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Edition

Jean Baudrillard



# Symbolic Exchange and Death

Translated by Iain Hamilton Grant



# Symbolic Exchange and Death

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Jean Baudrillard

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# Introduction: *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Today

Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane

Jean Baudrillard has been a divisive figure within the English-speaking disciplines of sociology and cultural studies. On one side, followers of Baudrillard have embraced his attack on the orders of economic value that underpin contemporary Western culture; while on the other, critics have dismissed Baudrillard as someone whose playful and poetic attack on core concepts such as the social, class, and the real is not worthy of serious consideration. The text of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, first published in French in 1976, has been central to the reception of Baudrillard within these two camps, for it has been seen either as providing a brilliant analysis of the shifting forms of value and exchange that are central to the assault of Western culture on 'symbolic' forms of otherness, or as a frivolous attempt to dispense with social problems and inequalities in favour of the analysis of the 'hyperreal'; an approach which, for some, can be characterised as postmodernism at its worst. What unites both these readings within much of the secondary literature on Baudrillard, however, is that they tend to focus on part of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* – Chapter 2 on 'The Order of Simulacra' – rather than the whole of this text (indeed many critics of Baudrillard appear to have read little else) and its relation to his other writings. This introduction will argue that such a partial reading of Baudrillard is a mistake, for it is only by locating the genealogy of value which is core to this chapter of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (of which the theory of hyperreality is merely a part) within the broader arguments of the book and of Baudrillard's early work more generally that full significance of this work can be understood. A key point that has often been missed is that *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is framed by an opening chapter on production that advances a devastating critique of the field of political economy. This chapter, which has been widely neglected, addresses questions of money, labour, exchange, and the market, and provides a powerful resource for thinking critically about the current logic of post-crisis capitalism and its associated pro-market (neoliberal) forms of governance. While many have turned to the work of Michel Foucault to think historically about neoliberalism, Baudrillard's critique of Western notions of value and exchange, if developed alongside his work on death and fate, offers a radical alternative to current understandings of neoliberalism. Given this, and the current

impasse on the political Left in the face of a strengthening neoliberal order, the time to read Baudrillard carefully, and the text of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* in particular, is now.

### **The Early Works: From *The System of Objects* to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1968–76)**

In order to grasp the basis of Baudrillard's early work, it is important to outline the logic of four publications: *The Object System*, *The Consumer Society*, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, and *The Mirror of Production*. To this we can now add his writings for *Utopie*, the journal he and a small group edited from 1967–78, collected under the title *Utopia Deferred*. The general frame of these works is the Marxist conception of society and culture as arising from and resting on an economic base, its mode of production, and its superstructures. But against thinkers such as Althusser, who asserted the simple model of class struggle emerging out of the contradictions of capitalist economics, Baudrillard's early writings provide a new challenge: to show that consumer society involved new ways of social integration and created a massive de-radicalising effect on the agents of revolution (as classically identified). Baudrillard's answer was to introduce a new term – sign-exchange – in order to mark the emergence of consumerism proper.

In order to follow Baudrillard's logic here it is necessary to work with two elementary terms: use-value (utility) and exchange value (in terms of market price). Marxist theory holds that within the economic form of the market, a surplus over and above that which goes to labour is produced. This is surplus-value extracted from labour and realised in profit, interest, rent, and taxation. Underlying this is the labour theory of value, with its moral overtones of usefulness, and puritanical virtues, and the necessary support of the idea that there are basic human needs that require satisfaction. To this, Baudrillard adds the idea of sign-exchange, conceived as the purchase of something beyond utility, its status, and aesthetic or luxury value, for with the passage from a utilitarian culture to a consumer culture the consumption of sign-values takes precedence. With this development, the commodity-system becomes the object-system; a series of commodities altered by having been designed and valued in part for aesthetic value (Baudrillard here points to the significance of the Bauhaus). Working within the Marxist frame, Baudrillard argues that this new consumerism had become the principal form of bourgeois class rule, but not in a simple and straight forward way. In an essay of 1969 (included in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*) he explains:

Now what must be read and what one must know how to read in *upper class* superiority, in electric household equipment or in luxury food, is precisely *not* its advance on the scale of material benefits, but rather its *absolute privilege*, bound up in the fact that its pre-eminence is precisely not established

in signs of prestige and abundance, but elsewhere, in the real spheres of decision, direction and political and economic power, in the manipulation of signs and of men. And this relegates the Others, the *lower* and *middle* classes, to phantasms of the promised land. (1981: 62, emphasis original).

The definition of a consumer society follows logically: the predominance in consumption of 'images, signs, consumable models' (1997: 191). A consumer society is one in which signs are manipulated and consumed.

Baudrillard's discomfort with this framework, however, becomes apparent at various points in his early work. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard employs a range of anthropological ideas (from Mauss, Malinowski and Bataille) in order to question the naturalness of fundamental notions of utility and need. This move signals an important change in his theoretical thinking. Baudrillard does not follow the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss which involves using semiotics to analyse 'elementary' forms of kinship, religious and cultural systems, or that of Godelier to analyse modes of production. For Baudrillard these actually de-nature the object of analysis. It is precisely the inverse strategy that is adopted as Baudrillard's attention shifts instead to questions of ritual, sacrifice, potlatch, kula, and above all the gift. These become the primordial constituent elements of culture and that are theorised by the general concept of symbolic exchange. Indeed, Baudrillard argues that conceptions of utility and need arise with the dominance of the philosophical frame of political economy and are not natural at all. The retrospective projection of categories of production to earlier formations in the guise of scientific analysis (historical materialism) is a mystification. Baudrillard writes (1981: 128–9, emphasis original):

The present theory posits three essential tasks, beginning from and going beyond Marxist analysis:

1. The extension of the critique of political economy to a *radical critique of use-value* ...
2. The extension of the critique of political economy to the sign and to the system of signs is required in order to show how the logic, free play and circulation of signifiers is organised like the logic of the exchange value system; and how the the logic of signifieds is subordinated to it tactically ... Finally, we need a critique of signifier-fetishism ... Strictly speaking Marx offers only a critical theory of exchange value. The *critical* theory of use-value, signifier, and signified remains to be developed.
3. A theory of symbolic exchange.

