

Historian Underground: Making History Relevant For Life

Georges Bataille and the Notion of Gift

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There has always been a strain of thought that argued that the capitalist system lacked a personal sense of humanity. All effort is put into the increase of production. Value is seemingly analogous to price. There seems little allowance for the truly human, for emotion and passion. There is nothing truly sacred or outside the scope of capitalistic calculation. For a while, some saw communism as an alternative to capitalism. Nevertheless, as details of the constructions of Stalinist communism were revealed, the path seemed even more mechanized and depressing than the capitalist alternative. In either system, economics was the prime determinant of human history. In light of these trends, some thinkers sought alternatives to capitalist production and exchange, for the re-introduction of the truly human and non-economic element into modern society. Within this discourse, discussions on the economic nature of the gift have played a central role in attempting to expose the cracks in theories that place economic necessity as the prime mover of history.

There was one promising hope that emerged from Anthropology. Marcel Mauss proposed the notion of the gift as an alternative to the rationalist calculation of capitalist exchange. Mauss' unique perspective inspired many philosophers and social scientists seeking to find a more humanistic basis for human relations and the movement of goods. One of the thinkers whom Mauss' essay inspired was Georges Bataille. For Bataille, reflection on the nature of the gift was a point of departure for his overall conception of general economy. Bataille's revolutionary perspective on economic structure used the Maussian conception of the gift to support his affirmation of the possibility of human sovereignty within economic systems, to break the stanglehold of economic predetermination. Bataille's construct is important to explore in that holds much fertile ground for philosophy and the human sciences.

Georges Bataille (1897 - 1962) was a Parisian thinker in the great subcultural tradition of Paris that produced such figures as Baudelaire, Apollinaire, and Breton. He was a literary figure, an art critic, and a philosopher, not to mention a librarian. He moved in Surrealist circles, earning early on the wrath of Breton for appearing to create a competing group of surrealists, a rift healed in the wake of rising fascism in Europe. Bataille had a flair for the dramatic and the mystical that was so much a part of Surrealism. He emphasized the irrational in opposition to the rational, the erotic as opposed to bourgeois morality, celebration of excess as opposed to capitalist restraint, transgression as opposed to conformity.ⁱ

He carried these tendencies over into his work on "general economy", which is found primarily in *The Accursed Share*ⁱⁱ. He saw the descriptions of classical economics as having a limited understanding of the nature of economic movement. In response, Bataille conceived of a meta-category of the movement of energy to which classical economics is only a subcategory. The flow of energy in his model extends as far back as the energy received from the sun. As the light and its energy falls upon the plants they capture it and make energy out of it to use for their own survival. But more importantly they create an excess of energy. The excess that they produce goes either into growth and reproduction or must be expended, used for the beauty of their leaves, for useless parts, or simply spilled into the ground.

This model he extends to all economic phenomena. As he writes in *The Accursed Share*:

On the whole, a society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it: The Surplus is the cause of the agitation, of the structural changes and of the entire history of society. But this surplus has more than one outlet, the most common of which is growth. And growth itself has many forms, each one of which eventually comes up against some limit. Thwarted demographic growth becomes military; it is

forced to engage in conquest. Once the military limits is reached, the surplus has the sumptuary forms of religion as an outlet, along with games and spectacles that derive therefrom, or personal luxury.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moreover, therein lies his primary challenge to traditional economics. In contrast to the classical notion of scarcity driving economic activity, he proposed a law of surplus. While classical economic thought emphasized the need for an efficient utilization of resources to fight the ravages of the scarcity of economic resources, he analyzed history in terms of the expenditure of excess energy and production. This put into question many of the classical historical assumptions, those of war as the competition among nations over scarce economic resources or that of the state as a Hobbesian limit placed on the competition of individuals fighting over those same resources. The impact of this refutation of classical economics cannot be underestimated.

