
ESSAY

PROPHYLAXIS AS A PLAGUE **

(WITH REFERENCE TO THE TEXT “SURVIVAL AND
IMMORTALITY” BY JEAN BAUDRILLARD)

by Martin Hopenhayn*

Baudrillard wants a new form of oppression to be recognised in post-industrial society, that of the morality of survival at whatever cost. This is shown at its extreme in the desire to experiment with human life in artificial environments, totally cleansed of any unpredictability, be it viral or bacterial, passionate or neurotic. A kind of ecological mentality, transformed artificially or into a “continuous laboratory experiment” could be the new way of denying or despoiling human life. In this essay Martin Hopenhayn points out that, in one way, Baudrillard’s criticism can be found in critics of alienation, from Marx to Horkheimer: in another, Baudrillard’s own insistence in thinking about “the pure individual” as a contrast to “the alienated individual” prevents us from associating him with that critical tradition. So where can we place this singular thinker in terms of contemporary culture?.

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** Transcript of the commentary made on the 23rd of March 1993 in the Municipal Theatre of Santiago after the conference “Survival and Immortality” given by the French thinker Jean Baudrillard.

In this edition, we have also included Jean Baudrillard’s essay and the text of the commentary that Arturo Fontaine Talavera made on the same occasion.

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At first sight Jean Baudrillard's text seems to be aimed at giving an explanation for a new form of oppression. He does it from outside, as if he is talking about a nightmare or a horror movie. From the text the conclusion seems to be drawn that there is "an aseptic reasoning" which extends, both literally and metonymically from operating theatres in hospitals (or from the Arizona desert) to the whole of the city and the countryside. But at the moment I am not interested in asking myself about the thoroughness with which this asepsis combs the streets of the city and the social imagination, neither am I interested in the level of totalitarianism which is incubating inside this "aseptic reasoning", a reasoning so uncontaminated, that in eradicating from human life everything next to death (including passion, pleasure, suffering, infection and madness) it introduces, through the back door, death in the heart of life itself. What interests me in particular is noticing a certain tension in the text, and what it has to do *with the place from which he unmasks or critically interprets a new and surreptitious type of totalitarianism*.

This critical interpretation of an alienated order has lots of milestones in modern philosophy. We can recall the classic criticisms of Marx against bourgeois ideology and against labour that was carried out using the methods of capitalist production, the Heidegger and neo-Heidegger ideas of the deconstruction of substance of the individual and the criticism of Adorno and Horkheimer of the primacy of rationality, instrumental to the projections of freedom during the Enlightenment and the Modern Age. We can certainly resort to the argument that there is a fallacy in all these discussions about alienation : how can a non-alienated individual hope to capture that alienation from outside?. If bourgeois ideology is so efficient as to convert itself into the dominant ideology, how difficult must it be for a figure like Marx to establish a relationship outside that ideology, look at it objectively and dismantle it. The same can be applied to Heidegger in relation to his criticism of the individual and to Horkheimer in his denunciation of the dominating power of instrumental reason over collective subjectivity.

But neither is it necessary to decree beforehand the impossibility of lucidity. We can always appeal to the principles of the dialectic, used so well by Marx and the Frankfurt thinkers, pointing out that every moment has the means of its own denial within its own internal logic: Marxism would have been born, as it were, from the contradictions inherent in bourgeois ideology. Or taking a less dialectic standpoint, we can rely on Foucault's thesis, which states that every argument which we construct in a certain way- and which therefore exercises its power over us- generates at

the same time resistance: not in relation to being overcome by dialectic but by a detailed study of its strengths and counter strengths.

Therefore it is possible to have non-aseptic criticism of aseptic reasoning.

However this does not prevent us from asking a Nietzschean question which is: "Who, or what unique wish, is behind this question, behind Baudrillard's criticism of post industrial society's prophylactic reasoning?". In other words: from behind what statement of values is Baudrillard positioning himself so that he sees this reasoning as being so symptomatic of Biosphere 2, so that we can stop and look at this aseptic reasoning with a particularly critical eye, and, in addition, make the apocalyptic tone of Adorno's negative thinking reappear but paradoxically apply it to an area where the heirs of Frankfurt would be able to see a space called liberty, which is ecology's banner?.

