When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy

by Jean Baudrillard
translated by Stuart Kendall

Continuity, sovereignty, intimacy, immanent immensity: a single thought for Bataille, a single mythic thought behind these multiple terms: "I am among those who dedicate men to other things than ceaselessly increased production, who provoke them to sacred horror."

The sacred is par excellence the sphere of the "accursed share" (the central essay of the seventh volume of Bataille's *Oeuvres complètes*), the sphere of sacrificial expenditure, of luxury and death; the sphere of a "general" economy that contradicts all of the axioms of economy properly so-called (an economy that, in becoming general, burns its limits and truly passes beyond political economy, which traditional economy, and all Marxist thought, is powerless to do according to the internal logic of value). It is also the sphere of *nonknowledge*.

Paradoxically, the works gathered here are in some way Bataille's "Book of Knowledge," in which he tries to buttress a vision that, fundamentally, does not need to be buttressed, whose drive toward the sacred would even, in its destructive incandescence, deny the type of apology and discursive declaration that *The Accursed Share* and *Theory of Religion* are. "My philosophical position is founded on nonknowledge concerning the whole—knowledge only ever concerns details." One must read these apologetic fragments from the dual aspects of knowledge and nonknowledge.

The Fundamental Principle

The central idea is that the economy that governs our societies results from a corruption of the fundamental human principle, which is a solar principle of expenditure. From the start, Bataille's thought attacks, beyond political economy proper (which, essentially, is regulated by exchange-value), the metaphysical principle of economy: utility. Utility is targeted at its roots—the apparently positive principle of capital: accumulation, investment, depreciation, etc.—as, in fact, a principle of impotence, total incapacity to expend, which all previous societies knew how to do, an incredible deficiency that cuts the human being off from all possible sovereignty. The whole economy is founded on what can no longer happen, no longer knowing how to expend itself, on what can no longer become the stakes of a sacrifice. It is therefore entirely residual, a limited social fact, and against the economy as limited social fact Bataille wants to hold up expenditure, death, and sacrifice as total social facts—such is the principle of general economy.

The principle of utility (use-value) is combined with that of 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 growing fatality and its immanent agony—is not linked, as in Marx, to a history, to dialectical ups and downs, but to this fundamental law of the incapacity to expend, which delivers capital to the cancer of production and limitless reproduction. There is no revolutionary principle in Bataille: "The terror of revolutions only subordinates human energy to industry better and better." But a principle of sacrifice—the sole principle of sovereignty, whose redirection by the bourgeoisie and capital causes all human history to pass from the tragic sacred to the comedy of utility.

This critique is not a Marxist critique; it is aristocratic because it sees utility, economic finality, as the axiom of capitalist society. Marxist critique on the other hand is only a critique of capital deriving from the depths of the middle class and the petites bourgeoisies, which Marxism has served for a century with latent ideology: critique of exchange-value but exaltation of use-value, critique therefore at the same time of what still created the almost delirious grandeur of capital and of what remains in it of secularized religion:[1] investment at any price, even at the price of use-value. The Marxist seeks a good use of the economy. The Marxist critique is therefore restricted, petite-bourgeoisie, another step in the banalization of life toward the "good use" of society! Bataille, on the other hand, sweeps this whole slave dialectic away from an aristocratic point of view, from that of the master gripped by his death. One could present this perspective as pre- or post-Marxist. In any case, Marxism is only the disenchanted horizon of capital—everything that precedes Marxism or follows it is more radical than Marxism.

What remains uncertain in Bataille (and undoubtedly this uncertainty cannot be lifted) is knowing if the economy (capital)—balanced by absurd but never useless, never sacrificial, expenditures (wars, squandering)—is after all coursed through and through by a sacrificial dynamic; is political economy fundamentally only an inverse avatar of the only great cosmic law of expenditure? Is the entire history of capital only an immense detour toward its own catastrophe, toward its own sacrificial end? Since, in the end, one cannot not expend. Perhaps a longer spiral sweeps capital beyond economy, toward a destruction of its own values, or rather, are we always in this denial of the sacred, in a stock vertigo, which signifies the rupture of the alliance (of symbolic exchange in primitive societies) and of sovereignty?

