Utopic Renunciations 'Unity in Diversity'

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UTOPIC RENUNCIATIONS, “UNITY IN DIVERSITY”: THE CONTEMPORARY, FOUCAULT, BATAILLE AND PROBLEMATICS IN POSTMODERN HISTORICAL THEORY

by

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UTOPIC RENUNCIATIONS, “UNITY IN DIVERSITY”:
THE CONTEMPORARY, FOUCAULT, BATAILLE AND PROBLEMATICS IN
POSTMODERN HISTORICAL THEORY

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Abstract
This paper focuses on comparisons of Michel Foucault’s and Georges Bataille’s visions of histories as
centered around thematics of the utopic, dystopic and difference. Positing that contemporary events
(the intifada, the “war on terrorism”) force us to face the possibility of a dystopic turn in relation to
ideas of difference in contemporary or “postmodern” history, I suggest that Foucault and others in the
milieu of the postmodern historical theory are unable to help us consider this turn from the perspective
of philosophy of history. Bataille, however, I argue, can. The difference comes in the idea of the
meaning of the renunciation of the utopic, and whether or not that is an act based in a vision of the
utopic itself. For Foucault it is; for Bataille it neither is not, nor should it be. This gives us perhaps a
better analytical tool for understanding turns in contemporary history, as well as suggests a truly
radical reformulation within the domain of philosophy of history.

I.
The postmodern age seems to have taken a strange turn lately. That is not to say that it was
ever completely “normal” but it seemed that through 1990s, more of us were beginning to
believe the talk of liberation that had always come with postmodern discourse. In defining the
postmodern project, Lyotard asked us in 1982 to “activate the differences” that had always
existed among us but modernist discourses would deny. 2 Perhaps we had; it was possible the
fall of the Eastern Bloc appeared to be a last step in a progressive post-colonial flowering of
the post-War era. Of course, people in the former Yugoslavia would attest to the problems
accompanying this “flowering.” However, we also should remember the enormous sense of
liberation that came in the wake of 1989-91. In this sense, at least in the West, we often
seemed willing to take “trouble spots” as trouble spots. Increasing numbers of us, it appeared,

1 Benjamin Dorfman was a visiting Ph.d. candidate at SPIRIT, Aalborg University, Denmark in the fall
Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 16.
believed – as Vaclav Havel predicted we would – that the world had found a greater “unity in diversity.” The idea was, in short, that it was a better, more democratic place after 1989.

The first cracks in this post-Cold War positivism might be seen to have come with the renewal of the intifada in September 2000. Wherever one places the blame for this, it is certain that the Oslo Accords had been a major piece in the puzzle of the new “unity in diversity.” The more or less peaceful coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians was important for indicating the possibility of the successful sustenance of not only diverse, but also even traditionally opposed, identities within the same geographical region. That is to say that they indicated that the multiculturality advocated in most postmodern discourses might work. But, as events show, perhaps it might not. Of course, the September 11 attacks ratcheted-up the tensions along lines of cultural difference (at least in racial, ethnic and religious terms). Left-wingers might decry Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis; in terms of his pejorative attitude toward non-Western civilizations, they are right to do so. However, he is clearly on target in the observation that we have such a clash. I hope that we can recover a sense of “unity in diversity.” For the time being, though, diversity – which, I think, is essentially to say cultural difference – appears to make us edgy and have become reshrouded in an atmosphere of tension and violence.

For historical theoreticians in the postmodern vein (which I consider myself), this turn in recent events brings out certain tensions that have always lay at the heart of postmodern historical thought. These boil down to the idea that, on one hand, postmodern theories of history have always been intriguing because they dispensed with historical utopias. That is to say that the absence of Hegelian Absolutes and Marxian Communist Utopias allowed history to happen. Certainly, Hegel and Marx certainly saw conflict as central to history. However, conflict was always tinged by senses of necessity and temporariness – simple stepping stones to our final historical destination. “The History of the World is not a theater of happiness,” wrote Hegel, yet the “vast congeries of volitions, interests and activities [that] constitute [conflict are] the instrument and means of the World-Spirit for attaining its object.” As Foucault wrote, such ideas gave us the feeling that what was important was not events and experiences themselves, but “a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout history.” It was hard to imagine history’s

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turn toward the dystopic under such a model. Postmodern thought seemed in that manner to fill in the blanks.