Through the course of *The Mirror of Production* and *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard adds to this agenda by calling for a new mode of theorising that 'will bring all the force and questioning of primitive societies to bear on Marxism and psychoanalysis' (1975: 108) as well as political economy as a whole (see below). Baudrillard calls this new mode of work *fatal theory*.

It is clear, then, that the idea of the symbolic is present in Baudrillard's work from the beginning. Indeed, one of Baudrillard's earliest points of

concern is the modern tendency to reduce the symbolic to a semiotic system of distinctive oppositions that at the same time denatures it (see 1981: 88–101). At the end of *The System of Objects*, for example, he writes that ‘Traditional symbolic objects (tools, furniture, the house itself) were the mediators of a real relationship or a directly experienced situation, and their substance and form bore the clear imprint of the conscious or unconscious dynamic of that relationship. They were thus *not arbitrary* ... Such objects are not consumed. *To become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign*’ (1996: 200, emphasis original). A structural analysis of consumerism is possible because it is a system of arbitrary signs, of objects eviscerated of substance, and of which exchange value is the determining logic. Fetishism in this context becomes the fetishism of the sign-system. Thus, paradoxically, it is the symbolic object which is primary, whereas fetishism belongs to a secondary order of generalised exchange of sign-values. Baudrillard gives the example of rings worn on fingers. He observes that the wedding ring is ‘a unique object, symbol of the relationship of the couple ... [it] is made to last and to witness in its duration the permanence of the relationship. The ordinary ring is quite different: it does not symbolize a relationship. It is a non-singular object, a personal gratification, a sign in the eyes of others. I can wear several of them. I can substitute them ... [it] takes part in the play of my accessories and the constellation of fashion. It is an object of consumption’ (1981: 66).

In his writings from 1968 to 1976, Baudrillard’s main object is to identify the new phenomenon of the logic of the sign, and this is contrasted with three other kinds of signification: the logic of use-value, the logic of exchange value and, most importantly, the logic of *symbolic exchange*. He says these are various kinds of logic ‘that habitually get entangled ... in the welter of evidential considerations’ (1981: 66). It initially appears that the features of symbolic exchange are held as relatively obvious, whereas it is sign-exchange and consumption that have to be clarified and developed. But gradually it becomes clear that the problem of Marxist discourse is what lies beyond productive labour – that is what is radically useless beyond ‘the repressive and exploitative traits of labour and leisure’ (2006: 120). Baudrillard quickly identifies an inversion of work into non-work or play that is immediately aestheticized. He writes: if Marxist thought ‘settled accounts with bourgeois morality [it] remains defenceless against bourgeois aesthetics, the ambiguity of which is more subtle, but whose complicity with the general system of political economy is also more profound’ (2006: 120). Baudrillard uses the story of Robinson Crusoe to question the idea that once bourgeois disciplines are withdrawn the era of freedom and culture will emerge as a natural process. What emerges in this story is rather like the image of the lifting or annihilation of a superstructure of exchange value: what emerges is not a natural freedom, but the constraints of a cultural system of use-values, and with Friday colonial values (1981: 140–42). Baudrillard pushes this logic to forge a new position: in primitive societies

where the symbolic order rules, there is no real, no necessity, no production, no scarcity, no unconscious, no law (see 1975: 60).

It gradually becomes clear that Baudrillard's programme involves the elaboration of a theory of symbolic exchange that becomes the basis of an alternative to political economy and which demands a way of thinking of its own. In the works of 1968–73 the logic of symbolic exchange is discussed as if it is just one logic among a set of four. In the build up to the book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, the conception of symbolic exchange is dramatically radicalised, and comes to be seen as antagonistic to the other three. In the place of the semiotic method of analysis another is developed out of the rather weak notion of ambivalence. Rather than developing the notion of ambivalence as is the case with Bataille's analysis (see 1981: 97–8), Baudrillard begins to work out at great length and in surprising ways Marcel Mauss's concept of gift exchange. This shift to an anthropological thematic developed within a Durkheimian scheme immediately extracts the theme from its rationalism and its relation with rules of sociological method (which strictly prohibit the generalising of thematics in this way). But Baudrillard is insistent that such symbolic processes are not to be confined to so-called primitive societies. Indeed, he adopts Durkheim's thesis that these processes are constraining just as consumption is constraining and not to be analysed as the free play of individual choice.

Baudrillard, however, is also interested in the nature of power and this can be seen in his remarks about the class structure that sits behind the sign system. At the end of *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, he introduces a new idea about power. In a discussion of the media he suggests one of its important constituent features is the fact that it appears as a one-way process, where information and messages are provided for a passive audience. He states:

We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback. Now the totality of the existing architecture of the media finds itself on this latter definition: *they are what always prevents response*, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated into the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact). This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it (1981: 169–70, emphasis original).

