

Toward General Economy

by Stuart Kendall

Georges Bataille's major contribution to the history of thought, if not consciousness, consists in his transformation of Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of general economy into a subtle tool for the critical analysis of expenditure in all of its forms at every scale, from the atomic to the cosmic, by way of cells, organisms, and societies. And expenditure takes many forms—eating, sex and death are only three ways of expressing the processes of incorporation, accumulation, transformation, reproduction, and dissemination that are the passageways of energy in its peregrinations through matter: each word expressing only a moment in the life of energy, a pause or delay in the relentless process of becoming. We ourselves are only a moment in the life of energy sent from the sun, a suspension of energy in liquid and mineral material coursing through the depths of space.

Envisioning general economy requires the deployment of another Nietzschean concept—*perspectivism*—as a fundamental gesture. The capacity to see the workings of a specific economy *from the outside*, to see that any given economy is limited, or restricted, when measured against or rather within the more general processes of exchange at work in the universe as a whole—this requires perspectivism, the capacity to shift one's point of view radically and perhaps continually. This vision looks at any given economy *as if* it were closed and set apart from other economies, though in fact only the cosmos as a whole can be conceived as a closed system, and even this is a matter for discussion at the frontiers of physics. Every other system is a system within a system, stacked upon and feeding off some other system. What looks like consumption from one perspective is revealed as production from another. The waste of one system is inevitably—consciously or unconsciously—the food or fuel of another. Resources are residues, and inputs are outputs by another name.

The basic structures of our biology and neurology undermine our human efforts to perceive these things. Our eyes and other senses serve as filters, selecting forms for perception from within the overwhelming chaos of reality. Our minds—or brains, if you prefer—synthesize these selective facts into the imaginary of a stable physical world, through which we may move and

within which we may act. And, throughout the modern era—since Galileo, Bacon and Descartes—we have extended our capacity for selection, our means of quantification, to almost every corner of our physical and social realities. But this reductive habit—measuring this but not that, defining a system based on outputs without concern for inputs, selectively valorizing some outputs over others—dissolves in general economy, which is, as Bataille describes it, the proposal of an economy equal to the universe. Despite our biological limitations and cultural habits, there are many reasons to believe that now, in our time, Bataille's untimely notion of expenditure, has come due.

The notion has already had a long history, even just within Bataille's life and work. In the preface to his major work of general economy, *The Accursed Share*, Bataille mentions the "18 years this work has demanded of me."¹ Taking him at his word and recalling that *The Accursed Share* was first published in early 1949, we may surmise that the project began for Bataille in 1930 or 1931, during or immediately following the second year of the seminal journal *Documents* or, at the latest, coincident with the beginning of his participation in Boris Souvarine's Democratic Communist Circle and its affiliated review, *La Critique sociale*. Bataille published his first book reviews in *La Critique sociale* in October 1931. Two years later, in January 1933, *La Critique sociale* n° 7 carried the first explicit

and extended elaboration of the theme of expenditure, “The Notion of Expenditure.”²

The project nevertheless seems to have roots that reach further back in Bataille’s life. Bataille’s close friend Alfred Métraux first introduced him to Marcel Mauss’s theory of gift exchange in 1925. Métraux was then a student of Mauss, and Bataille and Métraux spent hours walking the streets of Paris, talking about Mauss’s work. Despite this connection, or perhaps because of it, Bataille did not borrow the issue of *L’Année sociologique* containing Mauss’s famous *Essai sur le don* (known in English as *The Gift*) from the Bibliothèque Nationale until May 1931.³ In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille is clear about the derivation of his thought in this area: “Let me indicate here that the studies whose results I am publishing here came out of my reading of the *Essai sur le don*. To begin with, reflection on potlatch led me to formulate the laws of *general economy*.”⁴

