

**UN(FOR)GIVING:  
BATAILLE, DERRIDA AND THE  
POSTMODERN DENIAL OF THE GIFT**

---

**Guido Giacomo Preparata**  
*University of Washington*

*Georges Bataille, along with Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss, Rudolf Steiner, and Karl Polanyi, may be considered an exponent of a school of thought alternative, if not antagonistic, to Liberal economics—a school which may be called “the political economy of the Gift.” The economists of the Gift analyze economic performance mostly through a society’s use of its surplus. What differentiates Bataille from the others, however, is his obsessive insistence that wholesome, disinterested ways of giving are, in fact, an impossibility. To Bataille, all acts of munificence throughout history have been but manifestations of a barbarous appetite to outshine others, either in peace through sumptuary expenditure, or in war through holocaust and sacrifice. This characterization of human conduct has become a tenet of the late anti-humanist discourse by way of Jacques Derrida, who recycled Bataille’s polemic in the eighties. It is thus curious to observe how, in the end, Bataille’s anti-Liberal radicalism has brought his postmodern followers to converge with the Liberal school, which itself belittles the power of selfless donation and the significance of gift-exchange.*

**Introductory**

Contemporary social science, as practiced by lay professionals in the academic mainstream, may be summarily divided into two currents: the Liberal orthodoxy coursing unperturbed on one side, and the new, rising postmodern heterodoxy flowing ever more confidently on the other. The former banks on its long-standing and putatively respectable tradition of econometric, micro-economic and general equilibrium encapsulations of utility-maximization, all of which, truly, are part of a dogmatic, doctrinaire, and pseudo-scientific build-up fomented to persuade all and sundry that mankind is a collection of egotistic particles, “probably” engendered by chance, and reined in exclusively by the invisible hand of a god-like auctioneer within the no-less hypostasized suggestion of “the marketplace.” The latter current of postmodernism, instead, is the latest intellectual lifestyle fashioned *ad usum* of the institutional Left; increasingly orphaned of the Marxian faith, the “dissidents” appear to have taken refuge, ever more earnestly

during the past twenty-five years, in a different kind of ideological shelter. The new postmodern posture postulates the end of all certainties, universals and absolutes, all of them being arraigned as idols and superstitious phantasms that lay hold of the mind to work fascistic and genocidal disasters upon the masses subjected to leaders thus possessed. Postmodernism rejects, in fact, the old Socialist employer/employee antagonism, and has fished out in its stead a gospel of divisiveness, which, in its most explicit and refined expressions, depicts the world as an unbounded pool of “power,” whose social dynamics are dictated by the unceasing state of warfare pitting the sphere of rationalist and disciplinarian discourse (i.e., “the white, elitist powers that be”) versus the realm of the tattered “others,” whose aggregate counter-thrust to the coercive reach of the enemy is an illiterate and syncopated howl of furious defiance; it is, in the romanticized terms of this school of thought, the violent non-cooperation of the rejects—be they Muslims, madmen, minorities, or criminals, according to the opportune political definition of the moment. In a nutshell, this is the vision propounded by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-84), which the American intelligentsia has eagerly endorsed and readapted since the late seventies with a view to inculcating it into the language and mental mores of the collectivity. Thanks to assiduous and patient work, the ingraining in government and higher education has been so successful that nowadays most advocates of this view are only faintly (if at all) aware of its intellectual origin. Most professionals who are partial to the so-called “politics of diversity” do not seem to be aware that all such fantastic talk of “power,” “difference,” and of “reasoned discourse versus vital violence” is nothing but a late re-elaboration of anti-traditional Gnosis, and that its ultimate prophet is not Foucault, but rather the true master and inspirer of the entire movement: Georges Bataille.

As shall be detailed hereafter, Bataille was many things. Amongst them, a coripeus of sorts within a not-so-covert gathering of Devil-worshippers, who communed with the avowed intent of resuscitating somehow Dionysian rituals of immolation and like violent practices. In short, he was one of those *maîtres à penser* who believed that proper conduct in this world was to reconcile ourselves to the necessity of Evil, and to accost anew the sphere of the sacred by worshipping divinity as an impersonal principle that dispenses, with a dimly discernible sense of equilibration, love and creation with one hand, and carnage, holocaust and torture with the other. Integral to this conception of life is Bataille’s production as a social scientist—and it is on this aspect alone, Bataille’s economics, that the article will dwell.<sup>1</sup> Economically speaking, for Bataille, the active and willing labor of Evil

manifests itself in the cyclical and insuppressible churning of war and famine: this appears to be the dictate of the divine engine governing the universe. From this follows Bataille's need to erase in his argumentation any notion that there might be an aboriginal source of compassion, generousness, and cooperation in us humans that could not only offset the forces of ravage, but ultimately overwhelm them. In order to drive his point home, Bataille denied first of all the existence of a benevolent God, and second—as shall be described below—he attempted to reason that *disinterested gifting*, which is *the* economic token of love, is an ontological impossibility.

Ultimately, the message of this piece is fourfold: first, that what passes for new, radical postmodernism is actually a system of belief derived from the imaginative revisitation of Gnostic myth by a thinker, whose utterly noxious nature and perilous influence must be unambiguously recognized and denounced; second, that such postmodern heterodoxy has gained wide acceptance within the arts and sciences of America, which are governed with an iron fist by more or less conservative Liberal (unconditionally pro-market, materialist) stewards, precisely because postmodernism, despite its seeming opposition to standard Liberal politics, rejoins Liberalism in a common denial of the economic merits and significance of altruism; third, that the above conclusion is evidence that contemporary social science is for the most part fashioned and drafted by interests that are at best amoral (market Liberalism with its obsessive and exclusive emphasis on technology and business), and at worst downright immoral (Bataillean sociology and postmodernist derivatives); and finally, that all scholars that count themselves within the great compassionate traditions of mankind, should be clearly alert to this reality, and therefore prepare themselves to question with the greatest rigor and determination any normative suggestions, putatively drawn up for the benefit of the common good, that might arise from either the Liberal, or especially the postmodern camp—“especially” the latter because by professing its commitment to dissident radicalism, postmodernism's counsels might often reveal themselves, as it generally happens, to be insidious suggestions to indulge or persevere in the cultivation of uncompassionate and conservative patterns of thought.

## A Semi-Forgotten, Disquieting Genius

It seems to me that I have a crab in my head,  
a crab, a toad, a horror that I had to vomit at  
any cost.

Georges Bataille (Bataille, 1970, V, 240).

Georges Bataille (1897-1962) is possibly one of the most original thinkers of the twentieth century. Today, however, he is mostly remembered as a crankish icon of Paris's literary milieu, a ghost-like presence occasionally lurking behind the late postmodern bestsellers by Foucault, Baudrillard, and Derrida. But in truth, he was a towering personality, whose testimony has yet to be uncovered to its full extent, and whose pervasive inspiration on contemporary (postmodern, anti-humanist) thought has not been duly acknowledged hitherto.

Bataille was a quaint figure, indeed. Of the satanic fancy we have spoken. The range of his passion and the scope of his analysis were such that it is still difficult to determine whether he was a surrealist pornographer<sup>2</sup> who dabbled in the social sciences, or rather an economist who indulged a knack for smut and poetic reverie. Perhaps, it is in this ambivalence that Bataille's powers of fascination reside. His eclecticism, as well as the rawness of the material, which is compounded by the fitful unfashionableness of his fictional style, have so far prevented his opus from achieving the status of "classic" in the scholarly arena. It might not be long before this happens, however. In any case, upon close scrutiny, it shall be difficult to deny that two, interrelated concepts stemming from Bataille's social investigation have had an extraordinary and lasting impact on the discourse of American academia, as well as on America's public discourse and official double-speak.

