



Introduction to Bataille

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Introduction to Bataille

by John Brenkman

Georges Bataille's "The Psychological Structure of Fascism" is of historical interest in more than the degraded sense usually given to that term. An obvious question must, however, be addressed. What draws our attention to a long neglected essay, written in 1933-34, attempting to present the rudiments of a theory of fascism?

*Fascism, however much impelled by a silent drive to self-destruction, was in fact defeated from the outside. We still live the consequences of the failure of any oppositional politics to overcome fascism from the inside, and so our historical interest in the 1930s continues to take the form of a political interest in the state of critical theory itself, then and now. Fascist ideology was an anti-Marxism to which Marxism found no adequate political response. National Socialism was a rehabilitation of capitalism which outstripped the socialist movement. And, most importantly, fascism was a mass movement that preempted the revolutionary organization of the masses. The labor of the historian has been to discern, in the social and cultural dynamics of the rise of fascism, the gaps which mark the failure of effective opposition to emerge or sustain itself. The belatedness of this historical knowledge rejoins the efforts of those theorists who, in the 1930s, confronted fascism as a crisis in their own cultural and intellectual practice. For the labor of theory addresses itself precisely to what, in the domain of historical and political realities, has become problematical. Bataille, like Ernst Bloch, saw in fascism elements of a social experience that the socialist movement could not afford to cede to the Right — though it already had. Bataille's theoretical project thus shares another aim with that of Bloch: to discover in the ground of fascist mobilization the historical and affective forces which could and must form the base of social revolution. In this both of these theorists were too late and, therefore, too soon. It is precisely this misalignment, this temporal gap, between theory and reality, between historical process and political practice, that defines the relevance of Bataille (or Bloch) today. Marcuse put the problem succinctly in the preface to his writings collected in *Negations*: "At that time, it was not yet clear that the powers that had defeated fascism by virtue of their technical and*

economic superiority would strengthen and streamline the social structures which had produced fascism."¹

In the early 1930s, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) worked in collaboration with a group of intellectuals, principally Pierre Klossowski, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris, whose literary and intellectual interests were nourished by surrealism, the researches of Mauss, Hubert, Durkheim, and Lévi-Bruhl and the Hegel revival, and who first undertook the difficult synthesis of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche which would again revitalize French intellectual culture in the 1960s.² When he wrote "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille was associated with a group of writers and activists, the Cercle communiste démocratique, who sought to develop Marxism against the tendencies of the Communist Party. The essay was published in this group's journal, La Critique sociale. Later, with Caillois, Klossowski, and others, Bataille founded the Collège de Sociologie as a politically active and anti-academic research group devoted to the development of a critical "social psychology."

As a document in Bataille's intellectual biography, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," along with "La notion de dépense" written a year earlier, represents his first contribution to this social psychology. The intent was to elaborate a theory that could integrate into Marx's theory of history problems of subjectivity, the symbolic dimension of political and religious formations, and the affective base of collective experience. The rise of fascism gave this project its justification and intensity. For fascism marked a break between the collective experience of mass society and the cultural and intellectual heritage of Marxism itself. "Today one would have to abandon all understanding," he wrote in September, 1933, "not to see that the admirable confidence shared by Marx and the socialist movement as a whole was justified affectively not scientifically. The possibility . . . of such an affective justification has in fact only recently disappeared."³

Bataille saw in fascism the upsurge of a collective energy, which was itself the very basis of the revolt against capitalism, but which fascism was integrating back into the social relations of capitalism. Fascism thus manifested, for Bataille, the reality of the affective and symbolic dimension of social experience. He sensed not only the urgency of a critical social theory capable of addressing the affectivity of the masses, but also the obstacles that were created by the intellectual formation of the theorists and scientists themselves. Sounding a theme that shares much with the Frankfurt school's critique of instrumental reason, Bataille argued that the scientific knowledge of society

1. Herbert Marcuse, *Negations*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1968), p. xi.

2. For a concise account of the intellectual ambience provided by the Hegel revival, including the activities of Bataille, see John Heckman's excellent introduction to Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit,"* trans. Samuel Chernak and John Heckman (Evanston, 1974).

3. "Le problème de l'état," *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1970), p. 334.

was itself grounded, necessarily no doubt, in the forms of calculation that are specific to the capitalist mode of production: the primacy of economic value, utility, and necessary labor. This form of knowledge is limited precisely to the extent that the economic and calculable processes of capitalist society are but one side of its totality; the social totality is divided by “homogeneity” and “heterogeneity,” by the processes of economic accumulation and those of affective expenditure.

