**Sacrifice and expenditure: The sexual economics of Georges Bataille and Ezra Pound**

ABSTRACT

This essay compares the unorthodox literary economic theories espoused by Ezra Pound and Georges Bataille in the 1930s and 1940s, and explores the connections that these politically and stylistically divergent writers made between monetary and sexual circulation, wealth and natural growth. Interrogating their respective primitivist approaches to pre-capitalist cultural systems (Pound’s to a medieval arcadia before usury and Bataille’s to ancient Aztec and North American tribal societies), it draws attention to unexpected convergences between the writers’ political and economic ideas. I demonstrate that Pound – a supporter of Mussolini’s fascist state – was, by the use-value basis of his economics, in many ways closer to Marx than the expressly Marxist Bataille. Although Pound shared Bataille’s preference for pagan and Catholic ‘splendour’ over Protestant thrift, as well as his belief that sexual repression and puritanical fear were contributors to a blockage in the system, his economic approach ultimately abhorred the Nietzschean ‘squander’ celebrated in Bataille’s *The Accursed Share.* The essay ends by using the two writers to shed light on the literary-philosophical conditions that incubated fascism, as well as the perversely depoliticising and dangerous effects of interpreting the economy according to metaphysical ‘truths’. In so doing it warns against such tempting conflations in the present day.

KEYWORDS

Ezra Pound; Georges Bataille; sexual economics; John Maynard Keynes; fascism; modernism; social credit

**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 such as *The New Freewoman* alongside the anarcho-feminist critic Dora Marsden (Antliff, 2010: 47–57). Even in this context of shifting and interchangeable ideas, however, Pound’s occupation of common ground with Georges Bataille is remarkable. Poles apart politically and aesthetically, it is no surprise that they are rarely discussed together in 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 economic thinkers at the time, 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. Most intriguing of these – and the main focus of this essay - is a shared intimation about the interconnectedness of monetary and sexual expenditure, the catalyst for a shared belief that liberation in one sphere could be enabled through liberation in the other.

In exploring the relationship between their theories, I am pursuing a line of enquiry begun by Michael Tratner in *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth Century Literature* (2001). Tratner’s economic reading (2001: 6) of various modernist texts, including Pound’s *Cantos,* helpfully demonstrates ‘a set of attitudes [that] coalesced in discussions of economics and sexuality during the period from 1920 to 1960’. It is overly neat, however, in the connection it makes between the rise of a ‘Keynesian orthodoxy in economics that oversaving is harmful, and the prevalent view … that [sexual] repression is harmful’ (2001: 6). Tratner uses work by Joyce, Woolf, Pound, William Carlos Williams and others to demonstrate a convincing link between the mainstream acceptance of arguments about the dangers of under-consumption and the relaxation of sexual attitudes between 1920 and 1960. He rightly points out a general shift in public discourse from an emphasis on conservation to consumption, connecting the move away from Adam Smith’s theories of deficit avoidance to a literary, philosophical and scientific consensus that limiting sexual expenditure was harmful. John Maynard Keynes’s 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”’ (2001: 3). By analysing two writers who seem to corroborate this diagnosis but whose economic and political ideas were starkly opposed and often self-contradictory, I aim to demonstrate a tension between impulses towards control and release, conservation and squander that were essential and peculiar to the literature of the 1930s and 40s.

The essay begins by outlining the respective economic debates that Pound and Bataille were joining, positioning each in the context of successive early twentieth-century economic crises and the room they created for experimental theories. It then delineates these writers’ shared inheritance of Keynes’s objection to economic overproduction and under-consumption, identifying this as the catalyst for their fascinations with different pre-modern theories of wealth. My analysis of Pound and Bataille’s main writings suggests that, though they supported temporally and geographically opposed alternatives, they shared an enemy in what they saw as the usurious, protestant legacy of capitalist production-based economies. I go on to explore the anti-puritanical, sexual basis of their objections to usury, pointing to contradictions in Pound’s attempt to regulate and Bataille’s to deregulate the economy, before positing this as evidence of the idiosyncratic use each made of fascism’s dangerously versatile, anti-ideological aesthetics.