Baudrillard underlines that this conception is taken from the general idea of symbolic exchange: 'To give, and to do it in such a way that one is unable to repay is to disrupt the exchange to your profit ... The social process is thus thrown out of equilibrium, whereas repaying disrupts the power relationship and institutes (or reinstitutes), on the basis of an antagonistic reciprocity, the circuit of symbolic exchange' (1981: 170). Thus, at this point he is working with two quite different conceptions of power: the one based on a Marxist theory of class, and the second based on the Maussian theory of the gift. This new perspective is developed in an important discussion at the

end of *Mirror of Production*, and this idea is extended to the economy and to a thesis that capitalism faces a problem not of production or reproduction, but specifically its 'incapacity to reproduce itself *symbolically*' (1975: 143, emphasis original). He emphasises that it 'is this symbolic relation that the political economy model (of capital) ... *can no longer produce*. It is its radical negation' (1975: 143).

### **From the Early Writings to *Symbolic Exchange and Death***

Baudrillard's book *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, first published in French in 1976, registers a seismic shift in his work as the notion of the unilateral gift (not Bataille's mode of consumption, nor the simple humiliation of labour) as the source of power is placed not only in the mechanisms of the media, but at the heart of the economy and the welfare system of modern states. All of his previous theory is reorganised on this basis, as the materialist theory of class power through physical control of repression and capital is relegated to a secondary position in his work from this point. Indeed, Marxist conceptions of economic determinism and its political economy are identified as masking what is actually taking place in a mutation of capital itself. In so far as this is a mask it is, he claims, happily accepted by the ruling elites as a cynical legitimisation, and the proletariat will find its place in the system, along with the communist parties. Baudrillard suggests not only that production ceases to play a leading role (it is succeeded by reproduction through the code) but also that what is really decisive is that this is a form of (second-order) simulacrum. He argues that it is capital that gives to labour the gift of work, and that exchange in terms of wages, salaries and forms of income received by labour for work done masks this fact. Baudrillard here moves to a new and more fundamental critique of capital: it does not take, it *gives*, and in such a way that the gift cannot be returned in a form which will annul the symbolic debt. Importantly, the proletariat cannot provide a symbolic counter-gift which cancels power, and for this reason power is entrenched in its symbolic fortress: capital (a point we will return to below).

In order for this crucial argument to work a number of problems have to be overcome. The first set of problems concerns Baudrillard's theory of the gift, and this leads to the question of what is meant by symbolic exchange and the symbolic order of which the gift is just one instance. The second set of problems relate to the nature of the simulacra that are produced in this scenario by the processes of capital itself. The third set of problems concerns those of opposition, resistance, revolution to capital and its culture. These problems aside, what is significant in this discussion is the fact that Baudrillard does not believe that there are some societies based on symbolic exchange and some that are not. In the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, he declares that 'Symbolic exchange is no longer the organising principle of modern society. Of course, the symbolic



haunts modern social institutions in the form of their own death' (p. 22). What is significant in modern capitalist societies is that symbolic exchange is blocked, and with this the reciprocity of symbolic exchange is broken as it can no longer take place and be resolved. What occurs in the failure of symbolic reproduction is the appearance of *simulacra*. For Baudrillard, the whole thrust of resistance and revolution is to challenge this blocked resolution with a symbolic event which will shake the order to its foundations. However, Baudrillard also observes that the revolution itself, including Marxism, has been caught up in simulacra. Indeed, his view is that capitalism is an abnormal, indeed pathological, system, and the opposition has been absorbed within it.

The specific problem concerning the theory of the gift here is that it is evidently not registered in sign-exchange: it takes place rather in the sphere of ritual with its explicit forms of obligation. Baudrillard insists, following Mauss, that the gift is not something which is simply gratuitous and superficial. He draws on anthropology to argue instead that societies where the gift is evident are highly rule governed, not least because the return of the gift is obligatory. The rhythm of gift-exchange is cyclical in a mode characterised by challenge and reversibility. The importance of the return of the gift in the form of the counter-gift is that it contains the potential to cancel power. In his critique of Godelier in *Mirror of Production*, Baudrillard declares: 'The exchanged goods are apportioned and limited, often imported from far away according to strict rules. Why? Because given over to individual or group production, they would risk being proliferated and thereby break the fragile mechanism of reciprocity. ...' (1975: 79). But how does Baudrillard account for the gift as a process in a de-ritualised society? His answer is surprising: that modern capitalism is in fact feudalism pushed to the limit. Here, he advances Marx's idea that labour has become a service: this is 'not, however, a "regression" of capital towards feudalism, but rather the dawn of its real domination, solicitation and total conscription of the "person"' (p. 13). This idea is a crucial move, and Baudrillard later develops it as the basis for a critique of human capital theory. The gift from capital is the gift of work but the conception of work is radically altered in the new situation: it is no longer productive. Baudrillard points, for example, to the suggestion of the negative tax (the proposition that everyone receive an income as a right). This for many on the political Left was regarded as a step in the right direction, but for Baudrillard it is the stamp of complete domination in a new form.

The second set of problems relates to the way in which the symbolic order is reduced by a new one, called in some places a semiotic order, or again as orders of simulacra and simulation. If Baudrillard starts this work with a consideration of political economy (see below), it is clear that he regards this a simulacral model in the sense that it reduces the symbolic order to the play of signs. In his consideration of the orders of simulacra since the Renaissance he places this development in between the baroque period (characterised by the counterfeit, the mirror and theatre, masks,



trompe l'oeil) and the monopoly code of mass media. The industrial is the second order of simulacra, and this way of proceeding has the advantage of being able to theorise the conception of the 'real' at each stage, since this is not stable but evolves through different forms. Fundamental to his idea of the symbolic order is the thesis that it does not produce a reality as such; what counts as 'reality' only emerges with simulacra. Beyond the industrial stage is the third order, or the idea that a new binary coding emerges that has a profound effect across all spheres – not just the 0/1 of the code, but all alternating systems as found for example in politics (two parties), in fashion, and in economics (the duopoly). This latter, he argues, is the most stable monopoly form as a single giant organisation tends to be vulnerable to collapse. It is this observation that made Baudrillard famous as he asked the question in *Symbolic Exchange and Death*: 'Why has the World Trade Centre in New York got *two* towers?' (p. 90; on 9/11 as a symbolic event, see Baudrillard, 2013).

