

An Overview of Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu's Contributions to Critical and Cultural Theory

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Introduction: A new type of critical and cultural theory to emerge from post-May 1968 France.

French critical theorist Jean Baudrillard started making commentary as a Marxist theorist, yet displayed structuralist tendencies from his earliest writings. One of the legacies of Jean Baudrillard is that he used the structuralist techniques of structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to find aggregate faults in Marxian political economy. The structural Marxist Louis Althusser was starting to integrate these two fields of intellectual inquiry in the 1950s, yet Baudrillard was using the spirit of *Course in General Linguistics*, as well as philosopher/psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*, to actually discredit orthodox Marxism as early as 1972. The post-1968 France which gave us the critical theory and contemporary continental philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Julia Kristeva, was in the most part rooted in Nietzschean characteristics rather than staunch Marxist qualities. Jean Baudrillard is typically associated with this poststructuralist trend in contemporary French thought.

French cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, on the other hand, is a little more difficult to pin down. Generally he is regarded as an early innovator in the field of a type of structuralist or poststructuralist sociology of culture. In terms of contemporary sociological theory, one can place Pierre Bourdieu's writings within the postmodern selections of social theory (along side theorists such as Foucault, Baudrillard, Appadurai, Rose, and Seidman), yet one should note that Pierre Bourdieu was never in fact a postmodernist nor a poststructuralist (as neither is a cultural theorist such as Arjun Appadurai). Pierre Bourdieu is quick

to cite the analytic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his writings. Richard Nice and Richard Shusterman have both pointed out that his texts such as *Outline of a Theory of Practice* represent a critical reaction to, yet an apogee of, Anglo-American thought.

Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* can be thought of a synthesized reaction to Immanuel Kant and Max Weber, and to Neo-French theory to emerge from post-1968 France. Pierre Bourdieu may have been one of the contemporary French theorists most grounded in (1) classical social theory and (2) German continental pursuits (as evident in his *Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, in addition to the stated Kantian and Weberian themes of *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*). Both Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu, by the 1980s, had carved their own niche in critical and cultural theory, and at that time academic buzzwords such as "habitus" and "simulacrum" were the trendiest imports from the new French intellectual scene. These cultural terms, though, have now become more like institutions, which reflect the grandeur of both Baudrillard and Bourdieu's entire bodies of academic work.

Jean Baudrillard: Hyperreality burdened by blindly seductive simulacra.

Jean Baudrillard theorizes about a postmodern, hypercapitalist world in which emphasis is now placed on consumption rather than production. In fact, in this post-Fordist environment our consumption practices have become so complex that Baudrillard has conceptualized a "sign-value" dimension to decode the myriad of code-like signs in which the advertising realm has created to sell its

product. Philosopher Karl Marx theorized of two-dimensions in classical political economy, that of "use value" and "exchange value". Gold was to have great exchange value (or economic worth), but didn't have the practical utility water had (social worth) in the practice of everyday life. This was the message preached in the historical foundations of political economy, in which we find a ménage of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx's intellectual thought.

Missing from an account of materialistic phenomena are cultural dynamics, and Jean Baudrillard expressed these dynamics so precisely in his critical theory. Classical political economists did not intend to elaborate on social activities associated with use value, yet Baudrillard as social theorist made critical cultural statements when he examined the limits of political economy in a media-saturated society. In his first two books, Baudrillard writes about the emergence of ever-present advertising and branding in mass society, and in his third book - *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* - describes the inner logic which governs the consumer's confrontation with various labels, slogans and marketing devices.

Jean Baudrillard believes that there is something symbolic taking place in our consumer society when a multi-million dollar advertising company's cigarette ads appeals to one of the masses by saying, "smoke this brand of cigarette if you want to be one of the elite", when in fact this corporation is telling every consumer the same homogenized message. When we see this brand of cigarettes plastered on billboards and in between magazine spreads, we immediately associated the name with this social constructed message, and therefore Baudrillard theorizes of a

"sign value" to account for the symbolic character of this product. When the consumer gives in to the corporately informed slogan, and buys a pack of this brand of cigarette, we have the beginnings of symbolic exchange and Jean Baudrillard's critical inquiry into agency-rich "cultural metaphysics" (a term coined by commentator Charles Levin). Part of the critique Baudrillard makes about late capitalism is that not only are we inundated with commodities and their signifiers created by the advertising sector, but the actual signifiers point to one another and the actual corporeal tie from signifier to signified has been broken. We have become lost in a land of signs that have no resolution or grounding in Fordist production techniques and we are now disillusioned (like Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno was) by the warped product placement found in these signs motivating behavior.

