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Jean Baudrillard, *The Divine Left: A Chronicle of the Years 1977-1984*. Translation by David L. Sweet. Los Angeles. Semiotext[e], 2014. 151 pp. \$15.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-58435-129-0.

Review by Paul Hegarty, University College Cork.

Thirty years ago, Jean Baudrillard compiled a series of essays he had written on the state of the Left in France under the title of *La Gauche divine* (Grasset). For those who have taken an analytical interest in Baudrillard's oeuvre, this book has mostly only had peripheral status, and to others it has remained mysterious. Its appearance in English is to be welcomed as redressing a serious gap in the knowledge of that work for the non-French speaker. However, there is no mystery as to why this unloved (or only secretly cherished) volume remained enclosed in its original language. It is very specific in what it addresses, and this subject matter dated quickly. Baudrillard deals with the ways in which the French Socialist Party (PS) and French Communist Party (PCF, but annoyingly rendered as C. P. in *The Divine Left*) were exploring an accommodation with capitalism, i.e., how to move from a position against or outside, to governing. Given that the last remnant of belief in the utopian project led from Moscow and delivered through centralized control of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was floating in tatters only four years later, the book was quickly sidelined. In fact, at the time of publication, new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was already leading the way into a different Russian future with his policies of openness (*glasnost*) and restructuring (*perestroika*). Even the reading of socialism as something on the outside of liberal democracy and capitalism seemed peculiar by the time the essays from 1977 to 1984 were presented together. This book was never seen as problematic because of its counter-intuitive philosophy, but only because it seemed to lose its way in terms of the wider setting in which it was placed, unlike so much of Baudrillard's writing.

Baudrillard has long been a controversial figure, and the apparent simplicity of his speculative polemics makes him a target for anti-intellectuals, many of whom bolster their critique of him through not reading his actual texts. Nonetheless, it should be possible for the anti-Baudrillardian to pick up *The Divine Left* without flinching too much. After all, it is historically grounded, it looks at real political figures and parties, and raises questions that the Left likes asking itself, mostly around the question of legitimacy considered in the context of election-winning. We might forget that even electorally successful socialist parties had always been wary of capitalist-fuelled democracy, and what they would actually be allowed to do, even in the event of colossal historical compromise. Baudrillard ponders the run-up to elections in the late 1970s and the victory of François Mitterrand and his Parti Socialiste in 1981, and he always returns to the question of what it means for the Left, whether socialist or Moscow-friendly Communist (as the official PCF was in those days), to be in power. An initial reading might lead us to think Baudrillard believes that the Left should not ever be in power, as what it seeks is not possible, but quickly it becomes clear that the Left may as well be in power, and that the Right is at least as hapless. The core question, then, is that if the system can absorb a Leftist government and continue, can the movement of the Left act in ways consistent with its ideology?

The current political environment dramatically increases the relevance of this book, and I think the reader will be pleasantly surprised how a book that seemed so dated in the 1990s now makes a lot of sense. That said, this isn't a long lost book of oppositional communism, but it does revel in the prospect

of the Left in power as some sort of destabilizing media event. Furthermore, even though the book is caught within its specific timeframe, it seems to address future concerns of the Left, and the potential for either revolutionary change or even social change as a result of electoral victory. Baudrillard looks at how “the social” is dissipating even as we pay it ever more attention, and at how socialism only comes to power at a point when its aims are both in the past (achieved, at least in some form) or impossible (e.g. in economic terms). It looks at managerialist politics, it talks about the effect of IT communication on politics, about the belief in communication over-riding more traditional modes of political activity or instrumentalism, and it looks at the melancholy of hopeful electors let down by the only political representatives that claimed a socially moral high ground (i.e. on the basis of equality, redistribution, equal access to services...).

The backdrop for *The Divine Left*, as with his thought as whole, is Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. Readers will find a few unexpected gems as to the functioning of that theory, as theory and as modelling device of what Baudrillard would not be calling the real world. Anti-Baudrillardians may even accept the hypothesis in the terms laid out in this volume. In either case, it may well be that this book is not only timely but much more important than its languishing unreprinted and untranslated for so long would suggest. Even the boring bits come polished in a kind of retro glow, as the foolish figure of long-term Stalinist PCF leader Georges Marchais rumbles into view, or as the not yet exposed Mitterrand is perceived as someone who was only then ditching integrity. Even the puerility of the 1980 *année du patrimoine* (France’s Heritage Year) comes coated in a digitally-generated “VHS effect” of meta-nostalgia.

Readers today will not be aware of the massive change that was prophesied as a result first of the electoral pact between PS and PCF, first put into action, with mixed results, in the 1978 elections, and then as a consequence of a PS-led majority and government (which featured four Communist ministers). The word “alternance” came into play as the radical idea of having a government that was not Gaullist became a reality in 1981. Of course for Baudrillard, the idea of something’s becoming reality was ontologically strange, as he argued for the history of humanity being one where one type of simulacra simply succeeded another, while at the same time, many sectors of society held on to the belief in progress toward truth, goodness, and technological improvement of life. The then-current era was the one he identified as that of simulation—where there was no longer a real, as it had been supplanted by pre-emptive modelling. Reality would then be hyperreal, attaining ever greater heights of reality, while all the while, access to a true real faded away. Critics have been divided over whether Baudrillard was bemoaning a lost reality, or whether his system implies that the real was always only ever lost in the referent, i.e., a reflection and product of systems of attributing meaning. As usual, *The Divine Left* offers the possibility of both readings. With regard to a lost reality, on many occasions Baudrillard complains about the inability of the Left to properly seize power.