The third set of questions concern the opposition to and rebellion against simulacra. It is the same question as the nature of the revolution against capital, since the two are part and parcel of the same formation. The bourgeoisie, he argues, is the only class as such that has existed, and capitalism for a time the only mode of production that has existed. By contrast, the proletariat has never been a revolutionary class, and Baudrillard argues that it has already passed away into the mass. This does not mean, however, that there has been no revolutionary resistance to capital, or that such resistance is dead. Because symbolic reversal is blocked the system is continuously under threat as it attempts to impose its semiotic order. Indeed, the symbolic shows itself in all the messianic cults and movements that demand 'paradise now' – often involving considerable sacrifice and martyrdom. The imposition of the linear over cyclical time by semiotic culture was achieved only with difficulty, as was the discipline involved in industrialism. In fact, he argues, even modern security and safety systems have faced long and tenacious opposition because they too are forms of modern discipline.

Baudrillard's position, by way of response, was to align himself with the utopians, hence the adherence to the Utopie group. His writings from 1966 critique and reject all attempts at controlling the utopian challenge, postponing it, organising or planning it bureaucratically. Utopia is in fact one of the first signatures of the symbolic in his writings. Baudrillard's key 1971 piece on utopia (which originally had no title) has been translated into English twice: once as 'Utopia: the smile of the Cheshire Cat' (Baudrillard, 2001a: 59–60) and again as 'Utopia Deferred ...' (Baudrillard, 2006: 61–2). The title of this second translation became the title of the collection in English translation – in French its title is *Le Ludique et le Policier* (2001b). What is odd is that this particular essay specifically critiques the notion of deferring utopia. In fact, the French is 'L'utopie a été renvoyée dans l'idéalisme par un siècle et demi de pratique dialectique triomphante' (2001: 39) – 'Utopia has been propelled back (renvoyée)

into idealism by a century and a half of triumphant dialectical practice'. He continues: 'Today it is beginning to get the better of all revolutionary definitions and dispatches (*renvoyer*) all the models of the revolution back to their bureaucratic idealism'. In other words, utopian theory is that which rejects the bureaucratic organisation of the revolution, 'it does not inscribe itself in the future'.

## **Symbolic Exchange, Death and Political Economy**

This fundamental question of life and death lies at the heart of the argument of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. For Baudrillard, death is a cultural rather than a physical form, and through the course of this text he draws a distinction between primordial cultures in which physical 'real' biological death is not known as the symbolic cycles of life and renewal are continuous, and the modern world in which death is stripped of its symbolic significance and becomes increasingly meaningless (a position Baudrillard develops from the work of Max Weber, see Gane, N., 2002: 131–50). Baudrillard here advances Freud's notion of the death drive as pulsion and presents it as a fundamental Manichean duality that undoes all semiotic psychology and psychoanalysis. Baudrillard places Freud's death drive at the centre of his theorising, and argues, as stated above, that modern social institutions are haunted by their own death as all societies are founded upon a principle of symbolic exchange; a principle that in capitalist society is diverted or perverted but which nonetheless has the capacity to irrupt in unpredictable ways and potentially lead this type of society towards its demise. Baudrillard sees the reversibility of exchange in what he calls *sac-rifice*, which is a form of the gift that contains the potential to undo and reverse capitalist power structures that are founded upon economic principles of accumulation.

This belief in the continued threat of the symbolic to the stability of advanced capitalist cultures is accompanied by a highly nuanced analysis of capitalism itself which traces a shift beyond its industrial form (tied to class and the social) to a new world of code, simulation and indeterminacy. This marks the beginning of a new neoliberal order in which the code, including most importantly *price*, becomes paramount and the market becomes, in Hayekian terms, *the* meta-information processor to operate upon cybernetic principles. This development is concealed behind what Baudrillard calls the '*second life*' of political economy which remains tied to concepts of economic value that belong to an earlier stage of capitalism. Baudrillard insists that it is a mistake to be seduced by this second coming as 'Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model' (p. 23). This is to say that the whole of political economy, indeed most of modern science, creates a culture based upon the 'real' and on 'value' while in practice capital itself has long since escaped this system but at the same time continues to use it to its advantage. For as

opposed to the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (which is the object of political economy), we now live in a world dominated by the free play of the 'monetary sign' that is beyond reference to any 'real' of production or even a monetary referent in the form of a gold standard. In this world, the idea of a 'real' value (of equities, of commodities, of houses, of anything) is meaningless as what matters instead is not value *per se* but 'infinite speculation'.

Baudrillard argues that this new world is marked by the emergence of a 'brothel of capital': 'a brothel not for prostitution, but for substitution and commutation'. He advances a three stage genealogy that leads to this present: first, value as natural (as it was for the Physiocrats, who tied value to land and labour); second, value as produced (as something social not natural); and third, the collapse of the commodity form of value and the emergence of a new order based upon the play of monetary signs that is largely post-social in basis. This third order is marked by the separation of capital from class and, with this, the implosion of the social into the mass. This, perhaps, can be called the neoliberal moment, and Baudrillard himself asks: 'are we still within a capitalist mode? It may be that we are in a hyper-capitalist mode, or in very different order' (p. 32). Again, the question of money is central as Baudrillard accompanies this analysis by documenting a shift beyond the gold standard to 'hot money and generalised flotation' and then to a new world of 'cool money' that is based upon 'an intense but non-affective relativity of terms'. In this world, money becomes more than simply a medium in the McLuhan sense as it is rather 'circulation itself', or in Baudrillard's terms 'the realised form of the system in its twisting abstraction'. In this new situation, money breaks from the political-economic concepts of use-value and exchange-value and becomes a transversal form that crosses into everything else and enters its own orbit. Baudrillard observes that this logic of 'high intensity flotation' is the 'purest expression of the system'.

