

A review and reflection on the development of Baudrillard's sign value theory

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Abstract: Baudrillard's academic achievements were largely influenced by the Labor Theory of Value (LTV). Baudrillard's theory was derived from the LTV. Subsequently, Baudrillard gradually developed his own theoretical system and broke with the LTV finally. Baudrillard adopted the LTV dialectics, and critically inherited the LTV in his early works such as *Le système des objets*, *La société de consommation* and *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* was Baudrillard's last work on the LTV's ontological position, and the following work *Le Miroir de la production* signaled his departure from the LTV. Baudrillard harshly criticized the LTV in his later works. However, due to taking root in the LTV, Baudrillard's theory of sign value inevitably had flaws and self-contradictions when rejecting the LTV.

1. The Critical Inheritor of the Labor Theory of Value

In *Le système des objets*, consumption was considered as a way of labour, “a systematic behavior of manipulating symbols, and an important means of realizing social control”. In Baudrillard's view, the understanding of the basic logic of a consumer society rested in that of the differences among symbols. Structural functionalism believed that the functions of signifier and signified obtained by symbols came from the differences among symbols. Baudrillard used this theory to study the consumption field ^[1]. According to Baudrillard, “What you consume is never an object, but the relationship itself”, which opinion also rooted in the analytic logic of Marx's political economy. Marx thought, “In production, people are objectified, while in consumption, objects are subjectified”, “Once appearing in a commodity form, it will turn into a thing that can be felt but beyond the feeling”, that is to say, the thing that surpassed the feeling was not only confined to its own effectiveness as an object, but consumed as a social attribute. Baudrillard tried to deconstruct the Marxist value theories using the analytic logic of Marx's political economy. Baudrillard considered that “The functional matrix consciousness refers to the ability to be integrated into a whole”, in other words, commodities could only achieve their own “functionality” in specific capitalist production relations. Once separating themselves from the political and economic category of capitalist production relations, and getting into the category of the cultural meaning, commodities would be deprived from their functional values and digested as symbols. Therefore, the use values of commodities were deconstructed ^[2].

The early works of Baudrillard were heavily affected by the Marx's “fetishism” theory. Marx defined the concept of fetishism in his *Das Kapital*, which held that objects in the capitalist mode of production were not entity objects, but the embodiment of the existing political and economic relations: “To look for a metaphor, we have to escape to the fairyland of the religious world. There the products of the human brain are manifested as living and independent things that interact with one another, and people. In the commodity world, the products of the human hands do the same. I call it fetishism. Once products of labour are manufactured as commodities, they will have the property of fetishism. Therefore, fetishism is inseparable from commodity production ^[3].” Marx's concept of fetishism indicated that the relation among people was covered up by that among objects, and people were dominated by the relation among objects in capitalist production relations. Baudrillard explained the relationship among objects at the symbolic level. He reckoned that in the

consumer society, symbols lost their values of signified as well as their connection with reality, so they could be used to exchange at the symbolic level. In specific, in the commodity consumption field, people pursued no longer the usefulness of objects, but the consumption of differentiated meanings carried by commodities in the consumer society. In this society, people gained their identity by consuming a series of symbols, and distinguished others' identities based on the symbols consumed by others ^[10]. Human personality was completely reflected by differences in symbols. People carefully wrapped themselves with all kinds of symbols to expect to be recognized in the society operated by symbols. Thus the hegemony of symbols was established and formed a systematical control over all aspects of social life.

This opinion of Baudrillard was continued in his subsequent work “La société de consommation”, and developed into the sign value theory. In *La société de consommation*, Baudrillard still acknowledged that demand belonged to the category of productivity (the Marxist perspective, typically), but he claimed that consumption was growing into a self-enclosed loop of meaning, and drew a line with the Marxist value theory, that is to say, consumption lost its groundwork for satisfying needs and use value, and turned into by-products handled by systematic symbols ^[4]. Baudrillard also criticized Marx's exchange value theory, but his criticism of the Marxist value theory had not formed a complete system until his *La société de consommation* was published ^[11].

In general, Baudrillard inherited part of the critical methods and logic of Marxist political economics, and took some of Marxist ontological positions in this period. Although Baudrillard's several viewpoints were based on Marxist materialistic dialectics, he consciously escaped from the Marxist materialistic category to a purely critical category of symbolic meanings. According to the later works of Baudrillard, it was not difficult to find that Baudrillard had made preparations for constructing his own value theory during this period.

2. Establishing His Own Theory —— “Sign Value” and “Symbolic Exchange”

Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe was the last Marxist work of Baudrillard, which also marked the transition of his academic career. Published in 1972, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* grew up in *Le système des objets* and *La société de consommation*, and was derived from the formation of the sign value theory in the Marxist value theory. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* was just like a reservoir of Baudrillard's academic ideas that pooled and solved the problems previously proposed by *Le système des objets* and *La société de consommation*, and after that, Baudrillard's academic ideas were rooted in it.

