

Alchemist of the Revolution

The Affective Materialism of Georges Bataille

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Georges Bataille's famous claim that the revolution would embody the festive expenditure of the potlatch is a notion that has resonated like a refrain throughout the twentieth century, from the Situationists in 1968 to the anti-globalisation movements which brought a 'festival of resistance' to bear on the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in 1999.¹ In recent years there has been an equal philosophical emphasis on the role of affect in politics, in writing on affective labour, micropolitics, biopolitics, enjoyment or the realm of the sensible. Yet if Bataille's attempt to conjoin Surrealism and Marxism in the 1930s stood as a precursor to these ideas, it was a short-lived and abortive one. So it seems timely now to look back at the meaning of this moment in Bataille's thought and its early critical claim for the revolutionary potential of affect. In the abundance of scholarship on Bataille, the Marxian context of his revolutionary potlatch is often mentioned in passing, yet the specific role of Marxist concepts in his thought, and the kind of politics that emerge as a result, has received only tangential attention. But his peculiar attempt to marshal the force of affect rather than ideological rationalism for Communist organisation not only offers a new conception of the politics of Surrealism and their legacy that differs dramatically from accounts which take André Breton's *Surrealist Revolution* as their point of departure, but it stands, with all its problems, as an important precursor to contemporary attempts to theorise the possible political roles of affect.

Bataille's closest engagement with Marxist ideas took place in the 1920s and 1930s. Although, unlike Breton, Bataille never joined the Communist Party, he did attempt a more coherent fusion of Marxism with the heterology of the avant-garde. During the period of his association with Surrealism, Bataille had mostly developed his ideas on Marxism in some unpublished notes and sketches, but in 1931 he became involved in a new journal, *La Critique Sociale*, founded by Boris Souvarine. Souvarine had been a founder of the French Communist Party but, now excluded from it, was a left-Communist critic of the

1. 'Shut Down the World Trade Organisation: Come to Seattle, 29 November–3 December 1999', broadsheet flyer issued by the Direct Action Network and People's Global Action

encroaching Stalinisation of the Party as a whole. The journal grew out of a discussion group, the Democratic Communist Circle, and drew together an unusual mix of radicals and avant-gardists. Between his notes and his essays for this new journal, and in the later single issue of the *Contre-Attaque* journal, Bataille would develop his closest engagement with Marxist thought – though the development of his thought in this period would spill into his contribution to the College of Sociology in the late 1930s. After the College, though he retained the notion of a political economy of desire, Bataille drifted from the specific revolutionary perspective of Marxism, increasingly focusing in the immediate period on mystical and asocial experience.

THE MATERIALITY OF ‘BASE MATERIALISM’

Bataille’s use of Marx reworks a series of figures and images from Marxian writing and places them in his own heterologic context. Various critics have independently noted these borrowings, but bringing them together highlights his discrete attempt to wed Marxism to a peculiar conception of affect. Marx’s materialist transcendence of philosophy from within underwrites Bataille’s celebrated notion of a ‘base materialism’. But where Marx’s transcendence of philosophy had been Hegelian, Bataille’s is more purely Nietzschean. Marx’s dialectical transcendence of philosophy, outlined in his eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, was to be rethought in terms of the model of transcendence presented by Nietzschean transvaluation. With a nod towards Lenin’s critique of ultra-leftism, Bataille saw his approach as a maturation of the kernel of truth in Surrealism, such that ‘Surrealism [was]... an infantile disorder of this base materialism’.² In his article on ‘The “Old Mole” and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme and Surrealism’, echoing Marx’s critique of Feuerbach, Bataille attempts transcendently to return his subjects’ philosophical method back upon itself. Bataille reads both Friedrich Nietzsche’s ‘Sur-homme’ and Breton’s Surrealism as attempts at a revolutionary philosophy which fail to surmount nihilism, in that in wishing to transcend the ideas of their age, they inevitably slavishly invert them, and take on the values they wish to oppose, ‘clearly expressed by the addition of the prefix *sur*... All claims from below have been scurrilously disguised as claims from above.’³

The result of the tragic separation of these ‘claims from below’ from themselves is that their power is turned upon itself as self-destruction and nihilism. Bataille cites Breton’s ‘ridiculous’ claim that ‘the simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd’. Instead of this desperate image of ‘the Icarian celestial vault’,⁴ Bataille, a Surrealist beyond Surrealism, proposes to refocus without reserve upon the base values which stood at the origin of Surrealist and Nietzschean thought, in order more successfully to transcend philosophical idealism and nihilist impotency. Though his emphasis on the base plays on Marxist terminology, this is no economic determinism, but the determinism of an economy of desire. Infusing his heterologic approach with a reading of Marx, Bataille was the first properly to develop a potent synthesis of Surrealist-Marxism.⁵ ‘Base materialism’ gave a historical-materialist colouring to

2. Georges Bataille, ‘The “Old Mole” and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–39*, ed Allan Stoekl, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p 32 (translation altered)

3. *Ibid*, p 39

4. *Ibid*, p 42

5. Breton’s approach in this respect had always been more haphazard, though André Thirion’s articles for *La Révolution Surréaliste* on money and the refusal of work made for a slightly more systematic approach. See André Thirion, ‘Note Sur L’argent’, in *La révolution surréaliste*, 12 (1929), pp 24–8 and André Thirion, ‘A Bas Le Travail!’, in *Variétés: Le surréalisme en 1929*, eds André Breton and Louis Aragon, Editions Variétés, Brussels, pp 43–6.