**Cranks and heretics**

Pound wrote *The ABC of Economics*, his main treatise on the monetary system, in 1933, while Bataille published his *Consumption* (later combined with two successive economic volumes in the more famous *La Part Maudite* or *The Accursed Share*) in 1949. Despite the sixteen-year gap, their respective transformations from cultural and literary figures to economists came out of the same early twentieth century scramble for radical new ways of imagining money and markets. If, as Robert W. Dimand points out, the Great Depression of the 1930s led ‘mainstream economists [to be] unusually open to the ideas of monetary reformers whom they would at other times have dismissed as cranks’ (1991: 11), the precedent for such openness can be traced back further still to the First World War. Leon Surette is one of a number of scholars to pinpoint these two periods of economic crisis as equivalent catalysts for heretical economic thought:

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. (Surette, 1999: 30)

Indeed, between 1918 and the 1930s, finding solutions to a system that was apparently unable to provide stability and full employment became an increasingly legitimate pursuit for thinkers outside academic economic circles, and particularly those previously preoccupied with literature and the arts. Pound’s literary career began in earnest in London during the 1910s, a time when periodicals like A. R. Orage’s *The New Age* and T. S. Eliot’sthe *Criterion* were beginning to publish political and economic essays by writers from outside those fields. With the outbreak and aftermath of war, that tendency grew into something of a mission statement. *The New Age* functioned as aninter-zone for radical, often unschooled economic thought,regularly printing work on art and economics by modernist authors, poets and philosophers such as Katherine Mansfield, Herbert Read, T. E. Hulme and Pound alongside comment pieces by untested economists – people like the Guild Socialist Arthur J. Penty, the ‘free money’ advocate Henry Muelen and Social Credit theorist Major C. H. Douglas. As Michael R. Stevens has pointed out, during the same period Pound’s friend and literary collaborator T.S. Eliot was using his editorship at the *Criterion* to promote a form of ‘neo-medieval Economics’ (1999: 235) that had its own bearing on Pound’s world picture. The meeting of these interdisciplinary ideas might, Surette explains, have intensified during the First World War but its roots lay in a nineteenth century British tradition of attempting to promote and protect artistic production through economic argument. Taking inspiration from social reformers like John Ruskin, whose theories of economic ‘underconsumption’ ‘provided an economic justification for expenditure in the arts’ the ‘New Age circle’ set an early precedent for literary engagement in economics that would have important implications after 1918. As well as Pound’s turn to economics – which began with a series of articles investigating the economic causes of the First World War and culminated in the book-length *ABC of Economics* – London’s atmosphere of literary and economic cross-pollination also resulted in Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938), her Keynes-inspired essay proposing a feminist overhaul of the economy.

Significantly, Pound – who had made his name as a poet, literary essayist and promoter of new writers – became obsessed with monetary economics after befriending Major C. H. Douglas, the best known and most influential of *The New Age*’s amateur contributors. ‘An industrial engineer quite innocent of any training in economics or journalism’, for a decade at least he managed to occupy a serious position on the international economic scene (Surette, 1999: 36). Keynes, sceptical about his ‘Social Credit’ theories, paid the ‘heretical’ Douglas this backhanded compliment in 1936:

Since the war there has been a spate of heretical theories … of which those of Major Douglas are the most famous. The strength of Major Douglas’s advocacy has … largely depended on orthodoxy having no valid reply to much of his destructive criticism. (Surette, 1999: 36)

