Mass Movements, the Sacred, and Personhood in Ellul and Bataille: Parallel Sociological Analyses of Liberalism, Fascism, and Communism

Christian Roy
Independent Scholar, Canada

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Introduction

In a 1936 Esprit article portraying “Fascism as Liberalism’s Child”¹, Jacques Ellul noted how primitive spontaneity was worshipped by sophisticated intellectuals close to surrealism, who even strove to theorize it for its transgressive revolutionary potential. He was probably thinking of Georges Bataille, whose Paris-based circles (such as Acéphale) intersected with Ellul’s Bordeaux School of personalism² for over

¹ First circulated in typed form in the mimeographed internal newsletter of the local group of “friends of Esprit”, the Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d’Esprit, No. 4, “Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme” was relayed to the review’s readers in Esprit, No. 53, Feb. 1, 1937, 761-797, and reissued in Cahiers Jacques Ellul: Pour une critique de la société technicienne, No. 1: Les années personalistes (Bordeaux: Pixagram, 15 Dec. 2004), 113-137. This text was then translated by Jacob Rollison (and extensively revised by Christian Roy, whose suggested wordings are used here) with an introduction as Jacques Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism”, in David Gill and David Lovekin, eds. Political Illusion and Reality. Engaging the Prophetic Insights of Jacques Ellul. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications —an imprint of Wipf and Stock, 2018), 3-44.

a decade, albeit more via its co-founder Bernard Charbonneau. Despite a lack of direct interaction, striking parallels and illuminating contrasts can be drawn between Ellul’s essay on Fascism and Bataille’s “Sacred Sociology of Today’s World”, a 1938 lecture meant to wrap up previous ones of the first of two years of his Collège de sociologie sacrée, of which only the first two pages were initially located in compiling the original collection of texts from that crucible of French theory. (A fuller version has since been published in book form, but it is an online version that will be used here.) Though this intellectual circle is often seen as a touchstone of radical antifascism, this reputation bears re-examining from the angle of the broader sociological assumptions expressed by Bataille in this particular lecture. They can be related in many ways to those explicates by Ellul two years earlier to account for fascism as a thoroughly modern phenomenon that nevertheless retrieved such premodern features as fascinated Bataille. Ellul saw these as a regressive diversion that helped tighten the grip of technological society over the masses it generated under cover of liberal progress, hampering the emergence of conscious and active human personhood in their midst. His sociology and activism agree with his Barthian theology in contrasting holiness and personal integrity with the “holistic” social sacredness of all-too-human religion. Similarly, Bataille’s antifascism is of a piece with his atheistic, antihumanistic theories of religion, eroticism, literature and evil, in making uselessness autonomous, active, and militant as a sacred experience of waste. It is driven by a desire to be good for nothing but nothing—evil, then, in a sovereignty that is unserviceable for any use to the servile maintenance over time of any particularized state of being, least of all the State—against which, by contrast, Ellul and Charbonneau wanted to unite persons as concrete particulars rather than individual units lost in generic masses. By still favouring the latter’s incandescent fusion, Bataille’s quarrel with fascism articulates an intense rivalry over the same sacred wellsprings of mass violence as all interwar revolutionary mobilizations. They were simply less obfuscated by economic theory in fascist ones, allowing these to


I am currently working with German scholar Thomas Keller on an English version of his new book Anthropologien des Sakralen - Eine Geschichte des französischen Nonkonformismus (1937–1947) (Constance: Konstanz University Press, 2023), tracing the dialogue about the sacred after the “death of God” in wartime French circles like Bataille’s Collège d’études socratiques and Charbonneau’s Gascon personalists, as well as on an edition of the unpublished theoretical texts shared between the latter two groups.


better reveal what was at stake, namely an anthropological recovery of earlier modes of being, paradoxically driven by modern sociological developments. If Ellul and Bataille largely agreed on this diagnosis about the crisis of modern society, one that exposes its beleaguered liberal consensus as it is overtaken by totalitarian movements, they parted company over what would be a desirable outcome, because they rooted for different entities to take over in the wake of bourgeois humanism. For Ellul’s Gascon personalists, it is—to use an epithet coined by Charbonneau to refer to the ethical legacy of Christianity to which modern secular society remains indebted even after the “death of God”—the “post-Christian” person in the existential authenticity of his/her conscious singularity, while for Bataille’s Collège de sociologie, it is the formless flow of cosmic energy through expendable human forms back into the undifferentiated “sacred” ground of material immanence without project (in the sense of deferred gratification and planned futurity).

