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Georges Bataille's Base Materialism

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***Abstract.** The French intellectual Georges Bataille (1897-1962) developed base materialism in his work during the late 1920s and early 1930s as an attempt to break with all existing materialism. This essay is an explication of base materialism and its radical implications for contemporary theory. Bataille argues for the concept of an active base matter that disrupts the opposition of high and low and destabilises all foundations. Then he attempts to use this to develop a radical libertarian Marxism, opposed to both Stalinism and fascism. Although it provided a critique of the emphasis in Marxism on production, the active flux of base matter could not be contained in a political discourse. This means that Bataille's thought has an impact beyond the political and into the wider domain of theory. One example of this is the influence of base materialism on Derrida's deconstruction, and both share the attempt to destabilise philosophical oppositions by means of an unstable 'third term'. This explains why Bataille's materialism does not appear as conventionally materialist, and why it has had little impact within contemporary materialism. Despite attempts to force base materialism into the mold of a new form of materialism it disrupts conventional materialism and the 'radical' politics that often goes with it. Bataille destroys the promise of liberated spaces and offers a more radical and disorienting freedom which inscribes instability into all discourses. It is this that defines the importance and necessity of Bataille's base materialism today.*

Introduction

In the late 1920s and early 1930s the French intellectual Georges Bataille (1897-1962) articulated a new and radical form of materialism, which he called 'Base Materialism' (1985, 45-52; 1997, pp. 160-4). It was new and radical because it implied a revision of *all* existing materialism, as Bataille explained: 'Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist'

(1985, p. 15). By doing away with this hierarchy in materialism, Bataille turned his attention to 'base' matter, everything that had hitherto been excluded by both idealism and materialism: 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)' (1985, p. 118; 1997, p. 169). In the 1920s and 1930s, Bataille primarily articulated his interest in these excessive forces through his critiques of anthropology and politics, clashing and breaking with the idealism that he thought still dominated thinking, even in avant-garde movements like surrealism. Throughout his life Bataille pursued the systematic exploration of the non-systematic, touching on a huge range of discourses: religion, art history, literary criticism, political economy, and philosophy; developing his work through friendships with, what were at the time, marginal figures in French intellectual life: Maurice Blanchot, Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, and Jacques Lacan. It would be after Bataille's death that his style of work and the questions he posed would become influential with a new generation of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, etc. I want to take up the question of base materialism in Bataille's work as a way of demonstrating this vector of influence, and to suggest that the thinking Bataille elaborated under the name of base materialism is one which is both powerful and largely unreckoned with. Bataille's base materialism is a materialism that does not look very much like materialism as it had been previously thought, and it has led Macherey to suggest that 'Bataille's stance can be characterised as materialist to the extent that it helps to reveal what is problematic about the materialist attitude' (1995, p. 113). I want to take up this claim and to argue that instead of regarding Bataille's base materialism as a momentary blip in the history and development of materialism, a passing heresy whose extremism was a response to the rising political extremism of the 1930s (fascism on the right, Stalinism on the left), we can find the 'shock effect' (1985, p. 143) of base materialism still reverberating through contemporary debates in critical and cultural theory.

To justify my claim, I firstly want to excavate the strata of base materialism that Bataille elaborated in a series of dense and powerful essays which all share a common 'logic' (a 'logic' which will push to the limits of logic). The 'logic' of base materialism is that whatever is elevated or ideal is actually dependent on base matter, and that this dependence means that the purity of the ideal is contaminated. The dependence of the ideal or elevated (the 'high') on base matter (the 'low') and the contamination this produces is systematically denied by the ideal, which splits off base matter as whatever is disgusting, vile, sub-human, etc.¹ In this way it hopes to keep base matter in its place, as the base, but this splitting off can never be completely successful because base matter is at the basis of the ideal and the 'higher values'. Base

matter is an eternal reminder, and remainder, of all that threatens to drag down and ruin the ideal, as Bataille explained in his essay published in 1930 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism': 'Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations' (1985, p. 51; 1997, p. 163). It is a recurring insult to human dignity and any attempt to purify or idealise, because it can never be done away with despite the massive cultural, political, and philosophical denials of its existence.

We can find a comic example of the 'logic' of base materialism in Bataille's brief essay 'The Big Toe' (1985, pp. 20-23), first published in November 1929. In that essay Bataille explained how the capacity for man to stand upright, and all that flows from this (knowledge, reason, tool use, humanity, etc.) is dependent on the ignominious base matter of the big toe. Despite man's dependence on the big toe for producing him as an erect being because he is standing, he then looks *down* on the base matter of his big toe as disgusting: 'But whatever the role played in the erection by his foot, man, who has a light head, in other words a head raised to the heavens and heavenly things, sees it as spit, on the pretext that he has this foot in the mud' (1985, p. 20). This shows the process whereby the high or ideal denies its dependence on base matter by constructing it as disgusting and vile. In fact, 'the big toe is the most *human* part of the human body' (1985, p. 20), because it is what makes man into man, or woman into woman, by making it possible for us to stand upright. The big toe cannot be eliminated by the high because the high depends on it, and it torments our 'light head' contemplating the heavens with the nagging reminder of its presence by, in an example Bataille suggests, the pain of corns (1985, p. 22).