These two influential concepts originally coined by Bataille are the "accursed share" (*la part maudite*) and his notion of "power" (*le pouvoir*). Both are the fruit of a peculiar re-elaboration of Gnostic lore that Bataille undertook in order to account for the evolution and transformation, in our societies, of political and economic dynamics from the pre-modern to the industrial epoch. *La part maudite*, which Bataille considered his best piece of scholarship, was published shortly after World War Two (Bataille, 1967); it concluded a period of study that had been sparked in the early thirties by Mauss's famous 1925 essay on the Gift (*Le don*) (Mauss, 1990). In this book, Bataille outlined a general theory of growth, accumulation, and expenditure, which revolved

around the particular use that a given society may make of its superabundant crops, human resources, and commodities. From the anthropological record, he extracted the notion of “accursed share,” as that portion of a society’s surplus that “begs” to be dissipated violently and without counterpart—in war, mass sacrifice, or mere conspicuous, luxurious dissipation. While he was studying the economic physiognomy of societies, Bataille had also garnered a team of researchers and scholars, which he christened the *Collège de sociologie*. With the help of these collaborators, he proceeded to tackle the nature of royal prerogative and of power in a series of lectures held between 1937 and 1939. In these lectures, Bataille developed the concept of “the core” (*le noyau*). Bataille construed “the core” as that original body of practices, rituals and preternatural beliefs, which seemed to have exuded a form of cementing energy amongst the members of all archaic communities (Bataille, 1970, II, 310). Bataille saw these pristine worlds as being held together by a shared belief in an archetypal balance between birth and destruction, between joy and slaughter. Such credal principles traditionally took the form of a pantheon inhabited by truculent divinities demanding various forms of bloodletting. In this regard, the most poignant of instances was to Bataille the civilizations of the Aztecs, though he noted that rites of sacrifice and holocaust were common to many civilizations (Bataille, 1970, I, 152-57), so common that a general theory of creed and power could be etched. Bataille thus speculated that the story of power in our time is the narrative of this aboriginal sacred energy. According to his story, this potent social “fluid” was initially “appropriated” by the kings of the pre-modern era, who identified themselves with the crucified messiah of the Gospels, and began concomitantly to divert to the “outside” some of this accursed appetite for destruction, as evidenced by the interminable dynastic wars of the pre-modern era. Eventually, this intriguing transformation culminated into the advent of the modern State, whose mechanical routines and processes of thrift and accumulation crushed the kernel of sacred belief and dispersed its fluid in the texture of contemporary society. The result of this extraordinary metamorphosis could then be taken to be the reason behind the spiritual confusion of our times, which is contradistinguished by the soulless administration of our Liberal States, prone to fine words and brutal deeds (perennial warfare) on the one hand, and the inchoate frenzy of the dispossessed masses on the other, masses that are seen as the addled, unsophisticated inheritors of the pristine, violent energy of the core (Bataille, 1970, II, 342-46). Thus construed, the world is a surreal stage tenanted by bureaucrats bent on molesting madmen, and dragooning a refractory rabble into fighting

“patriotic” wars—wars that are, at a first remove, conflicts of oligarchic hegemony, yet which ultimately betoken the ineluctable price in blood ordained by the accursed share. As set out in the introduction, this Bataillean construction of the world, which hinges on the joint-construct of excess/power, is, indeed, the template of all recent so-called postmodern production, from Foucault’s monographs on asylums and clinics (Foucault, 1972, 1975), and his famous theory of Power/Knowledge to *Empire*, Hardt, & Negri’s late blockbuster on Globalization (Hardt & Negri, 2000), by way of Baudrillard’s reflections on the phoniness of television culture (Baudrillard, 1990, 1991) and Derrida’s appraisal of monetary exchange (appraised in the final section of this article). Such a production may also be legitimately filed under the rubric of anti-humanist thought. Anti-humanist in the sense that it is pervaded with deep existential despair, pervaded with the pessimist conviction, that is, that man per se, as a willed individual, capable of fashioning life for the good, does not exist. To this school of thought, man is just a molecule in a swirl of forces beyond his might, which jostle him in one direction or another according to some semi-inscrutable, and *natural* alternation of generation and devastation.

To repeat, no systematic appraisal of the Bataillean matrix behind conventional postmodern works will be attempted here. This article will merely focus on a very specific segment of this important connection, namely Bataille’s treatment of gifting, and its virtual replication in Derrida, fifty years after its original formulation. This circumscribed analysis is here presented as an introductory side step into the intriguing realm of Bataille, and into the semi-unacknowledged legacy bequeathed by this dark genius on contemporary political economy. In this sweeping fresco of existential hermeneutics, Bataille’s nested treatise on the gift is nonetheless a significant contribution. The seminal idea of this particular invective against charity—that it is unworthy of heroic beings, who need not be shackled by gratitude—was indeed planted by de Sade in his celebrated *Justine*. And Bataille was a careful reader and admirer of the Marquis. Bataille did something novel in revisiting this theme. And that was to highlight the strident antagonism of his pioneering anti-humanism to the idealistic hope that generosity and a system of benevolent emulation supported by a generalized policy of gifting among free city-states may act as a shield against man’s murderous and oligarchic propensities. The thesis of this article is, then, that Bataille’s (and Derrida’s) attack on the gift is, more than by skepticism, prompted by fear. In other words, it is my suspicion that behind the obsessive and renewed effort to deny the beneficial virtues of gifting there lies the determination to kill in the reader any

hope that this world is perfectible, that peace and justice may triumph in some form or other. It is as if thinkers of Bataille's ilk had already made up their minds as to what may be humanly effected in this world—and this would hitherto amount to little more than a series of truces in one endless sequence of painful tumults. And, therefore, to disabuse the rest of us of the notion that good can be done, the Batailleans have conducted a comprehensive critique of our modes of thought and social organization by laying special emphasis on the systematic failure of mankind's professed commitment to lofty, humane goals throughout history. The postmodern invective against the gift is merely an economic appendix of this vast project of anti-humanist catechesis. Ultimately, such anti-humanist speculation, despite, or rather owing to, Bataille's malevolent brilliance, has endured a steady, and refreshed season of success in academia (see for instance, Martyn, 1999) and public discourse for the past thirty years, because its inherent misanthropism and lack of compassion has proven to be highly compatible with the uncaring and unforgiving ethos of standard Liberal, laissez-faire economics (Polanyi, 2001, 116-35). And, as such, it does stand as one important and fascinating exemplar of *conservative* discourse.

As I have expressed in the introductory section, it is my hope to see all social scientists who interpret their scholarly mission as one devoted to establishing peace and cooperation amongst men to join together and close ranks in resisting and opposing, besides the more familiar staples of bellicose invective, this late flurry of uncompassionate neo-Gnostic proliferation within the hothouse of ultra-capitalist Liberalism. I shall refine this admonitory injunction in the concluding reflections.

### **“Expenditure” According to Bataille**

Bataille developed the “notion of expenditure” (*dépense*) as a theoretical alternative to the utilitarian principles of Liberal economics. Bataille takes exception, and rightly so, to modern economics' persevering refusal to acknowledge the fundamental role which *dissipation* plays in economic activity. Liberal economists insist on conceiving the economic sphere as one consisting exclusively of investment, production, and consumption. Their theorems are devised to rationalize the prevailing distribution of wealth, which often tends to be skewed in favor of the elite: that restricted nucleus of financial, bureaucratic, and military interests commanding a vastly disproportionate share of a nation's wealth. In the political economists' partisan depiction of the self-regulating market system, poverty is

regarded as an epiphenomenon, and taxes are accounted as something of a nuisance with no significant impact on welfare, other than providing for the state's basic commodities (laws, security and defense).

