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# General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism

*La Part maudite,* Bataille's most systematic and long-considered work, provokes in the reader an inescapable feeling of mingled enthusiasm and disappointment. There is something striking and grandiose about Bataille's attempt to subvert existing political economy, caught within the limits of a utilitarian or calculating rationality, in order to replace it with a "general economics" that would make of unproductive expenditure (sacrifice, luxury, war, games, sumptuary monuments) the most determinant phenomenon of social life. At last a critique of political economy which, while remaining on the decisive terrain of the social circulation of wealth, escapes the confined atmosphere of the bourgeois ethic—so often caricatured—, the cramped and grayish world of petty calculation, quantifiable profit and industrious activity! It is the most extravagant waste—gratuitous, careening consumption, where accumulated wealth is set ablaze and disappears in an instant, wreathing in ephemeral glory him who makes the offering of this blaze which becomes the central phenomenon, the one through which a society discovers itself and celebrates the deepest values that animate it: its religion, its metaphysics, its sense of the sacred.

Bataille's "Copernican reversal" of political economy is a remarkable and dazzling operation of ethnological decentering. It is not the store and the workshop, the bank and the factory, that hold the key from which the principles of the economy can be deduced. In the blood that spurts from the open chest of victims sacrificed to the sun in an Aztec ritual, in the sumptuous and ruinous feasts offered to the courtiers of Versailles by the monarch of divine right, in all these mad

**YFS 78,** *On Bataille,* ed. Allan Stoekl, © 1990 by Yale University.

dissipations is found a secret that our restricted economics has covered up and caused to be forgotten. We must rethink social wealth not from the parsimonious perspective of an ascetic bourgeoisie that only consents to spend when it expects a return, but from the point of view (nearly delirious to our mind) of the erection of the pyramids or the cathedrals, or of the sacrifice of thousands of herd animals in archaic holocausts. It is in this intentionally unproductive use, in this unlimited expenditure, and not in utilitarian consumption that a secret lies hidden, the "general law of the economy": "a society always produces on the whole more than is necessary to its subsistance, it disposes of a surplus. It is precisely the use made of this excess that determines it: the surplus is the cause of disturbances, changes of structure, and of its entire history."[1] A thesis that is radically opposed to the rationalist, productivist and utilitarian vision. It is the *mode of expenditure* of the excess, the consumption of the superfluous, this accursed share, that determines a society's form. The dominant prosaic vision may be only a recently formed prejudice contemporaneous with the reign of the bourgeoisie, ushered in by the Reformation, and unable to account for the real and ineluctable movement of wealth in a society, a movement that sovereignly engages human beings: their relationship to the sacred through religion, mysticism, art, eroticism.

One cannot deny that this "general economics" has a great force of conviction, the strength of a new critique of political economy which instead of accepting the notions of this discipline (market exchange, need, scarcity, work-value) as Marx did, contests the very metaphysical ground of a utilitarian and productivist rationality whose limitation becomes evident in the anthropology of archaic societies. Better still, far from retreating beyond an economic explanation, as do the spiritualist critiques, this vision generalizes the economic approach, directly placing in its conceptual field notions that do not seem to belong there: religion, art, eroticism. At the heart of Bataille's thought lies the troubling postulate that the distinction between the profane and the sacred—a fundamental distinction of all human society—merges in a broad sense from the economic. Whereas the profane is the domain of utilitarian consumption, the sacred is the domain of experience opened by the unproductive consumption of the

1. Georges Bataille, *La Part maudite* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 143. Henceforth cited in the text. This edition contains "La Notion de dépense" which was published fifteen years earlier.

surplus: what is sacrificed. Henceforth the position of religion or art with respect to the "economic base" as formulated by Marx is completely transformed. The religious or artistic domain is not a simple superstructure of vague whims built on the economic infrastructure: it is itself economic, in the sense of a general economics founded on the expenditure of the excess, on the unproductive and ecstatic consumption of the surplus, through which the human being experiences the ultimate meaning of existence. General economics, unlike restricted economics, encompasses obliquely the entire domain of human activities, extending the "economic" intelligence to highly symbolic practices where formidable energies are consumed for the celebration of the gods, the glory of the great or the dionysiac pleasure of the humble. What becomes apparent then is the *genealogy* of our economic thought. A complete desacralization of life (inaugurated by Calvinism and carried to its limit by Marxism) was necessary for the world of production and exchange to become autonomous according to the principle of restricted utility. The profane and prosaic reality thought by contemporary economics can be constituted only by excluding outside the field of human activity—through the total secularization of ethical values—any impulse toward sacrifice, toward consumption as pure loss.