What the big toe essay also shows us is that Bataille is not just reversing the hierarchical structure of high and low, and is not just arguing for us to stop standing upright and return to wallowing in the mud (although he is sometimes tempted by this prospect (1985, p. 39). Instead, as we can see with the example of the big toe, base matter is what makes the very structure of the high/low opposition possible in the first place *and* what ruins it: without the base matter of the big toe we could not stand erect, and so we would be deprived of the high, ideal, etc., but because of this the high can never be as pure as it would desire. It is from the position of the high that base matter is rejected as the low, when in fact base matter is the origin of the high and remains to torment the high and bring it back down into the low. This places base matter into the position of being both high and low, accounting for the *interdependence* of the high and low by being what they share. Base matter also remains exterior to this opposition, as we can see in the example of the big toe it is neither high nor low, but in an unstable position (although it gives us a relatively stable base) between the two,

sliding between them and destabilising the opposition. Therefore when Macherey describes Bataille's work as 'materialism inverted' (1995, pp. 112-31) he is being misleading. Bataille is never simply inverting high for low, swapping them over, but, as we will see, using base matter as what Julian Pefanis calls a 'third term' (1991, p. 4) that undercuts the opposition of high and low without, on the other hand, becoming a dialectical synthesis of the opposition; and so Pefanis is correct to argue that 'the third term, moreover, has a Nietzschean, rather than a Hegelian origin' (1991, p. 4), it is a force of disruption rather than a dialectical operator.

Bataille's work was not alone in its attempt to articulate a shocking and radical materialism. Emmanuel Berl's book *The Death of Bourgeois Thought, The Death of Bourgeois Morality*, published in France in April 1929, argued that 'Materialism is therefore a way of depreciating. It indicates a certain taste for depreciation' (in Hollier, 1995, p. 147). Also, Bataille's heterodox reading of the shock effect of materialism has much in common with that other heterodox 'Marxist' of the 1930s Walter Benjamin,² and both shared a strong visceral rejection of Hegelianism and Hegelianized Marxism. However, Bataille's work is remarkable for its clarity and for its radical critique of all existing materialism: his base materialism rejects both mechanical materialism, which still retains a hierarchy in which 'dead matter' is dominant as the object of scientific investigation (1985, p. 15), and dialectical materialism in which matter becomes part of the dialectic. Bataille still often hoped for a possible connection between base materialism and dialectical materialism, arguing in the essay *The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic* (March 1932) that 'it is not a question of setting aside dialectical thought; one must instead try to know the limit beyond which its application in this direction is fruitful' (1985, p. 111). What is ironic is that Bataille could not recognise that his base materialism already threatened the dialectic (whether Hegelian or Marxist) with an internal limit that ruined it in advance, and that he had already demonstrated that the dialectic depended on a base matter which would not stay fixed within a dialectical schema. Therefore the implication of base materialism is to produce what Macherey calls 'an undialecticized materialism' (1995, p. 123).

Further evidence for this comes from Bataille's preference for tracing his work back to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism, which is 'carrying the germs of a bizarre but mortal subversion of the ideal' (1985, p. 46; 1997, p. 161), a subversion that Bataille wants to extend into the present. Gnosticism is important to Bataille because it leads to 'the most monstrous *dualistic* and therefore strangely abased cosmogonies' (1985, p. 46; 1997, p. 160). Denis Hollier argues that 'Rather than a system of thought in the strict sense, dualism is an attitude of thought: dualism is not a dualist system but a will to dualism, a resistance to system and

homogeneity' (in Botting and Wilson (eds.) 1998, p. 62). The dualism of Gnosticism is re-formulated by Bataille as the rupture of base matter from the high, and this means that neither the ideal nor matter can ever form a stable monist system. Bataille is going back to the past, or his version of the past, to recover a more brutal dualism that would resist the moment of dialectical synthesis in Marxist and Hegelian dialectics. He found the promise of a radical materialism that articulated a base matter that would never fit in to any system, that would overrun any structure, and destabilise any discourse, in Gnosticism. However, he also articulated this unstable matter in a radical new form, for example in his '*insubordinate characterisation*' (1985, p. 129; 1997, p. 180) of matter at the end of 'The Notion of Expenditure' (January 1933): 'matter, in fact, can only be defined as the *non-logical difference*' (1985, p. 129; 1997, p. 180).

