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The 'Break'
with Marxism

INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE MIRROR OF PRODUCTION

[I]f the system could function without feeding its workers, there would be no bread.

(Baudrillard, 1981: 86)

No fool this Marx.

(Baudrillard, 2001b: 119 n. 1)

The notion of a 'break' with Marxism is misleading. From his earliest writings Baudrillard was clearly dissatisfied with both classical Marxism and the attempts at revision made by the Frankfurt School theorists and others. This is demonstrated in the important early essay 'Police and Play' (2001a: 61–9) and in other writings of the time published in the journal *Utopie*. Baudrillard never was a Marxist as such, yet he was deeply influenced by Marxism and retained a great admiration for Marx's theorisation of capitalism (1993b: 10). In what sense, then, can we speak of a 'break' with Marxism?

To investigate the relationship between Baudrillard and Marxism we must distinguish the writings of Marx himself from the vast body of theory spanning politics, economics and anthropology that can be labelled Marxist. Baudrillard's principal target in *Mirror of Production* (1975) is the latter, though he is also critical of the former.

In *Mirror*, Baudrillard develops many of what became his favourite tropes: the mirror, reflections, hauntings, illusion. He offers a sustained argument that Marxism is unable to challenge the system at anything approaching a fundamental level; indeed, that Marxist theory repeats, reiterates or fails to question some of the key assumptions of the capitalist system. Marxism is the mirror of production. Unlike Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists, notably Marcuse (1961: 4–5), Baudrillard does not claim that capitalism has produced a system of 'false' needs that have over-written and obscured genuine, concrete or objective needs. For Baudrillard the principle of need itself is ideological: 'true' and 'false' needs cannot ultimately be distinguished (1981: 63–97). This argument is explored below.

In *Mirror* Baudrillard begins to distinguish his theoretical position from that of critical theory generally, with which he had remained allied in *Critique* (see 1981: 29). Critical theory is rejected in *Mirror* because, according to Baudrillard, it questions only the contents of the mode of production and leaves 'intact' the form or principle of production (1975: 17). Further, production as principle insinuates itself into critiques of the capitalist mode of production such that would-be 'revolutionary' theories actually repeat and reinforce the system.¹

Mirror and *Symbolic Exchange* involve the development and application of a new methodology in Baudrillard's work. Baudrillard develops what he terms an 'ethnological reduction' aiming 'to strip our culture, including its materialist critique, of the absolute privilege that it gives itself by the imposition of a universal code' (1975: 115). A code of signs, signs of truth, signs of reality – the entire representational apparatus of Western culture and rationality is attacked. *Mirror* is the last text in which Baudrillard seems willing to anticipate likely criticisms of his positions. The following is particularly important:

The objection that our society is still largely dominated by the logic of commodities is irrelevant. When Marx set out to analyse capital, capitalist industrial production was still largely a minority phenomenon. When he designated political economy as the determining sphere, religion was still largely dominant. The theoretical decision is never made at the quantitative level, but at the level of structural critique.

(Baudrillard, 1975: 121)

In other words, theory must not limit itself to description, to an empirical or 'realist' cataloguing, nor to taking a critical 'standpoint' in relation to an aspect of the system. In order to be analytical theory must depart from the existing state of affairs and the ideas it circulates.

What is clear is that the scope of Baudrillard's early work expands constantly, circling outwards from objects to the entire system of consumption, from the production of signs to the metaphysical system of production. At each stage Baudrillard seeks a mode of resistance to, or better defiance of, these systems, through a radical difference that cannot be assimilated. The difficulties involved in articulating a convincing mode of resistance show just how deep and pervasive the systems of power, control and regulation actually are.

LE MIROIR DE LA PRODUCTION/THE MIRROR OF PRODUCTION

The early 1970s was a time of major political upheaval and contestation in the Western democracies. In Paris the students' revolt and workers' strikes of May 1968 temporarily and locally suspended the capitalist system, but faded during the long summer months with students and workers split by government manoeuvres. The Conservative government in the UK was destroyed by strike action in 1974 and the USA suffered the Watergate scandal while the Vietnam war still raged, as did protests against it. At the same time there was a widespread escalation in 'terrorist' activities. Baudrillard's contentions in *Mirror* (1975), that Marxism was not capable of challenging the system, were untimely, awkward and provocative, and a number of Marxist-oriented critics have never forgiven Baudrillard for writing it.

Baudrillard's major contention in this work is that production is far more than a mode of creating goods for distribution and sale: production is, in Western culture, a *metaphysical system*. A 'metaphysics' is a system of thought that bases its arguments on an abstracted or 'meta' principle that cannot be shown to be valid and has to be taken on trust. The implication is that metaphysical principles are spurious and fanciful, and Baudrillard uses the term 'metaphysical' in the most derogatory sense to mean something like empty, abstract nonsense.² To produce goods to satisfy basic survival needs is very widely understood as the fundamental law of the human species. According to Baudrillard productionism, as metaphysical principle, functions as an abstract principle that codes all human practices, desires, aspirations and forms of exchange as *production*. Yet, following Durkheim (1961) and Bataille (1986), Baudrillard insists that very little human action can actually be understood in terms of production. Instead, profound meaning, joy and intensity are experienced in taking risks, in wastefulness and even in destruction. The metaphysics of production locks us within a system of the production of *value* – whether as goods, services

or signs. Further, we are expected to produce and reproduce ourselves as *value*, we must maximize ourselves, exploit our potential, and this, for Baudrillard, is the most fundamental, insidious and developed form of social control.

According to Baudrillard, Marxism, though a powerful critical force in some respects, is confined within the metaphysics of productionism. Marxism departs sharply from liberal economic theory in that it emphasises the importance of the *social relations* of production, not merely the abstract forces or conditions of production (such as available technology, raw materials, markets for the sale of goods). Marx focuses on the *social relations* involved in any practice or process of production and asks awkward questions such as who benefits the most from such a system. Baudrillard still has a reputation as an anti-Marxist, forged largely by Marxist critics of his work, particularly Kellner (1989: 33–59) and Callinicos (1989: 144–54). However, there is no question that Baudrillard was inspired and deeply influenced by Marx even in the formulation of his notion of symbolic exchange and of sign-value, which, ultimately, Baudrillard deploys as a critique of Marx. Symbolic exchange and the logic of sign-value are developed to critique the integrating power of capitalism. It is therefore simplistic and misleading to suggest that these are anti-Marxist concepts and that by developing them Baudrillard entirely rejects Marxism (Kellner, 1989: 58; Callinicos, 1989: 147).

However, Baudrillard attacks Marxism explicitly on several related fronts. First, Baudrillard argues, Marx failed to see the interconnections between the system of political economy (of labour, the production of goods, the market) and the system of representation (language, the sign, meaning). For Baudrillard these two orders are parallel and 'inseparable' such that 'it becomes impossible to think outside the form production and the form representation' (1981: 43–63, 1975: 29). Other, more substantive criticisms flow from this principle. Because it does not question the abstract or metaphysical principle of production as a means of satisfying needs, Marxism tends to naturalise and universalise use-value. For the sake of clarity this point is explored in some detail.

In a section of *Critique* entitled 'The Myth of Primary Needs' (1981: 80–2) Baudrillard contests what he terms the 'bio-anthropological postulate' of primary needs. The notion of need is ideological in the sense that it is based on an insupportable abstraction: the separation of 'man as essence' from the social environment. One implication of this way of thinking is that the social system could be said to obscure the 'true essence of humanity', but Baudrillard denies that 'true', 'objective' survival needs can be identified, since 'it is always the production of the surplus that regulates the whole. The survival threshold is never determined from

below, but from above' (1981: 81). That is, 'needs' and their satisfactions are always ideological, always implicated in power relations, never 'natural'. For Baudrillard needs are defined as:

a function induced (in the individual) by the internal logic of the system: more precisely *not as a consummative force liberated by the affluent society, but as a productive force required by the functioning of the system* . . . there are only needs because the system needs them.

(Baudrillard, 1981: 82–3, original emphasis)

Baudrillard attacks the very principle of needs, uses and wants. To speak of needs, uses or wants is already an abstraction because it covertly assumes a great deal. It assumes an already existing, taken-for-granted individual separated from other individuals and separated from the world. It assumes that this 'individual', itself an abstraction, will naturally abstract or break down the world into useful things (and less useful things) and make use of the useful things to survive and reproduce. This assumes a natural state of scarcity and of competition for these scarce resources. It assumes that all of these components – 'objects', 'individuals', 'scarcity', 'usefulness' and 'competition' – exist in nature or reality, independently of social or cultural meanings and representational practices. It suggests that these facts of reality or nature are the *cause* of cultural meanings and practices, which are merely a 'reflection' of them. Baudrillard's contention, and it is by no means an original one, is that these components are effects, not causes, of cultural practices. It follows that each of these contentions can be contested and, for Baudrillard, must be if the capitalist system is to be challenged. Crucially, the idea that the individual pre-exists society, culture or community is patently absurd – although it is widely held. Every 'individual' is born into a community with values, norms and a language, or rather the notion of the 'individual' is only constituted through relations with the community's values, norms and language. That an individual can be recognised, and function, as 'an individual' is a measure of the community's success in producing individuals. Moreover, what we refer to as an 'individual' is an idea generated by our cultural practices and meanings, which are capitalist, and which are built upon the 'barring' of symbolic exchange relations *between* people.

These points relate to Baudrillard's theories in two important ways. First, the notion of symbolic exchange invites us to think about social relations without the abstractions and separations we are accustomed to: symbolic exchange expresses a 'pact' that defies abstraction into separate poles, terms or individuals. Second, Baudrillard continues to

explore the ways in which the individual – with his or her needs, wants and uses – are coded by the capitalist system. Capitalist exchange-value *represents* use-value as residing beneath or beyond it in a natural relationship of human beings to objects, but this is, for Baudrillard, a mirage on the horizon of exchange-value, 'a code effect' (1975: 25). The capitalist system of exchange-value claims to base exchange-values, or prices, on the solid reality of use-values. For example, a strong well made tin opener may cost twice as much as a flimsy poorly constructed one but it should last twice as long. But the relationship between use-value and exchange-value is not nearly this transparent. It obscures the fact that we live in a culture where people are unable to produce their own food and where they feel that they do not have time to prepare food. It obscures the appropriation of surplus-value or profit accrued by those who own the factories that produce tinned food. The Marxist critique enables us to theorise these relations, but it does not enable us to question the metaphysical principle of the individual with his or her needs and use-values because it accepts the reality of 'natural' needs and uses. Marxism allows capitalism this 'alibi' because it tries to locate and 'rediscover' a natural relation to use-value undistorted by capitalist exchange-value, but there is no 'natural' relation to use-value.³

Baudrillard focuses on the concept of labour, which is divided into two forms in Marx's *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (originally published in 1857). The labour used to produce use-value is 'concrete, immediate and special' but the labour used in producing exchange-value is 'abstract, universal and homogeneous' (1975: 26). Yet this distinction has the effect of 'autonomizing and generalising labour as the essence of human practice'. This amounts to 'an incredible simplification of social exchange' (1975: 29), which, according to Baudrillard, actually 'intensifies' the abstractions and separations made by liberal theorists of political economy:

Marxism assists the cunning of Capital. It convinces men that they are alienated by the sale of their labour power, thus censoring the much more radical hypothesis that they might be alienated as labour power, as the 'inalienable' power of creating value by their labour.