Bataille is thus proposing a veritable anthropology of history whose guiding thread would be the accursed share and which would achieve a unification of the two forces that have been considered individually the motors of human societies (religion and economics). But this history is marked by a break. Until the birth of capitalism every society is one of sacrificial expenditure. Whether in the *potlatch* of primitive tribes described by Mauss in *The Gift,* the bloody sacrifices of the Aztecs, the building of the Egyptian pyramids, or even the opposing paths of peaceful Tibetan lamaism and warlike Islamic conquest, the expenditure of excess is always inscribed within a principle of the sacred. With the birth of the bourgeois world a radical change takes place. Productive expenditure now entirely dominates social life. In a desacralized world, where human labor is guided in the short or long term by the imperative of utility, the surplus has lost its meaning of glorious consumption and becomes capital to be reinvested productively, a constantly multiplying surplus-value.

In my view it is in this historical outcome that the most serious difficulty lies. This is also undoubtedly Bataille's view: he always wanted to continue his first sketch but this continuation exists only

in fragments. On the one hand, there is hardly any doubt that Bataille always harbored a will to subvert contemporary society, a will that was heightened by his searing contact with surrealism and politically engaged groups. On the other hand, it is clear that the discussions in *La Part maudite* concerning "the present facts" of the world situation in terms of general economics are more than disappointing. Everything suggests that Bataille was unable to articulate his mysticism of expenditure, of sovereignty, of major communication—expressed so flamboyantly in *La Somme Athéologique, L'Érotisme* or *La Littérature et le mal*—in terms of contemporary general economics.

Where do we situate Bataille's claim? What happens to the demand of the sacred in capitalist society? How do we reconcile the affirmation that capitalism represents an unprecedented break with all archaic (precapitalist) forms of expenditure and the postulate of the necessary universality of spending as pure loss? This is the difficulty. Bataille wants to maintain as a general anthropological principle the necessity of unproductive expenditure while simultaneously upholding the historic singularity of capitalism with regard to this expenditure. Bourgeois society corresponds to a "general atrophy of former sumptuary processes" (41). An anomaly whereby loss is not absent (which would contradict the general principle) but virtually unreadable: "Today, the great and free social forms of unproductive expenditure have disappeared. Nevertheless, we should not conclude from this that the very principle of expenditure is no longer situated at the end of economic activity" (37). So what happens to ostentatious expenditure in capitalism? And can we really believe, furthermore, that the even more radical desacralization effected by communism could become a libertarian affirmation of sovereignty—the feast of self-consciousness, without divinities and myths?

Everything suggests that Bataille was unable to articulate the mystical tension toward sovereign self-consciousness "without form and mode," "pure expenditure" (224) with a utopia of social life that would make it possible, nor to explain in a *developed* capitalist society the consumption of the surplus beyond its reinvestment in production. Now it is quite clear that today's capitalism has come a long way from the Calvinist ethic that presided at its beginning. The values of thrift, sobriety and asceticism no longer have the place that they held when Balzac could caricature the dominant bourgeois mentality with the characters of père Grandet or the usurer Gobseck. It is doubtful that the spirit of capitalism, which according to Weber is

expressed with an almost classical purity in Benjamin Franklin's principles ("he who kills a five shilling coin assassinates all that it could have produced: entire stacks of sterling pounds") [cited by Bataille, 163], could today be considered the spirit of the times. Undoubtedly, the pace at which all residual sacred elements inherited from feudalism are eliminated has quickened. But hasn't contemporary society undergone a transformation of the ethic of consumption, desire, and pleasure that renders the classical (Weberian) analyses of the spirit of capitalism (to which Bataille subscribes) inadequate? If the great opposition between the sacred and the profane no longer structures social life, if communal, sacrificial, and glorious expenditure has been replaced by private expenditure, it is no less true that advanced capitalism seems to exceed the principle of restricted economy and utility that presided at its beginning. No society has "wasted" as much as contemporary capitalism. What is the form of this waste, of this excess?

These questions strike directly at the historical situation and philosophical signification of Bataille's thought. Is it not clear that his passion for the "notion of expenditure,"—which, beginning in 1933, is the matrix of all his economic reflections to come—emerge precisely at a turning point in the history of capitalism, in the 1920s and 1930s, which also saw the appearance of Lukàcs and Heidegger?[2] Can we not perceive within the principles of secularization and restricted economics that were the strength of early capitalism an internal conflict that undermines them, and puts capitalism in contradiction with itself?

To treat these problems in detail and with the developments they deserve would require an analysis that I could not think of completing in a few pages. Almost the entirety of postmodern thought would bear upon this problematic. My task will be facilitated however by a recent attempt at a new legitimation of capitalism—that of George Gilder—who situates himself, curiously, on the same terrain as Bataille, if only to arrive of course at opposite conclusions. Confrontation with this work will lead to a discussion of capitalist morality as envisioned by Bataille, and the correlative concept of utility.

George Gilder was one of the most vocal advocates of the economic politics of neoconservative during the early 1980s. In his book,

2. On this parallelism of the problematics and the divergence of solutions cf., Jürgen Habermas, *Le Discours philosophique de la modernité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), chapter 8 on Bataille.

