

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CONCERNING THE FULFILLMENT OF DESIRE
IN EXCHANGE VALUE

There was a raid on a U.S. department store several years ago. A group occupied and neutralized the store by surprise, and then invited the crowd by loudspeaker to help themselves. A symbolic action! And the result? Nobody could figure out what to take — or else they took insignificant items they could easily have filched on any normal shopping day.

If you had fifty million dollars, what would you do with it?
Chaos.

Faced with the disposal of free time at will, the same immediate panic surfaces in us. How do we get rid of it?

And we could adduce further examples, such as the French 400-meter runner in the European championships, who, 100 meters from the finish line, wilts in his final effort and finishes third. "When I sensed I was going to win," he said afterward, "something inside me broke." Or the French tennis player at a tournament in Spain: two sets ahead and the match in hand with an ailing opponent, he blows the match point and goes down to defeat — "irresistibly," one could say — and to the general amazement of the spectators. Not to mention Poulidor, the eternal runner-up whose fame is derived precisely from this chronic incapacity to wrap up victory.

When we say of someone that he "almost" won, that he fell just short of winning, what is supposed to have been missed? Don't these phrases indicate in a way that victory would have been the worst thing that could have happened to him, that victory would have been failure?

These are just slips of the will, of the drive for appropriation and satisfaction, performance and supremacy, which is supposed to be the deepest of human motivations. Freud advanced the exploration of human psychology immensely, taking such minutiae as his starting point. But the fantastic perspectives thus revealed have scarcely ruffled the composure of general anthropology, economic "science," or the "humanities." Psychoanalysis itself has helped to circumscribe these anomalies with depth psychology ("everybody has his unconscious and its *his* business"). And so, almost miraculously, we find they have no equivalent in social or political practice, where an essentially fail-safe rationality reigns supreme. It is this indefatigability of general postulates about man in economic, social and

political matters that we shall interrogate from the categorical perspective of exhaustion and failure.

The more or less experimental and limiting case of the department store shows that once exchange value has been neutralized, use value disappears with it. When the demand for always more utility and satisfaction is confronted with the possibility of its immediate realization, it evaporates. The whole package of motivations, needs and rationality that is so conveniently supposed to constitute human nature simply flies apart. Beyond the transparency of economics, where everything is clear because it suffices to "want something for your money," man apparently no longer knows what he wants.

Some hypotheses:

— Objects, and the needs that they imply, exist precisely in order to resolve the anguish of not knowing what one wants.

— What isn't mediated by the abstraction of exchange value cannot exist as a "spontaneous" and "concrete" value either — such as utility, for example. Both axiological levels are equally abstract and make common sense. There is no use value without exchange value. Once the latter is neutralized in the gift process, or gratuity, prodigality, expenditure, then use value itself becomes unintelligible.

— This idea applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to sign exchange value. What isn't mediated by statutory social competition, the exchange of differential signs, or by *models*, has no value. With respect to signs, the use value-exchange value distinction is virtually obliterated. If "sign use value" is defined as differential satisfaction, a sort of qualitative surplus value anticipated through a choice, a preference, a semiological calculation; and if sign exchange value is defined as the general form (the code) that regulates the interplay of models; then it becomes clear the extent to which use value issues directly from the functioning of the code and exchange value system. The process is the same in the so-called economic order: hence the abstractness of use value, which only appears already mediatized by the exchange value system (as commodity form) and simultaneously by the models and code (where it appears as sign form).

Thus, today exchange value and sign exchange value mingle inextricably.¹ The completed system (at bottom that of "con-

1. The Veblen effect (I am buying this because it is more expensive) is a significant limiting case in which the economic (quantitative) is converted into sign-difference. Here one can conceptualize the emergence of "need" starting from the pure outbidding of exchange value (cf. also the art auction as the locale of transition between spheres of value). In the case of signs, the Veblen effect becomes the absolute rule: fashion knows only pure and ascending differentiation.

sumption" as the ultimate stage of political economy) depends on liberty, not only at the level of production (liberty to buy and sell labor power), but also, in a second moment, which is by now concurrent, at the level of consumption (freedom of choice). The abstraction of the sign exchange system (i.e., models and their internalization in semiological calculation) is necessarily combined with the systematic abstraction of production and economic exchange (i.e., capital, money, exchange value).

The sign is the apogee of the commodity. Fashion and the commodity are a single, identical form. The differentiation of the commodity is inscribed, from the outset, in the form of sign exchange value (and not in a quantitative logic of profit). The commodity achieves its apotheosis when it is able to impose itself as a code, that is, as the geometric locus of the circulation of models, and hence as the total medium of a culture (and not only of an economy).

