

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *Passwords*. New York: Verso. 2003, 92 p.
Translated by Chris Turner.

During a conversation we had in Paris in April 2003, Baudrillard said about his life's work (more than thirty books since 1968): "It would be nice to clarify a few things." *Passwords* does just that and this makes it an excellent book for undergraduates grappling with Baudrillard's thought and contemporary society. For a generation also seeking to understand a transnational order of resistance to multinational corporate globalization, Baudrillard's passwords take us deep inside the system of production and consumption to its most powerful (and vulnerable) features.

Baudrillard describes words as "passers or vehicles of ideas" and the book gives us fifteen of these "passwords" from his oeuvre: object, value, symbolic exchange, seduction, obscene, transparency of evil, virtual, randomness, chaos, end, perfect crime, destiny, impossible exchange, duality, and thought. *Passwords* does not seek a definitive conclusion because for Baudrillard thinking is only radical so long as it does not try to prove itself or to verify itself in some reality or other. Adopting this perspective does not require us to deny the existence of reality or to remain indifferent to its impact. It does require us to remain conscious of "thought as an element in a game whose rules it knows only too well." For Baudrillard, the only fixed point is the undecidable, as the revolution of our time being the uncertainty revolution. As sociology grapples with transdisciplinarity, Baudrillard is the transsociologist par excellence, of our time .

For Baudrillard, consumer society is object focussed and as such always disappoints. The object however, does play a dramatic role. It designates the real world and its absence. Objects are uncanny: "there is always something in the object which the subject cannot comprehend," says Baudrillard. The more objects we accumulate, the more obstacles we place between ourselves and relating. The object is a source of extreme paradox for consumer culture. By focussing on the object rather than the subject, Baudrillard posits the object as a fully fledged actor in consumer society. Ours is a society which removes us from the world of heroic revolutions to the world of the globalizing implosion of the catastrophe which has already taken place: the West.

If globalization is irreversible, and it appears to be so, then it becomes difficult to imagine positive alternatives to the West's expanding violence against singularities. In the violence of the global we can detect something of the culture that attempts to subject every other culture to the ruthlessness of cultural equivalence. Baudrillard makes use of anthropology to look beyond the western system of the market as ideology, to cultures where things are never exchanged directly for one another and this takes us to the core of Baudrillard's thought on "value." We believe that anything can be exchanged for anything else and for this delusion to operate, everything has to have a referent or an equivalent somewhere, but this is not the case. Neither the economy nor the world can be exchanged as value because there is no equivalent to them anywhere. Our system is haunted by the limits of impossible exchange. In our contemporary society, where the virtual becomes the general equivalent through binary coding, we reach the limits of a world steeped in definitive uncertainty. In such a world of radical uncertainty we can never define both a thing and its price simultaneously. We can have one or the other, says Baudrillard, and this is the insoluble problem we face in the impossible exchanges we attempt.

Against a system of production, where both capitalism and critical alternatives such as Marxism are embedded in productivist ideology, Baudrillard poses seduction as the more powerful form. Baudrillard employs this password to illustrate how things are diverted from value and destined for symbolic exchange. Seduction is what works to unsettle identity and meaning and posits the possibility of radical otherness. At a time of so much focus on production, Baudrillard shows us that there are always seduction, reversibility, and challenge and that these are the more powerful forms for the theorist of symbolic exchange.

Symbolic exchange is a powerful password for Baudrillard. Indeed, he uses it to explain the attacks of September 11, 2001. Those who hate the West do not attack it because of what we have taken from them as in the dominant critical literature on colonialism. They attack us because we humiliate them in the globalization of our own culture without allowing other cultures to give back on equal terms. The curse and "symbolic" weakness of our culture is that the counter gift is impossible. Terrorism may be absurd and ultimately useless but it is the judgement and the penalty of a society which has forgotten symbolic exchange (for an elaboration of this position see Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem For The Twin Towers*, 2002).

The radicality of Baudrillard's thought, particularly in relation to the conservative orthodoxies of the traditional left and right, emerges in his writing on the obscene and the transparency of evil. We are in what he terms the "opposite of alienation" in a society which no longer distances us from things, but brings us up too close against them: the all too real world of the obscene. The total visibility of things, their transparency, becomes as in our media radiated society, unbearable. Baudrillard's strategy is an ironic one which he feels is the only way to survive this obscene total visibility of the screens. As a society that promises to achieve the total

good, perverse effects soon set in and evil emerges. Evil transpires. Evil “shows through” everything that attempts to ward it off. Nietzsche echos in Baudrillard’s thought on good and evil as he understands evil as the source of the energy from which the very effort to fight it comes. Baudrillard challenges both proponents and opponents of the globalization of the West with this thought.

In *Passwords* we find Baudrillard as a creature of the transpolitical universe that his transdisciplinary discourse seeks to understand. He does not set out to clarify the world, to render it knowable in a clear and uniform theory, but rather to make it more enigmatic and unknowable. We have always been in a distant relationship with a real that is ultimately unknowable for Baudrillard. Why then write over thirty books on theory and contemporary society? Because to think, to write, in such a way to take on the reality industry, including the university, is the only purpose of thinking and writing.

Like all of Baudrillard’s previous books, this is not a book for conservatives of either the traditional right or left. This is a radical book about a radical subject matter which dissolves categories such as left and right that have become meaningless in our contemporary transeconomic, transhistorical, transpolitical and indeed, transsociological moment. A striking effect of Baudrillard’s writing is that it reminds us that before America and Europe set out to destroy the rest of the world, they destroyed America and Europe first. This may not arrive as a shocking revelation to say, North American First Nations peoples. It is however, a very good place to begin to wrestle with the radical implications of Baudrillard’s work and the productivist myth at the centre of our culture. What makes Baudrillard so very interesting is that he makes no effort to stand outside of the system he discusses and he understands the system to be one, outside of which no one can stand. Baudrillard’s radicality surpasses that of the left and the right while not withdrawing to the centre. It is little wonder why he is so immediately popular with a generation seeking new approaches.

In Baudrillard’s many passwords thought plays a catastrophic role. Thought is a game of provocation with the real, where good and evil are understood as easily reversible, as are the human and inhuman possibilities of all thought. This is a book the generation that came to Seattle in 1999 with so many questions, desperately needs. It shares a destabilizing effect that his books written in the decade after May 1968 had for a previous generation. Reality exists, but our human power to not believe in it is our strongest protection against all ideologies. If there is an effect of this book it is the sixteenth password which is everywhere, but never specifically discussed: disbelief. The ultimate power of Baudrillard’s thought is that he teaches us the importance of having things in which not to believe. The effect of this however, can only be fully appreciated if we understand that Baudrillard’s wisdom is a joyful one, with its principle strategic value resting in its supreme radicality. *Passwords* is an outstanding book for helping undergraduate sociology classes probe the complexity of issues surrounding contemporary social issues and globalization.

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