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Towards a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*

Jean Baudrillard

Just as the critique of political economy set for itself the task of analyzing the commodity-form, the Critique of the political economy of the sign intends to do so of the sign-form.

As the commodity is both exchange value and use value—requiring that a total analysis of this form consider both slopes of the system—so too is the sign both signifier (Sr) and signified (Sd); the analysis of the sign-form must therefore proceed at both levels. Of course, this simultaneously requires a logical and strategic analysis of the relationship between the two terms, namely:
1) Between the EV system and the UV system (or between commodity-form and object-form), which we endeavored to do in the preceding article*:
2) Between the system of the Sr and that of the Sd (or between the respective codes which define the articulation of the sign-value and of the sign-form).

This relationship sets itself up in both cases as an hierarchical function between a dominant form and an alibi form, or satellite form, the latter being both the logical crowning and ideological fulfillment of the former.

1. The Magical Thinking of Ideology

This homologous structuring of values in what are commonly called the economic field and the field of signification has the effect of displacing the entire ideological process and of restating it in radically different terms. This process is no longer based on an infra/superstructural relation between material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.) which would emerge to express and mask its contradictions. All that is henceforth included, with the same degree of objectivity, in the general political economy (of its critique), penetrated throughout by the same form and governed by the same logic.

One must recall that, beyond the desperate gymnastics which it entails ("superstructural", "dialectical", "structural with dominant", etc.), the traditional view of ideology with its artificial distinction between the "economic" and the "ideological" also entails the impossibility of grasping the "ideological" function of culture and of signs, which have thus been isolated, except at the level of the signifieds.

The ideology (of such or such a group, of the ruling class) invariably consists of great themes, great contents, great values (nation, morality, family, humanism, happiness, consumption) whose allegorical power comes to play, in some undetermined fashion, on consciousnesses in order to integrate them. Thought contents come to play upon real situations, and, on the whole, ideology is defined as the backlash of culture on the economy.

Whereas it is clear that ideology is that very form which runs through "material" production as well as the production of signs—or rather the logical division of this form into two terms:
—a strategic, functional division through which the form reproduces itself. This means that ideology is already entirely within the relation of $EV$ to $UV$, i.e., is already entirely within the logic of the commodity, just as it is contained in the relation of the Sr to the Sd, i.e., within the logic internal to the sign.

Marx showed that the objectivity of material production resided not in its materiality but in its form. This constitutes the starting point of any critical theory. Ideology calls for the same analytical reduction: its objectivity does not reside in its “ideality”, i.e., in a realitic metaphysics of thought contents but in its form.

The “critique” of ideology (including the Marxist critique) feeds on a kind of magical thinking which does not decipher ideology as form but as content, as given transcendental value—a sort of mana fastening on to a few great representations which magically impregnate floating and mystified subjectivities known as “consciousnesses”. Just as “need” is given as the relation between an “object’s usefulness” and a “subject’s demand”, ideology appears as the relation between the projection of a consciousness and the ideality of an ... idea, or of a value. The same magical footbridge is strung between artificial, even metaphysical, concepts, transposed from material goods to values and collective representations.²

Indeed, ideology is the entire process by which symbolic material is reduced and abstracted into a form—but this reductive abstraction presents itself immediately as an (autonomous) value, as a (transcendental) content, as a (signified) representation of consciousness. It is this same process which lets an autonomous value, a transcendental reality be read into the commodity, through the misrecognition of its form and of the abstraction of social labor which it effects. Culture is thus defined in bourgeois (or Marxist, alas!) thought as a transcendence of contents, correlated with consciousness by “representation”, circulating between them as positive values, in much the same way as the fetishized commodity appears as an immediate real value, correlated with subjects through “need” and use value, and circulating according to the rules of exchange value.

The cunning of form is to continually veil itself behind the evidence of contents. The cunning of the code is to veil itself behind and to produce itself in the evidence of value. It is in the “materiality” of the content that the form consumes its abstraction and reproduces itself as form of the content. This is its own magic: to play on the production of both contents and the consciousnesses which receive them (just as production produces both products and their corresponding “needs”)—thereby setting culture in a dual transcendence of values (of contents) and of consciousnesses, and in the metaphysics of an exchange between the two terms. And while the bourgeois vulgate enshrines it in this transcendence to worship it as culture, the Marxist vulgate sets it in the same transcendence only to denounce it there as ideology. But the two vulgates converge in the same magical thinking.³

Almost all contemporary thought impales itself on false problems and interminable controversies arising from artificial disjunctions:
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1) The subject/object disjunction, bridged by the magical concept of "need". Everything would be fine if the insoluble problem of "supply and demand" didn't spring up in the general system of production/consumption. Free choice or manipulation? Pseudo-dialectic between the two? Eternal litany and false problem.