Bataille's Surrealist notion of heterogeneity, such that he is moved to assert the material determinacy of affect. All repressed and taboo affects are necessarily those with the greatest revolutionary potential. All that was lowest, dirtiest and excluded possessed revolutionary force:

Without a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed to be immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated – without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably thundering and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality.⁶

Perhaps following Alexandre Kojève, Bataille places his Marxian account of the material transcendence of philosophy in terms of the overturning of relations between masters and slaves. But his use of the plural form signifies that his context for this image of transcendence is not Hegel but Nietzsche.⁷ Thus, although base materialism focused more on the social realm, and upon class antagonism specifically, than Breton's Surrealism, this Nietzscheanism still placed it far from both the orthodoxies of the Communist Party or the emphasis on a philosophical, dialectical Marxism which was rising in other quarters.

A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DESIRE

Bataille manifests this move in the symbol of the old mole. The image of the old mole had been first appropriated from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by Hegel in his lectures on the philosophy of history, in order to describe the transcendent dialectical movement of history. Marx, in turn, took up this metaphor for the dialectical method on a number of occasions, to account for the virtuality of the ghostly spectre of Communism, moving towards its 'heaven' with dialectical steadiness, as grounded in the working-class cycle of struggles in the nineteenth century:

But the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still travelling through purgatory. It does its work methodically... And when it has accomplished this... Europe will leap from its seat and exult: well burrowed, old mole!⁸

To describe the material determinacy of affect he has asserted, Bataille mixes his philosophical metaphors in a menagerie that puts Marx's old mole on a comparative plane with Nietzsche's eagle.⁹ By way of this bestial balancing of accounts, the old mole is made part of a system of heterogeneity and excessive otherness that resists dialectical recuperation. As subterranean metaphor, it connects the explosive desublimation of desires from beneath the surface of consciousness to the revolutionary uprising of the subterranean class of the lumpenproletariat:

The old mole revolution hollows out chambers in a decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate nose of the utopians. 'Old Mole', Marx's resounding expression for the complete satisfaction of the revolutionary outburst of the masses, must be understood in relation to the notion of a geological uprising as expressed in the Communist manifesto... He begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians.¹⁰

6. Bataille, 'The Use Value of DAF De Sade', in *Visions of Excess*, op cit, p 101

7. See, for example Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in *Visions of Excess*, op cit, pp 125–6 and Bataille, 'Counter-Attack: Union of the Struggle of Revolutionary Intellectuals', in *Surrealism against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, eds Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Pluto, London, 2001, pp 114–17, p 116.

8. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart Napoleon*, trans Saul K Padover and Friedrich Engels, 1999, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/index.htm> (accessed May 2007)

9. See, for example Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans Walter Kaufman, Penguin Books, New York, 1978, p 258

10. Bataille, 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix Sur in the Words Surhomme [Superman] and Surrealist', op cit, p 35

Bataille holds to this old mole notion of revolution as a base outburst of desire from below, in opposition to a utopian, idealist ‘eagle’ revolution descended from on high. Focusing on the opposition between the base and the elevated, Bataille goes as far as to associate utopianism with authoritarianism. Both impose upon an other from on high, whilst his authentic, quasi-biological revolutionary urge develops from below. With this gesture, his affective revolution from the base also becomes an extra-parliamentary one.

Though one can definitely hear the echo of Georges Sorel’s own idiosyncratic anarcho-syndicalism and his myth of the general strike in all this, Bataille does not align his rejection of the state with the classical traditions of anarchism. His essay on ‘The Problem of the State’ rejects both the Leninist denigration of this issue as a matter of ‘petit-bourgeois anarchism’ and the anarchists’ ‘naive’ turn to ‘pure principle’.¹¹ Instead he wishes to return to a Marxist engagement with the issue which remains open and historical. He later makes it clear that he rejects the ‘anachronistic’ party form because it relates to a historical composition of the working class whose time has passed. Its proponents fail to ‘recognise... wholly new conditions of struggle’:

We must search out those conditions in the past which have favoured the effective uprising of proletarian minorities against the society of capitalism. We must determine whether or not such conditions are ever again likely to exist. If that seems unlikely, we must waste no time in looking back, but resolutely consider forms of prerevolutionary activity appropriate to the real situation.¹²

He kept a critical distance from a second more anarchist discussion circle he had some involvement with, the *Ordre Nouveau*, and was, according to some, openly disdainful of their activity.¹³ Instead, his Marxist account of affect maps out a different, if not wholly unsympathetic, trajectory.

Nonetheless, Bataille is frustratingly vague when it comes to the material composition of these social flows of affect as an organisational force opposed to capitalism. Where are they to be found, if not in the party? What form do they take? How are they composed and organised as a political force? Bataille would only begin to formulate this in a piece for *Contre-Attaque*, in terms of quotidian ‘organic movements’. These are ‘movements of recomposition to which important politicians are forced to give way’.¹⁴ Such movements in society are prior to, and even opposed to, parliamentary politics. But yet also, it would seem, to any other particular existing political form. Bataille would describe this force as present in the ‘Popular Front in the Street’, but would only later begin to theorise its organisational potential with the *College*.