Exchange value is realized in sign exchange value. Sign exchange value and exchange value are definitively realized in use value.

This trinomial delineates a total, coherent universe of value where man is supposed to fulfill himself through the final satisfaction of his needs. According to rational calculation, he is reputed to be continuously raising his rate of value production. Relayed from one summit to the other of the great axiological triangle, he can effectively only hope to transcend himself, to positivize himself, in values. His movement traces the boundaries of a value world that has coincided for centuries with the definition of humanism.

This triangulation of value defines a full, positive world, relentlessly completed by the plus sign: the logic of surplus value (inseparable from value). It is a world in which man is incapable of selling himself short. Hence, the value process is equivalent to a *phantasmic organization*, in which desire is fulfilled and lack resolved; in which desire is achieved and performed; and in which the symbolic dimension and all difference are abolished. Value is totalitarian. It excludes ambivalence, as well as any relation in which man would cease to complete himself in value, or index himself according to the law of equivalence and surplus value. But ambivalence haunts the sphere of value everywhere. It is what resurges, though covertly, in failure.

The crowd fails to react positively to the absolute availability of the commodity (that is, by responding with spontaneous appropriation); it fails to obey the categorical imperative of need; it even fails to understand what it wants and simply take what is offered. In fact, gratuity eliminates supply in the economic sense of the term, and

abolishes demand in the same stroke. So the latter is based only in the logic of value. Outside this logic, man has "need" of nothing. What we need is what is bought and sold, evaluated and chosen. What is neither sold nor taken, but only given and returned, no one "needs." The exchange of looks, the present which comes and goes, are like the air people breathe in and out. This is the metabolism of exchange, prodigality, festival — and also of destruction (which returns to non-value what production has erected, valorized). In this domain, value isn't even recognized. *And desire is not fulfilled there in the phantasm of value.*

What comes to light in this inability to just grab consumer goods, as in the case of the slackening athlete, is that the official imperative, orchestrated as individual need (the need to win, etc.), has displaced something else, which is precisely the contrary demand: to lose, misplace, dispossess oneself, or give up. And this isn't some masochistic reversal of a more fundamental economy aimed toward value, performance and achievement, but the inverse and radical necessity of lack (*manque*). Every fulfillment of desire in value returns to this contrary extremity, because with the termination of satisfaction, it alone preserves the subject's questioning concerning his own desire. Such is the foundation of ambivalence.

Taking has never been a sufficient condition for enjoyment. It is necessary to be able to receive, to give, to return, to destroy — if possible, all at once. The realization process of value dissolves all this into an impoverished, unilateral and positive modality, dispossessing the subject of his symbolic insistence: (1) the refusal to fulfill desire, or *lack*; and (2) the necessity of a relationship unmediated by the systemic logic of value, or *symbolic exchange*.

Enjoyment is radical, value is sublime; so this radical symbolic insistence is sublimated in value. The commodity is the incarnation of the sublime in the economic order. The radical demand of the subject is sublimated there in the ever renewed positivity of his demand for objects. But behind this sublime realization of value, there lies something else. Something other speaks, something irreducible that can take the form of violent destruction, but most frequently assumes the cloaked form of deficit, of the exhaustion and refusal of cathexis, of resistance to satisfaction and refusal of fulfillment. Viewing the contemporary economic situation as a whole, all this begins to look like a tendency we might want to call the *falling rate of enjoyment*. According to a mysterious counter economy of lost opportunity, it is this lively, basic denial of value, this latent violence toward the principle of identity and equivalence,

this vacillation beyond satisfaction which, in the last instance, assures the subject in his being. And this is not metapsychology. Rather, it is on account of having rejected all these considerations *en bloc* as "meta"-psychology that the contemporary human sciences and economics must watch their rational edifice founder without even being able to account for the reversal.²

We have been speaking of syndromes of lost opportunity and illusive pleasure: is this the death instinct talking through us? — preserving ubiquitously and perennially a radical difference, against the unitary phantasm of value? Perhaps. But any discourse in terms of a death instinct verges too close on metapsychology of the subject, forgetting that what is preserved in the splitting of the subject, and the subject's failure to satisfy his desire, is, along with the recognition of castration, the symbolic potentiality of exchange. Lack is always that in terms of which we miss others, and through which others miss us. In the value process (whether the investment be commercial or phantasmic), no one misses anyone, nothing is anything, because everything is equivalent to something, and everyone is assured of equalling at least himself. Only value is exchanged (which is to say, transformed into itself) — only value, and individuals and things as terms of value, according to the law of equivalence. Thus one could say that what preserves the potentiality of exchange, of a reciprocity where individuals truly emerge in their difference and their lack, is Eros — the death instinct being, inversely, that which tends to the abolition of the symbolic in the repetitive cycle of value. From this perspective, the sublime and repetitive world of the commodity could well be considered the field in which the death instinct attains its fulfillment.