2) The infra/superstructural disjunction which, as we have seen, surreptitiously covers over the insuperable disjunction between the materiality of contents and the ideality of consciousnesses—the two thusly separated poles rejoined through the magical concept of ideology. Here too everything would be fine if this did not leave eternally in suspense—to the great delight of generations of intellectuals—the problem of the "determining instance" and the whole resultant acrobatics of "interaction", of "dialectic", of "relative autonomy" and of "overdetermination".

3) The exploitation/alienation distinction which echoes this false problem at the level of political analysis. The endless debate of knowing if one founds the other, if the second succeeds the first as a "more advanced stage of capitalism"—all of which is absurd and results once again from the artificial division between sign and commodity, unanalyzed in their form and posed as contents (the former of meaning, the latter of production). Whence the distinction of an "exploitation of the labor force" from an "alienation through signs". As if the commodity or the system of material production didn't "signify"! As if signs and culture were not already abstract social productions at the level of the code and models, a generalized system of the exchange of values!

Ideology is therefore neither on one side nor on the other. It is that same and only form which cuts across all the fields of social production. It is the catching up of all production (material or symbolic) in one single process of abstraction, reduction, general equivalence and exploitation.

1) It is because the logic of the commodity and of political economy is at the very heart of the sign, in the abstract equation of signifier and signified, in the differential combinatory of signs, that these can function as exchange value (the discourse of communication) and as use value (rational decoding and distinctive social usage).

2) It is because the structure of the sign is at the very heart of the commodity-form that the latter can immediately assume an effect of signification—not "added on" as "message" or connotation—but because it sets itself up, through its very form, as total medium, as system of communication governing all social exchange. Like the sign-form, the commodity is a code organizing the exchange of values. Whether material contents of production or immaterial contents of signification, it matters little; the code is the determining factor: the rule of the play of signifiers, the rule of the play of exchange value. It is the code which, here and there, generalized in the system of political economy, reduces all symbolic ambivalence in order to base the "rational" circulation of values and the play of exchanges on the regulated equivalence of these values.

Here, because of its implication in the metaphysics of the subject of consciousness, the concept of alienation proves useless. Just as the myths of primitive societies are not "false" stories that consciousnesses tell one another, but rather a code of signs that are exchanged, integrating the group through this circulation and not through the weightiness of mythic "contents" on consciousness ("belief"), so too the fundamental code of our societies, which is that of political economy
(commodity-form and sign-form) does not operate through the alienation of consciousness from contents: it rationalizes and regulates exchange; it engenders communication, but under the law of the code and the control of meaning.

The division of labor, the functional division of the terms of discourse do not "mystify" man; they socialize him and inform his exchange in accordance with an abstract general model. The very concept of the individual is the "product" of this general system of exchange. And the idea of "totality" according to which the subject (either of consciousness or of History) conceives of himself in his ideal reference is only the effect, the symptom, the projected shadow of this system. Alienation—a magical concept through which consciousness thinks itself as its own ideal content (its recovered "totality")—is an ideological concept; and ideology, with its superstructural version of the contents of consciousness, is an alienated concept.

Today, consumption—if that term has a meaning other than the one given it by vulgar economics—defines precisely that stage at which the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign-value, and the signs (culture) as commodities. If, instead of dividing themselves up as specialists—some of "production (economy, infrastructure), others of ideology (signs, culture)—or as dialecticians of the boundless totality, "researchers", especially those up Marx's way, were willing to note the simplest realities, they would realize that nothing of what is produced and exchanged in our day (objects, services, bodies, sex, culture, knowledge, etc.) can any longer be decoded strictly as sign or measured strictly as commodity; it would be clear to them that everything came out of a general political economy whose determining instance is no longer the commodity (even reviewed and corrected in its signifying function, with its message, its connotations, but always as if there subsisted a possible objectivity of the product), nor, of course, culture (even in its "critical" version: sign, values, ideas everywhere commercialized or coopted by the dominant system, but always there too as if something subsisted whose transcendance, simply compromised, could be located—a short of sublime use value which the alternative culture finds in exchange value). The object of this political economy, i.e., its simplest element, its nuclear element—which is precisely what the commodity was for Marx—and which is today neither properly commodity nor sign but in which both have been abolished as specific determinations but not as forms, that object is perhaps, simply, the object, the object-form, upon which converge, in a complex mode which describes the most general form of political economy, the use value, the exchange value and the sign-value.

II. The Metaphysics of the Sign

The sign presents itself with the same evidence of meaning value as does the commodity in the "natural" evidence of its value. These are "the simplest things" and the most mysterious. As for semiology, similarly to political economy, all it does is describe its circulation and structural functioning. As shown in one of our earlier studies, the abstraction of the system of exchange value maintains itself only through the effect of concrete reality and objective finality of the use value and its needs. Such is the strategic logic of the commodity which
makes the second term a satellite of and an alibi for the first. The same applies to the logic and strategy of the sign. This hypothesis shatters the "scientific postulates" of semio-linguistics, in particular that of the arbitrariness of the sign, as defined by Saussure and corrected by Benveniste.