*Wealth and Poverty* (1981), which according to the *Los Angeles Times* made him "the prophet of the new economic order" (and President Reagan's favorite author), Gilder attempts to demonstrate once again the ethical value of capitalism against the "intellectual consensus" that stigmatizes the moral void on which it rests. The great interest of Gilder's endeavor lies in its ambition: "to give capitalism a theology."[3] Although unaware, we can reasonably assume, of Bataille's theories, Gilder seems to respond word for word to the author of the "notion of expenditure," placing himself immediately on the same terrain. Recalling the analyses of Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* and of Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind,* Gilder undertakes to demonstrate that contemporary capitalism is no less animated by the spirit of the gift than the primitive tribes described by ethnographers. "Feasting and potlatching illustrate a capitalist tendency to assemble and distribute wealth" (26). The most elaborated forms of capitalism are simply a more elaborated form of the *potlatch.* The current notion of a self-interested, parsimonious capitalism, motivated only by the interest of material gain, is erroneous. At the origin of "capitalism" is the gift, not self-love and avarice. The conceptual basis of this seemingly paradoxical affirmation is a classical economic principle known as Jean-Baptiste Say's law: "*Supply creates its own demand.*" Such is the modern, contemporary form of the *potlatch.* The essence of capitalism consists in supplying first, and in obtaining an eventual profit only later. The capitalist invests (he supplies goods and services), but he is never sure of the return, of the recompense for his supply. This movement, says Gilder, is the same as in the *potlatch,* where the essence of the gift is not the absence of all expectation of a countergift but rather a lack of certainty concerning the return. "Like gifts, capitalist investments are made without a predetermined return" (30).

Thus capitalism would be in essence no less generous than ritual tribal exchange. Let us cite at length the passage where Gilder summarizes his argument.

> Contrary to the notions of Mauss and Levi-Strauss, the giving impulse in modern capitalism is no less prevalent and important—no less central to all creative and productive activity, no less crucial to the mutuality of culture and trust—than in a primitive tribe. The unending offering of entrepreneurs, investing jobs, accumulating in-

3. George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 7. Henceforth cited in text.

> ventories—all long before any return is received, all without any assurance that the enterprise will not fail—constitute a pattern of giving that dwarfs in extent and in essential generosity any primitive rite of exchange. Giving is the vital impulse and moral center of capitalism. [30]

Despite the appearance of paradox, it is understandable why it is within a capitalism of consumption that Say's adage, which underlies Gilder's argument, becomes particularly apt. Supply precedes and creates demand: this means that there is no prior definition of need, no natural and preestablished demand founded on essential and rational exigencies that could be fixed in advance. Such is, according to Gilder, the heresy of the socialist economy: it begins with the postulate of a demand assigned a priori, corresponding to an identifiable essence of need and to which a corresponding production could adequately respond. But the capitalist economy is founded on a metaphysical uncertainty regarding the object of human desire. It must create this desire through the invention of the new, the production of the unpredictable. It *supplies* in order to create desire, instead of satisfying a desire that would already be known by the person who experiences it. The preoccupation with demand leads to stagnation. The preoccupation with supply—in the gigantic *potlatch* of the capitalist store, which puts the unpredictable on display in order to seduce the potential buyer without coercion or certainty—is the "genius of capitalism" (34), its frenetic pursuit of the new.

Thus there is no equivalence in fact between supply and demand, contrary to what Walras's curves of general equilibrium, for example, might lead us to believe. The mathematical theory of value, which locates the determination of prices at the intersection of the curves of supply and demand, is a false abstraction, a deceptive "reification" (45). Demand registers only the simple reaction of consumers to a supply that corresponds to efforts and "sacrifices," a veritable gift, which is not accounted for by this quantitative equivalence.

It is remarkable that Gilder, starting from this conception of capitalism as *potlatch* (loss being measured by the frightening sums and energies invested "for nothing" in a society where thousands of businesses are created and disappear each week), arrives at an irrationalist legitimation of the capitalist universe that stands in sharp contrast to the Weberian theme of the genesis of modern rationality. It must be emphasized that for Gilder it is because capitalism is irrational (always suspended in uncertainty, the uncalculable, the indeterminate)

that it is superior to all other forms of society. Criticizing "the secular rationalist mentality" (310), he praises the spirit open to the paradoxes of chance and gambling. For in the end, having taken into account the unmasterable nature of the multiple factors that enter into the success of a business (not the least of which is the unpredictable desire of the client), profit resides in chance. Understood in this way, the spirit of capitalism thus participates in the fundamental mystery of any human situation: its opening onto the unpredictable and the undecidable. "Even the most primitive societies invent forms of gambling (dice in many places precede the wheel)" (296). The ultimate metaphysics of capitalism is the theology of chance—our only access to the future and to providence (299). It is only in this way that the opening is preserved. "Because no one knows which venture will succeed, which number will win the lottery, a society ruled by risk and freedom rather than by rational calculus, a society open to the future rather than planning it, can call forth an endless stream of invention, enterprise, and art" (296).

