

AMERICA



Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Chris Turner

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(Material Word)



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UTOPIA ACHIEVED

For the European, even today, America represents something akin to exile, a phantasy of emigration and, therefore, a form of interiorization of his or her own culture. At the same time, it corresponds to a violent extraversion and therefore to the zero degree of that same culture. No other country embodies to the same extent both this function of disincarnation and, at the same time, the functions of exacerbation and radicalization of the elements of our European cultures. . . It is by an act of force or *coup de théâtre* – the geographical exile of the Founding Fathers of the seventeenth century adding itself to the voluntary exile of man within his own consciousness – that what in Europe had remained a critical and religious esotericism became transformed on the New Continent into a pragmatic exotericism. The whole foundation of America is a response to this dual operation of a deepening of the moral law in individual consciences, a radicalization of the utopian demand which was always that of the sects, and the immediate materialization of that utopia in work, custom, and way of life. To land in America is, even today, to land in that 'religion' of the way of life which Tocqueville

described. This material utopia of the way of life, where success and action are seen as profound illustrations of the moral law, was crystallized by exile and emigration and these have, in a sense, transformed it into a primal scene. For us, in Europe, it was the Revolution of 1789 that set its seal upon us, though it was a different seal, that of History, the State, and Ideology. Politics and history, not the utopian, moral sphere, remain our primal scene. And if this 'transcendent' European-style revolution is far from confident today either of its means or its ends, the same cannot be said of the immanent revolution of the American way of life, of that moral and pragmatic assertiveness which constitutes now as ever the pathos of the New World.

America is the original version of modernity. We are the dubbed or subtitled version. America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time, it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs. It has no ancestral territory. The Indians' territory is today marked off in reservations, the equivalent of the galleries in which America stocks its Rembrandts and Renoirs. But this is of no importance – America has no identity problem. In the future, power will belong to those peoples with no origins and no authenticity who know how to exploit that situation to the full. Look at Japan, which to a certain extent has pulled off this trick better than the US itself, managing, in what seems to us an unintelligible paradox, to transform the power of territoriality and feudalism into that of deterritoriality and weightlessness. Japan is already a satellite of the planet Earth. But America was already in its day a satellite of the planet Europe. Whether we like it or not, the future has shifted towards artificial satellites.

The US is utopia achieved.

We should not judge their crisis as we would judge our own, the crisis of the old European countries. Ours is a crisis of historical ideals facing up to the impossibility of their realization. Theirs is the crisis of an achieved utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence. The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the centre of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources, technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premiss of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of – justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too.

In the present crisis of values, everyone ends up turning towards the culture which dared to forge right ahead and, by a theatrical masterstroke, turn those values into reality, towards that society which, thanks to the geographical and mental break effected by emigration, allowed itself to imagine it could create an ideal world from nothing. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process by the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true.

But this is really not so very crazy: all pioneer societies have been more or less ideal societies. Even the Jesuits of Paraguay. Even the Portuguese in Brazil founded what was in a sense an ideal patriarchal, slave-owning society, though unlike the American, Anglo-Saxon, Puritan model, the southern model had little chance of being universally adopted in the modern world. By exporting itself, by becoming hypostatized across the sea, the ideal purged itself of its history, took on concrete reality, developed with

new blood and experimental energy. The dynamism of the 'new worlds' still bears witness to their superiority over the 'old countries': the ideal the others only cultivated as an ultimate, and secretly impossible, goal, they put into operation.

Colonization was, in this sense, a world-scale *coup de théâtre* which leaves deep, nostalgic traces everywhere, even when it is collapsing. For the Old World, it represents the unique experience of an idealized substitution of values, almost as you find in science-fiction novels (the tone of which it often reflects, as in the US), a substitution which at a stroke short-circuited the destiny of these values in their countries of origin. The emergence of these societies at the margins deprives the historical societies of their destinies. The brutal extrapolation of their essence across the seas means that they lose control of their development. They are eradicated by the ideal model they have themselves secreted. And development will never again take place in the form of progressive alignment. The moment at which those values, which up to then had been transcendent, are realized, are projected into reality, or collapse in the encounter with it (America), is an irreversible one. This is what separates us, come what may, from the Americans. We shall never catch them up, and we shall never have their candour. We merely imitate them, parody them with a fifty-year time lag, and we are not even successful at that. We do not have either the spirit or the audacity for what might be called the zero degree of culture, the power of unculture. It is no good our trying more or less to adapt, their vision of the world will always be beyond our grasp, just as the transcendental, historical *Weltanschauung* of Europe will always be beyond the Americans. Just as the countries of the Third World will never internalize the values of democracy and technological progress. There are some gaps that are definitive and cannot be bridged.

We shall remain nostalgic utopians, agonizing over our ideals, but baulking, ultimately, at their realization, professing that everything is

possible, but never that everything has been achieved. Yet that is what America asserts. Our problem is that our old goals – revolution, progress, freedom – will have evaporated before they were achieved, before they became reality. Hence our melancholy. We shall never have had the good fortune to enjoy the *coup de théâtre*.

We live in negativity and contradiction; they live in paradox (for a realized utopia is a paradoxical idea). And the quality of the American way of life resides for many in that pragmatic, paradoxical humour of theirs, whilst ours is (was?) characterized by the subtlety of our critical wit. Many American intellectuals envy us this and would like to fashion a set of ideal values and a history for themselves, and relive the philosophical or Marxist delights of old Europe. Yet this runs against the grain of everything that makes up their original situation, since the charm and power of American (un)culture derive precisely from the sudden and unprecedented materialization of models.

When I see Americans, particularly American intellectuals, casting a nostalgic eye towards Europe, its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, and its past, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference. History and Marxism are like fine wines and haute cuisine: they do not really cross the ocean, in spite of the many impressive attempts that have been made to adapt them to new surroundings. This is a just revenge for the fact that we Europeans have never really been able to domesticate modernity, which also refuses to cross the ocean, though in the other direction. There are products which cannot be imported or exported. That is our loss – and theirs. If, for us, society is a carnivorous flower, history for them is an exotic one. Its fragrance is no more convincing than the bouquet of Californian wines (in spite of all the effort being expended to make us believe otherwise).