(Baudrillard, 1975: 31)

At this stage in his argument Baudrillard refers less to the writings of Karl Marx and increasingly to 'Marxist' theorists of the twentieth century, particularly Louis Althusser and the Marxist anthropologist Maurice Godelier. Baudrillard's argument is that humanity, in all the richness of its relations of exchange, is circumscribed, contained and

domesticated by Marxists because they 'generalise the economic mode of rationality over the entire expanse of human history' (1975: 33). The important distinction between symbolic and economic understanding of wealth is expanded in a chapter titled 'Primitive Societies' (1975: 91–6), where Baudrillard develops the notion of 'anti-production', which he perceives as operating within such societies. Baudrillard begins with the contention that the institutions of 'primitive' (meaning non-industrial) societies do not correspond to anything that can be recognised by the metaphysics of production. Such societies are not merely 'other' or different but radically other, inassimilable. According to Baudrillard they have no distinction between infrastructure and superstructure; moreover, they produce no surplus even though they are technically capable of doing so. The notion of symbolic exchange is immediate proffered as the principle that embodies this radical difference. Symbolic exchange 'excludes any surplus: anything that cannot be exchanged or symbolically shared would break the reciprocity and institute power... this exchange excludes all "production"... production appears nowhere as an end or a means: the meaning occurs elsewhere' (1975: 79–80).

To clarify, it is not that culture or religion obstructs the potential for production or limits it to an underdeveloped state: for Baudrillard these are Eurocentric prejudices. Instead, social exchange is based on kinship ties of reciprocity, which are animated and maintained *through the ritual destruction of wealth*. The influence of Georges Bataille (1897–1962) on Baudrillard's theory is apparent at key points in the argument and is mobilised in the attack on Marxist anthropology. Following Bataille (1986), Baudrillard distinguishes between social wealth, which is material, and 'symbolic wealth', which is 'sacrificial'. The central distinction between productive economy and 'sacrificial economy' resides in radically different, 'irreconcilable' understandings of what constitutes wealth.⁴

Within 'sacrificial economy' the production of wealth is strictly limited and its destruction is an intensely meaning, expressive social practice. The rites and festivals of gift exchange cannot be considered forms of production, Baudrillard insists. To produce is not a spontaneous act of survival; production and even 'survival' are only meaningful in particular cultural contexts. In Western modernity it is thought desirable to maximize production, in other cultures it is not. In 'pre' or 'non'-industrial societies (there is no felicitous term) production is limited, and surpluses are not produced despite the 'potential' to do so. Surpluses or excesses are considered dangerous or disruptive because they carry the threat of a transformation of power relations, and an

unleashing of violence and upheaval. Instead surplus is devoted to festivity or sacrifice, where power and violence are expressed in symbolic form and limited by strict social rules. As we have seen, the relationship between production and wealth is not straightforward. Does production *produce* wealth? In this equation production is conceived as a force and wealth is defined in terms of an abstract equivalent – money. However, among what Baudrillard terms 'primitive' societies (a term he uses to offend academic anthropologists) the gift establishes reciprocity: the obligatory act of exchanging or circulating wealth such that one's possession of it is 'sacrificed', either to gods or spirits or to other human beings. The cultural meanings expressed and experienced through sacrifice are 'impossible', not reducible to an abstract equivalent and therefore in a sense 'priceless' or 'absolute'.

Baudrillard's contention, apparent from the very structure of *Mirror*, is that Marxist theory is unable to understand 'primitive', feudal or capitalist society. With regard to feudal social systems, Baudrillard argues that the master-slave relation is a 'symbolic relation' (1975: 93) in that neither position is abstracted or autonomous. What is exchanged between them is not a commodity or 'value' as such but a status and role, and there remains, Baudrillard insists, 'an element of reciprocity' (1975: 95). The relationship is one of domination but not alienation or exploitation because the slave is not objectified in the process. The slave is obligated to fulfil a role but so too is the master. Of course, Baudrillard does not maintain that the relation is fair, equal or just. Symbolic relations are never equal, since 'equality' is a property of an individualised or autonomous unit in an abstract or integrated system. Baudrillard readily admits that slave trading, which he defines as slavery within a market economy, offers no such element of reciprocity. Ultimately, Baudrillard redefines the concept of alienation to refer not to the selling of labour but as the individual's self-conception as, fundamentally, a source of labour: 'The free worker finds his identity in the mirror of his labour power' (1975: 94). That is, we learn to *dispose* of ourselves as economic value, we become our own slave-traders. The feudal master, Baudrillard contends, had considerably less power over the slave than *we assert over ourselves*. Once separated from the network of symbolic ties we become our own master and our own slave through the 'interiorisation' of the master-slave dialectic, which becomes our internal psychological dynamic.

Within the symbolic relation, then, the distinctions between producer and product, producer and consumer, producer and labour power, user and needs and finally product and utility are not distinct. This is why symbolic relations cannot be analysed within a Marxist framework; the

symbolic relation is 'irreducibly non-economic', since 'The symbolic sets up a relation of exchange in which the respective positions cannot be autonomized' (1975: 102-3).

BAUDRILLARD'S DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW METHODOLOGY: SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND THEORY

There are several important and interrelated themes to explore here. As I have indicated, Baudrillard was from his earliest writings unsatisfied with classical Marxist concepts, yet even in *Mirror* there is a strong sense in which Baudrillard attempts to 'complete' the critical tradition inaugurated by Marx: 'following the same revolutionary movement as Marx did, we must move to a radically different level that . . . permits the definitive resolution of political economy. This level is that of symbolic exchange and its theory' (Baudrillard, 1975: 51). Baudrillard critiques use-value as Marx critiqued exchange-value, in an attempt to delineate a position from which such value is revealed as contingent and particular, not natural and universal. Baudrillard's early formulations of the symbolic 'dimension' owed a great deal to Marx's concept of unalienated use-value, in that symbolic relations were deemed to be 'absolute' or 'unique' values. Yet in *Mirror* and *Symbolic Exchange* Baudrillard seeks to critique value itself, opening up a significant distance between his notion of symbolic exchange and anything conceived by Marx under the rubric of a communist utopia.

Symbolic exchange, for Baudrillard, expresses a 'rupture' with modern economic rationality and the values of utility, investment, accumulation and profit. *Mirror* pushes the rejection of Western rationality much further as Baudrillard seeks to locate the foundations of the code, to probe just how deep and pervasive the code actually is. The code is now defined not simply as the functional principle of consumption, it is also the governing principle of the modern system of representation and meaning: what Baudrillard terms 'the political economy of the sign'. In *Mirror* symbolic exchange appears as 'anti-value' and breaks or ruptures the code of value from within, albeit for a moment only. Symbolic exchange as the rupturing of codes is a theme developed on several occasions (1981: 159-63, 1993a: 195-242, 1993b: 81-8; 2003b) and these are discussed in the following chapter.

Mirror includes an important critique of the notion of universality that is much more than an attack on Marxism and will enable us to understand the shifts in Baudrillard's position during this very fertile period. Baudrillard's critique of the sign is a critique of representation and of epistemology: 'As soon as they [concepts] are constituted

as universal they cease to be analytical . . . they become scientific [and] set themselves up as expressing an "objective reality". They become signs, signifiers of a "real" signified' (1975: 48). What Baudrillard suggests is that as soon as concepts (representations) take themselves for 'reality' (which they are not - they are representations) they lose their analytic power and lapse into simulation. Baudrillard is not claiming that there is a pristine reality 'out there' that cannot be captured by such crude things as concepts. Instead those who follow the 'surreptitious religion' of 'rational discursiveness' take their concepts for reality because their concepts actually construct the object(s) of their analysis as 'real'. According to Baudrillard all variants of critical theory, including Marxism, fall into this pattern, which is ultimately one of the reproduction of their own terms of analysis and of the system of 'rational discursiveness' itself.

For example, Marxist thinkers, such as Godelier, claim to have described the mode of production and its dialectical workings in 'primitive' societies, just as psychoanalysis claims to discover the operations of the unconscious. For Baudrillard such societies and their people simply do not possess these things. In fact Marxism and psychoanalysis have simulated the presence of these 'realities' through their own concepts; that is, they have exported their concepts and taken the effects of the application of these concepts for realities. Signs then construct the very idea of 'reality'. Baudrillard does not contend that 'primitive' societies possess a different 'reality' (such as a 'reality' simulated by Baudrillard's concepts!). His argument is that 'reality' as concept has no meaning in the context of pre-industrial societies because 'reality' is not the anchoring point or foundation of the system of representation in such societies.⁵

Let us examine these claims in some detail. In *Mirror* and in *Symbolic Exchange* Baudrillard does substantiate these claims in theoretical discussions that are not repeated in later works. *Mirror* provides important arguments on the emergence of 'reality'. First, Baudrillard argues, during the eighteenth century 'Nature' comes to be understood in a new way: 'Under the stamp of Science, Technology and Production, Nature becomes the great Signified, the great Referent. It is ideally charged with "reality", it becomes *the Reality*' (1975: 54).

Nature as object constituted by science and technology is understood as a 'potentiality of forces' submitted to 'operational finality': the 'forces' of nature are put to use in order to achieve a particular goal or end, such as the fuelling of industry. The previous understanding of nature as totality, great law or principle did not lend itself to such operational ends. A scientific understanding of Nature that was suited to industrial

society was required and was generated by scientists because they theorised from within the code or matrix of industrial society; that is, their thinking was dominated, at an unconscious level, by the metaphysical principle of production. Science, then, does not deal in 'objective', timeless truths but, to paraphrase Nietzsche, is always 'timely', always restricted by the socio-historic context and ideas about what constitutes the truth (epistemology) current at the time. This line of argument is directed at Marxism itself, with Baudrillard's mock incredulity that 'the *reality* of production enters the scene at precisely the moment when someone is discovered who invents the theory of it' (1975: 113). However it is also directed at other targets – particularly Western notions of Nature, Civilisation, Science and Progress.