Before Douglas’s arrival on the scene in 1917, Pound’s economic theory amounted to an intuited Ruskinian sense of outrage at the plight of artists in the modern capitalist system –gleaned from his association with Orage and the Guild Socialists at *The New Age*. Like them he followed Ruskin’s lead in connecting an emphasis on cheap mass production in the arts to a more general overemphasis on production for profit rather than consumption in the economy. Pound agreed with John Ruskin (Surette, 1999: 25) that ‘the commission and purchase of art are a form of consumption and therefore an addition to the wealth of the nation’. He was put off Guild Socialism, however, by what he called their egalitarian ‘Christian piety’ (Surette: 2010, 111), an impediment he was relieved to find removed from Douglas’s Social Credit Theory. Douglas provided Pound with an economic approach that allowed him to pursue ‘Ruskinian medievalism’ while avoiding the socialist politics he was beginning to find increasingly abhorrent (Surette: 2010, 111). Between 1917 and 1933, he threw himself enthusiastically behind this new cause, publishing a series of pro-Social Credit articles and petitioning editors and politicians to take note of Douglas’ ideas.

If Pound therefore came to economics in an atmosphere of politico-economic dilettantism and hybridisation, Bataille’s shift from literature and anthropology to macroeconomics represents his own response to an equivalent milieu in post-Second World War Paris. Having outlined in ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism’ (1930) and ‘The Notion of Expenditure’ (1933) the Sadean theory 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’ (Noys, 2000: 108), Bataille set about trying to unleash a similar libertarian force in the sphere of economic relations. As he puts it in his preface to *The Accursed Share* (1988: 9), 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’.

Although he goes on to complain about having to ‘explain’ himself to economists seeking ‘precise’, ‘intelligible’ theories, the French intellectual scene after 1944 provided Bataille with similarly fertile ground for radical, abstract economic theories as England had Pound in 1918 (Bataille: 1988, 10). While lettered Londoners of the 1910s may have been used to reading Pound on economics in *The New Age* or Eliot on a politics ‘too serious … to be left to the politicians’ in the *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*’sstated 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).

**Overproduction, under-consumption**

For different reasons – owing to their politics but also the respective decades in which they developed their theories – Pound and Bataille identified the same original problem at the heart of modern capitalist economics. Following Ruskin in the nineteenth century and Keynes in the twentieth, both saw an overemphasis on production and an under-emphasis on consumption as the system’s principal flaw. In *The ABC of Economics*,Pound builds his argument around Douglas’s statements on the discrepancy between an exponentially high rate of production and a proportionally 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 of *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini* (1935)and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), and the 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’ (1999: 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. (Pound, 1935a: 23)

As Robert W. Dimand points out, the Social Credit solution was dismissed as reductive by the classically trained Keynes, who punned on Major Douglas’s title to label him ‘a private, perhaps, but not a major in the brave army of heretics’ (Dimand, 1991: 20). Like many academic critics of Social Credit, Keynes drew attention to a glaring oversight in Douglas’s theory. Douglas had based his contention of a value imbalance between production and purchasing power on a survey he carried out of a hundred businesses, which seemed to show that money earned from goods produced was consistently greater than money paid in wages and dividends. The workers, Douglas believed, were not paid enough to buy back what they had made. However, in Dimand’s words (1991: 21), ‘Douglas and Pound forgot that when a firm purchased raw materials or intermediate goods from another firm [this] created a demand for the second firm’s output, and the second firm would pay wages and dividends as a result of producing for sale to the first firm’. Keynes argued that the omission of this vital sum when calculating the difference between production costs and wages had led Douglas to exaggerate the weakness of purchasing power as well as the simplicity of his solution. In *The ABC of Economics*,Pound jumped rather lamely to Douglas’s defence, positing Keynes’s refusal to endorse Social Credit as evidence of his stupidity or corrupt political motives: ‘Until [Keynes] makes definite public acknowledgement of the value of C. H. Douglas’, Pound wrote, ‘I shall be compelled either to regard him as a saphead or believe that his writings arise from motives lying deeper in the hinterland of his consciousness than courtesy can permit me to penetrate’ (Dimand, 1991: 22). From Keynes’s perspective, heretics like Douglas and Pound were offering irresponsibly utopian solutions to a mathematically complex conundrum. For Pound, fighting Social Credit’s corner with the zealousness of the recent convert, Keynes’s inability to countenance Douglas’ vision of social and economic reform proved his conventionality and irrelevance. In truth, as Surette explains, Douglas and Pound were ‘quite unable – or unwilling – to see that Keynesianism addressed the same problem of underconsumption as did the “heretics” and like them recommended a solution that would not disturb the status quo’ (Surette, 1999: 7). Moreover, Keynes’s theory of under-consumption and overproduction remained unconventional for most of the 1920s and 30s – perhaps even until the late 1940s when it was applied in real terms by post-war governments – since he stood, like Douglas and Pound, against the international, neoclassical consensus that saving rather than consuming held the key to revitalising the world economy.