The way a given society chooses to annihilate the excess energy it produces is of the utmost importance. It is around this expenditure that a culture is defined. Whether a society is aggressive, imperialistic, or non-violent all depends on the form the society gives to expenditure of surplus energy. Each society had a defining choice on how it would expend excess resources, building its values on an economically useless expenditure. The artifices of religion and art all form around this essential cultural activity, acting as recipients and modes of expression of the basic embodiment of surplus. Be it a church with its corps of people removed from economic activity, or a frugal dedication of energy in terms of a military structure dedicated to expansion, they all have their origins in the same need to find a channel for excess production.

It is within this general economic context, then, that Bataille begins an explication of the gift which first of all fundamentally related to a type of sacrifice. To understand Bataille's notion of the gift, however, it is first necessary to see his conception of sacrifice and then how that relates to the gift. In a rational economy goods and production are either designated for meeting the general life needs of the populace or for the process of growth. All production then is designed with the future in mind, as part of a process of growth and expansion in which all objects are pre-ordained and understood as means towards the end, of the future *telos* of the economy. "The subject leaves its own domain and subordinates itself to the *objects* of the *real* order as soon as it becomes concerned for the future."^{iv} In the ritual destruction of material in the form of sacrifice, however, these goods are removed from that process, from that orientation towards a future *telos*. They are no longer seen as objects directed towards the use of the overall cultural system, but are seen in and of themselves, free of utilitarian domination.

Symbolically, along with the object itself, the one who offers the sacrifice is seen as removed from the demands of utility and consequently as possibly a sovereign subject. Those who offer the sacrifice are not completely dominated by the needs of the system or the process, but, rather, can exist free of their constraints in the moment of the sacrifice. Bataille examines these notions in light of Aztec sacrifice. While to modern sensibilities the immense level of human sacrifice in that culture seems an abomination, it represents the nature of sacrifice. In the words of Bataille, "The victim is surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth. And he can only be withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the *accursed share*, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the *order of things*; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings."^v

Those captured in war were sacrificed *in place of* the individuals of a particular culture. An immense symbolic tie was created between the victim of the sacrifice and those for whom the victim was a substitute. An immense level of *intimacy* is infused in the relationship with the victim. The victim is treated like a son, a daughter, or even as a king. By killing the associated victim, that victim is removed from the realm of the object. He can no longer be used for anything, and becomes simply itself, a sovereign subject in its absolute uselessness, and by association so is the one who offers the sacrifice. They enter the realm of the sacred, of the free subject who is not subordinated to the demands of useful production. "The world of the subject is the night: that changeable, infinitely suspect night which, in the sleep of reason, *produces monsters*. I submit that *madness itself gives a rarefied idea of the free 'subject,' unsubordinated to the 'real' order and occupied only with the present.*"^{vi}

The notion of the gift in Bataille is closely related to that of sacrifice. Bataille basis his comments on the nature of the gift on the essay by Marcel Mauss, first published as "Essai sur le Don" in 1950^{vii}. Marcel Mauss (1872 - 1950) was the literal heir of Emile Durkheim and deeply involved in Durkheim's project of sociology. While substantially a work of objective anthropology, the impact of the work, as Mauss makes clear in comments in his conclusion, was to be a critique, indeed an alternative vision, to utilitarian visions of capitalism. As Mary

Douglas has argued in her foreword to the translation of the essay, "*The Essay on the Gift* was part of an organized onslaught on contemporary political theory, a plank in the platform against utilitarianism."^{viii}

At the heart of the essay lies a critique of anthropologists' reading of gift-giving as a form of rational economic exchange. He berated anthropologists for imposing on other cultures preconceived models concerning the necessity and universality of economic exchange. Considering the analyses of gift exchange given by many of his contemporaries, Mauss argued that "current economic and judicial history is largely mistaken in this matter. Imbued with modern ideas, it forms a priori ideas of development and follows a so-called necessary logic."^{ix} Nevertheless, he found different aims than utilitarian economics had in its considerations of different systems of gift-giving. "Thus one section of humanity, comparatively rich, hardworking, and creating considerable surpluses, has known how to, and still does know how to, exchange things of great value, under different forms and for reasons different from those with which we are familiar."^x