On the other hand – and all Rankian protests aside – historians have a hard time not being philosophers. This is a point that Hayden White made well in the 1970s, and postmodernism was reassuring in this regard. Postmodern historical thought offered the possibility that there was meaning in dispensing with the transcendental historical subject. That meaning was the recovery of the immanence of experience, the uniqueness of the event and the opening of the historical field to possibility, resistance and non-conformity. Thus, while we might engage in a scholarship under a postmodern paradigm that was (to use Foucault’s terms again) “gray, meticulous and patiently documentary,” this was only so from methodological and narratological perspectives. Grayness, meticulousness and patience did not mean a lack of meaning and purpose in historical writing. Utopia could thus be both present and not in the historian’s work and vision of the world. Historians could downplay utopia to the extent that it would not become an analytical straightjacket. Yet they could maintain enough of it to make writing history something other than a matter of mundane record. It was a good situation to be in.

In our current global situation, however, all bets on utopia seem to be off. Indeed, if we are to take official discourse seriously, they will continue to be off for the next few years – we have been warned that the “war on terrorism” will be a long, painful process. (Negotiations for international support for an invasion of Iraq will probably take several months just in themselves.) As history seems to have taken a turn toward the dystopic, we have an occasion to think about the role of the utopic in historical thought. Generally, I want to do this for two reasons. First (1), we seem to have experienced another moment of utopia’s ideological resurgence and historical defeat. This seems to be the history of many utopian visions overcome by war and violence; why does this happen? If we are to come to terms with both historical reality as well as our cultural, political and existential possibilities, it is important to think about at what points we maintain and release utopias from historical discourse. At what point do we allow ourselves the dystopic, and why? What effects does the sustenance of the utopic within our visions have? Second (2), historical discourse (both

7 Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). Generally considered the father of modern historical studies and the source of its turn toward scientific standards of objectivity and away from literature and letters.
academically and popularly conceived) is one of the chief discourses by which we know ourselves. Generally, we have known ourselves under the aegis of utopic (modernity) historical discourses. Postmodern historical discourses – or at least “theories of history” – would supposedly disrupt such discourses. However, as indicated in the last paragraph, this may not be completely the case. Though surely not utopic in Hegelian or Marxist senses, postmodern visions of history may have their own logic of historical improvement, meaning that if not maintaining visions of utopia, they are touched with the utopic. That is to say that while they may not envision the perfect society as such, they function under certain teleologies and ideas of the approximation of perfection. However, as we will see – and as suggested above – the situation is more complicated than that. Postmodern ideas about history may not differ that drastically from its modernistic conceptions. This may be a problem not only for thinking history in general, but also for thinking the history of the postmodern age in terms of its immediate past and unfolding future.

II. It is perhaps worth noting that “historical theory,” or “historical thought,” are not the most precise terms. Generally, they are somehow a blending of historiography – usually defined as the history of historical writing – and philosophy of history – which is defined variously, but the most well-known branch of which is speculative philosophy of history. “Speculative philosophy of history” usually means the attempt to create general, metaphysical laws about the past that translate into general laws on human change over time. Some of the most famous examples of this are Hegel (the dialectics of Spirit), Marx (class conflict), Oswald Spengler (organic rules of rise and decline and cultural “soul”) and Arnold Toynbee (cyclical historical evolution); one might make an argument for Nietzsche as well (will to power). Obviously, the line between the two – historiography and philosophy of history – is not so strict. How one writes about the past says a great deal about how one thinks that the past functions, meaning that historians are often interested in historiography because it gives us philosophies of history. Thus, one can sometimes see Emmanuel Ladurie’s famous Les Paysans de Languedoc (1966) in courses on historical theory. Although hyper-empirical (and thus supposedly non-speculative), its empiricism gives us an image of historical change: it is detailed, local and infinitely complex.
In postmodern terms, historical theory or “thought” also shakes-out along these lines. On the historiography side are figures such as Hayden White and Dominic LaCapra. In fact, though, what sets them on the “historiography side” is less that they introduce new modes of writing history than that they revealed some interesting things to us about the history of historical writing. This was essentially that historical writing bears quite some resemblances to literature. This is not the newest idea – history writing and belles lettres were often seen as related before the nineteenth century. (And even on its own terms, the “linguistic turn” in history is not new. If Hayden White is the benchmark, the linguistic turn would in fact be coming up on its thirtieth anniversary. This also makes the “New Historicism” frequently discussed in the U.S. and other Anglophone oriented academic cultures not particularly new either.) However, over the past century and a half, the scientific model for historical investigation has been dominant to the point where we almost forget other models. To suggest, as did White and LaCapra in the 1970s and ‘80s, that underneath that model we were acting out modes of literature was provocative. In many ways, it still is.