This claim is partially disingenuous in at least two ways. First, it is disingenuous because Bataille borrows more from Mauss than his theory of gift exchange and potlatch. Bataille’s reading of Mauss stresses the sacrificial moment of gift exchange rather than the moment of reciprocal return. For Bataille, the gift is, first and foremost, something one sacrifices. Expenditure is sacrificial expenditure. But this notion, too, derives, at least in part, from Mauss, from his “*Essai sur la Nature et la Fonction du Sacrifice*,” co-authored with Henri Hubert, first published in *L’Année sociologique* in 1898.⁵ Bataille’s capacious view of the interdependence of elements of social reality also owes something to Mauss and his concept of the “total social fact,” of which the gift is only the best example. A total social fact is a fact or practice that is personal, political, economic, legal, and religious, among other things, all at once. To perceive a total social fact is to perceive things in general, with multiple systems of meaning intersecting or layered on top of one another.

But Bataille’s claim that the thought of general economy derives entirely from reflections on potlatch is also disingenuous in another more significant way. Elsewhere, Bataille remarks that his encounter with the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche in the early 1920s was, as he says, “decisive.”⁶ That encounter began with *Beyond Good*

and *Evil*, a book that Bataille borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale on 12 April 1922, three years before his first exposure to Mauss’s thought. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche develops his theory of will to power as a strategy for understanding what he calls—only once but explicitly—the “general economy of life.”⁷ Thus, while Bataille may have formulated the laws of general economy through a reflection on Mauss’s description of potlatch, he did so from a perspective deeply influenced by a prior reading of Nietzsche.

The name Friedrich Nietzsche is nevertheless conspicuous in its absence from *The Accursed Share, Volume One*. Nietzsche does, however, appear as a significant reference in *Sovereignty*, the book that was to become volume three of *The Accursed Share*, though Bataille did not see it published during his lifetime. This omission or concealment of Nietzsche’s influence on Bataille’s theory of general economy is particularly curious given his near omnipresence in Bataille’s other works, most obviously *On Nietzsche* (1945), wherein he writes: “With a few exceptions, my company on earth is that of Nietzsche...”⁸ In the aftermath of World War Two, the company of the German philosopher, still mistakenly associated with the dark drives and legacy of National Socialism, may have been too controversial for inclusion in a book Bataille took as seriously for its world-changing potential as *The Accursed Share*.⁹

Nietzsche does, however, appear in drafts for the project where, for example, Bataille cites a portion of this passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

How did gold attain the highest value? Because it is uncommon and useless and gleaming and gentle in its splendour; it always gives itself. Only as the image of the highest virtue did gold attain the highest value. Goldlike gleam the eyes of the giver...Uncommon is the highest virtue and useless; it is gleaming and gentle in its splendour: a gift-giving virtue is the highest virtue. Verily I have found you out, my disciples: you strive, as I do, for the gift-giving virtue...This is your thirst: to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves.¹⁰

It is not necessary to interpret this passage too deeply: Mauss’s social thought meets Nietzsche’s poetic psychology in Bataille’s general economy.

Despite the convergence of these powerful influences, Bataille ruminated over *The Accursed Share* for at least 18 years. In the late 1920s, following his encounter with Nietzsche, his introduction to Mauss’s theory of gifts, and his initial readings of both Sade and Freud (including his unorthodox experience with psychoanalysis under Adrien Borel), Bataille attempted to elaborate a cosmology of solar expenditure and base materialism circulating around and through several mythic figures: the solar anus, the pineal eye, and the Jesuve. These texts remained, for the most part, unpublished during Bataille’s lifetime, but they certainly constitute his initial attempt to express the ideas developed most fully in *The Accursed Share*.

The earliest of these writings, “The Solar Anus,” dates to 1927, though it did not appear in print until late 1931, when the Galerie Simon published it in a small edition illustrated by Bataille’s friend André Masson. The other manuscripts date to 1930, the year after Bataille came under attack by André Breton in the Second Surrealist Manifesto, and the year *Documents* lost funding. These texts reflect that moment of polemic and pause, a moment in which Bataille seems to have been gathering his thoughts, drafting manuscripts designed to articulate his position, a vision directly in contrast to and in contestation of the Surrealist vision.