Writing in 1949, after Keynes’s arguments had been accepted into the mainstream, Bataille agreed with the underconsumptionists’ diagnosis but sought to reroute the conversation by focusing on the metaphysics of consumption rather than practical, economic reasons for surplus. Explaining his motives for *The Accursed Share*, 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. (Bataille, 1988: 13)

The reference to ‘Keynes’s bottles’ points to an 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 famously postulated, ‘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 an integral element of human existence. As Nigel Dodd puts it,‘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 (1935: 30), ‘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 that emphasised loss to one that emphasises accumulation. Benjamin Noys (2000: 108) 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.’ 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’ (1988: 22).

If he echoed Pound’s concerns about a ‘clog[ged]’ (Pound, 1957: 133–34), over-productive and under-consumptive economy, Bataille 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, 1988: 21)

He 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. We must, Bataille writes (1988: 22), realise that it is impossible, even undesirable, to harness ‘the *totality* of productive wealth on the surface of the globe’, since mankind – like all life forms – is bound to absorb more energy than it needs. In thinking about production of wealth as a means to provide only what we need to consume, he continues (1988: 22), 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?’

**The metaphysics of wealth**

We shall see that these different motivations and investigative methods led Pound and Bataille to propose variant solutions. The two writers cohere, however, in their fundamental diagnoses, advocating economics based on remarkably similar theories of nature. Both believed that the modern Western concept of wealth was corruptive and both blamed malignant Protestant capitalist power structures for this; both carried out historical readings that understood economic systems as reflective of human misalignments with patterns in the natural world; finally, both were convinced that, in the twentieth century, the relationship between money and the natural world had fallen dramatically out of kilter.

For Pound, that misalignment began and ended with the crime of usury – a medieval term for the lending of money at disproportionately high rates of interest. Usury was, as K. K Ruthven puts it (1990:151), ‘the original sin’ of the moral-economic scheme Pound developed in his work and a convenient explanation for moral and spiritual decline in all spheres of existence. Throughout *The ABC of Economics* and his economic essays, he harks back to an age before corrupt state and religion-endorsed moneylenders had denaturalised human approaches to goods and currency (Surette 1999: 136). ‘Putting usury on a pedestal’, Pound writes in *Guide to Kulchur* (1952: 247),‘in order to set avarice on high, the protestant centuries twisted all morality out of shape’. According to this medievalist moral plan, everything that was wrong with twentieth-century economics originated in the sixteenth century, when John Calvin and Martin Luther produced successive theological justifications for unjust lending practices: ‘The scale and proportion of evil, as delimited in Dante’s hell (or the catholic hell) [sic] was obliterated by the Calvinist and Lutheran churches. The effect of Protestantism has been semiticly [sic] to obliterate values, to efface grades and graduations’ (1952: 185). As the second sentence demonstrates, Pound’s attacks on the religious basis of usury carried with them the anti-Semitism for which he would later become notorious. Like so many who wrote against Judaism in the 1930s, Pound posited usury as a disease contracted by a pure Christian culture from its impure counterpart. Indeed, 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’ (1952: 247) – mutated, by the 1940s, into a consistent campaign against what he came to call ‘Jewsury’ (1952 247).