For Baudrillard this new understanding of Nature realises a definitive split between the subject or person and the 'Nature-object'.⁶ In this splitting Nature and Man become separate or autonomous, both are 'liberated' yet 'dominated' in the same movement. As separated elements both Nature and Man can be coded; that is, they are understood as subject to 'abstract, linear, irreversible' (1975: 56) processes of development or 'progress'. Once split, both are then split again as the unquestioned criteria of rationality erects a 'bar' or barrier separating rational and irrational, good and bad into binary oppositions. Good Nature (food, abundance and beauty) is separated from bad Nature (disease, catastrophe), just as good Humans (white, hard-working) are separated from bad Humans (black, lazy). Marxism, according to Baudrillard, sought to overcome 'bad' Nature by the increased effort to conquer and master Nature as the fundamental signified.⁷

Baudrillard also attacks science and history as they are constituted by Western reason. His theoretical manoeuvres here lead us to the first formulations of the concepts of simulation and the notion of the *revenge of the object*:

It is only in the mirror of production and history, under the double principle of indefinite accumulation (production) and dialectical continuity (history), only by the arbitrariness of the code, that our Western culture can reflect itself in the universal as the privileged moment of truth (science) or of revolution (historical materialism). Without this simulation... our era loses all privileges. It would not be any closer to any term of knowledge or any social truth than any other.

(1975: 114–15)

The recurrent and important theme of the revenge of the object is first developed in relation to Marxism. Because Marxist epistemology

cannot question the primacy of needs, use-value and production, Marxist theory is ultimately, for Baudrillard, a 'simulation model' – a coding system that reduces all human activities to the model of production. Marxist theory tries to produce a general account of the course of human civilisation. It attempts this by sketching the respective modes of the production of goods that are said to characterise various historical epochs. However, in attempting to understand pre-industrial societies Marxist theory encounters, according to Baudrillard, cultures without the pretence of universality, without history, without relations of production, without a distinction between infrastructure and superstructure. In the attempt to analyse such cultures, by projecting its categories on to the Other, Marxism fails and *is actually analysed by its object*. This is the revenge of the object: Marxism's chosen object of analysis tells us far more about the state of Marxist theory than Marxist theory can tell us about 'its' object – 'primitive' society. The Marxist critique of political economy was, for Baudrillard, insufficiently radical because it was unable to perceive the operation of symbolic forces *within* the system of capitalist economy.

Baudrillard pursues the hypothesis that there has been an important shift from *competitive* capitalism to *monopoly* capitalism. While Marxism had considerable critical purchase on the workings of competitive capitalism it has little grip on the new phase. The dialectic, which had functioned in the phase of competitive capitalism, is undermined by the operation of the code as a system of 'total abstraction' where

the signified and the referent are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers... of a generalised formalization in which the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective 'reality', but to its own logic. The signifier becomes its own referent and the use-value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone. The sign no longer designates anything at all... all reality becomes the place of a semiurgical manipulation, of a structural simulation.

(1975: 128)

According to Baudrillard there is no more dialectic of meaning, either in representation, the dialectic between sign and reference, or in economics, between supply and demand. The code absorbs these through 'predictive anticipation' and 'planned socialisation', which extends far beyond the production and consumption of goods and incorporates 'needs, knowledge, culture, information, sexuality' as terms of the code (1975: 126). All that once had an 'explosive force' (*ibid.*) is defused, deterred or contained; there may still be signs of the dialectic, but they

are precisely that: *only signs*. Signs of revolt and 'liberation' abound: images of Che Guevara on T-shirts, spiky 'punk' hair on VO5 adverts, gay couples in soaps. But these are signs generated by the capitalist system and any 'revolution' they generate is at the level of the sign and of fashion. Content (of T-shirts and hair products for the young, of soap opera characters) changes constantly, it is always being *revolutionised*. There are, of course, healthy profits in niche and 'diversity' marketing, yet more important than profit margins, according to Baudrillard, is the level of form, of the sign as form and as code. The production and consumption of signs is the form through which we understand ourselves. The code sets all the terms in advance, of conformity and resistance, playfulness and seriousness. It promotes signs of revolt and signs of conformity because it constructs 'conformists' and 'rebels' as types of consumer, as alternative poles that structure patterns of consumption. The implication is clear: even 'pushed to the limit' Marxism is unable to critique the sign-form, the general principle of the code. The passage from the commodity-form to the sign-form or the political economy of the sign is one of 'the passage of all values to sign-exchange value, under the hegemony of the code. That is, of a structure of control and of power much more subtle and more totalitarian than that of exploitation' (1975: 121). The code is 'illegible', it cannot be read, it is instead the form that allows 'reading' to take place. 'Production' as metaphysical principle is the principle of the code: desire, sexuality, even knowledge is understood in terms of production. The code destroys social relations as *live* symbolic exchanges. It is far more destructive than ownership of the means of production, and, for Baudrillard, this represents a revolution as profound as the industrial revolution was two centuries earlier.

THE 'END' OF PRODUCTION: BAUDRILLARD'S THEORY OF CAPITALISM

[T]he fundamental law of this society is not the law of exploitation, but the code of normality.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 29)

The dialectic is definitively over.

(Baudrillard, 2001b: 95)

According to Baudrillard we have now reached the 'end' of production. Production still takes place of course, but it leads an increasingly shadowy, obscure existence: banished to the third world, operating within closed and guarded compounds, non-unionised, off the radar (see, for example, Klein, 2001: 195–229). But Baudrillard's 'end' of production

is not only geo-political but also epistemological. The sign-code or 'structural law of value' signals the end of production:

the structural configuration of value simply and simultaneously puts an end to the regimes of production, political economy, representation and signs. With the code, all this collapses into simulation. Strictly speaking, neither the 'classical' economy nor the political economy of the sign ceases to exist: they lead a secondary existence becoming a sort of phantom principle of dissuasion.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 8)

So, for Baudrillard the logic of economic production, analysed by Marx, and the logic of representation, analysed by Saussure, follow the same form: they establish principles of equivalence. Equivalence establishes regulated, ordered exchange, linear development and accumulation. In the economic sphere money is the abstract principle of equivalence: everything has a price and that price is directly comparable with the price for anything else. An academic, for example, is paid twice as much as a nurse, a doctor or lawyer three times as much as an academic and so on. Similarly, in the sphere of language or representation a relation of equivalence between signifier and signified, and between sign and referent, enables 'meaning' to be produced, exchanged and accumulated. The signifier 'tree' invokes the same 'thing' whether it is used by a child, a horticulturist or a poet. This Baudrillard dubs the 'classical' representation or 'the second order of Simulacra' (1993a: 53–7). The spheres of economy and of representation are linked by the same underlying form, but at the level of content they are distinct, they can be distinguished, and Baudrillard terms this a relation of 'determinate' equivalence. The 'end' of production occurs with the shift from determinate to increasingly 'indeterminate' equivalence. Signs circulate in the code and are able to do so because they tend to become detached from determinate signifieds. As the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is weakened the 'referential dimension' of meaning is undermined because it was the signified that supposedly 'captured' meaning out there in the world (the referent). Of course we do not live in a world of free-floating signs or signifiers that mean nothing, or alternatively anything (Callinicos, 1989: 145). This is a ludicrous misreading of Baudrillard given his emphasis on the constraining power of the code and his deconstruction of individual 'needs' and 'wants'. Signifiers *simulate* the effect of meaning and reference: a 'reality-effect' is crucial to the operation of the capitalist system. It might be objected that signifiers have only ever simulated the effect of meaning and reference. In a sense, this is not far off the mark, since Baudrillard insists that

the world is illusion, is simulacrum (1996c: 16–19, 2005d: 39–46). But there are, he asserts, meaningful, qualitative differences within simulacra, different and distinguishable orders of simulacra that have direct, meaningful and theorisable effects on lived relations and social experience. Baudrillard's approach is, then, more sociological than is acknowledged, at least given a broad definition of the sociological!⁸

With the phase of simulation, equivalence is established through the sign: it is internal to the play of signifiers. Signifiers circulate without the possibility of dialectical negation (or critique) because the signifiers refer to each other rather than to a 'real', or referent. A 'hyperreality' of simulations is far less susceptible to critique based, as it is, on contrasting the true and the false, the real and the unreal:

signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real . . . they do so *on condition* that they are no longer exchanged against the real. . . . Neither Saussure nor Marx had any presentiment of this: they were still in the golden age of the dialectic of the sign and the real . . . the 'classical' period of capital and value. Their dialectic is in shreds.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 7)

The tensions, contradiction, oppositions and sheer unpredictability of the dialectic tend to be neutralised by simulation, although Baudrillard is clear that the dialectic does not disappear, nor of course is it transcended or obliterated. It endures, as do aspects of the first order of simulacra, but in tattered, fragmented form in the firmament of ideas that have had their moment but do not die (see also Baudrillard, 1994b: 21–7). This, in itself, is a paradoxical, other-than-dialectical process because, according to dialectics, one state is supposed to be definitely raised, resolved and transcended by another state. The dialectic rolls on, but it no longer captures our imagination.

In a characteristic reversal strategy, directed at Marxist theory, Baudrillard argues that capitalism, rather than being 'transcended' by socialism, has actually leapt over the dialectic as it 'substitutes the structural form of value, and currently controls every aspect of the system's strategy' (1993a: 7). Given this metamorphosis, Baudrillard asks whether we are we still living within capitalism. 'Hyper-capitalism' may be a more accurate term, he suggests, but what is not in doubt is that 'the structural law of value is the purest, most illegible form of social domination . . . it no longer has any references within a dominant class or a relation of forces' (1993a: 10–11).

These are bold claims, yet Baudrillard, at this stage in his thought, does offer considerable substantiation in a discussion of the effects of

the sign on labour, on wages and on strikes. Instead of labour we have *signs* of labour. In other words, labour as living historical agency, as force with the power to transform social relations, becomes a 'dead' abstraction in the economic calculations of capitalism. This process was well under way in Marx's time and Marx produced the concepts of abstract labour and commodity fetishism to describe the way in which the living force of labour is hidden behind finished commodities. But, for Baudrillard, the living agency of labour is not just hidden or reified into commodities, it is also rendered symbolically dead – it is less and less a living principle of exchange. In an age of structural, permanent high unemployment, labour cannot be exchanged for employment, for a salary or for a comfortable life:

Labour power is instituted on death. A man must die to become labour power . . . the economic violence capital inflicted on him in the equivalence of the wage and labour power is nothing next to the symbolic violence inflicted on him by his definition as a productive force.

(1993a: 39)

Labour, then, is a slow death; it is neutralisation by slow death, by 'total conscription'. Labour no longer possesses a determinate relationship to production, having no meaningful equivalence in wages. Further, production no longer exists in a determinate relationship to profit or surplus value. There is in political economy, Baudrillard contends, a general loss of representational equivalence: 'the monetary sign is severed from every social production and enters a phase of speculation' (1993a: 21). In this new reign of indeterminacy there is 'nothing with which to fight capital in *determinate* form' (1993a: 19; see also 1993b: 26–35). Capital flows in global, deregulated money markets without reference to labour, work, production – without equivalence in terms of a 'gold standard'. Similarly, Baudrillard contends, strikes once functioned within a binary system of equivalence held in dialectical tension, that of labour and capital, unions and management. But this notion of the strike is now 'dead' because striking cannot affect capitalism as 'the reproduction of the *form of social relations*' (1993a: 24). Capitalism can endure the lowering of profit margins, strike disruption and even the collapse of share values. These 'contents' are no longer fundamental to its operation. Capital need only impose itself as *form* in order to reproduce itself endlessly and it achieves this by investing all individuals with needs, wants and desires – the apparatus of the active consumer. Any 'gains' won by unions, such as pay increases or improvements in working conditions, are immediately realised as benefits to the functioning of the system;

for example, as wages poured into consumer spending or in proliferating signs of an attractive progressive workplace.