Not only can history not be caught up, but it seems that in this 'capitalist'

society capital can never actually be grasped in its present reality. It is not that our Marxist critics have not tried to run after it, but it always stays a length ahead of them. By the time one phase has been unmasked, capital has already passed on to another (Ernest Mandel and his third phase of world capital). Capital cheats. It doesn't play by the rules of critique, the true game of history. It eludes the dialectic, which only reconstitutes it after the event, a revolution behind. Even anti-capitalist revolutions only serve to give fresh impetus to its own: they are the equivalent of the 'exogenous events' Mandel speaks of, like wars, crises, or the discovery of goldmines, which set capital off on a new developmental process on fresh bases. In the end, these theorists themselves reveal the inanity of their hopes. By reinventing capital in each successive phase on the basis of the primacy of political economy, they simply confirm the absolute initiative capital enjoys as historical event. They therefore fall straight into their own trap and give themselves no chance of getting ahead of it. And this at the same time ensures – as was perhaps their objective – the continuing validity of their retrospective analyses.

America has never been short of violence, nor of events, people, or ideas, but these things do not of themselves constitute a history. Octavio Paz is right when he argues that America was created in the hope of escaping from history, of building a utopia sheltered from history, and that it has in part succeeded in that project, a project it is still pursuing today. The concept of history as the transcending of a social and political rationality, as a dialectical, conflictual vision of societies, is not theirs, just as modernity, conceived precisely as an original break with a certain history, will never be ours. We have lived long enough now in the unhappy consciousness of this modernity to be aware of that. Europe invented a certain kind of feudalism, aristocracy, bourgeoisie, ideology, and revolution: all this had meaning for

us, but at bottom it had no meaning elsewhere. All who have tried to ape these things have either made themselves a laughing stock or have been dramatically driven off course (we ourselves are doing little more than merely imitating ourselves, outliving ourselves). America made a break with all that and found itself in a situation of radical modernity: it is, therefore, in America and nowhere else that modernity is original. We can only imitate it without being able to challenge it on its own home territory. Once an event has taken place, it has taken place, full stop. And when I see Europe casting longing eyes towards all-out modernity, I tell myself that that, too, is an unhappy transference.

We are still at the centre, but at the centre of the Old World. They who were a marginal transcendence of that Old World are today its new, eccentric centre. Eccentricity is stamped on their birth certificate. We shall never be able to take it from them. We shall never be able to excentre or decentre ourselves in the same way. We shall therefore never be modern in the proper sense of the term. And we shall never enjoy the same freedom – not the formal freedom we take for granted, but the concrete, flexible functional, active freedom we see at work in American institutions and in the head of each citizen. Our conception of freedom will never be able to rival their spatial, mobile conception, which derives from the fact that at a certain point they freed themselves from that historical centrality.

From the day when that eccentric modernity was born in all its glory on the other side of the Atlantic, Europe began to disappear. The myths migrated. Today, all the myths of modernity are American. It will do us no good to worry our poor heads over this. In Los Angeles, Europe has disappeared. As Isabelle Huppert says: 'They have everything. They don't need anything. Admittedly, they envy us our past and our culture and admire them, but deep down to them we are a sort of elegant Third World.'

In the political sphere, there will always remain of this initial decentring a federalism, an absence of centralism and, at the level of mores and culture, a decentralization, an eccentricity which is that of the New World in relation to Europe. The US has no insoluble problem of federation (they have, of course, had their War of Secession, but we are speaking here of the current federal set-up), because they are from the outset, from the very dawn of their history, a culture of mixing, of national and racial mix, of rivalry and heterogeneity. This is clearly visible in New York where each successive skyscraper and, after its own fashion, each ethnic group has dominated the city, and where the whole none the less still gives the impression not of a heteroclitish mish-mash, but of converging energies, not of unity or plurality, but of intensity born of rivalry, of antagonistic power, thus creating a complicity, a collective attraction, beyond culture or politics, in the very violence or banality of the way of life.

If we stay with this line of thinking, we can see that there is a profound difference in racial, ethnic tone between America and France. In America the violent mixing of multiple European nationalities, then of exogenous races, produced an original situation. This multiracialism transformed the country and gave it its characteristic complexity. In France there was neither an initial mix, nor a real resolution, nor was there any real challenge between ethnic groups. All that happened was a transferring of the colonial situation back to the metropolis, out of its original context. All our immigrants are, at bottom, *harkis*,* living under the social protection of their oppressors, to whom they can oppose only their poverty and their de facto sentence of transportation for life. Immigration is, admittedly, a hot issue, but the presence of several million immigrants has not made its mark on the French way of life nor changed the face of the country. That is why, when you

* *Harkis* are Algerian Muslims who took French citizenship after Algerian Independence. [Tr.]

return to France, the dominant impression is a clammy sense of petty racism, of everyone being in an awkward, shameful position. The sequel to a colonial situation, in which the bad faith of both colonizer and colonized persists, whereas in America, each ethnic group, each race develops a language, a culture in competition with and sometimes superior to that of the 'natives', and each group symbolically rises to the top. This is not a question of formal equality or freedom, but of a de facto freedom expressed in rivalry and competition and this gives a singular vivacity and an air of openness to the confrontation between the races.

Our European culture is one that has staked its all on the universal and the danger menacing it is that of perishing by the universal. . . This includes not only the extension of the concepts of market, monetary exchange, or production goods, but also the imperialism of the idea of culture. We should be wary of this idea, which has, like the concept of revolution, only become universal by being abstractly formalized, and which devours singularity just as rapidly as revolution devours its children.

