

Research Article

Luka Trebežnik*

“The Remedy for a World Without Transcendence”: Georges Bataille on Sacrifice and the Theology of Transgression

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Abstract: Georges Bataille is undoubtedly a key reference for all relevant contemporary thoughts about sacrifice. This article attempts to follow his impulses and intuitions, which are often misunderstood because they are highly personal, provocative, and suggestive. The problem of sacrifice is approached in three concentric circles. The first presents a view from a distance, from the cosmic standpoint of “base materialism” and “general economy.” The second takes a closer look at the sacrificial site and deals with Bataille’s fascination with Aztec sacrificial culture. The concluding third part looks at sacrifice from the point of the altar, the place of communication and communal consumption of death, as a site of the emergence of the sacred and of community. In this way, the article seeks to highlight Bataille’s transgressive thinking as a worthwhile contribution to post-metaphysical theology.

Keywords: sacrifice, Bataille, transgression, Aztecs, violence, sacred, communication

When we attempt to think about sacrifice, we are faced with a truly challenging task. These violent rites seem completely alien and inaccessible to modern Western thought. Certainly, sacred rituals cannot be adequately analyzed with academic coldness and methodology. Georges Bataille, a thinker who was not only theoretically concerned with sacrifice but fully existentially dedicated to the subject – for Bataille, sacrifice was an obsession that accompanied him throughout his life –, argued that thought must be gradually brought to the level of the solemnity of the rite and its participants if we are to make sense of the phenomenon of sacrifice. Seen from the outside, religious rituals appear completely foreign, senselessly cruel, as they destroy objects (or subjects) that might otherwise be useful. Yet, according to Bataille, we must not perceive this violence of cruel sacrificial gestures as alien to ourselves, but as a profound expression of our inner existential truth. In the introduction to *The Accursed Share*, he writes: “Indeed, the ebullition I consider, which animates the globe is also *my* ebullition. Thus, the object of my research cannot be distinguished from *the subject at its boiling point*.”¹ This article attempts to argue that in order to think about sacrifice in a post-metaphysical context, we must, at least to some extent, follow Bataille’s thought and try to understand why he was so attracted to the rite and concept of sacrifice.

The main aim of the article, then, is to better understand Bataille’s thoughts on sacrifice, his depiction of historical sacrificial rites, and, above all, his attempt to portray the “spirit of sacrifice,” the object of his obsession and fascination, his expression of the fundamental subversive human impulse to break with the

¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 10.

* **Corresponding author: Luka Trebežnik**, Science and Research Centre Koper, Institute for Philosophical and Religious Studies, Koper, Slovenia; Alma Mater Europaea University, Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, Ljubljana, Slovenia, e-mail: luka.trebeznik@zrs-kp.si

existing suffocating order.² For that purpose, we will try to explain it in three interconnected steps, first, we will look at how he understands sacrifice from a broad economic point of view, which in his case represents the cosmic dimension of “base materialism,” and in the second segment, we will try to answer why he was so inspired by the Aztecs, a civilization that understood sacrifice as its essence, and in the third approach, we will take a step closer to sacrifice and look at what, according to Bataille, happens on the altar itself, we will try to describe the dynamic between the sacrificer and the victim, which gives rise to the sacred and community. Thus, we will approach our topic in three concentric circles, the first one will offer a cosmological approach that does not distinguish between types of energy, but only cares about the system as a whole. In the following section, we will focus on the concrete historical practice of Old America, a civilization that raised sacrifice to the Sun to the highest level of social functioning. We will also look what role was and is ascribed to the Sun in various sacrificial practices. In the third, concluding part, we will focus on the question of sacred communication and death, and in this regard, we will reflect on the implications and potentials of Bataille’s ambivalent formulation of the sacred (as a violent unfolding of otherness that cannot be assimilated into sameness) for future theological and atheological studies.

