

## On the New Batailleans

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'But he would not be able by himself to acquire a power constituted by the relinquishment of power: If he destroyed the object in solitude, in silence, no sort of power would result from the act; there would not be anything for the subject but a separation from power without compensation. But if he destroys the object in front of another person or if he gives it away, the one who gives has actually acquired, in the other's eyes, the power of giving and destroying. He is now rich for having made use of wealth in the manner its essence would require: He is rich for having ostentatiously consumed what is wealth only if it is consumed.' (Bataille, 1989: 69)

The economic theories of French philosopher Georges Bataille are rarely taught in economics departments. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that his conception of the motor driving economic systems runs directly counter to normative economic theory. Whereas mainstream economics insists upon the rationalism and utility that undergirds any system that aspires toward its own continuity, Bataille was fixated on precisely the opposite.

Indeed, the question of "utility", so foundational to economic rationale, is precisely the point from which Bataille departs. Virtually every mainstream economic theory starts from the premise that human activity is directed by utility and its expansion through the rational employment and distribution of resources in production. According to these theories, each individual economic actor is frugal with their resources, expending little while producing beyond their immediate needs, creating a surplus that can be used either to reduce their need to work or to expand production in some way (e.g. with more materials and workers, or new, more efficient machinery). Extrapolating this narrative from the particular to the general, the economists argue that the same is as true for global human society as it is for individuals, and that the history of human development is one of frugality and accumulation, oriented toward expansion in the form of increased productive capacity.

Bataille, however, turns the picture on its head, instead focusing on the many forms of spectacular expenditure that abound in human and organic systems alike. Beginning with the image of the Sun, that transcendent body which radiates a 'superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe,' he traces the flow of that originary, life-giving expenditure (one given without recompense) toward numerous ends in which energy is squandered, wasted, or

destroyed in oft-spectacular fashions. Apex predators like the tiger, whose own sustenance is secured through the consumption of large numbers of smaller organisms. Plants in an overcrowded forest which, unable to acquire the necessary space and light for growth, are forced to squander themselves for the benefit of the surviving plants; plants which will eventually consume their composted remains. Or perhaps we can think of the point at which a forest becomes so overwhelmed with dry matter, light and heat-energy, that it erupts in a spectacular fire, decimating the landscape, clearing space for growth anew. For Bataille, the truth of economy lies not in the frugality and utility that characterise its thrumming centre, but in the acts of immense squander, destruction, expenditure and excess that take place at its limits.

This economy of expenditure holds true for human social orders as well as natural ones, and Bataille substantiates this by way of the Indigenous American practice of *potlatch* – the exchange, between chiefs of rival tribes, of increasingly squanderous gifts, always with the expectation that the gift will be returned, in kind, with excess. At the heart of potlatch is a sort of game in which rivals squander resources, their utility, and the wealth they might obtain in the future, in exchange for status and prestige in the immediate instant. It is anti-utilitarianism transformed into a game of oneupmanship. In its most extreme expression, a chief would bring a group of slaves before the rival chief and slit their throats, an act in which they both signified and magnified their power by asserting their right to squander wealth and utility, both real and potential (1989: 68).

For Bataille, this anti-utilitarianism, which runs counter to all normative economic theories of utility and frugality, unveils an aspect of economy beyond the particular in which expenditure, and not accumulation, is the end: ‘There would be no potlatch if, in a general sense, the ultimate problem concerned the acquisition and not the dissipation of useful wealth’ (1989: 68). It is not that wealth, resources and commodities do not circulate as in any other economic cycle, but that, in Bataille’s schema, the ultimate end of economy, in a general sense, is not frugal accumulation, but those eventual (and inevitable) moments of squander.