We will first see how they all recognized this drive in both modernist and antimodernist attempts to reactivate premodern experiences of a “primitive” sacred, in order to respectively defuse or foster them. The latter was the task of Bataille’s College of sacred sociology: no mere academic institute for the scientific study of the sacred as a social phenomenon, but a sacred community intended to prepare the ground for its virulent, deliberate distillation. Ellul by contrast turned sociology against the sacred, to deconstruct the causes and effects of its modern resurgence in new mass forms. Ellul and Bataille were nevertheless equally attentive to the mechanics and dynamics of the masses produced by capitalist and especially industrial society, applying to the study of a kind of social physics some categories they borrowed from the teachings of Émile Durkheim as father of the French sociological school. But far from following him in taking the sacred to be a sublimated common good which secularization desublimated into the rationale for the modern State, they viewed the latter’s new authoritarian incarnations as a return to the foundational violence of the sacred, overtaking liberalism’s attempt to neutralize, tame, or channel it. Bataille’s issue with fascism was that it was not violent enough (as mere militarism) and with communism that it was not “religious” enough (see the final section). Ellul and Charbonneau did not limit the sacred to its overtly sacrificial manifestations, which military, administrative or economic concerns obscured for the Collège de sociologie; for both friends also saw it playing out in the deceptively mundane cult of production to which modern regimes of all stripes sacrifice all other considerations, whatever higher values they may invoke to justify their rivalries. In revisiting contemporary forms of political religiosity decades later, Ellul would more openly draw on notions of the sacred informed by the Collège de sociologie, which had been mainstreamed in academia and the counterculture in the interval. Following the arc of his critical analysis down to our own contemporary society and its own culture wars, by uncovering its interwar roots in contested common ground between personalism and posthumanism, we may gain perspective on the existential stakes of renewed polarization as a further stage of the unfolding

of technological society. It will thus become clear that the longing to revert to fantasized noble savagery by accelerating the disintegrative mobilization of atomized masses was already part and parcel of that process as first elucidated by its most acute critics in 1930s France.

I. Sacred Primitivism Resurgent in Technological Society: A Liberal Phenomenon?

In “Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme”, Ellul views “the cult of the primitive” as “the normal and logical consequence of liberalism”’s “frantic quest” for novelty, i.e., for the new thing that—all things being equal—brashly pushes away everything already there to stand out and steal attention from one moment to the next, making for “a society where the intellectual is now only seen as an elegant and perfumed pariah”. Thus, “intellectuals, who sense their uselessness, who feel they have become ancillary phenomena among human phenomena, can only acquire prestige” by embracing this uselessness, making it a badge of honour as “despisers of this society—and if they push further than these useless invectives, they end up as cursed poets”8 “poètes maudits”, secure in the kind of literary prestige that would eventually accrue to the author of La part maudite and La haine de la poésie. Taking fascism as paradigmatic not just of revolutionary movements, but of the liberal society which they claimed to be parting from, Ellul does not seem to take too seriously the various banners under which sophisticated intellectuals “exalted the cult of strength and the cult of spontaneity. People went into raptures about the moral value of Negro brass sections and the spirituality of hot jazz—those who were incapable of spontaneity and strength were thrilled by spontaneity and strength as a foil to their refinement, as definitive proof of their understanding—and perhaps, for that matter, since not all of them were radically perverted, as regret for a paradise lost.”9 It is hard to tell who in particular Ellul might be alluding to, but Bataille’s first review Documents (1929-1931) does come to mind, with its juxtapositions of African-American pop culture with exotic ethnographic and archeological materials, where stylized Celtic designs and Aztec sacrifice are mobilized together with assorted fetishes as primal surges of mindless passion, to break open the prison of Western rationality and Judaeo-Christian morality in which intellectual readers were assumed to be caught.10 Such reductive dualities would be critiqued as cultural alibis of performative transgression within the smooth functioning of technological society by both Ellul11 and Charbonneau12, and are already located by them within the common liberal template from which

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9 Ibid., 24-25.
totalitarian trends arose. These answered a need for “something other … than this desolation, real action”, “which the world made impossible”. For “this spontaneity needed to be lived, not described in scholarly tomes. Now there were those philosophers who elevated this cult into a canon, giving it theoretical foundations.”

It is again hard to tell who Ellul might have had in mind at the time, but ironically, it is Bataille himself who, during and after the war, would write a *Somme athéologique* and other treatises about the inner experience of sacred violence. They would later be piously collected in his complete works at Gallimard as *canon* fodder for poststructuralist, posthumanist theory to this day. “Was this a philosophy? It matters not” to Ellul, ever skeptical of that exercise. He thus might not have minded either Bataille’s definition of philosophy in his lecture, as the study of being along the several levels of a composite ontology of the natural forms of existence, arranged from simpler elements up to that of sociology. If sociology runs parallel to theology in Ellul’s thinking, it is no less important in Bataille’s as philosophical servant of his atheological project.