To belie this tale of conservatism, several voices made themselves heard. Together they came to form another tradition of political economy, rooted in anthropological analysis, which featured some of the most sophisticated economists of modernity, such as Thorstein Veblen, Marcel Mauss, Karl Polanyi, and Rudolf Steiner. This new vanguard taught us to analyze economics from a vantage point that is the obverse of that of classical Liberal economics. Instead of considering economics, as the Liberals do, the problem of managing efficiently *resources that are assumed to be scarce*, the other school—let us call it “the political economy of the gift”—intimates that resources are not scarce but plentiful, and that the conundrum arising from such abundance (i.e., the surplus), *is how best to employ this miraculous gift*—the joint bounty of Nature and human ingenuity. The economics of Bataille represents, in a sense, the sinister complement to the economy of the gift. Unlike the other exponents of this new current, whose approach he nonetheless shared, Bataille was not preoccupied with the *benevolent* uses of the surplus, but rather with its consummation by those communities that happened to find themselves under the spiritual influence of violent Dionysian worship. Barbarous civilizations have made peculiar use of their surpluses, indeed: they have *squandered* unspeakable amounts of resources in pageantry, sacrifice, dazzling munificence, and bloody conquest. It is this aspect of the gift economy that enthralled Bataille: the financing of sovereign waste and religious rage—this aspect alone, not the wholesome gifting to the arts and sciences, and least of all the Liberals' utilitarian attention to thrift and capital accumulation, which he dismissingly deemed “a miserable conception” (Bataille, 1970, I, 303). What Bataille thought truly exceptional in the process of economic creation is not the process of stockpiling and the immense technological resources that have been mobilized for the sake of production so much as the *uses* that are made of this production in excess. And, clearly, this is a problem of metaphysical magnitude: the avenues along which the excess is distributed reveal the “soul” of the community under observation. By identifying the final destinations of surplus allocation (be it to war, instruction, sanitation, art, etc.), one may infer whether a given collectivity prays to Aztec divinities, Apollinean ones, an uncouth mix of both, other deities, or none at all. Despite the censorship imposed by the Liberal school political economy against opposing views, fascinating and difficult investigations of this sort have yielded some remarkable studies, including Bataille's.



All in all, a society always produces more than is necessary to its sustenance, it disposes of an excess. It is precisely the usage it makes of [such an excess] that determines [its physiognomy]: the surplus is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes of so much history. And growth itself has many forms each of which, in the long term, hits upon some limit. Contrasted, demographic growth turns military...: having reached the military limit, the surplus assumes the sumptuary forms of religion, from which derive games and spectacles, or the personal [ostentation] of luxury (Bataille, 1957, 143).

What is, then, “expenditure?” “Luxury,” replied Bataille, “mourning, wars, cults, monumental and sumptuary construction, games, spectacles, the arts and perverse sexual activity (that is to say diverted from genital finality) represent as many activities that...have their end in themselves.” Architectural excess, the jewelry and tawdry attire of harlots, and sodomy are all forms of dissipate expense expecting no counterpart. “All production of sacred things” [—i.e. sacrifice]—demands a bloody squander of men and beasts” (Bataille, 1970, I, 305). This is Bataille’s notion of “creation by way of loss”: in essence, an earmarking of human, earthly, and animal life for the celebration of truculent divinities. What of misery, poverty? Why, Bataille legitimately wondered, wasn’t the surplus throughout the ages systematically devoted to compensate distributional imbalances? Why was there always, in our world, extravagant waste existing side by side with indescribable squalor? The answer, said Bataille, is to be found again in the human collective’s archetypal propensity to squander sovereignly—for show, ostentation, rank, pleasure, hate, or rage. No matter how much the sight of indigence might offend our sensitivities, the urge to blast resources in the air, giving in to our erotic disposition, appears to have been always, historically, the stronger impulse—in truth, we happened to have lived hitherto like the monsters of Sade’s novels (Bataille, 1970, I, 306-8). There are cathedrals in the desert, high-rises in the slums, and mass sacrifices in times of “peace”: Bataille’s argument, alas, seems irrefutable.

Specifically, his inspiration for these economic reflections was Marcel Mauss’s famous 1925 *Essai sur le don* (published in English as *The Gift*), in which the French anthropologist explored the power of unrequited donation. Munificence, as Mauss observed, gave rise to the so-called “economics of the potlatch,” which governed, in two notable instances, the practices of the Pacific islanders and of America’s natives. Mauss followed the tokens of gifting, as they circulated among the sister

tribes in its pristine form, spurring growth and strengthening goodwill along the chain of exchange. Liberal textbooks, on the other hand, generally teach that modern monetary regimes were preceded by a barter economy. But that is false. Mauss illustrated how, by an act of donation made by one tribal chieftain to another and passed on from the latter to yet another neighbor, a web of promises came to link the islands of the archipelago: a circle was formed along which the offering journeyed endlessly, effacing as it went the notion of origin or destination, and cementing thereby the communal bond of the participant isles. The gift did not have to be, and should not have been mutual; it had to be given away, and in time, through the circle it would have assuredly returned in other form, often greatly magnified by a game of emulation, which triggered a dynamics of prosperous growth. It thus was manifest to Mauss that this institution was an open revelation of union—i.e., of religion (from the Latin *religare*, to unite). And, as such, Mauss revered it; he revered it as the vestigial analogue of the Greek, Apollinean liturgy (*leitourgia*: the obligation of the wealthy to fund the *polis's* arts and defense), the Buddhist and Christian alms, the Jubilee of the Old Testament, and the Islamic *zaqat* (one of the five pillars of faith). As religious offering, contribution to science, and streamlining of excessive wealth concentration; as a means which perpetuates the life of the all communities, the gift renews the life of our race.<sup>3</sup>

Of the stories told by Mauss, Bataille lingered exclusively on the perverse variants of the gifting cycle. He favored those accounts of tribal rulers competing with one another in an orgy of squander of life and wealth to affirm their *status*. Bataille was thus seeking to guess the identity of the so-called “infernal” forces, not the profile of the Apollinean gods, whose taboos he did urge to transgress. In this regard, he had two objectives in mind: to prove that the excess exhausts itself on a one-way street, and to undermine the traditional conception that the surplus regenerates itself virtuously along a circular process of gifting.

From the religious standpoint, be it Apollinean or Dionysian, Bataille stated that “every creation springs from abundance.” “The Gods create out of an excess of power, an overflow of energy. Creation is accompanied by a surplus of ontological substance” (Eliade, 1959, 97). How is one, then, to handle this overflow of Being? “The ultimate question for man,” according to Bataille, was the following: “Being is an effect constantly solicited in two directions: 1) one leads to the formation of durable ordinances and of conquering forces; 2) the other leads by means of the expenditure of force and excess to destruction and death” (Bataille, 1970, II, 371). In this dichotomy, we find the standard Bataillean schema positing the “true” sacred Dionysian-Aphrodisitic

forces of dissipation vis-à-vis the profane power of discourse and accumulation (the God of the Christians and the bourgeois regime of reason). The latter is the world of utility, and *work*, the former is the sovereign sphere of idleness, war, eroticism, leisure, and sacrifice.

The leisure, which affords prostitution, is not the same thing as beauty; often beauty coexists with work, ugliness with leisure. But never is work propitious to beauty, whose very meaning is to escape from overwhelming constraints. A beautiful body, a beautiful face have the sense of beauty if the utility which they represent has in no manner altered them, if they cannot warrant the idea of an existence devoted to *servicing* (Bataille, 1970, VIII, 126).

In his commentary upon the trial of the seigniorial murderer of the 1400s, Gilles de Rais, Bataille had similarly argued that “for the majority of mankind it is necessary to work, so as to allow the privileged ones to *play*, even to play, sometimes, the game of killing one another.” The sweat pouring down the brow of the masses is, in the eyes of the sovereign individual, only the effort preceding play. “We tend to forget this often,” Bataille pressed on, “but the principle of nobility itself, what it is in its essence, is the refusal to suffer the degradation, the forfeiture, which is the inevitable effect of [manual] work! In a fundamental manner, for the society of yesteryear, work is shameful” (Bataille, 1970, X, 313).

A quarter of a century before the publication of Mauss’s essay, Thorstein Veblen had already fully developed, in his masterpiece *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the late Bataillean notion of “*dépense*” by offering a detailed description of “wasteful expenditure” (or “conspicuous consumption”) under the influence of what the Norwegian-American social scientist called the barbarian spirit.

But the French, then, did not read English.

Veblen imputed all noxious waste, war, games, spectacles, ritual of prevarication, outlandish luxurious dissipation, and seemingly inexplicable, absurd fashion styles to the survival of archaic, that is, barbarous, traits in a modern machine-driven society (Veblen, 1899, chapters VIII-X). More than thirty years before Bataille, Veblen had written about the decisive transition from the Demetrian tutelary stage of husbandry and tillage to the masculine “predatory culture” of war and its economic pendant, slavery. What factors had been responsible for this particular transition, Veblen, and even Bataille, did not precisely know, though both authors averred that the shift has signaled a “spiritual

difference” (ibid.). “Until the advent of war and slavery,” Bataille wrote, “the embryonic civilization rested upon the activity of freemen, essentially equal. But slavery was born of war” (Bataille, 1970, X, 602). Likewise, Veblen spoke in connection to this age of “primitive technology” of “masterless men” and “group solidarity.” (Veblen, 1914, Chapter II; and 1899, 219). But with the coming of the predatory warriors, labor had become “irksome” (Veblen, 1899, 18).