1 Economy and Sacrifice

For Bataille, sacrifice is first and foremost a sacrifice of resources, a wasteful consumption of matter and energy; it is an expression of the boiling up of life that can no longer be contained. This approach places the theme of sacrifice in the context of cosmological thinking or what Bataille understood as economy. First, we must understand that Bataille distinguishes between two economies: The first is limited and based on scarcity, lack, limitation, and rarity, which corresponds to the classical understanding of economy (e.g., Marx); any political economy (protectionism) clearly falls under what Bataille calls “restricted economy” (*l'économie restreinte*). In contrast to most economists, Bataille sees the fundamental determinants of culture not in production but in consumption. The goals, hopes, and aspirations of a society are not manifested in its productive and reproductive activities, but in celebrations, festivities, madness, and excessive passion. This characterizes the “general economy” (*l'économie générale*), which offers us the possibility of understanding waste, destruction, and unreserved spending.

With this framework, Bataille offers us a way to understand the great diversity of phenomena, but above all the religious festivals where blood flows and wealth is consumed without end. Sacrificial rituals were “often described as a form of religious investment resonant of the Latin phrase *do ut des*, ‘I give so that you will give’,”³ but Bataille breaks with this interpretative tradition, he claims that we cannot understand potlach or sacrifice in ordinary logic of restricted economy, where waste is regarded as an unwanted element. This can only be done in the context of unlimited or general economy which is based on overflowing that produces the abundance that must be sacrificed, this abundance he names the “accursed share” (*la part maudite*). It is therefore not lack and necessity, but their opposite, abundance and luxury, which confront living matter and humanity with their most fundamental problems. Bataille’s thesis is quite surprising: it seems that in daily life, we cannot avoid scarcity, hunger, poverty, and similar expressions of the rarity of goods, but he claims that we have problems with abundance, with wealth. He says that there is no scarcity, and that rarity is not the cause of crises, but vice versa. He can argue this thesis convincingly because he has in mind the general movement of life that takes place beyond the demands of the individual. Societies produce more than they need to survive, and each of them determines or locates the “accursed share,” the surplus that is condemned to sacrifice. The resources in excess of needs can sometimes be invested in the growth of the system, and surplus energy (e.g.,

² Biles and Brintnall, “Sacred with a Vengeance,” 1, describe well those obsessions with negative: “Bataille’s writings are dramatic evidence of his relentless pursuit of the self-dissolving negative experience of ecstasy. They repeatedly reveal the sacrificial violence, the profound negativity, that haunts the always excessive moments that he deemed sacred.”

³ Chabbert, “What Forced Men to Kill Their Own Kind,” 59.

labor) is in these cases invested in expansion (e.g., new production facilities). However, this is only possible up to a certain limit: the "accursed share" is the surplus that is destined for sacrifice. It is taken from the amount of useful wealth and is intended for charitable consumption and must therefore be destroyed. "Existence in avidity attains, when fully developed, a point of disequilibrium at which it suddenly and lavishly expends; it sustains an explosive loss of the surplus of force it has so painfully accumulated. The amount of energy which thus escapes, though by no means negligible, is relatively low; however, it is no longer part of the world of use: use is then subordinate, it becomes the slave of loss."⁴

The economy is usually (i.e., always) studied as a separate, self-contained, and independent system. The processes within such a system can be isolated and controlled, but such an approach neglects the crucial dimension of these systems. Bataille, on the other hand, argues that we must take into account that the living organism is only a product of the energy play on the Earth's surface and as such usually receives more energy than it needs for its minimal functioning or for the mere maintenance of life. There are two possible uses for this surplus energy: It can be used for growth, development, and reproduction. But it also happens that the system can no longer grow for some reason, in which case it must inevitably be used up, without profit or return. This consumption can take many forms, but it is certainly unavoidable. It seems that we are blind to this aspect of our existence, we are used to growth, progress, development, and valorization, but we do not see that all this must lead somewhere, that the ideal of the accumulation of productive forces must ultimately be consumed in luxury, in unrestrained consumption. According to Bataille, our existence can therefore be described with a simple formula: A chain of useful actions ultimately has no other effect than the waste of profit, and the accumulation of resources has no other purpose than the senseless destruction, the consumption of these resources. This is a brief depiction of what he calls "general economy." From a general point of view, from the point of view of the fundamental matter of life, energy is always abundant, the only difference is the way in which this surplus is wastefully squandered. Here, we see that the first target of Bataille's thought is what can be understood as the most widespread spontaneous philosophy of modern people – utilitarianism. In ancient times or in societies that still live in the old way (in this part, Bataille's thinking was heavily influenced by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert), excessive spending and wasting were understood as a virtue and source of honor, but today, it is just the opposite, our society favors accumulating, collecting, hoarding; wasting energy and resources has a bad reputation (either as careless and unreasonable or even unethical). When we act and think rationally, we behave according to the utility and usefulness of our actions. At first glance, these actions are clearly oriented toward the future, we accumulate things and resources for an even greater growth of the system, but therein lies a paradox. Life cannot be kept within the limits of this logic; the system cannot grow endlessly. This is why Bataille writes: "I insist on the fact that in general there is no growth, but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on Earth is the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life."⁵ And yet somehow our culture is imbued with the false notion that this growth of systems, the productive consumption of energy, has a purpose. "Everything conspires to obscure the basic movement that tends to restore wealth to its function, to gift-giving, to squandering without reciprocation."⁶ If there is resistance to this, a fearful rejection of this order, it is only in a particular sense, from the point of view of the individual, but not from the point of view of the fullness of living matter. Any resistance to this reality is therefore only an excessive focus on one's own concreteness and a denial of life. "Anguish is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is an overflowing by its very nature."⁷