Nonetheless, when I speak about postmodern historical thought or theory I am more interested in postmodern speculative philosophy of history. Indeed, if we may make something of a postmodern/Derridian “graphic intervention” here, we might mark the term as postmodern (un)speculative philosophy of history. The reason for this is precisely what I mentioned a few paragraphs above. Hegel “speculated” on the phenomenology of Spirit. Spirit ran through the course of history, and its dialectic was the driving force behind all history. He could not be clearer on this point – “Universal History,” he wrote, “belongs to the realm of Spirit.” Marx, of course, made the metaphysical-material shift and placed the burden on forces and relations of production. Spengler – for those who are interested – saw history as governed by organic life-processes of birth, flourish, decline and death. Toynbee also viewed history cyclically, although much less pessimistically and in rather more moral and religious terms than did Spengler. Nietzsche, if we include him, placed the burden of historical change on the “will to power.” Postmodern (un)speculative philosophy of history, though, would deny such monocausal views. It would argue that there is no single

10 I should make the caveat here that in White’s case, the relationship with postmodernism is tenuous. He uses certain post-structural ideas about narrative and signification. However, he clearly defines himself if non-, if not anti-, Foucauldian. See White, “Foucault’s Discourse: The Historiography of Anti-Humanism,” in The Content of the Form (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
12 Hegel, 16.
force, mechanism or set of relationships accompanying humanity through time. Rather, its “speculation” is that there is a diversity of such mechanisms, and that the ways we engage them, think about them and define them are mobile at any rate. Therein, one could say that postmodern philosophy of history is philosophy of history and also not – it does not have a logical center or normative principle in the manner that philosophies of history usually do. However, that fact itself becomes the basis of a certain kind of logic and set of norms.

It is unquestionably Foucault who is the most important in this context – he is the prime representative when one thinks of a postmodern philosophy of history in the speculative mode. For the most conservative historians, this can be a point of contention (especially in the Anglo-American world) to the extent that Foucault was and was not a historian. His title at the College de France, for example, was “professor of the history of systems of thought.” However, he sometimes shied away from being called a historian and went to great pains to qualify the degree to which his histories were historical.13 Some historians thus view him as more as a sociologist or anthropologist than historian – which is to say that he portrays basic social and cultural dynamics rather than offering specific accounts of how specific events and circumstances changed over time. However, this view is more symptomatic of historians’ all-too-frequent antipathy toward philosophy than a reflection of reality.14 The point for Foucault was that basic social, cultural and – we might add – political dynamics were the causes for human change over time.

However, again, in a typically postmodern manner (if there is such a thing), the important element of “these basic social, cultural and political dynamics” is the “s” at the end of dynamics; it makes the situation plural. Given that – especially to audiences outside of history looking at this paper – Foucault’s basic ideas (especially from his 1970s, middle, “genealogical” phase) are well known, I will not devote a great deal of space to rehashing them here. However, shortly put, his ideas ping-pong back and forth between a unifying concept – power – and the idea that there is no staticizing component to power relationships. The following (and famous) lines from Surveiller et Punir (1975) are typical in this regard.

[Power is] dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings…one should decipher it as a network constantly in tension, in activity…one should take as its

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13 For an excellent reading of Foucault’s relationship to the French historical community, see G. Noriel, “Foucault and History: The Lessons of a Disillusion,” Journal of Modern History 66, no. 3 (1994), 547-68.

14 For the formative piece of this kind of criticism in the Anglo-American world, see A. Megill, “Foucault, Structuralism and the Ends of History,” Journal of Modern History 51, no. 3 (1979), 451-503.
model perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory...This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes and that they do not merely reproduce, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behaviour, the general form of law or government...they are not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations.15

The point to take away from this passage is simply that there was no “meta” level of power relationships for Foucault. Surely, the play of power in society – exertions of force and acts of coercion – is a given; that makes it normative, to a degree. However, the manner in which this play unfolds is utterly unpredictable. It pervades all social, political, cultural, economic and even personal relationships. One domain of power relationships could not be privileged over another. Relations of production, to pick on Marx for a moment, might be important, but no more so than any other social or economic relationship. The point was that the field of power – the space in which power plays – formed an incontestable regime. That is not to say that specific formulations and practices of power could not be resisted; of course they could. It is to say, though, that even such resistances are part of the logic of power. Power itself cannot be dispensed with. It cannot be combated on a universal scale because its operations are mutatable and mobile. We might decide to use it in certain ways – to manipulate it and take advantage of its presence at certain locales – but those were different tasks than being able to control it completely and exert mastery over its logos.