The arbitrariness of the sign does not lie in its being unmotivated, in the fact that the Sr "table" has no "natural" vocation to signify the concept or the reality: table (since Tisch in German, etc.), but in the very fact of setting up an equivalence between such a Sr and such a Sd. In this sense, the arbitrariness is as total in the case of the "symbol"6, where the analogy between Sr and Sd in no way alters the principle of equivalence. The arbitrariness is in the fundamental establishment of an exact correlation between a "discrete" Sr and an equally discrete Sd. In other words, the arbitrariness is in the "discreteness", which alone sets up the equational relation of the sign, such that: this=this and will never signify anything else. This discreteness is therefore the very principle of the rationality of the sign, which functions as the abstractor and reducer of all virtualities of meaning which would not depend on the respective framing, equivalence or mirroring effect of a Sr and a Sd. Rationalization which directs and reduces the sign, not with regard to an external, immanent "concrete reality" which signs would abstractly recover to express, but in relation to all that exceeds the scheme of equivalence and signification, and which the sign, in the very operation which constitutes it, in that sudden crystallization of a Sr and a Sd, reduces, represses, annihilates. The rationality of the sign is based on the exclusion, the annihilation of all symbolic ambivalence in favor of a fixed and equational structure. The sign is a discriminator: it structures by exclusion. Henceforth crystallized on this exclusive structure, designating its fixed field, resigning all the rest and assigning the Sr and Sd in a system of respective control, the sign presents itself as full value, positive, rational, exchangeable. All virtualities of meaning have been passed over the cutting edge of the structure.

This term by term assignment of the Sr and the Sd can very well be complicated into an equivocal, multivocal relation, without violating the logic of the sign. A Sr can refer to several Sd, or inversely: the principle of equivalence, hence of exclusion and reduction upon which the arbitrariness is based, remains the same. Equivalence has simply become polyvalence while still radically opposing ambivalence. The ambiguity itself is still only in the vacillation of a principle which, in the main, remains in effect. The fading of signification does not put into question the rationality of the sign, its reality principle. While multiple connections exist between Sr and Sd which retain their "discreteness", the code of signification continues to operate as system of the control of meaning.

Only ambivalence (to which we assign the strong meaning of rupture of value, beneath and beyond the sign-value and the emergence of the symbolic) puts into question readability, the false transparence of the sign, its use value (rational decoding) and its exchange value (the discourse of communication). It puts an end to the political economy of the sign, and hence to the respective definitions of the Sr and Sd—concepts bearing the stamp of signification—which only derive their meaning from the process of signification in the classical sense, and thus could not survive, in any form whatsoever, the shattering of this logic. In the logic of ambivalence and of the
symbolic, we are dealing with a process of resolution of the sign, resolution of the equation upon which it articulates itself and which, in communicative discourse, is never resolved: integrated, opaque, never elucidated, it establishes there the same type of social mystery as does that other medium, the commodity, which also rests on an abstract equation of all values.7

The critique of political economy, conducted by Marx at the level of exchange value but whose total scope also implies use value, is very precisely this resolution of the commodity and of its implicit equation, a resolution of the commodity as form and as code of general equivalence. It is this same critical resolution which must be extended to the field of signification in a Critique of the political economy of the sign.

Translated by Carl R. Lovitt and Denise Klopsch

NOTES


1. The notion of “pensée magique” (magical thinking) to which the author alludes here was a major instrument of early French ethnology (Ed. note).

2. It should be noted the “alienation” is also one such magical concept, intended to fill in an artificial disjunction, this one between the “consciousness” of the subject and his own idealized content (his “recovered totality”).

3. Thus the “critical” denunciation of “artificial needs” and of the “manipulation of needs” rejoins the unconditional exaltation of consumption in the same mystification.

4. An allusion here to Roger Garaudy, and in particular to the title of one of his works: D’un réalisme sans rivages. (Ed. note)

5. Two types of analysis have attacked this parallel fetishism of the commodity and of the sign: the critique of political economy, or theory of material production, inaugurated by Marx, and critical semiology, or theory of textual production, carried out more recently by the Tel Quel group.

6. Taken here in the classical semio-linguistic sense, of the symbol as analogical variant of the sign. On the contrary, we shall always use the symbol (the symbolic, the symbolic exchange) in opposition and as a radical alternative to the concept of sign and signification.

7. This resolution of the sign entails the abolition of the Sr and Sd as such, but not the abolition, toward some mystical nothingness, of the operation of meaning and its material. The symbolic operation of meaning also operates on phonic, visual, gestural (and social) matter, but in accordance with a completely different kind of logic.