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SØRENSEN'S BATAILLE: NOTES ON THE 'APOLITICAL'

ABSTRACT

In *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*, part of the development of Asger Sørensen's overall argument is a disagreement with Georges Bataille. The crux of the argument is that Bataille's thinking – especially his conception of subjectivity – is 'apolitical'. The aim of this paper is to investigate the force of this claim. What does it mean for a position – albeit a philosophical one – to be 'apolitical'?

KEYWORDS

Bataille, apolitical, Hegel, economy, subjectivity

1. In Asger Sørensen's overall philosophical project the writings of Georges Bataille have played and continue to play a major role. Tracing aspects of his critical engagement with Bataille is therefore a significant part of any engagement with that larger undertaking. In his *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* there is an important and sustained encounter with Bataille (Sørensen 2019). If there is a general summation of the position developed in the book then there is the claim that Bataille's analysis and evaluation of capitalism is inadequate were it to form the basis of a real critique which is accompanied by the related argument that Bataille advances a conception of the subject which has an affinity with the subject position that accompanies the neoliberal subject of self-care rather than a subject position not easily assimilable to the neoliberal project. Within Bataille's work there is not just an inadequate understanding of the economic, there is the incorporation of the economic into a more general theory of energetics. The problem at the heart of Bataille's approach to the economic, therefore, even in his attempt to develop a critique of capitalism, is that for Sørensen it remains mired in a sense of subjectivity that in the end becomes 'apolitical'. It is the movement to this position that at the outset needs to be traced. What is of interest is how Sørensen understands, not the political as such, but the term he uses to describe Bataille, namely the 'apolitical'. There is an affinity here with arguments developed elsewhere in terms of the so-called 'post-political'. The latter marks a type of foreclosure of the political. Rather than pursue the broader argument of what counts as the political,

the project here will continue to turn on an engagement with the possibility of the 'apolitical'. There is a type of urgency here. Not only has the question of what counts as the political acquired greater importance with the advent of the Anthropocene and the actualization of the climate crisis, for these reasons the possibility of different configurations of the political need to be entertained. In addition, there is the attendant problem of political expression. In other words, the additional problem that continues to occupy any conception of the political is not just its direct expression but the way that such positions can be represented. The question of either *who* or *what* represents political positions, becomes the more extended problem of what counts now as political actions.

The position from which a start may be made concerns Bataille's engagement with what he called *homo economicus*. At work within this position is an account of human being that is defined by the centrality of calculation and thus forms of completion. However, the value of Bataille's formulation is that it allows him to identify a constitutive division within human being. A tension that is already there, as Sørensen makes clear in terms of the distinction between 'need' and 'desire'. The reason, as noted, is the initial incorporation of human being into a logic in which there is a pre-existent economy that positions human being as constituted in relation to the endless attainment of goals. In Sørensen's argumentation there are direct consequences for Bataille of human 'economic activity'. In it, in Sørensen's reformulation of Bataille

we are searching for a good that in the end must escape us, because the complete satisfaction of the subjective desire, i.e. the sovereign and without any compromise unproductive pleasure, would result in a drainage of all accessible resources and therefore ultimately and quite literally in death. In a certain sense, we are very well aware that our desire for sovereignty is self-contradictory, and we can therefore be said subjectively as well as objectively to be separated from this good that we desire by the awareness produced by the anxiety of actually having this desire satisfied. (Sørensen 2019: 113)

The question of sovereignty needs to be located within the centrality of a dynamic conception of the energetic. There is a sense in which the expenditure of energy within the system can be, for the most part, absorbed by it. And yet, precisely because of the need for that absorption and regulation the creation of any excess appears as a problem for the system. Excess is linked to the critique of capitalism – and this is a point clearly argued by Sørensen – because profit cannot be absorbed by the system. While there are limitations in regard to the structure of the economic, ultimately what calls the system into question is sovereignty. Sørensen draws a precise conclusion from this positioning. Namely that

the general economy emphasizes – as science and ontology, philosophical anthropology and thus metaphysics – the real ontological necessity of subjective desire for the specifically human way of being. The subjective desire for individual sovereignty cannot be sublated, as puritan idealists have often hoped. Bataille maintains the contradiction between needs and desire, and the irreducible reality of both. (Sørensen 2019: 127)