Baudrillard allows that new fractures and instabilities emerge. He gives the example of non-unionised immigrant workers destabilising the game of signs carried out by managers and unions. However, such instabilities are quickly neutralised by strategies of incorporation and assimilation. Increasingly management is able to appeal directly to workers without the intermediary of unions; such strategies, Baudrillard argues, were central to the events of May 1968 when unions backed down, compromising with management to maintain their role as representatives of labour. Nevertheless, Baudrillard never suggests that the integrated, coded system is complete or invulnerable. Quite the reverse! The system's construction of the person as individual, productive, rational unit never really convinces anyone and is 'beginning to crack dangerously'. Further, the system is constantly under threat from symbolic challenges, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Finally, wages, Baudrillard argues, do not measure the amount we produce in our jobs, as both liberal and Marxist theories proclaim; instead, they are now 'a sacrament, like a baptism (or the Extreme Unction)' (1993a: 19). They mark us as full and genuine citizens of the consumer capitalist system. Workers today are less producers of measurable, determinate value than consumers, and their wage is access to the world of consumerism. Moreover, achieving wage status makes one a 'purchaser of goods in the same way that capital is the purchaser of labour' (1993a: 19). We are, according to Baudrillard, invested, colonised, occupied by capital, and apply a 'capitalist mentality' to all affairs. Wages do not guarantee any 'thing' in particular – that you are able to support yourself, afford somewhere to live, afford to have children – they simply insert us within the system of consumption. Consumption – the understanding of oneself as consumer and of the system around us as consumerist – becomes 'obligatory' and so is a *symbolic relation*.

In *Symbolic Exchange* Baudrillard expands this argument, and in doing so moves further from Marx than he had been in *Mirror*: the supposed 'break' with Marxism. Baudrillard argues that the system of production has always depended, fundamentally, on symbolic relations. In a highly original theorisation of capitalism, Baudrillard argues that the system depends on political economy as 'internal critique', in order to maintain the fiction of its reality. Capitalism, as an integrated system, has so outmoded Marxism that the latter plays the role of a 'dialectical stimulus' to capitalism – providing the illusion of depth and difference. Political economy, then, is a 'simulation model' (1993a:

31–9) providing capitalism with an 'alibi' or a 'screen', and is kept alive or meaningful through the efforts of Marxist critics. The power and dominance of the capitalist system is not dependent on economics, it derives more fundamentally, Baudrillard insists, from the symbolic. Capitalism exerts a 'symbolic domination' over 'life and death, established by the code' (1993a: 31) and is not susceptible or vulnerable to Marxist critique. Any vulnerability of the system exists only at the symbolic level. The economic system, the systems of production, reproduction and consumption mask the symbolic level and thereby occlude 'the possibility of its symbolic destruction' (1993a: 31). According to Baudrillard, capitalism 'never confused itself with production, as Marx did':

capital is content to extend its laws in a single movement, inexorably occupying all the interstices of life. If it has set men to work it has also impelled them to culture, needs, languages and functional idioms, information and communication; it directs them to rights, to liberty, and sexuality, it forces the instinct of preservation and the death instinct upon them; it has set them up everywhere in accordance with myths that are simultaneously opposed and indifferent. This is its only law: indifference.

(1993a: 34)

For Baudrillard, the system is so 'indifferent' it is scarcely meaningful to call it capitalist. Asked in 1997 what capitalism had become, Baudrillard replied, 'I really don't know . . . a sort of dilution of the universal . . . purely operational . . . an automatic transcription of the world into the global' (1998b: 11). How might we oppose such a diffuse, indifferent yet 'automatic' system? The only possibility is to re-engage the symbolic level. The system operates through symbolic violence. The only genuinely defiant strategy, Baudrillard asserts, is the symbolic reversal or 'counter-gift' (*contre-don*). According to Baudrillard the events of May 1968 'shook the system down to the depths of its symbolic organisation'. The system responded to the symbolic challenge, the refusal of work and education, with another symbolic challenge by giving 'official status to oppositional discourse' (1993a: 34). The power of the system is based on the monopoly of gift giving, 'the exclusivity of the gift without counter-gift' (1993a: 36). The system gives the gifts of self and identity through advertising and consumption; it gives the gift of work and wage through the economy; it gives the gift of knowledge through the education system and the gift of information and interactivity through media and communication (1981: 164–84). These gifts are unilateral, they forbid response, they must and can only

be accepted: they are, for Baudrillard, 'poisonous' gifts. The power of the system is completely dependent on 'the impossibility of responding or retorting' (1993a: 37).

The system might be shattered, or at least momentarily suspended, by a counter-gift of the rejection of the gift and a reversal of power relations through a symbolic challenge that forces the system to respond, to raise the stakes further. We might reject, or refuse to accept, the 'gifts' of self, career, status and information. However, the ultimate 'counter-gift' is, for Baudrillard, suicide – the rejection of the gift of life itself. Suicide as symbolic defiance is explored in Chapter 7, but first we must examine the relation of symbolic exchange to life and death in order to understand why suicide might be such a devastating weapon.

3

Symbolic Exchange and Death

The symbolic is neither a concept, an agency, a category, nor a 'structure', but an act of exchange and a *social relation*.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 133)

Everything which is symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for the dominant order.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 188 n. 7)

INTRODUCTION

Symbolic Exchange and Death (1993a) is widely considered to be Baudrillard's most important work. It presents a greatly expanded exposition of his notion of symbolic exchange, the scope of which becomes dazzling. It is a difficult yet very rich work but, as Baudrillard himself notes (in Gane, 1993), its arguments never received much serious critical attention. The failure to appraise this work critically has, particularly in the English-speaking world (translation was tardy and controversial), generated a great deal of unnecessary misunderstanding of some central themes in Baudrillard's work. These include the relationship of symbolic exchange to social power and economic

production, its relationship to death, its role as act of subversion and, above all, its continuing impact upon everyday life *here and now*.

It is a mistake to interpret symbolic exchange as Baudrillard's attempt to describe the practices of 'other' or non-Western cultures. Kellner (1989: 42–5) reads it in this way, as more recently do Browning and Kilmister (2006: 105–29); but as Grace (2000: 26–9) argues, Baudrillard's purpose is deconstructive rather than descriptive. There is an element of description but it is minimal, as Baudrillard does not claim to discover an ideal society of unfettered symbolic exchanges in 'non-Western' cultures. Symbolic exchange is presented as a *form* or principle, rather than as the specific 'content' of cultural practices. At the level of form symbolic exchange is crucial to both Western and 'non-Western' societies, as it is to ancient and feudal social organisation. Symbolic exchange is, Baudrillard argues, an 'indestructible' yet 'cruel' principle, and in later works he describes it as 'unbearable': there is little in the way of an idealisation of the symbolic order or 'non-Western' in these constructions. By invoking anthropological notions such as the *kula* and the potlatch Baudrillard seeks to displace the 'priority' the West awards itself through self-generated comparisons with the 'underdeveloped' world. *Kula* and potlatch are deployed as deconstructive tools to explore the consumer system and to speculate on ways of defying the capitalist order.

Symbolic exchange emerges as a principle that attacks, undermines, annuls or suspends binary oppositions – the very structures of Western rationality, political order, law, logic and meaning. Symbolic exchange, for Baudrillard, is manifest in acts, gestures, rituals and behaviours that *demand a response* from the economic/semiotic system. These are grave threats to the system because the system thrives when it is able to operate as if it is complete, total and closed. The challenge of symbolic exchange reveals that the system is incomplete, partial and open – that it is vulnerable. Further, symbolic exchange appears, in this work, as immanent within the semiotic orders, not 'outside' them. It refers to a barred absence 'haunting' the orders of the sign (1993a: 1). The sign is the material of symbolic exchange, just as it is the material of the semiotic orders. Symbolic and semiotic are not, of course, binary oppositions: they are locked together in a twisting spiral of ambivalence, both sides of the bar.

Symbolic Exchange and Death includes an important definition and clarification of 'the real' or 'reality' as the product of binary oppositions. If this definition is overlooked, as it often is, the emerging notions of simulacra and simulation become very difficult to comprehend. Further, Baudrillard's later works, which confront what he terms the

fourth order of simulacra, continue to develop the notion of symbolic exchange first elaborated in this work and, again, these works are often misunderstood because of lack of familiarity with this text.

THE POTLATCH: READING ANTHROPOLOGY AGAINST ANTHROPOLOGY

[P]ower belongs to the one who can give and *cannot be re-paid*.
(Baudrillard, 1981: 170)

The potlatch ceremony as discussed by Marcel Mauss plays an important, even pivotal, role in Baudrillard's formulation of the notion of symbolic exchange. The issue of how convincing Baudrillard's reading of anthropology in general, and Mauss in particular, is, is an important one and will be explored in some detail here.

As is widely recognised, Baudrillard's understanding of the potlatch relies heavily upon Mauss's influential study *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, first published in *Année Sociologique* in 1924/5. However, other, less well known works by Mauss and by other anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Maurice Leenhardt, Robert Jaulin and Marshall Sahlins were also important influences on Baudrillard at this time. Baudrillard's relationship to anthropology as an academic discipline is complex because sometimes he will refer to accounts, such as those produced by the above, as 'facts' or truths (1983: 81), while at other times he will denounce or belittle the discipline as a whole for dealing in simulation (1994a: 7–11). This has led to a curious situation where those critics who are receptive to Baudrillard's ideas politely ignore what he has to say about social anthropology (Gane, 2000; Hegarty, 2004), whereas those who seek to discredit Baudrillard's ideas argue that his approach to 'other' cultures is inadequate, offensive or contradictory (Kellner, 1989: 181–5; Lane, 2000). Baudrillard's position seems to be that anthropology as a discipline is now defunct, having passed into simulation (1994a: 7–11), but that the insights of certain of its practitioners remain important.

Baudrillard's position on 'non-Western' societies is relatively consistent though certainly contentious, and is crucial to an understanding of the trajectory of his thought. Baudrillard's basic assumptions regarding 'non-Western' societies seem to be as follows. First, forms of social organisation radically different from Western modernity do exist. Second, some of the practices, particularly ritual practices, of such cultures cannot be understood through the categories and concepts

of Western rationalism. Third, the practices of 'other' cultures are not incoherent or unknowable and some understanding of them can be reached through the critical or deconstructive reading of accounts produced by anthropologists.¹

To play anthropological accounts 'against themselves' is vital, for Baudrillard, because anthropology as an academic discipline is constituted by Enlightenment thought (as, of course, is sociology). This means not that Enlightenment thought is invalid or false, but that it encounters particular difficulties in understanding or accepting the operation of symbolic forms that Baudrillard takes to be central to the organisation of many non-Western societies, and always implicit in Western societies. Baudrillard, like Mauss before him, emphasises continuities and resemblances between 'self' and 'other', modernity and 'pre-modernity', between West and 'non-West'; indeed, the gift is a vital form of cultural expression in Western modernity, as it is in 'non-Western' cultures.

