

# The Imperialism of the “French Theory” (about a certain Jean Baudrillard)

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## Abstract

This text is an essay. More precisely, an intellectual chronicle which objective is merely provocative. It portrays, at the same time, a homage to Jean Baudrillard and to the French thought” and a criticism to the prevailing Positivism within some research fields on Communication in Brazil, as well as a defense of free argumentation related to the probating procedures by authors.

**Key words:** imaginary; French theory; Jean Baudrillard; culture; communication theory.

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Translated by Rafael Yamaga

## Resumo

Este texto é um ensaio. Mais exatamente uma crônica intelectual cujo objetivo é meramente provocativo. Trata-se, ao mesmo tempo, de uma homenagem a Jean Baudrillard e ao “pensamento francês” e de uma crítica ao positivismo reinante em certos domínios da pesquisa em comunicação no Brasil, assim como de uma defesa da livre argumentação em relação aos procedimentos de legitimação por autores.

**Palavras-chave:** imaginário, *french theory*, Jean Baudrillard, cultura, teoria da comunicação.

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**F**RENCH THOUGHT DOMAINS the world. Notedly the North American University world. By consequence and contamination, no one is free of the French influence. It has become ordinary however, among Brazilian researchers, saying that the core of Human Sciences research, including Communication, is done in the United States and one can theorize only in English. Brazilians therefore, at first, read and valorize North Americans. In the meantime North Americans read and valorize the French. From this, comes the first tragical consequence to Brazilians: we are suffering a second hand influence. We have never been that original. Now, to make things worse, we no longer drink from the original fountain. Trend or ideology?

There was a time however, in which it was common reading and citing directly the Parisian “maîtres-à-penser”. Perhaps only the teachers and researchers from UFRF (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) keep this “nefarious” tradition. In the rest of the country the tendency is to bury the French “bad mood” against the “cultural industry” or against the “spectacle society” in the name of scientific criteria and rigorous research. Jean Baudrillard’s death in March of 2006, restarted the controversy about the (ir)relevance of the French thought and about the meanings of the word “scientific”. What is really scientific? On the better scenario, it is a rational argumentation and free of contradictions. Hardly a definitely demonstrated truth. Baudrillard was seen as a star of the “French intellos” in universities of United States. He has left some yearning to be felt. Proving that are the homages to him that don’t cease in “America”. Why is that there is a growing resistance against the French thought in Brazil, regarding Academic research? Is this related somehow to the death of certain epistemological illusions?

If artistic and intellectual France itself feels amazed by Paul Auster, James Ellroy and Philip Dick, United States, according to Thierry Bardini from Montreal, favors Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>, a man of a humble origin who has become an Academy star. One can allege a French magazine might wish highlighting the importance of a French in United States. Against this is enough saying that among the most cited and most influential theorists within United States are Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard and Jean-François Lyotard. Multiculturalism owes almost it all to Derrida’s ideas. The rupture with the academic marasmus and with the Marxist dogmas owes to Lyotard and Baudrillard. But the essential in Baudrillard is the increase of the possibilities in the intellectual statements. Thanks to him, irony has hit the stage, although several people still believe on a certain scientificity notable by total objectivity.

1. Regarding this the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* has published an excellent matter: “Cool prophète, l’hommage américain à Baudrillard”. Paris, issue 2228, 19th to 25th July, pp. 84-85.

Maybe the main question is simple enough: what is researching? The enemies of essay-writing swear it is indeed to collect data. Something like doing ethnography in any field.

Paradoxically all these “researches” fall back on a theory-filled outline. In other words, they use an essay-oriented shelter. They seek in another statement an explanation to the elements they gather. All dissertation and thesis fall back on a procedure that legitimates them, by using authors’ citation. In general, essayists, for example Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Michel Maffesoli, Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Peirce, Theodor Adorno or any other from any given age or place. Normally it is not the best argument the one that excels. It is therefore the best citation. All these are legitimating exercises for the authorship of the cited speech. It’s plain *cartorialismo*.

This is not about inventorying what was said about everything and to establish a dialogue aiming to surpass questionable hypothesis, but simply to certificate the cited authority. In that sense, Positivism domains and causes huge damages with his attachment to the lack of originality and with its prohibition to the argumentative autonomy. It’s much worth “who says” something, not “what is said” about it. There are people who wander there is no Academic criteria without explaining or legitimating footnotes. All this resembles to “signature effects”, erudition effects, certification effects, legitimating effects and academic validation effects, outward to the logic of the best argumentation. Baudrillard used to deride about that.