Ellul held that intellectuals’ theories of sacred violence were “for strength and for the primitive roughly what Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is to the Middle Ages.” Yet “this did represent a fictional thought of the era, a desire, a useless but definite tendency, and fascism seized this to concretise this thought in a sense of its own, to give to this useless tendency an all-too evident efficacy.” Bataille’s aim was to reclaim from fascism this “useless tendency” *qua* useless, so as to liberate and cultivate its potential for untameable efficacy, sovereign and sacred as such, and thus impervious to capture by purposive militaristic orderliness, or any utilitarian project for that matter. Ellul agrees (bemoaning the fact along with Charbonneau and *Ordre Nouveau* personalists) that “the desire for adventure was hijacked. It was put into boots, made to march in step, made to witness beheadings with an axe and sworn to that it was thereby fulfilled.” And yet, bloody public executions, ritually riveting crowds into one composite being by vicarious sacrifice of a human scapegoat, are the fountainhead of the new society Bataille’s movement aims to create as antidote to fascism and capitalism with his *Acéphale* group. His lecture explicitly references Robespierre’s wish to have the January 21 celebration of Louis XVI’s decapitation on the Place de la Concorde in 1793 set as a high holiday of the Republic; it already was a sacred feast of this secret society devoted to losing heads at every level. Ellul might not have seen that much daylight between this fantasy of a bloodthirsty headless mass and the fascism it purported to counter, where “the taste for the primitive was captured, it was given garden parties, work camps were organized, there were choruses of spontaneous songs, violent speeches were made: this is what is called getting in touch with the concrete in our era.” That is, turning an abstract mass into a concrete one, as Ellul puts it in his text, in precise sociological terms that I will be examining more closely in another section.

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13 Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism”, 25.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
At a time when “it was becoming necessary to act” amidst widely acknowledged disorder, many “distraught young intellectuals refused to dirty their hands outside surrealism”\(^\text{18}\). This is of course just what Bataille, close to the movement’s ranks and concerns, was reacting against as a dissident, not just by celebrating the dirty in every sense in his writings, but also by calling for riotous bloodshed as an end in itself. For many in the generation of ‘non-conformists’ who came of age around 1930\(^\text{19}\), “all the old doctrines appeared identically abstract, identically valid and useless. People could rebuild the world from a postulate, but this was useless for living. What was lost was the discriminations between thoughts, between those that are alive and those that are dead” (which was the work of European revolutions as theorized by the German Protestant thinker Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, close to *Ordre Nouveau* personalists\(^\text{20}\); “—and yet it was necessary to act, and yet, under pain of acting like fools,” (“*comme des fous*”; as madmen, which, like uselessness, was not necessarily a bad thing for the surrealist crowd including Bataille—provided it was deliberate), “it was necessary to act with a semblance of reason, of coordination; what was needed was something immediately applicable to action and yet of higher origin than this action”, something ideal—or more likely, sacred. “In the face of thought disembodied from its role, there was now only one cry: death to irrelevantly complex discussions—we must act”\(^\text{21}\), and find doctrinal or sacred grounds after the fact. The forceful creation of a new situation or development is enough to justify it with a purposive focus that cuts all discussion short, bringing everything down to a liberatingly immediate demand for performance, be it ritual or technical, and often both. Premised on the same dissociation and arbitrary recombination of thought and action as the free market of goods and ideas, “fascism is thus the worthy son of liberalism.”

It keeps all the features of its father—but along with the features of its mother, technique. Liberal society was rolling along on itself and seemed balanced, when an element came up to trouble this balance: technique. Liberal society was not made for it; it reacted, trying at first to integrate, then to stop technique. It could not assimilate it because technique was in full progression, while society seemed fixed within bounds which it liked to think were unalterable. The adjustments liberal society made to technique broke apart one after another. It then tried to master them—but for this, it had to use violent means, and above all it had to know the point to which things had come. Liberal society was incapable of this stock-taking because its methods and its wishes were still too vague and

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 22.