Then *homo oeconomicus* entered the stage. Veblen portrayed him as an ingenious toolmaker, who would switch his archaic, emulative bent—including the propensity to fight and kill—to the acquisition of wealth, an excess of which, thanks to the technological shift, was presently available for the taking. Bataille, on the other hand, tinting the account with his customary morosity, narrated that man, “by abandoning his original simplicity, chose the doomed path of war.” From war was issued slavery, which eventually begot prostitution (Bataille, 1970, X, 603-4). Both authors agreed that the primal drive of man in a social environment is his *desire for standing, for status*. This is a corroborated finding of anthropological investigation, and it lies at the foundation of the political economy of the gift. Karl Polanyi gave it a classic formulation in *The Great Transformation*. Unlike the biased myths of Liberalism—which were first articulated by thinkers such as Smith, Hobbes, or Rousseau,—the political economy of the gift rests, instead, on the fundamental and *realistic* assumption that the first element of collective interaction is *the individual’s yearning for recognition*. The savage state of society, Polanyi objected, was characterized by neither the pursuit of self-interest, nor benevolent communism, nor the state of war of man against man (Polanyi, 2001, 48 and ff.).

When *squander* is the theme being broached, it is inevitably of *gods* that one will soon have to speak. A Demetrian—egalitarian, feminist, and communalist—yet afflicted by a disdain for animistic frenzy and a very modern passion for machines—Veblen could not but employ terms such as “spirit” or “genius” when it came to identify the prime engines of these wasteful appetites. Interestingly, he, like Bataille, had no liking whatever for the “vengeful God of the Book” (e.g., Jehovah, or Allah), which he condemned with no afterthought as one of the highest, and most repulsive forms of barbarism. However, if exposed to the anatomical mysteries of Dionysism, and of Bataille’s and Sade’s sovereign principle, Veblen would have in all likelihood found himself speechless. This son of immigrant Scandinavians believed passionately in the ethic of workmanship, in the elegance and truth of science, in aesthetic linearity, and in “the fulness of life.” To him, more than distasteful, Bataille would have been utterly unfathomable. Veblen was

the most genial social scientist of the modern era, but, like all Victorians, he did not believe in the existence of the Devil.

Bataille, instead, did not acknowledge the existence of barbarian gods but only of Dionysian power on one hand, and of a modern degenerate, rational usurpation of this *primordial, wild power* on the other. Sovereignty is barbarism. When a whole civilization is erected on the basis of such usurpation of “primordial power,” the result, so thought Bataille, *is the foundation of modern society itself*: God and bureaucracy are shoved together into this category. Because Veblen waged his scholarly battle in the name of universal compassion, workmanship, equality, peace, and the conservation of life, his vision is irreconcilable with that of Bataille. However, one could still say that Bataille completed the Veblenian investigation; he did so by plumbing the darkness into which, out of pudicity, the Scandinavian had not dared to venture.

“The gift,” Bataille wrote, “is not the only form of potlatch. It is equally possible to defy rivals through spectacular destruction of wealth. It is by the intermediary of this latter form that the potlatch rejoins religious sacrifice, the acts of destruction being theoretically offered to the mythical ancestors of the beneficiaries.” From Mauss’s book Bataille quoted, in this connection, the example of a chief who, as a savage display of one-upmanship, summoned several slaves from his train and paid homage to a peer by slashing their throats before him (Bataille, 1970, I, 309). Bataille thought this “offering” far more significant than the chain of gifting per se, and it brought him to *redefine* the matter entirely.

The gift must be considered a loss and thus as a partial destruction: the desire to destroy being in part carried over onto the beneficiary. In the unconscious forms, such as psychoanalysis describes them, it symbolizes excretion, which itself is tied to death, in accordance with the fundamental connection of anal eroticism and sadism (Bataille, 1970, I, 310).

Bataille did say it: modernity was built with slave labor. Therefore, production, along with its attendant sub-menus (saving and investment), is the preoccupation proper of the slave, never of the warrior. It is the former that slaves for the latter. It follows that, today, the mentality of the thrifty middle class is a servile one.

Industrial wealth, which is presently enjoyed by the world, is the outcome of the millenary toil of the enslaved masses, of the unhappy multitudes... (Bataille, 1970, X, 604).

It was with undisguised satisfaction that Bataille observed capitalism's periodical shows of impotence, as when it is cyclically forced to burn the crop in order to salvage profits. This was to him merely the miserable treatment that a homogeneous society has in store for the overflow of nature (*le trop-plein*). There just seems to be *too much* around us, Bataille reasoned; and despite the shameless bonfires of wheat and oranges, and the dumping of staples to the bottom of the sea to shore up prices on the marketplace, there is no resisting the damnation, the surplus, the curse of this exceeding quota, which is inevitably funneled towards orgiastic dissipation. Again, Bataille seemed to intimate, one should surrender to this state of affairs.

Resuming his Aztec romance, Bataille wrote that the overflow of men, beasts, crops, food, and life is the effect of the "radiating sun, which expends without compensation" (Bataille, 1957, 66). This is the true gifting, "the incessant prodigality" of the sun: an initial radiation of solar energy reciprocated by sacrifice. No virtuous cycle, no circular, cementing growth results from it. For Bataille, the excess can only be suppressed with an effusion of blood: thus the Aztecs had to recompense the solar emission by slaughtering the "excess population." And so it generally goes with wars, massacres, and ravages of all kinds. It is, in the sad eyes of Bataille, the accursed surplus of life that begs, in the final instant, to be annihilated through an unspeakable act of savagery. It is an accursed share, a curse rather than manna; it is an excrement, one of those divine secretions that must be hallowed and consumed as an initiatory step in the horrifying cult of infernal deities. Bataille naturally recognized that, at first, we are all deeply frightened by this fateful "movement of dilapidation"; its "consequences are anguishing from the outset" (Bataille, 1957, 76), but there appears to be no escape—no escape from the sacrifice and the suffering. This is the economics of tragedy.

The economic history of modern times is dominated by the epic, but disappointing attempt by ravenous men to wrest from the Earth her wealth. The Earth has been disemboweled, yet from the inside of her stomach, what men have extracted is above all iron and fire, with which they never cease to disembowel one another.... The Earth-Mother has remained the old chthonic divinity, but with the human multitudes, she has also brought down the lord in the heavens in a never-ending uproar (Bataille, 1970, I, 472).

At this juncture, Bataille turned around to attack the conventional form of gifting—that upon which, not accidentally, all

western monotheistic hierarchies are founded: above all, the vast edifice of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Muslim ulemas and the rabbinical caste. Historically, these institutions have controlled the appanage too exclusively, and have thereby exposed themselves to vehement, and justified recrimination. Bataille did conduct his offensive against his main target—the God of the Catholics—and in general against Apollonian gift, which is *free*—that is, *anonymous*. And when the gift is free (Steiner, 1971, 77 and ff.), as highlighted earlier, it naturally generates unconstrained spiritual, poetic, and scientific activity waged in the name of inventiveness and *compassion*. This is the gift to Saint Francis, to Shakespeare, and to the holy men of Burma—the gift according to Mauss.