For Jean Baudrillard, postmodernity may very well entail the widespread collusion of disparate signifiers. In *The Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard writes that actually "the sign no longer designates anything at all. It approaches its true structural limit which is to refer back only to other signs. All reality then becomes the place of a semiurgical manipulation, of a structural simulation". (Poster pg. 128; Kellner pg. 50) Jean Baudrillard is attempting to get the point across that there is in fact no referential tied to many of the innumerable signs which subliminally confront us in the public sphere. Philosopher and cultural theorist Douglas Kellner finds that Baudrillard as social commentator uses this type of postmodern rhetoric in order to express to his audience that "we have entered a new stage in history, in which sign control is almost complete and

totalitarian”. (ibid) Jean Baudrillard has seen the sign emerge from three different stages or eras in modern world history, which starts with the Renaissance, progresses with mass industrialization and concludes with "code" ridden postmodernity. This contrasts with the traditional three stage model of feudalism-mercantilism-capitalism developed by French historian Fernand Braudel, because capitalist industrialization is not the final stage in human history for Baudrillard: there is still a culturally distinct "hyperreality" that progresses after this ideology reaches full maturity.

A closer examination of Jean Baudrillard’s coded signs and semiotics is warranted, and their genesis in the French structuralist tradition should be discussed. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard writes that “sign value is to symbolic exchange what exchange value (economic) is to use value” and describes it in the equation of $S_gEV/S_bE = E_cEv/UV$ (Poster pg. 63). Such a formula has structural elements that bear an uncanny resemblance to philosopher Jacques Lacan’s algorithms of metonymy and metaphor in “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious”. In Lacan's *Ecrits* we are presented with the metonymy formula $f(S...S')S=S(-)s$ as a result of the Lacanian thesis that a signified can have multiple signifiers (for instance two identical bathrooms consisting of only a toilet and a sink, one labeled “ladies” and the other labeled “gentlemen” [Richter pg. 1048]). In *For a Critique The Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard builds on Jacques Lacan's post-structuralism and posits that “A signifier may refer to many signifieds, or vice versa: the principle of equivalence, ergo of exclusion and reduction, which roots the arbitrariness of the sign, remains

untouched. While still opposing itself as radically as ever to *ambivalence*, *equivalence* has simply transmuted into *polyvalence*.” (Poster pg. 84) What we have developing in Baudrillard's poststructuralist and postmodernist world is a clustering of signifiers, which although at a particular time pointed to one signified now reflect off one another, perpetuating each other's livelihood.

A recurring theme in Jean Baudrillard's literature is the Saussure-inspired idea of interplay and juxtaposition among *langue* and *parole*. In *Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition: Part 6 - Modernism and the Age of Analysis*, commentator Louis Markos explains how *parole* is a specific act of speech act or writing whereas the *langue* is the "overarching" deep-seeded pursuit of language (a structure). Baudrillard incorporates Claude Levi-Strauss' late structuralist development of analyzing social phenomena synchronically as well as diachronically. Although Saussure's linguistics is the motivation for this multidirectional way of analyzing structures (thinking vertically as well as horizontally, historically as well as ahistorically, and incorporating the belief that all language is arbitrary and that elements of linguistic signifiers only have meaning in a "greater system or structure of similarities and differences." [Markos]) Jean Baudrillard throughout his *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* cites Emile Benveniste as the semiotician who is chiefly influential in his work. Philosopher Roland Barthes is another figure who plays a central role in Baudrillard's conceptualizing of the deviant logic of the signified in this work. In *The System of Objects*, Saussure's "langue" and "parole"

directly account for the social standing of Jean Baudrillard's postmodern subject (a theme which resonates with qualities of Pierre Bourdieu).

What was symbolic and simulated in the Jean Baudrillard of the 1980s became "the virtual" with the emergence of information technologies of the 1990s. Baudrillard started making critical commentary under the guise of neo-Marxian social theory in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and found himself a major figure in contemporary cultural theory by the late 1980s with his concept of simulacrum. However, when his notion of the virtual emerged to socio-culturally make sense of the phenomenon of the internet in the 1990s, Jean Baudrillard became one of the world's preeminent media theorists (a new Marshall McLuhan of sorts). Jean Baudrillard writes in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* that "McLuhan saw that the real message, the *real ultimatum*, lay in reproduction itself, and that production, as such, has no meaning: its social finality gets lost in seriality. Simulacra surpass history." (Poster 2001, pg. 141) Jean Baudrillard also mentions the relevance of cultural critic Walter Benjamin's study of mechanical reproduction in such a line of pursuit during *Symbolic Exchange and Death*.