\(^{21}\) Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 22.
This is no doubt a reductively sweeping statement (not a rare occurrence in Ellul’s writings!), because the liberal response to technique could just as well take the form of a New Deal that called in managerial experts to take command under the aegis of broadened executive and administrative powers. This is what happened, with blithe indifference to ideology, under a variety or even a succession of political regimes—witness the modernization of France by an ever-more entrenched “deep state” of technocratic experts, from the Popular Front through Vichy to the *Trente Glorieuses* of the postwar boom. But Ellul has a point if we keep in mind that it was precisely in the same terms that Martin Heidegger would retrospectively formulate the hopes he had briefly entertained about national-socialism, claiming in a 1935 lecture that “the inner truth and greatness of this movement” was “the encounter of planetarily determined technology and modern human beings.” Heidegger began to formulate the question regarding technology around the time of Hitler’s rise to power in 1932, when he gave a seminar on Ernst Jünger’s just-published book *Der Arbeiter* (“The Worker”, which this quote echoes). Charbonneau and Ellul had come to the same realization about technique by then; they were however more clear-eyed in recognizing that fascism “arose in the decadence of liberalism to confirm this decadence.”

Fascism temporarily froze liberal decadence in grotesque forms as a foil to the crisis of business as usual, and in no wise as an antidote to technique, which “has neither reasons nor any capability to stop. To regain control over it, man would have to take a distance from it himself—and it is not fascism that is going to help him there.” More likely, this one needful task involved leading individuals one by one to take a physical and critical distance from technicized city life (with all its modern comforts and liberal commonplaces), such as that provided by reflection camps in the countryside, as was the distinctive strategy of Bordeaux personalists, devised by Charbonneau, who tested it on his friend Ellul, with life-changing results.

With “the development of technique” as “its material condition,” along with “all the intellectual factors and all the spiritual resignations … which liberalism had long been preparing,” according to Ellul, “fascism will have to be essentially demagogic,” eschewing too startling a break with existing civilization in that “it will have to take up and proclaim all the commonplaces of liberalism, reassemble all the juridical and intellectual creations of liberalism and raise them to the level of institutions. It will have to present itself as the factor of reconciliation of all average individuals around

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22 Ibid., 43.
25 Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 43.
26 Ibid., 42-43.
an average individual who will represent them better than each of them,” as “a man who strives to gather in himself all the commonplaces that the crowd accepts, who catalogues all the virtues that the public demands and who thereby acquires a power, an influence over it. A common state of mind prior to fascism is a *sine qua non* condition of fascism. It is born of a certain complexity of the world,”27 as “the leader only comes into the world because the general mentality of the public demands this leader, calls for this hero in whom it wants to become incarnate. Fascism is not a creation of the leader; the leader is a creation of the pre-fascist mentality,” as it arose on its own “under the influences of the times; it is not a deliberate and subtle preparation to which Machiavellian schemers would subject these minds. It is made slowly because everyone listens to the same discourse, because everybody thinks of some impossible escape out of the world where he lives, because everyone is fed on myths and the ideal, because people are in search of a better balance by the sacrifice of all which impedes it, because people want to renounce their real responsibility, their real risk, their real thought in favour of a proclamation of responsibility, of a will to risk, of a simulacrum of common thought—all destined to hide lacks and gaps: people are then ready to accept the leader.”28

Fascism’s substitution of real risk, thought, and responsibility with their public performance by a charismatic leader relieves members of the modern mass of the anxiety of personal stances amidst their growing irrelevance to the standard workings of technological society. Crystallizing from pre-existing attitudes a vivid common focus above the fray, this sleight of hand ties in with Bataille’s concerns about the sacred sociology of today’s world, wherein the “sacred” does not refer only to the way his Collège conceives and practices sociology as a life discipline. For it is also sociology of the sacred, intended to distill the new forms that it takes in the modern world as a resurgence of society’s primal wellsprings. Thus, says Bataille, “the men of my generation have witnessed with their own eyes the foundation of three new monarchies—much more than dictatorships: veritable divine powers.” In the age of the Soviet Union, Fascist Italy, and the Third Reich, it therefore becomes difficult to continue to insist on living with the principles of the liberal era, “when such responsibilities seemed excluded. But it has become impossible, to the extent that one acknowledges the reality of comprehensive movements, to imagine obstacles having more weight than movements.”29 By “obstacles,” Bataille means individuals in their claim to persist and act as something distinct from society’s general movement. This brings ominous focus to Ellul’s description of a society that, even in its liberal phase, was all too ready to sacrifice any obstacle to the “better balance” its members sought through its mobilization for ideals such as progress, as war alone amply demonstrated. If Ellul sees this in terms of an abdication of the responsibility and agency he ascribes to human persons as such, Bataille seems reluctant to grant them in social theory this sovereignty he claims in personal practice. Both Ellul and Bataille exhibit a tension between their somewhat deterministic sociological

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27 Ibid., 16.
28 Ibid., 15.
assumptions and their respective a/theological stances on human emancipation, which however are not foregrounded in the texts I am comparing. It is to the details of the sociological frameworks articulated in them by each that I will now turn, beginning with Bataille.