Baudrillard develops this theory of the transversalism of the monetary sign, which is disengaged from all previous certainties of the 'real', into a more general diagnosis of what today would be called neoliberal society; a society within which 'individuals, disinvested as subjects and robbed of their fixed relations, are drifting, in relation to one another, into an incessant mode of transferential fluctuations ...' (p. 24). The failure of the political Left to recognise and confront this new situation lies, for Baudrillard, in their nostalgia for previous forms of capital, and for their association with ideas of class and the social. He declares that a way forward beyond this nostalgia is to treat economic conceptions of scarcity and abundance, as well as the alternation between political parties and the alternation between economic boom and slump, as tools of the system itself – and as things to which the system is ultimately indifferent. The problem, he argues, lies in the naturalisation of political economy, which expresses everything in terms of production and value without recognising the need to question precisely these concepts. Here, Marxism, ironically, is part of the problem: 'Economics,

preferably in its Marxian variety, becomes the explicit discourse of a whole society, the vulgate of every analysis' (p. 55). What is needed, for Baudrillard, is to recognise and address the challenge of a new situation in which 'everything operates or breaks down through the effects of the code' (p. 54), and, beyond this, to question the ways in which symbolic forms continue to haunt this order. Baudrillard points to two main options here. First, he observes that the fragility of the capitalist system increases in proportion to its 'ideal coherence'. This raises the possibility of what he calls a 'catastrophic strategy'; one that pushes the system as far as possible within its own internal logic to exploit its resulting vulnerabilities. Second, he argues that this can be combined with an appeal to the disruptive basis of symbolic forms. He declares: 'Only symbolic disorder can bring an interruption in the code' (p. 25). Baudrillard here sees subversive potential in poetic, enigmatic and singular forms that cannot easily be captured by any system, and raises the prospect of a pataphysics – or a science of imaginary solutions – that works to show that the (neoliberal) present is by no means irreversibly closed.

### **Concluding Remarks**

These concerns feed into, and are modified by, Baudrillard's later writings. His essay *Carnival and Cannibal* (2010) [originally 2004], for example, breaks with the optimistic view that the symbolic cultures of the third world will eventually take their revenge on the semiotic cultures of the first and second worlds. Baudrillard presents a new hypothesis that concerns the nature of the semiotic order: on the one hand it may itself be subject to internal duality and the transposition of evil; while on the other hand, the semiotic may itself be seen as itself a symbolic form, a new and unprecedented form of challenge. In so doing, Baudrillard returns to the question of the emergence of the category of the real; a question that lies at the heart of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. This category is bound up with the logic of simulacra, and the precession of simulacra since it is within this precession that the real emerges in a sequence seen as producing an order of scientific truths in the context of technological practice engaged in the disenchantment of the world, the elimination of seduction, evil, and fate. Thus posed, Baudrillard focusses on the struggle of the symbolic order against this new formation (called here 'semiotic', for the cultural modification originated before and extended far beyond purely scientific endeavours). Fundamental however to all structures is gift exchange and it is here that the power of capital is located: the gift that cannot be returned. Capital provides for the proletariat, and only by its own death can the proletariat return an equivalent challenge. Baudrillard is careful to distinguish between all the elements of the symbolic order and those of the semiotic order, and draws a distinction between the fragment (symbolic) and the fractal (semiotic). But there is something else here. In

this logic there is the eventual appearance of third and fourth order simulacra, those which move through new technologies into the virtual. This is not simply a shift from real to hyperreal, but is a shift or move away from, or a break indeed with the whole complex of symbolic and semiotic formations up to the emergence of third and fourth order simulacra.

Thus, the new hypothesis suggests that the emergence of a new virtual world produced by new technologies involves a new challenge, for it attacks the 'real' itself. It is then a challenge in its final phases to the whole package of the symbolic and semiotic reality complex involving sign and representation, base and superstructure. Baudrillard expresses this as shift from a world in which humanity faces the original gift of having been created in nature without having been consulted to a virtual world in which humanity itself begins to disappear. He says 'our entire technical universe, even in its most excessive elements, would then assume a high symbolic value as a response to the original gift (the original crime) that is the existence of the world without us, without our having been consulted' (2010: 86).

So what does this change of position amount to? Three major consequences are in evidence. The first is that globalisation, the irreversible triumph of American power produces a new situation. It is no longer a form of capitalism. Its space-time formation is non-Euclidean. Going beyond the traditional forms of domination (master-slave dialectic) the new situation is one in which there is no longer an oppositional formation, an alternative culture that might be victorious in the struggle against it. He registers this change by introducing the concept of hegemony: global power has attained a hegemonic position in which alternatives to the system, including symbolic ones, are rendered impotent. The epoch of domination, with its promise of triumphant struggle in the Third World (2010: 28) as an alternative to the ruling order is over: this is irreversible.