In the meantime, Bataille affirmed his solidarity with ‘communist workers [who] appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty and hairy as sexual organs, or lower parts’.¹⁵ Rosalind Krauss has noted that Bataille’s scatological evocations of the oppressed recall those of Marx.¹⁶ In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, for example, Marx refers to the lumpenproletariat as ‘the scum, offal, refuse of all classes’.¹⁷ But there is an important difference here. Where Bataille’s references valorise an other, those of Marx effect an exclusion. First, against bourgeois

11. Bataille, ‘Le Problème de l’État’, in *Oeuvres complètes I: Premiers écrits, 1922–1940*, ed Michel Foucault, Gallimard, Paris, 1970, p 336
12. Bataille, ‘Toward Real Revolution’, *October* 36, 1986, pp 32–41, p 33
13. See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, Verso, London, 2002, p 522, note 9
14. Bataille, ‘Toward Real Revolution’, op cit, pp 37–8
15. Bataille, ‘Solar Anus’ in *Visions of Excess*, op cit, p 8
16. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Informe without Conclusion’, *October*, 78, 1996, pp 89–105, pp 99–100
17. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, op cit

18. Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat', *Representations*, 31, 1990, pp 69–95, pp 82–4
19. Nicholas Thoburn, 'Difference in Marx: The Lumpenproletariat and the Proletarian Unnameable', *Economy and Society*, 31:3, 2002, pp 434–60, pp 443–6
20. Hal Draper, 'The Concept of the "Lumpenproletariat" in Marx and Engels', *Economies et Sociétés*, 6:12, 1972, pp 2285–2312
21. Karl Marx, review, 'Les Conspireurs', in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung Politisch-Ökonomische Revue*, no 4, April 1850, Progress Publishers, 2007, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/03/chenu.htm> (accessed July 2007)
22. The italicised terms refer pointedly to Bataille's essays, 'The Big Toe' and 'The "Lugubrious Game"': Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans Richard Seaver and Helen R Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1969 p 185.
23. *Ibid*, p 174
24. Only a little later, speaking at the College of Sociology, Bataille would employ Marx's Goethian image of revolution as magical agency, describing himself as a 'sorcerer's apprentice'. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Merlin Press, Rendlesham, 1998, p 8; Bataille, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', in *Visions of Excess*, op cit.

conceptions of the 'dangerous classes', Marx defines the proletariat as the productive labouring class upon which the world turns, necessitating a separation from the lower, unproductive 'lumpenproletariat'.¹⁸ But in this movement he also repeats a bourgeois psychologisation which – in this category – excludes those 'unclean' heterogeneous parts of the social body which do not fit his analysis. Rather than an insurgent excess, the excluded lumpen is reactively characterised as a set of fixed identities and values in Marx's theatrical evocations of brothel-keepers, organ-grinders and ragpickers.¹⁹ Second, this psychological exclusion also functioned as a political exclusion of his rivals, Mikhail Bakunin and Max Stirner, whose ideas were based in groups which Marx bracketed in this 'lumpen' category.²⁰

Bataille returns these 'moral' exclusions as a central quality of the working class itself. Bataille's obsessive focus on pure, inverted valorisations, on celebrations of excrement, death and sex, comes to entail carrying out a psychological extension of Marx's own observation that the working class are the hidden motive force of history. Bataille makes of the entire working class a resistant other who are the excluded excess of capitalism. Bataille treats the entire working class not in Marx's terms as dialectically opposed to capital, but by extending the category of the lumpenproletariat as an account of the whole working class. Bataille's inversion of Marx's valorisation in this sense articulates a sort of implicit Bakuninism. Or rather, he takes Marx's negative account of Bakunin as celebrating the lumpen and says yes to it unreservedly, whilst conflating it with the proletariat. In describing conspiratorial secret societies as a means to revolution, Marx attacks the attempt by Bakunin and others:

... to launch a revolution on the spur of the moment, without the conditions for a revolution... They are like alchemists of the revolution... They leap at inventions which are supposed to work revolutionary miracles... expected to be all the more astonishing and miraculous in effect as their basis is less rational.²¹

Breton, in excluding Bataille from the Surrealist circle in his *Second Manifesto*, attacks Bataille's 'false' materialism and draws on another of Marx's wry dismissals. After noting Bataille's enthusiasm for terms such as 'befouled, senile, rank, sordid [and] lewd', he points out that:

In his *Différence de la Philosophie de la nature chez Démocrite et chez Epicure*, Marx tells us how, in every age, there thus come into being hair-philosophers, fingernail-philosophers, toenail-philosophers, excrement-philosophers, etc.²²

