

THE METAPHYSICS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY: SCARCITY, EXCESS AND SIMULATION

Dr. MEHDI MORCHID

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.6529>

ABSTRACT

This article explores a decisive shift in the metaphysics of political economy, from Adam Smith's grounding of economic life in scarcity, accumulation and productive labour, to Georges Bataille's reorientation around excess, expenditure and the sacred, to finally Jean Baudrillard's critique of consumer society as a regime of simulated expenditure. Smith's metaphysics of scarcity presupposes that individuals are not self-sufficient. They are compelled to labour productively and are bound together through exchange. Bataille, by contrast, locates the ontological ground of existence in excess, symbolised by the sun's superabundant energy. He insists that societies must expend this surplus through ritual, sacrifice and spectacle. Baudrillard builds on Bataille's insights, showing how late capitalism represses sacred expenditure, commodifies eroticism and death and traps excess in endless cycles of sign-value. By juxtaposing these metaphysical orientations, the article illuminates divergent understandings of value, morality and social order.

Keywords: Metaphysics of Economy, Adam Smith, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, The Wealth of Nations, The Accursed Share, The Consumer Society, Political Economy, Social Order, Scarcity, Excess.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of political economy is often reduced to technical questions of production, distribution and exchange. Yet, underlying these categories are metaphysical commitments about the human nature, value and society. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776/1904) and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759/2002) rest on a metaphysics of scarcity where individuals are insufficient on their own. They are compelled to labour and are driven into exchange. Georges Bataille, in *The Accursed Share* (1991/1949), proposes a radical reversal stating that the fundamental condition of life is not scarcity, but excess. Jean Baudrillard extends this Bataillean paradigm to critique consumer capitalism as a system of simulated expenditure without transcendence (1970/1998; 1976/1993). This article traces the transition from scarcity to excess, highlighting the stakes of reading political economy metaphysically. It shows that Smith, Bataille and Baudrillard represent distinct ontologies of value and divergent visions of social order.

Bataille's Metaphysics of Excess

Bataille begins with a cosmological premise. He observes that the sun emits far more energy than life requires. This surplus posits excess as the ontological ground of existence. Life absorbs this abundance, and as accumulation is finite, excess must be ultimately expended

(Bataille, 1991/1949). Bataille distinguishes between two economies: the “restricted economy” of utility, scarcity and production and the “general economy” of excess, sacrifice and waste (Bataille, 1991/1949, p. 41). While the restricted economy organises the profane sphere of survival, the general economy sustains the sacred foundation of life. Within this understanding, expenditure in the form of ritual, sacrifice, eroticism or festival is not accidental but necessary.

Failure to expend excess, Bataille warns, leads to catastrophic release through war, plunder and genocide. Sacred expenditure, by contrast, channels excess in ways that prevent destructive eruptions.

From Scarcity to Excess

Smith’s metaphysics rests on scarcity. Since individuals cannot survive alone, they must exchange, specialise and labour productively. Value lies in accumulation. Commodities embody labour, and money symbolises exchange. Progress is defined by efficiency, growth, and reinvestment.

Bataille reverses this schema. Scarcity is secondary, not primary. The true problem is not how to preserve life, but how to expend the superabundance of energy. Value lies not in accumulation but in loss. Sacrifice, destruction and waste become essential outlets of excess. Where Smith moralises productive labour, Bataille moralises extravagant expenditure.

This reversal has profound implications. Smith’s invisible hand (Smith, 1776/1904, p. 593) converts egoism into social order while Bataille’s general economy insists that social flourishing depends on sacred expenditure beyond utility. For Smith, violence is a disruption of the economic system. For Bataille, violence erupts precisely when excess is repressed.

Bataille and Marxism

The opposition of scarcity and excess is at the heart of the hypothetical debate between Marx and Bataille. For Marx, labour is rooted in the necessity of overcoming scarcity, while also constituting the defining expression of humans’ species-being. (Marx, 1964/1844). Labour manifests human creativity, overcomes alienation and fulfils communal needs. Bataille, by contrast, situates labour within restricted economy, where labour functions merely as a means of generating surplus. Labour, for him, is not an end in itself, but only a preparation for the unproductive expenditure that ultimately affirms existence.

In Marxist thought, scarcity structures economic relations. It is the basis from which emerge alienation, class antagonism and ultimately historical dialectic. Bataille, by contrast, begins from excess. Hence, while Marx posits labour as the ground of social life, Bataille situates expenditure and waste at the foundation of existence. Marx emphasises that surplus is an instrument of exploitation as it is unjustly appropriated by capitalists. For Bataille, surplus is not merely economic but cosmic. It cannot be contained within productive accumulation. All societies must dispose of excess energy through festival, art, sacrifice, luxury or war. For Marx, surplus-value must be redistributed justly. For Bataille, surplus energy must be consumed lavishly and unproductively.