In the theory and methods of cultural studies, one finds referenced Baudrillard's notion of "simulacrum" as proto-media studies, and his theory was introduced in the context of Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan's seminal studies in the interdisciplinary field. What further study of Baudrillard's concept of the simulated has taught me is that "media-steered systems" (as theorized by Jurgen Habermas) are inextricably linked to the economic sphere's activities.

Jean Baudrillard describes how one can feign an illness and really feel just fine inside, but when he simulates an illness, he feels real symptoms. "Media-steered systems" are vulnerable to such simulated risks, and when symptoms are felt there is an aggregates shift in the economic sphere. Jean Baudrillard approaches such activity on a micro-level (by debunking myths of the governing logic of economic agents) in his second book, which I would like to discuss next.

Part of what makes Jean Baudrillard's *Consumer Society* memorable is his critique of the "Homo Economicus" rationale. At the marketplace, neo-classical Oxbridge economics assumed the consumer would act rationally and attempt to maximize Benthamite marginal utility in a non-zero sum fashion (acting out of a type of Machiavellian self-interest.) Baudrillard responds to this orthodoxy in three ways. First, by citing John Kenneth Galbraith's *New Industrial State* (1967) he points out structural inconsistencies in the aggregate productive capacities of late industrial capitalism (which in a twist removes agency from the actual consumer and places action in the hands of transnational capitalist advertising institutions and their new paradigms).

Second, typical of a French theory guru who shamelessly promotes the continental philosophical tradition at any cost, Baudrillard debunks the Anglo-American myth of marketplace rationality on behalf of consumer alienation. Social philosopher Karl Marx originally wrote about an alienated worker, estranged from his manual labor process, yet from Jean Baudrillard's postmodern *Consumer Society* we get the sense that the consumer is inundated with capitalistic messages, codes and signifiers which are intended to sell the scads of

commodities forced upon him - which emphasizes an entirely different phase than the process of labor. There is then a new moment of stalling or deferment, not from inside the factory of mass production, but actually from within the realm of the marketplace and its cornucopia of choices manifested in the form of signs. We can see how Jean Baudrillard is building off of economist Thorstein Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption" (because it represents historical intellectual thought that borders on irrationality or abnormality at the marketplace) much more than he is appropriating the mass culture critiques of the Frankfurt School.

Third, Jean Baudrillard locates classical social theorist Max Weber's notion of the Protestant work ethic which has traditionally thought to be integral to the perpetuation of capitalism, and gives examples about how "themes of expenditure, pleasure, and non-calculation ("Buy now, pay later") have replaced the "puritan" themes of thrift, work, and patrimony". (Poster 2001, pg. 53) One finds in social inquiry that the historical Weberian theory of the wage worker laboring in excess is a response of someone uncertain of his salvation. In such a case, the intensity of this individual's work ethic is supposed to serve as a sign to God of that individual's commitment and devotion. Since the individual is not sent divine messages of reassurance, he may very well assume the worst and work furiously throughout his entire life (thinking he has much to prove to the higher power).

There only adds to the great deal of irrationality associated with the productive forces which generate the entire sphere of commodities that Jean Baudrillard critiques. Capitalists acts irrational (Galbraith), workers act irrational

(Weber), and Baudrillard finds that consumers totally absorbed by the referential-weak signifiers of commodities will also act this way. The consumer on a buying binge thanks to his or her new credit card is certainly now acting irrational, although this is a different type of rationality than discussed in the decision theory context as presented in the second example. Jean Baudrillard locates the banality of evil in the advertising sector once again in this third case, and gives the instance of Americans running to stores to purchase air conditioners to replace fans in the 1950s. Although such a case involves an increase in spending due to technological advancement, Baudrillard was more obsessed by the symbolism involved in the fact that such an advancement was coordinated so well with a mass capitalist marketing scheme to ensure an "economic boom" for the entire country.

Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural solidarity expressed through habitus.

Cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu writes in "Social Space and Symbolic Power" that "Habitus is both a system of schemes of production of practices and a system of perception and appreciation of practices" (1989 pg. 19) and that social reality is constructed collectively (in the form of norms and class) just as it can be individually. There is a type of Durkheimian social solidarity reminiscent when Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes about class concordance. In fact, the Third Volume of philosopher Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* comes to an abrupt stop when the issue of "class" is approached. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu gives the quintessential cultural account of "class symbolization" (as phrased by social theorist David Gartman), picking up where Karl Marx left off, yet

with entirely different methods (which are in fact rooted in the “Class, Status, Party” writings of Max Weber).

What Pierre Bourdieu does in his cultural theory is develop the concept of a dual "high-brow/low-brow" culture and examines "conspicuous consumption" *ad infinitum*. The aesthetic preferences and consumption habits of various educated French citizens are analyzed, and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* should be admired in part for its high theory and in part for its intensive ethnographic methods. Pierre Bourdieu shows how individuals with an especially high level of education or cultural producers do not, for instance, listen to Strauss' "Blue Danube" while manual workers and the undereducated for the most part do. (Bourdieu 1984, pg. 17) This relates to the Frankfurt School's critical theory of a homogenized mass culture, where there is only a power elite that is not hypnotized by the banality of the deceptive and barbaric culture industry and its standardized artistic product.

Like Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu uses symbolic devices aimed at codifying the spirit of late industrial capitalism, and theorizes of an educational capital whose endowment can help one recognize when there is any type of kitschy and commercial low-brow commodification taking place in artistic production via the culture industry. For example, Pierre Bourdieu once again uses the "Blue Danube" as representative low-brow art. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* was first published in 1979, and the research done by Pierre Bourdieu on the French public was done in the 1960s. In 1968 Stanley Kubrick used the "Blue Danube" in a blockbuster motion picture (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), and French intellectuals may

have been attempting to distance themselves from corporate Hollywood when acknowledging in surveys that they listen to 'Well-Tempered Clavier' rather than this composition. The "Blue Danube" may have symbolized, at the time of Pierre Bourdieu's fieldwork, a proto-'Hollywoodization' (that would lead to sociologist and social theorist George Ritzer's "McDonaldization") of society, and French cultural producers would therefore be much more likely to despise such American hegemony than wage workers who don't have as much education capital or stake in their nation's legacy.

Pierre Bourdieu writes in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that "the higher one rises in the social hierarchy, the more one's tastes are shaped by the organization and operation of the education system". (1984 pg. 67) Cultural institutions play a key role in the social structure of space for Bourdieu. Education is the cultural institution that provides legitimating appeal, providing credentials to a rather small group out of an entire mass of citizens. Not only does this institution provide legitimating appeal, it sets standards. Pierre Bourdieu writes that "There is such a thing as bad taste...and persons of refinement know this instinctively. For those who do not, rules are needed". (ibid) Bourdieu references poststructuralist Roland Barthes when he uses the term "scholastic acquisition" in the realm of "cultural capital", and emphasizes that the only factor that is as important as educational history when determining artistic success is social origin.

Towards the end of Pierre Bourdieu's earlier *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1972), the Second Volume of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* is brought up. Bourdieu references the distinction Marx made between labor time and production time.

Traditionally in agrarian societies, cultural anthropologists observed that there was nothing much significant (in terms of activity) emerging from the nine or so idle months of production time that Karl Marx theorized about in *Capital* Volume II. In Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, on the other hand, observed was the fact that in the case of the Kabylia people of Algeria, the practices taking place during the time of production carried symbolic value. From observation, we can deduce that Bourdieu and Baudrillard intersect on the notion of the symbolic. Where Baudrillard theorizes about symbolic exchange, Bourdieu conceived of the symbolic capital which complemented and possibly even historically informs such a process. However, part of what in fact inspired Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic capital", as first expressed in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, is cultural theorist Marcel Mauss' own earlier theory of "gift" exchange.

The final pages of *Outline of a Theory of Practice* are spent discussing the strange process in which economic capital is transmuted into "symbolic capital". Pierre Bourdieu brings up Marxian themes such as surplus values as well as Nietzschean themes such as the debtor/creditor and makes the claim that although these terms are traditionally used for materialist lines of pursuit, they may also carry over to the hazy world of the symbolic (we may in fact say there is a symbolic surplus value on an occasion, or a symbolic debt may be felt somewhere). Bourdieu actually re-distinguishes a third realm to accompany "economic" and "symbolic capital", that of "cultural capital". The two fields that Pierre Bourdieu links to "cultural capital" in this particular context are artistic endeavoring and the educational establishment. Bourdieu writes that "academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to

economic capital”. (1977 pg. 187) Bourdieu describes a type of motionlessness that exists in the cultural sphere (from an unbiased perspective) because once a cultural producer has their academic credentials, there is no need to constantly prove others of their acknowledged abilities or seek recertification through the educational establishments and institutions which granted them their original privileged cultural status.

