
Baudrillard in Terrorism and War in Times of Hyper-Mobility

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We can understand how this universal tourism, bringing with it the general exchange of all cultures, the human equivalent of the flows of capital, the obnoxious infiltration and modern avatar of colonization and war, could be seen by the terrorists as an incarnation of all the values they abhor, as a viral infiltration – which is, in fact, what it is. Tourism itself is terrifying; it is a form of terror and can only attract terror in return (Baudrillard, 2010:102).

Abstract

Many today are asking why terrorists kill? And why tourist destinations have become legitimate targets for attacks? The work of Jean Baudrillard on war and terrorism provides some insights that help us to begin to build answers to these questions in our era of hypermobility. The first part of this paper examines Baudrillard's contribution to our understanding of the recent wars, which are themselves an important part of hypermobility and terrorism today, serving as they do as the backdrop of today's terrorist attacks. The second part of this paper elucidates Baudrillard's understanding that globalization itself is largely responsible for today's wars and terrorists attacks. Here it is stressed that Baudrillard's approach takes us closer to the motivations behind terrorism than, for example, the work of Slavoj Žižek. Baudrillard is able to provide a clearer answer to many of the questions surrounding terrorism because he has already passed through and beyond many of the limitations Western intellectuals like Žižek impose on their own analyses (Eurocentrist communism in Žižek's case).

¹ Dr. Gerry Coulter is Full Professor of Sociology (Theory, Art and Cinema) at Bishop's University in Sherbrooke, Canada. gcoulter@bishops.ca

Quebec, Canada. He has written extensively on art, cinema, and the work of Jean Baudrillard over the past twenty years. His next book: *Baudrillard's References –An A-Z Annotated Inventory of Artists, Theorists and Others* is due to be published in 2016. He has authored two previous books on Baudrillard: *Jean Baudrillard: From the Ocean to the Desert – The Poetics of Radicality* (2012, Intertheory, USA) and: *Art After The Avant-Garde: Baudrillard's*

Challenge (2014, Intertheory, USA). He is the founding and managing editor of the *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* [Online since 2004]. He has won numerous awards for teaching including Bishop's University's prestigious William and Nancy Turner Prize for Teaching.

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I. Introduction

This paper provides a theoretical contribution to the discussion of war and terrorism today by examining Jean Baudrillard's assessment of terrorism and war in our era of hypermobility. Baudrillard provides us with much to think about as to: 1) why terrorists kill? and 2) why places of leisure [exemplars of the capitalist hypermobility], have today become legitimate targets (in the eyes of the terrorists)? Part one examines Baudrillard's contribution to our understanding of recent wars which are themselves an important part of hypermobility and terrorism today. Part Two discusses Baudrillard's understanding of terrorism in light of the emergence of global hypermobile tourism with a focus on the question: "why target tourist destinations?" Baudrillard has provided us with both an understanding of war and terrorism which are integrally connected and a fundamental part of early third millennium capitalism. Baudrillard understands terrorism as part of the "fourth world war" – the struggle of a highly mobile Western capitalism to insinuate itself into every corner of the world versus resistance in all of its forms, including an increasingly mobile (and integral to the system itself) terrorism.

Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. ...It is at the very heart of this culture which combats it. ...as though every machinery of domination secreted its own counter apparatus, the agent of its own disappearance – against that form of almost automatic reversion of its own power, the system can do nothing. And terrorism is the chock wave of its silent reversion(Baudrillard,2002: 11).

II. Baudrillard and War

For Baudrillard everything is connected: war, terrorism, globalization, and the lives of everyone on earth. For him it is impossible to develop a significant understanding of terrorism today without an appreciation of the wars which serve as its backdrop. The most important war (of which the skirmishes of the first Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan, or the War in Iraq, are lesser scenarios), is what he refers to as "the Fourth World War" – the war wherein Western globalization seeks to conquer the globe. Things have long moved past a point in time where

anyone can claim to be excluded from it or exempt from its affects – even while lying in the sun on a warm beach in some remote corner of the world.

a) War and Virtualization

Prior to the 1991 Gulf War Baudrillard said that it would not happen as it was a “simulacrum of war”. Baudrillard knew war. He was born in 1929 and just before his 11th birthday the Nazi’s rolled into his home town of Reims occupying it for the next five years. Baudrillard and his grandparents escaped prior to the invasions with a few belongings on a horse-cart. Baudrillard was, early on in his life, a war refugee.² Fifty years later we find him declaring that the Gulf War would not take place and after it had happened he declared that it did not take place. According to him the war did not take place because it was not war as we had previously understood war. The Gulf War was a preprogrammed war, more of a script than a war, fed to us as images to prove it did happen – on our TV screens. War as a synthetic object – almost, he said, an effort to see whether war was still possible (1993b: 207). The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have followed its model.

