

Bataille's Wars

Surrealism, Marxism, Fascism

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Abstract ■ Georges Bataille's experience of the First World War and his syphilitic father are considered as context for his engagements with Surrealism, Communism and Fascism. His anti-war sentiment, somewhat ambivalent, is mediated through his notions of expenditure and sacrifice and his post-Second World War studies of the gift. These offer material that might be worth considering in the light of contemporary political questions. On the eve of a new global war emergent from the unexamined limits of liberal charity and 'Third Way' governance, an experimental and extravagant, even excessive, application of Bataille might provoke rethinking.

Keywords ■ Bataille ■ charity ■ Communism ■ Surrealism ■ war

Part I

Burst of laughter from Bataille . . . (Derrida, 1967/1978: 254)

I suppose we could imagine him in the library. He comes every day, but he arrives late. When the reading room is at its quietest and most austere, he suddenly laughs out loud. Can we imagine him sitting there reading Marx? Or must it always be Nietzsche and Mauss? It was Nietzsche who destroyed his Catholicism, it was Mauss who gave him a theme, but how about Old Beardo? In that library in which he worked so dissolutely, drawing complaints from the patrons and transferred to a different section for publishing dubious works of pornographic flavour. A maverick librarian, he has his own classifications, and he leaves for a bar with his friends immediately on closing.

Reading Georges Bataille is a sort of gift off the shelves. A gift that – I want to convince you – repays effort. The use-value of Georges Bataille – reading is not a waste of time, is not thereby a squandering. It may be destructive perhaps – what you thought was certain will be destroyed, uncertainty is revealed as a conceit – but this is not wholly frivolous. And on reading Bataille, I want to ask if there are ideas there that can help us make sense of and respond to the current geo-political moment that threatens us all.

Georges Bataille, by his own words, was of a turbulent generation: 'born to literary life in the tumult of Surrealism. In the years of the Great War' (Bataille, 1957/1985: ix). The Surrealists, reacting to an aftermath of horror, death, brutality and chaos in the trenches (which afflicted the French more systematically than either the English or Germans, who sent soldiers to the front, but did not have the front on their doorstep), wanted to move beyond the anti-art disenchantment of Dada and, from the mid-1920s, moved into the orbit of communism.¹ Bataille was not directly involved in Dada, and was technically peripheral to Surrealism, but his ascription of 'tumult' as his first context is not a surprise. For many others in France, the 15 years after the war were heavily marked by its consequences. In sociology, for example, Marcel Mauss was one of the few of Durkheim's students to survive. In philosophy the future leading lights of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and de Beauvoir were competing for the baccalaureate. In anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss was planning his escape to South America. Bataille was meeting his lifelong friends Michel Leiris and André Masson.

Of course Bataille's response to the first imperialist World War might not be the only figuring factor in his twenties – he was born in 1897 – but it is not impossible to speculate that war shaped his life and thought to a crucial degree. It is the thinking of war, or rather a militant thinking against war, that might be the best and most important theme that could govern a reading of Bataille.

So Bataille was born on 10 September 1897 and died in 1962. His father was blind and syphilitic and in 1914 had to be abandoned, unable to move from the house, in Rheims, when the Germans came and destroyed much of the town (Surya's biography of Bataille [1992/2002] reports 846 days of bombardment – excessive). No doubt this horror was just one among the reasons why Bataille, after toying for some years with the Catholic Church, was drawn towards the trajectory of Surrealism, with its ambition to re-enchant the world and its oblique revolutionary politics. Disabused of Catholicism through his reading of Nietzsche, his (Oedipal?) engagement with Surrealism started badly, and he feuded with André Breton from the beginning. Much has been made of the conflicted relations between Breton and Bataille, and there is no pressing need to dig into those trenches again. It might, however, be worth giving a flavour of the conflict by quoting the highest public manifestation of the exchange, where an amazing passage in Bataille's essay 'The Castrated Lion' takes revenge on Breton for spiteful comments directed at him in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Breton had charged that Bataille wanted to 'avoid making himself useful for anything specific', he was obsessed with flies, an 'obnoxious' anti-dialectical materialism [?]; and, a librarian by day, at night he 'wallows in impurities' (Breton, 1929/1972: 183–5). Bataille replied, in a pamphlet written with others excommunicated from Surrealism: 'Here lies the Breton ox, the old aesthete and false revolutionary':

I have nothing much to say about the personality of André Breton. . . . His Police reports don't interest me. My only regret is that he has obstructed the pavement for so long with his degrading idiocies. Religion should die with this old religious windbag. Still, it would be worthwhile to retain the memory of this swollen abscess of clerical phraseology, if only to discourage young people from castrating themselves in their dreams. (Bataille, 1994: 28)

Bataille was later to express regret at these hostile words. As Breton had so generously noted – also an accusation – Bataille had trained as a librarian, and his dissertation was on a verse history of chivalry in the 13th century, submitted in 1922. In the early 1920s, Bataille published on 16th-century manuscripts and numismatics (the study of coins – prefiguring, in a way that must be decoded, his later interest in economic questions). Denis Hollier, whose book on Bataille, *Against Architecture*, generally excludes any discussion of Bataille's political economy, or his engagement with Marx and communism, beyond a few references, does make a good point about the 'perversity' of numismatists – they contemplate money 'not for what it is [the means of commercial exchange] but focussing on it an interest that is either strictly aesthetic or else documentary and historical' (Hollier, 1989: 124). Funnily enough, this aesthetico-documentary moment does open up a discussion of Bataille's politics in Hollier, after a detour through castration. In the later part of the decade Bataille wrote the pornographic novel *The Story of the Eye* (1928), an anonymous publication signed Lord Auch (meaning 'God in the gutter'). This was perhaps the night-time Bataille, who spent much of his time in bordellos, or gambling. Sure, into this much of a psychoanalytic nature might be read – he was in analysis – and no doubt it would have to be related to the syphilitic father figure. The separation from the father during the war sets up the outcome of a kind of double obsession – a conflictual hatred of war, tending towards the Surrealists and Dada, and a fascination-compulsion to understand and calculate its destructive excess. From his first book – on the war-ravaged cathedral at Rheims – through to his last, posthumous, book on sovereignty, war held Bataille in its fascinating, repulsive, grip.

A most interesting librarian to say the least, much has been said of the pornography – almost the sole focus of popular interest in Bataille, but a better read is the almost contemporaneous, equally racy, *Blue of Noon*, a novel about politics and the Spanish Civil War, written in the early 1930s but not published until 1957. Bataille had travelled to Spain in the years leading up to the civil war and wrote an engaging story about sexual ambivalence and communism that would repay investigation.² What is the use-value of the pornographic novel? I don't feel any need to defend that here – no doubt they could be defended – but it is possibly important that both novels involved travel to Spain. Escape from the stifling Paris was at stake, escape from (for) the father and from the war, and perhaps escape from his first wife, Sylvia Maklés (who later married Jacques Lacan). Looking for a way out, Bataille was a potential traveller, but his journey so

often seemed to stall. He also had plans to travel to Russia, Morocco, Tibet and China (he began learning the languages) but did not leave Europe. Instead he joined the Democratic Communist Circle centred around the old Comintern figure 'Souvarine'.