Thinking matter as difference means thinking matter as unstable, and the dualism of Gnosticism is now inscribed through a difference that never reaches the stability of logic. This demonstrates the effects we traced of base materialism on the opposition high/low as something which makes possible that difference and is also different to it. By refining his analysis in this rather throwaway comment Bataille will become a major influence on what comes to be called 'poststructuralism', which can be defined as a thought of difference (Bennington, 1994, p. 115). Bataille's achievement is to create an unstable discourse which communicates this possibility of matter as difference, and to provide a culture medium to carry the contagion of base matter, in the same way that a virus or a bacteria are grown and developed Bataille is developing an *infectious* thought. In drawing on anthropology, experiments in new types of materialism, ancient heresies, etc. Bataille produces a very *different* thought of matter. The weakness of his thought at this point is that it also tries to translate the instability of base matter into political terms, which is a weakness not because base matter has no effects on the political but because the effects it has are not only political; by reading base matter as politically revolutionary, Bataille is running the risk of weakening the *general* impact of base matter on *any* field, that is of making base materialism into a political doctrine or political theory. What I want to examine is how Bataille tried to put base matter at the service of the revolution, to produce a base Marxism, and how this attempt fails because of the instability he had already programmed into base matter. The consequences of this problem of determining the effects of base matter are still being felt today, perhaps in hidden and subterranean forms, in contemporary debates about 'theory' and politics. By passing through this tension in Bataille it will be possible to return to the tension in contemporary thought *differently*, via difference.

Base Marxism

Bataille can logically argue that base materialism has radical and revolutionary political effects because base matter destabilises the high/low opposition wherever it appears: as there is a political version of the opposition, so base matter also leads to political destabilisation:

All of its [the high/low opposition] interest and meaning are linked to the irreconcilable nature of its specific forms: the terrifying darkness of tombs or caves and the luminous splendour of heaven, the impurity of the earth where bodies rot and the purity of lofty space; on the order of the individual the base and noble faculties; on the political order the imperialist eagle and the 'old-mole' revolution, as on the universal order matter, vile and base reality, and elevated spirit. (1985, p. 35)

Here Bataille identifies the political version of the high/low opposition as being between the imperialist symbol of the eagle and the Marxist symbol of class struggle, the old mole, but in other works of the same period he also regarded the opposition as being between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: the bourgeoisie was the high, embodying values of labour, purity, hard work, dignity etc., while the proletariat was the low and so aligned with base matter. The result of the eruption of base matter in the political would be political revolution, because 'Communist workers appear to the bourgeois to be as ugly and dirty as hairy sexual organs, or lower parts; sooner or later there will be a scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off' (Bataille, 1985, p. 8). This revolution would be a 'base' revolution, both from the base (the most despised members of society: the sub- or lumpen-proletariat) and base in the base drives it unleashes: 'the urges that today require world-wide society's fiery and bloody revolution' (1985, p. 102; 1997, p. 158).

Bataille then aligned base materialism with Marxism by interpreting Marx as a base materialist *avant la lettre*, arguing that Marx 'begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians' (1985, p. 35). In this way Bataille attempted to establish an identity between base materialism and Marxism by trying 'to identify under the heading of materialism a crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable, to all that overthrows, perverts, and ridicules spirit' (1985, p. 32), and so producing a 'base Marxism'. Bataille placed his work under the sign of Marx, and used an epigraph from Marx for his polemical work 'The 'Old Mole and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* and *Surrealist*' which reads 'In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life' (1985, p. 32), but Bataille's reading of Marxist materialism was highly unconventional and critical. Firstly, it

destroyed the basis of classical Marxist materialism in the forces and relations of production. In his famous essay 'The Notion of Expenditure' Bataille stressed 'the secondary character of production and acquisition in relation to expenditure' (1985, p. 121; 1997, p. 172), and argued for a model of class struggle as 'the grandest form of social expenditure' (1985, p. 126; 1997, p. 178). Secondly, the implications of his left-wing Communism were hostile to the orientation of Marxist politics to labour discipline and party control. Lenin famously criticised left-wing Communism as an 'infantile disorder', and in the case of Bataille we could call it an anal stage Marxism. Whether at the level of Marxist theory or political practice Bataille's injection of base materialism into Marxism already had damaging effects.

Bataille was conscious of these damaging effects of base matter on many of the central tenets of Marxism, but this was intended to save what Bataille called 'the suppleness and the power of Marxism' (1985, p.114) from its ossification into the Stalinism of the 1930s. By using the instability of base matter to develop a libertarian Marxism that would break with the Marxist tendency to set up a new dictatorship of labour in place of the capitalist dictatorship of value, Bataille intended to rescue Marxism from Stalinism and revitalise it as a liberatory practice. Bataille was also more radical than other left alternatives to Stalinism, like Trotskyism, because he rejected revolutionary discipline and decency for a faith in the perverse power of the working class. He claimed that 'one frequently notes, among militant revolutionaries, a complete lack of confidence in the spontaneous reactions of the masses' (1985, p. 162). This critique of the piety of revolutionary politics is most humorously explored in Bataille's novel *The Blue of Noon* (1986), which contrasts the dull repressed woman militant Lazare (supposedly modelled on Simone Weil), with the perverse and sexually adventurous Dirty, a contrast which is another presentation of the impossibility of high ideals to motivate compared with the energy of base matter. By his refusal of production and revolutionary discipline, Bataille had developed themes that would later be taken up by revolutionary militants in the 1960s and 1970s as 'the refusal of work' or 'zerowork',³ and which also looked back to the French socialist of the 1880s, Paul Lafargue, who proclaimed 'the right to be lazy'. Bataille offered the promise of a 'Base Marxism' which resisted the Marxist emphasis on labour in favour of an uneconomic emphasis on festival (a promise that was to be partly fulfilled in May 1968).