II. Scales of Intensity: Mass Movements and Personal Agency

“If society is animated by a comprehensive movement that is distinct from the sum of the movements of each part, the only substantial study of society is the one that essentially looks at its comprehensive movement [mouvement d’ensemble].”

The typical example of such “comprehensive movements, animating elements of which unity is composed,” is “the life that animates our organism,” which either is or is not, as one is either dead or alive. There can likewise be no middle term between individual agency and society’s comprehensive movement. Oddly enough, Bataille illustrates his point by dwelling on the properties of a body part that both is “dead” and has a life of its own, in terms of motion and even post-mortem growth: hair.

Many individuals behave in relation to society with as much independence as a hair that is growing on our head: it is not the hairs that you attend to when dealing with one of your fellows. But it is more difficult to get rid of these immediate obstacles when it comes to society. For our way of perceiving society is such that we only ever see the individual hairs. But the virtue I deny to the individual is no less to be denied to the function, even if it is the economic function, and I would go even further, even if it is the political function. For the social movement can only affect the whole [ensemble] and it is as pointless to lock it up in any given place than to localize the soul in some gland. And if it is indeed a comprehensive movement, it goes without saying that it also cannot be reduced to one of this movement’s aspects such as the class struggle.

One wonders if technique as Ellul understands it would count as “merely” one aspect of society’s comprehensive movement. For it cuts across the whole range of social functions from the economic through the political to the religious, being ultimately the modern form of the sacred as the fascinating locus of society’s compelling power to cohere as one in a composite being, indifferent to the singularity of its component parts. Such a composite being is the supreme level of organization that the general movement of life takes on in Bataille’s sacred sociology. Its demands are independent of those of the “man among a thousand” (“l’homme entre mille”), no more relevant than those of a hair on the head, of the stomach in the body, of economic production (that plays the stomach’s role in the body politic), of class struggle or of electoral politics. These are second-order realities, only worth considering insofar as society’s true driving force may move through them in such a way as to transform them, even as they remain alien to what moves them.

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
Molecular structures do not result from the will, the needs or the conditions of atoms: there exists at most a vague conformity, a mere possibility of agreement, between the demands of atomic movement and those of molecular movement. And it is about the same with the social structure whose transformations occur without genuine agreement of individual demands but at least within such limits as may allow this agreement on the whole – agreement to be understood here of course as a capacity to put up with.32

And yet, it is largely the ascription of meaning, as internalized by individuals, that allows them to bear almost any social arrangement, as Nietzsche seemed to suggest: “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”33 For Charbonneau34, this implied that man has to be able to convince himself that he is free to fully adhere to any social order, based as it normally is on the abridgement or cancellation of his freedom; otherwise, it would be experienced as blind force, in a fate worse than death: slavery as the loss of agency along with face, and reduction to a cell in another’s body. Identifying with the deified head of the body politic is often all that is needed to turn this sorry fate into a splendid destiny: an old trick that is fascism’s calling card. Ellul shares this view of inalienable personal agency that needs to be placated in order to be fully subjugated in the service of an overarching collective entity, through a variety of mediations (such as mass media) that technique has come to subsume in the modern world, with an overwhelming dynamics and self-fulfilling agenda of its own. Technique in all its forms increasingly curtails but can never quite cancel the possibility of a free human response (e.g., to the revealed Word of God), nor that of initiating free relational spaces between self-aware persons to nurture and maintain resistance to social conditionings, and of course also as an end in itself for Bordeaux personalists.

Such intentional communities were also central to the Collège de sociologie’s project but were somehow conceived as springboards into an unmediated flux beyond (or prior to) individuation and organic life: a sovereignty in which the comprehensive movement of the social body was embraced, consummated and consumed as that of the cosmos itself, rather than resisted for the sake of singular persons in any other capacity than as its disposable vectors. For all his reputation as a pessimistic technological (i.e., sociological) determinist, Ellul assumed a potential for personal autonomy in the beings caught up in it, whereas Bataille, for all the heedless radicalism of his headless self-sovereignty, seemed to deny the reality of its individual bearers within the general flow of things and forces. He can thus wonder “what protest drawn from existence could be made if we state that individuals submit to a social movement sometimes joyfully and often against their will but that they do not determine it. It is society’s comprehensive movement that determines itself: its

32 Ibid.
33 "Hat man sein warum? des Lebens, so verträgt man sich fast mit jedem wie?" —Friedrich Nietzsche, "Maxims and Arrows" § 1.12, Twilight of the Idols (1888).
demands are the laws of its own development.” Ellul would say similar things about technique, only as a contingent modern configuration of society, heightening its self-sacralizing impulse at the expense of concrete human subjects, whose true calling was to resist this perennial process, rather than push it to its outrageous limit and beyond, in fantasized sacrificial ecstasies of the kind Bataille earnestly entertained.