By late 1931, Bataille’s horizon of concern had shifted away from Breton and the Surrealists toward Boris Souvarine’s Democratic Communist Circle and its associated journal, *La Critique sociale*. He continued to develop, and ultimately publish, his theories of base materialism and expenditure, now against a backdrop of Marxism and far left militancy. Through the Democratic Communist Circle, Bataille made another personal contact essential to the development of his thought on expenditure, Georges Ambrosino (1912–1984). Ambrosino was a nuclear physicist of Italian descent already active in the Circle when Bataille joined the group. The two became close friends. Following the dissolution of the Circle in 1934, Ambrosino continued to collaborate actively with Bataille, first in Counter Attack and later in *Acéphale*. His name appeared as a director of the journal *Acéphale* when it was first announced in 1936 and among the

signatures on the “Note on the Foundation of a College of Sociology” in 1937.¹¹ Ambrosino also participated actively as an auditor in both *Acéphale* and the College of Sociology. Ambrosino worked with the Commissariat à l’énergie atomique and, after World War II, became the director of the Maurice de Broglie Laboratory in Paris and Brétigny.

In a footnote to the preface to *The Accursed Share, Volume One*, Bataille writes:

Here I must thank my friend Georges Ambrosino, research director of the X-Ray Laboratory, without whom I could not have constructed this book. Science is never the work of one man; it requires an exchange of views, a joint effort. This book is also in large part the work of Ambrosino. I personally regret that the atomic research in which he participates has removed him, for a time, from research in “general economy.” I must express the hope that he will resume in particular the study he has begun with me of the movements of energy on the surface of the globe.¹²

As this note makes clear, Ambrosino was among Bataille’s closest intellectual collaborators, someone whose conversation was crucial to Bataille’s own sense of what he was doing. This is no small claim in relation to the editor of *Documents*, *Acéphale*, and *Critique*, the co-founder of Counter Attack, *Acéphale*, the College of Sociology, and other groups. Ambrosino served a role in relation to energetics and atomic theory analogous to Alfred Métraux’s role in relation to Mauss and sociology. During the mid-to-late 1940s, Bataille hoped that Ambrosino would co-author *The Accursed Share*, or at least parts of it, perhaps a volume on energy, with him. Ultimately this was not to be.

Between 1939 and 1949, Bataille drafted five different manuscripts for what would become *The Accursed Share*. This was in fact the book that Bataille was trying to write from 1939 to the Fall of 1941, while keeping the notebooks that he would later publish as the first half of *Guilty*. In the preface to *Inner Experience*, Bataille mentions *The Accursed Share* obliquely: “Three quarters finished, I abandoned the work in which the solved enigma [of general economy] was to be found.”¹³ In the Fall of 1941 his attention shifted to *Inner Experience*, though not entirely. He rewrote

parts of *The Accursed Share* in early 1942 while working on *Inner Experience*, and rewrote it again in 1943 while completing *Guilty*, *The Little One*, and *The Oresteia*. The project nevertheless languished as Bataille's focus drifted toward other things. Manuscripts from the period often include notes and outlines related to several projects—of several types: poetry, fiction, philosophy—at once.

The book resurfaces as a central concern in September of 1945, when Bataille mentioned it in a letter to his publisher Michel Gallimard: “*The Accursed Share*, on which I have been working for fifteen years.” He explains, “This is a work that I spoke to you about during one of our conversations, that touches on a subject of public interest, which will be easy, often even amusing to read, from end to end. The work is already well advanced and I think I can see the end within about a year.”¹⁴ At this point Bataille was living in the somewhat isolated medieval village of Vézelay on extended medical leave from his job at the Bibliothèque Nationale and increasingly desperate for money. There is no doubt that he hoped *The Accursed Share* would be both accessible to a wide audience and completed soon.

Only a few days later he mentioned the project again, somewhat obliquely, in a letter to his friend Roger Caillois. Caillois had solicited a contribution from Bataille for a London-based journal associated with the wartime resistance government *La France libre*, or Free France, and Bataille promised to have something for him in a “month or two.”¹⁵ That very month, Ambrosino visited Bataille in Vézelay and the two men talked at length about the project. The text Bataille sent Caillois: “Economy Equal to the Universe: Brief notes preliminary to the preparation of an essay on ‘general economy’ forthcoming under the Title *The Accursed Share*.” Ambrosino prepared notes for the text as well as making extensive comments on it, though it did not carry his name as a co-author.