For Bataille, base materialism was 'linked by the force of things to the uprising of the lower classes against present-day work' (1985, p. 32) and it fought on two fronts: firstly, as we have seen, it struggled against Stalinism and the official workers movement which were both as fascinated with production and labour as was capitalism, except in the name of revolution; secondly it struggled against the threat of fascism by

trying to both explain the appeal of fascism and attempting to counter it.⁴ In 'The Psychological Structure of Fascism' (1933/4) (1985, pp. 137-60; 1997, pp. 122-146), Bataille pre-figured the analyses of fascism developed by Freudo-Marxism (Reich, Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse, etc.). However, instead of producing what Foucault called 'Marx and Freud in the same incandescent light' (1983, p. xii), Bataille developed a different reading of Marx and Freud which was no longer an attempt at synthesis (dialectical or otherwise). He did this by using the emphasis he had placed in base materialism on what escapes stability and control to 'join' together Marx and Freud through the *heterogeneity* of their works: those 'elements which are impossible to assimilate' (1985, p. 140; 1997, p. 125) and which exceed stabilisation, i.e. the violence of class struggle and the unconscious. This was not done in the name of base materialism but through what Bataille called heterology – 'The science of what is completely other' (1985, p. 102 n. 2; 1997, p. 159 n. 2) – which he developed contemporaneously with base materialism. Like base materialism 'it constantly tends to a split-off structure' (1985, p. 140; 1997, p. 125), however instead of splitting off low from high it split off the heterogeneous from the homogeneous. While it shares a great deal with base materialism it was not so tied to the danger of being stabilised as matter, and Bataille developed it as a more general term and tool of social analysis, which he applied especially to fascism.

Bataille argued that fascism tried to use heterogeneity by making it into the property of the fascist leader, and that this use of heterogeneity will fail: 'But this concentration in a single person intervenes as an element that sets the fascist formation apart within the heterogeneous realm: by the very fact that the affective effervescence leads to unity, it constituted, as *authority*, an agency directed *against* men' (1985, pp. 143-4; 1997, p. 129). In trying to purify and control heterogeneity, fascism destroys the heterogeneity that it is trying to use. We can see how similar this is to Bataille's arguments about the resistance of base matter to political control by the 'imperial-eagle'. While heterogeneity and base matter are not exactly the same we can see them as both nicknames for a similar process of destabilisation, an argument that I will explore later. We can see already that we are not arguing that base materialism is the one and only term for destabilisation, and throughout his work Bataille constantly explored new terms and points of instability in the discourses and institutions that he analysed (for example, inner experience, sovereignty, communication, unproductive expenditure, etc.), but I want to argue that base materialism offers us a strategic lever into the unthought relationship between 'theory' and 'politics', an unthought that Bataille begins to think under this name and that still needs to be thought today. The disruption that Bataille is committed to thinking shatters capitalist work discipline and its mirror image of socialist work discipline, and also shatters the attempt to find a revolutionary

nationalism that would be neither left nor right: fascism. Through base matter and heterogeneity he unearths the controlling and limiting forces which dominate in political programmes and practical politics, and he also finds the promise of a 'deep subversion that continues to pursue the emancipation of human lives' (1985, p. 159; 1997, p. 145).

While it is certainly true that Bataille's libertarian model of revolutionary militancy still offers us valuable political resources, especially now as the capitalist work-ethic and 'law of value' is in a process of rapid globalisation, there is a tension between the 'logic' of base materialism and this political interpretation of base materialism. Denis Hollier argues that Bataille's materialism 'is more Heraclitean than Marxist' (1995, p. 148), and this points to the tension between the flux of base matter and the relative stability of a Marxist revolutionary dialectic. In 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism' Bataille drew on Gnosticism for 'the conception of matter as an *active* principle' (1985, p. 47; 1997, p. 162), and this active matter could not be controlled by any political, social, cultural, or theoretical force. Bataille also proposed there that 'I mean a materialism not implying an ontology, not implying that matter is the thing-in-itself' (1985, p. 49; 1997, p. 163). If materialism is not an ontology then it is not possible to *be* base matter, base matter is not the substance of being. It is also not the 'thing-in-itself', not the hidden object behind representation that we could break through to, the hidden support of the world of appearance. This active matter which is not a substance produces a profound difficulty for Bataille's political interpretation of base materialism as the property of the proletariat and as part of a revolutionary dialectic.