Ancient societies understood the destruction of everyday objects as a religious act, as a means of communicating with life and other forces. "Sacrifice, as a religious practice, establishes a connection between two

⁴ Bataille, *Writings on Laughter*, 78.

⁵ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

separate spheres of experience, the homogeneous profane sphere of everyday life and the heterogeneous sacred sphere of timeless and infinite value, the realm of the gods. In sacrifice an offering is effectively thrown out of everyday life, cast beyond utility into a realm beyond our comprehension.”⁸ Of course, acts of communication with the heterogeneous sphere can only take place in the complete unknowing, scientific thinking cannot help here. Neither the place nor the time of the sacrifice is completely known, nor is it clear which part is accursed, but it is certain that there must be an end to growth and decay, writes Bataille: “Neither the share that it is necessary to sacrifice, nor the moment of sacrifice are ever given exactly. But a *general* point of view requires that at an ill-defined time and place growth be abandoned, wealth negated, and its possible fecundation or its profitable investment ruled out.”⁹

2 The Fascination of Ancient America

Sacrifice, as Bataille argues, is a universal concept with a rich history that has shaped all civilizations, at least to some degree; European certainly has its paradigmatic forms (Jesus, Socrates, etc.), which are interpreted and placed at the beginning of a long tradition. Bataille was interested in European and Asian civilizations and their great religious systems, but he was even more fascinated by the pre-Christian world of pre-Columbian America.¹⁰ For Bataille, the bloody excesses practiced by these civilizations testified to something extraordinary. All civilizations knew sacrifice, but none elevated it to such an important level – we can easily say that the absolutely central place that work occupies in our modern industrial–capitalist meritocracy, when people are identified and recognized primarily through their work, sacrifice had for them. Bataille claims that the Aztecs respected, valued, and enjoyed life so much that they also revered death. Bataille contrasts this with a kind of indifference in modern man’s attitude to life. He describes the scene with barely palpable fascination: “Continuous crime committed in broad daylight for the mere satisfaction of deified nightmares, terrifying phantasms, priests’ cannibalistic meals, ceremonial corpses, and streams of blood evoke not so much the historical adventure, but rather the blinding debauches described by the illustrious Marquis de Sade.”¹¹ But contrary to what one might conclude from these atrocities, the Aztecs were not what some might West-centrally call a backward civilization. Their society was well developed and had a rich religion, literary culture¹² and cosmology, they produced sophisticated astronomical sciences, they had a well-developed socio-civil system, and their architectural mastery allowed them to build pyramids – but everything they invented and did was put in job of consumption (of life).

The sacrifices were not only unusually cruel but also stood out in terms of quantity. The priests killed the victims at the top of the pyramid, closest to the Sun, in full view of audience; they cut open the chest of those still alive and tore out the beating heart and lifted it into the sky. They also cut off the head and rolled it down the stairs. Then they pulled off the victim’s skin, which the priest put on. The high priest had a particularly

⁸ Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, 99.

⁹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 182.