Mauss asserted that in the ability to give a gift, as found in the supposedly "archaic" societies he was analyzing, there is a certain spiritual force that is associated with the gift. For every gift, there is a necessity of counter-gift necessary to remove or return the inherent power of the gift. It was the only way of lifting a certain hold that the giver had on the recipient through the gift. Gift-giving, according to Mauss, is fundamental glue in these societies for the maintenance of social structures. As Mary Douglas again argues, "the theory of the gift is a theory of social solidarity."^{xi} Through gift giving social bonds are created, individuals are joined, sharing with each other the back and forth of the social power that is associated with the gifts exchanged. It places the individual into a structure of "total services." In typical Durkheimian fashion, he emphasizes the collaborative, consensual social structure of an economic system as opposed to the rational calculation of individuals.

In other societies, however, Mauss related that this notion of gift-exchange rises to another level where gift-exchange takes on an essentially competitive aspect. The textbook case of this type of this kind of gift is found in the "potlatch" practiced among the tribes of the American Northwest. The potlatch takes the gift completely beyond the regime of utilitarian economic exchange, taking on an essentially destructive nature. During a potlatch, there is an orgy of gift-giving by the person holding the event. The emphasis is on a display of luxury and excess. However, one good potlatch deserves another. Being the recipient of a potlatch demands that one reciprocates and holds an even more lavish potlatch. "Everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry. The political status of individuals in the brotherhoods and clans, ranks of all kinds, are gained in a 'war of property'."^{xii} The givers of the potlatch are urged to show a disdain for economic wealth to the point of destroying gifts in order that they will not be returned. Precious coppers are broken and thrown in to the rivers. In extreme cases, entire villages are left destitute by the ravages of potlatch. In the destruction of wealth, then, the individual gains status, the recognition of superiority by their contemporaries.

Needless to say, the publication of Mauss's essay inspired a lot of interest. As Bataille stated it, "since the publication of Marcel Mauss's *The Gift*, the institution of potlatch has been the object of sometime dubious interest and curiosity."^{xiii} Bataille found, in the description of potlatch, a fundamental challenge to the necessity and role of rational capitalist economics. He saw in the potlatch the hint of his conception of the need to annihilate excess, rather than the gathering and hoarding necessitated by conventional analyses based on the assumption of scarcity. He argued that "classical economy imagined the first exchanges in the form of barter. Why would it have thought that in the beginning a mode of acquisition such as exchange had not answered the need to acquire, but rather the contrary need to lose or squander? The classical conception is now questionable in a sense."^{xiv} As one commentator on Bataille described, "The entire classical conceptual structure excludes an explanation for all human activities (such as extreme or violent pleasure) that are motivated not by a desire to gain, but rather by a desire to lose."^{xv}

Thus, in this process he could conceive of the gift as having a central role. It is one of the primary means of expending excess. As Bataille argues in considering the potlatch as well as the activities of Aztec "merchants",

We need to give away, lose or destroy. But the gift would be senseless (and so we would never decide to give) if it did not take on the meaning of an acquisition. Hence *giving* must become *acquiring of power*. Gift-giving has the virtue of surpassing of the subject who gives, but in exchange for the object given, the subject appropriates the surpassing: He regards his virtue, that which he had the capacity for, as an asset, as a *power* that he now possesses. He

enriches himself with a contempt for riches, and what he proves to be miserly of is in fact his generosity.^{xvi}

Thus by making a display of his disregard for his excess he obtains in the eye of the other who observes (and thus the necessity for giving over private destruction) a status, a power of expenditure and destruction. It is a means of killing two birds with one stone. Not only is the necessary annihilation accomplished, but also there is acquired the respect and regard of the other members of the society. Thus, paradoxically, by giving one is in fact gaining in prestige and societal power and status.