Base matter is too unstable to remain fixed in these political terms, and in his political reading Bataille is in danger of producing an 'inverted materialism' that claims to be shattering all values but which actually sets up a new set of 'low' proletarian values (filth, expenditure, virility, violence, etc.) against 'high' bourgeois values (propriety, profit, production, etc.). While Bataille is critical of subversion which 'instead of relying on presently lower forms whose interplay will in the end destroy bourgeois prisons, ... seeks immediately to create its own values in order to oppose existing values' (1985, p. 33), his own reliance on 'presently lower forms' to produce a reversal of the power structure risks turning base matter into opposing values. Also, when Bataille makes the base the *property* of the proletariat he is returning to the stable ontological interpretation of matter that he had criticised. These are the paradoxical results of fixing the active and unstable base matter in a stable political apparatus (even a revolutionary one), and of forcing base matter into being-present. This does not mean I am arguing that Bataille's work has no political effects or that those political effects should be discounted, but rather that Bataille's base materialism cannot be *reduced* to politics. The tension in Bataille's thought is between his thinking of base matter

as general instability and his political desire to articulate this instability as a programme of revolution. However, while base materialism has revolutionary effects, and may be even what makes 'revolutions' possible, it is not itself the revolution nor even a 'permanent revolution' (of a type that would be more radical than the common Trotskyist interpretation of that phrase). I am not rejecting Bataille's attempt to loosen up Marxism from its metaphysical moorings in production, but am interested rather in taking this tendency *further* by finding in Bataille resources that necessarily propel his thinking along this line of flight.

The problem of Bataille's desire for political revolution from the ultra-left is that the political effects of base materialism do not have the straightforward effect of producing revolution *as Bataille wants it*. Base materialism is revolutionary in the same sense as Bataille described Nietzsche's thought, which 'implies a destruction of the different possible foundations of current political positions' (1985, p. 184). Bataille wanted base materialism to produce a new more radical Marxism (a dream that is still shared today by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 1997, p. 136), and it certainly has important critical implications for Marxism. However, base materialism cannot be confined or limited to these political effects, nor can those political effects be considered as stable and univocal as Bataille suggests. The political attempt to force base matter into being present, and to produce a political ontology is ruptured by Bataille's thought of matter as difference. As we have seen this difference does not even have to retain the name matter and can go under other names (like heterogeneity), which does not mean that it could ever find its proper name, nor that base materialism would be that proper name. The selection of the point of instability is a radically contingent one, developed through a finite strategy that is always aware that the point of instability can itself be stabilised within a practice of writing and thought. What makes base materialism an 'intransigent materialism' (1985, p. 51; 1997, p. 164), is that it refuses to appear, to become present, to settle within our thought, because it is different. Base matter escapes from the political, and puts the demands of politics into question. It is this stubborn resistance of base matter, its stupidity even, that defines the difficult legacy that it leaves us today.

Base Theory

We have seen a paradox develop in Bataille's base materialism between the claim that it makes to undo all discourses through revealing their dependence on base matter and the attempt to then use that work to found a revolutionary politics. I have shown that the 'logic' of Bataille's base materialism means that it is impossible for Bataille to be completely assimilated to Marxism (or any other discourse). It is the resistance to the

systematic and the emphasis on difference which is what allies Bataille with poststructuralism. More specifically if we examine Bataille's inversion of the opposition high/low and the de-stabilisation of the very structure of that opposition, then this work of base materialism can be seen as the prototype for what Derrida calls the '*general strategy of deconstruction*' (1987, p. 41). Derrida describes this strategy as an intervention into the structure of philosophical oppositions in two 'parts' or 'stages' (which cannot be rigorously distinguished or separated out):

1. 'To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment' (Derrida, 1987, p. 41). This is the stage of *reversal*, and we can find it in Bataille where he intervenes against the violent domination of the high over the low to privilege the low against the high. However, to remain in this stage is simply to switch the opposition around, necessary but not sufficient to deconstruct it.

2. '... we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new "concept", a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime' (Derrida, 1987, p. 42). This is the stage that is marked in Bataille by the emergence of base matter as that which could never be included in the previous regime. It also explains the emergence of base matter as the emergence of that deconstructive 'third term' which is no longer dialectical.

Of course this is not the only example of the 'influence' of Bataille on Derrida, who also devoted a major early essay to Bataille 'From Restricted to General Economy: Toward a Hegelianism Without Reserve' (in Botting and Wilson (eds.), 1998, pp. 102-38), or of Bataille on poststructuralism, which is evident from the fact that all the writers associated with poststructuralism wrote at least one essay on Bataille (with the exception of Lacan, who just took Bataille's wife). What is most interesting about this *particular* vector of influence is how it not only helps us to understand the importance of base materialism to deconstruction, but also the importance of deconstruction to understanding base materialism. The emphasis that Derrida makes on how base matter escapes systematisation can help to explain why we rejected Bataille's political reduction of base matter. Derrida explains that 'matter in this general economy designates ... radical alterity (I will specify: in relation to philosophical oppositions)' (1987, p. 64). The concept of matter that Derrida develops from Bataille is posed *against* philosophical oppositions, and the claims of philosophy to be a universal discourse structured by these hierarchies. This means that it cannot be limited by radical politics (and at the time Derrida was marking his distance from the crypto-communist and Maoist politics of the literary