This sustained praise of the irrationality of capitalism strikes me as thoroughly remarkable. Is it not rhetorically satisfying that at the conclusion of a work on wealth and poverty the term "fortune" regains its most proper meaning: *Fortuna*, the Roman divinity of chance—a term which had acquired by metonymy the more restricted meaning of wealth? While a certain philosophical left, since Lukàcs, Horkheimer or Adorno, and in the wake of Weber—or a certain philosophical right with Heidegger—is bent on denouncing calculating reason as a dominant and alienating form of thought, inherent to capitalism (whose market, exchange side obscures its entrepreneurial side), a displacement is occurring (which is not entirely new since "capitalist anarchy" was denounced a long time ago) of which Gilder's book is a frank and unnuanced expression. Capitalism is irrational (in the last analysis it can rely only on a theology of chance—ultimately opening to the divine, to creativity and to the future) and this is why it is superior to all rationalist (hence socialist) pretentions to master the process of production and consumption, and consequently to prejudge human desire, to mortgage seduction. Is this not in 1981 the formulation of the *postmodern legitimation of capitalism*? Irrationality is no longer a denunciation but a justification, a defense.

Let me make it clear that, if there is no question of my subscribing without discrimination to Gilder's apologetic discourse, on the other

hand I take it quite seriously as a pointed ideological legitimation strategy of eighties-capitalism. Gilder's theory is exemplary as an attempt to formulate a morality of capitalism at odds with the heritage of the Enlightenment. If his theory is weak as political economy, it is highly significant (although at times disquieting)[4] as economic politics. Any social critic (to go back to a phrase that Bataille would not disavow) who overlooks this type of contemporary justification risks missing the true target and overlooking once more capitalism's resources and metamorphoses.

Furthermore, perhaps Mauss would not have disavowed Gilder's attempt in principle. The anthropologist does not hesitate to see in the skillful operations of *potlatch* on the part of the Iroquois (in whose simple disinterestedness he is careful not to believe) a prefiguration of the operations of capitalism. And it is also his aim, at the end of *The Gift* to search for something in the contemporary world that could prolong the process of gift and countergift of primitive societies. It is not, however, in "the cold reason of the merchant, of the banker and of the capitalist" (*The Gift,* Chapter 4, Conclusion, vol. 2) that he detects that prolongation, but rather in the liberality of the industrialist who creates family insurance funds or, better still, in national health insurance, where the community gives to the workers something other than a simple salary. We are far from the insane squandering fantasized by Bataille, as well as from the innovator's generous risk invoked by Gilder.

There still remains the question of why neither Mauss nor Bataille have pointed out, in some decisive mechanism of capital, a contemporary continuation of *potlatch,* while Gilder, in 1980, does not hesitate to resort to that ethnological reference, and to make it the guarantee of a moral basis. The reason is that a transformation (already at work but still concealed) has become manifest. In the capitalism of abundance the distinction between luxury and nonluxury has become indeterminable. Clearly, it is only in a regime of luxury, where everything is superfluous, that demand cannot be assigned and becomes open to possibilities that are less and less predictable. It is only in a regime of surplus consumption that the subject (the client who chooses) does not know his own desire, and that

4. Gilder in fact still returns to the simplistic notion of "poverty" of the last century, continuing a well-known tradition that makes poverty the result of vice or of divine disfavor.

supply (founded on still unknown, still unimagined technological and aesthetic possibilities) must necessarily precede demand. The distinction is no longer between the necessary and the superfluous, but between several as yet unimagined possibilities. This is why seduction, the aesthetization of merchandise, plays a primordial role. It is vital for this supply economy to deny the naturalness of needs—including the very notion of need and utility (in the trivial sense). In this sense we are witnessing the aesthetization of political economy.

Gilder's postmodern legitimization of capitalism thus resolves the question of the gift in capitalism by postulating a continuity with the rituals of primitive societies. The capitalist cannot count on an assured, calculable profit from his investment. He agrees to spend money and to spend himself in a project that is always aleatory. Gilder sees the noble and glorious side of the entrepreneur; he makes of him a gambler who sacrifices in order to "supply" with an always uncertain result: wealth or bankruptcy. It is in so gambling that he earns his rank. We should emphasize that Bataille did not completely fail to recognize this ludic dimension of capitalism; rather he was unable to integrate it simply within his vision. The fragments show that he reflected on the coexistence of play and the project in capitalism, but only to conclude that despite this coexistence (inherent in all action) capitalism is essentially a project, even if play and risk intervene necessarily between the project and accumulation. "Play in capitalism is somewhat heterogeneous, it is the effect of a relative lack of power. Capitalism would avoid play if it could."[5] Finally, Bataille summarizes, "the project dominates capitalist activity. Play is restricted to the stock exchange" (*OC*, 220). Denouncing "the avaricious practices of big business and industry," Bataille thus remains attached to the romantic image of capitalism as a moral anomaly. If "a current of *glorious activities* naturally animates the economy," "the bourgeois economy alone is exempted" (*OC*, 201).