These wars, Baudrillard pointed out, whatever else they are, have been conducted as media spectacles. What our TV’s show is the unfolding of a rehearsed war-game like simulation – war as news event – with its embedded journalists and pre-recorded “missile’s eye view” cameras. Our made for TV wars signal the arrival of hypermobile and simultaneously virtual warfare. They are good for television ratings and as virtual wars they are also successful. An important aspect of the hypermobility involved the very satellite systems themselves via which CNN brought them to global audiences.

There was of course real violence in these wars, as when the U.S. attacked and largely destroyed Saddam Hussein’s retreating Army in the first Gulf War. People die in these non-wars but the real violence stands little chance of getting through our screens in North America. Violence has

² Baudrillard, ever the proponent of reversibility and irony, took great pleasure from the fact that it was in Reims, five years later to the day, that the German Wehrmacht would tender its unconditional surrender – albeit to another, more insidious, march – Eisenhower, Marshal, the Americans and a rapidly deepening globalization.

been thoroughly blurred by the electronic narrative – the simulation of war. “War processing” Baudrillard called it (1991: 63), or “war exchanged for the signs of war” (1994: 62) ... a pre-fabricated war, a synthetic war... an orgy of simulation (Ibid.). Recent wars are “war stripped of its passions and its violence, by its technicians, and then re-clothed by them with all the artifices of electronics” (1991: 64). But what are our hyperealized and hypermobile wars really about? Baudrillard wondered if it was not really about the victory of the model which was understood by the Americans to be, more important than a victory on the ground (Ibid.:55). Terrorist attacks (like September 11, 2001) as also fed through the televised “official” narrative of the event which attempts to frame (convert the event into a mainstream model) the event for the majority of viewers.

This victory of the model, which unfolds, step by step on CNN complete with film footage of simulated and prerecorded missile strikes, has been key to the development of hypermobility. Hypermobility is not simply a feature on the ground [the ability of terrorists to appear and disappear instantly] it is also an essential element of how we know war and terrorism today – the hypermobility of the networks. Indeed, without the hypermobility of the networks, the hypermobility of terrorists today would lose much of its force. No other entity in our time, except war, requires the global mass media as does terrorism. War, terrorism and global media are three central pillars of hypermobile violence in our time. As each of us has a stake in globalization we are all involved – no exceptions. Some may prefer to avoid this knowledge and it was among Baudrillard’s tasks to illuminate our circumstance for us.

b) War and Globalization

In recent years when one thinks of Baudrillard and war it is quite probable that his “Spirit of Terrorism” comes to mind. Later a book, it appeared first as an article in *Le Monde* on 2 November, 2001. Here he proclaimed that we were all involved, directly and indirectly, in what he called “the Fourth World War” [which includes a kind of “new Cold War” with the perpetual deterrence of an invisible enemy (2002: 82)]. For Baudrillard World Wars I & II were closer to “classic wars” (war as it had long been understood). WWII (the Cold War), and WWIV (the ongoing war of Westernization / globalization to spread itself into every pocket of existence on

earth) are wars that did not take place according to the traditional understanding of war. The first casualty of hypermobile war has been war itself. Each of these four World Wars, Baudrillard believed, had taken us closer to a kind of world order: WWI set off the end of the old colonialist era. WWII ended Nazism. WWIII (which also did not happen) dissolved into an equilibrium of terror and deterrence called “Mutual Assured Destruction”. WWIV today takes us closest to a virtually accomplished world order where Westernization [globalization is much more than Americanization] is confronted by antagonistic forces, diffused in the very heart of the global as in the 9/11 attacks [where the terrorists used Western systems had everything we had to offer (money and our banking system, aeronautic technology, education – all the West has to offer and they crashed it all into those twin towers in New York)]. The fourth World War is a hypermobile and fractal war where the cells [singularities] (2002: 12) revolt – a conflict, said Baudrillard, as we are coming to understand better with each passing year, of unfathomable proportions. Such conflict erupts instantly and violently [as in the attacks of September 11, the attack on the Charlie Hebdo office, or on any tourist location around the world today. Baudrillard also noted that if Islam that achieved the kind of global hegemony that the West has, there would be terrorism against Islam – for it is the globe that resists globalization.