It is this point that makes Foucault interesting for historical theory. On one hand (even though I said that I was leaving it behind), it makes him interesting for historiography because it leads Foucault to make a historiographical charge: speaking globally about the past is impossible. The historian’s task is to patiently follow back the mutations of a particular strand of relationships within the field of power. This was Foucault’s notion of genealogy, which he borrowed from Nietzsche (Zur Genealogie der Moral, 1887). Larger characterizations – e.g. periodizations, zeitgeists – were outside of the scope of historical analysis. This contradicted even Foucault’s own earlier projects in the form of archeology. The book that made him famous – Les Mots et les Choses (1966) – was such an attempt at periodization. Historical writing, he later charged, however, had to be detailed, archival and, most importantly, always take the present as its starting point.

More important for our purposes, though, is that Foucault’s notions of the un-masterability of power made his ideas on history (un)speculative philosophy of history par

excellence. In part, this was because his speculation on what drove human change over time was not all that speculative – that humans enter into relationships with one another and that those relationships involve effecting one another was tantamount to asserting that the movement of the individual in the world was different than it might be if there was only one individual. That is to say that Foucault simply asserted that we are not fully self-determinatory. This hardly amounts to a speculation – such has been the assertion of every speculative philosophy of history. Thus, it was the lack of speculation – the emphasis on the local relationship and its mobility – that made Foucault interesting. These can still be difficult concept for us to digest. The meaning structures – the need to have a thesis and significance – of historical scholarship almost demands a signification of the meta. That we would dispense with meaning structures in historical analysis meant a complete reformulation of our historical imaginations and possibilities, both for the historian and the public at-large. As mentioned earlier, this was in some ways the ultimate historical philosophy; it was utterly non-philosophical and completely historical, or concerned with the past itself. The question, however, is whether or not historians were really ready to engage the promise of the pragmatism to which we were supposedly so committed.

However, this was and was not the point for Foucault. For one, as much of the pragmatist lineage from Dewey to Rorty would argue, pragmatism does not mean the loss of ethical discourses or normative socio-political formations. Thus, “pragmatism,” as such, was not the issue. The issue was, though, historical liberation; liberation through a reformulation of ethics and the opening of social structure. This might be news to some about Foucault, but it is a well-recognized point by now. That is simply to say that two elements intrigued Foucault about power. One was its localism and unpredictability. The other was its productivity. This was not only in the sense of producing history, but also in the sense of the progressive possibilities raised by recognizing power and – as much as possible – consciously and strategically maneuvering in its field. The false promises of history, argued Foucault, were the promises of the meta, of transcendence and of a utopian point of historical arrival. These were, at best, nothing more than incidental concepts emerging from power structures of discourse that bore no resemblance to reality. At worst, they were excuses for long and brutal histories of intellectual, political, social and cultural nihilism. Power relationships, however, were not unidirectional. We could resist nihilistic invocations of power and develop an ethics in which power was tempered. By understanding power’s dynamics, argued Foucault, we
might create a situation in which power games “were played to a minimum of domination.”¹⁶ This was the point of the last two volumes of his History of Sexuality (1980-84). We might choose, as he put it in an interview from that period, to find “a new tone, a new way of looking, a new way of doing.” People who did so, he argued, “will never feel the need to lament that the world is in error [and] that history is filled with people of no consequence.”¹⁷

In essence, such statements amount to the fact that, taken as whole, Foucault’s thought takes a strange turn – a bit of the utopic seeps into the field of a thinker who supposedly oriented himself against such things. That is to say that Foucault exposes himself as a bit of a dreamer. He argues that the world might become a better place through adopting a new mode of social (heavily imbued with linguistic and political) consciousness. This is not unusual for postmodern discourse. In 1967, for example, Derrida wrote that signs of this new mode of consciousness were “finding liberation all over the world” (although it was more linguistic than social consciousness that he had in mind).¹⁸ Although Derrida long remained apolitical as to the meaning of this point, he eventually revealed it – and in more concrete terms than did Foucault. This came in The Politics of Friendship (1994). What we opened ourselves to under this new mode of consciousness, he asserted, was “the ‘come’ of a certain democracy.”¹⁹ The importance of this statement, one that reflects currently popular notions of democracy held by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, is that it indicates that democracy demands resistance, and not simply in the form of a “loyal opposition.” It demands and can include radical resistance. Therein, democracy can never be a fixed state. As Mouffe phrased it, the value of imagining democracy in this manner is that it “refuses the objective of unanimity and homogeneity which is always revealed as fictitious and based on acts of exclusion.”²⁰ This was democracy in the sense of truly hearing from the demos, and allowing them to act. By this measure, concepts of society that do not allow for multi-directional exercises of power and see power at its very heart are not democratic. Reconceptions of democracy in the postmodern vein, as Derrida phrased it, “mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, of the very ‘spirit’ of promise.”²¹

