

WHEN BATAILLE ATTACKED THE METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLE OF ECONOMY¹

Jean Baudrillard

Continuity, sovereignty, intimacy, immanent immensity: a single thought in the work of Bataille, a single mythic thought behind these multiple terms: "*I am of those who destine men to things other than the incessant growth of production, who incite them to the sacred horror.*"

The sacred is *par excellence* the sphere of "*La part maudite*" [the accursed share] (the central essay of this seventh volume of Bataille's works), sphere of sacrificial expenditure, of wealth [*luxe*] and of death; sphere of a "general" economy which refutes all the axioms of economy as it is usually understood (an economy which, in generalizing itself, overruns [*brûle*] its boundaries and truly passes beyond political economy, something that the latter, and all Marxist thought, are powerless to do in accordance with the internal logic of value). It is also the sphere of non-knowledge [*non-savoir*].

Paradoxically, the works collected here are in a way Bataille's "Book of Knowledge," the one where he tries to erect the buttresses of a vision which, at bottom, doesn't need them; indeed, the drive [*pulsion*] toward the sacred ought, in its destructive incandescence, to deny the kind of apology and discursive rendition contained in "*La Part maudite*" and "*La Theorie de Religion.*" "*My philosophic position is based on non-knowledge of the whole, on knowledge concerned only with details.*" It is necessary, therefore, to read these defensive fragments from the two antithetical perspectives [*sur le double versant*] of knowledge and non-knowledge.

The Fundamental Principle

The central idea is that the economy which governs our societies results from a misappropriation of the fundamental human principle, which is a solar principle of expenditure. Bataille's thought goes, beyond proper *political* economy (which in essence is regulated through exchange value), straight to the *metaphysical* principle of economy. Bataille's target is utility, in its root. Utility is, of course, an apparently positive principle of capital: accumulation, investment, depreciation, etc. But in fact it is, on Bataille's account, a principle of powerlessness, an utter inability to expend. Given that all previous societies

Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*: vol. VII. Paris: Gallimard. 618 pp.²

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knew how to expend, this is, an unbelievable deficiency: it cuts the human being off from all possible sovereignty. All economics are founded on that which no longer can, no longer knows how to expend itself [*se dépenser*], on that which is incapable of becoming the stake of a sacrifice. It is therefore entirely residual, it is a limited social fact; and it is against economy as a limited social fact that Bataille wants to raise expenditure, death, and sacrifice as total social facts--such is the principle of general economy.

The principle of utility (use value) blends with the bourgeoisie, with this capitalist class whose definition for Bataille (contrary to Marx) is negative: it no longer knows how to expend. Similarly, the crisis of capital, its increasing mortality and its immanent death throes, are not bound, as in the work of Marx, to a *history*, to dialectical reversals [*péripéties*], but to this fundamental law of the inability to expend, which give capital over to the cancer of production and unlimited reproduction. There is no principle of revolution in Bataille's work: "*The terror of revolutions has only done more and more [de mieux en mieux] to subordinate human energy to industry.*" There is only a principle of sacrifice--the principle of sovereignty, whose diversion by the bourgeoisie and capital causes all human history to pass from sacred tragedy to the comedy of utility.

This critique is a non-Marxist critique, an *aristocratic* critique, because it aims at utility, at economic finality as the axiom of capitalist society. The Marxist critique is only a critique of capital, a critique coming from the heart of the middle and petit bourgeois classes, for which Marxism has served for a century as a latent ideology: a critique of exchange value, *but an exaltation of use value*--and thus a critique, at the same time, of what made the almost delirious greatness of capital, the secular remains of its religious quality:³ investment at any price, even at the cost of use value. The Marxist seeks a *good use* of economy. Marxism is therefore only a limited petit bourgeois critique, one more step in the banalization of life toward the "good use" of the social! Bataille, to the contrary, sweeps away all this slave dialectic from an aristocratic point of view, that of the master struggling with his death. One can accuse this perspective of being pre- or post-Marxist. At any rate, Marxism is only the disenchanted horizon of capital--all that precedes or follows it is more radical than it is.

What remains uncertain in the work of Bataille (but without a doubt this uncertainty *cannot* be alleviated), is to know whether the economy (capital), which is counterbalanced on absurd, but never useless, never sacrificial expenditures (wars, waste ...), is nevertheless shot through with a sacrificial dynamic. Is political economy at bottom only a frustrated avatar of the single great cosmic law of expenditure? Is the entire history of capital only an immense detour toward its own catastrophe, toward its own sacrificial end? If this is so, it is because, in the end, one cannot not expend. A longer spiral perhaps drags capital beyond economy, toward a destruction of its own values; the alternative is that we are stuck forever in this denial of the sacred, in the vertigo of supply, which signifies the rupture of alliance (of symbolic exchange in primitive societies) and of sovereignty.