Bataille’s theory is far from watertight. As he was no doubt aware, crises of overproduction are central to Marx’s theory of political economy, as are the oft-spectacular destructions of surplus

necessitated to relieve the periodic pressure that overproduction engenders in a system oriented toward expanded production at any and all costs (Marx, 1990: 580). The reliance of capitalist and other systems upon the gluttonous consumption of the upper classes to attenuate a productive cycle perpetually driving beyond its limits (Ibid.: 752) is a point that Marx illuminates with reference to imperial Rome, in which attempts were made to ‘raise consumption to an imaginary boundlessness, by gulping down salad of pearls’ (1993: 270). Within the Marxist framework that identifies production and its continual expansion as the beating heart of capitalist political economy, the exponential increase in consumption of useless and luxurious commodities by the bourgeois class is necessary to keep capital flowing even out of the hands of those who live for its accumulation so as to facilitate yet more production. The same is true of military industry, that sector of economy that confounds traditional Marxian categories given that its product is neither strictly means of production nor articles of consumption, appears to Marx as little more than a spectacular means of relieving the pressures of overproduction by directing surplus toward useless ends: ‘Economically it is exactly the same as if the nation were to drop a part of its capital into the ocean’ (1993: 128).<sup>1</sup> In a word, Marx too was attentive to squander, but even in its most extreme articulations, it remains not an end, but a means directed toward and in service of continued production without end.

Analogies from nature, likewise, weaken Bataille’s argument. While a forest fire might represent an act of extreme destruction and consumption in the immediate instance, that the destroyed matter is eventually re-absorbed by the soil, beginning a new phase of growth and productivity, again indicates that even the most extravagant acts of consumption are, in some way, ultimately oriented toward re-production, much like how the destruction of unemployable surplus during crises of overproduction serves the same role in Marx’s schema. Even Bataille’s noble tiger, that ‘point of extreme incandescence,’ will inevitably die, rot, return to the soil and contribute to new, as-yet-undetermined cycles of growth (1989: 34). In a word, Bataille takes for the end of a process what might be better understood as a phase in a cycle that is always, ultimately, oriented to production anew.

Nevertheless, there is something of Bataille’s thought that resonates. Perhaps it requires thinking through both the rational and irrational simultaneously – a gesture that would be

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Mandel’s (Marx, 1992: 54-6) attempt to square arms production within Marx’s schema, in which military production serves to redirect unproductive surplus in a manner that effectively conditions and enforces ‘the capacity or willingness of the workers to accept the current ‘norm’ of social labour,’ arguably bears shades of Bataille and, indeed, the argument I will advance in this essay.

appropriate for a thinker for whom non-knowledge, or a-consciousness, constitutes the supreme sovereign moment (Bataille, 1991: 203-4). To gain a hold of this unthought, it might help to trace the path laid out by minds more concerned with the rational.



Consider the etymological roots of the word “economy”. *Oikos* refers broadly to the home, the household, the family, and the various affairs that take place therein. The second component, *nomos*, is typically translated to mean law, but historically denoted an act of division or pasture and thus, per Carl Schmitt (2006: 70), more accurately refers to an originary act of division, such as the drawing of a line that distinguishes one territory from another, creating a space of interiority in which law might operate.

“Economy”, then, might denote the more-or-less rational distribution of resources within a household, the outcome of which establishes a visible hierarchy of power and ensures said household’s continuity – rational in the sense that no household would distribute resources in such a way that would hasten its own demise. One need only look at the distribution of food at a typical family dinner table to see how the distribution of resources within a delimited space reveals the hierarchy of power that subtends it. The hardest workers who contribute most, the parents, get the largest cuts, followed by the children, while the dog gets kibble. Likewise, within the household, the parents enjoy absolute sovereignty, the children have limited agency, and the dog follows commands. In any case, what is central is a strategic distribution of resources (in this case, food), that will ensure the continuity of the household. Ideally, each family member gets the necessary calories for their body’s reproduction and their daily labours, minimal food goes to waste, and the balance of power is reified and maintained. The same holds true for larger social units:

‘Here, measure, order, and form constitute a spatially concrete unity. The *nomos* by which [...] a people becomes settled, i.e., by which it becomes historically situated and turns a part of the earth’s surface into a force-field of a particular order, becomes visible in the appropriation of land and in the founding of a city or a colony.’ (Schmitt, 2006: 70)

Whence the inevitable conflict between Bataille's theory with normative modes of economic analysis, given his thesis that a social order's *nomos* is better understood through that which escapes rational ordering. There is, however, a logic beneath his thinking.