The subject appears. The problem of the 'apolitical' concerns the problematic presence of this subject. On one level Sørensen is quite right to be suspicious of the identification of an affirmation of sovereignty that seems to be no more than the affirmation of the individual. As Sørensen has argued, sovereignty for Bataille "is the manifestation of desire as inner experience, and both are irreducibly subjective". If the argument were to be left at that point then there is little further to add. Bataille is interested in a conception of subjectivity that can be identified with the formulation of "inner experience". And yet, is the subject of inner experience the sovereign subject that reappears with the sovereign subject of self-care? Were there to be a response, then it would be to suggest that there is a misunderstanding at the centre of Sørensen's analysis of how "inner experience" is to be understood. This is the point that has to be pursued. Who is the subject of inner experience?

Bataille argues in relation to the subject that his position is pitted against the great philosopher of experience, namely Hegel. The need to argue contra Hegel for Bataille is clear. In Hegel, for Bataille, experience is present as completion and thus both as finality and closure. The response to Sørensen therefore necessitates a turn – albeit brief and schematic – to Bataille's engagement with Hegel, specifically in Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure*.

2. Bataille devotes a number of pages to Hegel in *L'expérience intérieure*. The pages on Hegel come after an engagement with Descartes and before the departure named *L'extase*. That departure is perfectly situated. Hegel figures. And yet, if it weren't in fact Hegel, if in fact Hegel were something other, such possibilities still create tensions. The question of what is living in Hegel refuses to die. A certain project is still open. Not stilled in the open but there continuing as open. Hegel is not a corpse whose continual reanimation – brought back to life by moments of almost pure invention – is a concern for Bataille. On the contrary, Hegel holds a fundamental place within what might be described as a particular configuration of *the logic of exhaustion*. The limit of closure and the possibility of self-enclosed finality, in other words that which figures within the already determined subject, is the subject as exhausted. Indeed, it is the place in which exhaustion and inexhaustibility combine within a creative and generative intrication that marks the possibility of Bataille's departure from Hegel and thus a move away from what will become the neo-liberal subject. That point of connection between exhaustion and inexhaustibility, the known and the unknown is mirrored in the opening lines of the section on Hegel in Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure*. Bataille writes:

Connaitre veut dire: rapporter au connu, saisir qu'une chose inconnue est la même chose qu'une connue. (To know means: to relate to the known, to grasp that an unknown thing is the same thing as known thing.) (Bataille 1973: 127)

In Bataille, the logic of exhaustion and thus the possible affirmation of inexhaustibility is there in the reiterated presence of a specific modality of negation that holds the inescapability of production: in sum, the presence of negation as

a productive negativity. The negation that resists its own sublation. What is being distanced from therefore is a thinking of negation which, despite their differences, runs at least from Aristotle to Hegel and in which forms of exclusion or culmination are constrained to figure. The distancing and the inscription of production is a possibility that is there in the opening line; though it is there only as a hint. There is a confluence, in the sense of grasping or seizing that the line suggested is itself postponed, such that rather than the 'known' circumventing what there is and thus becoming the limit condition, it yields an opening. An opening that occurs at the limit, at the limiting of the known as a structure that forecloses. At the limit, what continues to insist is the unknown. Philological attention is necessary. The relation between the '*connu*' (known) and the '*inconnu*' (unknown) is carried by the prefix '*in*' (un). The prefix need not be literally present. Note that when Bataille suggests, again in the opening of the section under consideration that: "*La chaîne sans fin des choses connues n'est pour la connaissance que l'achèvement de soi-même*" ("The chain without end of things known is for knowledge the achievement of itself") the satisfaction that this might introduce ends (Bataille 1973: 127). To cite Bataille "*le caractère insatisfaisant du savoir*" would take over (Bataille 1973: 127). (Note again the reiterated presence of 'in'; again a negation refusing its own negation. The language of negation as negation's own marks of resistance.) The sign of inexhaustibility. An overlap occurs. There is the now even tenser imbrication of *l'achèvement* and *l'inachèvement*. The tension that holds open, that resists an end becomes the subject.

