

Baudrillard (1929 — 2007) & Mao: The History of Normal Violence

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When Annie and I arrived in Beijing, it had been two virtual days since we left New York for what turned out to be a thirty-hour trip that erased March 7, 2007 from our lives. We were met at the airport by my friend and colleague in sociology who, by the end of our stay, Annie came to call Auntie Ming. After greetings and inquiries as to the trip, her first question to me was, “How is this day being celebrated in the States?” The day was March 8, International Women’s Day, which of course was not being celebrated at all back home. If in China, and much of the sane world, it was not exactly being celebrated, the Day was noteworthy; so much for globalization in the fast-fading core. Time is very fast these days. Still some global spaces can pick and choose at will.

Not only that but, in some places, space makes for slow. It is nearly impossible to get anywhere fast when the place through or around which you must get is New York City. Annie and I started our impossibly long trip on a fast plane a good ten hours before take off. This just to get from New Haven, where we live, to JFK—a real distance of about 80 miles; hence, waiting, traffic, and security lines included, the speed of our airport trip was around 10 miles per hour or, not that much faster than it took Henry David Thoreau to walk same the same journey in 1843. Real space can grind virtual velocity to a halt, occasionally with real consequences. In our case, the unbearable slowness of fast time meant that my daughter and I were out of this world for the better part of three calendrical days. So far as news was concerned, we also missed March 6, 2007. For Annie, age nine, this meant little in particular. For me, it meant that in the time lost getting to China I also missed the day Jean Baudrillard died.

Actually, in real historical time, if there is such a thing, I had missed a good bit of Baudrillard. I had never met him, nor bothered to read many of his later books, which were, even when I was younger, a little too cool. My time diverged from his sometime after the famous *Simulacra and Simulations* essay in 1981—, just when, on the plane of my personal life, divorce and related troubles made books like *Cool Memories* (1987) dispensable. From the tiny window I afforded myself I could see his plane speeding off on a tangent I could not, then, pursue. I did not begin to catch up until my personal life had broken new ground to enter its own new time. Yet, Baudrillard’s death, like his life, is an event, so to speak, that is hard to outrun, impossible to ignore.



The end of Baudrillard may well have signified the end of the infamously important French tradition of post-something-hard-to-say-what-a-whatever-it-was that many in this world wished would never have been.

It has been my fate, if such a term applies to this world, to work in a field, sociology, that stirs the heart and mind with provocations so rich as to be too much for those encamped in the field's center ground. Though Baudrillard taught sociology at Nanterre, many of the profession abhorred his ideas which, when left unread, can indeed be overstimulating. The very idea that Disneyland and such like are the only reliable realities is unnerving to those who stake their sense of personal worth on hard realities that have rewarded them. The most memorable of these types, in my experience, was a lesser French sociologist whose academic post owed more to his bourgeois credits than to any real accomplishment. When invited to join an editorial project, he agreed on one condition: that Jean Baudrillard be excluded. Baudrillard sped on; this one sank of his own dead weight.

Baudrillard, in *The Illusion of the End* (1992), one of the books I caught up with, put the issue of our time just right: "The illusion of our history opens onto the greatly more radical illusion of the world." This was 1992, when he was among the first to appreciate the true importance of the events of 1989-1991 for Europe and the world.

Now we have closed the eyelids of the Revolution, closed our eyes on the Revolution, now we have broken down the Wall of Shame, now that the lips of protest are closed (with the sugar of history which melts on the tongue), now Europe—and memories—are no longer haunted by the spectre of communism, nor even by that of power, now the aristocratic illusion of the origin and the democratic illusion of the end are increasingly receding, we no longer have the choice of advancing, of persevering in the present destruction, or of retreating—but only of facing up to this radical illusion.

As Baudrillard's earliest books were written in the wake of the events of 1968, his later ones were of the events of 1989. What the queasy never quite understood is that the French social theorists who came into their own around 1968 were clear about what history was and was not. The French, after all, had invented History in the sense of the tragedy of 1789 and the farce of 1848. Europeans of the short twentieth century lived quotidian history with a sober intensity that even the Americans who died and suffered in the world wars had not. The Americans have always believed that History was on their side. This is an arrogance that can be justified only by an inexcusable abstraction from the surrealities of war. The Europeans lived with the violence of capital-H History—the tragedies and farces, the chambers and the saturation bombings, and all the rest that carried over with ever more sinister inventiveness from the failures of the nineteenth century ideal of History's purposeful End.

If lower-case history has anything good to say about the pathetic George W. Bush it might be that his time as the administrator of modern values exposed them for what they always had been—a phantasmagoria of moving pictures projecting the illusion of progressive History as more real than any true story could ever be. The Greatest Story Ever Told is that History triumphs, when in fact (so to speak) history just is what it is, without beginning or ending, save those supplied by popular fictions.

