

# Passwords



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VERSO

London • New York

This edition first published by Verso 2003  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

**Verso**

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG  
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606  
[www.versobooks.com](http://www.versobooks.com)

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-597-5  
ISBN 1-85984-463-4 (pbk)

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Bembo by YHT Ltd, London  
Printed in the UK by Bath Press

# **SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE**

Symbolic exchange is the strategic site where all the modalities of value flow together towards what I would term a blind zone, in which everything is called into question again. The symbolic here does not have the usual sense of 'imaginary', nor the sense given to it by Lacan. It is symbolic exchange as anthropology understands it. Whereas value always has a unidirectional sense, whereas it passes from one point to another according to a system of equivalence, in symbolic exchange the terms are reversible. The point for me in using this concept was to take the opposite stance from commodity exchange and, in that way, make a political critique of our society in the name of something that might perhaps be dubbed utopian, but that has been a living concept in many other cultures.

Reversibility is simultaneously the reversibility of life and death, of good and evil, and of all that we have organized in terms of alternative values. In the symbolic universe, life and death are exchanged. And, since there are no separate terms but, rather, reversibility, the idea of value is cast into question, requiring as it does distinctly opposed terms between which a dialectic can then be established. Now, there is no dialectic in the

symbolic. Where death and life are concerned, there is in our system of values no reversibility: what is positive is on the side of life, what is negative is on the side of death; death is the end of life, its opposite, whereas in the symbolic universe the terms are, strictly speaking, exchanged.

This applies in all fields, and hence also in that of the exchange of goods: in potlatch a certain type of circulation of goods operates, exonerated from the idea of value, a type of circulation which includes prodigality and the squandering of things, but must never stop. Exchange must never have an end, it must always increase in intensity, possibly continuing until death. Gaming might also be said to be of the order of this form of exchange, in so far as money no longer has any fixed value within that sphere, since it is always put back into circulation according to the symbolic rule – which is clearly not the moral law. In this symbolic rule, money won must in no circumstances become commodity value again; it must be put back into play within the game itself.

We may also extend this symbolic exchange to a broader level: the level of forms. So the animal form, the human form, the divine form are exchanged according to a rule of metamorphoses in which each ceases to be confined to its definition, with the human opposed to the inhuman, etc. There is a symbolic circulation of things in which none has a separate individuality, in which all operate in a kind of universal collusiveness of

inseparable forms. It is the same with the body, which does not have any 'individual' status either: it is a kind of sacrificial substitute that is not opposed to some other substance such as the soul or any other spiritual value. In those cultures where the body is continually brought into play in ritual, it is not the symbol of life and the question is not that of its health, survival or integrity. Whereas we have an individualized view of the body, linked to notions of possession and mastery, there it is subject to a constant reversibility. It is a substance which can move through other – animal, mineral or vegetable – forms.

And indeed, isn't everything always decided at the level of a symbolic exchange – that is to say, at a level that goes far beyond the rational commerce of things or bodies as we practise it today? In fact, paradoxical as it may seem, I would be quite willing to believe that there has never been any economy in the rational scientific sense in which we understand it, that symbolic exchange has always been at the radical base of things, and that it is on that level that things are decided.

We may choose to regard this symbolic exchange as something we have lost, to interest ourselves in potlatch in primitive societies and treat it anthropologically, taking the view that, so far as we are concerned, we are totally in market societies, in societies governed by value . . . But is this so certain? Perhaps we are still in an immense potlatch. We delimit areas in which kinds of economic, anatomical and sexual rationalities seem to come together, but the fundamental form, the radical form, is still that of

challenge, of one-upmanship, of potlatch – and hence of the negation, the sacrifice of value. So we might be said to be living still in a sacrificial mode, without wishing to acknowledge it. Without being able to either because, without the rituals, without the myths, we no longer have the means to do so.

There is no point being nostalgic for it: we have established another form of organization that has created an irreversible, linear system where there was previously a circular form, a circuit, reversibility. We live, then we die, and that is truly the end.

**THE LAST WORD**



It would be extremely presumptuous to attempt to pronounce a last word. But I think we have been on a journey where the terms – death, the *fatal*, the feminine, simulation – have metabolized into one another in a kind of spiral. We have not taken a single step closer to some possible end-goal. We have merely gone through a number of paradigms that have no end other than in the moment of their metamorphosis. For if concepts die, they die a natural death, if I may put it that way, passing from one form to another – which is still the best way of thinking. So, there is no end, then; no conclusion. For me, thinking is radical in so far as it does not claim to prove itself, to verify itself in some reality or other. This does not mean that it denies the existence of that reality, that it is indifferent to its impact, but that it regards it as essential to keep itself as an element in a game whose rules it knows. The only fixed point is the undecidable and the fact that it will remain so, and the aim of the entire work of thought is to preserve that.

But the inalienable presence of that undecidable does not lead me to an unsituated thinking, concerned only with abstract speculation and with manipulating ideas from the history of philosophy. I attempt to free

myself from a referential, teleological thinking precisely in order to pursue the play of a thinking which is aware that something else thinks it. This is why I have always been quite close to current events – not so much in sociological or political terms, but rather so as to measure the angle of incidence on those events of a parallel world with which a perpetual confrontation is going on.

Thought must play a catastrophic role, must be itself an element of catastrophe, of provocation, in a world that wants absolutely to cleanse everything, to exterminate death and negativity. But it must at the same time remain humanist, concerned for the human, and, to that end, recapture the reversibility of good and evil, of the human and the inhuman.