

Guy Stevenson

SACRIFICE AND EXPENDITURE: THE SEXUAL ECONOMICS OF GEORGES BATAILLE AND EZRA POUND

Introduction

- It has been widely pointed out that Europe's extreme political atmosphere in the first thirty years of the twentieth century produced a host of unlikely, often unwitting literary and political bedfellows.
- This was a time, as Henry Mead writes, in which Henri Bergson's philosophical pluralism 'appealed to readers on both the right and the left, those seeking a return to religious certainties on one hand, and those seeking a more radical progressivism on the other' (2008: 245-60).
- It was also a time in which an avowedly masculinist, elitist poet like Ezra Pound could co-edit a periodical -*The New Freewoman* - alongside an anarcho-feminist critic like Dora Marsden (Antliff, 2010: 47-57).
- Even in this context of shifting and interchangeable ideas, however, the common ground Pound occupied with Georges Bataille is remarkable.
- Poles apart politically and aesthetically, it is no surprise they are rarely situated together in scholarly studies of the late modernist period. While Bataille actively opposed fascism in the 1930s, Pound sided infamously with Mussolini; while Bataille cut his teeth writing Surrealist automatic prose, Pound co-founded the Imagist and Vorticist schools, both of which zealously advocated direct, 'concrete' expression.
- Like many post-Depression thinkers, however, they shared an abhorrence of modern capitalism and sought similar alternatives to it in the redefinitions of wealth available in ancient models of expenditure.
- Part of an inter-war trend which saw countless authors, poets and philosophers try their hand at amateur economics, Bataille's fascination with Aztec sacrifice and Pound's with an idyllic, pre-usurious epoch brings them together in bizarre and fascinating ways, the most intriguing of which is a shared hunch about the interconnectedness of monetary and sexual expenditure and belief that liberation in one sphere could be enabled through liberation in the other.

Cranks and heretics

- Before going into the specifics of their theories, it is worth considering the general condition of the economic debate Pound and Bataille were joining. Pound wrote *The ABC of Economics*, his main treatise on the monetary system, in 1933, and Bataille published his, *Consumption* (later combined with two successive economic volumes in the more famous *Le Parté Maudite* or *The Accursed Share*) in 1949.
- Despite the sixteen-year gap, they were in many respects products of the same scramble for radical new ways of imagining money and markets after the Wall Street Crash. As Robert W. Dimand puts it in his essay 'Cranks,

heretics and Macroeconomics in the 1930s', during that decade 'mainstream economists were unusually open to the ideas of monetary reformers whom they would at other times have dismissed as cranks' (1991: 11).

- Leon Surette:

Britain and Germany experienced a down swing in the [business] cycle after World War I, giving economic heretics an eager audience, which evaporated when prosperity returned. Interest revived only with the worldwide depression of the thirties.

(1999: 30)

- I'll talk about that downswing in a moment but the key point to grasp at this stage is that, between 1919 and 1949, finding solutions to a system that appeared unable to stabilize itself became a legitimate pursuit for thinkers outside academic economic circles, and particularly those previously preoccupied with literature and the arts.
- In post-First World War London, A.R. Orage's periodical *The New Age* was an inter-zone for economic, political and literary ideas, publishing articles by modernist authors, poets and philosophers – people like Katherine Mansfield, Herbert Read and Pound - alongside comment pieces by untested would-be economists.
- Significantly, Pound - who had made his name as a poet, literary essayist and promoter of new writers - became obsessed with monetary economics after befriending the best known and most influential of *The New Age's* amateur contributors, Major C.H. Douglas. 'An industrial engineer quite innocent of any training in economics or journalism' (Leon Surette), Douglas managed to occupy a serious position on the international economic scene during the 1910s and 20s.
- If Pound came to economics with this dilettantism at its peak – nailing his colours to Douglas' mast in a series of pro-Social Credit pamphlets - Bataille's shift of his anthropological gaze to macroeconomics continued the trend after World War Two.
- Having outlined - in essays entitled 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism' (1930) and 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933) – the de Sadean notion that 'elevated' material depended on 'base' material for its existence, and having used this to promote a proto-Marxist revolution which would harness 'the perverse power of the working class', Bataille set about trying to unleash a similar libertarian force in the sphere of economic relations (Noys, 2000: 108).
- As he puts it in his preface to *The Accursed Share*, he does 'not consider the facts in the way qualified economists do' and is intent on 'relaxing the problem that is posed in economic crises to the general problem of nature' (Bataille, 1949: 9).
- Interestingly, the French intellectual scene after 1944 provided Bataille with similarly fertile ground for radical, abstract economic theories as England had Pound in 1918 (10).