Yet Surrealism had been enamoured with alchemy from the start, and Breton had in the same manifesto already noted 'the remarkable analogy, insofar as their goals are concerned, between the Surrealist efforts and those of the alchemists'.²³ So, as well as the charge of 'excrement-philosopher', we might turn the attack Marx levelled at 'lumpen' conspirators towards Bataille as well. But, given his propensity to invert hierarchies and valorise the negative, and in so far as he attempted to materialise Surrealism's alchemy of the word, 'alchemist of the revolution' is perhaps an insult which this sorcerer's apprentice might have taken as a rather complimentary turn of phrase.²⁴ If the determinative

primacy of affect cannot be grounded in rationality, but only in experience itself, one was left in the circular position of having to abandon oneself to affect in order to employ and propagate it for premeditated ends. Kojève criticised this revolutionary alchemy as making something from nothing, telling Bataille that he was putting himself ‘in the position of a conjurer who expected his own tricks to make him believe in magic’.²⁵

THE PRODUCTION OF ABSENCE

In his notes for ‘The Notion of Expenditure’, Bataille begins with the role of production in political economy. He attempts to refine in concrete terms the Surrealists’ more romantic ‘war on work’ by attempting to conceive of labour-power beyond and against labour:

In a liberated world, the role of production is reduced to a condition of existence and existence itself begins only from the moment that it does away with work...What appears impossible to men that old bourgeois utilitarian conceptions continue to render servile is destined to become an immediate demand.²⁶

Yet, in insisting that this productive power not be theoretically ‘reduced to a condition of production’,²⁷ this class-orientated opposition to work eventually comes closer to an existential opposition to all utility and production. Insisting on the wholly other, Bataille emphasises expenditure’s originary role in a revolutionary conjuring act. The subjective experience of transgression is broadened to the whole social plane. Revolution is conceived as a unified moment of the mass refusal of limits. Thus, social revolution becomes a total experience of crisis and rupture, rather than a unifying historical moment of political composition. The great evening of revolution becomes ‘the *great night* when their beautiful phrases will be drowned out by death screams and riots’.²⁸ Looking more closely at Bataille’s particular imagining of this moment of conjuring from absence offers a means to critically retrace his passage from the politicisation of affect to this disquieting millenarianism, as it too reveals a reactive absence at its heart.

Bataille’s reading of Marxism in terms of base materialism reached its fullest and most public expression in his now-famous essay for *La Critique Sociale* entitled ‘The Notion of Expenditure’. The unorthodoxy of this essay can be gauged from the fact that it appeared with a disclaimer from Souvarine that ‘in many regards, the author stands in contradiction to the general orientation of our thought, but a review of research could not prohibit such deviations’.²⁹ Bataille argues that the base materialism of desire will mean that revolution will take a new and unexpected form. The revolution will resemble a festival. Bataille was not the first to talk about revolutions vis-à-vis festivals. Beyond the events’ connection in French popular tradition,³⁰ this notion can be seen to weave the threads of his Nietzschean and Marxian thought together. Lenin had already recognised the subjective wellspring of revolution using this image: ‘Revolutions are the locomotives of history, said Marx. Revolutions are festivals of the oppressed and exploited.’³¹ Equally,

25. Roger Caillois, ‘Interview with Gilles Lapouge, June 1970’, in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed Claudine Frank, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, 2003, p 143. For an extended discussion of Bataille’s impossible demand, vis-à-vis those of the SI and Operaismo, see Gavin Grindon, ‘The Breath of the Possible’, in D. Graeber and S. Shukaitis, eds, *Constituent Imagination*, AK Press, 2007.
26. Bataille, ‘La Notion de Dépense’, in *Oeuvres Complètes I*, op cit, pp 153–4
27. Bataille, ‘Le Rationalisme...’, in *Oeuvres Complètes I*, op cit, p 156
28. Bataille, ‘The Notion of Expenditure’, op cit, p 128
29. Boris Souvarine, introductory note to Georges Bataille, ‘La Notion de Dépense’, *La Critique Sociale*, 7, January 1933, p 7
30. See Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans Alan Sheridan, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1988.
31. Vladimir Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* 1999, accessed May 2007, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm>

festival as an image of philosophical transcendence rises time and again in the writing of Nietzsche. Nietzsche had argued that festival represented an originary plenitude of both affect and massed creative labour-power.³²

However, beyond these possible metaphorical sources the keystone of Bataille's argument is Marcel Mauss's famous account of a premodern economy founded not on exchange but on gift-giving, which seems to give Bataille's fastening of affect to political economy a material, social grounding. This economy culminates in the festival of potlatch which Mauss referred to as the 'monster child of the gift system'.³³ Bataille, displaying his characteristic affection for aberrant progeny, took up this notion with enthusiasm. But he went further. After accounting for potlatch's expenditure as aligned with the 'insubordinate function' of his own base materialism,³⁴ he goes on to assert that:

Class struggle... becomes the grandest form of social expenditure when it is taken up again and developed, this time on the part of the workers, and on such a scale that it threatens the very existence of the masters.³⁵

In order to make sense of Bataille's extrapolation, we must begin with the historical ambiguities of Mauss's account of potlatch as an indigenous, transnational practice. The potlatch was not in fact a discrete common phenomenon. Discussing his sources, David Graeber has argued that Maori and Kwakiutl gift-economies function on almost diametrically opposed principles, and furthermore that the Kwakiutl potlatch in itself took various forms which do not gel with Mauss's account of a universal game of debt repayment.³⁶ In some later cases, rather than a pre-capitalist paroxysm of expenditure, these potlatches were made possible by contact with European market exchange, for example in the use of mass-produced blankets as the medium of the potlatch. In fact, the term 'potlatch' itself encompassed an unstable and ill-defined set of Native-American practices and was in this way and others constituted by a colonial discourse which named it in order to outlaw it.³⁷ In this way, potlatch's characterisation as an example of the absolute other of expenditure is a product of its first recognition in colonial terms as marking a limit of civilisation and beyond.