 Crucially, Pound couched his ideas about contaminative economy in terms of growth and reproduction. Usury was, he wrote in Canto 45 ‘against nature’s increase’ since it distorted the relationship between money and goods, in turn damaging the relationship between producer and consumer, and between employees and their employment (Pound, 1970: 67). Between 1919 and the late 1930s, he gradually developed his intuition about usury into a catchall system of thought to explain corruptive patterns in every strata of human existence. Indeed, according to Ruthven (1990: 151), by the 1930s the poet had become convinced that ‘by corrupting the benefits to be had from a “natural” economy, [usury] deferred endlessly the prospects of a just society’. As the following lines from Canto 45show, Pound figured it as the original cause of the drastic depreciation of language, literature, politics and sexuality he believed he saw around him:

with usura the line grows thick

with usura is no clear demarcation …

Stonecutter is kept from his stone

weaver is kept from his loom

WITH USURA

wool comes not to market

sheep bringeth no gain with usura

… usura

blunteth the needle in the maid’s hand

… Usura slayeth the child in the womb

It stayeth the young man’s courting

It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth

between the young bride and her bridegroom

CONTRA NATURAM.

(Pound, 1970: 67)

When a population becomes dependent on a usurious banking system, Pound claims, 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.

This positing of unnatural economic relations as an asexualising force has intriguing implications for Bataille, who also sought to realign the concept of wealth with patterns of agricultural growth and fertility in the natural world. Crucially, Bataille based his economic theory on as vitriolic a rejection of Calvin and Luther as Pound’s, and he cited similar reasons – the overemphasis on accumulation, thrift and the virtue of labour and the facilitation of an epoch in which consumption was subordinate to production. Indeed, like Pound, he preferred 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, 1988: 122). However, he went further back and afield in his research, designing his theory of biospherical excess energies according to pre-Christian non-Western economic models. As Caroline Blinder explains (1995: 212), designating capitalism as ‘homogeneous and therefore faulty, [Bataille] sought to find models elsewhere in which the heterogeneous played a larger more active role’. Indeed, *The Accursed Share* is heavily indebted in both its language and logic to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (1924), an ethnographic reading of Aztec and Native American economic practices. Drawing on Mauss’s groundwork, 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 favour of the homogeneous desire for ‘production’ (1988: 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 Mexiconos por sus Pinturas* (which translates as ‘the history of the Mexicans as told by their paintings’, 1882), 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”’ (1988: 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. (Bataille, 1988: 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 as well 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, 1988: 67–68). At times entailing human sacrifice, potlatch appealed to Bataille as a subversion of the rules and purposes dictating ordinary acts of expenditure. Although he conceded that the pressure applied by the giver on the receiver suggested another kind of restrictive rationale, he applauded potlatch as a non-negotiable and spectacular means of demonstrating and exercising abundance. It is, he writes, ‘like commerce a means of circulating wealth, but [it] excludes bargaining’ (1988: 67–68).

Through this, Bataille promotes a new economics that takes count of the ‘wealth’ in nature. He shares Pound’s belief that twentieth-century economics suffers because of Protestant misconceptions of ‘wealth’, which themselves arise out of a deeper amnesia about growth. Indeed, in *The Accursed Share*,he follows Pound in opposing the constipating emphasis on acquisition in Protestant economies with a pre-Protestant economy based on bountiful generosity. Rather than the medieval societies of Italy in the thirteenth century, or of Ancient Greece or Rome, however, Bataille idealises non-Western, pre-Christian societies for producing systems based on the unconditional giving 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. (Bataille, 1988: 28–29)

By losing sight of the sun as an exemplar for the dispensation of wealth, modern economic man neglects a further biochemical first principle. As Rebecca Comay puts it, in Bataille’s vision of modernity ‘anthropocentric avarice replaces the cosmic prodigality of a solar economy freely expending its resources without return’ (Comay, 1990: 69).