- While lettered Londoners of the 1910s were used to reading Pound on economics in *The New Age* or Eliot on a politics QUOTES 'too serious ... to be left to the politicians' END QUOTES in *Criterion*, Bataille's successful launch of the quarterly magazine *Critique* in 1946 helped produce an equivalent interdisciplinary discourse in post-Second World War Paris.
- Co-founded with Maurice Blanchot and the economist Pierre Provost, *Critique's* stated aim was to 'provide as complete a glimpse as possible of the various activities of the human mind in the domains of literary creation, philosophical reflection and historical, scientific, political and economic research' (Roger, 2006: 694).
- Its contributors roamed easily between literature, art, art history, philosophy, critical theory, sociology, economics, politics and anthropology, as well – significantly - as from the right to the left extremes of the political spectrum, 'inveterate Marxists [writing] side by side with confirmed Gaullists' (Philippe Roger, 694).

Overproduction, under-consumption

- Following in the tradition of John Ruskin in the late nineteenth and Keynes in the early twentieth centuries, Pound and Bataille both saw an overemphasis on production and an under-emphasis on consumption as modern capitalism's principal flaw.
- In *The ABC of Economics* Pound builds his argument around Douglas' statements on the discrepancy between an exponentially high rate of production and an equally low rate of 'purchasing power' among citizens (Douglas, 1935: 14).
- The result, Douglas believed and Pound concurred, was a condition of 'overproduction' and 'under-consumption' (14). Since goods were being produced regardless of the population's ability to buy and consume them, it was inevitable that supply outweighed demand, resulting in ever more frequent 'dumpings' of excess product and an increase in job 'layoffs' (14).
- The consequence of this inverse and cyclical relationship, the Social Creditists held, was an equivalent increase in the frequency of 'trade wars', and the only way for the cycle to be disrupted was to rebalance the relationship between production and purchasing power through an annual dividend allotted equally to all citizens (14).
- Throughout the 1930s, in *The ABC of Economics* (1933), the political polemics *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini* (1935) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) and his essay 'Social Credit: An Impact' (1935), Pound championed Douglas' 'social credit' dividend as the only feasible solution to the problem of overproduction and under-consumption. He presented it, Surette explains, as 'a kind of negative tax ... to make up the shortfall in purchasing power' (8). Indeed, in *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini*, Pound paraphrases Douglas:

The way to solve the discrepancy between the goods on sale and the purchasing power of THE WHOLE PEOPLE, is by the issue of purchasing power DIRECTLY to the people, equitably and per person.

- In 1949, Bataille agreed with the underconsumptionists' diagnosis but sought to reroute the conversation by focusing on the metaphysics of consumption rather than the practical, economic reasons for surplus. Explaining his motives for *The Accursed Share* in its introduction, he writes:

I decided against analyzing the complexities of a crisis of overproduction, just as I deferred calculating in detail the share of growth and the share of waste entering into the manufacture of a hat or a chair. I preferred to give, in general, the reasons that account for the mystery of Keynes's bottles, tracing the exhausting detours of exuberance through eating, death and sexual reproduction.

(13)

- The reference to 'Keynes' bottles' points to the following then famous analogy Keynes had used in his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936) to explain the need for public work programmes that would create jobs and boost purchasing power: 'If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with bank-notes' Keynes wrote, 'bury them at suitable depths in disused coalmines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-tried principles of laissez-faire to dig the notes up again ... there need be no more unemployment and, with the help of the repercussions, the real income of the community, and its capital wealth also, would probably become a good deal greater than it actually is (Keynes, 1936: 16).
- Though a tongue-in-cheek response to government inactivity, the conceit provides Bataille with a convenient starting point for his analysis of useless, wasteful expenditure as integral elements of human existence. As Nigel Dodd puts it in *The Social Life of Money*, 'the purpose of gratuitous expenditure, as [Keynes] defined it, was to *stimulate demand* ... by contrast, Bataille's theory begins with the problem of *too much*' (Dodd, 2014: 178-79).
- Indeed, *The Accursed Share* rejects mathematical cures for the discrepancy – as Douglas called it - 'between poverty and distress on the one hand and potential plenty on the other,' seeking instead to explain the general origins of 'the crisis of overproduction' in the transition from an economic approach which emphasized loss to one that emphasizes accumulation (Douglas: 30).
- Benjamin Noys, in his critical introduction to Bataille's work, explains that 'for Bataille, economy, and especially modern restricted economics in its capitalist form, is secondary to the primacy of ... expenditure and loss. Economy originates not in accumulation but in loss' (Noys, 2000: 108).
- Improbably, *The Accursed Share* is built entirely on the premise of expenditure as a response to perpetual excess energy in the biosphere. 'On the surface of the globe', Bataille writes 'for *living matter in general*, energy is always in

excess; the question is always posed in terms of extravagance. The choice is limited to how the wealth is to be squandered' (22).