journal *Tel Quel* by whom he was being interviewed), instead it has a wider range, or the maximum possible range, because it makes it impossible to establish a universal discourse (philosophy). So, I have argued Bataille develops a radical thought of base matter that he is in danger of reducing to a political radicalism, but that the effects of base matter which he described disrupt his own political reading, and so in some sense Bataille misreads himself. By reading Bataille with Derrida we are not intending to correct Bataille or claiming to read Bataille better than Bataille reads himself, but to make clearer the contours of a thought of difference in Bataille that has developed after Bataille and through his legacy.

We can see how Bataille influenced Derrida and how Derrida's explication of matter stresses the range of its impact beyond the political, or any local or regional discourse. Returning to Bataille we can find the same claim in his work on heterology, where he argues that 'Above all, heterology is opposed to any homogeneous representation of the world, in other words, to any philosophical system' (1985, p. 97; 1997, p. 153). It is fitting that in the more general work of heterology Bataille should directly target the philosophical universal. He is expanding the range of the disruptions of base matter into the philosophical which claims to dominate everything. By moving from Bataille to Derrida and then back to Bataille we can see that the target in both cases is philosophical systems. This is because philosophical systems claim to be universal and enforce this claim with hierarchical oppositions, and in doing so they form the most complete attempt to dominate and eliminate base matter. The stress that Derrida puts on the philosophical opposition does not mean that we are swapping politics for philosophy or Marx for Derrida. Rather, if Bataille's base materialism can disrupt the universalism of philosophy then it can disrupt *any other* discourse, and the limits of discourse itself.

Philosophy is the 'test case' for base materialism, and the effect of base materialism on philosophy is to make it unstable, vulnerable to other discourses (like politics) that it has presumed to control. Base matter is what we called the 'third term', underpinning and undermining the oppositions which structure philosophy, it is an irreducible remainder that resists the imposition of philosophical universals. This is not simply the assimilation of Bataille to deconstruction or poststructuralism, but rather it shows how those discourses have drawn on the emphasis in Bataille on what escapes assimilation and integration. It also shows how they have developed and extended Bataille's work through the destabilising effects it has on academic disciplines and norms. In contrast, what is remarkable is how little impact Bataille's base materialism has seemed to register on contemporary materialist theories (such as cultural materialism, feminist materialism, etc.): base matter seems to have disappeared as Hollier

claims it always does 'The material is expended integrally, without remains, without leaving anything behind, not a ghost, not an heir, not a double. A flash - then night' (1995, p. 148).

Does the material undergo the complete 'integral' disappearance that Hollier describes? I suggest not, because it is not possible to completely eliminate the material, to expend it absolutely. Perhaps what Hollier is trying to indicate by the disappearance of matter is that it will not remain within a discourse of knowledge, and that it can never be captured by a philosophical apparatus. However, this resistance to capture should not only be thought of as a disappearance but as the impossible conjunction of disappearance and persistence: it is always disappearing from the grasp and at the same time persisting as this evasion. Also, Hollier is incorrect to limit the experience of matter to a sudden expenditure, or the brief flash of the flare against a night sky making that experience into something like the 'flash-over' point of the ignition of a fire. While matter can tip over a stable discourse into instability the striking image that Hollier uses suggests the transition from one state to another. This cannot be so, because base matter does not only disappear in a flash but it leaves an after-image on the eye, a trace of ash on the ground. Which is to argue that base matter remains as a *trace*, as the trace of the limit of any attempt to produce a materialist discourse. While it disappears from capture by knowledge, while it disappears as a basis, base materialism remains as the active flux of instability that ruins the closure of any discourse. It is the hinge that links and disrupts philosophical oppositions, and the hinge between changing states that sullies in advance the purity of those states. This contagious and contaminating base materialism exists as a materialism that is destroying itself, draining away and spreading its effects.

Base materialism lives on in its persistent disappearance as the blind spot of knowledge, but when contemporary theory tries to force it to appear, to become present, it disappears absolutely from these attempts at philosophical capture. One of the most rhetorically radical of contemporary receptions of Bataille, Nick Land's *The Thirst for Annihilation* (1992), tries to force base matter to appear, to conjure it from a black mass with Bataille. Despite recognising the 'line of flight' of base matter:

Matter is in flight from the possibility of essence as if from an original pertinence of ontology, and life is merely the most aberrant and virological variant of this flight; the convulsive fringe of being's vanquishment. (Bataille, 1992, p. 181)

Land transforms it into the relative stability of libidinal materialism which is supposed to be the most radical possible form of Bataille's materialism: 'Libidinal materialism, or the theory of unconditional (non-

teleological) desire, is nothing but a scorch-mark from the expository diagnosis of the physicalistic prejudice' (1992, pp. 37-8). But far from evading ontology (as he supposes), Land has instead reconstituted base materialism as an anti-philosophical libidinal ontology. In claiming that it is only possible to do justice to base materialism by reading it as libidinal materialism, and Land is certainly not modest in his claims for his own work's radicalism, he does not consider that by making the base of base materialism libidinal he might actually be limiting it. So, in forcing base matter into existence as libidinal materialism Land can only witness its disappearance as a force of disruption.