The point is, then, that Foucault especially, but also other important postmodern figures, support the Havel-esque notion of the postmodern age as a semi-utopic point of arrival. What is more – although it opens up a whole other can of worms – they also saw the possibility of these ideas as having become historical realities. Precisely when is difficult to say; Foucault’s hints along these lines are only hints. His famous “man disappearing like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” comment at the end of *The Order of Things* is probably the most well known. The postmodern age – the end of “unified man” – was upon us, he seemed to suggest in 1966. “Diverse man,” if we may call it that, was about to come. Derrida’s 1967 comment about the “liberation” of a new linguistic mode from *Of Grammatology* has the same ring to it, although he did not become more concrete about the issue until after the fall of the Eastern Bloc. Nonetheless, the strange role of the utopic in their theories of history is clear. On the one hand, they argue that history is propelled by difference and power, and that is a highly unphilosophical, neutral point. Moreover, that fact should make us look at history unphilosophically and in the absence of imposed meaning structures. On the other hand, though, difference and power also delivered history, at least to a certain extent. It was not delivered to utopia in the sense of utopia as the fully perfect society. However, it was delivered to the utopic – an improving society that could approximate perfection, as it happens, by declaiming the idea. In this, Havel – as well as a slew of other cultural prognosticators – would have agreed. This was precisely the “atmosphere of tolerant solidarity and unity in diversity based on…genuine pluralism and parallelism” that Havel referred to and that – I think – many of us wanted to believe we had after 1991.\(^\text{22}\) Thus, while it is true that analyses of the September 11 attacks in the United States and the ever-increasing violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are still emerging and that we are too much in the midst of those events to say what they represent historically in any assured manner, if we are even the least bit right in asserting a shift in attitude relating to difference – that we had a sense of increasing comfort and positivity in relation the idea that has been revoked– Foucault’s (as well as Derrida’s and Lyotard’s) theories of history become problematic. From an analytical standpoint, anyway, they betray their purpose. They become something other than “gray, meticulous and patiently documentary.” *They do not provide the space for the historical unfolding of the postmodern age that seems to surround us at the present moment.*

\(^{22}\) Havel, cf. footnote 2.
III.

Who, then, are our alternatives? That is to say that if Foucault, Derrida or Lyotard are unable to explain our current historical state of historical affairs, who can, especially in relation to conceptions of difference and the utopic? It would seem that we are not left with many options. One might say, for example, that we should move to historical pessimism; somebody like Nietzsche or Spengler, for example. Surely, such gloomy views of history would explain the dismaying surfacing of the dystopic in the midst of world historical situations that allowed us a moment with the utopic. However, in the first place, this is a false (although common) reading of Nietzsche. He is, of course, highly critical about the course of human history (or at least Western history) into his own age (the late 19th century). And his mode of criticism is complex; his relationship to ideas of will and power, a bit like Foucault’s, was double-edged. However, even previous to Foucault, he was hardly the only historical critic. To not imagine Marx as a historical critic, for example, is to not imagine Marx. And while we might recognize Marx as a great historical critic, it would be rare to call him a historical pessimist. The same *should* be the case for Nietzsche. Nietzsche, albeit in a much more complicated manner than Marx, maintained a powerful vision of historical liberation. Such is the meaning of his refrains toward “eternity,” the “woman he loves” at the end of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1884-88).23 (Beyond that, if we are thrown into looking a figures like Spengler – the early twentieth century German thinker whose book *Der Untergang des Abenlandes* (1918-22) was enormously popular on the heels of another historical crisis period – we have real problems. Spengler’s pessimism was that Western culture had entered the last phase of its life-cycle; that its “soul,” as he phrased it, was dying out and coming into decline with the rise of mechanization and technology. However, the problem here is that we are not so concerned with the “decline” [*untergang*] of a civilization – especially since the question is not “this civilization” versus “that” in terms of who might “win” or remain on the historical stage – although, while that is not our question presently, it does seem to be one of the bases for our discomfort in relation to the idea of difference. Rather, the problem is more analytical. The question is how can we imagine certain foldings and unfoldings in relation to the idea of difference, or the reorganization of our mentality in relation to the concept in terms levels of

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23 Expressed more prosaicly, this “eternity,” wrote Nietzsche, will “redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it...the will to nothingness, nihilism; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man...this victory over God and nothingness – *must come one day.*” See The Genealogy of Morals, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 96.
comfortability; we are not, in fact, talking about the enormous historical edifices of “civilizations,” but the finer, more multiplicatus points of “culture.”