In using "habitus" to see how an indigenous culture works in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu often finds himself juxtaposing binary opposites in a Derridean fashion (Bourdieu mentions continental philosopher Jacques Derrida, in the context of Immanuel Kant's Third *Critique*, in the post script of *Distinction*). For example, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* contains several charts in which the wet season of the Kabylia is opposed to the dry season, the cultural practices of the male are compared to the female, day is contrasted to night, moon juxtaposed to sun, hot is compared to cold, etc. These dichotomous elements of social life help to isolate and pursue Pierre Bourdieu's overarching theme of "habitus" (the black and white way of looking at culture make one want to build a grey bridge between the objective and subjective)

The structuralist thought of authors Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss is as important to the intellectual development of Pierre Bourdieu as it was to Jean Baudrillard, and the structuralist concept of synchronicity once again is broached in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Pierre Bourdieu introduces this method when analyzing the calendars of the natives of the Algerian culture he was studying. He writes, “The social calendar tends to secure integration by compounding the

synchronization of identical practices with the *orchestration* of different but structurally homologous practices”. (1977 pg. 163) Bourdieu presents such a statement in a section on *doxa* where he presents a collective world view that incorporates Empedoclean notion of heterodoxy and orthodoxy.

In the case of the indigenous Algerian tribe, during the last days of the dry season certain ages of men find themselves in fields doing preparatory work in the form of sowing. If we take the framework developed in some of the later Bourdieu, we can say that these Kabyle men have their own world view, and form their own social group within the culture because of large amount of hours spent together laboring. The next developmental stage concerns class: since these workers spend so much time together, their consumption preferences might become homogenous.

Outline of a Theory of Practice is a work in anthropology, not consumerism, yet we find some of the early signs and tendencies of *Distinction* in this book.

Pierre Bourdieu as French social theorist in relation to the world of economics and its capitalism helps give one a better perspective on what type of logic the "culture" of capitalism works by. In order carry this forward, one may have to learn some of what Bourdieu eloquently states in *Distinction*. However, his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* has an entirely different thesis. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu theorizes that the Kabyle shooting their rifles during marriage ceremonials symbolizes something greater than the physical union of those two people, and I thought this was indeed unique to read in light of Jean Baudrillard's extensive writings on the "economy" of the symbolic.

Closing Statement: Post-9/11 relevance and cultural critiques - Jean Baudrillard's *Spirit of Terrorism* and Pierre Bourdieu's *Tyranny of the Market*.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan ushered in a new phase of global capitalism, one that involved the concept of reform. Both Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu were alive to witness these historic events in 2001, although Bourdieu passed away the next year in France (at the time of his death he was considered one of the world's preeminent intellectuals). Jean Baudrillard, since the late 1970s, was obsessed with the architectural design of the Twin Towers in New York City and what they symbolized. Immediately following the terrorist attacks he was asked to write a book on the event, as was cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek, and he in part started promoting a controversial theory that America may have somehow encouraged terrorists to attack the skyscrapers that symbolized its global economic dominance, so that it could possibly exert its hegemonic military muscle abroad and rebuild at home as though it had never been challenged in the first place.

In the post-9/11 world, we may find the need for integrating Karl Marx's theory back into international capitalist reform. Whereas the relevance of Karl Marx was left dwindling after May of 1968, his influence may very well be called for again since the 9/11 attacks, and we should look for shifts in the style of Jean Baudrillard's social critique to meet that cultural need in civil society. Recently Baudrillard has published on the art world, and the pursuit of Marxian aesthetics would be a welcomed development by the Frenchman. In his virtual dimension of media and cultural theory, as well as in his early grounding in Marxian political economy, one finds Jean Baudrillard a social theorist fit for the contemporary world. As far as Pierre Bourdieu is concerned, one may in fact find

that the concept of "habitus" can help society understand the governing behavior of the cultural dimensions and limits involved with this rather new collective endeavor we call capitalist globalization.

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