But whatever the clear divergence between this position and Gilder's may be, one cannot help thinking that the latter's apologetic attempt ultimately endorses Bataille. For what is remarkable is that Gilder is obliged to resort to the notion of gift and sacrifice at the moment when he is giving capitalism a noble and glorious image, an adventurous legitimation that goes beyond "the secular rationalist

5. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1970–1988), vol. 7, 219. Henceforth cited in text as *OC*.

mentality" (Gilder, 310). When it is a matter of giving a theology to capitalism, of infusing it with a grandeur that even its most brilliant defenders generally do not recognize, there is no route but the one Bataille has already mapped out, as if the singularity of capitalism could only be upheld by connecting it, despite everything, with an unchanging, anthropological base, most clearly revealed by primitive societies: the gift alone creates the glory and the grandeur. Therefore, from the start, Gilder is obliged to position himself on the terrain that Bataille has cultivated. He is obliged to begin with Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* in order to bring out, in support of capitalism, the moral challenge constituted by the primitive practice of the *potlatch*. That Gilder must resort to this anthropological paradigm does not tell us much about the real mechanisms of capital and the multiple strategies of profit (it is only a legitimation) but it at least shows the force of the demand of which Bataille has made himself the bedazzled echo.

Morover, Gilder's theology rediscovers more than one notion dear to Bataille: the critique of profane rationalism as well as the final appeal to chance, not as a simple, favorable coincidence, useful for its anecdotal value, but as an existential structure that reveals the most profound mystery of being. "Chance is the foundation of change and the vessel of the divine" (Gilder, 312). Or again: "The crux of change and creativity is chance" (Gilder, 308). Gilder draws on the work of Pierce, well-known as a pioneer in the founding of semiotics, and whose work anticipates certain aspects of deconstruction. In his posthumous volume *Chance, Love and Logic*, "Pierce has shown that chance not only is at the very center of human reality but also is the deepest source of reason and morality" (Gilder, 312). Here again Gilder's arguments which oppose the "closed system of secular rationality" to the "prodigality of chance," strangely echo Bataille's notions even if the final argument is not the same.[6] "The most dire and fatal hubris for any leader" writes Gilder, "is to cut off his people from providence, from the miraculous prodigality of chance by substituting a closed system of human planning" (Gilder, 313). This is a remarkable effort to give the risk and chance of economic innovation an ontological dimension which contradicts rather than agrees with the great narrative of the Enlightenment and its secular rationalism.

6. Georges Bataille, cf., the third part of *Somme athéologique: Sur Nietzsche, Volonté de chance*, (1945).

Gilder is admirable in saying openly, something which both clouds the classical Weberian vision of a capitalism of rationalist legitimation, and illuminates the historical bases of the postmodern rupture: "The tale of human life is less the pageant of unfolding rationality and purpose than the saga of desert wandering and brief bounty . . ." (Gilder, 315). No, capitalism is not rational calculation (individual or collective) but indeterminable, undecideable play, and therein lies its grandeur, its profound ontological truth, and its harmony with the mysterious origins of things. There could be no better formulation of what we have called a "postmodern legitimation of capitalism" than these pages of Gilder. That capitalism legitimates itself today in a postmodern version, and could not do otherwise, not only profoundly illuminates its present nature, but also permits us apparently to decipher the sociohistorical meaning of postmodernism's philosophical (and aesthetic) manifestations. Postmodern thought is in accordance with this legitimation, without allowing us to prejudge the modalities of this agreement. This would justify certain suspicions of someone like Habermas (Introduction) but at the same time would invalidate them by virtue of their lack of adequate historicization, and their lack of a sufficiently articulated and profound evaluation of the necessities of this break between rationality and modernity. This is an essential point for not mistaking the era: the Enlightenment is over.

Therefore, one can now point to an "antibourgeois" defense of capitalism, an apposition of terms which resonate disturbingly, like an enigmatic oxymoron. Everything happens as if the traditional values of the bourgeois ethos (sobriety, calculation, foresight, etc.) were no longer those values which corresponded to the demands of contemporary capitalism. And it is in this way that Gilder's legitimation (which lends almost a sense of tragic heroism, of sovereign play to the creation of businesses)[7] can echo so surprisingly Bataille's critiques of the cramped, profane, narrowly utilitarian and calculating bourgeois mentality. The entrepreneur can no longer count on petty calculation, on the expected profit, at a time when supply must create demand (as in artistic activity or any work of genius, stresses Gilder) and not merely

