It Would Be Nice To Be A Terrorist

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Throughout the 1970s, Baudrillard was an unrepentant terrorist. He killed the idea of the "real", took theories of reference hostage and made demands that the hegemony of the global system of power be destroyed by forcing it to commit suicide. In his 1981 collection *Simulacra and Simulations* (trans. 1994), for example, he wrote: "If being a nihilist, is carrying, to the unbearable limit of hegemonic systems, this radical trait of derision and of violence, this challenge that the system is summoned to answer through its own death, then I am a terrorist and nihilist in theory as the others are with their weapons" (1994:163). But he regretted that to hold such a sentiment under the current system is simply "utopian": "Because it would be beautiful to be a nihilist, if there were still a radicality - as it would be nice to be a terrorist, if death, including that of the terrorist, still had a meaning" (163).

For Baudrillard, then, the meaning of terrorism remained an impossibility because the terrorism of the hegemonic order had neutralised all forms of meaning including that of death - one of the central themes of Baudrillard's most important 1976 work *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993). But that did not negate the potential symbolic value of terrorism as a threat to an increasingly dominant technological regime that continued to either destroy or negate any form of otherness that it encountered. That is because terrorism provided a symbolic "counter-gift" (1993:36) to a system that itself dominated by propagating "the gift without counter-gift" (36) in the form of the gift of work, the gift of the media and messages "to which, due to the monopoly of the code, nothing is allowed to retort" (36) and the gift of the social in all of its institutional and personal forms. Since this form of gift without return produced the death of meaning because it refers only to itself and the death of the social, the only logical response (in Baudrillard's view) would be to reverse the power relation by giving the system itself a gift to which it could not respond. Paradoxically, the system itself would be forced into a reply in an attempt to maintain power and, in doing so, would destroy itself.

Looked at in a formal sense, then, terrorism in the 1970s and right through until 2001 was of a different order to that of today. At that time, one of the main power games played by the terrorist was the taking of hostages. According to Baudrillard, two things could happen. First, the terrorists would attempt to negotiate, in which "the terrorists themselves often entered into this exchange scenario in terms of calculated equivalence (the hostages' lives against some ransom or liberation, or indeed for the prestige of the operation alone)" (1993:37). In this case, the terrorists make the tactical error of trying to play the power brokers at their own game - at the level of exchange values, the very language of technological capitalism. This had the effect of robbing both the hostage and the terrorist of their symbolic power, thereby neutralising the act of terrorism itself by playing it out on the stage set up in advance by the system. In other words, the system was able to respond in its own terms and was not forced into symbolic self-destruction. It could simply buy the terrorists off.

In fact, this was one of Baudrillard's main complaints against the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein in his controversial essay *The Gulf War Will Not Take Place* (1995), originally published on 4 January 1991 in the French daily *Liberation* shortly before the outbreak of hostilities in the Gulf on 16 January of that year. Hussein, said Baudrillard, had "vulgarised everything" (1995:25) by commercialising the hostage situation. The hostages that had been taken by the Iraqi military were strategically positioned at missile silos and other sites that would be obvious targets for the US-led allied strike. The promise of release was offered for a cessation of hostilities in the phoney war that took place both before and after the Christmas holiday that year. Baudrillard saw the whole scenario as a betrayal of both war and international terrorism:

> The warriors bury themselves in the desert leaving only hostages to occupy the stage, including all of us information hostages on the world media stage. The hostage is the phantom actor, the extra who occupies the powerless stage of war. Today, it is the hostage at the strategic site, tomorrow the hostage as Christmas present, as exchange value and liquidity. Fantastic degradation of that which was the very figure of impossible exchange…the grotesque vaudeville played by Saddam Hussein is a diversion, at once a diversion of both war and international terrorism. His soft terrorism will at least have put an end to the hard terrorism of Palestinians and others, thereby showing him to be in this as in many other respects the perfect accomplice of the West (24-25).

The second strategy that the terrorist could pursue would be hostage taking without negotiation, or what Baudrillard describes above as "hard terrorism". By making negotiation impossible, the situation becomes symbolic. Baudrillard argues that the only course of action open to the system is to physically kill the terrorists. But this is precisely what the terrorists themselves have staked in the game and so the violence that is enacted against them does not respond to their challenge - it's a kind of heads the terrorists win because they achieve their goal of death, tails the system loses because it gives the terrorists what they want by killing them. By killing the terrorists, then, the system effectively kills itself - by which I take him to mean that the system is forced to sacrifice its value of and basis in equal exchange. It can offer nothing that corresponds to the voluntary death of the terrorist. The only equal exchange would be its own death in return. Such a suicide of the system is "manifest in its disarray and defeat" (37) rather than its

physical disappearance as we shall see later in our discussion of 11 September. Terrorism, then, both reflects the repressive violence of the system and provides a symbolic model of violence that the system cannot enact itself: suicide.