This takes us to what I call “Baudrillard’s War”. While he is not a proponent of terror and murder – he saw enough of both as a child – Baudrillard at least understands the motivations of those who lash out at the West because since he was very young he has been involved in a war against globalizing sameness and homogenization (be it under a 1000 year Reich, Westernization, Americanization, communism or any of its other manifestations). Baudrillard’s war is a war with monoculture and the hypermobility of the computer and media worlds that support and enable it. At the end of his book *America* he fears that for all of its foibles the USA may well be the future of the entire planet at the expense of all other cultures and societies. He felt, and did not like, the encroachment of cloning – not merely biological cloning but social and societal cloning as the West attempted to create clones of itself elsewhere. Irony, always on Baudrillard’s side, has made both kinds of cloning increasingly difficult in recent years.

Baudrillard’s war as a philosopher was against the standardization of human life „the hell of the same“ he called it (1993a: 122). If we were to shape a large part of his thought into an anti-war slogan it might well be: “he who lives by the same dies by the same” (2003: 63) He wrote

against the kind of society that deprives people of the possibility to determine themselves as an individual. And it is precisely in “networks” that “every individual loses his/her sovereignty” (2005: 94). This included his long time opposition to the negative impacts of orienting our entire society [and expecting others to follow us], towards the object (the consumer item). By focusing on the object we are surrendering, and it is a bad exchange, human subjectivity. “The reign of the same” he wrote: “is the perfect crime” (2003: 63). It is the reign of the same which hyper mobile terrorists today target using other means than Baudrillard chose.

While commercializing everything [including pre-packaged tourism], the West has, in Baudrillard’s words, “aestheticized” the entire world, by which he meant – we have transformed the world into images – a semiological reorganization that awoke one morning, to find itself under attack – in a very carefully planned and executed event now known as 9/11, timed to capture the attention of the world’s image machines for as much of the day [and ensuing days] as possible.

For Baudrillard the answer to “why do terrorists kill?” is to be found in globalization (the Fourth World War) which envelops the lives of everyone on earth. As tourist destinations are an essential part of hypermobile globalization today it is not surprising that these destinations have become targets. If would-be tourists decide to stay home, negatively affecting a global industry which is turning vast tracts of the world into other versions of “Disneyland” (complete with the low labor standards and pay typical of the global tourist industries), the terrorists would certainly feel they had accomplished no small feat in a war that it ultimately against globalization and its hypermobility. Terrorists target tourist destinations because these places are beach-heads of globalization – the Fourth World War. Baudrillard also has important things to say about the motives of the terrorists to kill everywhere.

III. Baudrillard on Terrorism

This reversal is a worldwide phenomenon. It is now becoming clear that everything we once thought dead and buried, everything we thought left behind forever by the ineluctable march of universal progress, is not dead at all, but on

the contrary likely to return... with a vehemence and a virulence that are modern in every sense – and to reach the very heart of our ultra-sophisticated ultra-vulnerable systems. Such is the destiny of radical otherness – a destiny that no homily of reconciliation and no apologia for difference is going to alter (Baudrillard, 1993a: 138).

Baudrillard's particular contribution to contemporary thought was his way of projecting himself, as far as possible, outside of the comfortable limitations placed on each of us by our own language and culture. This is the first move of a truly radical approach to thought for Baudrillard. If we cannot at least attempt achieve an „escape velocity“ from our own society we stand little chance of understanding the radical other who attacks it. For Baudrillard, the attackers of September 11 (and we may presume those of the Charlie-Hebdo offices and other incidents such as the recent attacks on tourist sites in Tunisia), represent radical otherness and hypermobility.

