than critique this transition, sociology is *trending* toward embracing it – evident in titles such as “Facing Big Data: Making Sociology Relevant” (Mutzel 2015; see also Carruthers and Uzzi 2000; McFarland, Lewis, & Goldberg 2015). I am not suggesting that sociology should abandon big data but rather what is needed is to engage in a more serious critique of it. While some

sociologists are calling for “de-emphasizing theory-driven modeling” because “so many of the Big Data techniques like machine learning [...] are not designed for theory-drive modeling” (Bohon 2018:327) others must issue an alternative call for an increase in theory as research because only then might we be able to begin to fully understand the ramification of these techniques and what seems like a mutation in capitalism. While I am not suggesting that Baudrillard is the only theorist or best theory to utilize in engaging with the future, we can learn from the history of Baudrillard how we might go about it.

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