In February 1946, Bataille wrote to Caillois wondering when the piece would be published, expressing his hopes that it would appear before April, reflecting both the urgency of his financial interest in its publication as well as his sense that the content of the article, and hence of *The Accursed Share*, was profoundly signifi-

cant in the postwar era.¹⁶ Ultimately, the article would not be published until July. The book project would take even longer. Ambrosino was pulled away by his research, and Bataille opted to refocus his energies and drafts on historical and cultural topics: on the Aztecs, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, Capitalism, the Soviet Union, and the politics of the Marshall Plan. He published articles on most of these topics, which amounted to an entirely new draft of the book, in *Critique* and elsewhere between May 1947 and January 1949, the year *The Accursed Share, Volume One* finally appeared, eighteen years after its inception.

The project did not end there, however. At least as early as 1947, when it became clear that Ambrosino would not be able to participate as a co-author of the project, Bataille began to see *The Accursed Share* as a multi-volume work. He hoped Ambrosino might yet be able to co-author a later volume devoted to the physical science behind the argument, but he also anticipated other volumes. In a note to the preface of volume one, Bataille wrote: “This first volume will have a continuation. Further, it is being published in a collection that I direct, which intends to publish, among others, works in ‘general economy.’”¹⁷

The back cover of *The Accursed Share, Volume One* announced a second volume forthcoming under the title, *De l'angoisse sexuelle au malheur d'Hiroshima* (From Sexual Anguish to the Misfortune of Hiroshima). That volume recalls Bataille's efforts to write a phenomenology of eroticism in the late 1930s, a project in some ways related to the notebooks that became *Guilty*, as well as another project entitled *Sade et l'essence de l'érotisme* (Sade and the Essence of Eroticism) from the late 1940s. In late 1950–early 1951, Bataille finally wrote a draft of the book, again based on articles published in *Critique* and elsewhere. The draft bears the title *L'Histoire de l'érotisme* (The History of Eroticism). He rewrote it in 1953–54 and again in 1956, before finally publishing the book in 1957 as *L'Érotisme* (Eroticism, mistitled in the City Lights Books edition as *Erotism*). *Eroticism*, in other words, is in fact *The Accursed Share, Volume Two*.

A third volume was anticipated in 1950 under the title *Propos politiques* (Political Matters). This volume developed out of articles and notes for other projects on

Nietzsche, Camus, and Communism from the late 1940s, but Bataille did not prepare a final draft of the book until the spring of 1953, at which point he worked on it for a year before setting the manuscript aside. Some of the chapters had already appeared as articles, others would be published later in the same form. The book as a whole was not published in Bataille's lifetime. We know it now under the title *La Souveraineté* (Sovereignty), but we can also wonder not only why Bataille did not publish this manuscript, but also what he might have envisioned in its place.

The book series Bataille mentioned in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* is another largely phantasmic project. Published by Éditions de Minuit, “L'Usage des richesses” (The Use of Wealth) included only *The Accursed Share, Volume One* and a book by Bataille's former brother-in-law and close collaborator, Jean Piel, *La Fortune Américaine et son destin* (American Fortune and Its Fate). Other anticipated projects included a book by Mircea Eliade on Tantra and a book by Claude Lévi-Strauss on potlatch, as well as works by Alfred Métraux, Georges Ambrosino, and Alexandre Kojève, none of which came to light. These anticipated volumes illustrate the extent to which Bataille envisioned his work as part of a larger community of dialogue in the area of general economy and on the problem of expenditure.

