

“Bataille, Adorno-Horkheimer, and the Question of Nature in the Mimetic Model”

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abstract

In my paper for COVR 2004 I intend to take up Girard's mimetic model as it relates to the contributions of three other thinkers: Georges Bataille, and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their collaborative effort, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It must be noted at the outset that the need to determine how an 'understanding of human nature might fit into a total economy of the natural world' seems almost to call for an interrogation of Bataille's foray into economics, *The Accursed Share (Vol 1)*. In this work, Bataille announces that a fundamental reorientation of economic thinking is needed: we need a *general economy of life on earth* which accounts for every part's relation to a whole which invariably exceeds it, rather than a restricted economy which always works on the basis of calculations of its finite parts. He then goes further, announcing that all life on earth reflects the existence of what makes it possible: the free outpouring of the energy of the sun. Most of our scientific accounts, working from within the restricted epistemological economy of the Darwinian heritage, treat life as a zero-sum game, a wresting of resources from an environment of scarcity. Bataille insists that this is only true in considering the individual, isolated from its external environment. In fact, the biggest obstacle life collectively confronts is how to deal effectively with *excess* resources, and the *excess* growth these make possible. This excess appears inevitably in human societies as an excess of violence.

Here, we may already see the uncanny closeness between Bataille's theory and the mimetic model which has been developed by Rene Girard. Where they differ, and differ decisively, is in Bataille's valorization of the 'natural-unmediated' expression of the excess of life, in sacrificial ritual, the violent consumption of Self and Other characterizing pre-modern, pre-Christian societies like the Aztecs. Bataille also differs from Girard in his emphasis on how, as Christianity (most excessively in Protestantism) suspends the old sacrificial cycle, it has helped channel this excess back into the unending *enlargement* of the economy. As a corollary, it has made possible the restricted modern understanding which looks to solving ecological problems the way, in Bataille's analogy, a mechanic changes a tire (or installs a hydrogen motor).

We are left with a deepened appreciation of what Girard calls 'sacrificial Christianity' – but in this case a Christianity which fully suspends scapegoating, only to make a scapegoat of nature as a whole. But the ethical force of Girard's call for a new turn to Christ remains as a vital obstacle to the Bataillan ethic, which it seems must either make light of violence or translate it into pure textuality. Also left with this model/obstacle problem, I want to suggest, are Adorno and Horkheimer, as they write *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In their theory we learn that enlightenment, the abrogation of sacrifices, is mythic fear turned radical. It is 'itself mimesis: mimesis unto death.' But Adorno and Horkheimer are in no way deceived, as was Heidegger, by any rosy image of a primitive unity of nature and the human community, of Being – as their positions on ontology, as well as fascism, make clear. I want to suggest that their position against 'identity-thinking,' what Adorno would later call 'negative dialectics,' is one which I think could be brought into a fruitful dialogue with a non-sacrificial Christianity.