Of course, Bataille claimed the gift of poetry to himself and damned all else as hypocritical discourse: science, symphony, the Catholics, and the rest; but his procedure betrayed far too much, unwarranted bias. Bataille wanted to portray the gift as a *loss*, not as a *seed*, a suggestion he truly seemed to abhor. Bataille attempted here a sophisticated operation: If he could manage to undermine the wholesome notion of the gift, then he would have erased the idea of donation altogether. In essence, the plausible paths of gifting are three: the sovereign collection and subsequent squander of goods and lives as practiced by the Aztecs or other-holocaust-practicing civilizations; the conventional donation in the liberal regime of absentee ownership via taxes to the State; and the genuine, enlightened free gift to the arts and sciences as distributed to the free communes, from the Greek city-state to Cosimo de' Medici's Florence, by way of Father Arzmedi's communal experiments in the Basque lands and Rudolf Steiner's threefold commonwealth (Lux, 1990, 169-90; Steiner, 1923). From Bataille's viewpoint, the first path is presently unworkable, and the second he did not fear, for bureaucratized taxes go to feed the liberal state machine, which, despite its claim to uphold human rights, is still fully capable, and ever prone, through war, of triggering the holocaust. So it is the third path that presents something of an obstacle to his "project." Humans possess an innate responsiveness to the notion of gifting, as they intuitively understand how the latter promotes amongst them alliances, growth and knowledge; it treasures, to borrow Veblen's expression, "the fulness of life." The spiritual fabric of a society eventually built upon this notion of gifting would present no breach, no fissures through which Bataille's infernal cults, sovereign fury, and accursed dilapidation could be afforded unrestricted play. That is presumably why Bataille focused his hostility against it.

His reasoning runs as follows: The (wealthy) giver squanders the excess by transferring it in the form of money, say, to a hospital. But,

Bataille countered, the donor remains “greedily desirous to acquire” at the same time that he gives. There seems, he argued, to be a perverse contradiction at work here: the donor gives, but while he gives, he craves to take; for him it is a noble display to donate to the public, but the heroic donation is effected to reap the (slavish) kudos of the recipient community. In fact, the donor debits his balances to purchase adulation, public honors, and diffuse “servility” amongst the beneficiaries; he longs “to acquire rank.” “No one,” Bataille asserted, “can at the same time acquire knowledge without being destroyed, no one can at the same time consume wealth and augment it” (Bataille, 1967, 112). Thus Bataille thought to have proven the “ontological” impossibility of the gift: there cannot be an act that carries its contrary within itself. Either you give or you acquire; but there can be no free gift if you give (money) to acquire (subservience) in turn. Then the gift becomes a lie that cancels itself out. And that is precisely how, according to Bataille, the profane (religious and bourgeois) world manages its voluminous streams of donations. Indeed, this transaction whereby tangible goods are exchanged for immaterial prestige is a process typical of rationality, of discourse, which turns all sentiments into “things” (Bataille, 1967, 110-11).

We have heard this before: It is a variation on the sovereign theme of Sade. And, not coincidentally, it is also preached ad nauseam in every standard (Liberal) economics course throughout the western world to “disabuse” the students of the suspicion that economic efficiency is best achieved through cooperation, justice, and brotherhood. But even more pointedly, this question of the *free* gift, which, to perform its duty properly, must always come without any strings attached, has been dealt in the scriptures themselves, and has been the topic of innumerable and similar commentaries in all traditions of the world. In the gospel of Matthew (6, 1-4), for example, it is said: “Be careful not to do your merciful deeds before men in order to be seen by them.... Do not trumpet before you as the hypocrites do.... Do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, so that your alms may be in secret” (*en to kruptó*, says the Septuagint). Bataille, the ex-seminarian, obviously anticipated the objection and tried to parry: “It is not sufficient for our left hand to *know* what the right one gives: tortuously it seeks to take it back.” He was telling us still that by nature we are unable to keep the secret about “our merciful deeds.”

Perhaps, perhaps not.

Let us say for now that the match ends in a draw: no doubt, most gifts in society come with conditions, which clearly pervert the nature of donation, but on the other hand, Bataille certainly failed to



disprove that when the donation is anonymous, as it often is, it retains immense power—power to speak the truth in science and against injustice, and power to defend, propagate, and perpetuate life always in the face of chaos and sovereign violence. The world population, though sick and burdened, keeps growing.

But Bataille was confident in his plan anyway. Published after World War II, *La part maudite* featured at the end a discussion of the Marshall Plan, which, though cryptic, left no doubt as to his (not so secret) intentions and (perverse) expectations. “This achievement,” he wrote slyly of the Marshall Plan, was tied “to the increase of the level of welfare [and] to an earnest repositioning of social existence.... *Blindly [President] Truman, is today laying the groundwork for the ultimate and secrete apotheosis.*” (Bataille, 1967, 224-25).

In other words, Bataille feared the gift, but felt no dread whatever for America’s 1948 imperial plan to attract a devastated Europe into her orbit by way of a very self-interested, and rather paltry, gifting plan, which amounted to 2 % of the American GDP, less than the annual consumption of alcohol in the USA for 1947. Almost delighted, Bataille seemed to have braced himself for the great US imperial ride, “blindly” set in motion by the Liberal Truman, preparing for the “ultimate secret apotheosis”: a promise of unspeakable carnage, which the new means of industrial production and the atom bomb seemed to guarantee, and which the evil divinities would inevitably take as their accursed due. Dionysus loves the Liberal order, after all. Was Bataille hoping then for the final nuclear holocaust? Who knows.

There is something frightening in the destiny of the human being--something that always stood at the limit of this unbounded nightmare, which has been heralded by ever more modern armament, and by the nuclear bomb (Bataille, 1970, XII, 515).

### **Derrida’s Replica of Bataille’s Harangue Against the Gift**

Postmodern texts feel like Hollywood color remakes of foreign black-and-white classics: we are watching the exact same (Bataillean/Foucauldian) movie shot in digital technology with fresh faces, but possessing none of the grit and punch of the original. Consider Jacques Derrida’s re-production of Bataille’s “expenditure.”

“Is not the gift, if there is any,” wrote Derrida in 1991, “also that which interrupts the economy?”

That which, in suspending economic calculation, no longer give rise to the exchange?...If there is gift, the *given* of the gift (*that which* one gives, *that which* is given, the gift as given thing or as act of donation), must not come back to the donor.... It must not circulate, it must not be exchanged, it must not in any case be exhausted, as a gift, in the process of exchange.... Not that [the gift] remains foreign to the circle [of the economy] but it must keep a relation of foreignness to the circle: ... it is perhaps in this sense that the gift is impossible (Derrida, 1991, 18-19).

Derrida's conclusion that "the gift is impossible" has caught the deferential attention of several studies in the budding domain of heterodox economics. "The gift is not impossible," specified Derrida, "but *the* impossible."

The argument—which is, of course, Bataille's—is that for it to be a veritable, "pure" gift, the donation must entail no form of compensation or restitution whatsoever: no honor, no nurture of pride, no gratification, no gratitude, no amortization, no lease, no installments; nothing at all must remunerate the gifting, which must be by definition a caesura, a break, a singularity. The only gift conceivable for Derrida is an interruption (of the economic cycle) without return. The moment we recognize the gift as such—as something beckoning for some form of retribution, then it is as if the gift were denouncing its own impossibility: hence, the gifting is perfectly accomplished when we do "not recognize the gift as gift" (Derrida, 1991, 26). But as soon as the donation is acknowledged, it demands, as it were, a reciprocation that breaks the spell and betrays the self-interested nature of the act; the injunction to reciprocate plainly shows that the gift was never a gift to begin with, but a means to an egotistical end.

This is the Derridean "paradox of the *double bind* of the gift." (Derrida, 1991, 42, 67). Which is to say that, on the one hand, the gift to be pure should not even *appear* to the donor (first bind), and on the other, that the beneficiary should be *oblivious* to the offering itself (double bind) (Derrida, 1991, 29-31). Like Bataille, Derrida was re-appraising Mauss's essay on the Gift, a "monumental" work, as Derrida conceded. But he felt there was something cloying and unbearable about Mauss's hearkening to the "archaic" tradition of stewardship and benevolence. Derrida found Mauss's righteous injunction "to give," "to be good" irritatingly artless, and an impediment to the proper understanding of something so decisive as the act of gifting. Because, if

the gift is “the impossible,” if it is the divine suggestion of “excess, expenditure, and destruction,” it is then a deed of sacred madness (Derrida, 1991, 52, 55). Therefore, treating something hallowed as if it were a tame philanthropic routine (be good and give unto others) is for any Bataillean worth his salt, evidently, a sacrilege. When the gift is “pure” or “too good,” Derrida wrote, “it turns evil.” (Derrida, 1991, 88). This was the Bataillean fascination: to capture the moment at which the chieftains, gradually losing themselves in the rapture of gifting, would begin burning staples and slaughtering their retinues as tokens of their (raging) munificence. Compassionate men like Mauss (and Veblen) had refused to tribute to *excess* more than a distanced, and highly distraught, gaze. These humanitarians were guilty of having attempted to raise “a parapet against the madness of the gift.” Derrida thought Mauss’s “Liberal socialism”—which was opposed to the “inhuman coldness” of “capitalist mercantilism *and* Marxist communism”—“ingenuous, naively hypocritical, inconsistent and incoherent.” What with its mass of moralizing “one must” (one must give, one must be good, one must be generous...), and its paternalistic “not too much” of this, that or the other (Derrida, 1991, 64, 85, 86).