In this way Bataille's overdetermined revolution-as-festival sits at the heart of his Marxism but itself embodies a kind of absence. Marx's lumpen and Mauss's potlatch were both in part the product of reactive psychologisations of 'other' social forms, which Bataille appropriated as positive values which he synthesised in his image of revolution. The logic that stood behind this image was no less reactive. Expenditure referred always to an explosion of repressed vitality, but Bataille's conception of the particular form of social effervescence that stood behind his revolutionary potlatch was deeply ambiguous.

SACRED AMBIGUITY AND POLITICAL AMBIGUITY

Bataille would only later offer more specific hints of what shape a political programme for festive ends could take in his work with Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris, at their College of Sociology in the closing

32. For example, 'An age which shall one day bring back true festivals of joy and freedom will have no use for our art'. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans R J Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, p 350

33. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans W D Halls, Routledge, London, 1990, p 41

34. Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', op cit, p 129

35. Ibid, p 126

36. David Graeber, *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, Palgrave, New York and Basingstoke, 2002, pp 209–10

37. Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p 150

38. Bataille, 'Attraction and Repulsion II', in *The College of Sociology 1937-39*, ed Denis Hollier, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988, p 122
39. Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans Meyer Barash, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2001, p 55
40. *Ibid*, p 56
41. Roger Caillois, 'The Function of Myth', in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed Claudine Frank, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London, 2003, p 119
42. In fact, Contre-Attaque appears to be founded on an agreement between these two figures that the politics of Surrealism were to be located in an organisation based on an affective materialism. Breton's first lecture to the group asserted the value of an 'affective exultation and fanaticism' like that employed by fascism but 'without any possible ambiguity, to ends contrary to theirs' in a phrasing Bataille would echo in his declaration (below). However, Breton's first point of reference was Freud's essay on 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego'; see Breton, 'Trois interventions d'André Breton à Contre-Attaque', in *Oeuvres Complètes II*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, pp 590-1, 607.
43. Bataille, 'Popular Front in the Street', in *Visions of Excess*, op cit, p 162
44. Bataille, 'Counter-Attack: Union of the Struggle of Revolutionary Intellectuals', op cit, pp 116-17
45. For a symptomatically unbalanced attack on the College's 'fascism', see Richard Wolin, 'Left Fascism: Georges Bataille and the German Ideology', *Constellations*, 2:3 (1996), pp 397-428. For a more
- years of the 1930s. It is possible to sense in this explosive theoretical cocktail of Marxism and Surrealism a revolutionary urgency that reflects the historical circumstances of Bataille's writing. However, appropriately enough for an approach which depends on the last chapter of Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, entitled 'The Ambiguity of the Sacred', there is a deep political ambiguity in this urgency. At times Bataille tentatively attempted to align the poles of political left and right with those of Durkheim's left and right sacred:
- Even if it seems that the connections permitting the association of political left and right with sacred left and right are disputable, it is a fact that sacred objects, in the same way as political figures, are never consistently transmuted except from left to right.³⁸
- Caillois, less drawn to revolutionary politics than Bataille, was later to note that the left sacred belonged to 'transgressions against the political or religious order' as much as to natural disorders.³⁹ He notes that the exclusions suffered by the accursed extended for the Li-K'uei to anyone taking responsibility for protesting against some aspect of the social order.⁴⁰ However, had the College wanted a perfect example of the social expression of the left sacred in modernity as irrational, effervescent violence in the streets inspired by myth, they need have looked no further than the events of Kristallnacht, which were to take place in November 1938, only fifteen months after the College's first declarations. Meanwhile, the slogan of the Nazi administrative council of leisure activities advocated its own programme of 'Strength through Joy'. Caillois was to note at the time that 'at present, all the movements that show mythological characteristics display a real hypertrophy of this festival or ritual function'. But his only examples are 'the Hitlerian movement or the Ku Klux Klan'.⁴¹
- But Bataille was unswerving. Beyond the College itself, the closest Bataille came to a political group orientated towards these ends was Contre-Attaque, formed with Breton and other Surrealists to oppose Fascism outside and against the government of the Popular Front.⁴² He understood the driving origin of the movement of the Popular Front as the 'emotional resources' which found expression in its effervescent presence in the streets.⁴³ In the programmatic declaration he wrote for *Contre-Attaque*, Bataille made clear their intention:
- ... to make use of the weapons created by fascism, which has been allowed to use the fundamental aspirations of people for affective exultation and fanaticism. But we affirm that the exaltation... must be placed in the service... of a grandeur quite different from that of the nationalists.⁴⁴
- During that period and since, Bataille has been accused of Fascist tendencies from various quarters, and vigorously defended from others.⁴⁵ Most famously, according to Pierre Klossowski, Walter Benjamin was hostile and wary of (though also, in Klossowski's account, seriously misunderstanding) the College's project: 'Benjamin disagreed with us... he wanted to hold us back from a slippery slope: despite a clearly irreducible incompatibility, we risked playing out a pure and