This is tied to his conception of sacrifice in that the gift is an escape from the circle of necessity. "An article of exchange, in these practices, was not a *thing*; it was not reduced to the inertia, the lifelessness of the profane world. The *gift* that one made of it was a sign of glory, and the object itself had the radiance of glory. By giving one exhibited one's wealth and one's good fortune (one's power)."^{xvii} Thus by association the giver escapes the domination of objectivity through an assertion of the ability to engage in such expenditure. As the object is taken from the realm of utility to the sacred uselessness of sacrifice, so too is the subjecthood, a basic freedom to express an individual will, of the giver affirmed through his ability to expend beyond the demands of utility.

Bataille applies the schema of the gift to many parts of human life. The second major portion of *The Accursed Share* attempts a history of eroticism. There he argues that "it should come as no surprise to us that the principle of the gift, which propels the movement of general activity, is at the basis of sexual activity."^{xviii} It is an expression of the kind of sacred intimacy that is engendered from the escape from, and, indeed, the blatant disregard for rational necessity.

Like Mauss, Bataille saw the modern world having forgotten, to be lacking the type of intimacy that the gift allows. Bataille asserted a kind of greatness in the useless expression of wealth, which laid the foundation for great cultural and individual expression. The capitalist demand for the utilitarian deployment of resources does not allow for the kind of sacred affirmation of subjecthood that the excess of the gift required, a basic subjecthood that allowed for an intimacy that was antithetical to appropriation of the individual as an object of production. He argued,

It would be easy in fact to find ourselves personally looking for a form of humanity that does not betray it, shunning those vacant lots, those suburbs and factories, whose appearance expresses the nature of industrial societies, and making our way toward some dead city, bristling with gothic spires. We cannot deny that present-day humanity has lost the secret, kept until the current age, of giving itself a face in which it might recognize the splendor that is proper to it. Doubtless the 'works' of the Middle Ages in a sense were only things: They could rightly appear worthless to anyone who envisioned, beyond, in its inaccessible purity, the wealth that he attributed to God. And yet the medieval representation of society has the power today of evoking that 'lost intimacy.'^{xix}

Thus with capitalist society Bataille saw an essential abdication of the search for subjective meaning in the expenditure of success, a phenomenon well documented to in the contemporary situation. The needed outlet of expenditure is provided in the controlled environment of strip malls, providing the small and directed release necessary to avoid an outright explosion. The individual is marginalized as spectator, sharing symbolically in the expulsion of excess found in sports and talk shows. As Laura Marz has emphasized, "the spectacle steals every experience and sells it back to us, but only symbolically, so that we are never satisfied: via this mechanism we support the machine of endless consumption over and over."^{xx} Subjecthood is lost to a system of production and consumption. It does not allow for the kind of expression of personal power and subjecthood found in the gift. The nature of the expenditure does not come from a personal, intimate, relation to the subject, but is rather given to the consumer by the large corporations operating on an economy of scale. The personal and human, as was found in Bataille's considerations of Aztec sacrifice, is entirely absent in a pre-given impersonal world of the suburbs. Thus, there is no personal escape into the realm of the sacred subject.

It is in this context that one can recognize his essential interest in Nietzsche. Indeed, Bataille's work *On Nietzsche* is one of the fundamental documents of Nietzsche reception in France. It provides an essential bridge in the French reception between the invalidation of Nietzsche by his association with Nazism and the rejuvenation of the interest in Nietzsche with such figures as Derrida and Foucault. Foucault himself has stated that "I read him [Nietzsche] because of Bataille, and Bataille because of Blanchot."^{xxi} They found in his

interpretation of Nietzsche a way of describing and holding on to the subject that had been declared dead by Structuralism. Indeed one can say that Bataille put the "post" in post-structuralism. As Foucault further argued, "reading Nietzsche was the point of rupture for me. There is a history of the subject just as there is a history of reason; but we can never demand that the history of reason unfold at a first and founding act of the rationalist subject."^{xxii}

