

# The Sovereignty of Free Culture: Georges Bataille and *The Accursed Share*.

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## 1 ABSTRACT

We are not at all surprised that academic and amateur theorists should most often trace the movement of free culture in terms of practical problems and contemporary challenges. But when they do find occasion to widen their analyses to a historical questioning of free culture, a questioning well beyond the brief records of legal history and toward the scale of the anthropological dimension, we should likewise be little surprised to find that the intellectual debt most often acknowledged by these free culture theorists is to the work of the French ethnologist Marcel Mauss<sup>1</sup>.

The famous ethnological treatise by this nephew, and student, of Émile Durkheim, *Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques*, known to us as *The Gift*<sup>2</sup>, has provoked extensive curiosity since its publication in 1923<sup>3</sup>. The basic outlines of Mauss's seminal anthropology of the gift are well-known. Its implications for a theory of free culture appear all but beyond dispute.

Mauss's discovery, transformative for classical economics, is that the most elementary economic activity of primitive societies is not barter, but in fact gift-giving, wherein the function of the gift is not the mere exchange of utilitarian objects but rather the binding of social relations between giver and receiver, an activity that earns or affirms the prestige and rank of those who can give the most. The extent to which Mauss's theory of the gift has informed contemporary anthropological readings of the free software and free culture movements as a "gift-economy" cannot be denied, although I do intend a review of the literature to ascertain if these readings have been at all critical, and not merely recitative.

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<sup>1</sup>By way of example, see the work of (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001), (András 2001), (Bollier 2002), (Zeitlyn 2003), (Bergquist 2003), (Coleman 2004), (Stehr and Weiler 2006), (Rossi 2006), (Rajagopal 2006) and (Kelty 2007).

<sup>2</sup>(Mauss 2002)

<sup>3</sup>see (Fournier 2005)

However, my main intention for this paper is to bring to members of the global Commons a greater awareness of the work of another anthropologist of the gift, the so-called “Philosopher of Evil,” Georges Bataille (1897-1962)<sup>4</sup>. Bataille and Mauss did not share a relationship of student and teacher that a cursory reading of their respective works would suggest. Rather, Bataille had very close associations with some of Mauss’s most brilliant students (most notably Alfred Métraux), and it was due to their inspiration that Bataille himself undertook an intense study of *The Gift*.

While his early involvement with the Surrealist movement in the 1920s, as well as his founding the important journal *Documents*, merit consideration in evaluating Bataille’s importance for 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and art, the work that should occupy our attention is Bataille’s response to *The Gift*: namely, the three volumes of *La Part Maudite*, known in English as *The Accursed Share*<sup>5</sup>.

The evidence raised in *The Gift*, particularly Mauss’s discussion of the meaning of the tradition of *potlatch* (*i.e.*, a ritual of gift-giving), suggested to Bataille the need to develop a *general economics* that would explain this phenomenon. In contradistinction to Mauss, Bataille has much less interest in the function of social integration and creation of mutual obligations that the ritual of *potlatch* establishes (the function, it should be noted, most often mentioned in the context of the anthropologies of free culture). Rather, what fascinates Bataille about *potlatch* is the element of pure expenditure, the ecstasy of destruction, the endless squander and unproductive consumption, which characterizes not just *potlatch* and ritual sacrifice, but many other cultural phenomena, both modern and archaic.

This insight led Bataille to develop his theory of *general economics*. In contrast to a classic economics for which the principle problem is the efficient allocation of *scarce* resources, Bataille countered that the most fundamental economic (and ecological) fact is the *overabundance* of energy and material resources. He maintained that both animal and man collect more energy than is needed for the reproduction of life, and that the surplus of productive output that cannot be used for growth must either be used unproductively, or destroyed. This surplus is what Bataille called *the accursed share*. The *potlatch* of the Indians of the American Northwest was only one possible solution to the economic problem of overabundance.

*I would like to suggest that the global movement of free software and free culture is a contemporary solution to this problem posed by Bataille’s general economics, the overabundance of cultural and creative energies.*

More crucially still, I would like to explore Bataille’s notion that the unproductive consumption and wasteful expenditure of wealth and productive assets confers *sovereignty* onto the human subject, for the destruction of what is most precious and sacred suggests a capacity for radical self-realization and individual freedom. Sovereignty for Bataille meant a freedom from bondage, and from things, that had been lost in modern industrial society and capitalist economies.

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<sup>4</sup>I draw here on (Surya 2002).

<sup>5</sup>(Bataille 1991, 1993)

Bataille's theory of *the accursed share* led him to apply his *general economics* to the human sacrifices of the Aztecs, the military enterprises of early Islam, the Lamaism of the Tibetans, the Protestant Reformation, Soviet Industrialization and the Marshall Plan. Writing in the late 1940s, Bataille maintained the belief that the socialist revolution would end in a return to a sovereign existence as he defines it. His project of a general economics therefore was ultimately an attempt to imagine a future society that reconciles social equality with individual sovereignty<sup>6</sup>. But Bataille did not live to see this project realized.

*I therefore want to assert the bold claim that the movement of free culture can be read as a fulfillment of Bataille's unrealized project of human sovereignty. For us, sovereignty is attained through contributions to the free economy of the commons and a mastery of computing environments. This is what I will call THE SOVEREIGNTY OF FREE CULTURE.*

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<sup>6</sup>I must acknowledge my own indebtedness in an understanding of Bataille's notion of sovereignty to the work of Jürgen Habermas. See (Habermas 1987).

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