This question of alternatives thus takes us out of the domain of historical pessimism and puts us into the problem of radicalizing postmodern historical thought or genuinely realizing its possibilities. As I see it, anyway, that means giving an edge to Foucault’s conception of power such that it might not close and power somehow become “less powerful,” as he seemed to suggest that it might in the latter stages of his career. It is in this sense that I would offer the figure of Georges Bataille (1897-1962), a precursor to Foucault (Foucault edited the first volume of Bataille’s *Œuvres Complètes*, 1977-88) who presaged Foucault’s conception of power yet maintained it in a more radical formulation. This was especially as a means for conceptualizing difference. Bataille maintained a vision of history that, like Foucault’s, called for a dynamicization and infinite exponentialization of the field of power; that is, beyond just the frontiers of classes or states and publics. However, the consequences for this dynamicization and exponentialization were more dangerous and unclear for Bataille than they were for Foucault.

The central text in this regard is Bataille’s three-volume work *La partie maudite* (1949-54). Today, the most read volume of the work is the self-titled first volume (the other two volumes, in order, are entitled *Histoire Eroticisme* and *Souverainité*). In their own day, very few people read these books. Previous to their publication, Bataille had been known for his involvement (by way of opposition) with the Surrealists in the 1920s and ‘30s and as the author of the scandalous fiction *Histoire de l’Oeil* (1920); outside of the small but famous Parisian avant-garde in the inter-war years there was yet smaller avant-garde calling attention to what they saw are the dangerous, highly modern and normative standards often invoked by the political and artistic far left. Bataille was part of this smallest of avant-gardes, a point which he expressed through the ultra-realistic and hyper-pornographic *Histoire de l’Oeil* as well as through anti-Surrealist essays in the journal *Documents*. *Documents* had a short life, however, and *Histoire de l’Oeil* was first banned, and then never sold well until after Bataille’s death. So as Surrealism fell out of primacy in the art world – especially in the wake of the Second World War – Bataille moved on to other things; *La partie maudite* was one of them. Indeed, Bataille went to his death-bed thinking that its three books were his most important; time may well bear him out. They are, as one of his long-time friends observed,

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24 This also, to my mind, discounts Huntington’s book.
Bataille’s attempt to write a “universal history.”25 Within them we get a vision of history, a theory of history, that is just coming to light and may well prove central to the first years of the new millennium.

The reason for this projected importance is his concept of souverainité. It is the case that Bataille worked within a small circle of terminology in La parte maudite; in addition to souverainité, excès, transgression and dépense [expenditure] were also key concepts – and we can see by these concepts the post-Surrealist milieu to which Bataille was attached. However, souverainité was the lynch-pin. This was, on one hand, sovereignty as we traditionally understand it – more or less the power of self-governance. However, what this meant was a bit complicated and a bit Nietzschean. It meant, as Bataille phrased it, man’s vision of himself outside the bounds of “utility.”26 This meant outside economies, governmental or bureaucratic systems and social systems – anything that would tie us to logics of necessity or grant us anything other than full, self-contained self-mastery. It was an essentially mystical or theological vision of the self; Bataille himself termed it “atheological.”

It was man in relationship to God but faced with (as Bataille saw it) the fact that there was no god. It was the self as godhead; it was the self as master ruler in a manner that tread far beyond, for example, anything in Rousseau’s or Hobbe’s ideas of sovereignty.

Conjoining souverainité to one of the other terms that were important for Bataille, however, he took this vision of the self to be quite natural. We might take it as highly exceptional, or the property of pseudo-Surrealist fantasies. However, for Bataille, it was a matter, as he put it, of the “economy [of] the circulation of energy on the Earth,” or what he also called “general economy.”27 Moving straight to a pseudo-metaphysical principle “the living organism,” he determined, “ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life.”28 It is therefore, he argued, that systems grow. That much we might agree with – they seem to do so. It was also therefore that we were bound to the excessive (excès, term number two). It was the basis for life in all its forms. And, because man as opposed to other animals was sentient, it became the basis for the operations of human consciousness.