That dialogue never gained the momentum Bataille hoped it would during his lifetime, but the posthumous legacy of *The Accursed Share* and, more importantly, of the notion of general economy has been diffuse and pervasive. Georges Bataille was among the foremost influences on the generation of thinkers who followed his own. Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and other post-structuralists have all written in direct response to Bataille, and often as an extension of his work. The volumes of Foucault's history of sexuality, for example, are each exercises in general economy, as is much of Derrida's own body of writing.¹⁸

Perhaps more importantly for design, a substantial body of critical and theoretical literature has emerged from other disciplines that can be understood as extending the theory of general economy. Vaclav Smil has devoted his career to the patient analysis of physical forms of expenditure.

His book *Energy in Nature and Society: General Energetics of Complex Systems* is one of his many comprehensive works in this area.¹⁹ In *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, Luis Fernández-Galeano considers architecture, in theory and practice, as a multivalent mode of expenditure, examining buildings for the physical and social energy that they embody in construction and operation.²⁰ Kevin Lynch, another architectural theorist, devoted his last book, *Wasting Away*, to the problem of expenditure: what is waste, how is it embodied, how can we see it, how can we do it well?²¹

Architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart extend and transform this inquiry in their attempt to eliminate the concept of waste through what they call “cradle-to-cradle” design practices in their now well-known book of that name.²² One core conceit of their proposal is that “waste equals food”—the outputs of one system, in other words, are food or fuel for another. The design process gives shape to the displacement and transformation of energy as it moves from one form and one system to another. Their concept of cradle-to-cradle design recognizes that no design solution—no building, product, or system—exists in isolation from others, that all design solutions must be understood to exist in something like what Georges Bataille would have called a relationship of general economy. Bataille's theory of general economy is, in other words, a theory for contemporary design. But it is also more than that; by examining the means, both conscious and unconscious, through which expenditure shapes our social value systems, Bataille's theory of general economy calls on contemporary designers to examine their potential for shaping the social and political realities within which their practices struggle for meaning.×

Endnotes

- 1 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume One: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 12.
- 2 See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
- 3 See Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes, vol. XII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 577.
- 4 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 193.
- 5 See Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, trans. W.D. Halls (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).
- 6 Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes, vol. VII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 459.
- 7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Random House, 1966), § 23. The passage concludes: "And yet even this hypothesis is far from being the strangest and most painful in this immense and almost new domain of dangerous insights; and there are in fact a hundred good reasons why everyone should keep away from it who—can."
- 8 Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 3.
- 9 In fact, Bataille was so confident in the value of the project he confided in Michel Leiris that he believed it could lead to his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. See Georges Bataille and Michel Leiris, *Correspondence*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Seagull Books, 2008), 183.
- 10 See Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes, vol. VII*, 513; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Viking, 1954), 186.
- 11 See Denis Hollier, ed., *The College of Sociology*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3 ff.
- 12 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 191.
- 13 Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes, vol. V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 11.
- 14 Georges Bataille, *Choix de lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 247.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 268.
- 17 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 191.
- 18 For an outline of the key elements of this legacy, see Arkady Plotnitsky, *Reconfigurations: Critical Theory and General Economy* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).
- 19 Vaclav Smil, *Energy in Nature and Society: General Energetics of Complex Systems* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).
- 20 Luis Fernández-Galeano, *Fire and Memory: On Architecture and Energy*, trans. Gina Cariño (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).
- 21 Kevin Lynch, *Wasting Away* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).
- 22 William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

Bio

Stuart Kendall is a writer, editor, and translator working at the intersections of modern and contemporary poetics, visual culture, ecology, and design. His books include *The Ends of Art and Design*, *Georges Bataille*, and eight volumes of translations of French poetry, philosophy, and visual and cultural criticism, including works by Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Éluard, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, and René Char. He co-edited *Terrence Malick: Film and Philosophy* and a special issue of *Boom: A Journal of California* devoted to contemporary California design. Among his most recent books are *Gilgamesh*, a new version of the eponymous Mesopotamian poems – praised by Jerome Rothenberg as the "exemplary version for our time" – and *Louis XXX*, a volume collecting two hybrid works of theological eroticism by Georges Bataille.