Souvarine was the revolutionary name, taken from a militant character in Zola's *Germinal*, of Boris Lifschitz, a member of the executive committee of the Comintern. Born in Kiev but having grown up in France, Souvarine travelled to Moscow in 1921 and stayed four years. He was among the first to defend Leon Trotsky when the Left Opposition came under attack and he was expelled from the party in 1924, soon after returning to Paris. He was not a blind devotee of Trotsky yet published letters from him in his journal, the *Bulletin Communiste*, and also critiques of other communist leaders. He is said to have coined the term 'dictatorship of the secretariat' (in Surya, 1992/2002: 162) as an early critical description of Stalinism. He also published Karl Korsch and later, in a new journal, *La Critique Sociale*, published the first major political essays of Georges Bataille. Funded by Souvarine's mistress, Colette Pegnot, whom Bataille would later live with, it was in this journal that Bataille published key economic works, such as 'The Problem of the State' in 1933 and 'The Notion of Expenditure' in two parts, in 1933 and 1934. The first essay was a response to the rise of totalitarian states in Germany, Italy and under Stalin, and it questioned in this context how the revolution might do away with the state as anticipated in that 'withering' phrase. 'The Notion of Expenditure' signalled his interest in consumption and anticipated his later post-war works that took the Chinook word 'potlatch' as their credo. As a critique of orthodox Marxist focus on production (we will see that Marx himself was not so narrowly constrained as regards circulation and valorization), Bataille's 'expenditure' extended beyond Mauss and Malinowski's critique of mere barter (primitivism) to elaborate more strictly political-theoretical implications (this work is discussed in detail in Part III).

So, the early 1930s were again all about war for Bataille, this time the anticipation of it rather than the aftermath. In the orbit of communist activists, Bataille's work turned to militant themes. Not all his efforts were devoted to politics, however; still working by day in the library (he was notorious for arriving late and the patrons complained that the doors were never opened on time – Surya, 1992/2002: 147), he also had time, with Leiris and Masson, to publish an art journal *Documents* which gained much attention and discussion for its innovative and experimental – even sometimes 'monstrous' – tone.

Documents was published for two years from 1929 (15 issues) and Bataille apparently thought of it as a war machine against Surrealism and its alleged leader Breton – who had called him an 'excrement philosopher'. Breton was never mentioned, but philosophical it was, with a healthy dose of ethnography supported by Leiris's and Bataille's interest in Mauss. It carried articles such as 'Big Toe', several on taboo, filth, 'Human Face',

'The Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh' and short reviews or comments on theatrical events – 'the cemetery and mass grave of so much pathetic crap' (see the appendices of the volume *Encyclopaedia Acephale* [Bataille et al., 1995] for examples).

Like his good friend Michel Leiris, Bataille always had a complicated relationship with Surrealism. He later called himself Surrealism's 'old enemy from within' (in 1946; Bataille, 1994: 49), but had little time for contrivances such as automatic writing and the obsession with dreams and the meaning of chance (he'd rather gamble). His own obsession with regard to the surreal was with the eye as perspective and horror, with shock, contradiction and the uncontrolled – what he called heterology. This is what got him accused of being excremental; but Leiris too was documenting the satisfactions of the morning shit in his ethnographic studies (see Köpping, 2002: 189). Leiris travelled with Maurice Griaule on the Paris–Dakar–Djibouti expedition and wrote a detailed ethnographic report cum diary and subsequently several novels and a sustained autobiographical series (*Manhood*, 1946, the first of these, is dedicated to Bataille). His reminiscence in *Brisées: Broken Branches* is engaging, with gems like Bataille's response to being invited by the Surrealists to a meeting to discuss the 'Trotsky case', which he refused to attend, saying: 'Too many idealistic pests' (Leiris, 1966/1989: 240).³ Laughter and transgression are great interrelated themes; it was Bataille who introduced Leiris to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* and the two patronized bars and clubs together. Leiris worked at the Musée de l'Homme, near the Bibliothèque Nationale, and patrons could surely also hear there a sort of maniacal mischievous laughter, bordering on criminality, showing criminality to be merely morality. From Dostoevsky's book they acted on the motto: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' (a construction later significant for William Burroughs), attributed to Hassan I Sabbah, the old man of the mountain. Bataille was to write several articles on humour and its darker sides.⁴

And Bataille was to keep this laughter up throughout his life. Quoting Antonin Artaud in 1951, Bataille writes: 'and the garlic mayonnaise contemplates you, mind, and you contemplate your garlic mayonnaise: and finally let's say shit to infinity' (Bataille, 1994: 46). This was not incompatible with recognizing Artaud's mental shipwreck. Bataille should not be considered callous or inhuman. There is enough of that in automatic reaction to his writings. Misconstruals abound. So many that it is impossible, and unnecessary, to itemize them all. It will do to show how specific interests and agendas fashion a Bataille for all seasons. The postmodern use of Bataille in the 1980s certainly encouraged the 'nothing is true, everything is permitted' approach to theory. Exemplified on the one hand by Nick Land, despite protestations and an elegantly wasted style (Land, 1992); on the other hand, Jean Baudrillard probably takes things a step too far when he writes that, for Bataille, the 'economy has no meaning' and luxurious and useless expenditure is all that matters, and even this luxury

is, in what the advocate of simulation means as a critique of Bataille, 'no more "natural" than economics' (Baudrillard, 1976/1993: 156–7). Michael Richardson's introduction to Bataille adequately, if somewhat heavily-handedly, warns against other postmodern manifestations of Bataille-mania (Richardson, 1994: 4). Giorgio Agamben, normally so careful, seems to overstate the case for a versioning of Bataille as a kind of mystic. In his *Homo Sacer*, he suggests Bataille's inquiries into sovereignty were 'compromised' by the errors of Victorian anthropology in the study of the sacred (Agamben, 1998: 75). Bataille had in fact read Frazer's *Golden Bough* early on, and no doubt picked up some funny ideas (that he was still citing in the 1950s).⁵ With this taint, though, Agamben then praises Bataille's 'exemplary' attention to what he calls 'bare life' – to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the pure and the filthy, the repugnant and the fascinating – he only regrets the inscription of this life under the sign of the sacred rather than the political (Agamben, 1998: 112). Is Bataille a god-botherer unable to fully enact his Nietzsche and escape Catholicism? It would be another task altogether to follow the path of a sacred Bataille; suffice to acknowledge that 'sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark' (Agamben, 1998: 114–15). I don't think this Bataille prevails. I might be wrong.

