Bataille’s Peak
Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability

ALLAN STOEKL
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Allan Stoekl

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And—speaking of generosity—how do I acknowledge that of Nan Moschella?

Just as I started writing, my mother, Mary Ann Steinfort Stoekl, passed away. This one’s for you, Ma. I know you’ll find a place to stash it.
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At the end of the twentieth century, we were regaled with arguments concerning history: it had ended, we were told. The Franco-Russian philosopher Alexandre Kojève had been right when he argued in the 1930s and 1940s that at a certain point nothing new could happen. Human liberation, inseparable from human labor and the progress of philosophy, had ended; a state in which freedom was attained through the recognition of the freedom of the other was definitive. From now on a State that implemented that freedom was all that could be postulated; all else would constitute a fall backward into a historical movement that had, for all intents and purposes, ended. Of course things would still “happen”—tsunamis, earthquakes, famines—but the essential narrative was over. “Man’s” labor was complete—labor in the larger sense, in the sense of the construction of the meaning of the human and the concomitant end of the human (as a process of development). The accession to the end might be piece-meal—not all societies would arrive at it simultaneously—but once arrived at, it would be definitive.1

 Barely a few years into the new century, many have concluded that that “posthistorical” ideal is radically insufficient. Kojève’s model was structured in such a way that major historical events and changes would always seem minor—Kojève himself dismissed the importance of World War II, arguing that it was little more than a preparation for the final stage of a grand synthesis of American capitalism and Soviet collectivism (the ultimate state-sponsored consumer society, in other words). But something else—a new event, if we can call it that—has appeared that puts into question the very possibility of ending history and above all ending it because the “labor of the negative” has been completed. The very centrality of human labor is one of the things most in question.
In short, energy has been rediscovered. In the 1970s and very early 1980s, first world society was made acutely aware of energy, its limited supplies, and the consequences of energy shortages. A U.S. president (Jimmy Carter) even based his central policies on the idea that energy sources (fossil fuels) were scarce and could only grow scarcer in the coming years. He wore a cardigan (this is all that seems to be remembered about him) and, from the Oval Office, warned Americans that they would have to tighten their belts, turn down the thermostat, find alternative energy sources, get ready for dire, gray days, and gird for the “moral equivalent of war.” He was, of course, brusquely turned out of office and replaced by a president (Ronald Reagan) who cheerfully answered that the “free market” would take care of energy supplies forever. Luckily for him, the quantities of fossil fuels available shot up in the mid to late 1980s and throughout the 1990s because of conservation measures set up under Carter and because a few new sources of oil (from the North Slope of Alaska and from underwater fields in the North Sea) became available. By the late 1990s, oil was down to $10 a barrel.

As I write this, in 2006, even mainstream news sources have become aware that fuel supplies are fundamentally limited. Competition from China, India, and other developing nations, and the decline of American wells, has led to a situation in which there is virtually no excess oil production capacity anywhere in the world. As Gerald F. Seib puts it in the Wall Street Journal:

> From Iraq to China, from the Gaza Strip to Iran, the biggest foreign-policy problems of the summer [of 2005] all are setting off the same alarm: It is imperative for the US to become more energy independent.

> But that, of course, is precisely what Washington’s policymakers have been unable, or unwilling, to accomplish. Instead, America’s exposure to trouble in the world’s volatile oil-producing regions actually is on the rise, even as the summer driving season heads toward its climax with oil near a once-unthinkable $65 a barrel. In brief, while the 20th century was the century of oil, the 21st already is unfolding as the century of whatever follows oil—or the century of fighting over what’s left of oil—or both.2

The labor of the construction of civilization is not over, in other words, history is not at an end, because labor itself is not autonomous: you can’t work or produce anything if you don’t have the fuels (the sources of energy) to do it. The great myth that Man “forms himself” by forming, and trans-
forming, brute matter is over. The idea that Nature is dead is over because fossil fuels were not made by Man, they were only extracted by “him.” They are brutally natural, and their shortage too is a natural shortage (their lack is natural). And when a profound, irremediable shortage of those fuels supervenes, history opens back up. History will not, as some critics of the “end of history” thesis claimed, return merely as localized struggles and revolts that put the superpowers on the spot. Instead, History now is the fight for a resource that will allow History as we have come to think of it—the flourishing of civilization and the establishment of the definitive dignity of Man—to continue and triumph. No one yet wants to think about how History should continue in the absence of an adequate supply of fossil fuels. It is too horrible to think about. Human die-off is quite natural, but it also constitutes an incontrovertible historical event. With the finitude of cheap energy, alas, the end of history is itself finite. But how do we think the end of the end of history?