Marx underscores the intrinsic connection between labour and its products, a relation that lies at the core of his theory of alienation. Alienation, in Marx's conception, arises from the capitalist mode of production, which estranges workers from the objects they create. For Marx, the worker ought to sustain an uninterrupted relation to both the act of labour and its product as this continuity embodies labour as a mode of self-expression and species-being. Capitalism, however, disrupts this relation. The product of labour is appropriated by capital, and the worker is compensated not through a share of the value generated, but through wages that obscure and intensify the separation between labourers and the fruits of their activity. Bataille radically reverses this framework. While Marx focuses on the use-value of the product of labour, Bataille insists that the highest expressions of human existence emerge precisely outside productive labour. For him, value is not realised in the utility of labour, but in forms of expenditure without return through such outlets as eroticism, sacrifice, art and risk. To reduce existence to productive activity is, in Bataille's view, to efface its sacred dimension.

Diametrically different political visions of order ensue from Marx and Bataille's conceptualisations of scarcity and excess. Marx envisions communism as the abolition of alienated labour and private property, leading to a rational, equitable order of production and distribution. Conversely, Bataille's vision resists rationalisation. A society must affirm expenditure, risk and transgression. His politics designates the sacred and the irrational as the foundations of communal flourishing.

While both Marx and Bataille critique capitalism, their emphases diverge sharply. Marx exposes capitalism's injustice in its management of scarcity, whereas Bataille laments capitalism's repression of sacred expenditure

Bataille and Libertarianism

Both Bataille's philosophy and libertarianism address how societies manage resources, wealth and value, and they do so in completely different ways. Libertarians embrace a utilitarian and market-oriented view of value. Free exchange coordinates self-interest into collective prosperity echoing Smith's invisible hand (Nozick, 1974). Bataille situates the market within the restricted economy where activity is governed by utility and accumulation. By contrast, true economy, in his account, is defined by expenditure. From a Bataillean perspective, libertarian commitments to accumulation, profit-seeking and entrepreneurship overlook the sacred dimension of waste, sacrifice and ritual. In libertarian thought, work and production are valorised as intrinsically virtuous and as engines of civilisational progress. For Bataille, however, these are merely preparatory stages whose ultimate meaning lies in their dissolution through extravagant expenditure. The fundamental point of contention between libertarianism and Bataille's philosophy thus emerges in their opposed conceptualisations of accumulation and expenditure. The former upholds accumulation as an end while the latter insists that accumulation belongs to a restricted economy that must ultimately be undone in destructive release.

The most salient difference between Bataille's views and libertarian thought concerns how they account for social order. Libertarianism envisions order emerging spontaneously from free contracts and minimal state interference. Its ethos is one of utility and stability. Bataille's vision is anchored in completely different metaphysical grounds. Social order hinges on sacred expenditure of surplus energy through such outlets as ritual, sacrifice, eroticism and spectacle.

Any obstruction of these channels under pretences of efficiency or utility is bound to result in violent eruptions that take catastrophic forms, endangering social order.

Baudrillard and the Legacy of Bataille

Jean Baudrillard explicitly aligns himself with Georges Bataille, citing him by name and elaborating on his ideas to expose the profound damage wrought by consumer culture under late capitalism. Several points of convergence exist between their philosophies. Some are immediately apparent while others require closer analytical unpacking. Notably, both philosophers privilege the logic of excess over the paradigm of scarcity. Baudrillard's ideas, especially in *The Consumer Society* (1970/1998), echo Bataille's rejection of scarcity as the foundational principle of economy. Baudrillard argues that in late capitalism consumption does not respond to material needs. Instead, it proliferates endlessly through the circulation of signs as markers of status and distinction. Needs are amplified and used to culture infinite desires, leading to a voracious consumption of differential substitutes. In this sense, Baudrillard goes on to shift the logic of excess from a cosmological surplus of energy to a cultural surplus of signs. Commodities are consumed as signs, not as use-values. The proliferation of advertising, luxury and fashion reflects unproductive expenditure. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972/1981), Baudrillard argues that meaning circulates wastefully, detached from scarcity.

A salient line of continuity between Bataille and Baudrillard emerges in Baudrillard's analysis of symbolic exchange as the antithesis of productive accumulation. The incessant consumption of commodified signs underscores excess rather than scarcity. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976/1993), Baudrillard comes closest to Bataille by positioning symbolic exchange in direct opposition to the logic of accumulation. Baudrillard emphasises that eroticism and death represent the most potent generators of consumable signs, puncturing the utilitarian order and exposing society's fascination with rupture and waste.

