

Baudrillard's The Agony of Power

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April 25, 2022

Abstract

For Baudrillard, absolute Evil today comes from an excess of Good, of technological development, of totalitarian morality, of the desire to do Good without opposition. The attempt to force the world into a globalized and integrated society merely has the opposite effect of generating an ideological “Axis of Evil” in the form of terrorism. But there can be no axis of Evil, Baudrillard insists, because evil does not have a direction; only Good—i.e. the global dominance of the free market, etc.—can have a forward, linear direction.

Evil is more of a parallax, or a deviance, so it cannot even be opposed to the Good. Only Good can have an axis, a direction, so the “axis of evil” is something that is projected upon the Evil in order to justify the Good as ideology. When you fight Evil militarily with a frontal attack, you can only miss it.

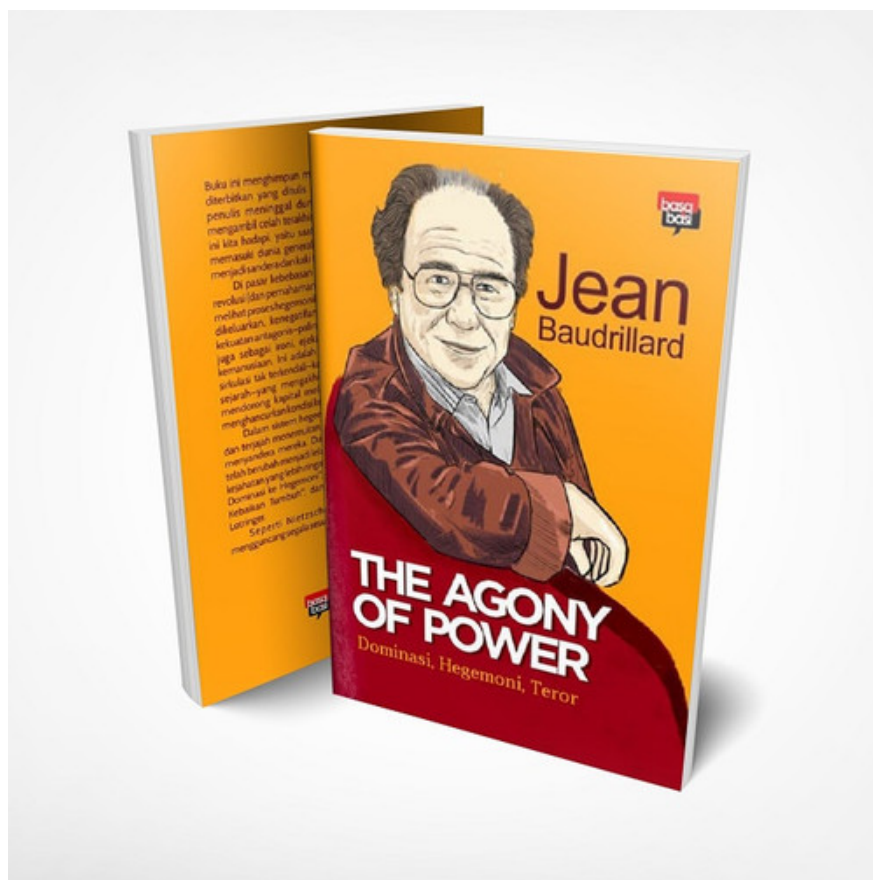


Figure 1: This is a caption

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The more this forced integration by hegemonic society increases, the more these rogue events, or singularities, will strike back against it: people, such as Iran or Palestine, will exclude themselves from the world order before they are excluded. We will see more and more people exiling themselves from this forced community and striking back at it through terrorism.

We have, in short, entered into the age of the despair of having everything. “If lack and servitude characterized earlier societies, opulence and free markets characterize our society, which has entered its terminal phase and is ready for intensive care.”

Human beings in this world order have been rendered obsolete by the perfection of our machines. “The world no longer needs us,” he says. Human beings have become the weak link in the chain of technological progress, for we have managed to surpass ourselves with our own machines. The choice seems to lie between either our disappearing or our being “humanengineerized”

The kidnapping of human intelligence at the hands of artificial intelligence took place when the government refused MacArthur the use of the Atomic bomb during the Korean wars as it plugged data into its computers in order to calculate what the outcome might be and the data came back negative. The end result, ever since, has been the capturing of human intelligence by artificial intelligence. The human has become dangerously obsolete in the new scale and size of this society of perfection and efficiency of machinery.