There are of course those who find Bataille too frivolous and too playful; others find him too exuberant, not dour enough; even his dark side is charged with eroticism. To counteract this it might be worth remembering Foucault's preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*: 'do not think you need to be sad to be a militant' (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/1984: xiii). Bataille offers what he called a 'paradoxical philosophy' (formless institute, heterology, decodifying dictionary). He writes of the 'dishevelled joy of communication' (Bataille, 1943/1988: 35) and of laughter as communication (Bataille, 1944/1988: 139). His eroticism is aimed at redeeming the sexual organs from embarrassed laughter; he takes seriously the fine line between pleasure and pain, and finds ecstasy and horror, joy and delirium, blood, vomit and death as the coordinates of our life. Very human, he seems to have had much trouble with his teeth. In *Guilty* he is up all night with bleeding gums; his *On Nietzsche* includes this fragment: 'A toothache (over now it seems)' (Bataille, 1945/1992: 108). The paradoxical philosophy had to be expressed in writing, yet 'writing . . . is deprived of wings' (Bataille, 1994: 130). The paradox: 'The leap beyond what is possible destroys what became clear: thus the impossible is the distressing contrary of what we are, which is always connected to the possible' (Bataille, 1994: 131–2). This was at the heart of his laughing-serious appreciation of the poem of Jacques Prévert that he cites in 1946 and which is worthy of study itself in its inspired combinations of 'a Bengal nun with a tiger of Saint Vincent de Paul, an inspector of the round table with the nights of the Paris gas company, a member of the prostate with a

swollen French academy' (in Bataille, 1994: 145–6). Of this, Bataille says the ruin of poetry is effected by means of an externally established determination – the exchange between couplets – that is akin to the writing triangles of Raymond Roussel (Bataille, 1994: 152; on Roussel and authorship, see Foucault, 1962). The Bengal nun particularly grabs attention, as does the swollen academic French prostate. The legacy of this Surrealism, with which Bataille was so obviously infused and enthused, despite struggles, is one that continues in other groups that either Bataille set up – Acephale (one of its advertising slogans was 'If you are not crushed you must subscribe') and the College of Sociology (on this see Hollier, 1988) – or groups that followed and might well be claimed to be the legacy of Bataille and a politicized Surrealism: most notably the Situationist International, but also such diverse irruptions as the YIPPIEs, fax art and some of the Reclaim the Streets protest performance politics of the anti-capitalist movement today . . .

It might be usual for an examination of Bataille to stop here, as many do, noting curiosities and assimilating his heterology to some trinketizing catalogue of French diversions – cue the tunes of Erik Satie – but there is a serious underside to this legacy of Bataille: it is founded on an explicit politics, born of his encounter with Dada and Surrealism and the horrific legacy of war. Just as Bataille says 'Yes' to Dada's 'no' and Surrealism's myth-making, Bataille brings a surrealist countenance to Marx and anti-fascist work. In the same way that his critique of Surrealism was made 'from within'. So too is his critical response to Marxism and communism.

Part II

I am amused, moreover, to think that one cannot leave Surrealism without running into M. Bataille. (Breton, 1929/1972: 183)

By 1935, Bataille was reconciled and working with Breton in an anti-fascist collective called *Contre Attaque*. In *Contre Attaque*, Bataille, Breton and Leiris participated in public meetings and critique of the established communist parties (for their defence of the popular front and its preservation of capitalism). *Contre Attaque's* initial declaration begins with an assertion against nationalism, calls for the arming of the people and asserts its fundamental fidelity to Marxism (in Richardson and Fijalkowski, 2001: 114–15). As mentioned above, Bataille had initially been drawn into the circle around Souvarine and had written articles in the journal *La Critique Sociale*. It is not a simple matter of Bataille becoming a Marxist, for what does it mean to be in this club that even Marx did not want to join? Rather, Bataille gets involved in the political movements he regarded as most compelling at the time. Among Bataille's writings in *La Critique Sociale*, for example, the especially important 'The Notion of Expenditure' was

conceived as a critique of the orthodox Marxist focus on production and a defence of the political significance of joy, desire, pleasure, excess and waste which economy would rather exclude. The critique from within at the start. Later in his life, Bataille admitted to Maguritte Duras that he was 'not even a communist' (in Surya, 1992/2002: 565).

Not ever? Duras asked Bataille, 'Can I nevertheless write that for you communism answers the communal demands?' Bataille replied 'Yes you can. . . . But I repeat, I am not even a communist' (Bataille interview with Duras in *France-Observateur*, 12 December 1957). Elsewhere the picture is carefully nuanced, as Bataille writes: 'I do not want to forget that Marx's doctrine has always served as the only effective application of intelligence to practical facts as a whole' (Bataille, 1994: 156). It is unnecessary to redeem Bataille to Marxism, but it is also not a matter of taking sides as when some commentators do not quite see the difference between Marx and orthodoxy. The strain is particularly pronounced in the art volume *Formless* by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, where a discussion of Bataille and contemporary art has Bois speculating on the similarity of Bataille to Benjamin, but wanting to 'resist' such readings 'since this would be to push Bataille's thought towards Marxism, with which he was engaged only briefly (. . . roughly from 1932 to 1939)' (Bois and Krauss, 1997: 48). To resist the brief engagement is a strange tension, since a few pages along from this 'rough' diversion it is the 'major theoretical text' from this period – the essay 'The Notion of Expenditure' – that Bois identifies as that 'from which almost all his later work developed' (Bois and Krauss, 1997: 55). The evaluation of this essay will become still more important, but Bois clinches the deal with reference to other work: 'No Marxist could have penned' sentences such as Bataille did about gushing blood, violent death, cries of pain, etc. (1997: 49). Though in the same book in which Bois claims Bataille was not dialectical (1997: 68), his co-writer Krauss notes Marx offering very similar language to describe 'the scum, offal, refuse of all classes' in his *18th Brumaire* (Bois and Krauss, 1997: 246). It is of course not the point that Marxists never write about shit, offal and blood (how absurd a taboo would that be?), but that the orthodox Marxism that Bois is at pains to defend Bataille from might be one that he was in fact never associated with, not even for just a few 'rough' years, and, as the line in Krauss indicates, this was something he perhaps shared – at least in style – with Marx himself. It is worth recalling that Agamben praises Bataille's exemplary excrementa (Agamben, 1998: 112), just as Breton condemned it in the *Second Manifesto* (no doubt the politics of shit would repay investigation; consider Dominique Laporte's inquiry into the town planning and sanitation edicts of the French state [1978/2000: 7] or Mike Davis's comments on the 'Hyperion' sewerage treatment in Santa Monica Bay in his *City of Quartz* [1990: 196]).

This excremental not-quite-Marxism, 'not even' communism, of Bataille, is what I would want to name an uncategorically 'bad Marxism',

and it is of a different character to the Marxism of those Surrealists who gravitated towards Trotsky (Lewis, 1990). Bataille's version of Marx differs again from the versions of French theorists after the war who found their own ways to embrace Marxism – Sartre, Althusser, even Lévi-Strauss says he was influenced, Derrida later jestingly 'returned', etc. Everyone is trying to specify and locate: the biographer Surya at one point calls Bataille a Trotskyist, but this seems far-fetched – remember his 'too many pests' quip, reported by Leiris. Whatever the case, Bataille's economic and anti-fascist writing deserves attention and gives a good indication of a variety of engagement and independence of thought arraigned against the 'sterility of a fearful anticommunism' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 168).⁶ In the post-Soviet world, Bataille's Marxism being no '-ism' might indicate a plausible way towards what Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri project as the need 'to rescue communism from its ill-repute' (Guattari and Negri, 1990: 1). In this regard, perhaps other communist connections among his co-writers around *Documents*, the Acephale group, and the College of Sociology also deserve to be thought of in terms of a 'bad Marxism' that should not be airbrushed away into literary dilettantism – Aragon for example, and Leiris (whom I discussed in these terms in 'Clifford's Ethnographica' [Hutnyk, 1998]). This is the parallel to making too much of Bataille's 'mystic' side. Along these lines, even the Surrealists might be re-evaluated not only as the merchants of dreams – this does not mean that investigating Dali and his paintings of the bust of Lenin will uncover a political programme, but . . . (see the volume *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* [Lewis, 1990]).