¹⁰ The data on sacrifice in pre-Columbian America used in this article come mainly from the cited books by Bataille and Todorov, both of whom summarized the data from the records of the first enumerators of this period and later historical studies (we can at least mention the records of Columbus, Cortés, Díaz, De Las Casas, and Durán from this period, both of whom also studied the later historical accounts in detail). These two sources are of course not satisfactory and in many respects are partially refuted by the latest studies and research. We refer at least to the recent book *At Home with the Aztecs* by Michael Smith, which reveals the rich, multifaceted, and complex lifestyle of the Aztecs and their community in addition to the rituals and violence that have attracted the majority of scholars attention. Olson, “Eroticism, violence, and sacrifice,” 246, also shows that historical accuracy was not one of Bataille’s primary motifs. Nonetheless, recent archeological excavations (between 2015 and 2018) at the Templo Mayor site, where piles of skulls have been found, confirm at least the basic idea of his understanding of the events of the time.

¹¹ Bataille, *Writings on Laughter*, 3.

¹² On the ramifications of Aztec literary expression, see Brown, “Human Sacrifice and Two Imaginative Worlds, Aztec and Christian,” 180–96, who compares the mourning poems for child sacrifice with Judeo-Christian literature, including psalms, poems related to the Akedah, and other traumatic events from sacred history.

important role, so he also received the body of the sacrifice, which he prepared at home for a solemn ceremony for his guests, but he did not eat it himself, for he regarded the sacrificed person as his son. The soldier who had captured the victim danced at the feast with the victim's head in his hand. The victims were found among the prisoners of war, but for the ritual to work, they had to be treated well before being sacrificed. The first of the victims (according to some estimates, around 20,000 people were executed on the main festival day; Durán writes that King Ahuitzotl sacrificed 80,400 people at the dedication of the new temple in Mexico alone)¹³ was even understood to be an image of God, so it was led to his death with full honors, the victims had to dance and celebrate their impending death, so they were also given opiates. It is also clear that the Aztecs had to undertake regular military campaigns to satisfy the need. The motivation for the military campaigns was primarily of a religious nature. The original goal was the conquest of people, not land. In addition, the Aztecs had to adhere to the seasons and the associated holidays. They themselves did not seek to expand their territory beyond their basic needs, as would be the case with a military civilization. The Aztec sacrifices were not only directed outwards but also inwards, “internal and external violences combined in an economy that put nothing in reserve.”¹⁴ Among the inward-looking rites, one of the most solemn sacrifices of the liturgical year, which functioned based on substitution, occupied a special place. The prisoner became a God-King through the rituals. Bataille notes at this point that this already heralds the process of rationalization of the sacrifice: the substitution of the prisoner for the king introduces the logic of substitution, which is also of foremost importance in other expressions of sacrifice throughout the world. We can even say that the higher the level of this logic, the more the sacrifice is humanized, diluted, and spiritualized – and thus, this rite is closer to its end. In fact, the Aztecs had two main types of human sacrifice, both of which were based on the ritual of vicariousness or substitution, “the immolation by heart-excision of Nahuatl-speaking warriors captured on the battlefield (*teomiqui*, ‘he who dies in godlike fashion’) and the ritual killing by decapitation of Mexica women and slaves who impersonated particular deities (*ixiptla*, literally, a ‘stand-in for god’).”¹⁵

To speak of the cruelty of the Aztecs in contrast to our non-cruelty would be a little exaggerated. In his study of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, Tzvetan Todorov distinguishes between the societies of sacrifice, best represented by the Aztecs, and the societies of massacre, best represented by the Spaniards of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ In his work, Todorov clearly does away with the exaggerated qualitative moral differences between civilizations. When we talk about the incredible number of ritual executions, the complete disregard for the number and accumulation of deaths, it can seem as if we are dealing with a completely inhuman culture, as opposed to the European one. But the Spaniards did not exactly arrive peacefully on the new continent either; on the contrary, they committed a genocidal act, the mass extermination of the population and diseases reduced the population in Mexico alone from 25 to 1 million in less than a century.¹⁷ Spanish violence was unbridled, “Spaniards were finding an intrinsic pleasure in cruelty, in the fact of exerting their power over others, in the demonstration of their capacity to inflict death.”¹⁸ On the one hand, then, it is a religious murder committed in the name of official ideology and carried out in public, in a temple erected for this purpose, a murder subject to strict rules: The victim is very important in this case, their identity counts (the victim must not have been too similar to the Aztecs, but not too different either), the sacrifice testifies to the strength of the social structure, to its superiority over the individual being. The massacres, on the other hand, show the weakness of the social fabric, the obsolescence of the moral principles that once ensured the cohesion of the group, and therefore take place in the sphere where the laws can be circumvented (far away from the European metropolises). The massacred people are completely de-individualized, and they are equated with animals, so it is not a case of murder. Unlike the victims of sacrifice, there is no one to blame, no one takes responsibility, the act is somehow not entered into the moral register, so the existence of these killings remains hidden. Their social function is not recognized. If sacrifice is a purely religious murder, then