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Bataille would have been impassioned by the present evolution of capital in this era of floating currencies, of values seeking their own level (which is not their transmutation), and the drift of finalities [*la dérive des finalités*] (which is neither sovereign uselessness nor the absurd gratuitousness of laughter and death). But his concept of expenditure would have permitted only a limited analysis: it is still too economic, too much the flip side of accumulation, as transgression is too close to the inverse figure of prohibition.⁴ In an order which is no longer that of utility, but an *aleatory* order of value, pure expenditure, while retaining the romantic charm of turning the economic inside out, is no longer sufficient for radical defiance [*au défi radical*]*—it shatters the mirror of market value, but is powerless against the shifting mirror [le miroir en dérive] of structural value.*

Bataille founds his general economy on a “solar economy” without reciprocal exchange, on the unilateral gift that the sun makes of its energy: a cosmogony of expenditure, which he deploys in a religious and political anthropology. But Bataille has misread Mauss: the unilateral gift does not exist.⁵ This is not the law of the universe. He who has so well explored the human sacrifice of the Aztecs should have known as they did that the sun gives nothing, it is necessary to nourish it continually with human blood in order that it shine. It is necessary to challenge [*défier*] the gods through sacrifice in order that they respond with profusion. In other words, the root of sacrifice and of general economy is never pure and simple expenditure—or whatever drive [*pulsion*] of excess that supposedly comes to us from nature—but is an incessant process of challenge [*défi*].

Bataille has “naturalized” Mauss

The “excess of energy” does not come from the sun (from nature) but from a continual higher bidding in exchange—the symbolic process that can be found in the work of Mauss, not that of the gift (that is the naturalist mystique into which Bataille falls), but that of the counter-gift. This is the single truly symbolic process, which in fact implies death as a kind of maximal excess—but not as individual ecstasy, always as the maximal principle of *social exchange*. In this sense, one can reproach Bataille for having “naturalized” Mauss (but in a metaphysical spiral so prodigious that the reproach is not really one), and for having made symbolic exchange a kind of natural function of prodigality, at once hyper-religious in its gratuitousness and much too close still, *a contrario*, to the principle of utility and to the economic order that it exhausts in transgression without ever leaving behind.

It is “in the glory of death” [*à hauteur de mort*] that one rediscovers Bataille, and the real question posed remains: “*How is it that all men have encountered the need and felt the obligation to kill living beings ritually? For lack of having known how to respond, all men have remained in ignorance of that which they are.*” There is an answer to this question *beneath* the text, in all the interstices of Bataille’s text, but in my opinion not in the notion of expenditure,

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nor in this kind of anthropological reconstruction that he tries to establish from the "objective" data of his day: Marxism, biology, sociology, ethnology, political economy, the objective potential of which he tries to bring together nevertheless, in a perspective which is neither exactly a genealogy, nor a natural history, nor a Hegelian totality, but a bit of all that.

But the sacred imperative is flawless in its *mythic* assertion, and the will to teach is continually breached by Bataille's dazzling vision, by a "subject of knowledge" always "at the boiling point." The consequence of this is that even analytic or documentary considerations have that mythic force which constitutes the sole—sacrificial—force of writing.

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, "Le Livre de la quinzaine: Quand Bataille attaqua le principe métaphysique de l'économie," *La Quinzaine littéraire* 234 (1-15 juin 1976): 4-5.
2. Translator's note: Only two essays from this seventh volume have been translated into English—"Le sacrifice" (dated 1939-1940), a portion of *La Limite de l'utile* (an abandoned version of *La Part Maudite*); and "Notice autobiographique" (dated 1958). Both essays have been translated by Annette Michelson and appear in *October* (Spring, 1986) respectively as "Sacrifice (pp. 61-74) and "Autobiographical Note" (pp. 107-110).
A number of Bataille's works have been translated into English. In addition to *Visions of Excess* (Minnesota 1985), translated by Alan Stoekl, these include: *Literature and Evil* (Urizen Books 1985; orig. 1957), translated by Alastair Hamilton, and *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (Arno Press, 1977; orig. 1957).
3. The "Puritan mania of business" (money earned is earned in order to be invested ... having value or meaning only in the endless wealth it entails), in that it still entails a sort of madness, challenge, and catastrophic compulsion—a sort of ascetic mania—is opposed to work, to the good use of energy in work and usufruct.
4. Destruction (even gratuitous) is always ambiguous, since it is the inverse figure of production, and falls under the objection that in order to destroy it is first necessary to have produced, to which Bataille is able to oppose only the sun.
5. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: RKP, 1954).