Baudrillard insists in this book that the true aim of globalization is actually the complete liquidation of values, either by consensus or force. The West, furthermore, demands that everyone else play the same game and liquidate their own values, as well. We create a desire in these other cultures to enter history through giving them access to the global market, implementing international institutions, causing national conflicts, and so on, but the problem is that other cultures have not yet even realized the stage of “history” and “reality” that the West has left behind with its descent into ultra-reality.

In *The Agony of Power*, Baudrillard deconstructs our current global situation to demonstrate that we, as societies, have internalised our own enslavement to the extent that we gate-keep our own prison cells. This might sound excessive at first. But, as always with Baudrillard, he has a pesky way of unveiling uncomfortable truths.

First, there is the distinction between domination and hegemony. Domination, Baudrillard says, is the old method of social control. But Hegemony is something new. Hegemony is when the system of control escapes the control of any single human or group and becomes systematised and internalised. For me, a good example of this might be our financial system. Presumably, once designed to serve us, we now serve it. In other words, our symbols have been turned against us. By us.

It reminded me of what Alan Watts observed of the Great Depression:

Remember the Great Depression of the Thirties? One day there was a flourishing consumer economy, with everyone on the up-and-up; and the next, unemployment, poverty and bread lines. What happened? The physical resources of the country – the brain, brawn, and raw materials – were in no way depleted, but there was a sudden absence of money, a so-called financial slump.

Complex reasons for this kind of disaster can be elaborated at length by experts on banking and high finance who cannot see the forest for the trees. But it was just as if someone had come to work on building a house and, on the morning of the depression, the boss had said, “Sorry, baby, but we can’t build today. No inches.” “

Whaddya mean, no inches? We got wood, we got metal, we even got tape measures.”

“Yeah, but you don’t understand business. We been using too many inches and there’s just no more to go around.”

Baudrillard goes on to explain how our state of hegemony means that we cannot fight against power, because it is tangled up in us, and is, to some extent, us. We are in an awful spaghetti of mashed-up signs and mangled symbols. A situation where the powerful can exhibit the horrors of their operations in broad daylight because the signs we would use to topple it are broken and warped.

In the excerpt above, Baudrillard begins to touch on the theories he expands much further in the excellent (and overwhelming) *Simulacra and Simulation*. I want to cover that book in more detail in a forthcoming review, but suffice to say that Baudrillard thinks we are living in simulation of reality. Not a computer simulation (although that is an adequate metaphor), but one constructed in language.

This constructed reality is one where signs have become corrupt. We end up, as obvious examples, with paradoxical linguistic constructs like “Clean Coal” or “Extraordinary Rendition”. Then we reach further and further into further linguistic abstractions when nations go to war with a noun.

In *The Agony of Power*, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard spoke about our transition from a system of “domination” (based on alienation, revolt, revolution) to a world of generalized “hegemony” (in which everyone becomes both hostage and accomplice of the global market). The intense political instability, social anxiety, and economic uncertainty that has come to characterize our era is a product of this transition.

In an era when revolution is no longer possible, notions of incremental struggle through material change become once again relevant. Architecture offers a distinctive method for structural critique and positive assertion; a way of understanding how the built environment enforces and reinforces social power relations, and – crucially – how we can intervene in this process.

In this book, Jean Baudrillard takes the final crack at the confusing situation we are currently facing, which is when we leave the system of “domination” and enter the world of generalized “hegemony” where everyone is a hostage and an accomplice to the global market.

In the market for political and sexual freedom, where the possibility of revolution (and our understanding of it) disappears, Jean Baudrillard sees the hegemonic process as the only beginning.

Once removed, negativity returns from within us as an antagonistic force—most clearly in the phenomenon of terrorism, but also as an irony, ridicule, and symbolic liquidation of all human values.

This is the dimension of hegemony characterized by unrestrained circulation—capital, goods, information, or historical structures—that puts an end to the very concept of exchange and pushes capital beyond its limits: to the point where it destroys the conditions of its own existence.