Sam Leach, *Target Eater*, 2012–13, Oil and resin on canvas on wood, 12 panels, each 50 × 50cm, 150 × 100cm (12 panels)
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf

The Economy Equal to the Universe: Brief notes preliminary to the preparation of an essay on “general economy” forthcoming under the title *The Accursed Share*

by Georges Bataille
translated by Stuart Kendall

Essentially wealth is energy: energy is the basis and the goal of production. The plants that we cultivate in the fields and the animals that we raise are sums of energy that agricultural work has made available. We use, we consume these animals and these plants in order to acquire the energy expended in all of our labours. Even our inert products—a chair, a plate, a building—respond to the necessities of a dynamic system. The use of my muscular energy implies a time of rest wherein I am seated on a chair: the chair helps me to manage the energy that I expend now by writing...

Surpluses of Energy Due to the Action of the Sun

It is not difficult for me to capture the energy required for my life. I usually even have a significant excess at my disposal, and as a whole humanity has access to an immense surplus.

But it is an error to attribute, as one usually does, our excess of wealth to recent inventions, to the development of modern tools. The sum of energy produced is always superior to that which is necessary for its production. This is the principle of life, which generally confirms the actions of plants and animals. The productive activity of a plant can be envisioned from one side as an expenditure of energy, and from the other as acquisition. If the acquisition was not greater than the expenditure, no plant could grow. It is the same with animals (animal growth is more difficult and often presupposes the assistance of adults: in this case it is the adult-young animal

group whose mass increases). This fundamental law of life is not surprising. The sums expended usefully permit life to capture solar energy and this easily provides the excess of the living world.

The green parts of the plants of land and sea endlessly implement the appropriation of an important part of the luminous energy of the sun. In this way light—sunlight—produces us, animates us and engenders our excess. This excess, this animation, is the effect of this light (we are essentially only an effect of the sun).

In practice, from the point of view of wealth, the radiation of the sun distinguishes itself with its unilateral character: *it loses itself without taking account, without compensation*. The *solar economy* is founded on this principle. Usually, if one envisions our economy *on the ground*, one isolates it. But this is only a consequence of that which engenders and dominates it.

If we force ourselves to grasp, setting out from this principle, the economic movements that animate us, we perceive at the same time the excess of production over the energy necessary and the general effect of this excess: if we produce more than we expend in production, the excess of energy must be recovered in some way. If it is used, this can only be in the growth of the system that produced it. If not, it must be destroyed. This energy in play in our activity is not freed from its origins, though we forget this. Its operation in us is only a passage. We can stop the solar rays but for a time. The solar energy that we are is an energy that *loses itself*. And

undoubtedly we can delay it, but not suppress the movement that demands that it lose itself. The system of which we are a part can stop the radiation if it accumulates it in growth, *but it cannot grow endlessly*. At a given point in time, when the growth of the system has reached its limit, the energy captured can only resume its course and *lose itself*. The solar ray *that we are* returns in the end to the nature and direction of the sun: it must give itself, *lose itself without taking account*. A living system grows, or lavishes itself, *without reason*.

Individual Use of these Surpluses

From this new perspective, it is necessary to envision the living world as a whole. If one envisions only a part, its extreme limit of growth only has a relative significance. That an individual organism has had its fill and cannot henceforth grow more does not limit the stagnation of the rays of the sun on earth nor the slow growth of the mass of energy sunk there. The limit encountered at a point, when the animal approaches maximum growth, permits the observation of what happens once the development of the individual no longer entirely absorbs the available excess of energy. The sexual explosion then comes into effect, and liberates a great quantity of energy. Seen from the point of view of the living world, this liberation assures the extension, the duration of life. For the individual, it is a loss, pure and simple.

Sexual activity escapes at least for a flash the stagnation of energy and prolongs the movement of the sun. On this topic, human subjectivity provides information in agreement with the facts of *general economy*. There is a shift between the immediate impulse and its results. In human terms, the domain of one is accursed, while reproduction, the growth of the species, is the object of a dominant solicitude.