Think of those daily activities that maintain a social order in perfect equilibrium as two arrows, curved into a perfect circle. One arrow represents production, the other consumption. At the centre of the circle, a surplus of produce that goes beyond simple reproduction accumulates, until such a time comes when it is consumed.

Eventually, a third arrow appears and breaks away from the circle, representing the consumption of this surplus. If put to new, productive ends, it returns to the original circle, which continues as before, but now on an expanded scale. If consumed in other ways, it veers away before vanishing into nothing (such as might be the case for festivals or sacrifices), or perhaps connects with other flows and networks. Bataille's contention, essentially, is that it is the direction and quality of this third arrow that is most crucial to any economy; how the surplus that cannot be productively re-employed within the extant system is ultimately spent, and to what end. While it is true that within the particularities of a capitalist system the surplus is most likely to be re-deployed within the system for expanded production and internal development, this is not necessarily the case on the level of economy in general. Bataille uses the examples of Aztec Sacrifice, Islamic imperial expansionism and Tibetan Lamaism as examples of systems in which surplus was instead primarily directed toward spectacular festivals, military conquest and national monasticism respectively (1989). At the core of Bataille's thesis is a distinction between economic processes of austerity and accumulation, and of prodigality and dissipation (Ibid.: 87). His contention is that, even within the ostensibly rational capitalist mode of production, there exist phenomena in which large amounts of surplus are unproductively squandered, dissipated into the ether to no rational end, and that these acts of expenditure are necessitated by the accumulation of surplus which cannot (or *need not necessarily*) be *productively* or *usefully* put back into circulation.



Such a thesis is difficult to square with our current neoliberal paradigm, in which the rationality and economised logics of the free market becomes the defining *eidōs* of our social and political

life, as Wendy Brown (2015: 63) argues by way of Michel Foucault (2008: 120). Since 2008, at least, “austerity” has been the watchword of governments across the globe, coupled with a belief that every aspect of social life must be ruthlessly subjected to the disciplinary mechanisms of the free market.

On the other hand, it is difficult to believe that the piles of cash currently being expended on space rockets, ape tokens and imaginary yachts (Lee, 2021) contribute to productive activity in any meaningful sense other than as other forms of ‘fictitious capital’ – though I defer to the economists for elaboration on these matters (Marx, 1991). A large component of the ongoing debate around rising wealth inequality between the billionaire class and working people lies precisely in the fact that these expenditures are taking place in a context in which there are dozens of other ways these surpluses, locked up varying in real estate, offshore tax havens and other quasi-evasive financial instruments, might be recuperated and redistributed to provide housing, healthcare, and education (to name three immediate, hot-button issues in American politics right now) for vulnerable segments of the population. Clearly, there are more generative ways money such as this might be spent.

However, this argument misunderstands a particular dimension of Bataille’s thesis. It is a matter of distinction between *productive* and *unproductive* expenditures, *useful* and *useless* activities, and their potential impacts upon the totality in which they take place. For clarity, an excerpt:

‘I will begin with a basic fact: the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used *for the growth of a system* (e.g., an organism); *if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess can not be absorbed in its growth*, it must be necessarily lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.’ (Bataille, 1989: 21, emphasis mine.)

Bataille is referring to a general notion of expenditure in the context of systems that are particular, localised, and delimited, and there is a distinction between returning surplus to a system as it is currently constituted (accumulation), and utilising surplus in a distinct way that diverges from that system’s normative operations (dissipation). An individual who consumes surplus calories will most likely end up storing these calories within the body as fat. They could not, for example, use these calories to grow an extra limb, nor could their body divert them to another organic function – such an alteration would fundamentally alter that being’s organic constitution.