The second is that the hegemonic power has attained such confidence of its own position that it comfortably absorbs critique within its own discourse. It eliminates evil (it is the Empire of the Good); and thus, given its hegemony, it can itself speak evil in a way that disables all critique – an idea that can be traced to *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. But where does this leave evil or what Baudrillard calls the 'intelligence of evil'? There is the evil which appears as terrorism (which even includes natural events). And there is also the evil which produces itself stubbornly and even stupidly in the refusal of the unilateral gift. The attempt to usher in a universe without evil is bound to fail; evil inevitably reappears and is the key to understanding the new hegemony. The basic epistemology of this new position is laid out in *The Intelligence of Evil* (Baudrillard, 2005).

Third, Baudrillard alters his approach by introducing the terms carnivalisation and masquerade to incorporate the new scenario of simulacra – terms that cannot be found in *The Intelligence of Evil*, and is the mark of the new problematic. This new focus presents Baudrillard's general theory of Western imperialism as a frame for his analysis of globalisation. It is not primarily economics or technology that is at work in a simple process of Western

domination. It is a strategy of an 'operational simulation' by which all other cultures are 'disneyfied' by a double process of cannibalisation (by the host culture) and carnivalisation (by American cultural hegemony). Hegemony asserts itself 'no longer through exporting techniques, values, ideologies but through the universal extrapolation of a parody of these values ... Global power is the power of the simulacrum' (Baudrillard, 2011: 66; 2010: 21). This new frame unifies the whole of the theory which has been latent in his writings since his early 1968 essay on modernity (see Baudrillard, 1987).

As a final word it is not sufficient simply to point to the already significant legacy of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* – its impact on the American art scene, on 'postmodernism', on the reaction to terrorism and '9/11' (the World Trade Centre as symbol is analysed in this 1976 work) and on the films like the *Matrix* series but to its future as a resource for the analysis of the career of current phases of the neoliberal world. Its importance here is not one that derives from a critique of neoliberal doctrines, for there is no analysis of Ordoliberalism, or Gary Becker in the style of Michel Foucault's (2008) famous lectures on the history of neoliberal reason. Baudrillard's contribution comes, first, in terms of an analysis of the semiotic powers of institutional and cultural forms such as markets, money and capital (which remain haunted by their symbolic others); and second, through an engagement with the emergence of the phenomenon as witnessed. Baudrillard was prepared for the moment of 'deregulation' itself not as liberalism but as liberation of elements from the system of the consumer society bringing with it a spectacular reversal of the beneficiaries of 'welfare socialism': from the poor to the rich and the dissolution of the 'social'. If alienation is no longer a class phenomenon it reappears with the introjection of entrepreneurialism into the individual fashioned as human capital. For Baudrillard, all this was prefigured in the simple but devastating shift to the arrogant style of advertising employed by the Banque Nationale de Paris in the early 1970s: 'I am interested in your money – fair's fair – lend me your money and you may profit from my bank' (p. 68, the advert itself can be found 2006: 210). In one of his last texts written in April 2005 Baudrillard again referred to this advert as a turning point as it 'encapsulates the ignominy of capital far better than any critical analysis ... It wasn't a denunciation, a critical analysis. It came from the dominant power and enjoyed complete immunity' (2011: 37).

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# Introduction to the First Edition

Mike Gane

*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, published in France in 1976, is without doubt Jean Baudrillard's most important book. It appeared alongside works by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault in Gallimard's prestigious series Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines. It is remarkable in many respects that it has taken some years for the full impact of Baudrillard's work to be felt in English-speaking cultures, and then under something of a misunderstanding. For various complex reasons Baudrillard's name is associated with postmodernism, indeed he has often been called the 'high priest of postmodernism', yet it is clear that Baudrillard's own relationship with postmodernism is hardly positive. The interest in postmodernism has certainly served Baudrillard for there is enormous curiosity in establishing just what Baudrillard's position is if it is not postmodern. The translation and publication of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* will be decisive in this respect.

The great interest in Baudrillard's work in recent years has led to a sudden flood of translations, and this has not been without its own problems, for works written at many years' distance have appeared in English as contemporaneous publications. The first work to appear in translation was *The Mirror of Production* in 1975 (French original 1973) followed in 1981 by *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (originally 1972). Parts of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* became available in 1981 in journal article form, and in 1983 in the collection *Simulations* by Semiotext(e) in New York, a publishing house which subsequently published *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (1983, originally 1978), *Forget Foucault* (1987, originally 1977), and *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988, originally 1987). Two books of selected writings, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (1988) and *Revenge of the Crystal* (1990), are now available in English, as are *Seduction* (1990, originally 1979), *Fatal Strategies* (1990, originally 1983), *Cool Memories* (1990, originally 1987) and *Transparency of Evil* (1993, originally 1990). The year 1993 will also see the publication of *Baudrillard Live*, a selection of interviews. The question arises therefore of how to make sense of this corpus and how does *Symbolic Exchange and Death* figure in it?

First of all some background on Jean Baudrillard himself. He was born in Reims in 1929. His formation and early teaching experience was as a Germanist. He wrote an early thesis on Nietzsche and Luther, and was particularly interested in the work of Hölderlin. His first publications were literary critical essays in *Les temps modernes* (1962–63). He was also



interested in photography (an edited book of photographs was published in 1963), an interest he still maintains (in December 1992 there was an exhibition of his photographs in a gallery on the Champs-Élysées). In the 1960s he was the principal translator of the works of Peter Weiss into French, but he also translated Brecht and a sociological work on Third World millenarian movements by Wilhelm Mühlmann. In the 1960s he converted to sociology under the influence of Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes. Most of his university teaching career was at Nanterre in Paris. In the late 1960s he was associated with *Utopie* and later with *Traverses*, both radical journals outside the orthodox organisation of the left. He was deeply influenced by situationism but was never attached in any formal manner. In the 1970s he began to travel, to the USA, about which he wrote the book *America* (1988, originally 1986), but also more widely, as is partially documented in his *Cool Memories*. Initially, his main axis of travel in Europe was Paris–Milan–Barcelona, which today has become Paris–Berlin–Madrid. He has recently spent time in Berlin as well as Argentina and Brazil, and has made a rare visit to Britain: he reckons to spend about half of his time out of France. It comes as no surprise that Baudrillard has a growing world reputation, indeed he was the subject of a recent conference (in Montana in 1990, published as *Jean Baudrillard*, Stearns and Chaloupka, 1992), and that in recent surveys he ranks in the leading half-dozen French intellectuals in terms of citations and translations.