It would be rather thoughtless to smile at the often indecent mediocrity of the mediating desire, at this median, measured, measuring morality, this rule of the compromise and of the ‘good but moderate blend of reality and the ideal’. The moderation of this *mediocritas* signals perhaps the most difficult task. Better—or worse—it announces perhaps as a sort of paradoxical *hubris*, the hubris of the right measure.... What it recommends is not any compromise, it is the good one (Derrida, 1991, 87, 88).

To think that one could make ours a better world by way of an equitable reallocation of the surplus and incitements to benevolence, is for Derrida the mark of arrogant mediocrity. It is the work of that antihero of the modern epoch: the respectable bourgeois. But this was a sophistry—a sophistry which intimated that the philistines of modernity and the classics, who lived by the Apollonian law of the just measure (“the meter,” *to métron* of the Pythagoreans: the gauge of harmony), were the same thing: here Derrida adopted Bataille’s subterfuge of assimilating contemporary drudgery with the classic ideal of harmony in order to defile the latter. The Apollonian power of the gift resides in its equilibrating virtue: If properly managed and regulated, taxes and alms effect a sensible redistribution of wealth; they should act ideally to keep

the economic metabolism *in balance*. They diffuse the bounties of labor and invention equitably among the citizens, seeking to achieve a just proportion; they are, in brief, an instrument of peace and democracy. But, no, insisted Derrida; just think of the *alms*. “Alms-giving,” Derrida observed, “fulfills a regulated and regulating function.” There is a filthy bargaining, a “sacrificial calculus” involving the gods, whereby one may buy them, and by paying, make his peace with them (Derrida, 1991, 174-76, 180).

The gift is allegedly that which does not abide by the principle of reason: it is, it must be, it owes to itself to be without reason, without question and without foundation....It should remain a stranger to morality, to the will, perhaps to freedom, at least to that freedom that is associated with the will of the subject.... It should remain a stranger to the law (Derrida, 1991, 197-98).

Gods or no gods, there is an air of sad uncandidness to this Derridean tirade: after all, haven't scholars like himself been allowed to grow, and to think at liberty thanks to a life-long (semi-) *free* endowment to the arts and sciences? Yes, the Pharisees of modernity may pervert or “bind” the gift, but this eventuality changes nothing about the recognized virtues of the free academic stipend, upon which invention and learning depend. And, moreover, the direction and magnitude of such allotments can only be decided by *law*—and who drafts the law? And according to which principles? These are essential questions. Certainly, Derrida would have responded, but this, he would have replied, was not his slant. Unlike Bataille, he was not instigating us to break all taboos and destroy the institutional supports of our society: This soft-spoken intellectual wouldn't have objected to the pursuit of harmony, or the anonymous donation. He was merely affirming that all such business is a general exercise in the art of compromise. All the gifts of our life are second best solutions to a game that could never be perfect (or “good”), because it is corrupted by each donor's secret wish to buy himself gratitude—if the gifting is declared—or a stairway to heaven—if the gifting is anonymous.

But even if this were true, where does this reasoning lead us in any case? With the suggestion, perhaps, that the game is thus pure and unsoiled only when the gift takes the form of destruction and mass carnage? If so, what is there to *know*, and to gain, *humanly*, by arguing thus?

Derrida's mischievous syllogism was straightforward: The gift (of bread or of forgiveness) is traditionally the badge of goodness; if the gift may be shown to be “ontologically” impossible (because inherently

self-interested), our faith and reliance on goodness shall thereby be undermined. This was a barefaced operation of mental and sentimental intoxication. The uncertain pace of his unoriginal argument brought Derrida to end his study on a false note. Coming finally to grips with that disturbing force—the natural power of altruism and *generosity*—Derrida asked himself whether a gift issuing from such a spontaneous proclivity could truly be a gift. Crucial and delicate juncture: the acknowledgment of generosity's spontaneous force could sap his entire soliloquy on the “impossibility” of the gift. Earnestly, and very unconvincingly, he argued that “we should come to disjoin the gift from generosity.” Granted, this was paradoxical, Derrida said, but it was a paradox worth pursuing “all the way.”

We should not be generous.... We may give *with* generosity but we should not give *out of* generosity, in order to obey that natural impulse, which we call generosity (Derrida, 1991, 205).

Was this an attempted emulation of Sade's hatred for charity and gratitude? “The gift,” Derrida concluded, “must go against ...nature.”

We shall not leave this culture [of the aboriginal state of nature] in its seedling state, without evoking in passing..., the solar, revolutionary and superabundant motif...—from Nietzsche to Bataille and beyond (Ibid.).

Possibly, Derrida had hoped with all this that he could pose next to Sade and Bataille, as the latest icon of the sovereign tradition. If that had been the case, the result fell rather short of the ambitious intent. Derrida had set himself squarely against the compassionate wing of the anthropological school, but gave his critique an allure so prosaic that, alas, he drove himself to the other end of the rainbow, right into the fold of the Anglo-Saxon ultra-capitalists. The aftertaste, indeed, was sour: by ridiculing Mauss's admiration for the economics of the potlatch, Derrida found himself implicitly, and grotesquely, accusing most primitive peoples of bourgeois hypocrisy. From then on, why not question the desire to love, or that of establishing bonds of friendship (Champetier, 1999, 87-88)? Were those, too, to be dismissed as the mediocre impulses of middle-class drudges?

Could Derrida's have been, from the outset, a utilitarian invective? It may appear so. Did he not insist that all economic deeds inscribe themselves in the “usurious contract” of the economic cycle?

That to comprehend them, in principle, as benevolent donations, as Mauss had done, was a hypocritical inanity? Did he not reiterate that all acts, in brief, are selfish? And did he not profess his abhorrence of that natural impulse called “generosity?” As we have seen, Derrida, it seems, with a bit a perfidy, invites us to “go against nature,” and to resist “the good”; he tells us never to “be generous.” He even mocks the “just measure,” aligning his critique with that of the free-marketeers, who denounce all Socratic attempts to “rule” society as “fatal conceits” (Hayek, 1988). Perhaps unwillingly, though not by accident, Derrida ended up echoing the anti-socialist carols of Milton Friedman—the Santa Claus of business curmudgeons, and the dazibaos of that Lady Macbeth of pre-cooked market hysterics, Ayn Rand.

Friedman: Are we prepared to urge on ourselves or our fellows that any person whose wealth exceeds the average of all persons in the world should immediately dispose of the excess by distributing it equally to all the rest of the world’s inhabitants? We may admire and praise such action when undertaken by a few. But a universal “potlatch” would make a civilized world impossible (Friedman, 1982, 165).

Rand: ...Any help that [an individual] gives is an *exception*, not a rule, an act of generosity, not of moral duty, that is *marginal* and *incidental*... (Rand, 1962, 56).

So Derrida wanted “the civilized world” just as it is, just as the theologians of the capitalist orthodoxy desire it to be: a circus of death and avidity...But did he really? In 1998, in a conference devoted to the nature of money, he related a personal anecdote. While making a call from a public phone in a Paris station, he saw a young English couple stranded and cut off from the communication lines for lack of a card.

I dialed the number they wanted using my own card and left it with them. They made as if to pay for it. I waved them off. (Derrida, 1998, 73).

He “waved them off.” Why, he was being generous.

## Concluding Reflections

*...It is obvious that not only is wealth concentrated in our times, but an immense power and despotic economic dictatorship is consolidated in the hands of a few, who often are not owners but only the trustees and managing directors of invested funds which they administer according to their own arbitrary will and pleasure.*

Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, [105].