Bataille's version of Marx seems similarly careful in its reading to that emphasized in discussion of responsibility and difference by Gayatri Spivak in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999: 78). Where she says 'ethics' Bataille says 'moral' or sentimental as he recognizes that Marx's originality was in working towards a 'moral result' through rigorously organized material intervention (Bataille, 1949/1988: 135). The necessary and sufficient material change is directed, ultimately, towards what is a 'sentimental' end – 'sovereignty'. But because this effort was directed towards the 'elimination of material obstacles' (obstacles to the achievement of sovereignty, or to species-being?), orthodox interpretations saw only 'an exclusive concern with material goods' which missed his 'provocative clarity, his utter discretion and his aversion for religious forms' where truth was subordinated to hidden ends (Bataille, 1949/1988: 135). It can be demonstrated that the presentation of Marx's *Capital*, beginning with commodities, was not the same as the analytical whole, and a reading requirement that would encompass the expanding analyses of production, consumption, circulation, credit, valorization and the global market might bring forth a different Marx. In the spaces between National Socialism and Stalin, Trotsky and Breton, Acephale and Souvarine, before and after war, Bataille read this Marx.

This Marx is not the economist construct of orthodox Marxism, with

its obsession with structure and superstructure, but Bataille starts out towards him by railing against the injunction, common in ideas about economics then in circulation, that leisure, play – and expenditure – were to be seen as ‘diversions’ (Bataille, 1997: 168). This was first broached in the 1933 essay that Bataille wrote called ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, also in *La Critique Sociale*, where he asserts that Marx developed no ‘scientific’ analysis of the influence of superstructure upon infrastructure. These building metaphors have always been a little problematic, and Bataille does not break them, but he is more sensitive than most to Marx’s use of metaphor – and, contra Hollier, it is perhaps his training as a numismatist that allows him to realize that money itself was less important for Marx than the equivalences between differences that it was used to measure. He takes seriously the key point about the relations between things being an expression of congealed relations between people – commodity fetishism: ‘it is only if I remain attached to the order of things that the separation [of beings] is real’ (Bataille, 1949/1988: 192) and ‘consumption is the way separate beings communicate’ (Bataille, 1949/1988: 59). Even when writing of fetish in a different sense, as in the valorization of ‘Big Toe’, it might be an error to think that the analysis of commodity fetishism was far from his mind – the celebration of things previously ignored is a process of subsumption. Similarly, the almost obvious insistence of Marx that even old Robinson Crusoe, alone on his island, was formed as a social being, was shared by Bataille: ‘Every human is connected to other humans, is only the expression of the others’ (Bataille, 2001: 236).

The issue of activism and organization cuts through here. Not just in the obvious case of the organization of the Democratic Communist Circle and Contre Attaque – though the significance of anti-fascist activity in 1933 and 1935 should not be missed – but in so many cases the issue of the group or the community comes to the fore. The creativity of the collective is asserted as greater than that of the individual, and this is reason enough to prefer communism – Bataille uses the example of myth-making to illustrate his point (Bataille, 1994: 106).⁷ Of course the group is more productive – the essence of the social – but the political group led by an inspired and original intellectualism is something else again. Bataille suggests that the theorist probably just as important to him as Marx was Friedrich Nietzsche – he was first to defend Nietzsche from National Socialist misappropriation. Like the Surrealists between the wars, Nietzsche wrote as if motivated only by the desire to ‘found an order’ (Bataille, 1994: 109), and this desire has affinities with the foundation of a political party. Bataille’s groups are not so different.

In his essay for *La Critique Sociale*, ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, Bataille considers the necessity of the proletarian classes becoming aware of themselves as an active, not passive, even as a revolutionary, class. Bataille’s call is for a ‘conscious proletariat’ (Bataille, 1997: 143). He writes even more militantly in the essay ‘On the Popular Front’.

He calls for subversion, against fascism, and this is urgent because thus far – 1933 – only the indifference of the proletariat had saved democratic countries from turning fascist. No doubt Bataille has his errors of historical detail, but he was certainly right to think later that his ideas were unlikely to be heard – the notion of an intellectual cohort exhorting the working class to revolt has always carried its own class contradictions.

An enemy also from ‘within’ communism perhaps. At the beginning of *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy, working through the meanings of the word ‘communism’ – a place of happiness and ‘community beyond social divisions’ is one emblem – cites Bataille as one of those who pointed out early that ‘the states that acclaimed it have appeared, for some time, as the agents of its betrayal’ (Nancy, 1991: 2). Nancy does point out that the ‘schema of betrayal’ is less tenable than it once seemed, as the ideal of a pure communism, untainted by realpolitik, is more difficult to project (‘not that totalitarianism was already present in Marx’, he quickly adds). Nancy accuses subsequent commentary on Bataille of being governed by, ‘despite everything, a meager and all too often frivolous interest’ and he underlines ‘the extent to which his thinking emerged out of a political exigency’ (Nancy, 1991: 16). We might hedge a bet on the psychological structure of Bataille himself: the politicization of the first war transfers its energy into activism against fascism, which in turn energizes the concern for, and critique of, totalitarian communism in the interests of another possible communism (and not sterile anti-communism).

Bataille and anti-totalitarianism deserves to be read carefully, not only because he was among the first to offer a sustained intellectual critique, and not because his psychological insights are superior to others, say perhaps Adorno, with whom there are useful similarities. Bataille’s critique of fascism was contextualized; he recognized that it would not do to go to war simply on behalf of capital. In 1935 he wrote:

... at the same time, while dread mounts from day to day before the immanence of physical extermination ... we know ... that stupid imperialism precisely engendered this fascism that we mean to fight while marching in ranks assigned to us by generals and industrial magnates. (Bataille, 1985: 164)

Imperialism and industry were at the heart of fascism and war, but the task of a politicized anti-fascism was more than national defence. It should be clear that this was a part of a wider practical-intellectual project – one not embarrassed by action – yet also not a patronizingly insipid engagement for the sake of the engaged theorist’s ego. The critique from within has the ultimate interest of a more adequate communism. In his book on Nietzsche, for example, Bataille points out that the idea that anyone would subordinate their thinking to the demands of a party was appalling (Bataille, 1945/1992: xxii). To think that being in a party would demand this is feeble itself, an abdication of any critical principle of the party and the responsibility of membership which requires people not to be

automatons. Any party member who abandons thought should be dismissed as unreliable and dangerous – a lazy follower who only deserves to be led by the nose. This is the material of the popular front essay, but it is also prefigured in the essay on fascism, where heterogeneity is identified as that which must be assimilated or excluded from homogeneous – democratic – society. As Bataille noted in 1933, a distinction may be drawn between those differences which can be negotiated and those which a state must suppress to retain power: a distinction between a parliamentary model of negotiated compromise and military suppression. Some differences are too different and must be overruled or the state overturned – hence the double deceit of democratic politics on the one side and despotic violence on the other – two strategies (see Bataille, 1997: 124). The problem is that it is Hitler who breaks laws, and his is a heterogeneous, hypnotic force, an authority based on a projected unity under his leadership, godlike, with devotees, a cult. It is the ‘uniting of the heterogeneous elements [of society] with the homogeneous elements’ that is specific to fascism (Bataille, 1997: 140). And a party – or an army – that assimilates and demands obedience, rather than develops a conscious proletariat, is one that spells trouble.