- If he echoed Pound's concerns about a 'clogged up', over-productive and under-consumptive economy, he found his reasons for it in modern capitalism's misunderstanding of the nature of consumption and expenditure.
- According to this scheme, systemic economic surplus mirrors a natural and essential energy surplus in all living things:

'The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.

(Bataille: 21)

- Bataille believed that to overcome the problem of overproduction and under-consumption, humanity must accept this biochemical first principal, adjusting its definition of expenditure to account for the importance of exuberance and glory rather than balance and common sense.
- In thinking about production of wealth as a means to provide only what we need to consume, he says, orthodox economists had grossly overestimated our importance in relation to the earth: 'Is the general determination of energy circulating in the biosphere altered by man's activity?' Bataille asks, 'Or rather, isn't the latter's intention vitiated by a determination of which it is ignorant, which it overlooks and cannot change?' (22).

The metaphysics of wealth

- Despite their different solutions, both believed that the modern Western concept of wealth had been corrupted by malignant protestant capitalist power structures; both carried out historical readings that understood economic systems as reflective of human misalignments with patterns in the natural world; following this, both were convinced that, in the twentieth century, the relationship between money and the natural world had fallen out of kilter.
- Throughout *The ABC of Economics* and his economic essays, Pound harks back to an age before state and religion-endorsed usury (defined as 'the growth of money from money alone') had denaturalized our approaches to goods and currency (Surette: 136). 'Putting usury on a pedestal', he writes in 1938's *Guide to Kulchur* 'in order to set avarice on high, the protestant centuries twisted all morality out of shape' (247).
- To his mind, everything that was wrong with twentieth century economics could be traced back to the sixteenth century, when John Calvin and Martin Luther found successive theological justifications for unjust lending practices:

‘The scale and proportion of evil, as delimited in Dante’s hell (or the catholic hell) was obliterated by the Calvinist and Lutheran churches ... the effect of Protestantism has been semitically to obliterate values, to efface grades and graduations’ (1938: 185).

- As this statement demonstrates, Pound’s attacks on the religious basis of usury carried with them the anti-Semitism that would eventually come to poison his legacy. Like so many who wrote against Judaism and the Jewish race in the 1930s, Pound posited usury as a disease contracted by a pure Christian culture from its impure counterpart.
- What began as an unpleasant but occasional tendency towards racially charged insinuation - ‘the evils of usury’, he says elsewhere in *Guide to Kulchur*, can be put down to ‘the injustice of supposing that money ‘grows’ (*vide* Shylock, etc.), while goods perish’ – became, by the 1940s, a consistent campaign against what he came to call ‘Jewsury’ (247).
- Crucially, Pound couched his ideas about contaminative economy in terms of growth and reproduction. Usury was, he wrote in his poem *Canto 45 ‘With Usura’*, ‘against nature’s increase’ since it distorted the relationship between money and goods, in turn damaging the relationship between producer and consumer, and between employee and his or her employment (Pound, 1937: 67). Between 1919 and the late 1930s, he gradually developed his hunch about usury into a catchall system of thought to explain corruptive patterns in every strata of human existence.
- Pound figured usury as the original cause of the drastic depreciation of language, literature, politics and sexuality he believed he saw around him
- When a population becomes dependent on a usurious banking system, Pound believed, the disease of unnatural increase works its way from the banking system into the working habits of its food producers, stonemasons, artisans, artists and inventors and ends by restricting the basic and vital functions of sexual activity and reproduction.

Pagan alternatives

- Bataille rounds on Calvin and Luther for similar reasons – their overemphasis on accumulation, thrift and the virtue of labour and their facilitation of an epoch in which consumption played second fiddle to production.
- Like Pound, he prefers a ‘Catholic’ to a protestant value scale, blaming Protestantism for a world in which ‘wealth was deprived of meaning, apart from productive value’, and European society came to be defined by ‘the utter negation of a system of intense consumption of resources’ (Bataille, 1949: 122).
- However, he goes further back and afield in his research, designing his theory of biospherical excess energies according to pre-Christian non-Western economic models.
- Indeed, *The Accursed Share* is heavily indebted in both its language and logic to Marcel Mauss’ *The Gift*, a spurious ethnographic reading of Aztec and Native American economic practices.

- Drawing on Mauss' groundwork (fieldwork? Too much?), Bataille investigates the heterogeneous drive towards 'sacrifice' as a form of ritualistic 'consumption' in 'primitive' Aztec and North American cultures, concluding that this drive has been neglected over the course of western economic history in favor of the homogeneous desire for 'production' (44). 'Consumption' Bataille writes, 'loomed just as large in [Aztec] thinking as production does in ours. They were just as concerned about *sacrificing* as we are about *working*' (49).
- He finds evidence for this in the Aztec belief that human sacrifice – enabled by the perpetual waging of wars - was an essential function in the continuing existence of the world. Quoting from the sixteenth century Spanish almanac *La Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, he writes that in Aztec society, 'wars were created "so that there would be people whose hearts and blood could be taken so that the sun might eat."' (49).
- For Bataille the essence of 'the social', like the essence of all existence, resides in the unproductive and the glorious. He opposes the utilitarian basis of modern economics with Aztec human sacrifice because it suggests extravagant expenditure, breaking the cycle of production, sale and consumption:

Destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal or plant. The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel. What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrifice and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end.