¹³ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 143.

¹⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 55.

¹⁵ Rival, “The Aztec Sacrificial Complex,” 165.

¹⁶ Todorov, *The Conquest of America*, 143–5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

the mass killings can be seen as an expression of the godlessness of Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century (which paradoxically corresponds to the alleged peak of Christian civilization). Todorov presents these acts of violence as an expression of a modern being that is completely civilized and fundamentally different from the ancient, traditional peoples (who could only do so at a certain time and place) and can therefore kill when and as much as they want. This is the undeniable dark side of the spirit of modern civilized man that was clearly exposed at the end of the fifteenth century.

3 Sacrifice to the Sun

To whom or what are we sacrificing, for whom is the sacrifice intended? For Bataille, the Aztecs have given a good answer: We must sacrifice to the Sun, we must respond to the Sun's waste with our own corresponding potlach. We must make sacrifices so that the Sun, object of wonder, admiration, and worship, does not go out. The Sun as the central point of the galaxy, as something that warms and nourishes, naturally has different emphases in different spiritual and religious systems, but at the same time, it retains its utmost importance. On the one hand, we have Heraclitus, who claimed that the sun is new every day, and on the other hand, we have Plato, for whom the Sun was the source of the highest eternal truths and knowledge. The debate about the centrality of the Sun was somehow finally settled by Nicolaus Copernicus, who wrote: "At rest, however, in the middle of everything is the Sun." But the realization of heliocentricity of the Universe even increased the importance of the Sun, and Sun cults proliferated even in modern times. Antonin Artaud, who, like Bataille, was excluded from the surrealist circles, went to Mexico to join one of those cults. This is reflected to a certain extent in his semi-autobiographical story about the Sun-God-King Heliogabalus: "In every country where one seeks to put oneself directly in communication with the diverse forces of God there are temples to the Sun."¹⁹

But today, it seems that we, modern western people, because of our indoor lifestyle, hardly notice the Sun, somehow take it for granted. It seems that the modern world of developed industrial society somehow manages to block out what is "essential and fills us with fear and happiness," today's world is dominated by the "absence of faith, or rather absence of ideas, that abandons modern thought to impotence."²⁰ We are too caught up in the world of various benefits. This world tempts us to imagine endless progress, all surplus energy is invested in production. But this is not possible: "it has to be granted that life or wealth cannot be indefinitely *prolific* and that the moment always arrives when they must stop growing and start to spend. The intense proliferation of immortal living beings – the simplest beings – succeeds the luxury of death and sexual reproduction, which maintains an immense endemic squander."²¹ The most basic truth, then, is that we cannot do without the Sun, and this immense source of energy that sustains us in pure abundance. The Sun is the clearest example of unconditional giving without receiving anything in return. In the eyes of the Aztecs, it was therefore the most visible expression of sacrifice. Tecciztecatl was initially only a human-like God, but through his leap into the embers he became the Sun. His role is redemptive, he brings light into the world since he took responsibility and sacrificed himself for his fellow citizens. The same myth also justifies military operations and the capture of soldiers, "so that there would be people whose hearts and blood could be taken so that the Sun might eat."²² This and similar myths fed the belief that bloody sacrificial practices were the only way to keep the Sun shining.

But the crucial question remains: How should we engage with the Sun? Beyond individual disciplines, there is a key problem that is the starting point for every discipline that thinks about the movement of energy on Earth – from the physics of the world to political economy to sociology, history, and biology. Even what we

¹⁹ Artaud, *Heliogabalus*, 62.

²⁰ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 147.

²¹ Ibid., 181.