This is not unlike the principal Pound seeks to protect by promoting social credit and by connecting money, nature, language, art and sex. In the first place, as Michael Tratner points out, Pound envisions the governmental provision of social credit as an expression of ‘the abundance of nature’ (Canto 52, quoted in Tratner, 2001: 142), a way of irrigating the economy not through state borrowing but by creating wealth without the promise of its return. In Pound’s scheme, Tratner explains, the state is intended to behave as ‘a communal, social fount’, ‘an inexhaustible source giving returns far beyond anyone’s labor, a fabulously bright light’ (Tratner, 2001: 142). More intriguingly, his conviction about the evil of usury is based on a deeper belief in energies that exist latently in the natural world but will remain concealed unless brought to the surface through virtuous economic, linguistic and artistic action (Soper, 1950: 242). ‘The plan is in nature’ Pound writes in Canto 99 (1959), ‘rooted/Coming from earth, times … respected’ (1970: 729), following up with a direct reference to interest rates: ‘the legal rate does not exhaust things’ (730). In other words, like Bataille, he believes that the circulation of money can be set up in such a way as to mirror the sustainable model in nature, rather than the vain, avaricious – and ultimately unsustainable – impulses of men. Such thinking becomes more general instruction in Pound’s ‘Pisan Cantos’ (1948) when he implores the reader to ‘pull down thy vanity’ and ‘learn from the green world what can by thy place’ (1970: 541), since ‘it is not man/Made courage, or made order, or made grace’ (541). Genuine order and grace in an economic, social and an artistic sense can only be achieved, he believes, through the apprehension of those essential virtues in the natural world. Predictably, since he came to economics through art, the quest for a morally and spiritually virtuous economics is inseparable from an aesthetic quest to receive and delineate the truth in nature. When Pound writes that ‘with usura, the Stonecutter is kept from his stone’, he implies not only his Ruskinian anxiety about the craftsman’s plight in a usurious age but a fundamental dislocation from the processes in nature. In his art and his economics, Pound works on the basis of ‘the stone knowing the form which the carver imparts’ (1970: 541), the notion of a sacrosanct relationship between physical and metaphysical worlds which can be ‘unlocked’ (Soper, 1950: 242) by realignment with what Hugh Kenner (1972: 159) calls the ‘patterned process’ in nature.

**Doctrines of the flesh**

If they shared anxieties about the economic negation of sacred metaphysical energies, and about humanity’s failure to learn from nature’s abundance, Bataille opposed Pound’s quest to reveal ‘*virtu*’ through pattern realignment with his own very different quest for excess (Caws, 2001: 361). It is a contrast that had significant bearing on the ways in which each brought sex into the equation. For both writers, the objection to Protestant notions of wealth was allied with an objection to puritanical ideas about the body. In his essay on the thirteenth-century Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti (1936), 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, 1954a: 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 demonstrate the limits of their own intellect. To Bataille’s mind, sexual relations in Protestant bourgeois societies had been damaged as a result of the fixation on work and productivity. Human beings, he believes, are taken out of the present by labour, forced to behave as functional objects rather than subjective beings animated by intimacy and deep desire:

From the start, the introduction of labourinto the world replacedintimacy, 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 laboured. (Bataille, 1988: 57)

In Bataille’s reconfiguration of Marxist theory, all work – not only the alienating tasks performed by the proletariat but the very concept of labouring usefully – is an impediment to individual sovereignty. As Jürgen Habermas puts it (1985: 224), Bataille believes that ‘to be sovereign means not to let oneself be reduced, as in labour, to the condition of an object, but to free subjectivity from bondage’. In contrast to Pound’s connection of the unnatural increase represented by usury and the decline in 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’ (1937: 67), he demonstrates a social conscience that is anathema to Bataille’s interest in the psychological and emotional health of individuals. Although equally fixated on natural growth patterns, Bataille uses them to celebrate unproductive economic and un-reproductive sexual expenditure, Pound to express fears about the future of the species.