Baudrillard, clearly, is not a cultural relativist, let alone an 'absolute relativist', as his Marxist critics Kellner (1989), Callinicos (1989) and Norris (1992) suggest. Baudrillard does use the term 'primitive', even 'savage', to describe non-Western cultures and Lane (2000) is right to question just how 'deconstructive' Baudrillard's radical anthropology actually is.² But the answers are in Baudrillard's work if we look for them. The terms 'savage' and 'primitive' are used by Baudrillard to achieve a number of objectives. First, they draw attention to the disreputable past of anthropology, to its roots in colonialism and economic exploitation. Second, he offends liberal and humanist sensibilities; for Baudrillard such people feel guilty about their own positions of power and wealth and seek to assuage this by insisting on politically correct or 'sensitive' terminology, while jealously guarding the power they have (2001b). Finally, by using such terms Baudrillard signals that the practices of non-Western cultures are not merely 'different' from the West in the pluralist sense of similar objectives or ends (survival, reproduction, expression) being satisfied in a different way. This is the 'culturalist platitude' he despises. Instead they are, he insists, radically and fundamentally different: 'the term "savage" conveys this foreignness better than all the later euphemisms' (1993b: 148). This is an otherness or foreignness more radical than can be understood within the 'mirror' of the self/other binary opposition, an otherness that is not merely the fantasy of the Western self but the annulment of its binary codes, thus challenging Western models of social organisation and knowledge.

GIFT AND COUNTER-GIFT

[B]y giving one is giving oneself, and if one gives oneself it is because one 'owes' oneself – one's person and one's goods – to others.

(Mauss, 1990: 46)

The term 'potlatch' is generic and imprecise: indeed, the use of the term has been the subject of an entire study (see Bracken, 1997). Marcel Mauss uses the term very broadly in his study *The Gift*, and Baudrillard uses it still more generally. I will outline what this important term implies, how it is developed by Mauss and the impact it has on Baudrillard's theory of symbolic exchange.

The term 'potlatch' is derived from the Nootka language of the indigenous or first nation people of North-West America. The Nootka 'patlatsch' means 'a gift'. The colloquial term 'potlatch' is Chinook, a hybrid or 'pidgin' language composed of English, French and various first nation languages and formerly used by traders and settlers in these regions. The Chinook 'potlatch' means both 'gift' and 'to give', and as both noun and verb it gained a wide currency by the late nineteenth century (Bracken, 1997).

'Potlatch' ceremonies are a particular case of gift exchange once practised by indigenous people living along the coastal regions of North-Western America, from California to Canada and Alaska and including the Nootka, Haida, Tlingit and Kwakiutl peoples. The ceremonies, which were of course varied and complex, have been studied extensively by social anthropologists and ethnographers (Boas, 1890; Rosman and Rubel, 1972; Mauss, 1990). There are indigenous accounts available (Clutesi, 1969), as well as philosophical and deconstructive readings of different kinds (Bataille, 1988; Derrida, 1992; Bracken, 1997). Mauss himself did not travel to the region and was dependent on accounts produced by Franz Boas, Maurice Leenhardt, Bronislaw Malinowski and others.

Mauss's study *The Gift* focuses on the potlatch and other ceremonies such as the kula, practised traditionally in the Pacific islands, which he argues to be similar in form and function to the potlatch. Recognising the imprecision of the terms 'gift' and 'potlatch', Mauss proposes his own term: 'total services and counter services' ('*prestations et contre-prestations totales*'; Mauss, 1950: 187). This term describes systems of exchange including presents, but also loans, entertainments and hospitality in the widest sense. What Mauss refers to as 'potlatch' refers to 'total services of an agonistic kind' with 'very acute rivalry and the destruction of wealth'; such ceremonies, Mauss declares, are 'rare

but highly developed' (1990: 7). There is, then, among such tribes, *honour in destruction*:

Consumption and destruction of goods really go beyond all bounds. In certain kinds of potlatch one must expend all that one has, keeping nothing back. It is a competition to see who is richest and also the most madly extravagant. Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry.

(Mauss, 1990: 37)

There are a number of related themes, drawn out in Mauss's study, that are vital for understanding Baudrillard's thought.³ The first is that there is no independent or autonomous logic of the economic – and this is central to both Mauss's and Baudrillard's rejection of both liberal and Marxist thought. It follows that the notion of economic man (*Homo economicus*) – man existing in a state of nature for immediate survival – is a fabrication of economic theory. This fabrication has been able to present itself as common-sense fact because it is shared by liberals, neo-liberals and Marxists; by both left and right.

Several other themes in Mauss's study are crucial for Baudrillard: the obligatory nature of reciprocity and particularly the power of 'counter-prestations' (or what Baudrillard prefers to call the *contre-don* or counter-gift) to challenge existing power relations. This theme is not highly developed in Mauss although it is hinted at by his emphasis on the establishing of honour through 'humiliating others' in potlatch ceremonies (Mauss, 1990: 39).

There are further Maussian influences on Baudrillard, neglected by commentaries on Baudrillard's thought. Important here is the notion of the 'spirit of the thing given', which is developed in Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism* (see Chapter 7). Moreover, the exchange of 'life' and 'death' in potlatch ceremonies, discussed by Mauss (1990: 14–17, 38), provides support for Baudrillard's assertion that death is a symbolic relation rather than a biological event (1993a: 125–94). Further, Mauss's theorisation of the 'individual' as only meaningful within wider kinship ties, as a 'channel' along which gifts circulate, and of ritual agents or personae (1979: 35–94, 1990: 9, 41, 46) is a profound influence on Baudrillard's notion of individuality, agency and the 'passion for rules' (see Chapters 6 and 8). But Baudrillard does not merely follow Mauss. For example, Mauss strongly suggests that obligatory gift-exchange ceremonies function to avert war between clans, tribes and cultures (1990: 7, 13, 25), Baudrillard does not take up this theme and we will enquire as to why this is in Chapter 7. Moreover, Baudrillard rejects Mauss's conclusions concerning the re-emergence of

generosity in modern welfare systems (Mauss, 1990: 65–71; Baudrillard, 1998a: 37–9).

The fundamental concern for Mauss is the obligatory nature of the gift exchanges and what he calls its 'total social' character, meaning that the ceremonies involve all aspects of the society at once, immediately or simultaneously. The gift-exchange ceremonies are 'total social phenomena' because 'all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time – religious, juridical, and moral, which relate to both politics and the family; likewise economic ones . . . production and consumption [and] aesthetic phenomena' (Mauss, 1990: 3). Gift-giving ceremonies, Mauss asserts, are far more complex phenomena than has been appreciated. The ceremonies are 'both practical and mystical' (1990: 73). Participation is both 'self-interested' and obligatory: social hierarchy, honour and prestige are at stake and are contested, but participation is constrained by an enforced obligatory nature (1990: 33). For Mauss the gift-giving process consists of three interlocking moments: the obligation to give gifts, the obligation to receive gifts and the obligation to reciprocate gifts (1990: 13–14). These definitely are not societies of communistic equality, Mauss asserts, but nor is there a notion of individual freedoms and rights. Such cultures cannot be fully understood by either Marxism or liberalism: to put it very crudely these peoples are neither sharing, caring hippies nor budding capitalists. They have no money in the sense of an abstract system of equivalence, nor do they barter. In fact, Mauss argues, such cultures demonstrate that the notion of credit and loan predate the emergence of barter and money, so the attempts of both liberals and Marxists to understand the 'development' of economy from barter to money to credit are quite simply wrong (1990: 36, 72–3).

Mauss is particularly keen to understand what force compels the obligatory reciprocity of gift-giving in these 'primitive' societies, the traces of which, he insists, are found very widely and persist into modern capitalist societies. The answer for Mauss is *in the spirit of the thing given*. The gift carries within it a moral force, it has a spirit and it carries something of the 'soul' of the giver (Mauss, 1990: 10–13, 43–4): 'to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself . . . to accept something from somebody is to accept some part of his spiritual essence, of his soul' (Mauss, 1990: 12). Wealth is circulated such that the participants 'did not emerge any richer than before' (1990: 9), and Mauss assures us specifically that there is no economic advantage in the ceremonies even for the chiefs (1990: 29–30). There is no ultimate end, purpose or destination for the gifts other than their return and constant circulation.

'Hau' is the spirit of the thing given in traditional Maori culture (Mauss, 1990: 10–13). The things exchanged are not inert or inactive. The Hau, it is said, wants to return to its 'place of origin', to the earth or forest from which it came. The 'ownership' of things is temporary, lasting only until the point when they must be returned. Gifts are in no way a neutral medium of equivalence. They are not an 'underdeveloped' system of money or of barter because they carry spirit or soul with them, they have stories that change and develop as they are exchanged, which increases their prestige – which is not an abstractable 'value'. In other words, 'persons and things merge' (Mauss, 1990: 48). Possession and gift are undifferentiated: things ultimately belong to the gods or, better, are of the gods and must return to them.

The sanctions for failing to observe ritual rules are grave and include loss of honour and authority and even, in traditional Maori culture, death – apparently self-willed and brought about by feelings of sickness and disgrace (Mauss, 1979: 35–56, cited by Baudrillard, 1993a: 134). 'Death' appears as a relation of social exchange rather than a biological event in the life of an individual because life and death are reversible. The disgraced may die and be brought back to life at a later date by the renewal of their inclusion in the ceremonial expressions of their community. Further, according to Mauss 'the chiefs . . . represent and incarnate their ancestors and the gods, whose names they bear, whose dances they dance and whose spirits possess them' (1990: 38–9). The participants in ritual are not 'themselves', not individuals, but are masked incarnations of the dead. The living die so that the 'dead' may live, and the 'dead' return to the beyond so that the living may go on living: 'life' and 'death' are reversible, indeed the meaning of the terms is annulled in exchange. Further ritual acts are enabled by the wearing of spirit masks, not chosen by the 'individual' participant: ritual agency is the agency of the *persona* rather than of the individual (Mauss, 1990: 39). Baudrillard's later work, I will argue, develops a closely related sense of agency within the ritual or rule (Baudrillard, 1990b: 134–6, 2001c: 67–73).

Mauss's discussion of the kula ceremony of the Trobriand Islands, which draws on Malinowski's monumental study *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), is also influential on Baudrillard. His discussion of the kula in *Critique* (1981: 30–1, 64–5) bears the imprint of both Malinowski and Mauss. Baudrillard writes of the gift being thrown at the feet of the recipient, and the anxiety and difficulty of giving and accepting gifts, which recalls Mauss (1990: 22) and Malinowski (1922: 173–6).