(1949: 56)

- On these terms, Bataille implies, payment is promoted from a means of stagnant exchange to a heroic and unifying ritual – as in the case of 'Potlatch', an ancient North American practice which Mauss analysed and which involved 'the solemn giving of considerable riches, offered by a chief to his rival for the purpose of humiliating, challenging and obligating him' (Bataille: 67-68).
- Also sometimes entailing human sacrifice, potlatch appealed to Bataille as a subversion of the rules and purposes dictating ordinary acts of expenditure. It is, he writes, 'like commerce a means of circulating wealth, but [it] excludes bargaining' (67-68).
- In line with Pound, Bataille believes that protestant misconceptions of 'wealth' arise out of a deeper amnesia about growth. In *The Accursed Share* he idealises non-Western, pre-Christian societies for producing economies based on the unconditional generosity of photosynthesis:

The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy – wealth – without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving ... In former times value was given to unproductive glory, whereas in our day it is measured in terms of production: Precedence is given

to energy acquisition over energy expenditure. Glory itself is justified by the consequences of a glorious deed in the sphere of utility.

(28-29)

Doctrines of the flesh

- For both writers, the objection to Protestant misconceptions of wealth carried with it an objection to puritanical ideas about the body.
- In his essay on the thirteenth century Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti, for example, Pound refers to Martin Luther's sexual code as 'anti-flesh' and therefore 'anti-intelligence', the preserve of 'dullards who, not having 'intelletto', blame the lack of it on innocent muscles' (Pound, 1936: 154).
- By denying the significance of sensory pleasure in human existence, he says, and positing it as an impediment to virtue and intellectual thought, religious prudes only serve to demonstrate the limits of their own intellect.
- To Bataille's mind, sexual relations in Protestant bourgeois societies had been damaged as a byproduct of the fixation on work and productivity:

From the start, the introduction of *labor* into the world replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks, with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but rather, the subsequent results of *operations* ... Once the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored.

(1949, 57)

- In Bataille's reconfiguration of Marxist theory, all work – not only the alienating tasks performed by the proletariat but the very concept of laboring usefully - is an impediment to the individual's sovereignty.
- As Jürgen Habermas puts it, Bataille believes that 'to be sovereign means not to let oneself be reduced, as in labor, to the condition of an object, but to free subjectivity from bondage' (Habermas, 1985: 224). 'The subject removed from labor' Habermas continues to paraphrase, 'and obsessed by the fulfillment of the present is wholly given up to the consumption of self' (224).
- In contrast to Pound's connection of the unnatural increase represented by usury and the decline in sexual activity and fertility, Bataille posits the consummation of sexual desire - and specifically sex without the end goal of reproduction - as a fundamental means of liberation from the bonds of protestant capitalist economic life.
- When Pound worries in 'Canto 45' that 'Usura slayeth the child in the womb [and] stayeth the young man's courting', he demonstrates a social conscience that is anathema to Bataille's interest in the psychological and emotional health of individuals (1937: 67).
- Although equally fixated on the growth patterns discernible in photosynthesis, one uses them to celebrate unproductive economic and un-

reproductive sexual expenditure, the other to express fears about the future of the species.

- In fact Pound is adamant there is a literal connection between monetary systems and fertility rates, in terms of both population and land. In his 1986 study *Language, Sexuality, Ideology in Ezra Pound's the 'Cantos'*, Jean-Michel Rabaté makes the link between Pound's animosity towards sexual puritanism and his identification of usury as the principal root of social evil. For Pound, Rabaté writes, 'The difference between surplus and interest bears ... heavily on sexual systems and moral codes' (Rabaté, 1934: 215). Rabaté goes on to quote from Pound's 1934 essay 'Date Line':

Opposing systems of European morality go back to the opposed temperaments of those who thought copulation was good for the crops, and the opposed temperaments of those who thought it was bad for the crops.