Baudrillard was unique among his contemporaries in his assessment of terrorism. By way of a brief comparison, take for example, Slavoj Žižek's response to terrorism after the “Charlie-Hebdo” attack. In his *New Statesman* article “Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?” (2015: unpaginated). Žižek writes: “How fragile the belief of an Islamist must be if he feels threatened by a stupid caricature in a weekly satirical newspaper?” Žižek cautions against succumbing to blind Islamophobia and to his credit wants to critically investigate the deeper complexities surrounding this attack as he earlier asked Americans to do. What Žižek fears is that in our efforts to reflect upon the attacks we will accept the logic that the attackers are heroic men willing to give up their own life for what they believe. Some may see him as constructing a „straw-man“ here but he does sincerely believe this idea to be a “demonic myth” (Ibid.).

For Žižek, what the attackers lack is an “authentic fundamentalism”. This kind of fundamentalism is practiced with “the absence of resentment and envy, the deep indifference towards the non-believer's way of life” (Ibid.). He then labels the Charlie Hebdo attackers “pseudo-fundamentalists”. It is the very fact that these pseudo-fundamentalists attack us that shows how weak, hyper-sensitive, and inauthentic they are. If they really did have the way to truth they would not feel threatened by non-believers and would have no reason to attack. It is at

this point that Žižek brings out his strongest weapon in his retaliatory strike on the Charlie-Hebdo attackers and their supporters: his reading of psychoanalysis. He argues that the fundamentalists who attack us “secretly consider themselves inferior to us”. He continues: “...the fundamentalists are already like us ...secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them... what the fundamentalists really lack is precisely a dose of that true „racist“ conviction of their own superiority” (Ibid).

Žižek’s best writing on this theme appeared in “Some Politically Incorrect Reflections on Violence in France and Related Matters” (2005: unpaginated). Here Žižek argues that the attackers are motivated by “resentment” and “envy”. The terrorists attack us because they envy our object centered consumerist Western lives and hold the primary goal of denying our enjoyment of our lives. As such they act out of resentment and envy towards us as inauthentic pseudo-fundamentalists working against their own self-interest (he points to how those burning cars and schools in the Paris Banlieue mostly strike in their own neighborhoods). But something else however is going on here and Žižek, despite the lucidity of his approach fails to address it. Žižek’s terrorists are like poor children beating up a rich child because he has so many toys and they have so few.

Over recent centuries all forms of violent otherness have been incorporated, willingly or under threat of force, into a discourse of difference which simultaneously implies inclusion and exclusion, recognition, and discrimination (Ibid.: 128). Writing in 1990, Baudrillard impeccably anticipates what Žižek does to the terrorists other a quarter-century later in his response to the Charlie Hebdo attacks. Žižek’s well-intentioned failure has a history – a long history of humanism which tends to prefer sameness – a history which does not understand what Baudrillard terms: “The Spirit of Terrorism”. For any global system, communist (Žižek’s preference), or otherwise, to succeed otherness must be conquered with difference (Baudrillard 1994: 109). Baudrillard gave up on such fantasies of the critical Left in the late 1960s-early 1970s (Baudrillard [1973] 1975). Radical otherness survives everything for Baudrillard (1993a:

146) as surely as the terrorists are likely to survive Žižek’s attempt to theoretically exterminate by labelling them “pseudo-terrorists” driven by envy. Baudrillard is able to adopt such a position because he is, more able than Žižek, to achieve escape velocity from his own culture – including

his own history as a humanist-Marxist precisely in the manner which Žižek has not. Baudrillard has made a passage that Žižek is, as yet, unwilling to make – the passage out of critical theory and into radical theory. The key difference between radical and critical theory is that the former sees new possibilities through the constant interrogation of its own beliefs. While critical scholars like Žižek constantly reassess – the effort is typically spent on augmenting their long held assumptions (there is no better example of this than Žižek on terrorism). Specifically, for a leading critical theorist enmeshed in communism and psychoanalysis to push him-self out of both, into radical new possibilities for thought, has been accomplished by no one better than Baudrillard. Because of this he is able to assess the terrorists without himself attempting to theoretically „exterminate“ them.

What Baudrillard shows us is the truly frightening terrorist (neither envious nor resentful) who cannot be won over by Western approaches – the terrorist who is not merely different, but radically other. Baudrillard’s terrorist not only cannot be mothered, s/he cannot be exterminated. Why? Because Baudrillard’s terrorist is a product of hegemonic globalization.