One consequence of this claim to universality is that it makes both downward diversification and upward federation equally impossible. Once a nation and a culture have been centralized by a solid historical process, they experience insurmountable difficulties when they attempt either to create viable sub-units or to integrate themselves into some coherent larger entity. . . There is a sort of inevitability about the centralizing process. Hence the difficulties currently being encountered in the attempt to find a European spirit and culture, a European dynamism. Inability to produce a federal event (Europe), a local event (decentralization), a racial event (multiracialism). Too entangled by our history, we can only produce an apologetic centralism (a Clochemerle pluralism) and an apologetic mixing (our soft racism).

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The principle of achieved utopia explains the absence and, moreover, the lack of need for metaphysics and the imaginary in American life. It gives Americans a perception of reality different from our own. The real is not connected with the impossible and no failure can throw it into question. What is thought in Europe becomes reality in America – everything that disappears in Europe reappears in San Francisco!

And yet the idea of an achieved utopia is a paradoxical one. If it is negativity, irony, and the sublime that govern European thinking, it is paradox which dominates that of America, the paradoxical humour of an achieved materiality, of an ever renewed self-evidence, of a bright new faith in the legality of the *fait accompli* which we always find amazing, the humour of a naive visibility of things, whilst we operate in the uncanny realm of the *déjà vu* and the glaucous transcendence of history.

We criticize Americans for not being able either to analyse or conceptualize. But this is a wrong-headed critique. It is we who imagine that everything culminates in transcendence, and that nothing exists which has not been conceptualized. Not only do they care little for such a view, but their perspective is the very opposite: it is not conceptualizing reality, but realizing concepts and materializing ideas, that interests them. The ideas of the religion and enlightened morality of the eighteenth century certainly, but also dreams, scientific values, and sexual perversions. Materializing freedom, but also the unconscious. Our phantasies around space and fiction, but also our phantasies of sincerity and virtue, or our mad dreams of technicity. Everything that has been dreamt on this side of the Atlantic has a chance of being realized on the other. They build the real out of ideas. We transform the real into ideas, or into ideology. Here in America only what is produced or manifested has meaning; for us in Europe only what can be thought or concealed has meaning. Even materialism is only an idea in Europe. It is in America that it becomes concretely realized in the technical operation of things, in the transformation of a way of thinking into a way of

life, in the 'action' of life ('action' in the film-making sense, as what happens when the cameras begin to roll). For the materiality of things is, of course, their cinematography.

Americans believe in facts, but not in facticity. They do not know that facts are factitious, as their name suggests. It is in this belief in facts, in the total credibility of what is done or seen, in this pragmatic evidence of things and an accompanying contempt for what may be called appearances or the play of appearances – a face does not deceive, behaviour does not deceive, a scientific process does not deceive, nothing deceives, nothing is ambivalent (and at bottom this is true: nothing deceives, there are no lies, *there is only simulation*, which is precisely the facticity of facts) – that the Americans are a true utopian society, in their religion of the *fait accompli*, in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things. You have to be utopian to think that in a human order, of whatever nature, things can be as plain and straightforward as that. All other societies contain within them some heresy or other, some dissidence, some kind of suspicion of reality, the superstitious belief in a force of evil and the possible control of that force by magic, a belief in the power of appearances. Here, there is no dissidence, no suspicion. The emperor has no clothes; the facts are there before us. As is well known, the Americans are fascinated by the yellow-skinned peoples in whom they sense a superior form of cunning, a higher form of that absence of truth which frightens them.

Admittedly, the irony of community is missing here, as is the playfulness of social life. The charm to be found in social graces and in the theatre of social relations is all transferred outwards into the advertising of life and lifestyles. This is a society that is endlessly concerned to vindicate itself, perpetually

seeking to justify its own existence. Everything has to be made public: what you are worth, what you earn, how you live – there is no place here for interplay of a subtler nature. The society's 'look' is a self-publicizing one. The American flag itself bears witness to this by its omnipresence, in fields and built-up areas, at service stations, and on graves in the cemeteries, not as a heroic sign, but as the trademark of a good brand. It is simply the label of the finest successful international enterprise, the US. This explains why the hyperrealists were able to paint it naively, without either irony or protest (Jim Dine in the sixties), in much the same way as Pop Art gleefully transposed the amazing banality of consumer goods on to its canvases. There is nothing here of the fierce parodying of the American anthem by Jimi Hendrix, merely the light irony and neutral humour of things that have become banal, the humour of the mobile home and the giant hamburger on the sixteen-foot long billboard, the pop and hyper humour so characteristic of the atmosphere of America, where things almost seem endowed with a certain indulgence towards their own banality. But they are indulgent towards their own craziness too. Looked at more generally, they do not lay claim to being extraordinary; they simply are extraordinary. They have that extravagance which makes up odd, everyday America. This oddness is not surrealistic (surrealism is an extravagance that is still aesthetic in nature and as such very European in inspiration); here, the extravagance has passed into things. Madness, which with us is subjective, has here become objective, and irony which is subjective with us has also turned into something objective. The fantasmagoria and excess which we locate in the mind and the mental faculties have passed into things themselves.

Whatever the boredom, the hellish tedium of the everyday in the US or anywhere else, American banality will always be a thousand times more interesting than the European – and especially the French – variety. Perhaps because banality here is born of extreme distances, of the monotony of wide-open spaces and the radical absence of culture. It is a native flower here, as

is the opposite extreme, that of speed and verticality, of an excess that verges on abandon, and indifference to values bordering on immorality, whereas French banality is a hangover from bourgeois everyday life, born out of a dying aristocratic culture and transmuted into petty-bourgeois mannerism as the bourgeoisie shrank away throughout the nineteenth century. This is the crux: it is the corpse of the bourgeoisie that separates us. With us, it is that class that is the carrier of the chromosome of banality, whereas the Americans have succeeded in preserving some humour in the material signs of manifest reality and wealth.

This also explains why Europeans experience anything relating to statistics as tragic. They immediately read in them their individual failure and take refuge in a pained denunciation of the merely quantitative. The Americans, by contrast, see statistics as an optimistic stimulus, as representing the dimensions of their good fortune, their joyous membership of the majority. Theirs is the only country where quantity can be extolled without compunction.