(Pound, 1934: 215)

- The theory rests on a pejorative conservatism that further distinguishes Pound from Bataille. In 1924 's 'Canto 15' - one of three poems in which he vividly reimagines the punishments endured in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* - Pound follows Dante's example in categorising usury and sodomy as equivalent sins.
- In both cases, according to Pound, the problem is an absence of positive charge. The 'sodomite' and the 'usurer' both engage in unnatural relations that pervert the equation for reproduction, since each attempts an act intended for growth in an onanistic rather than conjugal fashion (Pound, *Social Credit: An Impact*, 1935: 6).
- The man who has sex with another man ignores women in the same way as the moneylender who lends at disproportionately high rates of interest ignores the necessary and natural contribution of work and goods to a healthy economic system of growth. To 'grow money from money alone' - as Pound defines the usurer's *raison d'être* in *Guide to Kulchur* - is as futile a notion as to produce life from non-vaginal sex (6).
- Unlike Bataille, for whom truth means 'the heterogeneous', including the consummation of those sexual desires condemned as unacceptable or perverted, Pound wants a world in which the interdependent spheres of sexuality and economics are subject to naturalizing controls and limits (Bataille, 1985, 142-46).
- Rabaté explains this helpfully in relation to Pound's concerns about under-consumption and support for Major Douglas' Social Creditism. 'For Pound', Rabaté writes, 'money becomes positive when it is fluid, when circulation is swift and easy; a liquidized money loses its bad smell, it detaches itself sufficiently from the anal gift in which it found its origin' (268). By promoting Douglas' proscription of an annual dividend to all citizens, Pound seeks to transform the excremental nature of currency in a usurious economic system into something positive and procreative. Indeed, much of the anti-usury rhetoric in Pound's writing fixates on the problem of bodily waste in

opposition to procreation. Reassessing James Joyce's value in *Guide to Kulchur*, for example, he claims that Joyce's *Ulysses* summarized the 'fadeless excrement' of the 1910s. It is, he writes, 'the end, the summary, of ... the "age of usury"' because it satirizes the way in which unnatural economic growth has contaminated thought, language and sexuality (96).

- The counterproductive cycle of lending and speculation can be disrupted if only money can be understood in terms of its original, basic purpose – as a 'promisory note of value' or 'ticket' to be exchanged for labor expended and goods produced (Douglas, 30). Once this is achieved, a natural, biological order will finally fall back into place.
- Bataille's interest in the expenditure of excess energy also leads him to couch his ideas about monetary flow in excremental terms but to different ends. As Habermas has it, in Bataille's thinking, 'the heterogeneous is related to the profane world as what is superfluous – from refuse and excrement, through dreams, erotic temptations, and perversions, to contaminating subversive ideas; from palpable luxury to exuberantly electrifying hopes and transcendences pronounced holy' (218). He promotes these aspects of existence in opposition to 'the homogeneous and conformist elements of everyday life ... the result of the metabolism with a resistant external nature' (218).
- Where Pound advocates approaches to the economy and sexuality that avoid waste, Bataille associates excrement with virtuous expenditure and the problem of a production rather than consumption centered economy with constipation.
- Bataille's romantic vision of a pre-Capitalist age depends on his debunking of the myth that religious, governmental and economic regulation represented progress. People were richer in spirit, he believes, when the world was run according to 'the archaic sensibility' – a code of conduct that privileged 'contemplative idleness, giving to the poor and the splendor of ceremonies and churches' (Bataille, 1949: 122-23).

Usury and Utility

- Pound might share Bataille's preference for Pagan and Catholic 'splendor' over Protestant thrift, he might identify sexual repression and puritanical fear as contributing factors towards a blockage in the system, but his economic approach ultimately abhors 'squander'.
- He wants to bring order to an unnatural and insane system of 'growth', while Bataille disdains order and sanity altogether.
- Despite his protestations against the Lutheran utilitarian enslavement to work and money, Pound's own economic ideas are motivated by the desire to make the monetary system *useful*. Indeed, his Douglasite beliefs lead him to demand a controlled form of market economics that appears to contradict his aversion to the use-value basis of modern capitalism. Incongruously – given Bataille's Marxist background and Pound's opposition to Communism – their economic differences are helpfully explained through Jean Baudrillard's 1998 comparison of Bataillian and orthodox Marxist theory:

The Marxist seeks a *good use* of economy. Marxism is therefore only a limited *petit bourgeois* critique, one more step in the banalization of life towards the 'good use' of the social! Bataille, to the contrary, sweeps away all this slave dialectic from an aristocratic point of view, that of the master struggling with his death.

(1998: 192-93)

- Pound rather than Bataille advocates reforming the economic system to make "'good use" of the social'. Where Pound wants to sanitize a messy and manic situation masquerading as orderly and rational, Bataille denies the virtue in rationalizing monetary exchange, pushing instead for a physical and desire driven model of primitive economy based on the acceptance of chaotic and uncontrolled excess. If Pound's enemies are usury and utilitarianism, Bataille's, according to Baudrillard, 'is utility, in its root. Rather than an apparently positive principle of capital: accumulation, investment, depreciation, etc. ... it is, on Bataille's account, a principle of powerlessness, an utter inability to expend' (192).