2. The film *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* is a very fine example, from a social and political point of view, of this ubiquitous counter-economy. The hero is an adolescent in a rehabilitation center who deliberately renounces a decisive victory in a running contest in order to avoid spreading any of the glory to his institutional oppressors. By losing, he preserves his own truth: here, failure merges with class revolt. Admittedly, in this story, the failure is explicitly deliberate, but it is not difficult to see how "accidental" lapses and physical slips may acquire virtually the same meaning of denial and resistance. In his own way, the 400 meter runner mentioned above calls into question the exchange value system — whose forms are not limited to dominating the salaried worker and the consumer. By running to win, athletes reactivate the competitive value system; they work to reproduce it in "exchange" for the satisfactions of personal prestige. Exploitation is as intense here as at the level of selling one's labor power. It is this bogus exchange mechanism that failure unconsciously causes to break down. In this sense, every "psychological dysfunction" *vis-à-vis* "normality" (which is only the law of the capitalist milieu) is open to a *political* reading. Today politics has no particular sphere unto itself, nor any definition. It is time to discover the latent forms, the displacements and condensations — briefly, the "work" (as in "dream-work") of politics.

But we are never going to get very far quibbling over where to pin these labels. The essential is to grasp that what is speaking, beneath the "objective" process of value, does not speak contradictorily (in the sense of a dialectical contradiction). Ambivalence is not the dialectical negation of value: it is the incessant potentiality of its annulment, of the *destruction of the illusion of value*. It is not with an opposing code that the ambivalent and symbolic confront the discourse of value. Against value's positive transcendence, the symbolic opposes its radicality. Against the logic of sublimation and generality (of abstraction) are opposed the radicality of the non-fulfillment of desire and symbolic exchange.

It remains now to analyze the revolutionary illusion of those responsible for "Operation Super Market." Their hypothesis evidently went something like this: "We are going to suspend the rules of the capitalist game by neutralizing exchange value. We are going to return commodities to their pure use value, thus demystifying consciousness and restoring the clarity of people's relationship to their 'real' needs." Revolution, "hic et nunc." Such is the inspired logic of the purest philosophical Marxism: first, the sharp distinction between use value and exchange value (to the greater philosophical and humanist glory of use value); and then the rationalist theory of mystification. Their conclusion: If people can't spontaneously rediscover a liberated use value, it must be because they are so disciplined in self-repression and the *habitus* of capitalism, it must be because they have so completely internalized the law of exchange value that they are unable to desire a thing when it is simply offered to them.

This overlooks the fact that desire has little vocation to fulfillment in "liberty," but rather in the rule — not in the transparency of a value content, but in the opacity of the code of value. This is the desire of the code, and this desire "needs" to rescue the rules of the game — it requires them — in order to fulfill itself. It is with this investment of the rule by desire, with its own fulfillment in view, that the social order makes its pact. It is this desire that the social order exploits in order to reproduce itself. Here, the phantasm and the institution come together — the political order of power and the fetishized order of perversion (the fulfillment of desire). The phantasm of value is also the phantasm of order and the law.

The "rule" mentioned above is, in our society, the law of exchange value. If there is no longer a set of rules to play by, the game is no longer interesting, for then even cheating and stealing are ruled out. (After all, the latter practices are counter-dependent on the straight

rules of the economic game.) If, then, consumption is only possible within the rules, and if desire is only fulfilled fetishistically, the suspension of the rules, instead of clearing the way for wild pleasure, simply prohibits it. The price of things becomes, then, essential, though no longer simply in the quantitative sense, as in exchange value, nor only differentially, as in the "Veblen effect," but as law, as *fetishized form* — a crucial feature of the commodity economy and of the psychic economy of value. The price of things then becomes the guarantor of the psychic economy of value. One may well prefer this equilibrium to free and wild consumption. But for this one pays the additional price of pleasure, whose "rate" falls in proportion with the cycle of expanded reproduction of satisfaction.