In a hegemonic system, those who are alienated, oppressed, and colonized find themselves on the side of the system that holds them hostage.

In a paradoxical moment where history has turned into a joke, domination itself appears to be a lesser evil.

Baudrillard’s attitude to power, law, culture, sovereignty and politics, changed in this mid-1970s “punk” period. The agony of power was as much about the power of agony. In his own agonising introduction to *The Agony of Power* Lotringer claims powerfully, and in my view correctly, that Baudrillard’s two key ideas throughout his work were that, firstly, reality had disappeared and became replaced by simulacra and secondly that there was a potential symbolic challenge in this disappearance. This mid-1970s period is crucial for understanding Baudrillard’s work for the rest of his life, and especially its political implications for us here, desperately trying to jack into the claustropolitan trajectories of the catastrophic (Redhead, 2011), today. What can be labelled Jean Baudrillard’s “post-punk” work is revealed in all its glory in *The*

Agony of Power, a book praised from within by Lotringer as nothing less than Baudrillard's "intellectual testament".

Baudrillard's *The Agony of Power* offers a different view of sovereignty and power from the classical legal conception of power, often reproduced in major works of legal philosophy and sociology of law. Baudrillard's perspective is a form of the "patasociology" hailed by Jacques Donzelot, who worked with Baudrillard at the University of Nanterre. Whilst there are many interesting books in the excellent Nomikoi: Critical Legal Thinkers series produced by Routledge, the orthodoxy of the "critical legal thinkers" chosen on law, politics and power contrasts with Baudrillard's "late style" work on these issues. There are books, so far, on Carl Schmitt, Giorgio Agamben, Louis Althusser, Niklas Luhmann, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, amongst many others, but none on Baudrillard.

In all this posthumous work, especially in *The Agony of Power*, Baudrillard offers up a unique theory of power incorporating what he calls "a double refusal" – the sovereign's refusal to dominate as well as the subject's refusal to be dominated. As he points out in *Carnival and Cannibal* in a passage repeated word for word from *The Agony of Power* (and partially extracted by Semiotext(e) as the quote on the back cover of *The Agony of Power*) the radicality of his thinking is in the argument that power itself has to be abolished. Baudrillard claims:

It is power itself that has to be abolished – and not just in the refusal to be dominated, which is the essence of all traditional struggles, but equally and as violently in the refusal to dominate. For domination implies both these things, and if there were the same violence or energy in the refusal to dominate, we would long ago have stopped dreaming of revolution. And this tells us why intelligence cannot – and never will be able to – be in power: because it consists precisely in this twofold refusal (Baudrillard, 2010b: 17-18).

The refusal to dominate, or to exercise sovereign power, according to Sylvere Lotringer, seeking to illustrate Baudrillard's theory at its most banal, can be seen in the agonies of those involved in the revolts of May '68 or the activities of the "post-political" Italian Autonomists in the 1970s. They were, in Baudrillard's theory, according to Lotringer's interpretation, less than confident in wanting to dominate – they agonised about power, in both their resistance to sovereignty and their unwillingness to become involved in its exercise. Indeed, as Baudrillard says emphatically, "power itself is an embarrassment and there is no one to assume it truly" (Baudrillard 2010a: 82).

In two of his final texts – *Carnival and Cannibal* and *The Agony of Power* – written shortly before his death in 2007, Jean Baudrillard describes a newer "order of simulacra" which is the phase of irony, parody and the carnivalesque.¹⁵ Baudrillard upgrades his concepts of simulacra, simulation, and hyper-reality into a cogent diagnosis of the self-parodistic stage of Western society. Simulation or hyper-reality is no longer the artificial staging of a so-called reality by the models and codes which precede it. Simulation is now a farce, an immense irony, a masquerade, a funhouse-mirror distortion of the previous values and ideals of modernism: freedom, culture, truth, humanitarianism. "Every signification is eliminated in its own sign," writes Baudrillard in *The Agony of Power*, "and the profusion of signs parodies a by now unobtainable reality... Power is only the parody of the signs of power – the cannibalization of reality by signs."¹⁶ The values of the West and of America degenerate into a caricature of themselves and devour themselves.