²² Ibid., 49.

can say about art, literature, and poetry is primarily a concern of the movement of excess energy that is transformed into buzzing, bubbling life. Everything can be understood on a strictly material and energetic level, the movement of energy on Earth. Bataille's studies therefore encompass everything from geophysics to political economy, this common denominator he calls "base materialism," a general movement of cosmic expenditure.²³ Life confronts us with violence as a part of the general economy, and at the most basic level, we can recognize that everything is based on solar energy, pure boiling that happens to cover and warm the Earth with some rays while the others miss the Earth entirely. Nick Land argues that this is exactly what Bataille was hinting at in one of his earlier surrealist writings (from 1927), which he titled *L'anus solaire*. "Desire responds to the cosmic madness pulsed out of the Sun, and slides beyond love towards utter communion. This is a final break with Christendom, the disconnection of base flow from the terminal sentimentalism of Western man, nihilism as nakedness before the cyclone. Libido no longer as the energy of love, but as a raw energy that loves only as an accident of impersonal passion."²⁴ This accidental manner pointed out by Land is crucial for Bataille: some rays from this hot ball of plasma fall to Earth by pure chance, but the majority of them miss it and go into waste. This happy occurrence, that some rays do fall here, must be praised above all, and therefore, when we talk about the Sun, we cannot exclude anything. Bataille often begins his studies with this cosmological economy, the Sun is everywhere, and everything is due to the Sun, nothing can be without the Sun, as Zarathustra said (a book that is somehow in the background of Bataille's contemplation of the Sun), "the night is also a Sun."²⁵ The sacrifice must therefore be universal, as the only way to correspond to the Sun's exuberance. "The Earth is thus a cosmic hole in which the truth of the universe (expenditure, communication, glorious manifestation) gets drained, sucked in, sacrificed."²⁶ At the last analysis then, for Bataille, sacrifice is general logic of Being itself, the inevitable fate of existence.

4 Sacrifice and Communication

Here, on Earth, sacrifice and the shared consumption of death take on various dramatic expressions. Bataille's first inkling of how a crowd can enjoy and consume death came on May 22, 1922, when he sat in the audience that witnessed the brutal death of Manuel Granero, a young bullfighter who had been stabbed in the eye with the bull's horn (these eyes would later become another of Bataille's obsessions, see the event literary described in *Story of the Eye*, where "the eye is undoubtedly a symbol for the Sun"). There, Bataille saw the passion that a violent death can evoke, the ambiguous pleasure and joy that the violent end of life produces – he experienced what theater language calls the power of catharsis.

The act of communication shows that the sacred cannot be individual but is always communal, it is that which breaks through isolation and negates the personal; therefore, it constitutes "a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled."²⁷ This surely cannot arise in the banality of everyday. An event has to occur, "a divinely violent manifestation of violence elevates the victim above the humdrum world where men live out their calculated lives."²⁸ The process of sacrifice is actually the completion of the life of the victim; the transgression introduces us to the experience of the sacred. Bataille believes that the fundamental human experience is the experience of limits, the most obvious limit being death. "The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what historians of religion call the element of the sacred."²⁹

²³ Hollier, "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille," 135, shows, how Bataille often intentionally mixes up and even equates these terms, for him "matter is in fact just another name for expenditure and 'dissimulation'."

²⁴ Land, *Thirst for Annihilation*, 84.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 263.

²⁶ Hollier, "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille," 135.

²⁷ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 242.

²⁸ Bataille, *Erotism*, 82.

²⁹ Ibid.