According to Bataille's schema, the alteration of flows within a particular system, whether ecological or economic, would not alter the extant system so much as inaugurate a new one entirely. Acts of spectacular expenditure take place in such a way as to ensure the continuity of the system *as it is currently constituted*. For example, the building of an apartment block in the middle of a forest establishes a new system from what existed before, with drastically different combinations of flows, both organic and man-made. By contrast, a forest fire that ravages the landscape would not, without intervention, result in anything other than the gradual return of dead matter to the soil and the continued growth and regeneration of the forest. It is an act of immense expenditure that ultimately ensures the normative continuity of that extant system, unaltered.

As has now been thoroughly exposed by the vicissitudes of the pandemic, the economic system of the United States relies heavily upon conditions of absolute precarity and zero tensility. Recent reporting has revealed that a large component of whatever "slack" exists in the country's distribution infrastructure exists in the form of unpaid labour for truck drivers. Because truck drivers are paid by the load, and not the hour, companies have been free to leave trucks idling in long queues at shipping ports, effectively offloading the negative impact of supply chain congestion onto the backs of individual drivers. As one economic sociologist puts it, they are in effect 'shock absorbers' for the entire system (quoted in García-Hodges, 2021).

Similarly, emergency fiscal measures such as the extension of unemployment benefits or distribution of one-time pandemic relief payments have been loudly criticised by the business sector for disincentivising workers from returning to work in low-paid, precarious, but nonetheless "essential" jobs such as in fast food restaurants and grocery stores (Durbin et al, 2021). And despite repeated calls from governments and NGOs around the world, both the Joe Biden administration and the World Trade Organisation have dragged their heels on waiving patent protections on COVID-19 vaccines, a move that would empower nations such as South Africa and India to manufacture vaccines in their own facilities and stem the ongoing spread and mutation of the virus, but would deal a marginal blow to the pharmaceutical industry's immense profits at a time when they are selling a vitally essential product with virtually unlimited demand (Schwartz, 2021).

This tension should be understood for what it is: The normative and essential conditions for an economic system in which the necessity of workers being compelled to sell their labour in

order to survive has been pushed to near-absolute limits. While the coercive relation between capital and workers (i.e. the need to work for a wage in order to survive) is common to all capitalist economies, what makes the United States somewhat unique is the severity of the economic coercion immanent to its regular operation. Whereas states such as those in Europe provide varying levels of social welfare to their citizens in the form of housing, healthcare, and other benefits intended to attenuate some of the harsher vicissitudes of the so-called free market, in the United States these mechanisms are stripped to the bone – so much so, that virtually any adjustment in favour of workers against capital has the potential to massively alter the US public’s consciousness of their normative daily existence, as has been demonstrated by the impact of the aforementioned stimulus cheques (Konish, 2021).

It is in this light that the question of “useful” re-employment of surplus within the current system should be understood. While it is unassailably true that the \$1.8 trillion dollars in wealth that has been amassed by the US billionaire class during the pandemic could be put to a wide array of uses if recuperated through taxation and redistributed to those most in need, such actions would risk drastically altering the fundamental political-economic structure of the US, presenting a serious threat to those whom that structure is intended to benefit (Collins, 2021). Such an arrangement forecloses the very notion of such redistributive measures being “useful” or “productive” in any sense relevant to those interests. Increased wages or access to more affordable housing might cause a worker to only need to work 40 hours a week as opposed to 60. Affordable (or, God forbid, socialised) healthcare would deny the capitalist class one of the most powerful weapons they have to coerce labour – the need to afford extortionately expensive health insurance in order to survive or, as is often the case, find an employer who will provide health insurance as one of their “benefits”. A pile of cash that might otherwise have been put to useful ends becomes destined for the incinerator.