This being said, they would have agreed that mainstream discourses such as those filling the media could tell them nothing about the way society worked, except as symptoms. Bataille stressed that the vision he was articulating demanded the outright rejection of “the entirety [l’ensemble] of the hasty, simplistic ideas from which judgments about contemporary society are built, that is for us those about what is essential in life,” so that “you must reject outright all the principles you have accepted just by speaking with your contemporaries and reading their newspapers.” Consistency between one’s thought and its consequences was a matter of life and death in those perilous days, Bataille maintained. Bordeaux personalists could not have agreed more. In the summer of 1939, at their second general camp as a distinct regional movement, Bernard Charbonneau solemnly swore that he would never allow himself to take part in a modern war. (He would however be sorely tempted to join guerilla war in the Resistance as a still human experience of personal risk, which for him lost its interest as soon as it was regimented into units of foot soldiers in a global, industrial war effort whose outcome was by then a foregone conclusion, and had always been bound to seal technique’s triumph no matter which side won.) As he wrote in the context of the Spanish Civil War: “To defeat fascism, it is necessary to wage technical war, but a society organized for technical war is a fascist society.” This is why communists had to prevail over anarchist elements in a Republican government; for once modern war has set in, “it becomes necessary to centralize all defence, to organize factories, to submit soldiers to a single leadership, because only a machine can struggle against ruthless machines.” French military intervention against fascism in Spain was thus to be opposed because “war can only precipitate the crystallization of liberal democracy into a fascist type,” not to mention that “we need our skin to defend and spread personalism” as the only human alternative to all these regimes.

They all had in common mass mobilization not just of bodies, but of minds through propaganda, so that, with Ellul, Charbonneau saw those dynamics already at work in peacetime in the pre-fascist mentality cultivated by mass media, subtly gearing liberal mass societies to internalize their own conformist manipulation by Technique, Money, and the State. They tried to counter this juggernaut by launching a network of personalist press clubs at a dedicated camp around 1938 in a

35 Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain”.
37 Bernard Charbonneau, “L’Échec du Front Populaire Échec du réformisme”. Mimeographed typescript, ca. 1937. I quote from my own copies of documents found among the papers of Bernard Charbonneau, which were bequeathed after his death to the library of the Institut d’études politiques of the University of Bordeaux.
hamlet called La Chabanne near Cambes on the River Garonne, some 20 kms upstream of Bordeaux.

Introducing his “Observations on the Press Clubs,” Charbonneau says they “must exist because there is a problem of the press that is put to us by our personalist consciousness”; for “in a society where a knowledge of reality becomes impossible, where people only react to (im)printed formulas, fascism only expresses the way things are” in endlessly plastic liberal societies already, as Jacques Ellul had maintained in “Le fascisme, fils du libéralisme”. Indeed, the latter seems to be the “longer study” said to be required to demonstrate point 14ter of their 1935 joint outline for a personalist manifesto, about the “fatalité du fascisme” as one of many “fatalités” that characterized modern society, alongside its unprecedented “gigantism”. According to point 14, these fate-like autonomous processes were “not of a superior or spiritual order (there was no predestination)”, but “only the expression of certain material combinations that operated without the need for the human will to intervene.” These processes thus resembled patterns of a comprehensive movement beyond human scale in Bataille’s understanding of the dynamics of modern society, that made it give rise to new collective bodies as in fascism. Ellul and Charbonneau listed “a few aspects of liberalism” as “the elements which, propelled by production technique, of necessity [fatalement] give rise to fascism, whatever parties may attempt against that,” namely:

deification of the State by way of the common good, —social—
democracy through the good done to workers —quiet and insured
middle-class ideal—romanticism of false risk and false heroism—
participation in masses (masses of the newspaper, of the wireless, of
cinema, of work, etc.), taste for abstract force—for everything that is
exerted through a third party …

In contrast to such aggregation and abdication as liberalism cultivated and fascism systematized, Charbonneau held that “human society must serve its members’ material and spiritual needs”, which can only be expressed by a common opinion, arising from the comparison of personal experiences, as opposed to public opinion, that of a mass, of the kind manufactured by the press, which everyone talks about. Made for average people to consolidate average opinion, it does not appeal to will or to