Modernity's bourgeois revolution was—referring to one of Baudrillard's early theories—a system of consumption created by necessity at one and the same time as the system of production. Already in *The System of Objects* (1968), "There are no limits to consumption." If the capitalist mode of production is to be History, then even Marx's all-too-neat, if all-too-prescient, idea that production determines everything of value planted the seed of its own revision. Consumption is not an end, but a resource. Thus, as Baudrillard made clear, use-value must be analytically cut from exchange-value in order to insert the ownership of desire. Without the manufacture of need, there can be no surplus value. Production, in the end, such as it is, does not produce value seeking subjects but consuming humanoids—reifications of the real beings ground down by the avarice of modernity. "The system of needs is the product of the system of production."

Thus, later, from the notoriously wonderful essay, *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981):

In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials—worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its entire vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced: this is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death. A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference.

In lines that would make Žižek blush, Baudrillard lends specific gravity to his semiotic theory of consumption as

a theory of history as the reality of History. When need is the only product of the modern system, then the fetishism of commodities is more than a moral error. It exhausts the meaning of historical reality, in the modern sense, as a fog of fungible references without referents—a system beyond systems that renders impractical the very idea of discernible values, whether material or ideal; hence, the hyperreality of all things—a universe without end in which social things disclose their perfect instability.

Beijing on March 8, 2007 was just the place to be forced to mediate on Baudrillard's passing into a time that never ends. On that day, in a city where many wear masks to protect what lung tissue remains, the air was uncommonly clear. The sun was bright. Tiananmen Square was crowded with tourists from the provinces. The Great Hall of the People was hosting the National People's Congress (an institution so illusory as to meet annually to rubber stamp decreed policies). Party flags were flapping in the brisk wind. Mao's Tomb, just across the Square from the Great Hall, was beset I thought by an unusually long line of visitors waiting to gape at the Chairman's remains.

Even on a bad weather day, Tiananmen is a sight to behold. Few places on earth, in my experience, better suit Baudrillard's theory of consumable objects. It is a Disneyland in which Mao is the ubiquitous Mickey Mouse. An enormous mug shot of the Chairman is mounted over the South Gate of the Forbidden City. His visage is plainly visible from any point in Tiananmen's 4.3 million square feet wide open space; or, better put, he, in death, stares far along the ancient axis of the city he meant to modernize.

The Forbidden City was the Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1912). The Palace occupied an enormous center ground of the ancient walled city. From the Imperial Palace looking to the South, Tiananmen Square is framed to the West by the Great Hall of the People, with Mao's Tomb prominently in the very middle. Beyond the Square, on the same meridian, the eye can make out in the distance the delicate outline of the Temple of Heaven—the Taoist temples built in the fifteen century under the Ming Dynasty. Each year on the winter solstice, the emperors processed from the Imperial Palace to the Temple where they paid homage to the Heavenly powers. Just beyond, still to the South, the 700 acre Temple grounds that dwarf both today's Square and the much reduced grounds of the Forbidden City, stand the remnants of the outer Southern Gate of the once-walled city. The Communists had torn down most of the ancient walls, as they are destroying the remaining urban villages that carry on much as they did in the days of the emperors.

The empires were overthrown in 1912 by the nationalist revolution. Mao was then a young student in Changsha in Hunan Province. He served perfunctorily for six months in the Republican army. His studies were under local provincial scholars who taught rudimentary philosophy based on Confucian classics. Mao quickly soured on the nationalists and their enlightened politics that turned out to be as cruel as were the feudal ones they overthrew.

By 1927, then in his mid-thirties, Mao had risen in the ranks of the Communist Party and begun to organize the peasants in eastern Hunan. They were the peasants who lent force to the army of the romanticized Long March. The Communist revolution suffered many defeats by the Kuomintang before Chiang Kai-shek was vanquished in 1949. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the Party under Mao began a Soviet-style "reconstruction" program.

Jonathan Spence, in *Mao Zedong: A Life* (1999), said of Mao:

Both Hundred Flowers movement and the launching of the Great Leap show Mao more and more divorced from any true reality check. ... And he himself seemed to care less and less for the consequences that might spring from his own erratic utterances. ... For the strange fact was that Mao had created a world in which things could hardly be otherwise.

Hence, even if Spence exaggerates, the Cultural Revolution of 1966 proves the point that Mao's vision for China was defiantly trapped in the traditional China of the imperial dynasties—a world cut off from the outside, a world organized around what turned out to be Disneyland principles. The enduring suffering of the Chinese people, most notably the peasantry that formed the political foundation of Mao's revolution, continued until the Chairman's death in 1976, and continues still. The Tiananmen slaughter in 1989 was but the most visible sign of the irreal system that killed so many for so long, violating the moral grammar Mao had imposed, then destroyed in his own unreal system of human consumption.