7. It is this adventurous dimension (perceived by Balzac, but in essentially critical and sarcastic terms in response to the narrowness of the bourgeois ethos of the 1830s), which gives birth to the *financial novel.* For example, cf., the mass-produced novels of Paul-Loup Sulitzer (*Money, Cash, Fortune, Le Roi vert*) from the beginning of the eighties, which are closely linked by their themes, their ideological universe, to the vision developed at the same time by Gilder in *Wealth and Poverty.*

satisfy it. An overturning of the founding values of political economy is occurring. The vision of Adam Smith himself is deceptive and dangerous: "In fact, a rational calculation of personal gain would impel an individual above all to avoid risk and seek security. In our world of fortuity, committed to a secular vision, the invisible hand of self-interest acclaimed by Adam Smith would lead to an ever-enlarging welfare state—to stasis and sterility. This is the root of our crisis and the crisis of classical economics today" (Gilder, 321). There is no longer, therefore, an "invisible hand." The divinity of capitalism is no longer the social insurer that guarantees the bourgeois harmony of egotisms. The entire ruse of reasoning whose grandiose philosophical expression was furnished by Hegel, is, in fact, only the ruse of socialism—a "welfare state" of the end of history that stops chance's miraculous prodigality. The marriage of the Enlightenment and political economy is over. "The future is forever incalculable" (Gilder, 314).

We must add, of course, that it is precisely at the moment when the entrepreneur must think himself into the model of the most advanced artistic genius, at the moment when the avant-gardist strategy of innovation at any price becomes the paradigm of dominant economic practice, that the artistic avant-garde necessarily loses its difference, its marginality, its deviance-value. The aesthetic avant-gardes have won. That is what paralyzes them so seriously. When the gadget maker, along with Gilder, borrows from them their critique of bourgeois rationality which becomes in his [Gilder's] eyes "the mythology of a secular rationalist world" (309) and which he calls upon "to plunge into the realm of dark transcendance where can be found all true light and creativity" (309), it becomes more difficult for the poet to distinguish himself from the grocer, more difficult for the surrealist to differentiate himself from the disheveled manager.

Along with this "postbourgeois" capitalism that at once contradicts Bataille's *sociological* interpretation and confirms his *ontological* vision, explode the sociocultural contradictions of capitalism. Daniel Bell has convincingly shown that with the development of mass consumption and mass credit (which he situates in the 1930s) the puritan ideology of early capitalism entered into contradiction with an increasingly hedonist mode of consumption favored by capitalism. The entrepreneur's need to revive seduction, to respond to competition with promises of evermore complex pleasures, inscribes him in a consumerist ideology directly at odds with the "bourgeois" virtues of sobriety, thrift, and hard work that had assured

the development of production. In this way, the strict moral confines necessary for production enter into contradiction with the ethical liberation (even moral license) necessary to consumption.[8] Bataille does not seem to have foreseen this conflict born of abundance and the extraordinary sophistication of production. The Weberian image of capitalism that he maintains, the slightly obsolete conviction that Franklin's precepts of economy and sobriety represent capitalism's morals in its pure state, seem to indicate that Bataille did not imagine the paradoxical situation of postindustrial capitalism where only the appeal to compete infinitely in unproductive consumption (through comfort, luxury, technical refinement, the superfluous) allows for the development of production.

One must recognize that Gilder skillfully emphasizes the most seductive aspect of capitalism (the capitalism of abundance as seduction) even if it is by overlooking, or feigning ignorance of, that which can intentionally mislead, deceive, manipulate the consumer, whether it is the fiction of perfect competition or the buyer's lack of control over the real nature of the merchandise (harmfulness, fragility, planned obsolescence) to the profit of its appearance, of its pure transient spectacle. If "an American apple is not an apple," as the poet Rilke used to say in an amazing aphorism, it is not only because generations of peasants have not crystallized their sacred efforts in it, but also because the producer and the seller of that apple preferred to give it all the most stereotyped qualities of the "beautiful apple"—(big, red and shiny, like the one the Witch offers to Snow White), even if it is to the detriment of the real apple (tasteless, fiberless, carcinogenic). This substantive, actually consumed apple must remain a simple "noumenon," inexistent and without interest compared to the "phenomenon," the spectacle of the apple, which alone is at stake in the sale. But that does not prevent this very spectacle, this abstract aesthetization of the merchandise, from going hand in hand with an ideology of consumption that seems to transgress utility value.

We are touching here on difficulties which are linked from the start to the terms "utility," "unproductive consumption" etc. . . . There are ambiguities here that Bataille has not dealt with directly, even if the posthumous fragments offer some questions that nuance and complicate the positions of *La Part maudite*. I would like to note

8. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

several objections which also concern more recent theories inspired largely by Bataille.