In fact, Pound is adamant there is a material connection between monetary systems and fertility rates, in terms of both population and land. Jean-Michel Rabaté supports this link between Pound’s animosity towards sexual puritanism and his identification of usury as the principal root of social evil, writing that, for Pound (1934: 215), ‘The difference between surplus and interest bears … heavily on sexual systems and moral codes’. As evidence, Rabaté cites Pound in his 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. (Rabaté, 1986: 215)

In other words, ‘Anti-flesh’ ideas and policies distort and damage human relations in much the same way as usurious economic systems, the existence of one implying the existence of the other. Indeed, in a 1921 interview with *The New Yorker* Pound described England’s recent conversion to high interest rate credit controls as a direct result of her ‘insensitization’ (Rabaté, 1986: 217). A lack of sensitivity to bodily pleasure not only causes ‘dullness of mind’, the reduction of ‘intelletto’ referred to in the ‘Cavalcanti’ essay, but a reduction in economic vitality.

This equation of intellectual with physical sensitivity carries with it a pejorative conservatism that further separates Pound from Bataille, at the same time crystalising their respective impulses towards regulation and its opposite. ‘I suppose the word sensitive gives an impression of femininity’, Pound tells *The New Yorker* interviewer ‘and yet any scientist is anxious to have his instruments highly sensitized’ (Rabaté, 1986: 217). Consistent with his dismissal of ‘femininity’ is a tendency to couch ideas about sex and economics in terms of natural and unnatural sexual practices. Canto 15 (1924) – one of three poems in which he vividly reimagines the punishments endured in Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* – sees Pound follow Dante’s example in categorising usury and sodomy as equivalent sins. Again, the issue revolves around growth and the flow of energies. In both cases, according to Pound, the problem is an absence of a 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, 1952: 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’etre in *Guide to Kulchur* – is as perverted a notion as to produce life from non-vaginal sex (6). Unlike Bataille, for whom truth means ‘the heterogeneous’ (1985: 142–46), 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 naturalising controls and limits.

Rabaté explains this helpfully in relation to Pound’s concerns about under-consumption and support for Major Douglas’ Social Creditism. ‘For Pound’, Rabaté writes (1986: 268), ‘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’. By promoting Douglas’s 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 *Ulysses* summarised the ‘fadeless excrement’ of the 1910s (Pound, 1952: 96). It is, he writes, ‘the end, the summary, of … the “age of usury”’ because it satirises the way in which unnatural economic growth has contaminated thought, language and sexuality (1952: 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 labour expended and goods produced (Douglas, 1935: 30). Once this is achieved, a natural, biological order will finally fall back into place.

Bataille’s interest in the expenditure of excess energy leads him to couch his ideas about monetary flow in excremental terms as well. As Habermas has it (1985: 218), 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’. 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’ (1985: 218). Where Pound advocates approaches to the economy and sexuality that avoid waste, however, Bataille frequently associates excrement with virtuous expenditure and the problem of a production rather than consumption-centred economy with constipation. As Rebecca Comay notes, these ideas had their roots in Nietzsche’s notion of aristocratic and slave-like forms of existence. Inspired by passages from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, she claims, Bataille developed his analysis of excess to imagine a new form of uninhibited, unregulated generosity that had existed before Protestantism and the moral endorsement of interest:

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. (Comay, 1990: 67)

In contrast to Pound’s concern about the ‘fadeless excrement’ of unnatural increase, Bataille uses the image of excremental expenditure to reify irresponsible monetary circulation as the expression of a wasteful, noble impulse; an impulse he believes is repressed across the board in an age of modern capitalist slavery.

**Visions of control and excess: reversing political dialectics**

Pound might share Bataille’s preference for Pagan and Catholic ‘splendor’ over Protestant thrift, he might identify sexual repression and puritanical fear as contributors to a blockage in the system, but his economic approach ultimately abhors such Nietzschean ‘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. Their economic differences are helpfully explained through Jean Baudrillard’s 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 banalisation 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. (Baudrillard, 1998: 192–93)

Pound rather than Bataille advocates reforming the economic system to make ‘“good use” of the social’. Where Pound wants to organise a messy and manic situation masquerading as orderly and rational, Bataille denies the virtue in rationalising 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, deprecation, etc. … [utility] is, on Bataille’s account, a principle of powerlessness, an utter inability to expend’ (1998: 192).