Fascist aesthetics: visions of control and excess

- In a reversal of the same dialectic, the attraction to excess that differentiates Bataille from orthodox Marxist economists also led him to flirt with his avowed enemies on the right.
- Despite his position as co-founder of *Critique*, the Parisian leftist magazine aimed at countering fascism, various of his essays demonstrate an interest in Hitler and Mussolini that was in fact more emotionally charged than Pound's.
- With a group of like-minded thinkers including Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Provost, Bataille envisioned *Critique* as a corrective to *Action Francaise*, Pierre LaSerre's radical rightist group that grew out of 1894's Dreyfus Affair, inspired and was inspired by Italian and German fascism.
- Unpardonably, to the Nietzschean Bataille, *Action Francaise* also followed the Italian and German examples in appropriating Nietzsche to justify its totalitarian stance.
- And yet, in a 1933 essay entitled 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism', Bataille explains fascism's mass appeal in terms of the heterogeneous truth discussed earlier.
- 'The fascist leaders', he writes, 'are incontestably part of heterogeneous existence. Opposed to democratic politicians, who represent in different countries the platitude inherent to *homogeneous* society, Mussolini and Hitler immediately stand out as something *other*' (1933: 143).

- Looking beyond his objections to their politics, Bataille assigns value to these figureheads because they symbolize and facilitate unproductive expenditure. The strong man at the heart of a populist movement like fascism, he says, is a conduit through which the 'excessive energies' accumulated by 'the common consciousness' can be released:

The affective flow that unites him with his followers – which takes the form of moral identification of the latter with the one they follow ... is a function of the common consciousness of increasingly *violent* and excessive energies and powers that accumulate in the person of the leader and through him become widely available

(143-44)

- Bataille is interested in Hitler and Mussolini as symptoms of the powerful natural human desire to transcend rational, political thought and discourse. While he acknowledges the dangers inherent in such a process (a form of mass 'hypnosis', as he later calls it), he also celebrates its potential for psychological liberation.
- Quoting from the same essay, Habermas notes that Bataille was himself seduced by these leaders' rupture with a 'boring' homogeneous reality:

Into this rationalized world irrupt the fascist Fuhrer and this entranced masses. It is not without admiration that Bataille speaks of their heterogeneous existence ... He is fascinated by the violence "that raises them [Hitler and Mussolini] above the people, the parties, and even the laws, a violence that penetrates the normal course of affairs, the peaceful but boring homogeneity that is impotent when it comes to maintaining itself by its own force"

(218)

- Surprisingly, Pound's promotion of Mussolini is based on something far more prosaic – indeed, echoing that old apologists' adage about 'making the trains run on time', he focuses on the Italian's ability to convert political ideology into action. In his 1933 tract *Mussolini And/Or Jefferson*, Pound reveals himself to have been – to all intents and purposes - one of Bataille's hypnotized masses, in thrall to what he calls Mussolini's 'straight stare'. The personal admiration, however, had its origins in a genuine belief that Italian fascism dealt in 'fact' rather than 'merely theory' (103-04). Affirming the kinship between Mussolini's dictatorship and the paternal agrarian politics of eighteenth-century American president Thomas Jefferson, he posits the Italian as the long-awaited answer to the question troubling '[modern] democracy: namely whether its alleged system, its *de jure* system, can still be handled by the men of good will; whether real issues as distinct from red herrings CAN be forced into the legislatures (House and Senate)' (110). Where Ramsey MacDonald and Franklin Roosevelt have 'merely talked', he writes, Mussolini has done 'something, *constructive or otherwise*' to challenge the status quo (110). Both sympathetic towards the popular distaste for the

unserviceable 'platitudes' of democratic governments, Pound and Bataille's respective interests in control and excess led one to identify with fascism on practical and the other on spiritual and metaphysical terms.

Conclusion

- What we see in Pound's inter-war polemics and Bataille's *The Accursed Share* are two writers who looked to the radical politics of the 1930s to validate and inform their unorthodox economic positions but who picked and chose from very different elements within those politics.
- As such they indicate the seductive versatility of an ideology that rejected the standard hermeneutics of socialism, liberalism, even conservatism. Roger Griffin, who discusses Pound in his 2007 study *Modernism and Fascism*, calls this 'fascism's multivalent, multifaceted nature as a utopian project of historical change that allowed any number of rival political visions to be projected onto it' (2007: 215).
- Just as Pound was able to ignore the violence so heavily implied by the 'mass ecstasy and authority' underpinning Mussolini's rule, Bataille could look past its authoritarian nature and find evidence of the heterogeneous truth orthodox economics were unable to accommodate. In both cases, fascism's newness and otherness provided unusually fertile ground on which to experiment with alternative systems that might mirror patterns of energy in the natural world.
- Of course, the horrors resulting from fascist ideology have almost completely de-validated the connections Pound made between economics and nature, and – in particular – economics and sexuality. How can we possibly take seriously a man who genuinely believed an ultra-repressive, eventually genocidal government held the key to fixing the world economy? Moreover, how can we entertain any theory motivated by the racist belief in a conspiracy orchestrated by Jewish moneylenders? Although neither a conspiracy theorist nor a programmatic anti-Semite, Bataille's savoring of fascist and Aztec violence clearly carries with it its own impediment to an appreciation of his economic ideas.
- From a historical but also cautiously theoretical perspective, however, these radical positions are revealing. On their most basic level, they are symptomatic of a wider correlation between sexuality and economics after World War One. In *Deficits and Desires*, Michael Tratner rightly points out a general shift in public discourse from an emphasis on conservation to consumption, connecting the move away from Smithsonian deficit avoidance to a literary, philosophical and scientific consensus that limiting sexual expenditure was harmful. Keynes' ideas grew in prominence alongside the arguments of sexologists like Willhelm Reich who, as Tratner puts it, posited a 'consumerist theory of sexuality, in which pleasure becomes quite literally the "productive process in the biological system"(3).
- Bataille and Pound's quests to unclog economic and libidinal systems roughly support Tratner's hypothesis. Theirs is the language of consumption over production and they proffer expenditure as a source of growth.