These few pages of Bataille's *L'expérience intérieure* have their own sense of continuity. At the limit of knowledge, what appears is the possibility of 'absolute knowledge'. To engage the subject who claims, if only to be that subject for a moment, and thus to avoid the slide into a form of mastery, Bataille proposes a mimetic relation. He proposes the miming of absolute knowledge. If only to ask: what then? The answer is that the subject will have become God. It is important to add that this God sees the all as the all. It is the God therefore for whom there can be no night. Neither blindness nor fallibility could obtain. However, once the subject becomes equated with 'absolute knowledge', even in the process of miming, the subject then becomes 'unknowable'. Becoming God, the subject becomes undone. Bataille continues by suggesting that what cannot be excised from this subject is the presence of a question that occasions what he describes as "the deepest foray into darkness without return". This movement is the undoing of absolute knowledge that is inscribed into the project of absolute knowledge itself. The question for Bataille is the following: "*pourquoi faut-il qu'il y ait ce que je sais?*" ("Why must there be what I know?") This is the question posed to knowledge's own necessity, which, once posed as a question, for Bataille, shatters that necessity. It tears it. The question hides another truth. It tears open the completed and the finished. This is the subject of 'inner experience'. In Bataille's terms it hides "*une extrême déchirure*" ("an extreme rupture"). The use of the term *déchirure* is fundamental. Earlier in *L'expérience intérieure* Bataille writes of the Hegel who "*toucha l'extrême*" ("touched the extreme") (Bataille 1973: 56). And who then

recoiled from it. *Déchirement* is the French translation of the German *Zerrissenheit*. The latter is the term that figures in Hegel's presentation of the truth of subjectivity in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – a truth that Bataille held as fundamental. Hegel wrote,

*Spirit only wins its truth when it finds itself within its absolute disruption. (Er gewinnt seine Wahrheit nur, indem er in der absoluten Zerrissenheit sich selbst findet).*¹

Hegel's "*in der absoluten Zerrissenheit*" is of course a staging of what will reappear in Bataille as "*la voie extatique*" (the way of ecstasy). And yet Hegel, the Hegel who "touched (*toucha*) the extreme" – and it can be conjectured that the use of the past historic is important – becomes the Hegel of absolute knowledge (Bataille 1973: 56). Hence Hegel is positioned not just as God but as having to live with God's certainty. Moreover, he had to live it within the 'official world'. The world assured of its own certainty. The certainty of normativity understood as the naturalization of officialdom. Within this world that saddened Hegel, a world attended by the horror of becoming God, Hegel saw himself, and this is Bataille's conjecture, "*devenir mort*" ("becoming dead"). This aged Hegel had for Bataille the head of one 'exhausted' (*épuisé*). This fear is compounded by that which Hegel had touched. In this section Bataille writes of Hegel "*repugnant à la voie extatique*" ("recoiling from the way of ecstasy") (Bataille 1973: 129). The 'recoiling' is the same movement that has already been noted.

Bataille then moves from Hegel to the adoption of an almost autobiographical tone. And yet, though he writes "*mon existence*" ("my existence") what is at stake is selfhood and thus not a claim that is merely autobiographical (Bataille 1973: 129). If Hegel's position develops into a claim about the truth of subjectivity, and a truth that is discovered in the process of living, then Bataille, as a commentary on this position, can write "*mon existence*" with the same force. Bataille, too, can write the history of consciousness. Within that existence, knowledge – the known – is there integral to his being; however, and the addition is crucial, "*cette existence ne lui est pas réductible*" ("this existence is not reducible to it") (Bataille 1973: 129). There is a space and thus a founding irreducibility that is maintained at the outset. It is the spacing at the centre that, while allowing for knowledge, will always pre-empt the possibility of closure. The history of consciousness would not therefore be the movement towards identity and finality – the I=I of absolute self-consciousness – but of the necessity of undoing, thus exhaustion's impossibility, the continuity of the ecstatic. The question that has to be addressed is how does Bataille present that which is there as the necessity of a founding irreducibility. The answer to this question is addressed in the next few paragraphs of this section of the book.

1 In this regard see the detailed engagement of Bataille with Hegel and the discussion of this passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; see his *Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice* in Bataille 1988.