The attempt to construct a model of heterogeneity and homogeneity as a diagnostic for politics resonates with the later ‘war machine’ and ‘nomadological’ primitivism of Deleuze and Guattari (in their *Mille Plateaux*, 1980/1987). Yet the neat models were a cul de sac of sorts, which Bataille recognized yet was compelled to explore in the context of fascism and totalitarian bureaucracy. In a 1935 lecture to a Contre Attaque meeting, he argued that if insurrection ‘had to wait for learned disputes between committees and political offices of parties, then there would never have been an insurrection’ (Bataille, 1985: 162). This might echo Souvarine who, recall, had coined the phrase ‘dictatorship of the secretariat’, but Bataille’s target was those ‘professional revolutionaries whose party activity amounted to both disparagement of the spontaneity of the people and distrust of the intellectuals’. These ‘so-called revolutionary agitators’ would like to ‘eliminate’ the ‘brutal’ and ‘convulsive’, ‘human tragedy that the revolution necessarily is’ (Bataille, 1985: 162). Perhaps there is behind this again a more sentimental and scatological Bataille, the blood gushing once more, but the critique of revolt via meeting procedure is well taken. In the event, this so-called revolutionary was also much ignored. Contre Attaque foundered after two years. Bataille moved on to other projects with a more academic bent – the College of Sociology – and again into the library, so that by the time Hitler’s war started, he seemed resigned to sit it out – not only for health reasons.

Part III

... celebration of a militant communism. (Habermas, 1987: 228)

On either side of the second imperialist World War – if we take his health problems of 1942 as a marker, then symmetrically seven years either side – Bataille published his most important economic studies. In 1933 ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ and in 1949 *The Accursed Share*. During the war a period of introspective writing – *Inner Experience, Guilty, On Nietzsche* – while all the while ‘working on a book on economics’, which, as even Bois tells us, was the key work of his later life. Michael Taussig gives a generally accepted assessment of the significance of this work in anthropology vis-a-vis the exchange theories of Malanowski and Mauss et al.:

... against more restricted views of the undoubted importance of exchange in grounding social life ... this emphasis on giving for the sake of giving, on giving as expenditure regardless of return, was Bataille’s contribution to social theory. (Taussig, 1999: 268)

It is idealism to reify exchange and expenditure and not examine the specificity of capitalism’s ‘restricted economy’ in the context of Bataille’s attempt to escape the curse of this accursed share. A case in point that should modify the idealism of this would be to consider the ‘gift’ and ‘consumption’ of workers’ labour power, nominally purchased by the capitalist, who then gets the surplus produced by that power for free. Taussig distinguishes the ‘art’ of ‘profitless spending’ from ‘the restricted economy of capitalist profit-maximisation’ (Taussig, 1999: 81) – and, with Bataille, has in mind here the more restricted notions of exchange of those who do not see an alternative, whose vision of the social rests complicit with the idea that exchange determines production (I’d suggest Clifford, 1997, as example; for argument see Hutnyk, 1998). Such interpretations forget that Marx wanted to take production and exchange, consumption, circulation, etc. together, so as to overturn the process of exploitation (*aufheben*) and emancipate creative life from exactly those restrictions. Bataille says as much in the introduction to *The Accursed Share*.

... the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles – the overturning of the ethics that grounds them. Changing from the perspectives of restrictive economy to those of general economy accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking – and of ethics. If a part of wealth (subject to a rough estimate) is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even inescapable, to surrender commodities without return. (Bataille, 1949/1988: 25)

Anthropology had long been fascinated with the idea of ‘potlatch’. Mauss wrote *The Gift* in 1926 on the basis of reports from other anthropologists like Malinowski (on the Kula gift exchange of the Trobriand Islands) and on the festivals of destruction of the indigenous North

American potlatch ceremonies. This text inaugurated what Lévi-Strauss identifies as a beginning of theorizing in social science:

For the first time the social ceases to be the domain of pure quality – anecdote, curiosity, material for moralising description or scholarly comparison – and becomes a system, among whose parts connections, equivalences and interdependent aspects can be discovered. (Lévi-Strauss, 1987: 38)

Bataille had attended Mauss's lectures in the 1920s and, with the already mentioned essay in *La Critique Sociale*, began a lifelong exploration of notions of expenditure, reciprocity, exchange and the problematic of the gift. The gift is about ostensible generosity, it is that which is to be given generously, in excess of utility, given beyond what would be a utilitarian or reasoned calculation of value. The gift establishes social ties, reciprocity implies an ongoing relationship. In anthropology and related disciplines the well-worked theme of the Kula finds the Trobrianders engaged (seemingly forever) in a series of exchanges – of shells and necklaces – which bind trading partners together in a circle of reciprocal gift relations – these are the obligations of the gift. For Malinowski, the Kula is a serious game of both calculating exchange and of excess, debt and luxury (but for the Trobrianders?). Kula shells and necklaces are prized objects of renown, but the social relations Kula secures are trading relations, and all manner of other exchanges accompany the Kula trading trips (Malinowski, 1922). The gift here is also contradictory in that it is never only a gift – as many have pointed out, including Jacques Derrida – if a gift is to be a gift there must be no exchange, no debt to be repaid, no reciprocity, not even the idea of a payback – there can be no gift, there is only the exchange of gift and counter-gift (Derrida, 1991/1992: 6). It is impossible to give without return. Even charity returns something to the anonymous giver. The Kula and the potlatch is more like a contest, as most exchanges seem to be – destructive. As Dan Ross argues in an unpublished paper, the gift is the mythical virtuous side of a calculation that, in other respects, takes the form of the gamble, another kind of exchange, that is about chance, but unreasonably – as everyone knows – it doesn't pay off, one does not escape the calculus of credit and debt (Ross, 1992). For Derrida the unreason of the gift is that it is always a debt that is invoked – he suggests that any calculation or legislation of the gift, or, in another example, of hospitality, is impossible – hospitality must be freely given in excess of what is expected, it cannot be calculated (Derrida, 2000: 22).

For Derrida, who ascribes to Bataille a 'Hegelianism without reserve' (Derrida, 1967/1978: 251), what the gift gives is time – the possibility of taking time before repayment, whether that be a return gift or an even more extravagant potlatch. For Deleuze and Guattari, who mention Bataille only in passing, the gift inscribes, it writes, it records. In the context of a discussion of ethnology and bourgeois colonial economy they write:

The essential thing seemed to us to be, not exchange and circulation, which closely depend on the requirements of inscription, but inscription itself, with its imprint of fire, its alphabet inscribed in bodies, and on blocks of debts. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/1984: 188)

For Bataille, the gift and potlatch are a part of a calculus which suggests the necessary expenditure of an organism that, generally, receives more energy 'than is necessary to maintain life' and 'excess energy (wealth) can be used for growth of a system . . . if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit, it must be spent . . . gloriously or catastrophically' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 21). It is important again to note how Bataille distinguishes between the general and restricted, with the bourgeois manner of giving the most limited: 'Where accumulation is concerned, the one who gives loses what they have given, but in the traditional world their dignity grew in proportion to their material loss' (Bataille, 1991: 346). This may hint at romanticism, derived in part from that reading of Frazer and Mauss, and forgetting colonial disruptions. But would it change the reception of Bataille's work if it were understood that his notion of the 'ultimate' necessity to consume without return (Bataille, 1949/1988: 22) is distinguished from individual examples of destruction – coffee overboard etc. – in a way that can in fact be reconciled with the contradictions of the capitalist circuit of production in Marx? Although he explicitly disregards the significance of individual examples – accidents – in favour of the 'totality of productive wealth on the surface of the globe' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 22), he writes of 'the final dissipation'. It is here that the trick of the gift is most explicitly revealed in a political way, as part of a programme.