Now along with a permanent energy crisis, or rather a permanent shortage of cheap fuel supplies, we face another crisis: a permanent religion crisis. It seems as if energy and religion are inseparable issues. On the simplest level (and this was already apparent in the 1990s), the decline of the secular dream of the end of history explained rationally and scientifically—e.g., the decline of Marxism and capitalism—resulted in a turn, in many parts of the world, to other models of strategy and solidarity. If the ultimate secular, rational models of community building and future understanding failed, they could only be replaced with more traditional and less rational models: Christianity, Islam, and other religious creeds. At first it seemed that these particular modes of belief stood little chance of challenging the mainstream new world order, the order of the termination of history in secular citizenship and the universal ideal of proletarian solidarity or contented, suburban moneymaking.

The first crack in the ideal of posthistorical reason was to be found in the decline of Marxism. Marxism too posited an end of history, one that was definitive, secular, rational, grounded in the physical and moral contentment of Man. But Marxism was the canary in the coal mine, so to speak, because its decline was due to an energy crisis, the first to shock the world since the crises of the late 1970s. Marxism collapsed because its great, worldwide patron, the Soviet Union, collapsed, and the Soviet Union collapsed because it could no longer support itself by selling its oil profitably on the world markets. It was driven into the ground by Saudi Arabia, which in the
late 1980s produced so much oil that the world markets became flooded. And at that very moment, the Soviets discovered that their oil production had peaked and was entering into decline. The Soviets quickly went out of business, as did their ideology. (The Saudis knew what they were doing.)

The great irony is that religion came to the fore in the very countries whose vast production of fossil fuels had made the Soviet system untenable. The Islamic countries of the Middle East were the producers of the fuels that the West needed to continue its individualist lifestyle. But they got little for what they sold—just diminishing fuel reserves, falling oil prices (since they were forced to compete with each other), and increasingly impoverished populations. The humanism of the posthistorical era, be it American or Soviet, was over, replaced by a theological realm that recognized no difference between religious strictures and the laws of human comportment. In this view, neither human labor nor fossil fuel ultimately made possible the world’s survival; instead, God was the ultimate referent, man and energy alike sinking into insignificance before him. Energy for religion was nothing more than a resource to be sold to enable not so much a higher standard of living (the posthistorical imperative) but a more perfect level of worship.

Thus the standoff of the early years of the twenty-first century. Secular humanist countries, practicing a rigorous separation of church and state, crave oil because their lifestyle depends on it: they engage in a lavish expenditure inseparable from the wanton waste of the easily refined energy available, in concentrated form, in fossil fuels. Many of the regions that provide these fuels have turned to a religion that is, in principle at least, indifferent to the fossil fuel lifestyle and to the cult of the human. Many in the high-consumption world have turned to fundamentalist religion as well, perhaps in reaction to the embrace of fundamentalism in the fuel-exporting world.

Fuel production, fuel consumption, conflict over fuel; energy shortage, religion surplus in reaction to it; resource wars, religious wars, history after the supposed end of history. As fuel reveals its finitude, we come to recognize our dependence on it and our dependence on others who affirm a religious culture that survived and flourished in the profound absence of fossil fuel.  

There is, however, a deeper connection between energy and religion. Energy is not just a commodity to be measured, stockpiled, sold, consumed, wasted. And religion is not just a method of resisting a relentless movement of
production-consumption, nor is it merely a means of providing a stable alternative (God) that can ground society in the absence of (or against) the delusive subjectivity of the “age of the world picture.” Energy may in fact be a profoundly religious issue—energy in its vastness, its violence, its defiance, its elusiveness, its expenditure. And religion may be an event not of the establishment of God, or of his patronage of humankind, but of his death, his void at the peak of values and purposes. God’s death, in effect, may very well be inseparable from the movement of the violent expenditure of energy, all types of energy.

The French writer Georges Bataille (1897–1962) put forward a social model that sees religion and human existence as inextricable, and the religious experience—sacrifice—as entailing the profligate wastage of energy. But therein lie the central questions: Which religion? And which energy?