The Use of Surpluses in the Extension of the Living World and the Limits of this Use

The activity of the living mass of the globe in relation to the radiation of the sun only has a provisional and subordinated sense. Its opposition to the movement of the solar ray is no less constant and, for itself, fundamental. The principle of this living mass, on the surface of the globe, is to uti-

lize, in order to extend to the maximum, the too-full energy that the sun gives it. The limit of growth is that of the possible. Extension only stops when life has invaded then filled up the accessible domain. Not only does each species—plant, animal—occupy on its own account all space where it can live. But also living nature itself, at the extremity, multiplies its forms to the point of finally reaching the inaccessible (to that which up till then had remained forbidden): the trunks and branches of trees have raised green foliage above the grasses, winged insects and birds have filled the air with life. The same penetration exerts itself in the waters, in the mud at the bottom of the sea, even within solid ground. There is no other limit than a maximum of population, but life attains this limit. And if it attains it, even as it approaches it, life is in the state of an individual who can no longer expend to grow a constant surplus of energy: excess is always present, but energy recovers its initial freedom. Life being unable to endlessly invest itself usefully consumes itself *in pure loss*.

The Use of Surpluses before the Arrival of Human Beings

It is difficult to follow the play of energy in epochs that precede the arrival of human beings. At least the precise picture of a group of movements demands the application of very diverse disciplines, the basis of which undoubtedly exists, but the facts of which remain to be specified. The livable realm must have been filled, life must have reached its limits, or thereabouts, long before human beings existed. How, in these natural conditions, was the wasting of excess assured? Only the deep studies of diverse biologists could respond to this question. For now I must content myself with general propositions. Excess is the incontestable point of departure. The surplus can only be invested from the moment when extension is no longer possible. This implies *a priori* that great quantities of energy were available for the use of those who had the strength to waste them. A certain advantage was given from the outset to beasts of prey. Carnivores of various classes of animals not only had a position of privilege over herbivores: they responded poorly to the necessities of a system excluding indefinite growth. A

world of herbivores in which development has encountered no other obstacle than a scarcity of food is inconceivable. A permanent scarcity of food cannot result in superabundance. And in the form of flesh, excess was given to those who wanted it, on the condition, however, that it be *wasted*. If carnivorous animals had been constituted economically, if they had used the energy that belongs to them to its maximum extent, making it return in volume the same quantity that was produced, by assimilating the same quantity of energy that the animals ate, the effect would have been weak.

Ultimately, however, it is clear that the waste of devourers did not suffice: even if reproducing themselves slowly, they did not endlessly provide for the needs of the globe—living to dispense with and to lose all that it can contain.

Importance and Difficulties of the Problem of Expenditure

To power the economic problem like this, in the wrong way, I will undoubtedly provoke a hesitation. Not content to invert the usual point of view, I push a principle to absurdity, going so far as to say: *the globe needs to lose what it cannot contain*. If one cannot contain, it is easy to lose... A question as mad as this has never been posed.

I must therefore presently define my intention as firmly as I can. The consequences of so simple a principle have been poorly drawn up to this point. *Every system with a certain quantity of energy available to it must expend that energy*. In that the immediate perspective of human beings is constant. Though difficult to acquire, it is always easy to expend any resource whatsoever—money, for example, which is only a form of energy—that may be available to us. To the extent that the words *difficult* and *easy* define current reactions, this is accurate. Meanwhile, the effort of running quickly is no less evident than that of digging. In practice, the principle that I have defined signifies this: of a certain quantity of calories absorbed and assimilated by me each day, a certain part was necessary to maintain my life; the surplus, if I do not get fat, must be entirely spent. I can come and go, speak, whistle, work or laugh. I can set my money aside, but not my vital energy. Only a brief period separates me from the expiration

date at which I will have lost or will lose the surplus. My will decides the method, not the quantity of the loss.