Bataille had been impassioned by the current evolution of capital toward the buoyancy of values (which is not their transmutation) and the drifting of finalities (which is, on the contrary, neither sovereign uselessness nor the absurd gratuity of laughter and death). But his concept of expenditure did not permit an analysis of this: it is still too economical, too close to the inverse of accumulation, as transgression is too close to the inverse of a taboo.[2] In an order that is no longer that of utility, but a random order of value, pure expenditure no longer is enough for the radical challenge, while still retaining the romantic charm of a game that is the inverse of economy—a broken mirror of commercial value, but impotent against the mirror drifting from structural value.

Bataille founds his general economy on the "solar economy" without counterpart, on the unilateral gift that the sun gives us of its energy: cosmogony of expenditure, which is deployed in a religious and political anthropology. But Bataille has poorly read Mauss: the unilateral gift does not exist. This is not the law of the universe. He who has explored the human sacrifice of the Aztecs so well should have known, as they did, that the sun gives nothing, that it must be continually nourished with human blood so that it shines. One must provoke the gods through sacrifice so that they respond with profusion. In other words, the root of sacrifice and of general economy is never pure and simple expenditure, wherein I know not what drive toward excess comes to us from nature, but an incessant process of provocation.

Bataille "Naturalized" Mauss

"Excess energy" does not come from the sun (from nature) but from a continual overbidding in exchange—a symbolic process legible in Mauss, not that of the gift (this is the naturalist mysticism into which Bataille falls), but that of the counter-gift—the sole, veritably symbolic process and one which effectively implicates death as a kind of maximal excess—but not as individual ecstasy, always as 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 one), and of having made of symbolic exchange a kind of natural function of prodigality, at once hyper-religious in its gratuitousness and still

far too close, *a contrario*, to the principle of utility and the economic order that it exhausts through transgression without ever losing sight of it.

We reencounter Bataille "at the height of death," and the real question posed remains: "How is it that men have all experienced the need and felt the obligation to kill living beings ritually? Having been unable to respond, all men have remained ignorant of what they are." There is a response to this underneath the text, in all the interstices in Bataille's text, but in my opinion, it is in the notion of expenditure and not in the kind of anthropological reconstruction he attempts to do starting with the "objective" facts of his times: Marxism, biology, sociology, ethnology, political economy, from which, just the same, I attempt to reassemble objective potential from a perspective that is neither exactly a genealogy, nor a natural history, nor a Hegelian sum, but a little bit of all of that.

But the demand of the sacred, itself, is undoubtedly mythic in its assertion, and the didactic will is ceaselessly pierced by Bataille's fulgurating vision, by a "knowing subject," always "at the boiling point," who realizes that even analytic or documentary considerations always have this mythic force that realizes the sole—sacrificial—force of writing.×

This text first appeared in *La Quinzaine littéraire* (June 1976) on the occasion of the publication of *Bataille's Oeuvres complètes, vol. 7* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), containing *The Accursed Share, Theory of Religion*, and other related texts. The editors of *Scapegoat* would like to thank Sylvère Lotringer for recommending that we translate this text to accompany Stuart Kendall's translation of Bataille for the issue; and, thanks again to Stuart for his impeccable translation, in this case, of Baudrillard.

Endnotes

1 The "puritan rage for business" (money earned is earned to be invested…having no other value or meaning than in the endless enrichment in which it is engaged) still constitutes a kind of insanity, a challenge and a catastrophic compulsion—a kind of ascetic rage—and is opposed to work, to the good use of energy in labour and usufruct.

2 Destruction (even gratuitous) is always ambiguous, since it is the inverse form of production, and falls to the objection that in order to destroy one must first have produced, to which Bataille can only oppose the sun.



Sam Leach, *Baldessari Tribute Monkey*, 2012,
oil and resin on wood, 50 × 40cm
courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

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