simple “pre-fascist aestheticism”.⁴⁶ It is worth recalling here Benjamin’s essay on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, which Klossowski was translating at the time, and which had already asserted that the aestheticisation of politics was ‘the logical result of fascism’.⁴⁷ Bataille, however, had always stringently opposed the far right. He overcame his differences with Breton to form the radical anti-Fascist group *Contre-Attaque*, and was one of the first to write to reclaim Nietzsche from Fascist culture. From the *College*’s perspective, not only had the Communists fatally overlooked the potential of affect, but Fascists had meanwhile taken full advantage of it, to terrible effect. Indeed, though it put its faith in Johann Gottfried Herder’s notion of ‘Volk’, rather than the French anthropological tradition of Durkheim, German Fascism had made its own activist use of myth. Prior to the *College*, Bataille had already noted in his 1936 account of organic movements of affect that they have been more often appropriated by the right than the left. As a result, he argued that it was a matter of learning from Luitpoldhain:

... we must know how to appropriate the weapons of our adversaries... We must cease to believe that methods invented by our adversaries are necessarily bad. On the contrary, we must, in turn, use those methods against them.⁴⁸

In this light, his celebration of the Popular Front in the street must be read not existentially, but as a tactical engagement to marshal the emotional power of the movement’s hopes and anxieties.

We can begin to understand the problems and impasses of Bataille’s conception of affect as revolutionary if we look at his ideas in context. A brief comparison is helpful here. In asserting the role of affect within Marxian analyses Bataille had another striking contemporary. The similarities between his thought and that of Wilhelm Reich, who was as much an excessive old enemy from within to the Vienna Circle as Bataille was to the Surrealists, have often been remarked upon. Bataille’s 1933 essay ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ has many parallels with the arguments of Reich’s 1929 ‘What is Class Consciousness?’ and ‘Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis’. Both not only make a novel and pioneering turn towards a revolutionary social psychology, but do so in remarkably similar terms. Both understand a potential Marxian account of affect not as a critique of ideology but as an attempt to outline the organisational structure of a political economy of desire, extending from their assertion of the determinate materiality of the forces uncovered by psychoanalysis. Here is Reich in 1929:

The urge to dance is powerful with almost all young people without exception... [it] can be a positive element in the development of class consciousness if the relationship of politics to private life is solved in a revolutionary manner: particularly skilful youth group leaders have succeeded in doing so in Germany on occasion. In Germany today it is the Right which is reaping the benefit of... the urge to go dancing, for it is they who organise them.⁴⁹

In pursuit of a scientific approach, both also tend towards a structural biological account of this economy of vitalism. Bataille not only sometimes

nuanced overview, see Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, pp 289–96.

46. Klossowski is clear on the basis of their disagreement: ‘He was tempted to apply his analysis [of German bourgeois intellectual life] to our own situation... This interpretive scheme also strongly coloured the theories of Lukács. He was clinging onto it to overcome his own disarray, and sought to imprison us in such problems. No agreement was possible on this point of his analysis as its presuppositions were completely at odds with the facts and the previous history of the successive groups formed by Breton and Bataille.’ Pierre Klossowski, ‘Entre Marx et Fourier’, *Le Monde*, 31 May 1969.

47. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, Pimlico, London, 1999, p 234

48. Bataille, ‘Toward Real Revolution’, op cit, p 7

49. Wilhelm Reich, *What Is Class Consciousness?*, Socialist Reproduction, London, 1971, p 29

theorises the revolutionary urge from below, in terms of an irrepressible radicalism rooted in the bowels of proletarians, but in his lectures for the College draws on biology's development of organicism as a structuralist scientific model as well as Durkheim's metaphor of society as composed of cells and organisms. Reich was even more direct, developing social and individual analysis side by side. Even more tantalisingly, both use this framework to make startling analyses of the successes of Fascism and the failures of the left when it came to the potential of affect as a political force. Bataille's 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' appeared in *La Critique Sociale* in 1933, the same year as Reich published 'The Mass Psychology of Fascism' at his own dissident Sex-Pol Press.

However, Michel Surya's biography of Bataille follows Jacques Chatain's claim, made in passing, that Reich, though Bataille's only equal in the period regarding these issues, was 'a German he had never heard of and who had never heard of him'.⁵⁰ Reflecting on *La Critique Sociale*, Claudine Lautier suggests the reasons for this:

... the discussion in France had not taken shape, no doubt because of the political conservatism of orthodox psychiatry and of the rejection of Reich and the Freudo-Marxists by the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers and the Communist Party.⁵¹