This clearly follows Bataille's reading in that he sees Nietzsche as the prophet of the subject in opposition to an in-humane rational economic construction. Bataille argued that "in fact, today there are only two admissible positions remain in the world: Communism, reducing each man to the *object* (thus rejecting the deceptive appearances that the subject had assumed), and the attitude of Nietzsche -- similar to the one that emerges from this work -- free the *subject* at the same time, of the limits imposed on it by the past and of the objectivity of the present."^{xxiii} Nietzsche sought to escape the imposition of objective rational necessity. Bataille further argued "he [Nietzsche] remained completely on the side where calculation is unknown: Nietzsche's gift is the gift that nothing limits; it is the sovereign gift, that of subjectivity."^{xxiv}

The primary German receptions of Nietzsche that emphasized the will to power, tied to an advancement of the societal structure. They possessed a *telos* of the *Volk* concerned with a future in a relation to the past all tied to an essential temporal progress. Bataille, on the other hand, asserted the importance of Eternal Return in Nietzsche's thought, which emphasized the experience of the moment and which thus escaped the essentially temporal progress. Habermas has said that "For Bataille, as for Nietzsche, there is a convergence between the self-aggrandizing and meaning-creating will to power and a cosmically moored fatalism of the eternal return of the same."^{xxv} Bataille argues that "if we stop looking at states of ardor simply as preliminary to other subsequent conditions grasped as beneficial, the state I propose seems a pure play of lightening, merely an empty consummation. Lacking any relation to material benefits such as power or growth of the state (or of God or a Church or a party), this consummation can't even be comprehended. It appears that positive value of loss can only be given as gain."^{xxvi} This is closely related to Bataille's notion of the gift in its relinquishing of the objectivity of a process for an escape into a possibility of a moment. It is the freedom provided by the subjecthood allowed by the gift.

The emphasis is on an escape from the forward progression of humanity in time and, instead, a focus on the potentiality of the moment. "Immanence exists simultaneously and in an indissoluble moment as both an immediate summit (which from all standpoints, is the same as the individual's destruction) and a spiritual summit."^{xxvii} That is the essential meaning of eternal return, a moment, and experience, that escapes rational necessity. "At least the idea of eternal return is added . . . In a spontaneous movement (so it seems), it adds the expansion of eternal time to passive terrors."^{xxviii} As he argued elsewhere in reference to Surrealism, this seizure of the moment as opposed to dissolution in the temporal flow is essential.

This seizure of the instant -- in which the will is relinquished at the same time -- certainly has a decisive value. It is true that operation is not without difficulties, which surrealism has revealed but not resolved. The possibilities brought into play go further than they seem. If we were genuinely to break the servitude by which the existence of the instant is submitted to useful activity, the essence would suddenly be revealed in us with an unbearable clarity. At least, everything leads one to believe so. The seizure of the instant cannot differ from ecstasy.^{xxix}

The anti-temporal character of the gift as expenditure of excess cannot be understated for it is the support of the escape from utility. And yet, this must be coordinated with Derrida's conception of the gift in his work *Given Time*. Derrida found the gift a most paradoxical, perhaps impossible idea (indeed, "the Impossible"). According to Derrida, vernacular usage of the term indicates the gift is a giving without expectation of return. Yet, some kind of return seems inevitable. If one gives a gift normally one expects to get one back, if one gives a party it is proper for others in the group to hold one in turn, if one buys a friend a Guinness, that friend usually tries to buy one next time. When this is not the case, the return is in terms of a gain in prestige at the manifestation of power that is inherent in the gift, or merely in the pleasure of giving and in seeing the joy of the recipient. Even a kind of symbolic return would seem to eliminate the possibility of gift.

Therefore, in Derrida's view, if a gift exists at all, it must not be recognized as such, either by the giver or the receiver. The parties involved must forget the giving every occurred, even before it is given. However, it would have to be a forgetting more complete than even the normal modes of forgetting of psychoanalysis. It must not be repressed and be part of the

subconscious. It must, rather, be apparently obliterated, without obliterating the gift itself. To be a gift the gift must not be a gift; i.e. it is the Impossible.