In *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Baudrillard improved his own value system, and differentiated four types of values, that is, value, use value, sign value and symbolic exchange value.

Value and use value were dual properties of commodities, which was the classical theory of Marxism. Sign value was the expansion and supplement of the Marxist system of value theory. Under the influence of Semiotologist Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Baudrillard conceived that sign value stemmed from the difference in the category of structure and function ^[5]. For example, the consumption of a particular brand of commodities would incorporate consumers into a particular cultural group or social class, thus distinguishing them from other consumers. He believed that in the early capitalist society, exchange value was the core logic of capitalist modes of production, while in modern society, the status of sign value was higher than that of exchange value, serving as the core logic for dominating the society. Baudrillard regarded the understanding of daily consumption as an important means of political and economic analysis. Despite consumption met part of the requirements, it was not demand-oriented ^[12]. Baudrillard criticized the viewpoint that consumption was to fulfill “false needs” in his *La société de consommation*. Similarly, consumption was also not value-oriented because in the consumer society, the majority of human purchasing behaviors were impulsive and irrational. Only by learning the meaning of sign value, namely, a symbolic world with commodities as carriers constructed by differentiated signals, could the consumption in contemporary capitalism be fully explained.

The final part of Baudrillard's value theory was symbolic exchange value, whose ideological

rudiment of symbolic value was initially mentioned in *Le système des objets*. Influenced by Georges Bataille (1897-1962) and Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), the concept and definition of symbolic exchange value were recorded in *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* ^[6].

Baudrillard's symbolic exchange theory was greatly affected by Marcel Mauss, and assumed that the gift exchange described by Marcel Mauss best reflected the essence of symbolic exchange in the post-modern society. In the reciprocal exchange of donation and reward, gifts acted as a bridge of symbolic exchange ^[13]. Baudrillard deemed that the exchange of gifts was the embodiment of symbolic value: A series of obligations and contracts generated in the process of donation, acceptance and reward connected people together, making this reciprocal exchange method be continued.

The symbolic exchange value of Baudrillard was essentially different from Marx's exchange value. Above all, in Baudrillard's view, the "objects" in symbolic exchange were not the universal equivalents in Marxist political economics, so they could not be quantized. In his later work *Le Miroir de la production*, Baudrillard pointed out that capitalism could not produce commodities at the level of symbolic exchange, and criticized Marxism on that ground. Except that commodities in symbolic exchange failed to work as the universal equivalents, the biggest difference between symbolic exchange value and exchange value also lied in that symbolic exchange could only occurred in specific social relationships ^[14]. The existence of exchange value referred by Marx did not depend on specific social relations, which occurred in anonymous and random purchasers. Once the exchange behavior happened, there would be no longer any bond between individuals ^[8]. However, symbolic exchange value could only existed in specific social relations. If Marx's exchange value embodied a kind of social relation, the symbolic exchange value of Baudrillard reflected a type of personal relation, in other words, the subjects that made symbolic exchange connected with each other through symbolic behaviors, but symbolic exchange could merely existed in entire non-anonymous subject population, not between anonymous individuals.

Until his *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, Baudrillard had completed his supplement and criticism of the Marxist value theory, and advanced his own symbolic exchange theory, whose question and indecisiveness of Marxism were clearly seen. In his later academic career, Baudrillard was totally divorced from the ontological basis of the Marxist theory — historical materialism, which criticized the Marxist value theory taking the Marxist value theory as the core.

3. The Marxist "Deviant"

Baudrillard criticized Marxism in his *Le Miroir de la production* published in 1973, when he tried to overthrow the paradigm of Marx's "productivism", and proclaimed to displace it with consumption. In Baudrillard's opinion, Marx failed to realize that the contemporary capitalist society was an unprecedented society with abundant materials. When people's basic needs were satisfied as never before, their main desire was to possess more commodities. Therefore, consumption substituted production, and became the logic of capitalist society. Baudrillard thoroughly abandoned the Marxist value theory, because he perceived that value and exchange value did not explain a society manipulated by codes. In his eyes, "(Marx) universalizes the rational mode of economics, which is promoted to the whole human history by him as a general mode generated by people ^[15]. Baudrillard describes the entire human history in a grand emulation mode. The tools he uses to object to the capitalist order are exactly the most ingenious ideological fantasy elaborated by capital." The publication of *Le Miroir de la production* signalled Baudrillard's ultimately departure from Marxism.

Baudrillard discarded Marxism, and also the mass revolution theory. However, just as Marx did, Baudrillard did not stop his criticism of capitalism. In the *L'échange symbolique et la mort* issued in 1976, he discussed the possible ways of human liberation in a society dominated by symbols.

