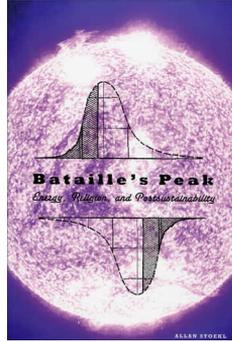


○ **REVIEW OF ALLAN STOECKL, *BATAILLE'S PEAK: ENERGY, RELIGION, AND POSTSUSTAINABILITY***
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The title, *Bataille's Peak*, alludes to Hubbert's Peak, the 1956 prediction that oil production would peak in the late twentieth century only to drop swiftly thereafter, as on the downward-driving line of a bell-curve (p. 118). Allan Stoekl, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University, addresses the post-peak fossil fuel crisis predicted by Hubbert, and in which we now live, through the economic theory of the French 'philosopher' Georges Bataille, present in such writings as 'The notion of expenditure' (1933) and *The Accursed Share* (1949). The problem seems to be, what are we to do about our scarce resources, the same apparent problem faced by the post-WWII society in which Bataille wrote *The Accursed Share*. But the problem was not, Bataille proposed, how fairly to distribute scarce resources (so Sartre and communism), but how best to expend the resource surplus he considered his post-war society possessed. This is the stance, with some adjustments, taken by Stoekl in *Bataille's Peak*.

The book is divided into two parts: 'Rereading Bataille', and; 'Expenditure and depletion'. In the first chapter Stoekl traces Bataille's theory of matter and energy through the traditions of Giordano Bruno and the Marquis de Sade. Stoekl offers an interesting summary of Bruno's and Sade's rethinking of matter in relation to creation, and the death of God which ultimately stems from this. He then analyses Bataille's 'faithful and obsessive' reading and rewriting of Sade, especially the extreme Sadean selfishness which for Bataille becomes the gift of sacrifice (p. 29). The following three chapters address Bataille's notions of energy, religion, and the city, and this order is repeated in the three chapters of the second part, in which Stoekl rewrites Bataille 'in light of the current energy-religion articulation' (p. xviii).

Bataille 'does not renounce profligate spending, but affirms it' (p. xiv). The universe expends vast amounts of unrecoverable energy, and humans mirror this expenditure in an act called *dépense*, spending without return. This 'profligate wastage of energy' is a sacrifice and a religious experience (p. xiii). But, Stoekl argues, *dépense*, the great gift, has been lost within the restricted economy. Our profligate spending can be seen in our consumption of fossil fuels, a consumption

which threatens to destroy us. ‘People want profligacy’, Stoekl writes, ‘which they identify with freedom, precisely because it is a nevertheless minor, deluded version of a more profound “tendency to expend”’ (p. 122). So, not only does the consumption threaten to destroy us, the consumption (the sacrifice) has become a means to an end (freedom). This runs counter to Bataille’s notion of sacrifice, which requires that sacrifice be useless, not useful; an end in itself, not a means to an end (p. 61).

Stoekl proposes a shift in thinking, a liberation of the sacred left from the restricted right, a reconfiguration of our concept of freedom which will produce a new type of energy consumption which will, in turn, result in (post)sustainability. The current trends in ecoreligion, assessed by Stoekl in chapter 6, ‘The atheological text’, involve sacrifice in order to save ourselves. They suggest we sacrifice by consuming less, with the sacrifice serving an end which lies beyond it. However, this is unlikely to appeal to our profligate nature. Stoekl proposes, following Bataille, that we consider the vast amounts of energy expended through the human body, and recognise that ‘happiness is not tied to the mere consumption and disposal of material’ (p. xx). If we satisfy our desire for profligate energy expenditure through our bodies, rather than through fossil fuels, not only will we regain our health, we might also, as an after effect, achieve sustainability, a sustainability after the fact, hence a postsustainability.

Bataille considered religion and human existence to be ‘inextricable, and the religious experience – sacrifice – as entailing the profligate wastage of energy’. Therein, Stoekl writes, ‘lie the central questions: Which religion? And which energy?’ (p. xiii). The energy, we discover, is the ecstatic and useless energy expended in dance, or in sex without procreation, or in riding one’s bike to work when driving would be more efficient (assuming one doesn’t get stuck in traffic). The religion, despite both Bataille’s and Stoekl’s claims to the contrary, seems to be nothing other than Christianity. Bataille’s religion requires useless sacrifice, and it was in part for this reason Bataille rejected Christianity, where the sacrifice of Jesus has become a means to salvation. But he didn’t really let go of Christianity at all. He was criticised for this, and it is a criticism which can be leveled also at Stoekl.

Stoekl seems to write of the three religions of the book – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – as well as other religions (such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism), through use of the umbrella term ‘religion’. Closer inspection however reveals the Christocentric nature of Stoekl’s analysis. For Bataille, and thus for Stoekl, all religions seem to be concerned with personal salvation through sacrifice, and one is not surprised by the repeated references to Jesus on the cross. The few times Stoekl incorporates Judaism or Islam he does so only to contribute his discussion of Christianity. Both progressive and fundamental Christianity are given voice in ‘The atheological text’, but the only Muslim mentioned is ‘a leading modern exponent of ... fundamental Muslim law’, and this is only to comment on how ‘Christian tradition neglected the law of the everyday world’ (p. 163). We also learn that it is the advent of Judaism which is responsible for the destruction of the environment (pp. 151, 167).

Stoekl clearly enjoys his subject. His ideas are original, and his writing sometimes poetic. It is unfortunate then that he chooses to employ such curiously gendered and jarring language as, ‘The idea that Nature [sic] is dead is over because fossil fuels were not made by Man [sic], they were only extracted by “him”’ (p. xi). Nature here is capitalised and gendered following Sade (p. 11), though this is not consistent. We are left to wonder at the masculine universal until p. 74, where we are told (in endnote 14, p. 219), “Man” is used here in conformity with Kojève’s

usage; Kojève does not write of or mention women in his work. Man in a Kojévian, posthumanist sense is the highest manifestation of the human, prior to the death of Man in Man's own accomplishment. Throughout the book I will use "Man" in the same humanist sense ...' The use of the universal masculine has long been critiqued by feminist scholars, and one must ask whether Stoekl's choice is justifiable.

Stoekl's approach sprawls like suburbs around the sacred city, and there is much more in this book than can be mentioned in this review. Stoekl covers topics such as the death of God, counter-religion and the counter-book, mysticism and the unwritable nature of the religious experience, the shift from the Aztec city to our own over-tarmaced cities, and the soul-deep misery of suburbanites. *Bataille's Peak* therefore is an important resource for Bataille scholars, but will also interest theologians. Whatever the faults in Bataille's theories – and there are many – Stoekl has managed to show how he might still be relevant in our modern world.