Whence Bataille’s theory gains renewed salience. While acts of waste and fruitless squander might not be capital’s ultimate *telos*, they certainly appear as something of an imperative among wealthy individual capitalists and their aspirants. One individual on Twitter recently remarked that purchasing an NFT of a poorly-drawn ape and ordering an £850 steak from #SaltBae’s Nus-

Et restaurant are essentially two articulations of the same phenomenon; an act of purchase in which what is gained by the buyer is not the commodity itself so much as the claim to having purchased it, validated in each case by a sequence of digits, or a video posted on social media. These commodities are not purchased for any utility. They are purchased for the right to claim, and demonstrate, one's ability to purchase them. What is being bought is, in essence, an opportunity to spend an obscene amount of money in a manner that is tailor-made for an economy of spectacles. It is the setting alight of a \$100 bill to light a cigarette, transformed into a speculative asset. In some cases, the individual is speculating on increased value, in other cases an increase in social capital, and other cases still, a hazy combination of the two. Salad of pearls. Like and subscribe.

We live in a period in which acts and activities of exuberant, feverish squander are proliferating at an alarming rate. Multi-billionaires are laying out full percentage points of their net worths to spend a handful of minutes floating in not-quite-space. Frenzied investors are forking out hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of dollars for speculative assets that ostensibly grant title of ownership over digital images. Faced by waves of displaced peoples produced by changing climates and wars, governments across the developed world are increasingly adopting a response that amounts to locking the gates and abandoning thousands of human beings to waste. Even the response to the climate crisis (or lack thereof) has something of Bataille to it, as national leaders and the capitalist class are beset from all sides with calls for urgent, drastic measures to prevent climate change, and respond with plans for more mines, more drilling operations, more refineries, more, more, more. Apparently, the world is destined to burn. The only question that remains is who will burn brightest.

To understand this, we must turn to another opposition that is central to Bataille's schema, alongside production and consumption; servility and sovereignty. For Bataille, the act of production is inherently servile, in the sense that it entails an individual applying themselves to an activity that is oriented to the future, and an individual who is forced to live their present in anticipation of their future is, in effect, subjugated to it (1991: 198-99). A worker in an auto factory produces cars in anticipation of the individual who will eventually buy the car and provide their salary. A farmer tends their crops for months on end in anticipation of the harvest that they will sell or eat. Any act of frugality, in which an individual sets aside a portion of their present lot with an eye toward its future use, affirms their servility, to futurity if nothing else.

Sovereign life, on the other hand, is a life in which one consumes without concern for the future, such as the prince who consumes but does not labour, or the tribal chief who can sacrifice subjects without any concern of the utility they are squandering in so doing (Ibid.). These two modes need not be discrete; someone who buys a car may sometimes use it for work, and other times for aimless, leisurely drives. In the latter moments, they are in some sense sovereign. It goes without saying, however, that for Bataille, the truly sovereign life is the reserve of those who need not ever produce. In fact, the truly sovereign life is one so liberated from futurity that even the concept of death becomes an impossibility:

‘The sovereign man escapes death in this sense: he cannot die *humanly*. He cannot live in an anguish likely to enslave him, to determine the flight from death that is the beginning of servitude. He cannot die fleeing. [...] Thus, in a sense, he escapes death, in that he lives in the moment.’ (Bataille, 1991: 219)

Irrespective of whether or not spectacular consumption truly is the driving moment in capitalism, the relationship between consumption and sovereignty bears consideration. More fundamentally, one might examine the order of relation. Is the sovereign the one who can lay claim to useless expenditure, or is it through useless expenditure that one lays claim to sovereignty? Taking the latter formulation, recent events gain salience.