This same indulgence and humour which things attest in their banality here, Americans also show towards themselves and other people. Their intellectual conduct is pleasant, a model of gentleness. They make no claim to what we call intelligence and they do not feel threatened by other people's. For them, this is merely a particular cast of mind in which one should not indulge unduly. They do not therefore move spontaneously to deny or contest; their natural inclination is towards agreement. When we say 'I agree with you', we do so to contest what follows. When an American says he agrees, it is because, in all honesty, he can see no reason to demur. But quite often he will confirm your analysis by facts, statistics, or lived experience, thereby divesting it of all conceptual value.

This self-indulgence, which is not without humour, is evidence of a society secure in its wealth and power, a society which seems, to some extent, to have internalized Hannah Arendt's comment that the American

revolution, unlike the European revolutions, was successful. But even a successful revolution has its victims and its sacrificial emblems. When all is said and done, it is on the murder of Kennedy that Reagan's current reign is founded. That murder has been neither avenged nor elucidated, and with good reason. And this is not to mention the murder of the Indians. It is the energy of Kennedy's murder which radiates out over present-day America. I say this to illustrate not only the indulgence, but the self-publicizing, self-justificatory violence of this society, that triumphalist violence which forms part of all successful revolutions.

Tocqueville describes the beneficial effects of democracy and the American constitution with considerable enthusiasm, praising the inherent freedom of the way of life, the regularity of mores (rather than the equality of status), the supremacy of a moral (rather than political) organization of society. He then describes with equal lucidity the extermination of the Indians and the condition of the Negroes, without ever bringing these two realities together. As if good and evil had developed separately. Is it possible that one can, while keenly feeling both these aspects, pass over the relation between them? Certainly it is, and the same paradox faces us today: *we shall never resolve the enigma of the relation between the negative foundations of greatness and that greatness itself*. America is powerful and original; America is violent and abominable. We should not seek to deny either of these aspects, nor reconcile them.

But what has become of this paradoxical grandeur, the New World's original situation as described by Tocqueville? What has become of this American revolution that consisted in the dynamic resolution of a clearly understood individual interest and a well-tempered collective morality? A problem that was not resolved in Europe and for that reason was to fuel a problematic of history, of the State, and the disappearance of the State,

which America has not known. What has become of the challenge sketched out in Tocqueville: can a nation strike a pact of greatness on the basis of each individual's banal interest alone? Can there exist a pact of equality and banality (of interests, rights, and wealth) which retains a heroic and original dimension? (for what is a society without a heroic dimension?). In short, has the New World fulfilled its promise? Has it reaped the benefits of freedom to the full, or has it merely garnered all the unhappy consequences of equality?

The glory of American power is most often described as an effect of freedom and its exercise. But freedom does not of itself generate power. Freedom understood as public action, as the collective discourse of a society on its own undertakings and values, has in fact disappeared in the individual liberation of mores and in agitation (agitation, as is well known, is one of the Americans' main activities). It is, therefore, equality and its consequences that have been more instrumental in the creation of power. This is the equality of which Tocqueville once said, in a fine phrase, 'I do not find fault with equality for drawing men into the pursuit of forbidden pleasures, but for absorbing them entirely in the search for the pleasures that are permitted.' It is this equality, the modern equalization of statuses and values, the uniformity of features and characters, which gives birth to power. It is around this equality that Tocqueville's paradox is recast: the American world tends both towards absolute insignificance (all things tending to become equal and therefore cancelling each other out in their power) and towards absolute originality – today even more than 150 years ago, the effects having been multiplied by geographical extension. *This is a world that has shown genius in its irrepressible development of equality, banality, and indifference.*

It is this overall dynamism, this dynamic of the abolition of differences which is so exciting and which poses, in Tocqueville's words, a new problem for the understanding of human societies. It is, moreover, extraordinary to

see how little the Americans have changed in the last two centuries – much less than European societies. Whereas these were caught up in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, the Americans kept intact – preserved as it was by a breadth of ocean that created something akin to temporal insularity – the utopian and moral perspective of the men of the eighteenth century, or even of the Puritan sects of the seventeenth, transplanted and kept alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history. This Puritan and moral hysteresis is that of exile, that of utopia. We criticize them for this: why did the revolution not take place here, in this new country, this land of liberty and advanced bastion of capitalism? Why do the 'social' and the 'political', our favoured categories, have so little purchase here? The answer is that the social and philosophical nineteenth century did not cross the Atlantic and here the driving forces are utopia and morality, the concrete idea of happiness and mores, all of which political ideology, with Marx at its head, liquidated in Europe in favour of an 'objective' conception of historical transformation. It is from this point of view that we tax Americans with historical naivety and moral hypocrisy. But the fact is simply that, in their collective consciousness, they are closer to the models of thought of the eighteenth century, which are utopian and pragmatic, than to those that were to be imposed by the French revolution, which were ideological and revolutionary.

Why are the sects so powerful and dynamic? The mixing of races, institutions, and technologies should have swept them away long ago. Yet the fact is that they have preserved here the living form and practical illuminism of their origins, together with their moral obsession. In a sense, it is their micro-model which has been extended to the whole of America. From the beginning, the sects played the major role in the move towards an achieved utopia, which is the equivalent of an 'acting out'. They it is who live on utopia (the Church considers it a virtual heresy) and who strive to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth, whereas the Church restricts

itself to the hope of salvation and theological virtues.

It is as though America as a whole had espoused this sect-like destiny: the immediate concretization of all perspectives of salvation. The multiplication of individual sects should not fool us: the important point is that the whole of America is preoccupied with the sect as a moral institution, with its immediate demand for beatification, its material efficacy, its compulsion for justification, and doubtless also with its madness and frenzy.