As opposed to the more traditional hypocrisy of the Right (he says), the Left believes in its simulacrum and is confused by the actual practice of power. As far as he is concerned, the Left in power in the late twentieth century is all about managing decline, about putting a utopian gloss on the failure of the social, precisely when social concerns come to dominate and await “fixing.” The demand for, say, health or welfare is unstinting, and only through a renunciation of its own mission can the Left even partially succeed. In many ways, Baudrillard is just offering a standard ultra-leftist or *gauchiste* spin on a standard argument: that the deck of capitalism is stacked against anything that threatens the concentration of wealth. But if we look at what he has to say about contemporary phenomena around politics, we will find a more sustainable prognostication about where “the political” is going.

For Baudrillard, as expressed in his writings on Foucault and on the contemporary “masses,” power is in some way over, devolved into a simulation of itself. The emergence of the PCF as possible governing party is the final illustration of “the impossibility of a determinate position of power” (p. 23). In ultra-Foucauldian mode, Baudrillard does not say power has vanished but that its omnipresence removes its

reality as directable force and that only “the political class is dismayed by the reversal of the political into simulation”; only they suffer from “realist blindness.” Those who are not willing to accept Baudrillard’s claims about reality as simulation will of course differ, but what if we look at the politicians of the West thirty years on? Even the most cynical “realist” keen to praise authenticity as suitability for power would surely have to concede that the “political class” is even more entrenched within itself and its own interests. This includes those who present themselves, often absurdly, as outside of the political class. With superstar performers across the ideological range from Syriza in Greece to the GOP in the US, realness pushes “the political” further into a hyperreal state, and what Baudrillard saw, through the lens of the institutionalization of the Left, is now “the new normal.”

On the other hand, the masses have freed themselves from believing in the truth in politics, do not wish to be represented (p. 51), and have begun to experiment with politics (p. 52). The best example of this would be people lying to polls, or keenly contributing to polls or the realm of “likes” and then not voting, or voting too much, too often. The populations of simulated democracies have embraced the move to simulation and play the politicians, he continues. Critics on the Left have always had a problem with the idea of the masses being free to not want social change. Critics of Baudrillard seem to imagine his point of view is about quietism, about denial of agency, whereas as early as these writings from the late 1970s, he had spotted what the “social media savvy” politician stumbles on today, which is that people will participate but have adapted their involvement so as not to be led by their clairvoyant avant-garde leaders in ideology.

From any ideological perspective, there is much for the non-Francophone to savour in this book, and it helps to dismiss claims that Baudrillard took very little interest in politics, a claim that is puzzlingly echoed on the back matter of this volume. The analysis here of the fate of apparently revolutionary politics caught up in reformism and the absurdity of managing the enemy’s domain helps round out what Baudrillard has to say about the political realm across many, perhaps all, of his books. The most interesting feature for those familiar with Baudrillard’s writings, is the early appearance of the idea of the “non-event,” whether of taking power, the year 2000, the future, or of history, that dominates the closing essay from 1984. The most important part for all readers must be the farsighted assessment of the spectre of managerialist democracy and communication in the same essay, where he assesses the spread of the belief in interactivity and also the rapid growth of the proto-Internet in operation in France in the guise of the Minitel (the Teletel system, p. 132). By 1984, this interactive device was already full of potential for what we now call social media, a term that would have made Baudrillard laugh for its redundancy and hypocrisy, and would then no doubt have prompted him to imagine a world where the media formed a society separate to humans.

The future, as Baudrillard saw it, lay in the obligation to communicate, to participate, to be social, in order to fill in the absence identified as the flawed social. He argues that IT will not provide a revolution in behaviour and will instead lead to a privatization, or internalization of control, wherein we will acquire only “autonomy in the management of [our] own affairs” (p. 132). For a thinker so far ahead of his time, he was oddly and viscerally against IT, even as he was seen by many to “celebrate” it, so we could imagine a point of view from today that simply saw his premonition as fear (the kind of fear McLuhan identified as “pain” as the inevitable reaction to technological novelty). Alternatively, we can see the current spread of managerialism, which replaces the bureaucratization of “existing” socialism in the East (p. 131) as confirmation of Baudrillard’s thoughts in this book, and likewise we can find a counter to the optimism of ideas of post-capitalism in the notion that “everyone will now have to create his or her own job” (p. 116).

In many ways, it is astonishing how future-proofed Baudrillard’s analysis of society, politics, media, or the future of “the masses” was at his peak in the 1970s and 1980s. *The Divine Left* confirms the need to continue to read him, to look beyond the more provocative statements, and to keep in mind his advice about the role of theory as a speculative, creative counter to those who would impose their vision of

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their world as realism (see p. 73). One last insight from this book, then, emerges in response to the French view that theory was a slightly foolish invention of the “Anglo-Saxons”: theory as practice, idea and word was there all along, as was its mission, and even in the ultra-critical mode of this book, a spark of hope remains for the mission of critique. Baudrillard’s writing, perhaps because of the subject matter, is less explosive and inventive than usual, and the translation is uneven, but this volume extends Semiotext[e]’s pioneering advocacy of Baudrillard and is imbued with far more than collector-completist value.

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