It is clear that even the most unproductive seeming consumption (for example: tobacco, alcohol, but also pleasure trips, movies etc.) produces a profit-making industry, and thereby falls into the economic sphere according to the logic of the general equivalent. If one remains on strictly economic ground, it is in truth impossible to separate productive consumption from unproductive squandering. Ethical criteria alone could claim to make this distinction. It is perhaps one of the aspects of our society to have erased at once the opposition between the sacred and the profane, and with the same gesture, the difference between the useful and the useless, the necessary and the superfluous, primary need and secondary satisfaction, etc. Is it useful or superfluous to manufacture microwave ovens, quartz watches, video games, or collectively, to travel to the moon and Mars, to photograph Saturn's rings, etc.? Condillac had already written that "What is luxury for one people is not so for another, and for the same people, what was a luxury can cease to be one."[9] Condillac and many others saw the very principle of the "progress of the arts" in this relativity of luxury, this movement whereby the choicest goods "enter into common use" (191). And it is doubtless this erasure, this blurring, that makes it so desperately difficult for Bataille to find the opposition between the glorious, sacrificial, spectacular consumption of the accursed share (founded upon the principle of a loss that lends grandeur and nobility) and prosaically utilitarian consumption.

But if this line of demarcation cannot be found, it is the very result of democratic life which has weakened and dismantled these oppositions, which has made them lose their meaning of social cleavage and confined them to the realm of insular individual experience. All the examples of consumption societies that fascinate Bataille are extremely unequal, even cruelly hierarchical societies in which spectacular consumption is the tool with which the powerful maintain their position above the dazzled, miserable masses. The counterpart of the erosion of these hierarchical oppositions (and in the first place, the antimony sacred-profane) is certainly the domination of all activity by the categories of political economy. This does not, however,

9. Condillac, "Du Luxe," *Le Commerce et le gouvernement*, (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1980), chapter 27, 190. Henceforth cited in the text.

imply the reign of the "implacable, serene God of the useful," as Baudelaire writes.[10] Unless we understand it as a production marked by complete *axiological indifference.*

Baudrillard is in fact wrong when he contends that the notion of "use-value" and "utility" has a restrictive moral sense in economics, a sense that implies a naturalist metaphysics of need.[11] It is false that when economists speak of the use-value of goods, they suppose that the goods produced must first have had "utilitarian" value in order to have exchange value. In economics, use-value and utility were separated, from the start, from any moral evaluation concerning their legal or illegal "utility," or the very possibility of their having "use" at all in the current sense. If one may reproach classical political economy for something, it is certainly not, as Baudrillard believes (and mistakenly credits Marx with the same limitation) that it presupposes a metaphysics of need and of the utilitarian (in the trivial sense), but on the contrary, that it operates a radical demoralization of these notions (which gives them complete axiological indifference).[12] Keeping this indifference in mind, we see that it is not really a break in historical development, but a continuity that leads to a capitalism of consumption. From the start, even if the common conscienciousness formed by traditional moral values of utility could not perceive it, political economy has effected a denormativation of use, returning "utility" to the most subjective whims of individual choice. Moreover, when Bataille attacks "the principle of classical utility," he first reduces it prudently to "current intellectual representations ("The Notion of Expenditure," *La Part maudite,* 26)," that is, he reduces it to the most conventional notion of utility. In the fragments that he has left on "the limits of the useful" he has perfectly grasped "the moral indifference of capitalism," "The greatest moral indifference reigns from the start, and does not stop reigning in the use of products" (*OC* 7, 218). Does this observation not contradict the "utility principle" that he denounces in "The Notion of Expenditure"?

Let us reiterate that it would be useless to look for any kind of normativity in the notions of "use-value" or "utility" as political

10. *Les Fleurs du Mal,* poem 5.

11. Jean Baudrillard, *Critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

12. Cf., my text "Calcul des jouissances" in *Les Iconoclastes* (Paris: Seuil, 1978). American translation forthcoming in *Symbolic economies,* Cornell University Press, 1990.

economy defines them, either to critique political economy as an enslaving metaphysical vestige or to seek in it a basis for authenticity. Very early on, perhaps even from the beginning, political economy declined all responsibility. And it is doubtless this disengagement, this audacious pulling away, this autonomization in relation to all moral ballast (which the current terms "use" and "utility" still convey) that soon gave capitalism this precipitancy, this careening acceleration, this fever for any form of production, this unprecedented multiplication of supply that did not respond a priori to any demand.

Let us consider, for example, Jean-Baptiste Say. For him, men only attach value to something in function of its "uses," and "this ability of certain things to satisfy men's diverse needs" is called "utility." But, he adds, political economy only takes note of a fact, its task is not to judge whether or not this appreciation corresponds to "real utility." Political economy must not judge in the manner of "the science of moral men, men in society"[13]—the science to which he leaves the task of this judgement. Therefore, "the most useless, most inconvenient item, such as a royal robe, possesses what I am here calling utility, if a price can be attached to its use, whatever that might be."[14]

Elaborating on the same idea Auguste Walras, clearly marks this extension of the term "utility" that requires a separation of "moral utility" from "economic utility" (Walras, 83). This explicit dissociation, which is at the base of the conceptualization of political economy and marks its radical break with all normativity (ancient or medieval) of the useful, renders inoperable and naive those critiques of the so-called utilitarian presuppositions of the notion of "use-value." Auguste Walras writes: "There is this difference between moral and political economy: the first terms "useful" only those objects that satisfy those needs explained by reason, while the second grants this name to all objects that man can desire, either in the interest of self-preservation, or by virtue of his passions and whims. Therefore bread is useful because it serves as our food, and the choicest meats are also useful because they appeal to our sensuality. Water and wine are useful because they quench our thirst, and the most dangerous liquors are useful because men have a taste for them. Wool and cotton are useful because one must be clothed; pearls and diamonds are useful as objects of adornment" (Walras, 82).