3. The answer hinges on what Bataille locates in the understanding, namely “*une tache aveugle*” (a blind spot) (Bataille 1973: 130). It is not a contingent addition. On the contrary, it is a constitutive element. The understanding therefore contains that which makes both its unity and self-enclosure impossible. The original irreducibility is thought – at last at the outset – in terms of the language of optics and thus of blindness and insight. It is within this setting that references to ‘blindness’ have to be understood. The night beckons at the centre of the day and thus of the centre of light. The ‘blind spot’ demands attention precisely because it works within and against the understanding – one with the other. And yet, showing, knowing, that which refuses both sight and location, whose being therefore refuses and resists its absorption in taking on the quality of the unknown, becomes that which absorbs. The unknown draws in, its refusal to satisfy, its own insufficiency lingers on as the form as much of desire as anxiety. It fascinates the understanding without allowing for its own cancellation. In Bataille’s terms, “knowledge loses itself in it”. While there is a form of closure, that closure is closure’s own impossibility. Note Bataille:

L'existence de cette façon ferme le cercle, mais elle ne l'a pu sans inclure la nuit d'où elle ne sort que pour y rentrer. Comme elle allait de l'inconnu au connu, il lui faut s'inverser au sommet et revenir à l'inconnu. (This form of existence closes the circle, but it would not be able to do it without including the night from which it comes if only to return there. As it went from the unknown to the known it has to turn around at the summit and return to the unknown.) (Bataille 1973: 129)

Acting is linked to the known (*connu*) – understanding linked the known to the unknown. As Bataille writes, existence “in the end discloses the blind spot of the understanding and right away becomes absorbed by it”. There is continuity but not the continuity of that which is always regulated. The continuity of officialdom. Continuity is there as ‘agitation’. Here there is the moment in which exhaustion and the inexhaustible overlap. What therefore comes to the fore is the moment in which ‘ecstasy’ in refusing exhaustion – because it is a way rather than an end state – allows for beginnings. Bataille’s formulation is prescient here. He writes of this agitation that it “*ne s'épuise pas dans l'extase et recommence à partir d'elle*” (“does not exhaust itself in ecstasy and starts again from it”) (Bataille 1973: 130). This act of starting again is the moment in which inexhaustibility continues to be signalled. It is thus that for Bataille ‘poetry’ and ‘laughter’ cannot be absorbed into the logic of calculation. Hegel’s fatigue – thus his presence as exhausted – is linked to the blind spot. Bataille writes: “*L'achèvement du cercle était pour Hegel l'achèvement de l'homme*”. (The completion of the circle is the completion of man) (Bataille 1973: 130). A possibility that is undone by that which in refusing any satisfaction maintains *L'inachèvement*. *L'inachèvement* is always there. It continues to attend. What continues therefore is the continual opening beyond that always already regulated, the completed-by-its-having-been-regulated-in-advance. The project of human being resists project by the co-presence of the yet-to-be-completed.

The question is to which extent this conception of subjectivity is “part of the neo-liberal world order”?

On one level it is possible to argue that holding to the primacy of *l'inachèvement* may lead to a conception of desire that is linked to the project of commodification that both marks capitalism and positions subjects within the neo-liberal world order. And yet Bataille insists on the ineliminability of the incomplete. The *non-savoir* – and thus contrary to the ‘project’ of philosophy – does not allow itself to be negated. There is the continual opening sustained by what can be called the continuous presence of forms of productive negativity. What this opens up is not the ‘apolitical’ – though it could if *l'inachèvement* was just thought in relation to the commodity form – but the identification of a conception of life as a series of interrelated continuous processes, in which the opposition between need and desire was itself undone in the name of a set of needs that were orientated by the prolongation of life. That prolongation would then have the name of the political. In other words, while there is an ambivalence in the conception of subjectivity at work in Bataille – and it might be conjectured that it is there at the heart of subjectivity itself – that ambivalence is the locus of a decision. The decision is not between the apolitical and the political. Rather it is between the affirmation of capitalism as opposed to the affirmation of life.

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Endrju Bendžamin

Serensenov Bataj: Beleške o 'apolitičnom'

Apstrakt:

U *Kapitalizmu, otuđenju i kritici*, deo razvoja celokupne argumentacije Asgera Serensena predstavlja neslaganje sa Žoržom Batajem. Srž argumenta je da je Batajevo mišljenje – a naročito njegovo shvatanje subjektivnosti – 'apolitično'. Cilj ovog rada je da ispita snagu ovog argumenta. Šta znači kada kažemo da je neka pozicija – čak i filozofska – 'apolitična'?

Ključne reči: Bataj, apolitično, Hegel, ekonomija, subjektivnost