In a restricted economy, destruction serves primarily to reaffirm the position in the hierarchy of the one who destroys most. Reciprocity of course is an ideal in the notion of exchange as it must imply a notion of equivalence in value. That value equivalence is a matter of calculation is one of the key tricks of commerce. Hierarchy and exploitation do not calculate this ideal except to subvert equivalence as the deceit of the market where money is used to stand for a general equivalent and the various interests come to trade do not do so from equal positions. Is it this idealism Bataille wished to fight? The desire to solve this paradox of reciprocity which is never equal is perhaps the same sentiment that leads people to project human qualities (good, evil) in idealized form on to a deity (cf. Feuerbach, 1841/1972). Bataille hints at something similar in his wartime introspection about sacrifice:

The forces which together work at destroying us find in us such happy – and at times such violent – complicities that we cannot just simply turn away from them as interest would lead us to. We are led to contain the fire within us . . . without going to the point of delivering ourselves [Bataille had mentioned the Hindu who throws himself under a festival cart], we can deliver, of ourselves,

a part: we sacrifice a good which belongs to ourselves or – that which is linked to us by so many bonds, from which we distinguish ourselves so poorly – our fellow being. (Bataille, 1943/1988: 96)

In a system obsessed with things, the absolute and sacrificial ideal is curiously not things, but profit. Having banished God and insisted on materialism, capital still reifies a deity of abstract and awful power. Where what Bataille calls the moral result of Marxism is to be achieved through subjecting things to a regime of governance that enslaves things and not people, instead capital has developed into the unrestrained liberation of things from any rigorous control, while humanity remains enslaved (Bataille, 1949/1988: 135–6). Against sacrifice and complicity, against the restricted economy, Bataille wants to release a self-consciousness that would not be deceived into false transactions. He denounces the ignorance of the generally 'catastrophic destructions' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 24) just as he condemns 'shameless attempts at evasion such as charitable pity' (Bataille, 1997: 129). What is needed is to face up to the fact that 'the choice is limited to how the wealth is squandered' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 23). Bataille recognized that the compulsion to produce an excess is not inevitable – but equilibrium is also not compatible with capitalism, as Marx's analysis of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall had shown. There are, however, the possibilities of choice of expenditures: destructive war, or expansion of services, frivolous dissipations (like brothels?) or 'the rational extension of a difficult industrial growth' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 25). In an introductory essay Bataille was not going to dwell on the undeniably interesting possibilities and specific instances, he was concerned instead with exposing general parameters and working for an escape from the poverty of accumulation. It was 'Bataille who showed that the glorious and transcendent sovereignty of the sun-king present[ed] to all [that] their common sovereignty had only ever taken place held and enslaved within the installation of bourgeois power, of market economy, of the modern state' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1997: 131).

The trick of restricted economic systems is the conflicted hypocrisy of claims to equality mouthed by those whose privilege to speak rests upon an inequality they will not admit. The structure of fascism, ruling class stupidity, illegitimacy, bourgeois delusion and lack of courage is clear in the self-centred opportunism manifest in the failure to face up to the ongoing crimes of that same privilege⁸ – bureaucrats claiming unrestrained universal forces as excuse for their repressive rules and showing no restraint in claiming specific rights for when they break these rules themselves. The advent of war is a curse of a sacrificial expenditure out of control, just as is the exploitation of slavery, including wage-slavery. The curse of restricted economy can only be lifted by a consciousness of the process, and in this light it seems disappointing that all that can be proposed instead of war is a general raising of the living standard (Bataille,

1949/1988: 40) – but after all, this would be something, wouldn't it? No doubt what is raised must also be education, and autonomy – sovereignty, the freedom to squander for all, not just the rich – but something in the formula of the gift – its duplicity as debt, returns to haunt. Bataille had also argued that social security and wage claims increase the share of wealth that is allocated to non-productive labour and this would apply to efforts – after the Second World War, the Marshall Plan – to raise the general standard. There would be less for the bosses' luxuries, but also less to devote to the development of the means of production. 'The share allotted to present satisfaction [bosses' luxury and welfare] increases at the expense of the share allotted to the concern for an improving future' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 154). Wage claims are part of the negotiation of a system which needs to be abolished, not improved. Shopping (for a better deal) is indeed a form of civil war.

A further trouble with Bataille's formula lies in 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' where his notion of sovereignty in the end undermines the coherence of his political programme. In 1933 Bataille identified fascism as 'no more than an acute reactivation of the latent sovereign agency' (Bataille, 1997: 135). The etymology of fascism has to do with 'uniting' or 'concentrating' according to Bataille, and this is used to show how fascism is the activation of the masses under a sovereign leader (the power of the charismatic king, or the Führer, based on a unity of military and religious legitimacy with – like Louis Bonaparte in Marx's *18th Brumaire* – a populist public support). Jürgen Habermas is critical of this ambiguous fascination with fascism as unity, and questions his proximity to the Weberian religious explanation of capital – as well as insisting that Bataille could not be dialectical (Habermas, 1987: 229). Be this as it may, Bataille was clearly a militant against the war, there is no doubting his engagement in this regard:

... we can express the hope of avoiding a war that already threatens. But in order to do so we must divert the surplus production, either into rational extension of a difficult industrial growth, or into unproductive works that will dissipate an energy that cannot be accumulated in any case. (Bataille, 1949/1988: 25)

And even after the war he maintained a theoretical interest in ways to escape restrictions. In the second volume of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille speculates on alcohol, war and holidays as the choices for expenditure. He is not so naive as to think that a larger participation in erotic games would help avoid war (nice thought), but he does rethink the ways of avoiding war: 'we will not be able to decrease the risk of war before we have reduced, or begun to reduce, the general disparity in standards of living' (Bataille, 1991: 188). This 'banality' is what Bataille sees as the only chance for an alternative to war, and it is possible even in the midst of the Cold War.

The trouble was, faced with war itself, Bataille retreated to the library.

Bataille's contempt for and fascination with fascist 'community' must – Nancy says – be behind his withdrawal (Nancy, 1991: 17). Unlike Marx in the Brumaire, Bataille's analysis fills him with unease and inevitable failure in the face of 'a paradox at which his thinking came to a halt' (Nancy, 1991: 23). It is this interruption that left Bataille susceptible to the postmodernist revision which drained any sense of a political programme – the fight against fascism – from his work.⁹ He was confined to the library, resigned, introspective, and in the end left passing books on to others with a whispered recommendation (the review *Critique* was the last publishing venture he started, and it continues today). Spiralling into the conflagration of the sun, which gives energy without (obvious) return, he later wrote:

The planet congested by death and wealth
 a scream pierces the clouds
 Wealth and death close in.
 No-one hears this scream of a miserable waiting.

And then:

Knowing that there is no response. (Bataille, 2001: 221)

And, finally, from the 'Notebook for Pure Happiness' written towards the end of his life:

The only escape is failure. (Bataille, 2001: 223)

Everything that we know is true, but on condition of disappearing in us (we know better in ceasing to know). (Bataille, 2001: 247)

Part IV

Have I not led my readers astray? (Bataille, 1991: 430)

Bataille cannot be left to rot in the library.