Baudrillard and Mao were not of the same worlds, nor of like mind. Yet, in a weird way, both were caught up, to differing ends, in the two most symbolic of late modern years: 1968 and 1989. Baudrillard flourished in the events of 1968 which were in Paris a street theater replaying modernity's unfinished revolutions—1789, 1848, 1871, and 1968. That year must also have brought Mao to his senses, to a degree. In 1969, he declared the Cultural Revolution over. But it had already taken on a life of its own. He could not end what he had begun. He died in 1976 still swimming up river against the violence he had wrought out of the reality he had made after his own illusions. 1989, in Beijing,

was a Prague springtime—an oddly deferred revelation of the force of popular rebellion against the power of a state gone mad on its own ideological opiate. In Europe, as Baudrillard said, the End of the Revolution exposed the illusion of all the epiphanies of all of modernity's insistencies on the reality of its own systems—communist, aristocratic, democratic. 1989, in Beijing as well as Europe, established, as Baudrillard said, “a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection which no longer leaves any chance even in the event of death.”

Beijing today is a magic kingdom. Mao looks out in death over Tiananmen Square, guarding the Forbidden City modernity meant to tear down. Tourists from the countryside stream through the Palace gates under the overblown image of the dead Chairman. They are the fortunate ones who can afford the price of admission, even perhaps a cup of Starbucks sold at the coffee shop deep within the once forbidden Palace. They, the younger generations, are among the descendents of the same rural poor Mao championed before he became a surreal fact of his own imagination. Their distant cousins at several removes suffer in the remote provinces, some stealing into the capital city to work for scant pay, with irregular sleep and meager rations, to build the new, pseudo-modern buildings that will sell Buicks and Audis, Kentucky Fried Chicken and other Western poisons. They kill our dogs; we kill their children.

In the end, so to speak, the Magic Kingdom is everywhere. The postmodern China that Mao made possible is itself an imitation of the Western idea of the Good. Beijing is not yet Mumbai, but lord knows it is trying; and, if this, then Dubai cannot be far behind—the world as indoor mall, reality as shopping, truth as denial of the suffering one can see from the hotels late at night as peasants, chilled to the bone, work on pouring the foundations of the Kingdom.

It is not easy to get to Blacksburg, Virginia. Flying requires a series of hub connects. Driving is through the mountains. Blacksburg is a remote oasis on the wrong side of the mountains that separate the Blue Ridge playground from Appalachian poverty.

What made the slaughter of so many students and faculty at Virginia Tech so senseless was, in part, that it happened here. For a time, the world moved to Blacksburg to gawk at the terrible pain. In time, the dead will be forgotten in the system of death that moves on inexorably without ending.

I have lost a child to another kind of violence. I do not minimize the suffering of parents who lost children that terrible day. But in time's slow progress, life triumphs, for what that may be worth. Those who get through the pain will allow their dead to find their places in a time the living cannot, and must not, understand. Fast time or slow, all time, as Levinas and Heidegger taught, is the time of non-being. The dead measure what progress there might be.

Blacksburg shocks, still now and for a while longer, because it is so remote in a world where, the well-connected believe everything is connected. The rural poverty of the western Virginias is Appalachian, which in turn is a comparable to Eastern Hunan where Mao started out with the best of intentions on few clues as to what was and was not real History.

The rage that pushed a boy from Korea to murder innocents who, to him, no doubt, looked like all the faceless others who had, in his mind, tormented him is like unto the rage in all human beings. The normals hold it in. The paranormals pretend it is not there. The abnormals succumb to it. Normal violence is a terrible thing. It is the lifeblood of the modern world. Once it pours out of open wounds it drowns the pain.

Today, as for several centuries, normal violence is done in the name of class, ideals, values and all the rest of the purported realities by which this world has been organized since, say, 1500 or so, when the Iberians sailed for their India and the Mings built their Forbidden City. What were they escaping? Who were they sheltering themselves from? What makes them so different from the rest of us who have been invented in the wake of the modern illusion?

Blacksburg is not terrorism. It is not even murder. It is but one of the realities of a world that Baudrillard, among many others, saw dimly in 1968 and Mao, among many others, must have dimly figured out when he tried, in 1969, to stop the violence he had begun. Time moves, ever more now than then, in odd, tangential ways and speeds. It may even be reversible, but it certainly cannot be taken back. A thousand mile march may begin with a single step. But if its drummer beats too hard, the march will not end well.

Mao looks out on us as the reminder of what moderns wanted—a republic of peoples the world over. It is, instead, a state of continuous violence. If, as Baudrillard put it, we accept this world as a radical illusion, then, who knows—might we begin to live as people can?