38 Bernard Charbonneau, “Pour la constitution d’un groupe d’information”. Mimeographed typescript, ca. 1938.
40 Bernard Charbonneau, “Pour la constitution d’un groupe d’information”. This distinction would be carried over in Bernard Charbonneau’s La Société médiatisée (self-published, 1986; Paris: R & N, 2021) in the guise of a mistrust of publicity, as indeed of any large-scale publication as a making-public, tailoring material to a public as a performance for a public, suspect as such. See my ongoing crowdfunded translation of this book at https://www.patreon.com/christianroymedia.
reflection, but to sensations, of three closely tied kinds: sensationalism as such, the erotic, the culturally reactionary, jointly getting persons to identify with a mass-produced social type. Even the political paper’s reader does not seek information but is content to find pleasure in a reliable supply of familiar images and formulas. The reader of the Communist daily L’Humanité is in this little different from that of the right-wing Paris-Soir, since party papers are then becoming ever-more sensationalistic in character. As Ellul wrote about “Measured action in Revolution” in the first issue of the regional newsletter of personalist groups in Southwestern France, “to avert war, I am counting more on ten people who know each other well than on Paris-Soir’s 150,000 readers who will all think the same.” For “if we have precisely taken the measure of our task —that there has never been a huger one in history”—and its demands, without romanticism, enthusiasm, or hope, “we will be the only ones at the crucial moment not to be disoriented and rushed amidst explosions, not to lose our heads, and to see clearly —Our action must be at once humble and extraordinary”—, i.e., no more and no less than that which personalist doctrine demanded. Thus, “when, each in our own town, we will have attacked by every means insurance or advertising, or credit, or interest, both in their technique and in their psychology, we will have struck a world in its vital parts and more surely than the assassin of Hitler or Stalin.” There will thus be no need for a “titanic upheaval, maybe a slight spasm at most but that is enough to stop the heart”—41, making room for healthy new life on a more modest, human scale. Similarly, as Charbonneau pointed out, “amidst the flow of events, in an empty room where a few men gather, there is a moment where the new society is born from zero”, “when revolutionary action is one with personal action” as “action de présence”, a duty as a matter of conscience; “but at the basis of any movement there is not so much a powerful personality as a narrow society with an intense life. (Apostles, group of reformers, the few friends around Lenin and Hitler.)” From this nucleus, “a new movement manifests its vitality through the creation of autonomous institutions, to the extent that the movement’s spirit is strong it is embodied in those common works, to create autonomous institutions is not to perfect an organization” designed to tally and manage masses of members that no shared experience brings together as living communities.42 Also fascinated by “narrow societies with an intense life”, of the kind that he studied along with Roger Caillois (active religious orders, secret societies, the Ku Klux Klan, the SS, etc.), as crucibles of social action, Georges Bataille likewise warns against a focus on Hitler as a target to defeat fascism, for the dictator has no existence of his own other than as “the expression of the crowds gravitating around him.”43 But what matters in his view is that spiral movement, of like nature as that of a galaxy or of any vortex of loose materials.

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42 Untitled typescript accompanying the text “Réformisme et action révolutionnaire” in Charbonneau’s papers.
43 Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”

