

# Jean Baudrillard vs. America?

by Paul Austin Murphy (November 2015)

Jean Baudrillard was a well-known French philosopher and sociologist. He died in 2007.

Baudrillard, along with Jean-François Lyotard, more or less invented postmodernism – or at least provided its theoretical underpinnings. Baudrillard also said (amongst other things) that “[r]eality itself is too obvious to be true” and that “truth does not exist” [in *Fragments: Cool Memories III*].

As hinted at, Baudrillard is often sold to the public as a “postmodernist” and a lover of America. Marxist writers – such as [Christopher Norris](#), [Frederic Jameson](#) and [Alex Callinicos](#) – have been particularly critical of Baudrillard’s seemingly “pro-American” stance. Yet until he was 40 (in 1969) Baudrillard was (more or less) a revolutionary Marxist. And it can also be seen that despite the criticism he has got from Marxists/socialists for his “relativism,” “support of the status quo” and “lack of political commitment,” the ghost of Marx still haunted him. Much of what he did, essentially, was to take some of Marx’s theories and ideas in a radically new direction.

Since postmodernism has just been mentioned, I’ll let Baudrillard himself tell you what postmodernism actually is. He wrote:

“Postmodernity is... a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.”

As for Baudrillard’s indebtedness to Marxism, what’s non-Marxist or postmodernist about, for example, talk of a “classless society” and the “naturalisation of the proletariat”? There are many other aspects of Baudrillard’s thought which are Marxist in tone and in political objectives/hopes. For example, his critiques of the “bourgeoisie” and “capitalist humanism”; along with his fetishisation of “Otherness” and talk of “liberation” and “emancipation.”

What Baudrillard did, then, was substitute certain Marxist variables (*i.e.*, theories and technical terms) and juggle them around a little. Thus Baudrillard kept himself in the Marxist *épistème* and then played his postmodernist games within it.

Again, it may still seem strange to class Baudrillard as, well, a *lapsed Marxist*. So just sample this wee diatribe against liberal democracies to be going on with:

“One has never said better how much ‘humanism’, ‘normality’, ‘quality of life’ were nothing but the vicissitudes of profitability.” [Simulacra and Simulation]

As for Baudrillard’s texts, quite frankly, one often doesn’t know what to make of them. Is it poetry? Is it prose? Or is it philosophy? Is it all these things?

If it’s philosophy, then if you take his statements literally, almost all of them come out false, meaningless or silly – though sexy – generalisations. Thus none of his pronouncements can be taken literally: we have Baudrillard’s word on that. He once urged us to “[n]ever resist a sentence you like, in which language takes its own pleasure.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **America & Americans**

When you read Baudrillard, you get a huge sense of a French intellectual being condescending towards America and Americans. After all, the French are known to have a low opinion of all things American. And if you add to that the extreme pretentiousness and *outré* radicalism of French philosophy, then Baudrillard’s [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish interesting articles such as this, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Paul Austin Murphy, please click [here](#).