If America were to lose this moral perspective on itself, it would collapse. This is not perhaps evident to Europeans, for whom America is a cynical power and its morality a hypocritical ideology. We remain unconvinced by the moral vision Americans have of themselves, but in this we are wrong. When they ask with such seriousness why other peoples detest them, we would be wrong to smile, for it is this same self-examination which makes possible both the various 'Watergates' and the unrelenting exposure of corruption and their own society's faults in the cinema and the media, a freedom we might envy them, we who are the truly hypocritical societies, keeping our individual and public affairs concealed beneath the bourgeois affectations of secrecy and respectability.

Tocqueville's central idea is that the spirit of America is to be found in its mode of life, in the revolution of mores, the moral revolution. This creates neither a new legality nor a new State, but it does create a practical legitimacy, a legitimacy grounded in the way of life. Salvation no longer has to do with the divine or the State, but with the ideal form of practical organization. Is this to be traced back to the secularization of conscience effected by Protestantism, to the introjection of divine jurisdiction into daily discipline? The fact is that religion has become part of everyday life, which means that it can no longer be challenged or questioned as to its bases, since it no longer has transcendent value. This is religion as way of life. Similarly,

politics has become part of everyday life – as pragmatic machine, as game, as interaction, as spectacle – which means that it can no longer be judged from a specifically political point of view. There is no ideological or philosophical principle of government any more. Things are at once both more naive and more conjunctural. This does not mean there are no strategies, but they are modal, not final strategies. Sexuality itself has become part of life, which means that it, too, no longer has transcendent value, neither as prohibition, nor as principle of analysis, pleasure, or transgression. It has been ‘ecologized’, psychologized, secularized for domestic use. It has become part of the way of life.

The pre-eminent position accorded to mores, the hegemony enjoyed by the ‘way of life’ signifies that the abstract universal of law is subordinated to the concrete regulation of exchanges. Law is not consensual: you are supposed to know it and obey it. But there may be honour in disobeying it too, and history is made of the simultaneous extolling of the law and of those who have broken it. What strikes you, by contrast, in the American system, is that there is no honour in breaking laws, nor prestige in transgression or being exceptional. This is that notorious American conformism, which we see as a sign of social and political weakness. But the fact is that people are more united on concrete regulation than on abstract legislation here; they are more agreed on informal ways of doing things than on a formal authority. What could it mean to dissociate oneself from a rule, to challenge a mechanism? You have to understand this conventional, pragmatic solidarity of American customs, which is based not on a social contract but on a kind of moral pact, and which might be compared not so much to the highway code, which anyone may disobey, as to the consensus that governs driving on the freeways. This conformity makes American society close to primitive societies, in which it would be absurd to distinguish oneself morally by disobeying the collective ritual. American conformism is not therefore ‘naive’: it is the product of a pact at the level of

custom, of a set of rules and procedures which presuppose quasi-spontaneous adherence. Whereas our lives, by contrast, are governed by an equally ritualized disobedience of our own value system.

This ‘conformism’ reflects a particular kind of freedom: the absence of prejudice and pretentiousness. One might suggest that Americans’ lack of prejudice has to do with their lack of judgement. This would be unfair, but all things considered why should we not prefer that lightfooted solution to our heavy, pretentious one? Just look at this girl who serves you in the guest-room: she does so *in total freedom*, with a smile, without prejudice or pretentiousness, as though she were sitting opposite you. The situation is not an equal one, but she does not pretend to equality. Equality is part of the way of life here. Precisely the opposite of Sartre’s waiter, who is completely alienated from his representation and who only resolves the situation by calling on a theatrical metalanguage, by affecting in his gestures a freedom and an equality he does not really enjoy. Hence the unhappy intellectualism of his behaviour, which is shared, in our part of the world, by almost all social classes. This question of equality in mores, of freedom in mores has neither been resolved nor even properly posed within our culture. Only the political or philosophical question of equality has been posed and that keeps us locked in our eternal pretentiousness. In America – and this is a commonplace – you are astonished by the almost natural way status is forgotten, by the ease and freedom of personal relations. This ease may seem banal or vulgar to us, but it is never ridiculous. It is *our* affectation which is ridiculous.

You only have to see a French family settling in on a Californian beach to feel the abominable weight of our culture. The American group remains open; the French unit immediately creates a closed space. The American child roams far and wide; the French one hovers around its parents. The Americans see to it that they stay well stocked with ice and beer; the French see to it that social niceties are observed, and that they keep up a theatrical

show of well-being. People move around a lot on American beaches; the Frenchman stays camped on his little sandy domain. The Frenchman makes quite a show on holiday, but the mediocrity of his petty-bourgeois space stays with him. Now, you can say anything you like about Americans, but they are neither mediocre nor petty-bourgeois. They certainly do not have aristocratic grace, but they have an ease that comes from space, the ease of those who have always had lots of space, and this makes up for a lack of manners or noble breeding. The freedom of bodily movement which this possession of space gives them easily compensates for the blandness of their features and character. Vulgar but 'easy'. We are a culture of intimacy, which produces manners and affectation; they have a democratic culture of space. We are free in spirit, but they are free in their actions. The American moving around in the deserts or the national parks does not give the impression of being on holiday. Moving around is his natural occupation; nature is a frontier and a place for action. There is none of the flabby Romanticism and gallo-roman quietude that clutter up our free time. Nothing of the 'holiday' label, as it was invented in France by the Popular Front: the demoralizing atmosphere of free time snatched from the State, to be consumed in a plebeian spirit, with theatrical regard for one's hard-earned leisure. Freedom here has no static or negative definition. Its definition is spatial and mobile.

The great lesson of all this is that freedom and equality, like ease and grace, only exist where they are present from the outset. This is the surprise democracy had in store for us: equality is at the beginning, not at the end. That is the difference between egalitarianism and democracy: democracy presupposes equality at the outset, egalitarianism presupposes it at the end. 'Democracy demands that all of its citizens *begin* the race even. Egalitarianism insists that they all *finish* even.'

However, when the obsession with judging others or with social prejudices has been left behind, there is greater tolerance, but greater

indifference too. No longer wishing others to see them, Americans end up not seeing one another. So people pass in the street without looking at one another, which may seem a mark of discretion and civility, but which is also a sign of indifference. At least this is not affected. It is both a quality and the absence of a quality.