The flood of translations of Baudrillard's works has been accompanied by commentaries from writers such as Fredric Jameson, Douglas Kellner and Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. By and large these writers have tried to link Baudrillard's ideas with postmodernism. Jameson used Baudrillard to fill out a conception of postmodernism as the cultural formation of 'late capitalism'. In effect this line was taken a great deal further by Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. Douglas Kellner first presented Baudrillard as the major postmodern theorist but later altered the thesis, admitting that in reality Baudrillard's writings were generally extremely hostile to postmodernism. Kellner's book on Baudrillard (1989) is an attempt to argue that he is a dangerous writer whose position needs to be entirely rejected. Yet there is still a sense in which the relation to Baudrillard is one of repulsion and attraction. Even Kellner points to the 'insightful' and 'brilliant' analyses in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (Kellner, 1989:102).

Baudrillard's position in *The System of Objects* (1968), but even more so in *The Consumer Society* (1970), seems influenced by a Marxist point of view. But there is a violent reaction to Marxism in *The Mirror of Production* (1973) that leads to the new synthesis that is explored in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). A formula in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981, originally 1972), the 'semiological reduction of the symbolic properly constitutes the ideological process' (p. 98), can be taken as a key statement of Baudrillard's object. It was at that time very clearly considered an analysis of crucial processes within capitalist society: an 'ideological reduction to the (capitalist) system of order and social

values' (p. 100). Certainly in the years leading up to 1972 Baudrillard seemed to be working within a Marxist framework: he referred to the capitalist mode of production as the basis of the social formation. In 1970, with his book *The Consumer Society*, it was clear that unlike more orthodox Marxists he saw that affluence and consumption has profound consequences for social structure and cultural integration. Marxists like Althusser talked of the key role of social class reproduction in the family and the school ('ideological apparatuses of the State'), Baudrillard talked of the power of consumption and repressive ambience in a line of thought influenced by Barthes, Marcuse and McLuhan.

It became clear, however, that the critical base, the theoretical position, from which Baudrillard undertook his analyses was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand there is in this period a gesture to the importance of the proletarian position. There is also increasing reference to the significance of an order higher than that of the semiotic culture. He called this the 'symbolic order', a more radical if more primordial basis. At first the symbolic order is discussed with reference to the famous analysis of gift-exchange by Marcel Mauss (see Baudrillard, 1981, originally 1972: 64ff.). This is an initial study, the first of a long series of oppositions between the symbolic and the semiotic order. Thus it is essential to clarify the nature of these two concepts. Of course this cannot be done definitively since many of the concepts have been modified through the course of Baudrillard's subsequent evolution. It is Baudrillard's own account of the sacred culture defined by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), it is that defined by Max Weber as the enchanted world of traditional societies, it is the fatalistic culture of peasants. For Baudrillard Marx was not sufficiently radical in his analysis, it was not use-value which should have been contrasted with exchange-value, but symbolic exchange which should have been contrasted with commodity exchange. Baudrillard's reading of Marx suggests that his conception of communism was trapped within the matrix of the cultural order of rationalisation and therefore could not be other than its (bad) mirror-image. Like Mauss, Baudrillard suggests the superiority of the symbolic order over the semiotic order (the obligation of gift over the cash nexus) while witnessing the apparent destruction of the former by the latter. Against the Marxists, Baudrillard appears more radical, and more primitive. But there are surprises. Baudrillard does not simply document the course of the destruction of the symbolic order but analyses the ironic evolution of the semiotic order itself.

If we turn to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* we can follow the analyses of the *ideological process*. Chapter 1, on capitalism and production, is perhaps a crucial analysis. It is curious in many respects. It is written in a highly rhetorical style, playful, wilfully malicious. Although the analyses of simulation, fashion, sexuality, death, are likely to be more celebrated, this first chapter in a sense is more fundamental – yet the text is both assertive, dogmatic and at the same time illusive. The writing is in the main unsupported by any burden of evidence or any attempt at systematic argument,

as if a highly perverse dialectical mania had grasped the writer. First of all Baudrillard presents the thesis that in order to grasp the nature of modern capitalism it must be thought of not as a mode of production but as a code dominated by the 'structural law of value'. This term is obviously developed from Marx's own law of value, but here it detaches itself from economics and becomes a mechanism which invades all cultural spheres. In other words all spheres can be analysed as the process of the political economy of the sign. Baudrillard insists in fact that the development of modern society is uneven, and like Weber argues that the process first attacks art, politics and culture and then the economy itself. The economy, after having passed through a specific phase of simulation known as the capitalist mode of production (the phase of the factory, etc.), undergoes an ironic logic since the mode of production inverts itself and begins to destroy the very separations it was built upon. Capital itself proceeds to destroy the hierarchy of base and superstructure, of production and reproduction, of labour and capital.