- While this analysis works up to a point, it glosses over the historical precedent for twentieth century anxieties about expenditure, in the process applying an artificial order to the complex relationship between sexuality and economics after 1920.
- Indeed, what is intriguing about the conflation of sexual and economic language of the early to mid twentieth century is its complicated and paradoxical embodiment of politically contradictory impulses.
- Bataille and Pound's contributions to the economic debate between 1920 and 1960 – and to similar debates in the twenty first century – are interesting exactly because of their resistance to such stable historical and political interpretation.
- By coopting related language for apparently opposite ends, and by ending up in strange and unfamiliar political territory, they expose the perversely depoliticizing effect of interpreting the economy according to metaphysical 'truths'.
- Looked at from a certain angle, Bataille's celebration of 'useless expenditure' conjures as violent a vision for the future as anything imagined by Hitler or Mussolini.
- Likewise, Pound's attempt to reorganize the economy along rational 'use value' lines is many ways as progressive and utopian as Marx's. Apart from shedding light on the special conditions of the period in history in which they were writing, their experiments serve as valuable warnings against the dangerous appeal of attempting to naturalize and – indeed - sexualize the economy.

Notes

- As Rebecca Comey. Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and *Genealogy*:

A giving so "pure" it would accommodate no return – no payment, no feedback, no profit, however secret. Avaricious, anal, unable to "be done" with things, it was the slave who quietly stockpiled his disadvantages to secure compensation in a future heaven. He took secret payoffs for his petty sacrifices, surreptitiously profited from every pain. Unlike the noble consciousness – wasteful, extravagant, Zarathustra's "squander" with a thousand hands – the slave waited, counted, plotted the advantage in every setback, took the measure of every loss.'

(67)

- **Marxism**
- The main charge Pound leveled at Marx was that he was that he was 'unconscious of the problem in money' (Pound, *History and Ignorance*, 1935: 268).

- He strongly refutes Marx's assertion in *Capital* that 'money is a commodity... an external object, capable of becoming the private property of any individual' (1867: 86), believing that 'money is not a commodity' and that the attempt to think of it in these terms results in a naïve and misguided programme for reform. Leon Surette, one of many scholars to highlight the inconsistencies in The Social Credit project, puts Pound's objections to Marxism down to the split between 'equilibrium' and underconsumptionist positions in the aftermath of World War One:

Marx and the communists ... adhered to equilibrium theory and also to the labor theory of value, in which precious metals were thought to embody labor value. In such a view, monetary reform could never be anything but a placebo for the disease of maldistribution of wealth within an economy. All the underconsumptionists, in contrast, held to a fiat theory of money and saw adherence to a commodity theory of money – which underpinned the gold standard – as the principal cause of underconsumption

(8)

- Pound, Surette goes on, 'was theoretically insulated from Marxism by his adherence to fiat [or paper] money' (8). His support for the annual dividend of Social Credit is evidence of his belief in government-sanctioned bank notes as a means of balancing the market, of remedying the problems caused by thinking about money as having an independent value based on its material composition. Where Marx believed that money had a fetishistic allure that could not be counteracted unless by a complete overhaul of the prevailing social and political order, Pound - as Michael Tratner puts it - believed 'the answer is to change people's conceptions of money, to see it not as payment for labor or services but rather as inherent credit owned by everyone' (126). Pound could not abide what he saw as the Marxists' inability to recognize the possibility of creating a just monetary system removed from the 'gold standard', an adjunct to their misguided adherence to Equilibrium Theory – the belief, Surette explains, 'that purchasing power and productive capacity are always and necessarily in balance' (8).