Again, we ask, what could possibly be the benefit in denying a priori that love, in fact, may be the principle that will eventually win the contest of endurance versus indifference and/or hatred? Shorn of its philosophical pretensions, the argument of Bataille (and Derrida) is not much more than sullen proverbializing on the immutable mediocrity of our modern soul: a soul incapable of great deeds, and forever bent on the sycophantic acquisition of cumulative perks. The Liberals would demur, naturally: Self-interest might not be glorious, they'd say, but it remains nevertheless the sole propellant to riches, and hence, by way of philanthropic trickle-down, to the tempered "happiness" of the collectivity. Riches, the postmodern Batailleans would rejoin, cannot be a vehicle to satisfaction if their owners are not given the sovereign privilege to blast them with splendor. To "blast" anything, the Liberals would insist, is, at best, a savvy PR stunt (i.e., a perfectly legitimate business proposition), or, at worst, something "irrational." Which reply goes to confirm the thesis of the Batailleans: that the benevolent gift, truly, does not exist, for neither of its two contemporary expressions—as taxes to the bureaucracy and as the charity of foundations—is driven by a disinterested love for fellow human beings. As charity, emoluments are granted in keeping with the donors' wishes, and as taxes, the given funds are involuntary transfers that fatten an administrative elite on the one hand, and spur wars on the other. In a modern regime, the accursed share thus re-emerges as the semi-unintended effect of fiscal collection. In any case, the Batailleans would argue, the modern policies of gifting, be they publicly or privately inspired, make a sonorous mockery of our professed adhesion to the "universal" values of brotherly union, civility, goodwill, and "human rights." And to that, the Liberals would respond in the end with a polite, semi-uncooperative (and interested) silence.

Which is to say that the Liberals, who hold the reins of power, have understood that they might benefit by making room for the Bataillean postmoderns in the proprietary area of academic debate. The

benefit consists in co-opting what presents itself as the adversarial faction—postmodernism fashions itself as the true beacon of the dissenting Left—by identifying common positions and beliefs. These beliefs must be leveraged to keep at bay alternative ways of thinking. In this instance, Liberalism and Bataillean anti-humanism appear united by their common hostility to a jurisprudential reform seeking to enact *anonymous*, that is, *free* gifting. The former seems to fear that such a reform would disable the tenure of business, and the latter sees it as a potential threat to their more or less unavowed espousal of misanthropic nihilism.

This convergence of interests would also contribute to explaining the otherwise bizarre triumph in America of thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida. Both, and especially the former, were tributaries of Bataille. Their successful launch in the United States is all the more curious as it coincided with their passing out of vogue in their own country (at the beginning of the eighties) (Macey, 1993, 430). What is captivating, as mentioned in the introduction, is that most Foucauldians and Derrideans, of whom there are presently legions in American academia, are not fully conversant with the work of Bataille, and therefore tend to dismiss the essential connection of these latter-day pundits to the baroque and truculent estheticism of the master. Without bringing to light the Bataillean imprint, we contend that the true pedagogy of these French postmodern gurus may not be fully discernible. In truth, both Foucault and Derrida had no sympathy for the catch-all label of postmodernism, though in America both came to be irremediably associated with it. Postmodernism, as known, has become, in the past twenty-five years, a byword for academia's protean brew of skepticism, relativism, jocose literary criticism, and anti-colonial invective. Postmodernism's *pièce de résistance* is, of course, Foucault's Power/Knowledge, which is a peculiar distortion of Bataille's theory of the "core." Power/Knowledge provided a clever discursive structure with which to articulate, *without any attempt to solve it*, racial difference in American society.<sup>4</sup> Power/knowledge came to *freeze* such a difference, so to speak. Similar political aims seem to lurk behind Derrida's re-issue of Bataille's ontological denial of the gift, or the related theme of the impossibility of forgiveness, which also appears to be inspired by Bataille's meditations on the powerful suggestions of the Christian myth (Bataille, 1970, VIII, 31). The objective of these philosophical pieces is to intimate and persuade the reader that "goodness" is an Apollonian illusion. Because the anti-humanists, like the majority of Liberals, are convinced that humans are at bottom egotists, if not altogether malevolent, they believe it their mission to disabuse us of any wishful



idealism. This kind of intimation indisputably betokens *conservative* intent: “whatever is right”—no need to fix it. Because men give only to get something back, say the Batailleans, gifting, and the kind-hearted suggestion it carries, is an absurdity. Likewise with forgiveness: if I forgive a tort, says Derrida, it is because the affront suffered thereby is ultimately tolerable. As such it did not truly require of me any extraordinarily selfless and magnanimous stretch: in fact, I pardoned nothing. Therefore there can be no forgiving: what is “unforgivable” is by definition beyond our powers of sentimental absorption. In conclusion, as averred by another Bataillean postmodern such as Jean Baudrillard, we humans are perfect the way we are: dispensers of merriment and dispensers of sorrow all rolled into one (Baudrillard, 2004, 117). This, the Batailleans sentence, is the “principle of evil,” and it is the natural state of affairs with which we must always reckon. In this regard, the postmodern outlook is compatible, if not perfectly identical with the practical cynicism preached by the modern school of Liberal political economy.

To return to the gift, one need only look at the emphasis recently laid on the alleged merits of philanthropy by *The Economist*, the self-confident voice of Anglophone plutocracy. In these journalistic accounts, the top corporate stars—Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, et al.—are hailed once as the meritorious leaders of the global economy, and twice as its enlightened, and sole legitimate donors. According to such a view, the government is, of course, deemed parasitical and inefficient, and therefore not suitable for a sensible allocation of the surplus money. Which may often be the case. That is also why foundations, charitable organizations, and NGOs have sprung up to redirect the excess funds in a fashion consonant with the wishes of their chief contributors. It then follows that if the corporate manager, as it now happens, is at once captain of industry, legislator (i.e., lobbyist), and almighty Maecenas; if, in other words, the captain of industry, like the lord of the feudal era, is allowed to vest himself with the prerogatives arising from all three spheres of society (the law, the economy, and the arts & sciences), taxation may be altogether bypassed, and the endowments for research and development suitably placed in the hands of trustees and boards directly answerable to the tycoons themselves. Hence *The Economist's* paean of so-called “philanthrocapitalism.” Given that more and more, the capitalists are coming to control both the starting-point (accumulation and production) and the end-point of the economic cycle (gifting), laws might as well acknowledge the drift and call for a downright “businesslike” management of philanthropy. The same criteria are to apply at every stage. Total charitable giving in America is

still puny (2% of GDP; welfare spending, instead, is 18%), but, banking on “ego gratification,” “reputation enhancement” and “the need for transcendence,” academic and professional experts reckon that the corporate leaders of the world may be counted on to give gifting a new direction by “maximizing their social return.” This means, automatically, that the best gifting “is the sort that enhances profits.” (*The Economist*, 2006, 5-9).

[The new philanthropists] are introducing the best techniques from business and ensuring that market forces are being given a much bigger role. This amounts to an industrial revolution in what Rockefeller called “the business of beneficence.” It has just started, but rich and poor should hope it succeeds (*The Economist*, 2006, 16).