Likewise, the athlete who can't stop himself from losing is partly doing this to preserve the very possibility of battling, without the rules of which it would be difficult to run competitions at all.³ Once again, safeguarding the rules turns out to be a more fundamental imperative than winning itself. Each participant implicitly obeys this structure of exchange, this collective and unconscious function.⁴

So the issue is clearly not "mystified consciousness," nor whatever illusion the aforementioned revolutionaries had about the liberatory suspension of exchange value. They failed to see that there is no contradiction between exchange value and the satisfaction of desire — on the contrary. To be sure, such a contradiction would make the thought of revolution much simpler to grasp, but it is only possible from the perspective of an axiological idealism, and the idealization of use value in particular. In effect, this position is betrayed by its own, powerful sublimation, which leads its adherents to underestimate the radicality of the law of value, and hence the radicality of its transgression. Having approached the problem so gingerly, they have, in effect, proposed a reformist strategy that contests value at only a relatively superficial level. Then, they are taken aback by the lack of "mass" reaction to their initiative. We can be quite sure they impute this to the fact that their action was too radical, and place their hope in the maturation of the people's consciousness. It never occurs to them for an instant that this passivity might have been due to the fact that their action was too reformist — and that instead of

3. The ideology of sports is a mixture of this implicit "law" and the law of the stronger.

4. A competitor, a runner for example, who won straightaway, every time — such a case would be a serious exception to the law of exchange, something like incest or sacrilege, and, in the extreme, the collectivity would have to suppress it. Another example of the same sort of thing would be the complete collection, to which not a thing remained to be added: this would be a kind of death.

interpreting it as revolutionary passivity, they would do better to understand it as resistance to reformism.

In other words, this negative reaction of the liberated consumers has perhaps less to do with their submission to the system of exchange value, and more with their resistance to use value, insofar as the latter is at bottom only a ruse of exchange value. Through this refusal to play the use value game, everything happens as though the public had already sniffed out this yet more subtle mystification.

In the final analysis, what is this use value that comes unto them, naked? From where does this offertory emanate, and who gives it? What is this gratuitousness of the content of products, and is it enough to establish the transparency and gratuity of a *social relation*? One thinks not. The unilateral gift is as cold as charity. Granted and submitted to, it is one with the deeper logic of the system, which revolutionary symbolic action therefore manages to escape as ineffectively as the zeal of the shopping public. In the blinding light of revealed use value, no one saw that to abolish the commodity form, pricelessness does not suffice. Radically undermining the logic of exchange value requires more than re-establishing the autonomy and gratuity of use value; it is necessary to restore the possibility of returning, that is, to change the form of social relations. If no counter-gift or reciprocal exchange is possible, we remain imprisoned in the structure of power and abstraction.⁵ Such was the case in the example under review. By preserving, in the absence of a radical analysis, a certain level of value (use value), and by experimenting at this level, the "liberators" have also preserved a certain level of power and manipulation. Having played with value, they have inevitably extracted a little surplus from it, in the form of domination.

Hence the negative reaction to this sudden *conferred* profusion, the defensive reaction to the form of the instituted relation, to the non-reciprocity of the situation. This is the defensive reaction of those who "prefer to pay and owe nothing to anyone" — a class reaction that is at bottom perhaps more lucid than that of the liberators, in that they may have sensed, quite correctly, in the unilateral form of the gift and in its content (self-proclaimed liberated use value), one of the many avatars of the system.

To break the circuit of exchange value, it is necessary to restore

5. The unilateral gift is the inverse of the exchange gift. The latter is the basis of reciprocity, whereas the former founds superiority. Only the privileged, like the feudal lord, can allow themselves to receive without returning, without providing a counter-gift, because their rank protects them against challenge and loss of prestige.

exchange itself — not value (not even use value). In fact, use value implies the rupture of exchange for the same reason that exchange value does, namely, it entails the object completed as value and the individual objectified in his relation to this value. In symbolic exchange, however, the object, or the full value that it was, returns again to nothing (consider the ambivalence of the Latin term *res*). It is that something which, through being given and returned, is, as such, annulled, and marks in its presence or absence the movement of the relationship. The "object," this *res nulla*, has absolutely no use value, it is good for nothing. Thus, only that which assumes its meaning through continual reciprocal exchange eludes exchange value, in the gift and counter-gift, in the ambivalence of an open relationship, and *never in a final relation of value*.

In the present case, the "negative reaction" is tantamount to a radical demand for a revolution that would liberate — not objects and their value — but the exchange relationship itself, the reciprocity of a speech that everywhere today is being eradicated by the terrorism of value.

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