It is from this understanding of the gift that Derrida also approached Mauss's anthropological account of the gift and giving. He criticized it primarily on two grounds. The first seems a more general critique of anthropologic synthesis itself. He asked "How is one to legitimate the translations thanks to which Mauss circulates and travels, identifying from one culture to another what he understands by gift, what he calls gift."^{xxx} Derrida dances amongst the ambiguities of language and was very careful as to how the particular terms are being used. He noted how Mauss had criticized other scholar's casual application of gift to the language of economic exchange. Yet, later on, Mauss seemed to recognize the ambiguity of the term gift when it is necessarily part of an exchange, and argued explicitly for a melding of the two in an understanding of the practices he had considered. For Derrida, this shows a recognition towards the madness of the impossibility of the term itself.

Indeed, this ties in to a second line of his critique of Mauss, his idea of the gift itself. If a gift is a giving without hope of exchange, Mauss's account denies its very possibility by insisting that for every gift there is a return. "He never asks the question as to whether gifts can remain gifts once they are exchanged."^{xxxi} Derrida graphs this exchange in terms of the circle, of gift and counter gift, of exchange. However, the gift, to be a gift, must break out of this circle. According to Mauss' perspective this is an impossibility, the gift is cemented firmly into this circle of exchange. "It deals with economy, exchange, contract (*do ut des*), it speaks of raising the stakes, sacrifice, gift *and* counter-gift -- in short, everything that in the thing itself impels the gift *and* the annulment of the gift."^{xxxii} The gift Mauss discussed, according to the Derrida's perspective, cannot be a gift at all.

There are two aspects of Mauss' description that intrigued Derrida, however. The first is the emphasis on time. For Mauss there must elapse a certain period between gift and counter-gift. It is rude to both return too quickly and to return immediately. Thus, what the gift gives is time. "The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*."^{xxxiii} It gives to the cycle of human relations a history, an essential temporality. This is a point that will important later for comparison with Bataille.

Second, he notices that the gift must be excessive. It tries to move beyond the circle of exchange in extravagance. However, this seems to be a hopeless task. As with the potlatch, an attempt to go beyond simply ups the bet, requiring a greater exchange gift. Indeed, this aspect gives to the idea of the gift a certain madness, a "madness of keeping or of hypermnesic capitalization *and* madness of the forgetful expenditure."^{xxxiv} If the gift attempts to break free of the circle of exchange, it instead draws the circle to it, moving it anew. Derrida compared the gift to the first mover. In an attempt to break free of the circle, it draws the circle around it. The gift in its destruction of itself as gift brings movement and history forward, initiating anew, sparking the circle, and changing its weave. "For finally, the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation. It is this exteriority that sets the circle going; it is this exteriority that puts the economy in motion. It is this exteriority that engages in the circle and makes it turn."^{xxxv}

Derrida's notion of the gift also seems to have an essentially temporal character that on first glance seems to invalidate Bataille's emphasis on an escape from temporal progression. Derrida extrapolates from Mauss's observation that between gift and counter-gift there must be a proper lapse of time. Thus while the value of the gift is returned in the socially required counter-gift, indeed, in most cases a demand of return with interest, the gift gives time. "One can translate as follows: The gift is not a gift, the gift only gives to the extent it *gives time*. The difference between a gift and every other operation of pure and simple exchange is that the gift gives time. *There where there is gift, there is time*. What it gives, the gift, is time."^{xxxvi}