According to Baudrillard, the control of signs over political economy and daily life had found its way into their every aspect, and people were under the control of a sign system. In a great vortex where people's material and spiritual life was signified, the objects used for exchange were no longer the use values, but the signs and codes that were separate from reality. Marx's political economics did not direct new forms of revolutions: "Neither Saussure nor Marx forecast that they are still in a golden age of signs and true dialectics, also the classical age of capitalist values. Under the attack of

this magical value autonomization, their dialectics falls apart, and the reality died, the certainty died, and the uncertainty turns into the master.”

From Baudrillard’s point of view, in the contemporary society a with highly developed productivity, the uncertainty of production of material goods declared the end of production. In “the classical age of capitalist values”, also the “production” stage of three-level simulacra mentioned by Baudrillard, the labor, time, cost and others consumed in commodity production were within the countable limits. When the consumer society entered into a “simulation” phase of three-level simulacra, and a huge symbolic world “covered the absence of basic reality”, a self-operating and self-replicating simulation order was formed, all certainties were decomposed in an enormous simulated world, and even the production itself was reduced to the produced object at the symbolic level, which were called “the end of production” by Baudrillard ^[16]. Baudrillard supposed that in the “simulation” phase, both production and demand were symbolized produced objects, and the opposition between workers and capitalists was also eliminated. The traditional criticism of political economy fully lost its basis of reality, being descended to a mutual game of valuable assistants, and finally dropping into the capital trap. At this point, the Marxist value theory had been completely out of order.

It was noted that although the concept of political economics and the shadow of the dialectics of Marxism still appeared in many of Baudrillard’s works after *Le Miroir de la production*, Baudrillard was completely demarcated from the historical materialism of Marxism, as a concrete manifestation of the centralized criticism of the ontological standpoint of the historical materialism of Marxism ^[17].

4. Several Criticisms on Baudrillard’s Value Theory

Baudrillard’s value theory was derived from the logical framework of materialist dialectics, but it was short of sufficient empirical foundation. Therefore, it had been criticized by academic circles. Besides, the most serious problem with Baudrillard’s theoretical system was that it was heavily divorced from practice. Baudrillard believed that in the contemporary capitalist society, the object used for exchange was not value but sign, and the logic of capital consisted in consumption rather than production, and arbitrarily claimed that sign value involved all exchanges ^[18]. However, in line with the data released by the World Bank, in the 1980s, when Baudrillard established his theoretical Mansion, more than half of the poor people in the globe lived on a daily living cost of less than \$1.25 on average. In 2017, 26 years after the development of productivity, the global extreme poverty rate remained 9.2%, that is to say, another nearly 700 million people relied on an average living cost of \$1.25 below a day. According to Baudrillard, the production was produced, and the demand created in contemporary society. So was the demand of 700 million extremely poor people also created? Baudrillard solely noticed the so-called sign and code exchange in the luxurious advanced capitalist metropolis, while ignoring a vast number of impoverished people from the third world, whose theory was on a strong Eurocentrism standpoint. The scholar who liked this should assert to emancipate all human beings with “symbolic exchange”.

In Baudrillard’s view, the opposition between production and consumption, bourgeoisie and workers was completely eradicated. From the author’s point of view, his later theories were purely to confuse the public, and cover up exploitation with obscure language, which was extremely similar to the “bourgeois trap” carefully built by capital. The author considered that one of the important targets of contemporary Marxist theoretical construction was to pull down the fig leaf of concealing exploitation, and make Marxism available to answer the new problems facing the 21st century. Marxists must realize that so long as a man was being exploited, all mankind could not be emancipated.

The author supposed that sign value was still not divorced from the category of use value, which was used to meet the psychological and social needs of human beings. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, these needs were natural ones in essence after human psychological and safety needs were satisfied, but not those created by capital. It was just because in contemporary society, capital distorted and amplified these needs with the help of mass media ^[19]. Sign value was produced by powerful capitals via mass media, and formed a monopolistic market of signs, with its pricing power being in hands of bourgeoisie. Petty bourgeoisie had a limited command of means of

production, without the conditions of producing signal value. In other words, the production of signs was costly, rather than the infinite replication in the “simulation” discussed by Baudrillard, and sign value still congealed the homogeneous human labour. Of course, it was only the preliminary conception of this paper, the author would further launch his study and demonstration of this point based on this.

5. Conclusion

Baudrillard played an important part in the history of western philosophy. He introduced the analytical methods of linguistic semiotics into the criticism of consumer society, and formed the critical theory of semiology, which greatly influenced the contemporary Western philosophy. His attitude toward Marx passed through the phase from adherence to deviation, and later he carried out a series of criticisms on Marxism. Baudrillard regarded himself as a transcendent beyond the truth. In his eyes, Marx’s criticism of political economy was caught in the trap of capital, which was the internal exchange at the symbolic level. However, Baudrillard did not demonstrate whether the “symbolic exchange” theory was the internal exchange at the symbolic level in person. Certainly, it could not be denied that Baudrillard’s theory also had its positive significance.

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