More than a “revolution,” this would be the *coup de grâce*: the final dispossessing turn of the screw inflicted upon the economy through State sanction of an extravagance of corporate power which would thereby become virtually irresistible and unchallengeable.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, following Rudolf Steiner, we have expounded what (ideal) form the economy should assume in order to ensure a wholesome system of donation.<sup>6</sup> Briefly put, one would have first of all to enforce inheritance, patent, and copyright laws that would prevent the formation of monied dynasties. Royalties should be divided into two streams: one earmarked for the inventors, another destined to the community, since all inventions build on the technological patrimony of society, which is common. In the United States, this would require a fiscal suction far more progressive than what is presently enforced. In principle, however, it is sensible to assume that the State is best left out of such arrangements, confined as it should be to drafting, among other things, the very laws that set the percentages (royalties) to accrue to the various parties. This implies that there is indeed the need for establishing associations of competent individuals appointed precisely to direct the social funds to those most qualified. Such a bestowal of significant funds would be effected with an eye to these individuals’ personal benefit and satisfaction—yes, as incentives—but above all, they should be effected for the benefit of the community in which the entrepreneurs and inventors live and work. And this is roughly what is being performed by State agencies and charitable foundations, in one complex, tangled, and confused skein of interests. So, in a sense, the system is doing what it is supposed to do, yet the problem is that it performs this vital function very imperfectly. And the imperfection is due to the “strings attached” of

*non-anonymous* donation. As the Batailleans would inveigh, it is because we put ourselves at the mercy of the State or of the corporate benefactors' "need for transcendence" that we deprive gifting of its meaning, and existence. Which is not false. But this is clearly no sufficient argument for proving the ontological impossibility of the gift; all that is required to make the gift free and effective is simply to guarantee that it be granted *anonymously*. And by means of enlightened legislation, the State should allow the constitution of free associations—associations not unlike those we already have which would award on a competitive basis—the proceeds of voluntary donations as well as the stewardship of the *communally-owned means of production* to the best applicants. Needless to say, all such bidding and deliberative action would be subject to transparent administration and to the democratic scrutiny of the affected communities.<sup>7</sup>

Why should "the poor" listen to the voice of *The Economist* and "hope" that increased permissiveness for business would improve their lot? Most assuredly it will not, for economic/business interest—i.e., that of employers, traders *and consumers* altogether—is by nature inimical to labor compensation. The dignity of work and the welfare of a society can only be safeguarded by the law and by unfettered associations—special colleges of the arts and sciences—that do not reckon in terms of profit and loss; colleges whose undeviating mission should be the communal good, that is, the education, the health, and the prosperity of *all* citizens. The Batailleans talk nonsense, they mystify, and the Liberals are happy to oblige the cant. The gift does exist; after all, there are six billion of us on this earth: is this not the token of bounty? What we need to do is to erase our name when we give, for the mere joy of it. A joy we all feel, as did Derrida himself that day in Paris when he made life easier for the stranded couple from Britain.

## References

Bataille, Georges. 1967. *La part maudite, précédée de la notion de dépense*, Paris: Les Éditions de minuit [1933, 1949].

Bataille, Georges. 1970. *Oeuvres complètes* (OC, 12 volumes), Paris: Gallimard.

Baudrillard, Jean, 1990. *La transparence du mal. Essai sur les phénomènes extrêmes*, Paris: Éditions Galilée.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1991. "When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of the Economy," in *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 15.

Baudrillard, Jean. 2004. *Le pacte de lucidité, ou l'intelligence du mal*, Paris: Éditions Galilée.

Champetier, Charles. 1999. *Homo Consumans*, Bologna: Arianna Editrice [1994].

Derrida, Jacques. 1991. *Donner le temps, la fausse monnaie*, Paris: Galilée.

Derrida, Jacques. 1998. "The Principles of Pricelessness," in Roger-Paul Droit (Ed.), *What is the Meaning of Money?*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972 [1961].

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Surveiller et punir, naissance de la prison*, Paris: Gallimard.

Friedman, Milton. 1982. *Capitalism and Freedom*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Hayek, Friedrich. 1988. *The Fatal Conceit, The Errors of Socialism*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Lux, Kenneth. 1990. *Adam Smith's Mistake: How a Moral Philosopher Invented Economics and Ended Morality*, Boston: Shambhala.

Macey, David. 1993. *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, London: Hutchinson.

Martyn, David. 1999. "Sade's Ethical Economies," in M. Woodmansee and M. Osteen (Eds.), *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, New York: Routledge.

Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, New York: W.W. Norton, [1950].

Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The Great Transformation, The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, Boston: Beacon Press [1957].

Preparata, Guido Giacomo. 2007. *The Ideology of Tyranny: Bataille, Foucault and the Postmodern Corruption of Political Dissent*, New York, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Preparata, Guido Giacomo. 2006. "Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth, The Social Economics of an Anarchist Utopia," in *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 38, n. 4.

Rand, Ayn, 1962. *The Virtue of Selfishness, A New Concept of Egoism*, New York: Signet Books.

Sade. 1957. *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu*, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert Éditeur, [1791].

Steiner, Rudolf. 1923. *The Threefold Commonwealth*, London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company [1919].

Steiner, Rudolf. 1971. *World Economy*, London: Rudolf Steiner Press, [1922].

*The Economist*. 2006. "The Business of Giving. A Survey of Wealth and Philanthropy," *The Economist*, February 25th.

Veblen, Thorstein. 1899. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York: Macmillan.

Veblen, Thorstein. 1914. *The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of Industrial Arts*, New York: The Macmillan Company.

Veblen, Thorstein. 1923. *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times, The Case of America*, New York: B. W. Huebsch.

### Notes

1. For a comprehensive treatment of Bataille's opus and of its spectacular and ongoing re-adaptation within public and academic discourse in America see my *The Ideology of Tyranny: Bataille, Foucault and the Postmodern Corruption of Political Dissent* (New York, London: Palgrave Macmillan, September 2007).

2. His first work, which he published under a pseudonym (Lord Auch) in 1926, was the pornographic *Histoire de l'oeil (History of the Eye)*.

3. "A person's superfluous income, that is, income which he does not need to sustain life fittingly and with dignity, is not left wholly to his own free determination.... The rich are *bound* by a very grave precept to practice almsgiving, beneficence and munificence," (Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, [50], emphasis added).

4. As said, Bataille had imagined that modernity is characterized by the contraposition of the modern bureaucracy to the diffuse fluid of the core, which has dispersed itself into communicative networks tying loosely one group of individuals to another, especially amongst the populace and the rabble—those most distant from the rungs of administrative power (Bataille spoke of a "labyrinth of knowledges," a metaphor which Foucault fully, and somewhat surreptitiously appropriated). Foucault reformulated this vision by denying the existence of a rigid confrontation between the rebellious energy of the core and the State, and by replacing it with a "theory of power." In this theory, Foucault fabulized that the circulation of the sacred energy within the strictures of modern-day bureaucratic apparatuses had given rise to a myriad of

turbulent power configurations (of subjugation of one temporarily powerful “group” over another), which are perennially liable to change and transformation: in other words, the roles (of oppressed and oppressor) could always be reversed (Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, pp. 31 and ff.). Practically speaking, this construction was adopted as the theoretical scaffolding for modeling racial tension in America: the racist policies and jargon of the white elite were seen as one particular configuration of power/knowledge, to which the subjugated ones—all weak non-whites—responded with a politics of defiance and a jargon of their own (Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp. 31 and ff.). According to the Foucauldian construct, the game has no issue; power was said to be “de-centered” and mobile; and these never-ending and ever-shifting assaults conducted by the militias of the State against the gutter are requited by the latter with a no less stubborn “resistance at the margins.” There are no winners or losers; Whites and non-whites may thus be theoretically separated into incompatible “blocks,” each possessing its own idiom and knowledge structure. The “minorities,” then, become featured as the victimized and pitied prey of a State run by whites, who nonetheless remain faceless by virtue of the system’s putative center-less structure (in other words, no one can be truly held responsible if everyone is a potential persecutor). Now, why the academics of the Liberal persuasion would tolerate this sort of speculation is not hard to imagine.

5. What ensues as the economic/financial sphere gradually swallows that of the laws and rights (i.e., the State)—a digestive process conventionally masked by the euphemism of “lobbying”—was already clearly diagnosed in *Quadragesimo Anno*: “The accumulation of might and power generates in turn three kinds of conflict. First, there is the struggle for economic supremacy itself; then there is the bitter fight to gain supremacy over the State in order to use in economic struggles its resources and authority; finally there is conflict between States themselves,” Pius XI, op. cit., [108].

6. Guido G. Preparata, “Perishable Money in a Threefold Commonwealth, The Social Economics of an Anarchist Utopia,” in *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 38, n. 4, Fall 2006.

7. This is, in fact, precisely what is being intimated by the *principle of subsidiarity* of the papal encyclicals—namely, the indirect facilitation of economic prosperousness by way of the juridical and moral

guardianship of the people's right to form private associations in the realm of economic (and social) activity. "...Those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a gradual order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of the "subsidiary function," the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State," Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* [80]. The concept was underscored anew in *Centesimus Annus*: "...A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activities with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good." John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, [48]. Incidentally, the social doctrine of Steiner's anthroposophy and that of the Church are virtually identical.