For Bataille, the evidence for this was simply a matter of even the most cursory glances at human history; this is largely what brings him into conjunction with Foucault. It

28 Ibid., 21.
was not just, as Hegel put it, that human history was not a “theater of happiness.” The problem was that human history was drenched in blood, abjection, sacrifice and marginalization and that these, even, were bound to human history on its positive side in its *juissance*, creativity and uniqueness. In the context of art history, this was the point of one of Bataille’s other later works *Eroticisme* (1957) (which was reviewed by Sartre) and of a long historical narrative within *La partie maudite* that space demands do not allow me to fully account here.²⁹ However, what this suggested to Bataille was that human history was more than a system, even though the consistent role of sovereignty and excess made it something of one. It was a set of unpredictable actions based on multiple individual visions of sovereignty and their urging-on by the economics of excess. The systematic play of these concepts was not hermetic – it was a matter of *dépense* (term number three), or the use of excess energy. This was energy that, as Bataille put it, “must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.”³⁰

The manner in which we made these expenditures is what made us historical, or gave us the impetus to change over time. It is this that thus makes Bataille, like Foucault, relevant to speculative philosophies of history – or (un)speculative, if we are attaching them to the postmodern milieu. To invoke the last of Bataille’s central terms, expenditure was a matter of transgression. That is to say that the odd thing about human consciousness under the realization of the roles of sovereignty, excess and expenditure in human history is that it revealed our reliance on heterology. In other words, it revealed how our development of hermetic systems, be they capitalism, communism or any other, relied our imagination of ourselves outside their boundaries. Political and economic behaviors and systems were not truths whose destinies were working themselves out over time. They were locations of retreat from the exigency of expenditure. Expenditure was an exhaustive process – though we might all imagine ourselves as grand kings, warriors or artists, the demands of human life meant pulling back from the frontiers of extreme expression from time to time. We had to construct systems that would generate the capital that we could then expend in order to have the excessive and sovereign experience. This meant the establishment of social power structures and discourses. Sovereignty, after all, included competition. Most of us, held Bataille, did not imagine multiple sovereigns; we alone were to be sovereign. This was the cause of hermetic

²⁹ For an account of this narrative though, see my “The Accursed Share: Georges Bataille as Historical Thinker,” *Critical Horizons* 3, no. 1.
³⁰ Ibid.
social, economic and political systems and ideologies. They were to limit the sovereignty of some while sustaining that of others.

The point for Bataille, though, was the transgressiveness of this situation. While we existed within the borderslines of particular systems in our day-to-day life, we did not in our minds. Indeed, here was the real power of the sovereign imagination: our vision of life outside our prescribed social borderlines, behaviors and norms is precisely what kept us inside of them. Thinking ethnographically and along class lines, Bataille charged that in the modern world, “the privileges of race and class are indefensible, and they are the only ones that find defenders!”31 Politically, he captured a strange tendency in modern Western history – the oft-surprising allegiance of the working classes and socially “low” with bourgeois and landed parties. It took quite some daring and imagination to intervene against dominant discourses, institutions and norms. The exigencies of consciousness generally ensured our obedience.

However, this was by definition also not completely the case. This fact played itself out in two ways. First, in the competition for sovereignty, lines of difference were bound to be drawn – and drawn variously. À la Foucault, they would be drawn along the lines of class, states, ethnicity, gender as well as interpersonally; that is to say, along all possible lines of identity difference. However, at the level of what Bataille referred to as “history properly speaking” – meaning political history – class conflict and conflicts between state and public became very real. We made and broke alliances along shifting lines of common experiences and interests. Therein, history had revolutionary moments – moments of dramatic institutional and ideological change. However, those “in power” also disobeyed; which is essentially to say that they transgressed the very standards that supported their own power not only psychologically but also behaviorally. This was – like the evidence for excés – also a relatively simple matter of history for Bataille; it was the history of war, acts of violence on the part of the rulers toward the ruled and upper class luxury. Transgression brought with it the realities of difference. We might establish discourses that either pretended its non-existence or insisted on its overcoming, or pretended that its incorporation – our gaining consciousness of it – prevented its effects from being fully deleterious and led to our acceptance of multiple assertions of sovereignty. However, those discourses themselves, discourses such as Havel’s “unity in diversity,” would be just that to Bataille – discourses. They were, under the surface, informed and guided by visions of sovereignty themselves.