Mauss's account suggests an alternative anti-liberal and non-Marxist means of theorising 'the economy' and the position of the individual

within it. The 'economy', Mauss contends, does not exist as an autonomous or separable sphere or institution. Indeed, there is no such thing as 'natural economy', Mauss insists; even so-called 'primitive societies' do not live in the 'state of nature', a raw and unending quest for survival (Mauss, 1990: 5). On the contrary, these societies are traditionally very wealthy, with vigorous trading practices. Such people are perfectly capable of striking hard bargains and accumulate very large surpluses even as measured by Western standards (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1990). As the natural economy of hand-to-mouth survival cannot be located, it is for Mauss, as for Baudrillard, a mythical construct of capitalist modernity. There is no locatable economic infrastructure; instead the 'total social' practice of gift exchange, an endless cycle of giving, determines the course of social hierarchy and authority, kinship relations, religious practices and the 'aesthetic' phenomena of dance and performance. Gift exchange is the expression of societies without the demarcation into the spheres we recognise as politics, economics, religion, sexuality and culture.

It could be objected that a form of power does indeed emerge in such ceremonies. However, prestige or honour do not necessarily translate into political power or authority (see Clastres, 1977, cited by Baudrillard, 1993a: 43). There is a double sense in which power could not be 'owned' or accumulated by individuals. First, prestige is accrued through the loss or giving away of wealth, rather than its accumulation: chiefs may live in destitution. Second, prestige is a temporary effect determined by gift-giving within networks of kinship relations, it is not the *property* of individuals.

Mauss's study also suggests what we might hesitatingly call a 'psychology' of gift-giving (bearing in mind that these are 'total' social phenomena, not quasi-autonomous features of the psyche). The processes of gift-giving tell us something about the nature of individuals and their actions, particularly if we accept Mauss's (and Baudrillard's) assertion that the principles of kula and potlatch persist 'hidden below the surface' of 'our own societies' (Mauss, 1990: 4).⁴

BINARY OPPOSITIONS AND DEATH

Power is possible only if death is no longer free . . . the economic consists in life taking death hostage.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 130)

The social begins by taking charge of death.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 178)

What could be more natural than the separation of life and death into a binary opposition? Surely death is death, when life is no more we encounter death. Death is inevitable, it is final, it is brutally obvious. All objects can be separated into animate and inanimate, living and non-living. Even animals recognise these differences. Yet Baudrillard wants to 'deconstruct' this opposition. Why?

The separation and opposition of life and death, Baudrillard contends, creates power: the hierarchical structures of authority that are the fundamental mechanisms of social control. When life and death are separated time becomes linear rather than cyclical, religion becomes repressive rather than expressive and death becomes *the final, irreversible event in the life of the individual*. The separating of life and death, then, is the founding condition of binary thinking. Once binary thinking becomes dominant it is difficult to think of otherness or difference as anything other than a relation of binary opposition to what is known or similar. The linear calculation of time produces the 'cyclical' as no more than its binary opposition: as imaginary, phantasmal, irrational or lost rather than real. Or, to take the example of religion, the ritual practices of polytheist or 'pagan' religions are not *opposed* to monotheistic religious codes but come to seem so from the perspective of the latter. Other binary oppositions – the opposition of male and female, of good and evil, order and disorder, individual and society, workers and their labour – flow from the separation of life and death, Baudrillard asserts. The production of the binary opposition of life and death is nothing less than the foundation of Western civilisation. Baudrillard attempts, on many occasions, to elucidate a sense of otherness or 'radical difference' that is not contained or pre-structured by a binary opposition and that does not exist in a dialectical relation. The symbolic is not the opposite of the semiotic, seduction is not the opposite of production: these are what Baudrillard later calls 'dual forms' and are discussed in this and the following chapters.

Baudrillard begins his task of deconstruction by acknowledging the importance of Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1967). Foucault's genealogical study argued that 'madness' is constituted by Enlightenment thought as it erects a division between the normal and abnormal. Whereas in the medieval period a far wider spectrum of behaviour was permitted, enlightenment thought judged human experience in relation to scientifically defined 'norms', thereby actually producing categories of 'abnormality'. The 'abnormal' were then confined to asylums and subjected to further scientific scrutiny. Yet Baudrillard aims to outflank Foucault's genealogy of modernity by arguing that the fundamental exclusion enacted by Western civilisation is not that of the

mad, but that of the dead. The dead are 'thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation . . . no longer beings with a full role to play' (Baudrillard, 1993a: 126). In Western societies the dead are removed further and further away from the living: they are no longer buried in village churchyards but banished to out-of-town municipal cemeteries or 'ghettos', increasingly inaccessible to their kin:

there are no longer any provisions for the dead, either in mental or physical space. Even madmen, delinquents and misfits can find a welcome in the new towns . . . only the death-function cannot be programmed . . . we no longer know what to do with them, since today, *it is not normal to be dead, and this is new*. To be dead is an unthinkable anomaly: nothing else is as offensive as this.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 126, original emphasis)

The emergence of the notion of the immortality of the soul, according to Baudrillard, ruptured symbolic exchanges between living and dead. Immortality first appeared in ancient Egyptian society (approx. 3000 BCE) and at first only the elite were said to possess a soul; indeed, it was the pharaoh's possession of a soul that made him 'Man-God'. In other words, a vast degree of social power accrued to the Pharaoh and his priesthood by their severing of collective social exchanges between 'living' and 'dead'. How do we know that collective exchange rituals between living and dead occurred before the great dynasties of ancient Egypt? We don't. However, the anthropological sources that interest Baudrillard – Mauss, Leenhardt, Clastres and others – explore societies that had not developed the settled agriculture, literacy and city states that characterised ancient Egypt. Societies such as the Canaque of New Caledonia, studied by Leenhardt (1979), appear to have no strict opposition between 'living' and 'dead', or between the 'body' and the 'soul'. Indeed, Leenhardt argues that the Canaque have no word for 'body' and no concept of a biological body. Traditionally their art makes no attempt to suggest depth or perspective, so 'bodies' or 'physical properties' are always presented in two dimensions. Further, their term for death, dead, dying and ill – 'boa' – is also their word for god (Leenhardt, 1979: 24–42).

Leenhardt suggests that the distinction 'men and gods' is more appropriate to Canaque society than 'living and dead' because persons who possessed 'do kamo' (translated as 'which living') became gods when their 'costume' was worn out. Of course, there were inequalities among the Canaque: the possession of do kamo was not an automatic 'right' for all members of the tribe but was conditional upon 'honourable' behaviour. How this was judged is not clear from Leenhardt's account.

The status of women was certainly different from that of men, although women, like men, were considered sacred and acceded to the god-like status of tribal ancestors upon what we would term 'death'. Certainly inequalities in status and power were not of the order of those of the first 'civilisations', such as ancient Egypt where pharaohs used their divine status to rule absolutely.

In time the immortality of the soul was distributed democratically, becoming the property of all men under Christianity. It was later extended to include women but was never officially conferred to animals. The fundamental rupture of symbolic exchange between living and dead, then, enables the emergence of social and political power, first of the priesthood and later of the secular state. The rupturing of symbolic exchange is, for Baudrillard, the foundation of social power.

As modern, rational standards of normality and abnormality are applied, life and death become binary oppositions, separated out across linear time as the beginning and end of biological existence rather than being enclosed within cycles of exchange (the 'life cycle').⁵ What is now termed 'death', as an event that happens to the body, is for Baudrillard 'ultimately' nothing more than the social line of demarcation separating the 'dead' from the 'living' (1993a: 127). That is, society and its systems of knowledge attempt to define what constitutes 'death'. There are a number of conflicting and irreconcilable definitions of what precisely constitutes death. Is it when the heart stops beating? When the brain stops functioning? When the soul has left the body? How are these criteria affected by life support technologies? The binary opposition of life and death is unable to progress beyond the simplistic logic of life equals not dead, and dead equals not living. When one is confronted by 'reality', matters are not always so simple. To be alive is to be mortal, as we live we are also dying, as we die we are also alive. Once we are dead we are no longer dying. We die only as we are living. Life and death are not either/or categories, are not binary oppositions.

Baudrillard's theoretical manoeuvres with binary oppositions owe a considerable debt to Lacanian psychoanalysis. The concept of the bar (*la barre*) is taken from Lacan's reading of Saussure (Lacan, 1977: 149) and the concept of the Imaginary flows from this. Where Baudrillard is original is in his rejection of the Lacanian notion of the Real, and in his contention that Real and Imaginary function as binary oppositions, each implying the other in a tactical, coded relationship. In other words, the 'real' is produced through the binary opposition, it does not precede or pre-exist it as ontological essence. Baudrillard, following Nietzsche, completely rejects the notion of essential things-in-themselves, the so-called brute physical nature of things supposedly existing independently of any

particular perspective. Instead the Imaginary – the perspective of the human self, its self-identifications through images and objects, and its capacity to represent – produces the 'illusion' of the real world.

Baudrillard pushes further. Life and death are separated by a 'bar' or 'line of social demarcation'; the bar actually constitutes understandings of *both* life and death, of the properties on both sides of the bar. Life and death are still conjoined, contiguous: the bar of their separation also joins them. The barred symbolic exchange (of life and death) is present in the very process of its barring. Death as symbolic exchange with life is barred, but separated out from symbolic meaningfulness death is devoid of meaning, an 'unprogrammable' horror, an 'unthinkable anomaly'. Yet life too, separated from death, loses its meaningfulness, reduced to 'the indifferent fatality or survival' (1993a: 126). In other words the separation of life and death does not result in a profit accruing to life. Although life is shielded from death it must end in death; moreover, a death now devoid of symbolic meaning. Life, then, is reduced to survival, not ~~living~~ but literally 'living-on', not (yet) dead. No matter how we ~~deny~~ or hide death it touches life. Similarly, it is possible to define sanity only by separating it from insanity, so the meaning of sanity depends upon the existence of insanity. The 'excluded', negative or demonised term exerts a certain power over the positive term. So, according to Baudrillard, the spectre of death haunts life, just as the spectre of madness haunts sanity, disorder threatens order and Evil stalks the Good. The excluded or 'pathological' term casts a shadow over 'normality' because, in the terminology Baudrillard borrows from Lacan, it becomes its Imaginary, its phantasy.

Capital and economic power are, for Baudrillard, ultimately only the 'fantastic secularisation' of the power to separate living and dead. Humanism, democracy and even revolution alter nothing fundamental because they do operate at the level of symbolic exchange – that is, they do not challenge the bar of binary oppositions. Indeed, by aiming for equality they actually nourish the systemic or structural nature of binary oppositions, Baudrillard suggests. Political movements based on improving matters for the repressed term, in terms set by the dominant term, cannot, for Baudrillard, ever be revolutionary: on the contrary, 'the revolution can only consist in the abolition of the separation of death, and not in equality of survival' (1993a: 129).