Without any doubt, the fact that a given quantity of assimilated calories inevitably corresponds to a determinate expenditure of energy is of fundamental importance. However, if it is normally neglected, it is not because it has become clear, but it is going so well that no one, it seems, has paid attention to it. Precisely its (ineluctable) necessity permitted it not to be taken into account. Whereas the problems on the side of acquisition imply a possibility of failure, those on the side of expenditure, since it is inevitable...for all that it is not always pleasant. And, in any case, a difference must be marked between *active* and *passive* solutions, the latter possessing as a principle an inconvenience for those who submit to them (hence the solution of the carnivore from the perspective of the herbivore). If one admits in general the interest of active responses, expenditure—when the excess can be invested in growth—is as important, as difficult as acquisition (Keynes's bottles illustrate this principle). The point of view of the surplus of energy—which characterizes *general economy* and principally distinguishes it from classical political economy—assumes this reason not only in the human sciences but in the general theory of evolution. The point of view of the extension of the domain accessible to life has been introduced (rather recently) in biology. That of surplus must be in its turn: the first is only, as we have seen, a consequence of the second.

Man as Response to the Problem of Extension

Man offered the decisive response to the general problem of surplus. Man brought a portion of a considerable possibility of extension to living activity utilizing a share of the available energy. To an important extent, he untied another share of numerous expenditures from the provisional goal of extension. But saying “offered a response” isn't saying much: the response is man himself. The influx of solar energy, the critical point of its consequences, is humanity.

Man is an effect of the surplus of energy: the extreme richness of his elevated activities must be principally defined as the dazzling liberation of an excess. The

energy liberated in man flourishes and makes useless splendor endlessly visible. But the surplus of energy would not have been liberated if it had not first been seized. Condensation was necessary for expenditure. Human activity exploits the wealth of the earth with the help of new means. In this way it extends the domain of life. Men do not limit themselves, like trees and winged animals, to the occupation of spaces that are still free. There was not, in fact, when man appeared, any space that was not filled to the maximum extent with life. But by arranging new means, human beings invested considerable quantities of energy in installations increasing their power. They grew and increased the living nature from arrangements of dead matter that should in the end be regarded as one of the modalities by which life is extended.

Man as Response to the Problem of Expenditure

But one cannot grant major importance to the means that man now has of extending the domain of life—since, *more and more*, these means themselves increase the surplus. Undoubtedly there are periods of investment: in the end they only accelerate things. Capitalist accumulation tended to slow the sumptuary expenditures of the feudal world. Accumulation, in our day, can be far from its limits: the problem of unemployment (a *passive* solution) nevertheless indicates that the investment of energy toward extensions already no longer suffices to reabsorb the excess. Thus the essential problem of life that man—actively if he can, if not passively—must resolve, is posed to our life in its plenitude.

The crisis is that much more acute since human beings, in equal measure to the worsening crisis, are distanced from its active solutions. Sumptuary expenditures are viewed negatively by the multitude: they are habitually taken on by a few people, despite the general misery. It is admitted, still today, that the world is poor and that one must work. Meanwhile the world is sick with wealth. A contrary sentiment about the inequality of conditions leads us to judge as denying Pierre what is really only the surplus of Paul. What's more, the present shortage of food is the consequence of a debauchery of energy. It is undoubtedly difficult to simply say: “If you work, it is because without work you would

not know what to do with the sums of energy available to you. You can envision working less, but you cannot stop working and rest. You are only, if you must know, an explosion of energy. You will change nothing here. All of these human creations around us are themselves only an overflowing of vital energy. From the fact that you have available all the resources of the world, since they cannot endlessly serve their own extension, you must *expend them actively, for no other reason than the desire that you have to do so*. If not, you must, passively, go from starvation to war. You cannot deny it: the desire is in you, it is keen; you can never separate it from man. Essentially, the human being is here charged with expending gloriously what the earth accumulates, what the sun lavishes. Essentially, man is a being that laughs, dances, throws parties.” This language is clearly the only serious language. Naïve humanity, given to the practices of glorious expenditure, links that expenditure tragically to the grandeur and meaning of man. Human nature is already equal to the immense liberations of energy. Those who perceive it dedicate themselves to these liberations. The full fact on the earth of energy radiating from the sun, they are charged with returning it to its initial liberty. If they are betrayed by the (provisional) weakness of human intelligence, the rage of the sun at least will not fail them: through glory—intended—or horror—undergone—no proposed task was more certain of coming to be.✕