31 The Accursed Share, vols. 2 & 3, 169.
They were discourses that emerged out of particular places and particular circumstances., which is to say that “unity in diversity” might be a product of a long, Euro-centric, neo-liberal intellectual history. This tied it to the history of the “glorious or catastrophic” displays that made Euro-centrism and neo-liberalism hold good – this was essentially the history of wars and bourgeois excess. Ideas such as “unity in diversity” could only be a façade in that case. If we could contact the deepest parts of our psychology, we would know that was so. The utopic was clearly a part of the human imagination. However, what we imagined was utopia for ourselves, or perhaps those who we considered as similar to ourselves. And history showed us only too well the costs and realities of trying to attain those utopias. We knew, therefore, that dystopia lurked around every corner of our socialized and temporalized existences.

As his dates would indicate, Bataille was a product of the modern. Two world wars and the rise of fascism (which he virulently opposed) took their toll on Bataille’s psyche as it did many others. In fact, though, what worried Bataille most was the emerging Cold War and, at least in the West, the strengthening of liberalistic vocabularies, practices and ideologies. These concerns have large play in the first volume of La parte maudite. The problem was not that fascism had (more or less) died out, but that there would arise a new, uncontestable discursive regime of freedom – that the world was now about choice, the possibilities of the individual, participation and democracy. We could be told that we had sovereignty, that under the victory of liberal democracy and capitalism, we were self-masters. To prove it, we would be bathed in the opulent. Access to material luxuries would increase, technology would allow people to leave the industrial workplace and we would all be given some of the trappings and affectations of the upper class. In the emerging competition with the Soviet Union, Bataille argued, this is what the Marshall Plan was intended to do for Europe – help with recovery such that Europe might have the base for such a socio-economic take-off (we can argue with Bataille, but this was his analysis, anyway). This is certainly a large part of what the Truman and Eisenhower years were about in the United States. Under these conditions, he posited, conformity and materialism would be hard to combat; why would we want to? Thus, we might say that we were establishing the conditions for individual liberation, but it was not hard to see that this was not so. Most of us, posited Bataille, were simply succumbing to discourses and powers – a regime, really – larger than ourselves.

The most dangerous part of the establishment of this regime, however, is that it provided the means and justifications to work quickly and effectively against claims that “I/we are different” and “I/we do not agree.” For one, in such regimes, such assertions, if they were to be heard, needed to be made dramatically. An intifada or terrorist bombing would, in
fact, fit the bill nicely – something that exposed the alterior excess that we know is present in world systems but we refuse to admit. Responses, though, would be swift and complex. They would come in the defense of free expression and political pluralism, accompanied by the might of the world’s most powerful late industrial economies. Resistance to such responses could only take the form of a long, tactical struggle. It is a good question whether this makes Bataille modern or postmodern. However, his vision clearly becomes transferable to postmodern times, as well as picks up on the promise of postmodern historical thought. That promise, at least in part, was demonstrating the two-way functioning of power – recognizing that it works on us and that we may work against it (that is to say, we may exercise it ourselves). Bataille recognized the exigencies of this claim. He tells us that we can and should recognize the constructed nature of any variety of claim to “unity in diversity” and the assertion of the utopic out of its renunciation. To do otherwise, he argues, is to deny diversity in its immanence and to deny the difference of differences that accompany us in our imaginations of souverainité.

I might conclude, then, with the following remarks. Analytically, it seems to me, Bataille is right – at least at the level of what we can and cannot afford. We cannot deny the differentiating nature of difference because it is real and its effects – as they are now – can be violent and dangerous. We remain blind to these dangers if we claim to overcome difference, even through its embrace. What is worse, we are able to pretend that violence prosecuted as a result of difference does not exist as we are able to fit it into the space of a grand narrative of universality. This then faces us with a political question – how can we, or even should we, stem the tide of dystopic turns in relation to difference? Here I think that Bataille provides some interesting possibilities as well. We must remember that he suggested the excesses of political economy that drive conflict to be a matter of “glorious or catastrophic” expenditure. The relationship he proposes between the two – glory and catastrophe – is unclear, although he seems to suggest that the line between them is thin, yet present. In the globalized world, there is no reason not to extend and struggle on behalf of our own sovereign vision – that the excesses of the powers that organize the world be spent gloriously rather than catastrophically and, equally importantly, we stop confusing the two categories. After all, at least if Bataille is right, it is out of this confusion that the realities of catastrophe become discourses of glory, and that we then become blind to those who lay in catastrophe’s path.