Yet given the intellectual effervescence of the 1930s, with its numerous overlapping circles and networks of intellectuals, and *La Critique Sociale's* connections to both dissident German Marxists and the Vienna Circle (both milieux in which Reich was prominent) as well as its interest in 'social questions', it seems unlikely that Bataille had not at least heard of Reich. And indeed, in issue eleven of *La Critique Sociale*, the same issue which featured the second part of Bataille's 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', Reich's *La Crise Sexuelle* (which, compiling 'The Sexual Revolution' and 'Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis', met with palpable success in French radical circles)⁵² was listed under the heading of books received 'to be reviewed next issue'. But this was to be the last issue of the journal, so we are left to guess what Bataille, who was a regular reviewer, might have made of Reich's text. By 1937, though, the connection had become direct. In the College of Sociology's introductory lecture, delivered by Caillois and Bataille, Reich's 'The Mass Psychology of Fascism' was cited as one of the group's formative influences.⁵³

However, despite the apparent symmetry of their work, their conclusions differed radically. Reich's attitude towards affect's role in class composition, in texts such as 'What is Class Consciousness?', was – if less ambitious – certainly more specific, pragmatic and concrete than Bataille's millennial literary howl. In 1927–1928 Reich travelled through the Vienna suburbs offering free contraception and popular counselling on sexual and emotional problems, attempting to link these issues to the wider economic and political organisation of society. Although equally vitalist, Reich's approach to Marxian synthesis develops from his analysis of the psychosomatic function of the orgasm in individuals. Bataille's conception of affect, meanwhile, was primarily indebted to his Nietzschean engagement with both Surrealism and the social analyses of Durkheim. This conception of affect can explain both his conception of

50. Jacques Chatain, *Georges Bataille*, Editions Seghers, Paris, 1973, p 84; Surya, op cit, p 180

51. Claudine Lautier, 'De Krafft-Ebing à la psychose paranoïaque... Quel Saut Qualitatif?', in *Boris Souvarine et La Critique Sociale*, ed Anne Roche, Editions la Découverte, Paris, 1990, pp 181–215, p 188

52. See Thierry Paquot, 'Entretien Avec Victor Fay, 5 Mars 1979', in *Boris Souvarine et La Critique Sociale*, op cit, p 119 and F Delpla, 'Les communistes français et la sexualité (1932–1938)', *Le Mouvement Social*, 91, 1975, pp 121–52, p 132

53. See Jacques Chavy, 'Notes on "First Lecture: Sacred Sociology and the Relationship among "Society", "Organism", and "Being"', in *The Edge of Surrealism*, op cit, p 154

the working class as lumpen and his embrace of festival as a moment of orgiastic revolutionary nihilism.

Surrealism had posited desire as a political factor but had failed to find a meaningful politics for this notion. Bataille took this crucial turn and gave it both more theoretical consistency and a historical location. However, he did so in entirely negative terms. Desire was embraced politically, but was still conceived of as simply and completely opposed to rationalism. Attempting to ground Surrealism's radical impulse, he had chosen the 'base' irrational over the rational, reactively inverting Surrealism's values, rather than overcoming them. As a result, where Breton's conception of desire led towards hopeless utopianism, that of Bataille tended towards apocalypse. Crucial to this moment of political ambiguity was his use of the concept of the sacred. His particular inversion of Surrealist values was bound to this ambiguous concept.

The sacred has commonly been understood as meaning both 'holy' and 'accursed', but this interpretation has been seriously questioned by recent scholarship. The ambivalence of the sacred is first asserted by Robertson Smith, in his 1889 *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, before being picked up ten years later by Durkheim and Mauss's *Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice*, and then most fully explored in Durkheim's 1912 *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Before Smith, earlier theorists of social affect had simply asserted the senseless mob-mentality character of events where the social group takes precedence over the rational bourgeois individual. Michèle Richman describes how such a perspective was founded on a political fear of the growth of the 'dangerous' mass of the urban working class. As such, for Gustave Le Bon, a leading theorist of crowd psychology, socialism was little more than a form of mass hysteria, and his theory attempts to exclude the working class as an anonymous mass. He reassuringly argued that such mass actions as strikes, due to their hysterical, irrational basis, have little power in the face of rational political institutions: after removing the leader 'the crowd returns to its original state of a collectivity without cohesion or force of resistance'.⁵⁴ Richman argues of Le Bon and his contemporaries that:

Such texts elide the social origins of the post-Commune workers' movement in order to characterise it as an anonymous mass which, irrespective of its particular social composition, succumbs to predictable psychological laws.⁵⁵

54. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, Penguin, New York, 1997, p 121. For a thorough account of Le Bon's precedence to Smith's notion of the sacred, see Michèle Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie*, University of Minnesota Press, London and Minneapolis, 2002, pp 110–12

55. Richman, op cit, p 112

Smith, however, took a different approach to social affect. In his analysis, he asserted a division in religious affect between this 'left' (divisive, accursed) and a 'right' (unifying, holy) sacred: the distinction which Durkheim inherits and bequeaths to Bataille. Smith does so in order to try and appreciate the value of affect in primitive societies. However, Giorgio Agamben argues that the unease of the bourgeoisie in this unstable period still colours this reading. A similar psychological exclusion takes place but, this time, anxiety is not directed towards the urban horde, but the foreign one:

These *Lectures* correspond to the moment in which a society that had already lost every connection to its religious tradition began to express its own unease... What is at work here is the psychologisation of religious

experience (the ‘disgust’ and ‘horror’ by which the cultured European bourgeoisie betrays its unease before the religious fact).⁵⁶