In the light of Pound’s profound political and social opposition to Marxism, however, these economic differences are less significant than their similarities. Pound consistently espouses elitist, explicitly anti-socialist ideas throughout his literary, political and economic writings. Indeed, central to his philosophy was the belief in the sanctity of a number of men – active chiefly in the arts – with the intelligence to counteract the veniality of ‘the mob’ or ‘the bullet headed many’ and move culture forward (1954b: 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 what Douglas (1935: 30) characterised as ‘the paradox between poverty and distress on the one hand and potential plenty on the other’ coincides with Marx’s.

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 many ways as emotionally charged as Pound’s. With a group of like-minded thinkers including Maurice Blanchot and Pierre Provost, Bataille envisioned *Critique* as a corrective to *Action Française*, Pierre LaSerre’s radical rightist group that grew out of 1894’s Dreyfus Affair, and was inspired by Italian and German fascism. Unpardonably, to the Nietzschean Bataille, *Action Française* 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 (1985: 143), ‘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*’. Looking beyond his objections to their politics, Bataille assigns value to these figureheads because they symbolise 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. (Bataille, 1933: 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 (Bataille, 1985: 143), 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 rationalised 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.’ (Habermas, 1985: 218)

Surprisingly, Pound’s promotion of Mussolini is based on something more prosaic – namely, 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 hypnotised 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’ (1935a: 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)’ (Pound, 1935a: 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 early twentieth century to validate and inform their unorthodox economic positions but who also picked and chose from very different elements within those politics and, as a result, arrived at conclusions that contradicted their stated aims. As such, they indicate the seductive versatility of ideological positions that rejected the standard hermeneutics of socialism, liberalism, even conservatism. Roger Griffin (2007: 215) 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’. 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 that 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, in many quarters the horrors resulting from fascist ideology have de-validated the connections Pound made between economics and nature, and – in particular – economics and sexuality. It remains important to question the efficacy of a theory that promoted an ultra-repressive, eventually genocidal government as the key to fixing the world economy. More pressingly, Pound’s predication of his economic ideas on the racist belief in a Jewish moneylending conspiracy necessitates scrutiny of their logical and ethical validity. Although neither a conspiracy theorist nor a programmatic anti-Semite, the fact that Bataille savoured Aztec violence and was fascinated by fascist leaders carries its own impediment perhaps to a serious appreciation and certainly to the practical application of his economic ideas.

From a historical but also cautiously theoretical perspective, however, these radical positions are revealing and instructive. On their most basic level, they are symptomatic of the wider correlation Michael Tratner identifies between sexuality and economics after World War One. Pound and Bataille’s respective quests to unclog economic and libidinal systems roughly support Tratner’s hypothesis that ‘Keynesian orthodoxy in economics that oversaving is harmful’ and the rejection of Adam Smith correlated with the emergence of ‘the prevalent view … that [sexual] repression is harmful’ (2001: 6). Theirs is the language of consumption over production and they proffer expenditure as a source of growth. Moreover, as Tratner rightly points out, sixty years on from the first wave of Keynesian economics, Bataille’s ideas of an economy based on the perverse productivity of useless expenditure might actually appear more relevant than when they were first published:

The strange sequence … of persons stepping outside of the logic of exchange and participating in acts of loss and useless behavior, and then finding that the economic system makes use of them, is not so very strange. It is the new logic of exchange itself in the twentieth century, the logic of deficits as a way to create growth. (Tratner, 2001: 49)

While Tratner’s 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, inconsistencies that are often ironed out in attempts to identify moments of major political and economic sea-change. 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 co-opting related language for apparently opposite ends, and by ending up in strange and unfamiliar political territory, they expose the perversely depoliticising 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 reorganise the economy along rational ‘use value’ lines is in 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 and morally, politically distortionary effect of attempting to naturalise and, indeed, sexualise the economy.

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