When I speak of the American 'way of life', I do so to emphasize its utopian nature, its *mythic* banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur. That philosophy which is immanent not only in technological development but also in the exceeding of technology in its own excessive play, not only in modernity, but in the extravagance of modern forms (whether it be the vertical network of New York or the horizontal one of Los Angeles), not only in banality, but in the apocalyptic forms of banality, not only in the reality of everyday life, but in the hyperreality of that life which, as it is, displays all the characteristics of fiction. It is this fictional character which is so exciting. Now, fiction is not imagination. It is what anticipates imagination by giving it the form of reality. This is quite opposite to our own natural tendency which is to anticipate reality by imagining it, or to flee from it by idealizing it. That is why we shall never inhabit true fiction; we are condemned to the imaginary and to nostalgia for the future. The American way of life is spontaneously fictional, since it is a transcending of the imaginary in reality.

Fiction is not abstraction either, and if America suffers from a kind of infirmity when it comes to abstraction, that incapacity takes on a glory all its own in the sprawling reality of middle America, in the apotheosis of daily life, in that empirical genius which so amazes us. Perhaps this successful revolution is no longer successful in the way Tocqueville understood it, as a spontaneous movement of the public mind, a form of spontaneous, concrete ordering of mores to modern values. It is not so much in the operation of institutions as in the freeing of technologies and images that the glorious

form of American reality is to be found: in the immoral dynamic of images, in the orgy of goods and services, an orgy of power and useless energy (yet who can say where useful energy ends?), in which the spirit of advertising is more to the fore than Tocqueville's public spirit. But these are, after all, the marks of its liberation, and the very obscenity of this society is the sign of its liberation. A liberation of *all effects*, some of them perfectly excessive and abject. But this is precisely the point: the high point of liberation, its logical outcome, is to be found in the spectacular orgy, speed, the instantaneity of change, generalized eccentricity. Politics *frees itself* in the spectacle, in the all-out advertising effect; sexuality frees itself in all its anomalies and perversions (including the refusal of sexuality, the latest fad, which is itself only a supercooling effect of sexual liberation); mores, customs, the body, and language free themselves in the ever quickening round of fashion. The liberated man is not the one who is freed in his ideal reality, his inner truth, or his transparency; he is the man who changes spaces, who circulates, who changes sex, clothes, and habits according to fashion, *rather than morality*, and who changes opinions not as his conscience dictates but in response to opinion polls. This is practical liberation whether we like it or not, whether or not we deplore its wastefulness and its obscenity. Moreover, people in 'totalitarian' countries know very well that this is true freedom and dream of nothing but fashion, the latest styles, idols, the play of images, travel for its own sake, advertising, the deluge of advertising. In short, the orgy. Now, you have to admit that it is America which has concretely, technologically achieved this orgy of liberation, this orgy of indifference, disconnection, exhibition, and circulation. I do not know what remains of the successful revolution Tocqueville speaks of, the revolution of political freedom and of the quality of public spirit (in this regard America today has both the best and the worst to offer), but it has certainly achieved *this revolution*, whereas we, having failed in our historical revolutions, our abstract revolutions, are in the process of failing in this other revolution too. We absorb these logical

consequences of modernity, of this lifestyle revolution with all its inevitable excesses, in spite of ourselves, in homeopathic doses, with a mixture of fascination and resentment. We in Europe are stuck in the old rut of worshipping difference; this leaves us with a great handicap when it comes to radical modernity, which is founded on the absence of difference. Only very reluctantly do we become modern and in-different. This is why our own modernity is so lacklustre. This is why our undertakings lack the modern spirit. We do not even have the *evil genius* of modernity, that genius which pushes innovation to the point of extravagance and in so doing rediscovers a kind of fantastical liberty.

Everything that has been heroically played out and destroyed in Europe in the name of Revolution and Terror has been realized in its simplest, most empirical form on the other side of the Atlantic (the utopia of wealth, rights, freedom, the social contract, and representation). Similarly, everything we have dreamed in the radical name of anti-culture, the subversion of meaning, the destruction of reason and the end of representation, that whole anti-utopia which unleashed so many theoretical and political, aesthetic and social convulsions in Europe, without ever actually becoming a reality (May '68 is one of the last examples) has all been achieved here in America in the simplest, most radical way. *Utopia has been achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved*: the anti-utopia of unreason, of deterritorialization, of the indeterminacy of language and the subject, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture. America is turning all this into reality and it is going about it in an uncontrolled, empirical way. All we do is dream and, occasionally, try and act out our dreams. America, by contrast, draws the logical, pragmatic consequences from everything that can possibly be thought. In this sense, it is naive and primitive; it knows nothing of the irony of concepts, nor the irony of seduction. It does not ironize upon the

future or destiny: it gets on with turning things into material realities. To our utopian radicalism it counterposes its empirical radicalism, to which it alone gives dramatically concrete form. We philosophize on the end of lots of things, but it is here that they actually come to an end. It is here, for example, that territory has ceased to exist (though there is indeed a vast amount of space), here that the real and the imaginary have come to an end (opening all spaces up to simulation). It is here, therefore, that we should look for the ideal type of the end of our culture. It is the American way of life, which we think naive or culturally worthless, which will provide us with a complete graphic representation of the end of our values – which has vainly been prophesied in our own countries – on the grand scale that the geographical and mental dimensions of utopia can give to it.