Beneath Land's radical rhetoric of the shattering impact of Bataille he silently produces a reading of base matter which turns it into the base of libidinal materialism: 'Base materialism is the plague of unilateral difference, which is a difference that only operates from out of the undifferentiated' (1992, p.123). The plague of difference is made to emerge from the undifferentiated, the base as basis, and Bataille's matter as 'non-logical difference' is ejected because it would threaten this libidinal ontology. Difference could not be limited to being libidinal because it would also open up the libidinal to its exterior, and Land does not explain how we are supposed to get difference out of the undifferentiated. The same problems haunt Scott Wilson's *Cultural Materialism* (1995), which tries to take up the challenge of base materialism to contemporary cultural materialism, but also limits base materialism to the conceptually stable figure of the void. Firstly it suggests that Bataille's thought finds its destination in the void, which is not a dominant term in Bataille's own thought and is rather derived from Lacan, which seems strange considering the mobility of Bataille's own selection of disruptive effects. Secondly, by choosing the word void, Wilson has the problem of latching onto a topological figure that implies the possibility of mapping, even if it could be argued that that would be empirically impossible. I would agree that there is a close proximity between the arguments of both Land and Wilson and what I am trying to elaborate as a thought of difference in Bataille, but I would also argue that difference is both more and less determined than their use of the libidinal and the void. More determined in that difference only appears as different from something, and less determined because difference is always differencing actively in its determinations. In the readings of Land and Wilson Bataille is once again turned into a materialist and active base matter is freeze-framed out of existence. What these attempts to receive and hold base matter cannot understand is that for Bataille matter *only exists as difference*, not as the base for a new anti-philosophy. The differential existence of base matter means that it refuses to remain as a stable basis, and so it resists incorporation into materialism. We actually find its trace more readily in poststructuralism, which is so often thought of as immaterial or un-material. This is *not* a dematerialization

of matter by Bataille or poststructuralism, but a re-thinking of matter as difference, neither material nor ideal. While poststructuralism is commonly assimilated to the domain of 'theory', Bataille helps to make clear that it is not just theoretical. There can be no such thing as a 'base theory' because base matter will also make unstable the opposition theory/practice, and so when poststructuralism draws on Bataille's emphasis (and others) on the inassimilable it is also opening the limit of theory. What is worth holding on to from the reference to theory is the range of the impact of base matter, but it does not find its destination in the theoretical.

Conclusion

After all this we might want to ask why keep the name materialism at all for what Bataille is trying to think, not least because of all the difficulties and misunderstandings to which it can lead. Why not use a more neutral and less metaphysically loaded name like difference instead? I want to suggest some reasons why Bataille keeps the name of materialism and why this is an important gesture that does not commit him to a metaphysics of matter. Bataille is making a strategic intervention into materialism which is designed to unhook it from the 'metaphysical scaffolding' (1985, p. 45, 1997, p. 160) in which it is held and in which it holds us. Materialism is tied together with idealism as its opposite, but it still remains trapped within this structure: 'an abstract God (or simply the idea), and abstract matter; the chief guard and the prison walls' (1985, p. 45; 1997, p. 160). For idealism (especially Kant and Hegel) matter is a dispersion or scatter that threatens the gathering that it regards as the condition of philosophy. For Bataille base materialism is a way to liberate us from 'this idiotic idealism that leaves us under the spell of a few comical prison bosses' (1985, p. 28) and return us to 'a feeling of freedom' (1985, p. 14), by returning to the 'scatter of matter' (Bennington, 1994). This scatter is no longer an abstract dispersion, or the remains of a dead matter that could be subjected to science, but an active displacement and an active resistance that will not settle in the opposition materialism/idealism. So, Bataille is retaining the name materialism to radicalise the way it appears to idealism, to take it out of the trap of the metaphysical opposition, and at the same time disrupting both materialism and idealism.