How useful an experiment would it be to try to 'apply' Bataille's notion of expenditure to politics today? Klaus-Peter Köpping asks questions about 'modernity' which arise explicitly from his reading of Bataille as a theorist of transgression, addressing political examples such as Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia and Indonesia (Köpping, 2002: 243). A more extravagant general economy framework for such questions might take up the massive accumulation that is the excess of an arms trade promoting regional conflicts as integral to sales figures on the one side, with the performative futility of massed anti-capitalism rallies and May Day marches that fall on the nearest Sunday so as not to disrupt the city on the other. Expenditure and squandering today, in Bataille's sense, might be seen in both the planned obsolescence of cars, computers and nearly all merchandise, as well as in the waste production and fast-food service industry cults and *fashionista* style wars, tamogochi and Beckham haircuts that currently sweep the planet. No

doubt it would be too mechanical to rest with such applications, too utilitarian, but the relevance is clear. The use-value of Georges Bataille is somewhat eccentric and the deployment of pre-Second World War circumstances as a comparative register for today is of course merely speculative. No return to the 1930s (colourize films now). Yet, taking account of a long list of circumstantial differences – no Hitler, no Moscow, no Trotskyite opposition, etc. – is also unnecessary since it is only in the interests of thinking through the current conjuncture so as to understand it, and change it, that any return should ever be contemplated.

The importance of French anthropology – Mauss – as well as psycho-analysis and phenomenology, cannot be underestimated and all are crucial in Bataille's comprehension of the rise of fascism. Can these matters help us to make sense of political debates in the midst of a new world war today? That the intellectual currents which shaped Bataille's analysis were post-Marxist did not, then, replace the importance of Marx. Today the comprehension of Bush's planetary terror machine still requires such an analysis, but one that can also be informed by the reading of Bataille's thought as shaped by the intellectual currents mentioned above. In a period of capitalist slump, crisis of credit, overextended market, defaulted debt and threatening collapse, the strategy of war looms large. Even before the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, Bush was clearly on the warpath with missile defence systems, withdrawal from various international treaties and covenants, and massive appropriations for military and surveillance systems. The imperial element is clear and sustained – the aggression against the Palestinians, the adventure in Afghanistan and the war on Iraq (to defend papa Bush's legacy) obviously have their roots in the imperialist mercantile tradition – plunder and war in pursuit of resources, primarily oil, secondarily armaments sales. If this is potlatch, it is of the destructive kind that Bataille feared.

The possibility of a geo-political solution other than war should be evaluated. But it is a matter of record that, under the Bush family regime, the US–Europe alliance has not been interested in pursuing any programme of reduction of disparity, a few suspensions of Third World debt and UN summits notwithstanding. When Bataille searches for an alternative to war in some 'vast economic competition' through which costly sacrifices, comparable to war, would yet give the competitor with initiative the advantage (Bataille, 1949/1988: 172), he holds out hope for a kind of gift without return. That he showed some enthusiasm for the Marshall Plan after the Second World War as a possible model for this might need to be ascribed to the exhausted condition of post-war France, but he soon revised his assessment. The Marshall Plan was not as disinterested as Bataille implied; it facilitated circulation and recoupment of surplus value as profit. The Cold War and nuclear proliferation turned out to be the preferred examples of reckless waste in actuality – as recognized in volume two of *The Accursed Share* (Bataille, 1991: 188). Today,

redistribution is not considered an option, the threat of Asian capitalism – after the slaughter of millions – can be ignored, and the war on Islam (known variously as the Gulf War, Zionism, and the War on Terror) appears as the primary strategy (combined with a war on South America, mistakenly named as a war on drugs, and a war on immigration disguised as a security concern).

The secondary strategy is a newly hollowed out version of liberal welfare. In 1933 Bataille had written of the bourgeois tendency to declare 'equality' and make it their watchword, all the time showing they do not share the lot of the workers (Bataille, 1997: 177). In the 21st century, Prime Minister Blair of England has made some gestures towards a similar pseudo-alternative. At a Labour Party congress in the millennium year he spoke of the need to address poverty and famine in Africa, and no doubt still congratulates himself on his pursuit of this happy agenda; as I write a large entourage of delegates and diplomats are flying to Johannesburg for another conference junket – the Earth Summit. The party accompanying Blair and Deputy Prescott includes multinational mining corporation Rio Tinto Executive Director Sir Richard Wilson (*The Guardian*, 12 August 2002). Rio Tinto is hardly well known for its desire to redistribute the global share of surplus expenditure for the welfare of all.

If there are no gifts, only competitions of expenditure, what then of the effort of Bataille to oppose fascism? It is not altruistic, and yet it is the most necessary and urgent aspect of his work that is given to us to read for today. Is fascism a charity-type trick? A deceit of double dealing which offers the illusion of more while giving less? Something like this psycho-social structure of fascism appears to be enacted in the potlatch appeasements of the propaganda spinsters surrounding Blair. The New Labour and Third Way public offering is ostentatiously to be about more healthcare, more police, more schools, but Blair spins and rules over a deception that demands allegiance to a privatization programme that cares only about reducing the costs (fixed capital costs) of providing healthy, orderly, trained employees for industry, of short-term profit and arms sales to Israel, of racist scare-mongering and scapegoating of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, of opportunist short-term gain head-in-the-sand business-as-usual. Similarly, the gestures of multi-millionaires like George Soros and Bill Gates in establishing charity 'foundations' to ease their guilt is not just a matter of philanthropy, it is a necessary gambit of containment (and these two in particular bringing their cyber-evangelism to the markets of Eastern Europe, South and South-East Asia). The liberal rhetoric of charity and the militant drums of war are the two strategies of the same rampant restrictive economy. Carrot and stick. Team A and team B of capitalist hegemony – the critique of the gift is clear, a gift is not a gift but a debt of time – and this is not really generosity or hospitality. The same can be said perhaps of war – it is not war but profit, just as the gift reassures the giver of their superior status, the war on terror unleashes a terror of its own;

war does not produce victories but rather defeat for all. Bataille shows us a world in ruins.

September 11 has been made into the kind of event that transforms an unpopular (even unelected) figure into a leader under whom the nation coheres in a new unity – much as Bataille saw Nuremburg achieve for the National Socialists. Of course I am not suggesting Bush is a Nazi – he hasn't got the dress sense – but people were betrayed by the trick of a 'democracy' that offers pseudo-participation once every four years, and this time in a way that has consequences leading inexorably to a massive fight. The kowtowing to big business with a rhetoric of social security has been heard before – it was called the New Deal (or welfare state) and was a deception almost from the start. Where there was perhaps some contractual obligation of aid in the earlier forms, today the trick of the buy-off bribery of service provision is contingent and calculated according only to corporate strategic gain. While we lurch towards endless war, governments reassure us with the watchwords of security that really mean death and despair to those on the wrong side of the wire. The largest prison population ever (under democracy or any other form of government), mass confinement for minor offences (three strikes), colour overcoded death row (Mumia Abu-Jamal etc.), arrest and detention without trial or charge, celebratory executionism, etc. The incarcerated souls in the concentration camps of Sangatte,¹⁰ Woomera,¹¹ Kamunting¹² or Guantanamo¹³ are wired in and offered up as sacrificial gifts to the rule of new judicial-administrative fascism. A new toothy-smiling Christian cult of death and technology, spun carefully via press conferences and TV sitcoms – television has given up any pretence of journalism in favour of infotainment. Does the US administration dream of a new post-war era where, once again like Marshall, they could come with a plan to rebuild upon ruins? This would indicate the exhaustion of the current mode of production, which, with 'information' promised renewal but quickly stalled. Whatever the case, the enclosure of the US and Europe behind fortress walls does not – experience now shows – ensure prophylactic protection, and ruin may be visited upon all. It was Bataille who said that perhaps only the 'methods of the USSR would . . . be equal to a ruined immensity' (Bataille, 1949/1988: 167–8). Polite critiques and protest have no purchase – orderly rallies against the aggression in Afghanistan, against asylum and immigration law, against the destruction of Palestine, etc., get no 'airtime' (instead, 'political' soap opera like *The West Wing*, as the current equivalent in ideological terms to the Cold War's Bomber Command). Every leader that accedes to the 'War on Terror' programme and its excesses (civilian deaths, curtailment of civil liberty, global bombing) is an appeaser. This is like the dithering of Chamberlain, only this time the opposition activists are fighting in a 'post-national' arena and Stalin's slumber will not be broken, the Red Army cannot run interference, there is no Churchill rumbling in the wings, the fascist empire will prevail without militant mobilization across the board. This is the