THE EXCHANGE OF DEATH

Symbolic exchange is halted neither by the living or the dead.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 134)

The effect of the real is only ever therefore the structural effect of the disjunction between two terms, and our famous reality principle, with its normative and repressive implications, is only a generalisation of this disjunctive code to all levels.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 133)

Baudrillard develops these themes with great audacity. He insists that the biological conception of death – accorded the status of objectivity in modernity – has no meaning in 'primitive' societies. Death, he argues, like disease and other 'natural' phenomena, is brought 'under control' by symbolic exchange rituals. Death, then, is understood not as biological event but as social relation:

the real materiality of death . . . lies in its form, which is always the form of a social relation . . . initiation is the accented beat of the operation of the symbolic. It aims neither to conjure death away, nor to 'overcome' it, but to articulate it socially.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 131)

Initiation rites make death a symbolic relation; initiates 'die' symbolically and are 'reborn' in new or transformed social roles. As initiates 'die' they are said to join ancestors, conjoining the living and the dead, then the ancestors give back the living in a reciprocal movement such that 'death can no longer establish itself as end or agency':

the initiation consists in an exchange being established where there had been only a brute fact: they pass from a natural, aleatory and irreversible death to a death that is *given and received*, and that is therefore reversible in the social exchange . . . the opposition between birth and death disappears.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 132)

What exactly is Baudrillard claiming? There seems to be a significant equivocation in his argument here. Does symbolic exchange ritual merely disguise the 'brute fact' of biological death? Is ritual exchange nothing more than a comforting pretence, a sham? Baudrillard warns against mystical interpretations: death is not 'conquered' (as, for example, is claimed in the Christian notion of resurrection). On two occasions (pp. 132 and 134) Baudrillard seems to suggest that symbolic exchange rituals are a response to the 'natural' or 'real' event of death, as if the 'reality' of death precedes symbolic exchange. But such a position would amount to conventional Freudo-Marxism. Although Baudrillard does not make this particularly clear he appears to be using the terms 'real' and 'natural' here not in the scientific or objectivist senses

but in a sense adapted from Lacan. 'Death' is a construction of the Imaginary, not an objective biological reality, and symbolic exchange 'puts an end to the opposition between the real and the imaginary' (1993a: 133). In other words, symbolic exchange disrupts and overturns binary oppositions, since for Baudrillard all binary oppositions are based on the real/imaginary distinction. For him, 'each term of the disjunction excludes the other, which eventually becomes its imaginary' (1993a: 133), so death is only the imaginary construct of the living, women is only an imaginary construct of men, nature is constructed by culture and the idea of the soul by the experience of the limited, biological body. Moreover, according to the principle of symbolic reversibility, 'every separate term for which the other is its imaginary is haunted by the latter as *its own death*' (1993a: 133).

Nevertheless there is a temporal problem here. Which comes first, the symbolic order or the real/imaginary opposition? In other words, do symbolic cultures develop symbolic exchange to overcome their conception of the brute fact of death (albeit real/imaginary rather than simply biological)? If so, then how does this primal conception or experience of the 'brute fact' of death come about? One response would be to argue that there is always a tension between symbolic exchange and binary structures, that it is meaningless to suggest that one 'precedes' the other in a historical fashion.

What does emerge is that Baudrillard does not adopt a strong constructivist or culturally relativist position on death. Death is horrifying and threatening to the social order in both 'primitive' symbolic cultures and capitalist modernity. For Baudrillard all societies, 'primitive' and modern, share a necessary 'thanatopraxis'. This means that any society must do something to ward off or make meaningful the 'sudden loss of signs that befalls the dead, to prevent there remaining in the *asocial* flesh of the dead something which signifies nothing' (1993a: 180). *It is not 'real' biological 'death' but the asociality of signs that is most threatening.* The corpse of the recently deceased is rich with social meaning, the bleached bones of the ancestor are rich with meaning, but in between is putrefaction: a formless squalor of signs signifying nothing. It is, then, always a matter of signs and social meaning, not the biological 'reality' of death. As we have noted, the Canaque have no word that corresponds to 'body' and one term, 'boa', covering both dead and god. Nevertheless, the Canaque hasten the decomposition of the corpse by the sprinkling of water over it, and obscure the signs of decomposition by embalming (Leenhardt, 1979). All societies, it seems, deploy artifice or 'semiurgic practices' to avoid confrontation with the disturbing loss of socialised signs.

The distinction between 'primitive' and modern is, for Baudrillard, that modern semiurgic practices attempt to achieve 'naturalness' to make the dead look like the living, whereas 'the primitive concedes the dead their difference' (1993a: 181). Through their difference the dead remain partners and agents of social exchange; difference or heterogeneity enables symbolic exchange, sameness or homogeneity undermines it. Modern practices, then, are built upon the persistent, but nonsensical, binary opposition that life is natural and death is unnatural. Confined and naturalised as 'stuffed simulacra', the dead lose their social status.

So, in Western modernity, it seems the binary opposition life/death develops, whereas in 'primitive' cultures such an emergence is prevented by cycles of symbolic exchange. Yet Baudrillard's interest is not in documenting 'other' cultures but in interrogating the West:

Throughout the entire system of political economy, the law of symbolic exchange has not changed one iota: we continue to exchange with the dead . . . we simply pay with our own death and our anxiety about death for the rupture of symbolic exchanges with them.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 134)

The operations of symbolic exchange suspend or annul binary oppositions and 'end' the dominance of the code. Symbolic exchanges are always breaches in the code because in the act of exchange the two terms of the binary oppositions lose their autonomy, lose their 'reality'. 'Reality' is revealed as a fabrication, an illusion.

NATURAL AND SACRIFICIAL DEATH

Socially programmed for survival, we are increasingly fascinated by death: 'If life is only a need to survive at any cost, then annihilation is a priceless luxury. In a system where life is ruled by value and utility, death becomes a useless luxury and the only alternative' (Baudrillard, 1993a: 156). Death becomes 'inhuman, irrational and senseless' (1993a: 162); torn from symbolic relations it is absurd and abnormal. In modern societies 'the social' is an abstracted, separated instance distinguished from and opposed to other spheres such as economic, politics and law. The social has its own structures, and institutions and social relations are further abstractions: welfare and security, the family and health, work and leisure (1983: 90 n. 7). According to Baudrillard these institutions 'annex' death by constructing the phenomenon of 'natural death'.

The construction of natural or biological death effects an 'equivalent neutralisation' of life such that life is understood as a quantity of linear time – 'life capital' – while death is reduced to nothing. The retired and the old, Baudrillard argues, come to be seen as a 'dead weight', a burden on society capable of nothing but 'sliding' into death (1993a: 163). Increasingly they are packed off to care homes and hospices where they survive for a few years, out of view, no longer in any position to participate in symbolic exchanges – *already dead*. Rarely visited, tended by staff paid the minimum wage or less, surrounded by the stink of piss and excrement, they expire: a merciful release not only for the dying but for their embarrassed families too. The difference from 'non-Western' cultures, and the West in its pre-modern period, where elders, corpses and ancestors are venerated and central to social rituals, could not be greater.

According to Baudrillard, as 'natural' death becomes ridiculous, 'violent, accidental and chance death' takes on a macabre and fascinating interest – and surely he has a point. We moderns seem to be obsessed with the ghoulish figures of serial killers and suicide bombers, with so-called embodiments of evil. But why exactly do we find violent or accidental death so fascinating? Baudrillard warns against a simplistic 'blame the media' argument and again understands these phenomena through the severing or barring of symbolic exchange. Violent and accidental death is the closest form in modernity to the sacrificial deaths of the symbolic order. Violent and accidental deaths, like sacrifices, 'escape' natural or biological reason: they are in Baudrillard's language 'artificial' and so are a challenge to nature. Further, by their artificial form, such deaths are lifted out of the sphere of individuals and families, of science and medicine, which are equipped only for 'natural' death. Artificial deaths arouse collective passions and, by the rule of symbolic exchange, such deaths demand a collective symbolic response. Yet today there are no rituals 'for reabsorbing death and its rupturing energies' (1993a: 165), so what remains is the 'phantasm of sacrifice' and this is what fascinates.⁶ Another example of 'willed death', which Baudrillard develops at some length, is hostage-taking. Willed or 'anti-natural' violence may be willed by the self, such as in suicide, or by others, such as an aggressor or murderer. In either case such violence brings about a collective shock-wave of fascination or horror, which, Baudrillard suggests, links modern and symbolic cultures. We are never convinced by the modern, rationalised, economic order, Baudrillard insists, so the 'collective imagination' always tends toward modes of symbolic exchange.

SUICIDE, SUBVERSION AND DEFIANCE

[D]eath is perhaps the only thing that has no use-value, which can never be referred back to need, and so can unquestionably be turned into a weapon.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 176)

Violent death changes everything, slow death changes nothing.

(Baudrillard, 1993a: 40)

Our lives and our deaths seem to be separated out and neither 'belongs' to us. We lose ownership of these, apparently our most singular and personal experiences, to the state, science and medicine. As the juridical, medico-scientific and administrative dimensions of modernity extend, Baudrillard argues, we are all confined, figuratively speaking: 'we are all madmen and criminals... we are all Indians, Blacks, Palestinians, women or homosexuals' (1993a: 192 n. 34).

The 'ultimate aim of the system', of seizing 'control of death' (1993a: 48 n. 24), makes it highly vulnerable to any defiance of its control over death, since for Baudrillard the entire edifice of power is built on this foundation. Death, then, is the ultimate weapon against the system because it is capable of re-engaging the symbolic exchange of life and death. As we are condemned to a 'slow death' of labour and survival by the system, according to Baudrillard,

We must therefore displace everything onto the sphere of the symbolic where the challenge, reversal and overbidding are the law, so that we can respond to death only by an equal or superior death. There is no question here of real violence or force... only the challenge and the logic of the symbolic.

(1993a: 36)

Baudrillard clearly feels that 'real' acts of violence are pointless and counterproductive because they feed into the system, justifying its methods of control, and ultimately serve as commodity-sign or entertainment value for its media networks. To defy the system, Baudrillard argues, we must be prepared to 'die', in the sense of surrendering the 'life' (or living-death) that the system has given us. We must, he asserts, throw the gift of living death back in the face of the system and demand either an 'immediate death' or a new 'life' freed of the barring of symbolic exchange (1993a: 36-7). The self as *given* by the system cannot liberate itself from the system because it is *of* the system. This self must be annulled or sacrificed and the system is then put in the position of having to respond to this symbolic exchange:

To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death. Nothing, not even the system, can avoid the symbolic obligation, and it is in this trap that the only chance of catastrophe for the capital remains.