Thus how does one rectify the notion of Bataille that the gift as an annihilation of excess escapes a forward movement of time into the privileged domain of the sacred and eternal moment and Derrida's argument that the gift actually creates a forward motion, an opening in temporal flow? The answer lies in the magnetic, indeed impossible, power of the gift. As Derrida argued, the gift draws the flow of exchange and the temporal flow towards itself. In the gift, the giver as subject initiates, the giver creates the demands and determines the very nature of the exchange. It is thus for that subject an escape from the rational discourse, which demands the individual as object. It opens the area of freedom, of play, that Bataille demanded and saw the hope for in Nietzsche. As Bataille saw an essential paradox of a gift that is an attempt at acquisition of a power, so Derrida saw an essential madness of the gift that seeking to escape and lose itself, draws the world to it. It is an escape from the rational discourse of economic utility, an emptying out that is really a new creation and

acquisition. The subject becomes sovereign in the very creation of the temporal place for play. It is the impossible moment that diverts the flow of energy in rational exchange in its selfish uselessness to a new point of definition.

Such a power of the annihilation of excess is reflected in the structural analyses Bataille gives in *The Accursed Share* of different cultures. Each culture he analyzes, be it Tibet, the Aztecs, or early Islam, is defined by an initial choice of gift, of the way the excess wealth the culture produces is expended. "Human improductive expenditure creates new improductive values, which reconnect humans to the universe through the loss principle."^{xxxvii} In this notion, there is more than a slight echo of the demands of Dionysus as the foundation of a healthy culture. There is the possibility of a sovereign act of cultural production that bears little resemblance to a rational choice determined by maximization of available resources. It is the very moment of definition of humanity rising above the utilitarian dominance that signifies the life of an animal. As another commentator has argued, for Bataille, "interdiction is presented as a negation of nature (le donnJ) which founds culture, marking the emergence of man from animal."^{xxxviii}

Thus, for Bataille, the notion of gift plays an essential role in the life of individuals and of cultures. In his vision of general economy, every culture produces excess that must be expended, annihilated. It is a vision of cultural surplus rather than of economic scarcity. The gift is one of the primary means of the expenditure of that surplus. As he expands on the observations of Marcel Mauss, in the giving of the gift, givers affirm their power as sovereign subjects, the ability to give, to expend in excess, to enjoy in luxury and leisure their wealth, taking them beyond the domination of rational economic necessity that would make them objects. With Derrida, he affirms that in *the moment of madness* that is the gift there is an opening of freedom to change and define individual and cultural self-understanding. The gift, then, for Bataille is a manifestation of the demand to escape a structural determinism, allowing for a return of the subject and human freedom to philosophical discourse through a paradox of losing it, of giving it away.

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- ⁱ For a general biographical summary of Bataille see http://www.fringeware.com/subcult/Georges_Bataille.html (accessed on 12/2/99)
- ⁱⁱ George Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, two vols. (New York: Urzone, Inc. 1988). The first volume was originally published in France as *La Part Maudite* in 1967. The second volume was originally published as *L'Histoire de l'erotisme* and *La Souverainet * in Georges Bataille's *Oeuvres Compl tes* (vol 8) in 1976.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Accursed Share*, vol 1, 106.
- ^{iv} *The Accursed Share*, vol 1, 58.
- ^v *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 59.
- ^{vi} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 58.
- ^{vii} For this essay, I will be using the translation, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls, with a foreword by Mary Douglas (New York, 1990).
- ^{viii} *The Gift*, viii.
- ^{ix} *The Gift*, 36.
- ^x *The Gift*, 33.
- ^{xi} *The Gift*, x.
- ^{xii} *The Gift*, 37.
- ^{xiii} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 68.
- ^{xiv} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 67.
- ^{xv} Lysa Hochroth, "The Scientific Imperative: Improductive Expenditure and Energeticism," found on *George Bataille in America* (<http://www.phreebyrd.com/~sisyphus/bataille/>, accessed 12/5/99).
- ^{xvi} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 69.
- ^{xvii} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 65.
- ^{xviii} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 2, 41.
- ^{xix} *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, 132.
- ^{xx} Laura Martz, "Free Time! Lucidity and the Anti-work Ethic," found on *George Bataille in America* (<http://www.phreebyrd.com/~sisyphus/bataille/>, accessed 12/5/99).
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