The text reveals a place, a counter position, from where Baudrillard appraises or evaluates, taking the side of living a life intensely with all risks included, including that of the possibility of passion even at the price of infection or neurosis, a vitalistic wager for not sacrificing one's most uncontrolled impulses to the cause of decontamination, a rejection of survival as a value goal, "the price of ceasing to live, ceasing to feel enjoyment". Baudrillard does not look upon the loss of a metaphysical utopia in any nostalgic way but he does lament that change exists- a prophylactic utopia- a change which is also another "fall" into the desire for totality, once again leaving the individual as a being completely fabricated, invented, isolated from all the dissolvent ties that surround him.

Does Baudrillard reassume the tradition of critical theory?. Yes and no: he exercises criticism but from the point of view of a non-constituted individual and an experiential field, that of the illusion of living, of passion, of sexuality. Criticism from the point of view of the theory of alienation presupposes, to a certain extent, a pure individual, pre- alienated and not contaminated. In the criticism which Baudrillard formulates of this prophylactic reasoning, there is no ideal of a pure individual. On the contrary, prophylactic reasoning would be precisely a discourse on the individual in which the metaphysic of the pure individual is personified in a real way. The extreme concept of a non-alienated individual would be crystallised in a new image, a paradigm, of an uncontaminated individual. In the language of Foucault, it would mean having an all embracing knowledge about the body and another efficient argument for moulding bodies, impulses and personal experience. Once more this liberating argument is caught up in, what Kafka would call, the lash of the master's whip: imprisoned in our

aseptic purity, we embody the ideal of a non-alienated individual, but in the shape of an individual with no identity or intenseness, like an emptiness without end.

Does this mean, therefore, that Baudrillard places himself above or behind or further on as regards critical arguments about alienation?. As regards the previous statement -yes. He criticizes the effect of these arguments precisely when they make a strong impression on history. But now critical theory has done with criticising actual socialisms, instrumental reasoning and other all embracing theories of knowledge. Now criticism has pointed out that the dialectic of the Enlightenment converts an argument about emancipation into concrete history made up of events that dominated and restricted life. So is this a new type of critical reasoning which, after the rhetoric about emancipation (not now of the Reds but of some of the Greens), concisely unmasks the alienation which, once again, has shown itself, the anti-utopia of Huxley's "Brave New World", life converted into a laboratory experiment?.

To be sure there are passages in Baudrillard's text which resound of Huxley and Orwell: "If one wants to live, it is forbidden to go to the extremes of one's possibilities, to go to the extremes of logicity, to the end of the magnetic tape". Genetic and environmental manipulation is a parody of the Nietzschean proposal for all life's values: in place of a way towards a better individualism, the way is towards one of non- differentiation or non-distinction of values. Here Baudrillard comes very near to most of the apocalyptical versions of negative thought from Horkheimer and Adorno. He uses a beautiful phrase for the apocalypse : "Reabsorbing the metaphor of living into the metastasis of surviving (...) no more transfiguration, no more metaphor: immortality becomes a code". The white hell of permanence, of a supra-conducive immortality.

The betrayal of reasoning is now judged to be the ecological ideal. Baudrillard- "Behind this ecological frenzy for preservation, which is much more than nostalgia or remorse, a totally distinct tendency has been cooped, one that deals with sacrificing the species to an experimentation without limits ". And to this we can add at the same time a new twist: isn't this desire for endless experimentation precisely another strong argument of modern times as well, another argument for emancipation which stems from the Nietzschean mould more than from the neo-Hegelian one?. Concepts so dear to Nietzsche, such as the freedom of spirit, the power of the will, the Superman, the Herculean child who toys with the future: are they not now charged with vital meaning when we consider this defense of experimentation?. Would we not have to add, therefore, that the experimental ideal, like

the other face of the modern argument for emancipation, alienates itself in this aseptic or prophylactic aspect and falls into what Nietzsche himself would call a reactive force, allowing us once more to talk of the desire to enslave?. This desire to experiment (which, in a way, Baudrillard also shows in his revindication of evil, of dissolution, of passion and sexuality) reverts back on itself: the ultimate experiment is to annihilate what the experiment can have as an experience of life.