Bataille argues that violent communication produces the sacred (here we can recognize his influence on René Girard; by analyzing this hierophanic element, both come to “a similar conclusion: sacrifice is constitutive of being human”³⁰), this fundamental human fact is at the root of community, “humanity is not composed of isolated beings but of communication between them. Never are we revealed, even to ourselves, other than in a network of communications with others.”³¹ We are driven by the fear of solitude, and human existence itself (in isolation) is nothing. Bataille speaks of two levels of communication and precisely where the first (i.e., the linguistic level) fails, the second (i.e., the community-building level) seems to be the strongest. The first communication is called “feeble communication,” a base for a mundane society that leads to productivity, and on the other hand, we have the “powerful communication,” based on social discrepancies, on the achievement of a common goal and the preservation of the individuality of the individual. This potentially very violent communication “abandons the consciousnesses that reflect each other, that impenetrability which they ‘ultimately’ are.”³² For Bataille, powerful communication is equated with sovereignty because strong communication presupposes sovereign communicators, and sovereignty is precisely being in communication. Sovereignty is communication, and communication is always sovereign.³³ A sovereign act such as sacrifice naturally bears characteristics of a crime, because the execution of a victim is of course a criminal act, a violation of a law that would also apply in other cases (sacrifice does not abrogate this fundamental law but reaffirms it). Illegal behavior is sometimes even commanded (in the sense of transgression). This is the basic law of human sociality, of sovereign behavior and free actions, and the law as the flip side of transgression:

The creation of a sovereign (or sacred) element, therefore, of an institutional figure or of a sacrificial victim, depends on the negation of some interdict, the general observation of which makes us human beings, as opposed to animals. This means that sovereignty, in that humanity trends towards it, requires us to situate ourselves ‘above the essence’ which constitutes it. It also means that major communication can only take place on one condition – that we resort to Evil, that is to say, to violation of the law.³⁴

Here, we come up against the limits of the Bataille’s account of sacrifice, its double gesture of affirming and overcoming or, as Dennis King Keenan calls it, the “sacrifice of sacrifice.” For him, any “reading of Bataille’s reading of sacrifice must be attentive to the sacrifice of sacrifice characteristic of the question of death (the moment when death as possibility turns into death as impossibility).”³⁵ Sacrifice has always been and remains imbued with ambiguity, it breaks with language and communication in order to deepen them, and it completes and enhances death in order to negate it at the same time. This clash of the possible and the impossible, sense and nonsense arises from “the irreducible aporia of death: the richest moment of meaning (death) is simultaneously the moment of the impoverished meaninglessness of absolute dismemberment.”³⁶

Sacred communication, the rite of excessive, unreserved spending, reveals the protagonists to others and to themselves. Bataille writes: “Thus, when I consume immoderately, I reveal to my fellow beings that which I am intimately. Consumption is the way in which separate beings communicate.”³⁷ Through the act of unrestricted consumption, our boundlessness is revealed. Community is founded on violence, and this violence is then somehow commemorated and concealed at the same time. Community often exposes the traces of violence, displays the remains – the Aztecs even had the infrastructure to display a multitude of skulls – while simultaneously hiding some of the aspects of this founding crime. In a strange way, sacrifice is an escape from death (for the Aztecs, for example, from the end of light and heat that would come with the end of Sun), but also from dirt, decay, and so on. It is in our nature to turn away from these unpleasant things. Bataille

³⁰ Chabbert, “What Forced Men to Kill Their Own Kind,” 65.

³¹ Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, 170.

³² *Ibid.*, 172.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁵ Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice*, 45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁷ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 58.

quotes a Mexican law that forbade people to turn away from a procession leading to a temple where children were being ritually sacrificed – from the very existence of this law, we can conclude that sacrifice was perceived as an extremely unpleasant but necessary act for the preservation of society and life.

Communication enables one of the most important aspects in the development of sacrificial practice and thought: the principle of substitution. In the case of sacrifice, everything revolves around this principle: “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane.”³⁸ Objects and items circulate and take on new roles and meanings, a slave can thus become a king, and a ram replaces a human sacrifice. At this point, however, the mimetic dimension of the sacrifice becomes clear: if the main protagonist is not present, her reserve can replace her, the scene is prepared in advance. The sacrifice is performed as mimesis and repetition.