Baudrillard has repeatedly maintained that the closer the system of technological, global capitalism is to perfection, the more vulnerable it is to symbolic destruction. The smallest reversal is magnified in the imagination into the catastrophic collapse of the entire system because it reveals its inherent weakness. In that sense, a single act of "hard terrorism" should be capable of bringing the system into disrepute, disarray and finally (self) destruction. But this has quite clearly not been the case. Any terrorist activity up until 11 September 2001 had left everything exactly as it was before. The impasse in Northern Ireland, for example, remained indecisive as long as symbolic acts of terrorism dominated the scene. While the system was only able to respond to individual acts of violence - the "challenge" of terrorism - either by the physical death of the terrorists involved or their incarceration, the system persistently failed to suicide itself in response. In the end, it neutralised the symbolic threat posed by the terrorists by bringing them into the conventional politics of the exchange system in which it operates - non-violent negotiation. Baudrillard was quite simply wrong, a fact that he effectively accepted by calling both his analysis and his wish to be a terrorist "utopian" under the then current regime.

Baudrillard's most recent article on the subject - *The Spirit of Terrorism* - was published by the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* on 2 November 2001 as a direct response to the terrorists strikes against the World Trade Centre in the US on 11 September of that year. The impact of the attack on New York was immediate and massive. At the time, there were an estimated 7,000 people dead or missing. New York's infrastructure was shattered: "…buildings, transport systems, fixed-line and mobile telephone networks were all destroyed within minutes. Richard Ellis, the property agency, estimates 2.4 million square metres of office space were rendered unusable" (Piper 2001:11). Eighteen suicide terrorists had struck at the real and symbolic heart of America with breath-taking audacity and effect. Al-Qaeda's attack inaugurated a new age of global terrorism.

Even though the language of Baudrillard's article is striking for its consistency with his own previous theoretical terrorism against the system, he leaves us in little doubt that "the conditions of analysis" (2002:4) have been permanently altered by the event he calls a "Manhattan disaster movie" (29). Now, we find that the world is speeding up. The "events strike" of the 1990s is off. In the terrorist attack on New York - Baudrillard has little interest in the strike against the Pentagon in Washington DC - he recognises "the absolute, irevocable event" (17) of symbolic death. This is the spirit of terrorism to which the title eludes. Yet while Baudrillard's response is both complex and wide-ranging (if a little hurried in its execution), I would like to focus on what I take to be the three major, inter-related factors that emerge from his analysis of the al-Qaeda attack on the twin towers: the symptom of antagonism that pervades the system itself and reaches its most perfect form in the creation of the new form of terrorist; the terrorists' hi-jacking of the system's modes of power; and, that it has resuscitated "both the image and the event" (27). I will conclude by looking at the way in which Baudrillard argues that the global superpower's response to the attack is a form of suicide.

Firstly, then, Baudrillard argues that everybody "without exception" (5) has dreamt of the destruction of a global superpower, and it was this secret desire that motivated the "prodigious jubilation" (4) at seeing that same superpower being destroyed. While there

were open celebrations in such countries as Pakistan and Afghanistan, Baudrillard suspects that the event's fascination for Western viewers of the spectacle was based partially on this hidden desire. Baudrillard takes as his cue the universal attraction of disaster movies. By picking symbolic targets, the terrorists were able to tap into this "deep-seated complicity" (6). But this antagonism to the system is a product of its own violence against those living under its thrall. As long as there is a dominant global and repressive system, terrorism will haunt it like its own shadow: "Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a global perfusion of terrorism, which accompanies any system of domination as though it were its shadow, ready to activate itself anywhere, like a double agent. We can no longer draw a demarcation line around it; it is at the very heart of this culture which combats it" (10). Baudrillard may point in support of his argument to the anthrax scare that followed the al-Qaeda attack - perpetrated, as it may have turned out, by disaffected US citizens.