Baudrillard revindicates evil facing a prophylaxis converted into a symbolic order (or prophylaxis as the annihilator of all symbolic order like a plague). This distances him from humanist critics. In the first place a bad Nietzschean defense: evil as individuation (not as individuality), like something that passes, inhabiting an empty space, figures which emerge and also figures which dissolve, to summarise- evil as the possibility of future. Prophylaxis is the negation of future, the presence of death within life, the foundation of stationary time (the model is the space station or the human laboratory in the desert). But also there is an evil nearer to George Bataille's sense of the word and which seems to be a good place from which to refute this prophylactic reasoning; evil as transgression, present in chaos, catastrophe, "the mortal innocence of desire", "the fatal cycle of metamorphosis", the celebration of the uncontrollable. In both senses this confirmation of evil can be a place from where it is possible to distance oneself from the humanist ideal of the non-alienated or uncontaminated individual, to place oneself outside the morality of the pristine or consistent individual. "We are not going to liberate good by purging evil", says Baudrillard and he adds "furthermore when we liberate good, we also liberate evil".

So is Baudrillard speaking of a supposedly dynamic balance in which good and evil are impossible to isolate?. Does he throw himself critically against this aseptic desire, this need to last forever which wants to transform evil into nothing, to purify itself at the cost of being transparent, completely insipid?. I keep on sifting away at the place from where Baudrillard formulates his criticism and I find that it is not easy to place him in one particular spot. I begin to ask myself if I am not simplifying things too much when I think in his reflections as if they were critical ones.

Getting back to the text, I should like to think about this desire to endure as an active principle in prophylactic reasoning. One phrase in the text stands out in its beauty: "From what metaphysical anomaly comes the right to not disappear- a logical counterpoint to the formidable luck in having appeared?". There is, as Baudrillard points out, this desire to last forever in the image of the resurrection. The question consists of discerning between a prophylactic resurrection- as in resurrection/cleansing- and a full

resurrection (a resurrection that has everything of us, our failings and desires, our health and neuroses). But here is where the heaven that is promised turns into the threat of a new hell: a purified resurrection (disinfected, purged, immune) is not the ideal one, but only the ideal of a resurrection turned into a voiceless endlessness, bereft of touch and smell, devoid of all senses. The desire to endure becomes, in its endlessness, a white hell. CNN, Disneyland, space stations and Biosphere 2 in the Arizona desert consecrate this loss of carnality: the world can last forever on a floppy disk or on a video. It doesn't need space, there is no problem with space because it can be reduced exponentially almost to infinity. Instead of a football pitch (or a street where people go out to play with the neighbours) we have miles of games on the monitor. "Nintendo" is the infinite version of game-playing, the immortal version, the aseptic one; it doesn't take up space, it never gets tired, it doesn't need anyone else, or gets dirty or leaves fingerprints or runs out- it's always new and at the same time wipes out all the passion of novelty. It is the infinite game and also the death of all games by its endlessness. White hell is a boredom that has forgotten itself, a deafness that is induced and accepted. As we can make everything happen in virtual reality, reality remains proportionally, destitute of events. It is not the end of History: it is History without the volume turned up, without noise.

So, for the last time: from what position does Baudrillard speak and from what point is he looking so that the apocalypse, this deaf apocalypse and white hell, is caught in his retina?. Once more, from the enjoyment of seduction which, unlike pornography, preserves the mystery of unfinished business?. Like a metaphor, says Baudrillard at the end of his text, reality should not be completed. Do not put trust in open umbrellas. Against the plague of prophylaxis, it is better to get your hair wet and stay in the rain. □