It is important to distinguish between the world of utility, utilitarianism (what we perceive as *sensus communis* or the spontaneous philosophy of modern people), and the logic of the sacred, which destroys the principle of equivalence (general equivalence, as Marx says, describing the age of absolute substitutability). We speak of objects that are in the world and to which we assign a symbolic and practical value. What is sacrificed is precisely the value. What is sacrificed must have a certain useful function, and the act of sacrifice gives up precisely that. The serving use has transformed an object, which is of the same order as the subject, into a thing. This allows the object to be sacrificed. The destruction negates the utilitarian aspect, the consumption of this object is different from what happens in the world of utility. Bataille can therefore say: “What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrificer and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end.”³⁹ If we consider the example of a prisoner of war who could serve as a slave, he would only become a means with this fate; he could, for example, be sold on or used elsewhere. With the sacrificial ritual, however, this relationship is elevated. “No one can make a *thing* of the second self that the slave is without at the same time estranging himself from his own intimate being, without giving himself the limits of a *thing*.”⁴⁰ Bataille emphasizes the authenticity of the relationship between the victim and the sacrificer, namely, the most fundamental human connection, the sharing and consumption of death. In this context, it becomes clear that the sacrifice is not a single episode of singular violence, but that the universe itself is played out on the altar. Through this process, man tries to distance himself from the world of work, from the banal chain of production that also reduces him to the effect of labor. All these strange myths about God jumping into the embers, etc., which fuel all these extremely bloody rituals, are just man’s attempt to “recover the lost immediacy.” In this respect, religion is only an attempt to escape this banality of the utilitarian worldview, “this long effort and this anguished quest: It is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things*, and of restoring the *divine* order,” wrote Georges Bataille.⁴¹

5 Conclusion

The rite of sacrifice has a long history, which now seems to be coming to an end. This is especially true in the West,⁴² where it is obvious that the bloody sacrifices belong to the past. Ross Anthony links this with a postmodern economy, since “excess in a world in which excess is the norm, no longer guarantees passage from the world of homogeneity to the world of the sacred.”⁴³ Bataille’s accounts therefore seem to be a kind of nostalgia for something that is simply no longer accessible to modern man. In this context, Jean-Luc Nancy described Bataille’s thought as a final attempt to grasp this elusive mystery, as modern man comes to the

³⁸ Ibid., 55.

³⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 57.

⁴² Globally unfortunately this is not the case, and human sacrifice is still relatively common. Let’s just mention the cases of child sacrifices in Sub-Saharan Africa, most notably in Uganda. See, Igwe, “Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Africa.”

⁴³ Anthony, “This is Not an Exit,” 9.

realization that the ultimate truth of existence is that it cannot be put outside of use. Nancy equates Bataille's and the traditional Christian representation of sacrifice, as both strive to negate death, but in the post-Christian era, death simply cannot be negated. Therefore, Nancy claims that today we simply cannot sacrifice any more, as this would require an impossible return to an earlier era of naïve thinking, "henceforth it is incumbent upon us to say – after Bataille, with him and beyond him – that there is no 'true' sacrifice, that veritable existence is unsacrificeable, and that finally the truth of existence is that it cannot be sacrificed."⁴⁴ Modern man is therefore forced to look for less shocking expressions of transgression than sacrifice, but at the same time, as Bataille argues convincingly, with this purification of life, we risk losing the sacred altogether. This "sterilization of the sacred," which no longer has any effect, was one of the reasons why he soon abandoned his plans to become a priest and turned away from Christianity in his youth. The undesirable, dangerous, and even repulsive elements cannot simply be separated from the sacred, because the essence of the sacred is the unfolding of otherness that cannot be assimilated into sameness – this is the main paradox that characterizes the impossibility of institutionalizing sacred communities.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that our existence is driven to transcend, and dissatisfaction with the banality of everyday life leads us to affirm excess: "We are the door to everything that can be, we are the expectation that no material response can satisfy, no trick with words deceive. We seek the heights. Each one of us can ignore this search if he has a mind to, but mankind as a whole aspires to these heights; they are the only definition of his nature, his only justification and significance."⁴⁵

And although Bataille's account of sacrifice was, in his own words, part of a grand a-theological project, with the aim of sacrificing God for the creation of community, today's post-metaphysical theological thinking, following some important developments in the second half of the twentieth century that have softened the divide between theism and atheism, can certainly benefit from his impulses. For his anthropology shows how urgently we strive for transcendence and a break with the economic cycle. Human existence strives not for the simplicity of everyday, but for heights and extremes: "Our only real pleasure is to squander our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us; we always want to be sure of the uselessness or the ruinousness of our extravagance. We want to feel as remote from the world where thrift is the rule as we can..., we want a world turned upside down and inside out."⁴⁶

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⁴⁴ Nancy, "The Unsacrificeable," 38.

⁴⁵ Bataille, *Erotism*, 274.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 170–1.

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