13. Jean-Baptiste Say, *Traité d'économie politique* (Paris, 1841) 57.

14. Cited by Auguste Walras in *De la nature de la richesse et de l'origine de la valeur* (Paris: Alcan editor,) 82. Henceforth cited in the text.

What has been described as a "society of consumption," the conspicuousness in the 1960s, of a consumerist capitalism, therefore does not at all subvert the status of the extensive concept of "utility" in political economy, even if it undoes the trivial (moral) notion of the useful. It is, on the contrary, the implications of the axiological indifference of economic "utility" and the historical consequences (beyond all reason) of Say's principle, that are exposed and triumph in the light of day.

A lesson, however, emerges from this. It is not the quantity of waste, the amount of squandering or the importance of unproductive consumption (which is impossible to assign in economic terms, but which supposes a moral criterion) that enables us to distinguish between precapitalist societies, supposedly governed by the principle of pure expenditure, and capitalist societies, supposedly governed by "the utilitarian." Undoubtedly, no society has squandered so much, produced and spent so much merely for the sake of producing and spending, as contemporary industrial societies. The difference lies in the mode of waste, its social *mise-en-scène,* its representation, and finally the imaginary of the expenditure. Without arriving at clear conclusions, Bataille looked for the singularity of modern societies in the individualism of their expenditure (*OC,* "The Limits of Utility," 232 ff.) and its allotment (*La Part maudite,* "La Notion de dépense," 37) (which is opposed to communal and spectacular waste, offered by the rich for their own glorification).

Perhaps Bataille's economic theory is explained not by his discovery of *potlach* in primitive societies, but by the presentiment of what capitalism is becoming. That is why Bataille finds himself in such bad company: in troubling consonance (although one cannot reduce Bataille to what compromises him here) with Gilder's postmodern legitimation. What Gilder reveals is the play of capitalism, which without his knowing it overdetermines Bataille's exaltation and which also, at the moment that it becomes even more visible, dazzling, spectacular, sets off Baudrillard's accelerated derangement. Baudrillard and Gilder map out the same configuration of postmodern capitalism. But Gilder is the *truth* of Baudrillard since he *wants* politically and theologically the social play of which Baudrillard is content to be the appalled television viewer (more than the rational critic). At the moment that Gilder forges the ideological instrument of a libertarian (or rather neoconservative) politics and thus determines a reality, even indirectly, Baudrillard endures the

spectacle of that politics in turmoil and unreality. Gilder theorizes postmodern capitalism from the point of view of the active entrepreneur, while Baudrillard raves brilliantly about postmodern capitalism in the televisual armchair of the stupefied consumer. But Gilder's entrepreneurial morality proves that there is indeed in our era an economic political project, a locatable metamorphosis of capital, where Baudrillard sees only a desintegrative and paradoxical poetry.[15]

But if Bataille was unable to think through consumerist capitalism (which took on a more readable form only after the upheavals of the 1960s), if he was unable to think the dissolution of all foundation in the unconvertibility of the general equivalent (which could serve as a definition of the postmodern conjuncture)[16], if he could not think the subsequent legitimations of a "postbourgeois" capitalism which dismisses the Enlightenment and the great rationalist narrative, Bataille did offer a new grid which also facilitates this thought. Moreover, with his fragmented and fissured work, he testified to an unconditional demand that has the volcanic center of the most powerful contradictions, a demand before which his existentialist contemporaries appear—with the passage of time—as mere "men of letters." We know that his work in "general economics" had a major place among Bataille's preoccupations, and that it was undoubtedly the connecting strand of his theoretical efforts. Even the mystical essays of *La Somme athéologique* are indebted to this persistant endeavor, even if only as a moment of distancing, of overwhelming liberation, from the burden of his argumentation. The preceding pages attempt only to mark several guideposts: both the difficulties of the "notion of expenditure" when one tries to link it with contemporary conditions, and the still unexhausted richness of an opening in which we seek the bases of a morality for which the two modes of communication could be articulated. One of these is daily, prosaic exchangė, and the other is the stronger mode of love, the festival, and art—communicational unreason.

Translated by Kathryn Ascheim and Rhonda Garelick

15. Especially in *Les Stratégies fatales,* where the reference to Bataille is most direct (Paris: Garnier, 1983), 119.

16. Cf., my analysis in *Les Monnayeurs du langage* (Paris: édition Galilée, 1984). American translation forthcoming at Oklahoma University Press.