In light of Pound's profound political and social opposition to Marxism, however, these economic differences are less significant than their similarities. He famously espouses elitist, explicitly anti-socialist ideas throughout his literary, political and economic writings. Indeed, central to Pound's philosophy was the belief in the sanctity of a number of men – active chiefly in the arts – with the intelligence to be able to counteract the veniality of 'the mob' or 'the bullet headed many' and move the culture forward ('Henry James', 1918: 297). Alongside friends and literary collaborators Wyndham Lewis, T.E. Hulme and other so called 'men of 1914', Pound opposed liberal but also socialist values with a radically conservative set of directives. Yet – in keeping with the 'use-value' foundation discussed earlier – Pound's fundamental aim to solve 'the paradox between poverty and distress on the one hand and potential plenty on the other' coincides with Marx's (Douglas, 30).

-

References

- Antliff, Mark. 'Sculptural Nominalism/Anarchist Vortex: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Dora Marsden, and Ezra Pound.' *The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-18*. Ed. Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene. London: Tate Publishing, 2010. 47-57.
- Bataille, Georges. 'The Notion of Expenditure.' *Visions of Excess – Selected Writings, 1927-39*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovit and Donald M. Leslie. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.
- Bataille, Georges. 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism.' *Visions of Excess – Selected Writings, 1927-39*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovit and Donald M. Leslie. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985.
- Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. Vol. 1*. Zone Books: New York, 1988. Orig. ed.: 1949.
- Blinder, Caroline. *Henry Miller's Sexual Aesthetics: A Comparative Analysis of Selected Twentieth-Century Influences on Henry Miller's Writing*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, King's College London, 1995.
- Braudrillard, Jean. 'When Bataille Attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy.' *Bataille: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Fred Botting & Scott Wilson. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. 191-195.
- Chace, William. *The Political Identities of T.S. Eliot & Ezra Pound*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973.
- Comay, Rebecca. 'Gifts without Presents: Economies of "Experience" in Bataille and Heidegger.' *Yale French Studies*. 78 (1990): 66-89.
- Dimand, Robert W. 'Cranks, Heretics and Macroeconomics in the 1930s', *History of Economics Review*, 16 (1991): 11-30.
- Dodd, Nigel. *The Social Life of Money*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Douglas, C.H. 'The Use of Money.' *The Social Credit Pamphleteer*. London: Stanley Nott, 1935. 5-30.
- Eliot, T.S. 'A Commentary.' *Criterion* (June 1926): 420.
- Griffin, Roger. *Modernism and Fascism*. London: Palgrave, 2007.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 'Between Eroticism and General Economics: Georges Bataille.' *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985.

- Keynes, John Maynard. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. New Delhi: Atlantic Press, 2008. Orig. ed.: 1936.
- Kritzman, Lawrence D., ed. *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2006. 694 – 697.
- Marx, Karl (1990). *Capital, Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books. Orig. ed.: 1867.
- Mead, Henry. 'T.E. Hulme, Bergson, and the New Philosophy.' *European Journal of English Studies*, 12:3 (January 2009): 245-260.
- Noys, Benjamin. *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2000.
- Pound, Ezra Henry James', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, pp. 295-338, p. 307. Originally published in *Little Review* (August, 1918).
- Pound, Ezra *Social Credit: An Impact*. London: Stanley Nott, 1935.
- Pound, Ezra. 'Canto 45 - With Usura.' *Selected Cantos*, London: New Directions, 1970. 67-68. Originally published in *The Fifth Decade of the Cantos XLII-LI*. London: Faber & Faber, 1937.
- Pound, Ezra. 'Cavalcanti.' *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T.S. Eliot. London: Faber & Faber, 1954. 149-200. Originally published in Ezra Pound, *Make It New*. London: Faber & Faber, 1934.
- Pound, Ezra. *Guide to Kulchur*. Norfolk: New Directions, 1952. Orig. ed.: 1938.
- Pound, Ezra. *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini*. London: Stanley Nott, 1935.
- Pound, Ezra. *Social Credit: An Impact*. London: Stanley Nott, 1935.
- Pound, Ezra. *The ABC of Economics*. Norfolk: New Directions, 1953. Orig. ed.: London: Faber & Faber, 1933.
- Rabaté, Jean-Michelle. *Language, Sexuality, Ideology in Ezra Pound's the 'Cantos'*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- Ruthven, K.K. *Ezra Pound as Literary Critic*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Surette, Leon. *Pound in Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism*. Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1999.
- Tratner, Michael. *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Biographical Note

Guy Stevenson is an associate lecturer and postgraduate research assistant at Goldsmiths, University of London. He recently completed a Ph.D. about the radical modernism of the 1930s and is now researching its legacy in the American counterculture after World War Two. Guy's reviews have appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Times*, *The Financial Times* and Toronto's *National Post* and an essay, 'Henry Miller and Morality' was published last year in the Bloomsbury anthology, *Henry Miller: New Perspectives*.