This book is about Bataille’s take on these issues and my version of what Bataille’s take would be if it were extrapolated to the twenty-first century. Bataille died a long time ago, ages ago it seems, but one can perhaps rewrite him, all the while recognizing certain limitations of his approach, in an attempt to understand the possibilities of the future in a post–fossil fuel era. That’s what I try to do in this book. Bataille is hardly the last word on anything, but he is rare—in fact, unique—among twentieth-century thinkers in that he put energy at the forefront of his thinking of society: we are energy, our very being consists of the expenditure of quantities of energy. In this Bataille anticipates scientists like Howard Odum, who in a very precise way calculate the amounts of energy that go into a given product, a given lifestyle, and so on (and calculate as well how we can work to make the processes of production and consumption more efficient, given the scarcity of recoverable fuels). But Bataille is about more than simply quantifying energy; indeed, his approach both sees energy at the basis of all human activity, of the human, and puts into question the dominion of quantifiable, usable energy. That is precisely where religion comes in, since God, or religious “experience,” entails not purposive activity—the kind that would involve energy supplies quantified and then used with a goal in mind—but rather activity of the instant that leads nowhere, has no use, and is unconditioned by the demands of anyone or anything else: sovereign, in Bataille’s sense. Such sovereign activity involves an energy resistant to easy use—the unleashing of an energy that is characterized (if
that is the word) by its insubordination to human purposes, its defiance of the very human tendency to refine its use.

My consideration of Bataille, then, will necessarily involve a critique of the notions of energy and religion that characterize our epoch—an epoch in for some interesting times as cheaply available energy from fossil fuels grows scarcer and scarcer. It will attempt to imagine how other notions of energy and religion will provide an alternative means of living in an era in which the truth of fossil fuel, and revealed religion, comes into question. Another model of spending, based on what Bataille called an “economy on the scale of the universe,” seems appropriate at a time when a certain human profligacy has revealed itself to be an ecological and cultural dead end. Bataille’s importance, however, stems from the fact that he puts forward a model of society that does not renounce profligate spending, but affirms it. What is affirmed, however, is a different spending—a different energy, a different religion—and that difference perhaps means the difference between the simple meltdown of a civilization and its possible continuation, but on a very different “scale.”

On the other hand, an ever more counterproductive orientation will assert itself in the years ahead. Such an orientation sees energy as an adjunct of, at best, a certain humanism: we spend to establish and maintain our independent, purpose-driven selves, our freedom as consumers, spenders of certain (rather lavish, given available reserves) quantities of refined energy. This model is doubly humanistic in that not only is the beneficiary the “free” self of Man; the human spirit itself is incessantly invoked to get us out of the jam. We are told over and over again that the human mind alone produces energy: when reserves are short, there is always a genius who comes along and devises some technology that turns things around, makes even more energy available, and so on. Technology transcends energy, in other words, and reflects the human mind’s infinite ability to derive energy from virtually nothing. We always find more efficient ways to derive energy from available fuels, and in doing so, we always are able to produce more fuel to produce more and higher quality energy. James Watt’s steam engine was first used to drain coal mines, producing more coal, which in turn could be used by more (and more efficient) steam engines to produce transportation (steam trains), electricity, and so on. And petroleum, an even more productive and efficient source of energy, replaced coal, and it will no doubt soon be replaced by something else, yet to be discovered. At
this point we move from a historical account to a kind of uncritical faith in the capacity of human genius.

Fossil fuels, then, entail a double humanism: they are burned to serve, to magnify, to glorify the human or (what amounts to the same thing) the human in the automobile (“freedom,” “happiness,” etc.) as transcendental referent, and they are produced solely through the free exercise of the mind and will.

One can argue that the religion that confronts the fossil fuel–driven civilization of Man is equally grounded in the demands of a human subjectivity. People demand salvation, an ultimate purpose for which they are consuming so much fuel: I spend, or waste, so that I will ultimately be saved. Conversely, energy inputs are available because God has blessed me with them; the faithful are rewarded with a healthy, fertile, and energy-rich environment. God is the ultimate meaning of all that I think and do. There is no distinction between my personal belief and belief sanctioned by society, derived from a literal reading of a holy Book. In order to give this version of religious belief even more authority, law is grounded not in man but in God himself; literalism serves as a satisfying alternative to humanism.