Baudrillard’s radical approach to terrorism, specifically terrorism against the West from Islamist sources, makes no effort to psychologize the terrorist or to explain away the sincerity of his/her motives via traditional critical Western theoretical approaches. Baudrillard’s terrorist – the hard other – is a vehement actor in what he calls “The Fourth World War” – the battle of Westernization globalization to infiltrate everywhere on earth and the resistance to it (2002: 11). What is at stake in this war is globalization itself – the acting out of the fundamental antagonisms of globalization.

Baudrillard’s “hard other” is willing to turn his/her own death:

...into an absolute weapon against a system... it is all about death, not only the violent irruption of death in real time [on television] but the irruption of a death which is far more than real: death which is symbolic and sacrificial – that is to say, the absolute, irrevocable event (2002: 16-17).

For Baudrillard the terrorist hopes that the system under attack will then act against its own best interests [the U.S. and its allies invasion of Iraq in March 2003 comes to mind]. Baudrillard understands the terrorists to be motivated historical actors in a game of life and death. Rather than attempt to deploy Western models such as psychoanalysis [Žižek] to belittle the terrorists, Baudrillard recognizes that they have carefully assumed the knowledge and practices of the West – all the things we sought to use to subjugate them (money, stock market speculation, computer and aeronautic technology, as well as the spectacle of the media) (Baudrillard 2002: 19) – and have sent these spiraling back at the heart of global capitalism (just as terrorists somewhere else might be expected to react toward the heart of global Islam, global communism, or any hegemonic power).

IV. Conclusion

While he does not support their violent methods Baudrillard understands that the terrorists who strike against the West are authentic living, thinking beings, there is nothing pseudo about their thought processes or their belief system, they are not something that can be explained away as easily as those like Žižek may think. For Baudrillard the terrorists “assimilated everything of modernity and globalism, without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power. For Baudrillard what is especially frightening about the September 11, 2001 terrorists is that they became rich like Westerners without ceasing to want to destroy the West. (As I write this [July 2015] news is breaking of the second terrorist attack on foreign tourists in Tunisia this year.)

For Baudrillard, the events of September 11, 2001, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, and attacks on tourists around the world, are single acts in a much greater Fourth World War. In this action the terrorists managed to return centuries of humiliation at the hands of the West, endured by Islam, and return this humiliation to the hegemonic Western power (what could be more humiliating, asks Baudrillard, than for the most powerful nation on earth to be attacked at its core as it was on September 11?) For Baudrillard, this kind of terrorism understands that it cannot win with a frontal attack but it can deliver humiliation by way of devastating “symbolic” attacks (Baudrillard 2002: 26).

Today's terrorists, as Baudrillard shows us, have mastered the rules of the Western capitalist game while simultaneously rejecting it. Baudrillard's hard other as terrorist does not offer us the comfort of a "pseudo" terrorist. This is what theory must do – it must take us out of our comfortable history of humano-communist (or liberal) assumptions to see the terrorist, as much as possible, from his/her own point of view – without so easily imposing predetermined Western frames of reference. We can do this, as does Baudrillard, by not forcing the terrorist through the established categories of the hopes for the future that we prefer no matter how popular and theoretically just they may be. Contra critical theory, Baudrillard presents us with a radical analysis of a more frightening world.

There are many ways to fight globalization and some will adopt a strategy that includes killing. Baudrillard did not support this strategy but his analysis does help us to see it as something other than a completely irrational act. His understanding of globalization as a world war is especially helpful here. As for why terrorists attack places of leisure, we may understand them as legitimate targets (in the eyes of the terrorists) because of their key role in globalizing capitalist hypermobility. Attacks on them, from the point of view of a terrorist resisting globalization, are part of our current global war. Attacks on tourist destinations by terrorists are only surprising if one does not understand Baudrillard's primary message: today's terrorists are real, they are committed, they are willing to kill and to die, and they are fighting a war. Baudrillard shows us that we are all part of the Fourth World War. In conditions of war killing and targeting "soft-targets" (like tourists at a beach hotel) are part of the game. As his writing usually did Baudrillard seeks to wake us from our slumbering belief that we live in a time of peace. Terrorists kill because they are operatives in a global war – the war of globalization or what Baudrillard calls "The Fourth World War". Tourist destinations are considered to be legitimate targets for attack because they are an integral part of hypermobile [terroristic] globalization today which is itself an integral aspect of globalization.

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