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Book Review

Jean Baudrillard, *Amerika* (America). Translated from French* by Ya^ar Avunç. 145 p. Ystanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları, 1966. Available from Piyer Loti Caddesi 17/2, Çemberlitaş, 34400 İstanbul.

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Jean Baudrillard has an unusual approach for a European, and specifically a French writer, in trying to explain the American phenomenon. His method is to look at America from the inside out instead of the other way around. The uniqueness of this book lies in the fact that America emerges neither as the "other"--as it would have, had a Eurocentric viewpoint been adopted--nor is it presented as an alternative to European modernity. This becomes all the more apparent through comparison, because pictures of America and Europe come through almost as an Hegelian dialectic. The gist of the book is that America has already made a synthesis of the old and the new with the help of geography, demography, sectarianism, social mores, and patterns of assimilation. And Europe has long ceased to be a motherland to America, except in the imaginations of some Americans. In other words, there is an existential difference between the two entities. Therefore, it is perhaps only fair to look at America for what it is rather than for what it is not.

While interpreting the meaning of America, the author chose as his laboratory, not the East coast, its European heritage, the Establishment, but the space and architectures of Los Angeles and New York, the desert and the attitudes of common people. The outcome of these observations is threefold. One is an incisive and at times humorous look into the American psyche; the meaning of space, speed (in the sense of pace), freedom, individualism, alienation, and fetishism of health and body. Then, there is the inevitable comparison of how Europeans and Americans handle concepts. Baudrillard argues that Europeans are confined by

history, space, and a false adoration of their culture, i.e., a form of bourgeois hypocrisy, which may very well be sources leading to unproductivity. According to him, Americans are good at realizing concepts without any fanfare attached to the intellectual value of conceptualization. Europeans take much pride at their almost inherent skill at conceptualization without being equipped with the means to realize these concepts. This is exactly where Europe and America part ways. The former has not exhausted the capacity to make revolutions, while the latter has, primarily because in Europe the concept of freedom is political rather than individual, and because history has a haunting as well as limiting effect on Europe.

In 1970, another French thinker, Jean-François Revel, published *Ni Marx Ni Jésus: De La Seconde Révolution Américaine à la Seconde Révolution Mondiale* (Paris: Laffont, 1970). Revel was quite excited about the new information age which touched upon the lives of a substantial number of the worlds population, implicating national, societal, and individual lives. His book was a breath of fresh air to those of us who were tired of the ideologies and dogmatism of equally the Right and the Left. America was indeed capable of making revolutions *sans idéologie.* Although Baudrillard is not as optimistic as Revel had been about the future of America, there is an underlying sentiment that the charming naiveté, basic innocence, and toleration of local and national politics, however sceptical, may yet prove assets in civil society which feed ethics into the workings of the system.

The last but not least interesting theme of the book is the meaning of American modernity. Baudrillard questions whether this modernity is embedded in the obscenely huge and tall buildings of New York City or in the horizontal city network and freeways of Los Angeles. Considering that one does not encounter built-in prejudice as far as difference in status or class is concerned, is it possible to account for American modernity by looking at social norms? Or better yet, does image-building in the movie industry, society and politics comprise American modernity? Europes modernity is of a far different genre--one frozen within 18th and 19th century values. Otherwise, why do many of us consider the Pompidou Center in Paris horrendous and/or are still sceptical about a United States of Europe?

Baudrillard's book is not just another travel book that makes interesting observations of the American way of life. It offers a critical socio-political analysis of what one accepts as a homogenous Western system of values and principles. *

* Editors note: *Amérique* (Paris: Grasset, 1986) has been translated into English by Chris Turner as *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).