(1993a: 37)

In modernity, suicide has such a subversive force: 'through suicide, the individual tries and condemns society... by inverting the authorities and *reinstating reversibility*' (1993a: 175, emphasis added). So, for example, the high rate of suicide in prisons is understood as a symbolic exchange, 'an infinitesimal but inexpiable breach' in the system of control. Suicide is a 'challenge that society cannot reply to' (1993a: 180), it seizes back control of (the individual's) death and, further, it subtracts 'capital' or value from a system based on the accumulation and realisation of value. In the act of suicide we remove ourselves as a quantity of capital. Moreover, Baudrillard insists, 'if every suicide becomes subversive in a highly integrated system, all subversion of and resistance to the system is reciprocally, by its very nature, suicidal' (1993a: 176).

Baudrillard does not only mean suicide in the literal sense, but any behaviour that challenges or opposes the maximizing of performance, growth, accumulation, success. He includes neurotic behaviours by which 'sufferers' can prevent their full integration into the code and also street demonstrations that have no other goal than to provoke the authorities to 'real' violence, to shame and humiliate them.

Baudrillard does not develop examples at this stage, but he cites briefly the student demonstrations of May 1968 where students 'sacrificed' their gift of a higher education, throwing it back at the system such that the system 'loses its footing'. The anti-Poll Tax riots of July 1990 in London seemed to undermine the Thatcher government as people rejected the secure life of (signs of) prosperity and instead risked life and limb in pitched battles with the police. But in both cases any fractures in the system were soon repaired, or at least papered over; particular politicians are removed but the system continues. Yet this does not necessarily undermine Baudrillard's argument as he asserts that the system has the power 'to displace the time of exchange, substituting continuity and mortal linearity for the immediate retaliation of death' (1993a: 40). In other words the system has time on its side, or rather linear time is the time of the system. Baudrillard's point becomes painfully obvious in cases where corporations are found by the courts, or increasingly by the media, to have risked the health of consumers by negligence. This occurred when Coca-Cola marketed 'Dasani' purified water as a health drink when it was in fact ordinary tap water with

various pollutants added by the company, and when Cadbury-Trebor-Bassett UK sold chocolate laced with salmonella. On both occasions the companies' PR spokespersons announced that since the unfavourable findings were made their company had already introduced the most stringent safety improvements: in other words your critique is already long out of date, time is on *our* side.

To summarise, the system (political economy) has 'possession' of death such that it 'gives' us our natural, biological death, just as it gives us the gifts of a self and identity in consumer society. It gives us the gift of welfare, security and finally a painless 'natural' death in hospital. We may well try to resist these gifts, by driving fast without a seatbelt, heavy smoking, over-eating or starving ourselves.⁷ We may deliberately refuse to maximise ourselves, to realise our potential, or our refusal may be beyond conscious volition as in Baudrillard's examples of impotence and anorexia (1990a: 119–28). In each of these cases failure is equal to symbolic death in our competitive, performance-obsessed societies. However, an effective 'counter-gift' of potlatch-style destruction can only occur through suicide. The system gives and dominates by giving unilaterally, its power is based in the cessation of the cycle of symbolic exchanges. According to Baudrillard 'the worst repression . . . consists in dispossessing you of your own death' (1993a: 177). Suicide gives back, returns or counters the gift of life/death given by the system: symbolic exchange is once more put into play, the cycle continues and unilateral power and authority crumble by lacking a symbolic response.

Domination is never total. The system cannot hunt down or neutralise every aspect, every fragment of our lives and thoughts; we remain 'free', at least free to challenge the system. We cannot and will not be made to identify fully with our individual interests, needs, desires and 'potential' that the system promotes as coded options within an integrated system. Baudrillard's conviction is that people will never acquiesce to the system and resign themselves to being merely 'the capitalist of their own lives' (1993a: 179–80).

SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE AND LANGUAGE

Symbolic Exchange and Death claims a site of resistance and defiance at both the socio-economic level and the level of language and writing. The principle of symbolic exchange, according to Baudrillard, operates at the level of words and meanings. 'Poetic language' is a site of the sacrifice or extermination of linguistic value, a place of the suspension and annulment of the fixed, referential meaning of word-signs. Symbolic or poetic language is, for Baudrillard, a non-expressive, anti-discursive

'beyond' of the economy of signification. Within the poetic or symbolic operation words do not signify or represent, signs are cancelled or 'sacrificed'. The ordered, regulated opposition between signifier and signified and sign and referent is dissolved in ambivalence by poetic resonances that play on both sides of the bar simultaneously (1993a: 198–205).

Here Baudrillard reads 'Saussure against Saussure'; not the Saussure of the *Course in General Linguistics* (1966), his well known study assembled posthumously by students, but the far less well known Saussure of the anagrams, termed Saussure's 'abandoned hypothesis' by Baudrillard. Briefly, Saussure's hypothesis, at least as Baudrillard renders it, consists of two 'hidden' laws of poetry. The first is that the numbers of vowels in a verse should be 'countered' by a given number of non-vowels in a fixed pattern. In other words, meaning is not free to be developed at will by the poet, it is constrained by a rule of composition that ensures there are no remainders, no leftovers; all must be *exchanged*. The second rule is that a 'theme word', such as the name of a god or hero, be generated by anagram through emphasised phonemes. Put simply, as the poem is spoken out loud (as poetry always should be) the sound produced by recital will suggest a name through the repetition of certain sounds. Such poems, found widely in ancient Greece and Rome, are thought to be offerings.

Baudrillard opposes Saussure's understanding of the anagrams secreted in ancient poetry in two main ways. First, Baudrillard criticises Saussure for ignoring the symbolic relations between poet and reader in his focus on the poet and 'artistic inspiration'. According to Baudrillard this understanding participates in the severing of symbolic relations, abstracting the greatness of the individual poet while ignoring the 'ecstasy' that can sweep over the reader of a great poem in a symbolic exchange. In other words, the greatness of a poem resides in the pact formed by reader and poem, not unilaterally in the figure of the poet.

Second, Baudrillard contends that the rule of no remainders does not merely reinforce the meaning or message of the theme words through repetition, but actually cancels the theme word by 'doubling' it. For Baudrillard such poems are sacrificial: the god is put to death, symbolically, through the poem by dispersal into phonemic elements. The signifier – the name of a god – is sacrificed by the splitting away of the signifiers, the word-sound from the supposed referent – the god in a dispersal into sound, a 'cancellation by the double' (1993a: 199).

The poetic form, according to Baudrillard, 'shatters' the equivalence of signifier and signified, it shatters the 'linearity of the signifier' (the

accumulation of meaning) and it shatters the boundlessness or infinity of meaning, bringing it under strict regulation. But these principles of regulation, the laws of the anagram, are not a code. The poetic has a form but not a code – an important distinction. Poetry ‘ruptures not only the arbitrariness of the sign, but also the Law of equivalence (signifier/signified) and the function of representation’ (1993a: 214).

This is a complex point and must be dwelt on. The sign, as unit of meaning or value, acts as a ‘stand-in’ for reality. Representation works by requiring us to believe that the sign/stand-in actually emanates from a reality that, so to speak, ‘makes signs at you’ (1993a: 214). This Baudrillard terms ‘the Linguistic Imaginary’. Representational meaning or signification takes place in the imagination of the science of linguistics, not ‘out there’ in the world. Poetry does not operate in this way, Baudrillard asserts, but linguistic science attempts, unsuccessfully, to *code* poetry. Poetry, according to Baudrillard, is generally misinterpreted as a ‘better’ or higher type of equivalence, as offering a more apposite expression of meaning – not merely arbitrary but artful in its ability to tie together signifier and signified. But this interpretation remains locked within the code of representation and equivalence. Baudrillard follows standard structuralist and poststructuralist theory here but also adds something distinctive in his insistence that the rule-bound or ritual-like use of language leads to a sacrificial annulment of referential value. The following of rules as a mode of breaking with coded models of subjectivity is explored in Baudrillard’s later work (see Chapters 5 and 8 of this volume).

Taking the example of Swinburne’s poetry, where Ss sound like s-nakes hi-ss-ing, Baudrillard argues that the ‘Linguistic Imaginary’ reduces poetry to an artful technique used to reinforce meaning, to bolster the metaphysics of representation. Without a logic of equivalence there can be no representational meaning, there is ‘nothing’: ‘if the poem refers to something, it is always to NOTHING’ (1993a: 209).

The something that is nothing cannot be coded, it cannot be rendered into equivalence. It is not a ‘thing’ but a ‘no(t)-thing’; that is, it is not an abstract unit but a relation, an experience, a possibility. To clarify, a person can be given a number and treated as a number – indeed, this happens all the time in modern bureaucratic societies. A number is a thing, an abstract unit of coding, but a person is not a ‘thing’, to be a person is to exist in relations with other. Our sense of personhood, of who we are, cannot be separated from our relations to others. A person, then, is not a thing but a not-thing, not an abstract, isolatable unit but a relation, a form.

Poetry, for Baudrillard, or at least ‘good poetry’, is akin to gift-exchange and sacrifice. Indeed, poetry is to language what gift-exchange is to economics: its sacrificial annulment, its resolution without remainder, its ‘anti-value’. Value, whether economic or semantic, is, according to Baudrillard, merely a residue that has escaped or ‘not been exhausted’ in the cycle of gift exchange. Such residues are the source of power struggles and conflicts.

The ‘rational’ economic, productivist worldview dominates when we believe ourselves ‘free’ to use words without ‘ritual, religious, or poetic restriction of any kind’ (1993a: 201). The illusory freedom to *use* words as we please to *produce* referential meaning enables, and is mirrored by, the later situation where capitalists are free to *use* labour as they please to *produce* profit. Baudrillard’s argument here ‘mirrors’ Marx, even as he suggests that Marx mirrors capitalism, in that Baudrillard seeks to expose empty, formal rather than actual, freedoms in the sphere of representation, as Marx had done in the sphere of economics. Baudrillard’s theories pass beyond Marxism, but, initially at least, by way of Marxism. The unlimited productivity of goods and labour, of words and meanings, does not deliver freedom or progress, Baudrillard insists. Instead modernity is ‘caught in an endless escalation at every level’ (1993a: 201), an accumulation and profusion of residues – of objects, capital, meaning and psychic debris.

For Baudrillard everything that is symbolically exchanged is a ‘mortal threat’ to the dominant order because the dominant order in all its dimensions – linguistic, economic and political – is built upon the expulsion, barring or denial of symbolic exchange. Systems of representation and meaning, systems of political economy and finance, systems of communication and mediation can only function as commodity-signs if symbolic exchanges are barred. Accumulation, hierarchy, social power and control occur when the cycle of symbolic exchange is brought to an end; during the cycle they are in a state of flux. The capitalist system has the distinction of effecting a permanent, though partial and always unstable, cessation of the cycle of exchange. Gift exchange continues in circumscribed form at the individual level, but is barred at the systemic level. Ambivalence is not an opposing or alternative ‘code’ but ‘the incessant potentiality of the annulment of value’ (1981: 210), nothing more, nothing less. The various forms of symbolic exchange – willed, suicidal, accidental, poetic – ‘shatter’ these systems.