But is this really what an achieved utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes indeed! What do you expect a 'successful' revolution to look like? It is paradise. Santa Barbara is a paradise; Disneyland is a paradise; the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. Mournful, monotonous, and superficial though it may be, it is paradise. There is no other. If you are prepared to accept the consequences of your dreams – not just the political and sentimental ones, but the theoretical and cultural ones as well – then you must still regard America today with the same naive enthusiasm as the generations that discovered the New World. That same enthusiasm which Americans themselves show for their own success, their own barbarism, their own power. If not, you have no understanding of the situation, and you will not be able to understand your own history – or the end of your history – either, because Europe can no longer be understood by starting out from Europe itself. The US is more mysterious: *the mystery of American reality* exceeds our fictions and our interpretations. The mystery of a society which seeks to give itself neither meaning nor an identity, which indulges neither in transcendence nor in aesthetics and which, *for precisely that reason*, invents the only great modern verticality in its buildings, which are the most

grandiose manifestations within the vertical order and yet do not obey the rules of transcendence, which are the most prodigious pieces of architecture and yet do not obey the laws of aesthetics, which are ultra-modern and ultra-functional, but also have about them something non-speculative, primitive, and savage – a culture (or unculture) like this remains a mystery to us.

We are at home with introversion and reflexion and with different effects of meaning coexisting under the umbrella of a concept. But the object freed from its concept, free to deploy itself in extraverted form, in the equivalence of all its effects. . . To us this is a total enigma. Extraversion is a mystery to us in exactly the same way as the commodity was to Marx: the commodity, hieroglyph of the modern world, mysterious precisely because it is extraverted, a form realizing itself in its pure operation and in pure circulation (hello Karl!).

In this sense, for us the whole of America is a desert. Culture exists there in a wild state: it sacrifices all intellect, all aesthetics in a process of literal transcription into the real. Doubtless the original decentring into virgin territory gave it this wildness, though it certainly acquired it without the agreement of the Indians whom it destroyed. The dead Indian remains the mysterious guarantor of these primitive mechanisms, even into the modern age of images and technologies. Perhaps the Americans, who believed they had destroyed these Indians, merely disseminated their virulence. They have opened up the deserts, threaded and criss-crossed them with their freeways, but by some mysterious interaction their towns and cities have taken on the structure and colour of the desert. They have not destroyed space; they have simply rendered it infinite by the destruction of its centre (hence these infinitely extendable cities). In so doing, they have opened up a true fictional space. In the 'savage mind', too, there is no natural universe,

no transcendence of either man or nature, or of history. Culture is everything, or nothing, depending on how you look at it. You find this same absence of distinction between the two in modern simulation. There is no natural universe there either, and you cannot differentiate between a desert and a metropolis. It is not that the Indians were infinitely close to nature, nor that the Americans are infinitely distant from it: both belong to the ideality of nature, as they do to the ideality of culture, and both are also equally alien to nature and culture.

There is no culture here, no cultural discourse. No ministries, no commissions, no subsidies, no promotion. There is none of the sickly cultural pathos which the whole of France indulges in, that fetishism of the cultural heritage, nor of our sentimental – and today also statist and protectionist – invocation of culture. The Beaubourg would be impossible here, just as it would in Italy (for other reasons). Not only does centralization not exist, but the idea of a cultivated culture does not exist either, no more than that of a theological, sacred religion. No culture of culture, no religion of religion. One should speak rather of an 'anthropological' culture, which consists in the invention of mores and a way of life. That is the only interesting culture here, just as it is New York's streets and not its museums or galleries that are interesting. Even in dance, cinema, the novel, fiction, and architecture, there is something wild in everything specifically American, something that has not known the glossy, high-flown rhetoric and theatricality of our bourgeois cultures, that has not been kitted out in the gaudy finery of cultural distinction.

Here in the US, culture is not that delicious panacea which we Europeans consume in a sacramental mental space and which has its own special columns in the newspapers – and in people's minds. Culture is space, speed, cinema, technology. This culture is authentic, if anything can be said to be authentic. This is not cinema or speed or technology as optional extra (everywhere in Europe you get a sense of modernity as something

tacked on, heterogeneous, anachronistic). In America cinema is true because it is the whole of space, the whole way of life that are cinematic. The break between the two, the abstraction which we deplore, does not exist: life is cinema.

That is why searching for works of art or sophisticated entertainment here has always seemed tiresome and out of place to me. A mark of cultural ethnocentrism. If it is the lack of culture that is original, then it is the lack of culture one should embrace. If the term taste has any meaning, then it commands us not to export our aesthetic demands to places where they do not belong. When the Americans transfer Roman cloisters to the New York Cloysters, we find this unforgivably absurd. Let us not make the same mistake by transferring our cultural values to America. We have no right to such confusion. In a sense, they do because they have space, and their space is the refraction of all others. When Paul Getty gathers Rembrandts, Impressionists, and Greek statues together in a Pompeian villa on the Pacific coast, he is following American logic, the pure baroque logic of Disneyland. He is being original; it is a magnificent stroke of cynicism, naivety, kitsch, and unintended humour – something astonishing in its nonsensicality. Now the disappearance of aesthetics and higher values in kitsch and hyperreality is fascinating, as is the disappearance of history and the real in the televisual. It is in this unfettered pragmatics of values that we should find some pleasure. If you simply remain fixated on the familiar canon of high culture, you miss the essential point (which is, precisely, the inessential).

The advertisements which cut into the films on TV are admittedly an outrage, but they aptly emphasize that most television productions never even reach the 'aesthetic' level and are, basically, of the same order as advertisements. Most films – including many of the better ones – are made up from the same everyday romance: cars, telephones, psychology, make-up. They are purely and simply illustrations of the way of life. Advertising does just the same: it canonizes the way of life through images, making the whole

a genuinely integrated circuit. And if everything on television is, without exception, part of a low-calorie (or even no-calorie) diet, then what good is it complaining about the adverts? By their worthlessness, they at least help to make the programmes around them seem of a higher level.

Banality, lack of culture, and vulgarity do not have the same meaning here as they have in Europe. Or perhaps this is merely the crazy notion of a European, a fascination with an unreal America. Perhaps Americans are quite simply vulgar, and this meta-vulgarity is merely something I have dreamt up. Who knows? But I am inclined to suggest, in time-honoured fashion, that you have nothing to lose if I am wrong and everything to gain if I am right. The fact is that a certain banality, a certain vulgarity which seem unacceptable to us in Europe seem more than acceptable – even fascinating – to us here. The fact is that all our analyses in terms of alienation, conformism, standardization, and dehumanization collapse of themselves: when we look at America it is the analyses which seem vulgar.