Bataille’s reading of Marcel Mauss’ famous “*Essay on the Gift*” (1925), reinforced by the influences of Freud and Nietzsche, provoked him to draw out an undeveloped dimension of Marx’s theory of labor and value. Bataille’s premise is actually quite straightforward: the energies of the laborer are not completely exhausted (utilized) in the labor process itself. Surplus value represents the measurable portion of the worker’s productive capacity which does not return to him or her as a wage. There is, however, another surplus, an unmeasurable excess, which does not return to the production process but is expended “unproductively.” This unproductive expenditure Bataille calls heterogeneity — in opposition to the homogeneity of capitalist production and calculation, that is, the system of equivalent values and interchangeable actions and objects.

From Mauss’ description of the potlatch in primitive societies, Bataille constructed, in “*La notion de dépense*,” the anthropological and historical hypotheses that subtend his theory of fascism: (1) A process of expenditure, “the lavish loss of an object given up,” lies at the base of primitive economies, such that the process of production and acquisition is a secondary development. (2) In all pre-capitalist societies, the ruling classes not only took charge of the material surplus but also acted under an obligation to expend a part of that surplus, converting it into symbolically charged objects and events of excessive consumption — from Roman games and cults to medieval cathedrals and monasteries. (3) The bourgeoisie, in contrast to all previous ruling classes, repudiates this obligation to excessive expenditure; the bourgeois revolution, instigated by capital’s search for autonomy and guided by an ethic of accumulation and utility, thereby tended to destroy the symbolic structures which had established an affective tie between rulers and ruled. As a consequence, Bataille argued, the capacity for unproductive expenditure, removed from the social order as such, is concentrated in the mass of producers, whose existence is divided between the participation in the production of economic values (labor) and an unbound energy which is, strictly speaking, destructive: “Class struggle [in the modern era] becomes the most grandiose form of social expenditure, as this expenditure is taken up again and developed, this time for the sake of the workers, with an amplitude that threatens the very existence of the masters. . . . The class struggle has but one possible outcome: the ruin of those who have sought to ruin ‘human nature’.”⁴

4. “*La notion de dépense*,” *ibid.*, pp. 316, 318.

Heterogeneity, this affectivity and energy which concentrates itself in the subjectivity of the working class but is manifested throughout the population, Bataille argued, had been tapped by the fascist movement. Fascism in turn, however, tied this explosive affectivity back to the existing social relations by means of the set of symbolic forms, institutions, and political representations that were at once anti-bourgeois and anti-Marxist. Fascism found its support in the force of heterogeneity and its coherence in the fixing of this heterogeneity in authoritarian structures. In this way, fascism is the negation of its own affective sources.

This account of fascism boldly brings together two theses which various theoretical paradigms and political allegories, in the 30s and today, would consider wholly incompatible: the working class, in whom the heterogeneity of society concentrates itself, is the only possible “gravitation point” for social revolution; however, for this very reason, the working class could be integrated into the fascist mobilization, whatever the predominance of other classes in the rise of fascism. Bataille located the source of opposition to the social order of capitalism in the divided subjectivity that wage labor produces in the very being of the producing class — the division, that is, between its reified experience of production and those unbound affective experiences and symbolic interactions that exceed the aims of production, self-preservation, and utility. Fascism unleashed this excess only to bind it in symbols and representations of unity — the unity of classes and the unity of individuals in their racial and national identity.

Faced with this development, Bataille repudiated the possibility of finding the link between theory and the social being of the working class in a unified consciousness, whether that of the theorist or of the proletariat. Rather, social theory must unfold from and in the division of subjectivity that capitalism produces by splitting the laborer into a producer of value (a thing, “an existence for something other than itself”) and a human being whose experiences of unproductive expenditure comprise the fragmented domain of an existence for itself.

An evaluation of Bataille’s efforts to develop the connections between theory and social being out of this division lies beyond the scope of this introduction. A few remarks can suggest the issues to be taken up, and these truly mark the contemporaneity of Bataille’s work. Bataille did not take the demands of his own arguments in the direction of a search for the forms of political organization capable of gathering a fragmented heterogeneity toward its ultimate aim of social transformation, nor did his researches go in the direction of a concrete analysis of the specific manifestations of heterogeneity in the daily experiences and practices of the working class. Historical and intellectual crisis presented him with two more immediate exigencies: to confront scientific and theoretical consciousness with the fact of heterogeneity in the historical life of humanity, and to discover, in his own experience as a divided subject, the manifestations of heterogeneity which he identified in unmasterable anxiety and in the capacity of aesthetic, erotic and ecstatic

excess. In this, Bataille surely followed the consequences of his political and theoretical insights, in that the consciousness of the theorist, as a part of its development of a knowledge of society, must experience the very divisions and disorientations of actual social being.

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