appeaser's gift – betrayal into the 'ranks assigned to us by generals and industrial magnates' (Bataille, 1985: 164). The unravelling of the tricks of social welfare, of 'asylum' and 'aid' programmes, of 'interest' even (the narrowing of news broadcasts to domestic affairs) or respect, of the demonization of others, of tolerance, the hypocrisy of prejudice – all this prepares us for a war manufactured elsewhere. After the breakdown of the gift's tricks, fascism is the strategy, the obverse side of capital's coin. In this context, the geo-politics that enables, or demands, appeasement of the imperious corporate/US power is the restricted destruction we should fear, and we should fight in a struggle that goes beyond national defence, wage claims or solidarity. The discipline of the Soviets and of Bataille could be our tools.

Bataille reads on in his library. We are left speculating with him, rashly charging in with ideas that are less excessive, less exuberant, that moderation might withhold. But there is no more important time to consider the efforts in the arts to fight militarism out of control, and, as Bush drags the world into permanent war, it is worth asking why Bataille's surrealist opposition to Hitler was inadequate. Is it because there are no more thinkers in the Party? Is it that subversion is uninformed and its spirit quiet? Chained to the shelves, it is not enough to know that appeasement of the military-industrial machine is the obverse side of liberal charity. Why are we still unable to acknowledge this is the path to war? What would be adequate to move away from appeasement to containment and more? What kind of sovereign destruction would Bataille enact today? Against the 'immense hypocrisy of the world of accumulation' (Bataille, 1991: 424), the answer is clear: we should 'condemn this mouldy society to revolutionary destruction' (Bataille, 1997: 175). The Bataille of *La Critique Sociale* might argue for a glorious expenditure as that which connects people together in the social and recognizes their joint labour to produce themselves, and this must be redeemed from the restricted economy that insists on expenditure for the maintenance of hierarchy. If he were leaving the library today, the Bataille of anti-war Surrealism might say it is time for a wake-up knock-down critique of the barking dogs. The castrating lions of appeasement must be hounded out of town. Back in your kennels, yelping pups of doom. Fair call, Georges Bataille.

Notes

- 1 The Surrealists engaged in anti-colonial activity before 1925 but it was only with issue 5 of *La Revolution Surrealiste* that they began to use a Marxist vocabulary writing in opposition to the imperialist Riff war in Morocco (Lewis, 1990: 32–5).
- 2 *Blue of Noon* opens with a few pages from the unpublished and destroyed earlier book *WC*, and it is set in the Savoy Hotel, London. Is it worth travelling to the foyer of that luxurious hotel to read these pages, as a kind of perverted tourist appreciation? And to participate perhaps, if you can afford the extortionate

- tariff for a room, in an orgiastic diversion something like that therein described as passing between the characters Troppman, Dirty, the doorman and the maid. Vomit, then leave.
- 3 Richardson, in the Introduction to Bataille's *Absence of Myth*, says a similar comment – 'too many fucking idealists' – was contained in Bataille's letter of reply to the meeting invitation, claiming this as his first written criticism of Surrealism (in Bataille, 1994: 4).
 - 4 Bataille was criticized by Sartre for telling us about laughter but not making us laugh. Surya and Lotringer have both commented on this. They point out that, were he to write of an orgasm, Sartre would not then expect to come (Lotringer, introduction to Bataille, 1945/1992: xiv).
 - 5 In the final volume of the trilogy *The Accursed Share*, he writes: 'I am not overly concerned about the legitimacy of the results that I borrowed, as judiciously as I could, from the history of religions, from sociology, from political economy or from psychoanalysis . . .' (Bataille, 1991: 201).
 - 6 Bataille also side-steps the rather 'simple-minded' practice which condemns on false grounds: 'If one wishes to judge communism, it is necessary to begin by noting the differences between the development Marx forecast and the facts subsequent to that development' (Bataille, 1991: 265).
 - 7 And he then curiously begins a comparison of the treatment of a beggar in London with the outcaste in Bengal. What the significance of the Bengali example achieves here is separate from, but cannot be separated from, the ways Bengal, India, Calcutta continue to serve as a limit experience, as the polarity on the other end of the scale from London. In *The Rumour of Calcutta* I tried to contextualize this hierarchy by reading the history of Empire up to the present day from a centre in Calcutta – through which the wealth of India flowed – rather than from the moribund finance capital and retirement home for Raj officials that was colonial London (Hutnyk, 1996).
 - 8 Charity is 'only the expression of the cowardice of the modern upper classes, who no longer have the force to recognize the results of their own destructive acts' (Bataille, 1997: 177).
 - 9 For that matter, Surrealism as a whole has been similarly sanitized. Why did the 2002 Tate Modern Surrealism exhibition cleanse the movement of any political content? Desire for a communist future was fundamental to Surrealism too, but went almost without mention in 2002. What this amounts to is a systematic 'cretinization' (a good Surrealist and Marxist word). A way of blocking meanings from circulation, the disqualification of revolutionary spirit through sanctioned ignorance (Spivak, 1999).
 - 10 The detention centre in France that Blair and Home Office Minister Blunkett want closed. Blunkett himself has been particularly rabid on issues of asylum, challenging even allocations of lottery money – charity after all – to the NCADC (National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns) as part of his no sympathy Fortress UK regimen. Apparently the Minister had decided the NCADC website went beyond its brief and strayed into 'political' matters (*The Guardian*, 12 August 2002)
 - 11 Woomera is a former weapons testing area and US spy base in the South Australian desert, land appropriated from the Kukutha people. The US facility was transformed into a high security prison for primarily Afghani and Iraqi refugees, some of whom were able to escape after solidarity actions by activists outside the camp over Easter 2002.
 - 12 Kamunting is the detention centre which houses the Malaysian internees held

under the notorious Internal Security Act of Mahathir Mohammed. Originally a British law designed to deal with the communist insurgency of the 1940s and 1950s, the Malaysian state took it over and have used it to stifle dissent, holding opposition leaders and suspected militants for up to two years without trial or charge. As of late July 2002 there were 113 in detention, including the opposition youth leader Tian Chua.

- 13 The tabloid British newspaper *The Mirror* was among the few to take a fighting stand on the issue of Guantanamo when its front page headline commemorated the 200th day of incarceration for those held by the US without charge, trial, lawyers or rights with the banner headline, 'NO JUSTICE'.

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