Against this energetico-theological model is arrayed an ecoreligion, one that would defy the “comfortable” or “free” (and nonnegotiable) lifestyle of consumerist humanism, not through a recognition of the literal truth of the divine Word but through a religiously inspired cult of austerity, simplicity, and personal virtue. Such a cult refuses certain basic human urges to consume or destroy, and in the process involves the affirmation of yet another humanism (the self as virtuous in its austerity) and, after consumer profligacy, yet another model of nature as a standing reserve to be protected largely for its value to Man.7

Fossil fuel civilization, then, and its antitheses, or antidotes. Man and/or God as ultimate referent: a couple we can expect to hear more from in the coming years. Bataille poses a very different model of the interrelation of energy and religion. This is not to say, however, that the spending Bataille examines somehow replaces or is more fundamental, more originary, than the consumerist or religious models it confronts. Instead we might say that Bataille’s vision is the underside, the ungraspable double that has been there from the first effort of the human, that it asserts itself precisely at the moment in which the finitude of the human manifests itself through
the recognition of the limits of fossil fuel energy itself. Bataille’s energy and religion are not an alternative; they promise nothing for the future, certainly no salvation, although their aftereffect may entail a future more livable—by whom?—than that promised under the signs of God or Man.

Bataille’s energy is inseparable from that which powers cars and raises elevators, but it is different as well. It is excess energy, and in that sense it is left over when a job is done, when the limits of growth are reached, or, in the current situation, when fossil fuels themselves reveal their profound limitations. Bataille’s energy is a transgression of the limit; it is what is left over in excess of what can be used within a fundamentally limited human field. As such, it is quite different from what can be used: it is not just left over in the sense of not being consumed; it is fundamentally unusable. At the point at which quantification reveals its finitude, energy asserts itself as the movement that cannot be stockpiled or quantified. It is the energy that by definition does not do work, that is insubordinate, that plays now rather than contributing to some effort that may mean something at some later date and that is devoted to some transcendent goal or principle. It is, as Bataille reminds us a number of times, the energy of the universe, the energy of stars and “celestial bodies” that do no work, whose fire contributes to nothing. On earth, it is the energy that traverses our bodies, that moves them in useless and time-consuming ways, that leads to nothing beyond death or pointless erotic expenditure, that defies quantification in measure: elapsed moments, dollars per hour, indulgences saved up for quicker entry into heaven. Energy is expended in social ritual that is pointless, that is tied not to the adhesion of a group or the security of the individual but to the loss of group and individual identity—sacrifice.

Bataille’s religion is thus inseparable from Bataille’s energy. Sacrifice is the movement of the opening out, the “communication,” of self and community with death: the void of the universe, the dead God. These are not entities that can be known or studied, but sovereign moments, moments of unconditional expenditure. This entails the expenditure of certainties, of any attempt to establish a transcendent, unconditioned meaning that grounds all human activity, a referent such as Man or God. Precisely because it really is unconditioned, this meaning—God, if you will—is sovereign, dependent on nothing, and certainly not on Man and his petty desire or demands. Religion, in the orgiastic movement of the body, is the loss of transcendent meaning, the death of God as virulent force, the traversing of the body by
an energy that overflows the limits it recognizes but does not affirm. If there is community, it is the unplanned aftereffect and not the essential meaning of this energy, of this movement of the death or void of God.

Thus ethics for Bataille, the community, and its meaning and survival are aftereffects of the expenditure of the sacred. Bataille's theory is profoundly ethical but only in the sense that the instant of preservation, of meaning, of conservation, of knowledge, is the unforeseen offshoot of another movement, that of the drive to spend without counting, without attempting to anticipate return. To deny the ethical moment, the moment in which conservation and meaning are established only the better to affirm the destruction of expenditure, is to relegate that destruction to the simple, homogeneous movement of the animal, unaware of limit, meaning, and purposive act. Expenditure, in other words, is not the denial of the human, its repression, but instead its affirmation to the point at which it falls: the sacrificial act, the recognition of an energy that does not do "work" for the maintenance of the human, is the affirmation of a God who is not the slave of the human. It is the impossible moment in which awareness doubles the unknowable loss of energy and the virulence of a God who disbelieves in himself.

The ethics of Bataille, then, entail a vision of the future in which the "left-hand sacred," the sacred of impurity, of eroticism, of the radically unconditioned God, spins off a community in and through which expenditure can be furthered (a community of those with nothing in common). Not nuclear war, but the channeling of excess in ways that ensure survival so that more excess can be thrown off. And (one can continue along these lines) not generalized ecocide, but an affirmation of another energy, another religion, another waste, entailing not so much a steady state sustainability (with what stable referent? Man?) but instead a postsustainable state in which we labor in order to expend, not conserve. Hence the energy, and wealth, of the body—the energy of libidinous and divine recycling, not the stockpiled, exploited, and dissipated energy of easily measured and used fossil fuels.