The opponents of French thought have reasons to be worried: the French influence is still huge. The epistemological damages are incalculable to Positivism’s progress. It would be necessary to protect the United States from this harmful contamination. For while, our researchers work based on a split of anachronistic classes: workmen bring the empirical data; the elite theorize. The result is a never shown before contradiction: data is always analyzed using foreign theories. Or foreign theories applied as interpretative layers to the “real”. In practice, most of the researches fail by absolute artificiality and limit themselves to check if a certain chunk of “reality” fits in the theory previously or randomly chosen. The biggest paradox is in the critics of the essay-writing that end up working hard to the proof of the most abstract intuitions from the essayists. Another current does the opposite: refuses on having any contact with every day life. That’s the researcher defining life’s conditions in a madhouse without even have ever stepped on a psychiatric hospital. This kind of posture has the advantage of not invalidating the best ideas with the worst expressions of the existent. If the empiricists swear only over the concrete fact, making themselves free of the unpleasant obligation of having their own ideas, theorists hate the contingent and keep on producing systems that are independent of any reference. Some of them, undoubtedly, end up providing a good literature of theoretic fiction as a sub-genre of the ideas-based romance, although the ideas are borrowed. Other ones, indeed, limit themselves to

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infinitely list the same citations, which allow them speaking all the time with a perfect awareness of the issue, but without any consequences. The “French theory” attacks both side of this useless battle. It doesn’t believe on the scientificity of the sciences, specially the human ones, and it doesn’t see on the data collection anything beyond than a journalistic enterprise. To Jean Baudrillard everything was about opinion. A theory at first, imposes itself through its inventivity, its ability to come up with new terms or concepts, through its originality, its innovative power or through its creativity. Baudrillard was against the footnotes game. He wanted to think by himself, free, radically free. He didn’t let the illusions of an impossible verification tie him up. Which is the best government system? No scientific answer is possible from the Positivist point of view. Why do people watch the Big Brother show? No hypothesis will be ever proved. The thought is hypothetical, probabilistic and always contradictory. If this is true, there is a true. But the limit of this logical truth is evident and it doesn’t work to endorse other truths from reality. For example: which is the best government system?

Researching means to produce knowledge. All the ways are good to generate knowledge: essays, research reposts, quantitative methods, qualitative ones, intuitions, formulas, argumentative chronicles, transdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, theories confront, articulation of contradictory authors, ad hoc hypothesis, whatsoever in fact that causes intensive brain activity and results in new visions of world or in new sightings over a world in discussion and permanent construction. We need a sort of smaller essayism, the intellectual chronicle, on the best Jean Baudrillard-style, associating erudition, sense of observation, intelligence, language-games and ability of “uncovering”. Thinking and researching is “un-cover”, “discover” indeed, or mainly that that is on the surface of the real. Researching is producing oddly reactions.

Baudrillard doesn’t say that everything is relative. That would be too simplistic. Too easy. With no possible return. He suggests that the verification of all the verifications is rarely done. Is there really a “French thought” or an “American thought”? Of course there’s not. Which unity would be found within the diversity that characterizes all the thinkers of a country? What is the relation between Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Baudrillard? The uniformity is always something to build up *a posteriori*, a pedagogical, reductionist and dangerous facilitation, but inevitable. Il faut faire avec. Each society chooses its unifying mechanisms. When Baudrillard passed away, the Western newscasts have announced the death of the man who had inspired The Matrix movie. It was an inversion of values. The Matrix as a sponsor of importance to Baudrillard’s own importance. The spectacle as intellectual pledge. The “cultural industry” as a guarantee or ballast for a philosophical value. It was also a symptom: the trail of the poor medias’ knowledge about the bizarre universe of the intellectuals. To notice the death of an outcast thinker, although illustrious, the media needed any kind of “attractor”. Obviously it had to be a “strange attractor”. A radical attractor.

The struggle against the French thought will need to some aggravation and will also need to use new methods. In opposition, the “French intellos” will continue as barbarian invaders, entrenched in the campus of America’s elite. For while, Baudrillard and his Nihilist compatriots are a huge Vietnam inlaid in North American territory. Worst of all is that the North Americans do not signalize the smallest resistance. There is even a process of adhesion, of “voluntary serfdom”, of complicity with the invader. It went from manipulation to seduction, from rejection to indifference, from active resistance to the passive game of acceptance. It is, in a certain way, an effect that can be diagnosed only as “Stockholm Syndrome. The defense of the North American values has been made outside the country, by colonized that are more royalty-focused than the king himself. It makes sense. After all, someone needs to believe on the metropolis’ ideology when it has already been swallowed by a virus-full and irreversible simulation process. All this, of course, is nothing but an hypothesis of medium radicalism. The “French intellos” will leave the United States as soon as the North Americans establish democracy in Iraq. According to the writer Chris Kraus, from Los Angeles, “Baudrillard was like William S. Burroughs by the end of his life – one of these rare public persons whose presence transmits a promise of happiness beyond all the literal contents.” Tim Griffin, editor-in-chief for Artforum International magazine is even clearer: “Baudrillard’s intuitions are fundamental to think and research about the mechanisms of mass culture and its wide circulation of images in reproduction”<sup>2</sup>. In this way, Jean Baudrillard, the *footnoteless* French chronicle writer, was the biggest theorist of hypermodern communication, of hyper-real communication as a system of objects with no definite object or objective. With not so many citations neither field research, he had seen more and better than many investigators, packed with wide-angle lenses. As always, Baudrillard has inverted the logic: instead of analyzing his own data with foreign theories, he has analyzed foreign data with their own.

The imperialism of “French theory” continues.

2. Regarding the testimonials from more than twenty North Americans about Jean Baudrillard, check the cited issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*: “Cool prophète, l’hommage américain à Baudrillard”. Paris, issue 2228, 19th to 25th July, p. 84-85.

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**Colaboration**

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