There are two steps in the argument which must be examined. The first is the argument concerning the nature of the change of the terms within the capitalist mode of production. The second is the argument concerning the relation between the symbolic order and capitalism. The character of the former argument is perhaps best grasped as process occurring at an already advanced stage of the destruction of the natural economy of primitive symbolic exchange (the argument follows on from that presented in *The Mirror of Production*). For Baudrillard the primitive society has no 'mode of production', indeed perhaps industrial factory capitalism is the only 'mode of production' that has existed as such. However, once the structural law of value attacks the elements of the system the code becomes determinant, ending any order of causation between the spheres of production and consumption. Hence the historical dialectic between them comes to an end. Baudrillard produces the irony of the Althusserian version of Marx which suggested that reproduction (class struggle) was determinant in history, for Baudrillard suggests that when reproduction becomes dominant, labour and production change their sense, they lose their finality, that is, they lose their rationality as purposeful work as they become reproduced for the sake of the reproduction of work itself. This idea reflects the great change that has occurred in Western societies in relation to the meaning of the term alienation. When this happens all elements in the system are affected as the proletariat is incorporated into the social order; trade unions, strikes, revolts such as May '68 lose their claim to justice and radicality. Indeed, the organisations and theoreticians who mark time with insistence on the centrality of 'production' and 'labour' – and those who believe in 'the use-value of their labour power – the proletariat – are virtually the most mystified and the least susceptible to this revolt' (p. 52 below). Baudrillard reorganises the theory of resistance and revolt from one based on internal system contradiction (Marx) to that of exclusion and excommunication (Durkheim and Mauss).

The second element in the argument is the scope and role Baudrillard gives to the symbolic order within the capitalist system. It almost appears as a replacement for the notion of a social infrastructure, and on occasions Baudrillard has formulations which approach this image. It is a mistake, then, to think that *Symbolic Exchange and Death* is simply about the 'ideological process' of the reduction of the symbolic by the semiotic. It is also about the irruption of the symbolic within the semiotic. The challenge, the stake is, he says, a dimension 'immanent in the code' (p. 60 below). In an analysis which at first sight appears slightly facile, the terms Baudrillard uses to analyse capitalism reverse all previous conceptions. The capitalist presents the gift of work to the proletarian. Because the proletarian cannot return this gift and cannot cancel it he cannot cancel the power of the capitalist. But the position and order of the capitalist is vulnerable none the less, since Baudrillard claims nothing can evade symbolic obligation, indeed not even the system itself: terrorism, the taking of hostages, sacrificial martyrdom, are challenges to the system which pass into the symbolic order. If there is a strategy in Baudrillard's work perhaps this is where it is discussed: the fundamental challenge to the semiotic system will be in the form of a gift which it will not be able to return (pp. 58–65 below).

The chapters which follow study themes directly related to the apparent destruction of the symbolic by the semiotic order. The chapter on simulation discusses the genealogy of the orders of simulation from the counterfeit, through production proper to the hyperreal order itself. Chapter 3 examines the case of fashion and the fashion cycle which is crucial to the analysis of consumer society and the commutation of all cultural elements, even the most apparently critical, to the code of fashion and its temporality. Chapter 4 examines the body and sexuality. Here the 'phallus exchange standard' operates as a cultural parallel with the law of value determining a specific destruction of the radical difference between the sexes and the symbolic exchanges based on it. In the next chapter, on death, Baudrillard presents a genealogy of the dead, the destruction of the original unities of life and death and the rituals which integrated the relations between generations in traditional societies. In the final chapter Baudrillard uses Saussure against Saussure. The great analyst of the sign, the originator of structural linguistics and semiology, Saussure also wrote voluminous notebooks on the hidden anagrams in classical literature. Baudrillard argues that this provides a clue to reading such poetry not as accumulation but as sacrificial, cyclical, as prestation and cancellation (extermination). This chapter also includes a critique of the Freudian analysis of jokes seen as complicit with the order of accumulation and repression.

After *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was published in 1976 Baudrillard published a number of brilliant short articles and reviews – a critical review of Foucault, a critique of the architecture of the Pompidou Centre, etc., as well as a set of poems called *L'ange de stuc* (*The Stucco Angel*). His next major work was *Seduction*, published in 1979. This developed the theme of the opposition of seduction to the semiotic and masculine principle of

production; it suggested a return of the principle of seduction in consumer society, but in a changed form, that of the ludic, a cool seduction. In 1983 Baudrillard published *Fatal Strategies*, which charted the collapse of agency in a society dominated by the code and the phenomena which accompanied the disappearance of the constraints of the dialectic. It became clear that a crucial influence on Baudrillard, apart from Marx, Freud, Saussure and Mauss, was Nietzsche. The latter's anti-modernist aphoristic style was evident in Baudrillard's *Cool Memories*, published in 1987, one of Baudrillard's most successful works. In recent years Baudrillard has published *Transparency of Evil*, *The Illusion of the End* and a collection of articles on the Gulf War. These works continue the analysis of the apparent destruction of the symbolic by the semiotic and the subsequent ironic evolution of the semiotic order; they still draw on the theory and analyses of *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, in fact at points are almost unintelligible without a knowledge of that text. Indeed, in a recent interview (1991), Baudrillard drew attention to the fact that in France *Symbolic Exchange and Death* was

the last book that inspired any confidence ... Everything is deemed brilliant, intelligent, but not serious. There has never been any real discussion about it. I don't claim to be tremendously serious, but there are nevertheless some philosophically serious things in my work! In the fine arts milieu I was received fairly well, but with such misunderstanding! (Baudrillard, 1993:189)

Certainly with this English translation it is evident that many of the misunderstandings that have surrounded the writings of Baudrillard, perhaps far beyond the fine arts milieu, will find they have no textual basis. More than that of course, the publication of this translation brings to the English-speaking public a document which has already had enormous indirect influence. For those who have wished that Baudrillard would express his argument in more orthodox terms, this is undoubtedly the text where he attempted to do precisely that.

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