Eroticism and Death: From Sacredness to Simulation

For Bataille, eroticism is a privileged site where discontinuity dissolves into continuity. In the erotic experience, the boundaries of individuality are transgressed, exposing subjects to the sacred and to death (Bataille, 1957/1986). Baudrillard takes up this insight and pushes it to demonstrate how consumer capitalism profanes eroticism. Erotic signs proliferate in the imagery of liberated bodies and sexual displays. Yet, these signs are emptied of transgression. Eroticism is transformed into a sanitised, commodified spectacle, stripped of its Bataillean sacredness.

The same applies to death. In traditional societies, death was ritualised, integrated into the sacred order. In consumer capitalism, death is repressed, rendered meaningless, divested of symbolic power (Baudrillard, 1976/1993). In both cases, late capitalism converts sacred rupture into an endless circulation of signs. Expenditure persists, but without transcendence.

From Accumulation to Expenditure: Implications for Political Philosophy

The metaphysical contrast between Adam Smith on the one hand and Georges Bataille with Jean Baudrillard on the other yields divergent political philosophies and distinct

conceptualisations of order. For Smith, order rests upon scarcity, productivity, accumulation and reinvestment. Progress is identified with growth. By contrast, Bataille grounds order in excess, expenditure and ritual where progress lies in the sacred handling of surplus. Baudrillard, adopting a critical posture, extends Bataille's philosophy of excess to argue that late capitalism represses genuine expenditure, simulating it through consumption while foreclosing rupture. Thus, if Smith's metaphysics of economy establishes the foundational principles of capitalism, Bataille and Baudrillard reveal its blind spots where the repression of sacred expenditure risks catastrophic eruption.

CONCLUSION

Political economy crystallises from metaphysical considerations. Smith conceives of scarcity as the condition of human life with labour as the measure of value and accumulation as the path to civilisation. Bataille reverses this order, locating the basis of existence in excess and insisting on the necessity of expenditure. Baudrillard extends Bataille's insight, showing how consumer capitalism represses the sacred dimension of expenditure, commodifies eroticism and death and traps excess in endless simulation.

Placing Adam Smith, Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard in conversation is theoretically generative because it broadens the conceptual field through which human economic activity and behaviour can be understood. Smith's metaphysics of economy grounds economic life in the dynamics of scarcity, exchange and the civilising force of the "invisible hand," offering a rationalist framework for behaviour oriented toward prosperity and social order (Smith, 1776/1904, p. 593). Bataille, by contrast, destabilises this logic by foregrounding excess, expenditure and sacrifice as the ontological conditions of life, thereby accounting for the irrational and often destructive impulses that persist beneath economic rationality. Baudrillard radicalises this paradigm by diagnosing how modern consumer society is structured not by needs, but by the symbolic play of signs where irrationality manifests in consumption spirals. Read together, these three thinkers not only deepen our understanding of human economic life and behaviour at large, but also provide a robust theoretical account of the irrational and violent dimensions of comportment which cannot be reduced to sporadic disruptions, but instead reveal structural tendencies of economic and cultural orders.

REFERENCES

1. Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The consumer society: Myths and structures* (C. Turner, Trans.). Sage. (Original work published 1970)
2. Baudrillard, J. (1981). *For a critique of the political economy of the sign* (C. Levin, Trans.). Telos Press. (Original work published 1972)
3. Baudrillard, J. (1993). *Symbolic exchange and death* (I. H. Grant, Trans.). Sage. (Original work published 1976)
4. Bataille, G. (1991). *The accursed share: An essay on general economy, volume I: Consumption* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Zone Books. (Original work published 1949)
5. Bataille, G. (1986). *Erotism: Death and sensuality* (M. Dalwood, Trans.). City Lights. (Original work published 1957)
6. Fitzgibbons, A. (1995). *Adam Smith's system of liberty, wealth, and virtue: The moral and political foundations of The Wealth of Nations*. Clarendon Press.

7. Marx, K. (1964). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (M. Milligan, Trans.; D. J. Struik, Ed.). International Publishers. (Original work published 1844)
8. Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. Basic Books.
9. Smith, A. (1759/2002). *The theory of moral sentiments* (K. Haakonssen, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
10. Smith, A. (1776/1904). *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* (E. Cannan, Ed.). Methuen.
11. Svizzero, S., & Tisdell, C. (2019). Barter, money and the ‘double coincidence of wants’: The neglected contribution of Adam Smith. *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 26(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672567.2018.1545786>