Unlike the strategy of Derrida, to which it is so close, Bataille's strategy is a more direct and brutal intervention. This is in keeping with the brutality of base matter, as both inert resistance and as active instability. Of course this is not to exaggerate the differences between Bataille and Derrida or to suggest which is superior to the other. Like Derrida Bataille too does not stick to one name for the disruptive effects

he traces, Bataille runs through his own series of nicknames for something which lacks a possible proper name (base materialism, sacrifice, eroticism, heterogeneity, unproductive expenditure, etc.). These nicknames are equivalent, but also intervene in particular into the fields from which they are more or less violently withdrawn, and base materialism is certainly not *the* key term for Bataille or the master-signifier for his work; yet is *a* key term, especially in the context of the 'theoretical' and the 'political', that opens up this context. What is noticeable about Bataille's 'names' is that they are often more metaphysically loaded than the nicknames Derrida selects. This is what gives them their power as direct and violent interventions into metaphysics, but it is also what makes it possible for them to be re-coded within metaphysics. It may also account for the violence of Bataille's reading practices, which are so often in contrast to the detailed readings undertaken by Derrida. In Derrida we find a practice of quotation and discussion of the text being read, whereas with Bataille we find an unmistakable violence in the reading, a violence to the textual bodies which it writes on and to the textual body which is the result of that reading. In Bataille's violent forcing of the text we can find the traces of the violent instabilities of base matter. So, it may be obvious to say that Bataille is not Derrida and Derrida is not Bataille (although there are moments where this does not appear so obvious), but they do share points of contact, unstable communications that leap across these textual bodies like an electrical charge, and one of these points of contact is the communication of base matter.

The communication of base matter communicates between Bataille and Derrida a free and open possibility, not a fixed or determinable operation. Neither is it a new value to live by but the disruption that makes values possible and which ruins them in advance. It is this which makes its political effects so hard to calculate, but is what also makes it so resistant to attempts to determine and close off the political. The freedom of base materialism is *virtually* impossible to translate into political demands or programmes, it is a freedom that is free of the dictates of any space or discourse. When base materialism tears down the 'metaphysical scaffolding' which had entrapped us it does not leave us liberated from all constraints or free to dissolve into the flux of base matter or in that commonly desired contemporary space, a temporary autonomous zone (Bey 1985/1991). This is not because it is a form of political realism that accepts things as they are but because it abolishes the paradox of a limited space of freedom by ruining any closed 'liberated' space. It is actually the most unreasonable and unrealistic political demand, which is not a utopian demand (which is always for another space or an Other space, a u-topia). This is what makes it so damaging to the limits of radical politics, especially those academic political radicalisms which lay claim to the name of materialism. The

disorienting freedom of base materialism leaves us without the security of circulating academic radicalisms, and without the security of materialism. This is not just the disappearance of freedom and the acting out of a revolutionary impotence and capitulation to the powers that be, because base matter remains as always tracing the impossibility of the most 'universal' of philosophical oppositions. It is a radical thought of freedom that exists at the limits of the claim to be radical because liberty is itself unstable, it is not a place we can occupy or a position we can monopolise.

So, we can confirm Macherey's suggestion that Bataille's work demands a re-thinking of the very possibility of materialism rather than the production of a new materialism. It retains the name of materialism all the better to ruin it in a base materialism, and at the same time to promise us a freedom that is disruptive of metaphysics. It does this by freeing matter: freeing it from its determination by idealism as a dead dispersion, freeing it from scientific attempts to fix matter, freeing it from the abstractions of mechanical materialism, freeing from the machinery of dialectical materialism, and even freeing it from the name 'matter'. In his writing of base materialism Bataille acts-out (in a psychoanalytic sense) a thought of freedom by freeing matter from its place, making it active with an active thinking. Matter as difference is never stable, and can never remain trapped within the closure of philosophy. The paradoxical result is that we cannot produce a base materialism, we cannot be base materialists, or exist in or as base matter, and the more we specify base materialism the more we cancel it out. This is the strangely destructive demand of base materialism, but it is a destruction which liberates possibilities, makes politics and philosophy unstable and liberates them from their current codes. It is not a task that can ever be completed, but while we cannot produce base materialism we can also never be done with base materialism, its legacy to us comes as a demand from Bataille: 'the introduction of a lawless intellectual series into the world of legitimate thought defines itself at the outset as the most arduous and audacious operation' (1985, p. 80).

Notes

1. This operation of splitting between high and low, and then the rejection of the low as base matter, is very similar to the unconscious mechanism of splitting in the work of Melanie Klein, which is a pre-Oedipal defence of the infant (see 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms' (1946) in Klein, 1986, pp. 175-200). I explore the analogy between Bataille and Klein further in research in progress.
2. See Allan Stoekl's introduction to Bataille (1985, note 18, p. xxv) for a suggestive comparison of Bataille's and Benjamin's materialism.

3. This is the tendency in Marxism often known as 'Autonomist Marxism', extending from council communism, to Socialism or Barbarism, and then on to the Situationists and given its name by Italian theorists and militants in the 1960s and 1970s (see Witheford, 1994, pp. 85-125). While this tendency of Marxism radically breaks with productivism in Marx, its stress on the value of the autonomy of the working class is in danger of restoring a metaphysics of subjectivity.
4. That this has led to Bataille being accused of fascism himself is an historical irony of the attempt to articulate an anti-fascism which did not attack fascism as a secure and pure discourse, or fascists as 'scum' or 'animals'. This resistance to the exclusionary logic on which fascism itself depends easily leads to charges of sympathy with fascism; Bataille was trying to resist this assumption.

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