Why is a passage like the following (by G. Faye) both true and, at the same time, absolutely false? 'California shines out as the total myth of our times. . . . Multiracialism, hegemonic technology, shrink-culture narcissism, urban criminality and audiovisual saturation: as super-America, California stands out as the absolute antithesis of authentic Europe . . . from Hollywood to disco-pap, from *ET* to *Star Wars*, from the pseudo-rebellious itchings on the campuses to the ravings of Carl Sagan, from the neo-gnostics of Silicon Valley to the wind-surfing mystics, from the neo-Indian gurus to aerobics, from jogging to psychoanalysis as a form of democracy, from criminality as a form of psychoanalysis to television as an instrument of despotism, California has set itself up as the world centre of the simulacrum and the inauthentic, as the absolute synthesis of "cool" Stalinism. An *hysterical* land; focus and meeting-place for the rootless, California is the land of non-history, of the non-event, but at the same time the site of the constant swirl, the uninterrupted rhythm of fashion, that is to say, the site of

tremors going nowhere, those tremors which so obsess it, constantly threatened as it is by earthquakes.

'California has invented nothing: it has taken everything from Europe and served it up again in a disfigured, meaningless form, with an added Disneyland glitter. World centre of sweet madness, mirror of our dejecta and our decadence. Californitis, that hot variant of Americanism, is unleashing itself on the young of today and emerging as a mental form of AIDS. . . . To the revolutionary *angst* of the Europeans, California counterposes its long procession of fakes: the parody of science on the rite-less campus, the parody of cities and urbanism in the sprawl of Los Angeles, the parody of technology in Silicon Valley, the parody of oenology in its insipid Sacramento wines, the parody of religion in its gurus and sects, the parody of eroticism in its beach boys, the parody of drugs in its acids [?], the parody of sociability in its "communities". . . . Even nature in California is a Hollywood parody of ancient Mediterranean landscapes: a sea that is too blue [!], mountains that are too rugged, a climate that is too gentle or too arid, an uninhabited disenchanted nature, deserted by the gods: a sinister land beneath a sun that is too bright. The expressionless face of our death, since Europe will surely die sunburnt and smiling, with its skin lightly baking under a holiday sun.'

All this is true (if you like), since the text itself resembles the hysterical stereotype it confers upon California. And it is surely easy to detect in Faye's writing a degree of fascination with his subject. But if we could use precisely the same terms to say exactly the opposite of what he says, then this only emphasizes the point that, for his part, G. Faye was not able to effect this same reversal. He has not grasped how, at the edges of this meaningless world, this 'sweet madness' of meaninglessness, this soft, air-conditioned hell he describes, things turn into their opposites. He has not grasped the challenge of this 'marginal transcendence' in which precisely a whole universe is brought up against its margins, its 'hysterical' simulation –

and why not? Why should Los Angeles not be a parody of cities? Why should Silicon Valley not parody technology? Why should there not be a parody of sociability, eroticism, and drugs, or even indeed a parody of the (too blue!) sea and the (too bright!) sun. Not to mention museums and culture. Of course all this is parody! If none of these values can bear to be parodied, it must mean they no longer have any importance. Yes, California (and America with it) is the mirror of *our* decadence, but *it* is not decadent at all. It is hyperreal in its vitality, it has all the energy of the simulacrum. 'It is the world centre of the inauthentic.' Certainly it is: that is what gives it its originality and power. The irresistible rise of the simulacrum is something you can simply feel here without the slightest effort. But has he ever been here? If he had, he would know that the key to Europe is not to be found in its past history, but in this crazy, parodic anticipation that is the New World. He cannot see that even though every detail of America may be abject or insignificant, it is the whole which passes our imagining – by the same token, every detail in his description may be accurate, but it is the whole which goes beyond the bounds of stupidity.

What is new in America is the clash of the first level (primitive and wild) and the 'third kind' (the absolute simulacrum). There is no second level. This is a situation we find hard to grasp, since this is the one we have always privileged: the self-reflexive, self-mirroring level, the level of unhappy consciousness. But no vision of America makes sense without this reversal of our values: it is Disneyland that is authentic here! The cinema and TV are America's reality! The freeways, the Safeways, the skylines, speed, and deserts – these are America, not the galleries, churches, and culture. . . Let us grant this country the admiration it deserves and open our eyes to the absurdity of some of our own customs. This is one of the advantages, one of the pleasures of travel. To see and feel America, you have to have had for at

least one moment in some downtown jungle, in the Painted Desert, or on some bend in a freeway, the feeling that Europe had disappeared. You have to have wondered, at least for a brief moment, 'How can anyone be European?'

AMERICA

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Translated by Chris Turner (Material Word)



Jean Baudrillard was born in Reims in 1929, and now lives in Paris. From 1966 to 1987 he taught sociology at the University of Nanterre. Among his works translated into English are *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, *Simulations and Simulacra* and (forthcoming from Verso) *Cool Memories*.

In this, his most accessible and evocative book, France's leading philosopher of postmodernism takes to the freeways in a collection of traveller's tales from the land of hyperreality.

Since de Tocqueville, French thinkers have been fascinated with America. But when it comes to mysterious paradox and lyrical complexity no French intellectual matches Jean Baudrillard in contemplating the New World . . . [He] has become a sharp-shooting Lone Ranger of the post-Marxist left.

New York Times

The collection of wild, often hilarious postcards from his trip to America contains some of the year's most original and beautiful writing.

New Statesman and Society

. . . occasionally provocative and almost always infuriating . . . *America* is filled with perceptive, almost poetic observations.

Rolling Stone

A mixture of crazy notions and dead-on insights, *America* is a valuable (and voluble) picture of what Mr Baudrillard calls 'the only remaining primitive society' – ours.

New York Times Book Review

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