Bataille’s sovereign lives a ‘life beyond utility,’ and a life without limit (1991: 198). It suffices to remember Marx’s (1990: 254-55) manifold characterisations of capital and capitalists as figures that constantly discover their limits only to continually drive to break them to recognise that Bataille’s preoccupation with consumption beyond rational boundaries is not necessarily misplaced. Bataille’s sovereign, like capital itself, aspires toward a life unfettered by material, financial, temporal or existential limitations. As with capital, these limitations reveal themselves – be they in the inevitability of death or the practical impossibility of human beings living on Mars in the near future. And yet the sovereign life drives to break them, all the same.

Return to the question of the order of relation. Is limitless expenditure the right the sovereign lays claim to, or is it the act of expenditure that distinguishes one’s life as sovereign? Jeff Bezos provides one answer to this question. Much hay was made of Bezos’ remarks following his brief sojourn into not-quite-space, in which he thanked Amazon workers because ‘you guys paid for all of this’ (Morse, 2021). It would be easy to read these words as little more than the

tone-deafness of the billionaire set made legible. A Bataille reading, however, might argue instead that these expenditures are acts of potlatch tailor-made for the late neoliberal era.

How else might one make sense of his declaration that critics of his self-indulgent excursions are ‘mostly right,’ only to then describe space travel as ‘the only way that I can see to deploy this much financial resource’ at a time where manifold crises that can only be resolved with massive deployment of resources are engulfing humanity and the planet (Vega, 2021; Döpfner, 2021)? Bezos is aware of these crises, and the power he has to resolve them with his stagnant capital – his recent pledging of a paltry \$2 billion dollars to environmental causes, less than half of the cost of his rocket trip, indicates as much (Taylor, 2021; McCarthy, 2021). But those forms of expenditure are not productive or useful in the context of the system in which Bezos operates; economically, epistemologically, and ideologically.

And besides, what better way to remind people who’s boss, than to quite literally fiddle while Rome, and then, the planet, burns? Given the amount of glowing media coverage he, Musk, Michael Bloomberg and the rest of their cohort have received over the past few years for their myopic vanity projects, vulgar consumption certainly appears quite an effective way to sharpen the sparkle of the crown. ‘Pure and simple destruction evidently commands great prestige’ (1991: 42).

Finally, it is worth remembering that of those transgressive acts that characterise sovereignty, there is one that holds particular importance in Bataille’s schema; the transgression of the prohibition against killing. In his words, ‘sovereignty is essentially the refusal to accept the limits that the fear of death would have us respect in order to ensure, in a general way, the laboriously peaceful life of individuals’ (Ibid.: 221). Is it likely that these new expenditures in planet-cooking NFTs and cryptocurrencies, which work to negate much of the progress made to fight climate change with new expenditures of energy, and these frivolous rocket trips which burn masses of fuel for the sake of a few minutes in space, will lead, directly or indirectly, to thousands of deaths (Sorkin, 2021).

One recent statistic from the 2022 World Inequality Report estimates that ‘a few minutes [of] space travel’ produces ‘at least as much carbon [emissions] as an individual from the bottom billion [of wealth] will emit in her entire lifetime’ (Chancel et al, 2021: 134). Given the ever-deepening interrelation of excessive consumption of fossil fuels and mass death – human, animal, and other-than-animal – that will be the ultimate consequence of unaddressed climate

change, it is neither an analytical nor a philosophical stretch to say that Bezos, Musk, Branson et al's relentless individual pursuits of the great beyond, in accelerating our drive toward climate catastrophe, are tantamount to acts of killing of unfathomable magnitude. But it is through these acts of killing, direct or tangential, that they distinguish themselves from the workers through whom they live their sovereign lives: 'By killing, he escapes the subordination he refuses, and he *violently rids himself of the aspect of a tool or a thing*, which he had assumed only for a time' (Bataille, 1991: 221, emphasis mine).

The world must be laid waste, spectacularly. How else would you know who's really in charge?

'When the sovereign himself refused to fully accept the prohibitions on which society is based, when he took it upon himself to transgress them in some way, on behalf of his followers, the rebellion had begun and the sovereign could say on behalf of the others: "I have refused to submit, therefore I am."' (1991 [1976]: 252)



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