Linked to this first point, is Baudrillard's second: that the terrorists have effectively appropriated the modes of domination in their pursuit of the systems' destruction. The very way that these terrorists have disappeared into the banality of everyday American life points to fact that they are indistinguishable in any other way from ordinary citizens: "Sleeping in their suburbs, reading and studying with their families, before activating themselves suddenly like time bombs" (19-20). Every individual has become a potential terrorist. More than that though, the actual terrorists have overtly hi-jacked every mode of aggression open to the dominant power: "Money and stock-market speculation, computer technology and aeronautics, spectacle and media networks - they have assimilated everything of modernity and globalism without changing their goal, which is to destroy that power" (19). This is the very thing that terrifies us, says Baudrillard, because while the terrorists have become rich, they have maintained their unswerving desire to eradicate us. "This", he concludes, "is a terrorism of the rich" (23).

The third and final point that I would emphasise is the special use to which Baudrillard says the terrorists have put the "image-event" (27) - "the 'real time' of images, [and] their instantaneous worldwide transmission" (27). That such an event is usually a weapon of the system gives it its power; that it is also a form of symbolic violence gives it a singularity that is unanswerable by the system itself. In the video footage of the disaster of 11 September 2001, "the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism" (29-30) are joined in an event that is unique, irreducible and beyond interpretation. What we are left with is the pure image itself and our "immoral fascination" (30) with it: "It is at one and the same time the dazzling micro-model of a kernel of real violence with the maximum possible echo - hence the purest form of spectacle - and the sacrificial model mounting the purest symbolic form of defiance to the historical and political order" (30). One has only to wonder what the event and global impact of 11 September would have been without the footage; or indeed to reflect that out of the hundred thousand Iraqi casualties in the Gulf war we saw only a single, anonymous casualty: "A photograph of a barely recognisable, blackened and charred, grimacing deathmask at the windscreen of a bombed-out vehicle" (Merrin 1994:452). No images, no event, no war, as Baudrillard wryly concluded.

Even if we can make sense of Baudrillard's analysis of the situation of terrorism after 11 September 2001, as I have argued, perhaps the most difficult aspect of his work to accept is his insistence that the system "suicides" in the face of symbolic challenge. After all, the US's campaign in Afghanistan and its recently revised foreign policy that displays

unprecedented "willingness to launch pre-emptive strikes against perceived dangers posed by tyrant states and terrorist networks" (*Financial Times* "Bush unveils first-strike US security strategy' 21-22 September 2002) suggests that the system is arming itself to destroy all opposition once and for all. Baudrillard's argument is that in doing so, the system destroys itself because it becomes something else. Not only does it face "economic, political, financial slump" (Baudrillard 2002:31) and "moral and psychological downturn"; "but [also] in the slump in the value-system, in the whole ideology of freedom, of free circulation, and so on, on which the Western world prided itself, and on which it drew to exert its hold over the rest of the world" (31-32). For example, it locks up thousands of its citizens without due legal process on the basis of their religion or race. It asks its citizens to spy on each other and to report suspicious activity to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "The global system" concludes Baudrillard, has entered "strategic fallback, carrying out a painful revision of its values - in defensive reaction, as it would seem, to the impact of terrorism, but responding, deep down, to its secret injunctions: enforced regulation as a product of absolute disorder, but a regulation it imposes on itself - internalising, as it were, its own defeat" (32-33). And who could fail to reflect on the tragic spectacle of Israel's own suicide as a free state in its violent response to the violence of Palestinian suicide bombers.

So, is the globalisation of liberalism turning into the globalisation of law and order, as Baudrillard concludes? Is George W Bush's new National Security Strategy, which preaches its own form of a "single sustainable model for national success", the ground rules for a new imperium, as Seumas Milne has recently suggested in *The Guardian*? Or to put it yet another way by borrowing an analogy from Slavoj Zizek, have we reached the same juncture as the Republic did in the blockbuster Hollywood movie sequence *Star Wars* when it turned to the dark side of the Empire? Zizek quotes George Lucas, the director of the most latest film *Star Wars: Episode II*, who asked: "How did the Republic turn into the Empire? That's paralleled with: how did Anakin turn into Darth Vader? How does a good person go bad, and how does a democracy become a dictatorship? It isn't that the Empire conquered the Republic, it's that the Empire *is* the Republic. One day Princess Leia and her friends woke up and said, 'This isn't the Republic anymore, it's the Empire. We are the bad guys.'" The way the system does all of this, as Baudrillard contests, is that it commits suicide in its failure to offer a credible response to the demands of terrorists - those who ultimately fall outside of the system's own logic. So, are we dissenters today waking up to find ourselves cast as the bad guys, the terrorists? And is it really nice to be a terrorist?

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