Agamben argues that this historical ambivalence came to colour Smith’s interpretation of the earlier Latin terms *homo sacer* and *sacratio*, which in fact have their origin in a particular aspect of Roman law. This reading of affect from the political perspective of the colonial bourgeoisie came to dominate studies of the sacred. This, at best, ambiguous critical tradition of writing on effervescent social affect was Bataille’s inheritance, through which he would attempt to understand affect as potentially positive, radical, communifying and as produced from below by a sovereign political subject (Breton, in his own contributions to *Contre-Attaque*, ploughed a parallel path using Freud’s critique of Le Bon in ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’).⁵⁷ Bataille had sensed this potential in Surrealism, but his articulation of it would be tragically marked by this ambiguity. Working within the negative terms handed to him, but through them attempting to conceive of a position beyond them, Bataille would bite the bullet of his own logic and, with apparent perversity, valorise the divisive left sacred for its unifying right sacred effects. As such, he found himself celebrating *all* that was excluded and other, increasingly in and of itself. Little wonder, then, that his reading of Marx arrived back at an ‘irrational’ celebration of that excluded anonymous mass of the lumpenproletariat. In this articulation, the tools of the enemy are transformed into a weapon to turn against them, but an unwieldy and double-edged one. Bataille’s Icarian leap was still secretly tethered to that which it opposed. His revolution is founded on a counter-valorisation and a conjoining of the psychologisation of horror at the urban mass and at the foreign other as equally irrational. In one of his earliest formulations, Bataille draws directly upon a dual inverted valorisation of the colonial other and the lumpen mob which yet remains Eurocentric and vanguardist:

All organisations that have ecstasy and frenzy as their goal... can only transform themselves while they spread, under the violent impetus of a moral doctrine of white origin, taught to blacks by all those whites who have become aware of the abominable inhibitions paralysing their race’s communities. It is only starting from the collusion of European scientific theory with black practice that institutions can develop which will serve as the final outlets... for the urges that today require worldwide society’s fiery and bloody Revolution.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, more orthodox Marxists would exclude the College’s perspective as fundamentally asocial irrationalism, just as Marx had with the lumpenproletariat and Le Bon with socialism more generally. After Benjamin’s warning to Bataille, Adorno and Horkheimer would later, very critically, cite Caillois’s essay on festival for the College, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They agreed with Caillois that festival has been recuperated by capital. But, crucially, they saw the festival as without radical potential to begin with, as simply an ‘escape from civilisation’. They argue through a process of dialectical critique that, as a pure other external to the social order, festival is in fact dependent on the social order it refuses for its self-definition.⁵⁹ Desire and affect, in themselves, as irrationality, are therefore inevitably in the service of the

56. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, pp 75–8

57. See Simon Baker’s discussion in *Surrealism, History and Revolution*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007, p 327.

58. Bataille, ‘The Use Value of DAF De Sade’, op cit, p 102

59. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p 82

social order, whether in the form of Fascism or the consumer society. Alien to this argument, as to Caillois and Bataille's celebrations of effervescent affect, is a notion of desire as anything other than what-it-is-not, as anything but the excluded irrational. As yet, desire has no material presence.

Contrary to this project, affect as conceived through myth and the sacred functioned as a clumsy means of ontologising desire over economics, as the irrational over the rational. For Bataille affect was accepted simply as irrational passion, however dangerous. This festive force could only be led by an external rationality to other ends, or wildly embraced for its own ends in a leap of faith beyond rationality. Bataille's non-vanguardist politics, then, entailed an immersion in this total other, abandoning oneself to the irrational. He had rejected Surrealism for simply acting reactively to that which it opposed by constructing an idealist 'sur'-realism. However, he constructed his own system of resentment, playing into the hands of his enemies by accepting and working within their terms. Nonetheless, Bataille had opened the possibility of the radical political role of affect, not in vague Romantic or poetic terms, but in terms of concrete Marxian analysis and engagement. In fact, although Bataille's Surrealist-Marxism appears to have only marginally influenced the politics of Surrealism in the turbulent period directly following the end of *La Critique Sociale* and the College,⁶⁰ Bataille's aborted project for a conception of affect in relation to historical-materialist analyses of society and his image of revolution as festival were both adopted and transformed by the theoretical perspectives which emerged in 1968 and after. Meanwhile, in practical terms, Bataille's notion of organic movements of affect can be found in the networks of elective affinity upon which European social movements were increasingly based as the twentieth century progressed, as well as in practices of 'creative politics' which emerge from the 1960s onwards. As such, in the spirit of Nietzsche's own transvaluation of festival, and following the line of Bataille's own attempt to be Nietzschean beyond Nietzsche, we might yet find a joyful, active content in what is too often seen as Bataille's tragic notion of festive revolution.

60. For what appears to be a notable exception, see Nicolas Calas, 'On Revolutionary Sadism': 'Economic and political slogans are no longer enough... it is necessary to complement them with affective slogans. Against fascist love we must oppose revolutionary love.' *Partisan Review*, vii:1, 1940, pp 41-9, p 49