This book has two goals: in the first part, to sketch out Bataille's positions on energy expenditure, religion of and against the Book, and the city; in the second, to extrapolate from those positions and consider current questions of energy use and depletion, religious literalism and fervor, and urban "life." Urban space is a crucial problem for Bataille in that for him
the city is the privileged locus of the physical and geographical elaboration of the sacred: either the right-hand sacred of concentration, hierarchy, and God as repressive force or the left-hand sacred of dispersal, the fall of meaning and sense, and God as figure of the sovereign expenditure of authority. The city is, finally, the locus of concentration in and as the modern, and any consideration of a transition from an energy-religion complex of Man to one of the death of Man entails a reconsideration of the city as spatial and economic structure: a reconsideration that proposes not just energy efficiency and sustainability, but those elements as aftereffects of a more profound burn-off.

The first four chapters of the book are therefore concerned first with the intellectual antecedents of Bataille—Giordano Bruno and the Marquis de Sade—in whose writings a profound connection between untamed matter-energy and religion as the dispersal or death of God is already evident (and who are rewritten in significant ways by Bataille); then, successively, with Bataille’s theories of energy, religion, and the city. In these chapters I am concerned with the ways in which Bataille specifically established his theory against certain positions that had undeniable force: in the case of energy, against a version of scarcity that implied only conservation and utility (the Protestant ethic, communism); in the case of religion, against immutable doctrines of the Book (the Bible, Kojève, Sade); in the case of the city, against the image of the city as method of human concentration and hierarchy through religious-secular monuments and mechanized transport.

The second part of the book, my rewriting of Bataille in light of the current energy-religion articulation, follows the same order: energy (chapter 5), religion (chapter 6), the city (chapter 7). Here, however, I want to consider how Bataille’s theory helps us understand energy and reconvive it (this entails a reading of Heidegger on technology as well); how his critique of religion lends itself to a reconsideration not so much of traditional religion, which Bataille himself has already carried out, but of contemporary humanist and/or fundamentalist ecotheology (doctrines that bear an eerie resemblance to the secular cults of the Book demonstrated by Sade and Kojève); and finally how Bataille enables us to think about the death of God in the post–fossil fuel city, the city that will likely be left over after the dreams of inanimate resource-rich wastage in perpetuity have revealed, quite palpably, their limitations. In each case, I attempt to elaborate a Bataillean ethics based on certain simple premises: that fossil fuel energy
is entering the early stages of depletion and that it is time to think the consequences of another type of energy and another kind of relation to recycling and to matter in general; that humanist ecoreligion or theocratic ecofundamentalism is not the inevitable result of the decline of a fossil fuel economy and the return of a solar or (more generally) renewable energy economy; that, in other words, a critique of modern, humanist, or anti-humanist religion leads not to the triumph of Man but to his death in glory or agony (hence to another religion, one on the “scale of the universe”); and finally that the city is the privileged space of this social transformation but in the future the city must be conceived as a topography of spectacular energy expenditure in the largest, Bataillean sense of the term, rather than as a mere locus of energy use and conservation.

I am above all concerned with strategies that will allow us to elaborate Bataille’s ethics. As I have noted, these ethics entail a certain blindness: the left hand does not always know what the right is doing, or in a Nietzschean formulation, one loves a profound ignorance concerning the future. The future, I argue, is fundamentally resistant to planning; blind expenditure entails not an obsessive and centralized prognostication, authored by a head that is always the supreme metonym and referent of social intelligence, but rather the playing out of aftereffects in which social practices may very well “save the earth” in spite of themselves (save it not for conservation but for lavish consumption). An economy on the scale of the universe implies an earth on the scale of the universe. Recycling, for example (as I try to show in chapter 5, in my presentation of Agnès Varda’s film *The Gleaners and I*), is not merely a question of a new, slightly more benign form of maintaining a standing reserve; on the contrary, it is the orgiastic movement of the parody of meaning, of the expenditure of the energy of meanings and of physical and social bodies, an ethics (and aesthetics) of filth, of orgiastic recycling. Similarly, a religion on the scale of the universe means one that rejects the inevitable: if renewable energy in the past has always spawned some version of feudalism and fundamentalism, our profound ignorance of the future precludes this simple and self-defeating certainty. A critique of humanism or fundamentalism means the refusal to see God or Man as the ultimate signified before which all (energy) slaves bow. The expenditure of Kojève’s Hegel, after all, means the loss of all certainty, all dialectical and labor-oriented modes of the establishment of (terminal) meaning, history, and value. The future for that reason is not necessarily a reverse replay of