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Who would pretend to make this innocent, this stupid man among a thousand responsible in Germany for what writhes under the scalp of Adolf Hitler? Currents of an extreme intensity move through him as through any other of which he understands but little, which he has not chosen and the extent of whose consequences he can hardly grasp. Now what I insistently ask is that these currents be studied and that we stop talking about Adolf Hitler or the men on the street [hommes entre mille] who triumphally hail him today.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Collège de sociologie’s focus was on these flows and their dynamics for their own sake as potential loci of the sacred, whereas Gascon personalists were interested in the “structures” that expressed and shaped them, as a way of knowing the enemy of the person. (Along with “fatalités”, both can be correlated to what Ellul would call, using a Paulinian phrase, “principalities and powers” in his theological writings\footnote{See the recent special issue of \textit{Ellul Forum} 69 (2022); “Principalities and Powers,” including the first two chapters of Marva Dawn’s Notre Dame University dissertation on the topic, “The Concept of ‘the Principalities and Powers’ in the Works of Jacques Ellul”, whose “first purpose is to demonstrate”, from scattered comments in Ellul’s later works and from his first three articles in \textit{Foi \& Vie}, that the “concept of ‘the principalities and powers’ provides a bridge between Ellul’s two major tracks of thinking”: the sociological and the theological, “and a key for interpreting his work.”\textnormal{(29) However, her postwar focus causes Dawn to refer to the “use of the term \textit{structures} and later of the word \textit{forces} as Ellul’s earliest designation for the powers”\textnormal{(36)}, when in fact, it is under the untranslatable name of \textit{fatalités} that they unmistakably appear in internal newsletters of the personalist revolutionary groups led by Charbonneau and Ellul in Southwestern France over a decade earlier, prior to the sharp distinction and implicit correlation between the sociological and theological streams of Ellul’s official publications.}} of current events, as the contest of individual or partisan vectors of these unexamined common patterns. That bone of contention led many in the Southwest to break away from the national \textit{Esprit} movement and join together with local \textit{Ordre Nouveau} militants under Charbonneau’s regional leadership with its own distinctive approach, centered on practical changes in daily life. Bataille by contrast hoped to trigger what Ellul had called a “titanic upheaval”, namely a kind of bloody Cultural Revolution against culture, minus Mao, plus Sade, only through the contagious example of the select circles he gathered. This could occasionally make him sound like personalists with their wager on a few good men in conscious nuclei of a new way of life. Thus, when facing the aftermath of the Munich Crisis, at a December 13, 1938 meeting of the Collège de sociologie on “The Structure of Democracies”, he could talk publicly of the value of total heroic sacrifice to the absolute of one’s Truth as that of God (!) if citizens worked toward an adaptation of institutions to reflect

\footnote{See Jacques Ellul. \textit{L’Illusion politique} (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1965; La Table Ronde, 2018).}
“man’s royal freedom”. He contrasted this with the democratic public’s readiness to go from military mobilization to hailing appeasement within a couple of days, switching from war to peace, from Popular Front to National Front, as the liberal State dictated. “There is man’s true resignation, this obliteration of the person who expects the solution to come from someone other than oneself.” Ellul had long had a related reasoning about the liberal equivalence of anything with its opposite, as long as the State that claims to stand for the people leads the dance. He saw this as a pre-fascist mentality, in that it prepares the ground for the real thing once the State drops the empty show of alternating political teams at the helm.

The convictions shared by Ellul and Charbonneau about the primacy of personal agency, even under technological mass conditions, enabled them to be more proactive about an issue Bataille described in similar-sounding terms: that of mass media. Hence the need for personalist press clubs, whose members, leaning on “a total conception of man which the press lacks”, were instructed “not to place themselves at the level of politics, not to maintain a chronicle of big lies”, but rather “to examine all forms of the press, to learn to be free readers vis-à-vis the newspaper.” Charbonneau’s call to the founding meeting at La Chabanne, titled “For the Constitution of an Information Group”, starts by identifying as “one of the most worrisome facts of our time” the way “the political opinion of individuals” is manufactured by the interests controlling access to the increasingly varied and distant facts on which it depends now that “oral information only plays a secondary role.” For even in areas where people could get relevant knowledge on their own, they still turn to the newspaper as a default source. This is true for successive waves of modern media technologies, from the radio to cinema, be they under the sway of economic interests, of the State, or of parties. “The only difference between capitalist democracies and totalitarian regimes is that in the former case, several propagandas seek to hoodwink the reader, whereas in the latter case, the State keeps that monopoly.” The structures hardly differ, regardless of rhetorical contrasts, so that, as Ellul wryly notes, “nobody is shocked to see insurance companies developing in those countries where the values of risk are extolled, to see a gigantic bureaucratic apparatus where various Führers proclaim their hatred of everything to do with administration, and to hear talk of the primitive and wild man, of the pure blond barbarian by means of the radio.” Ellul applies the critical method of discourse analysis devised with Charbonneau as a uniquely personalist revolutionary tactic: the exegesis of commonplaces. They even preface their “definition of society”, point 12 of their 1935 manifesto, by stating that “it is the result of exegesis of the commonplaces of this society, that is of facts that are unimportant and sentences that

47 From writer Bertrand d’Astorg’s report on that session, “La structure des démocraties,” for No. 5 of Les nouvelles lettres, as it appears in Hollier, op. cit., 336-7.
48 Charbonneau, “Pour la constitution d’un groupe d’information.”
are innocuous by themselves, but that are the expression of ideological currents common to all who make up society, that everyone accepts, and that thereby express a general state of mind (e.g., the ad that says: a million men cannot be wrong: importance of the crowd, of numbers, of the quantitative, etc.)”

By that standard, Ellul feels,

“We now need only do a brief exegesis of the commonplaces of fascism to show that it is indeed the same dead gods that fascism and liberalism are using. The same formulas are common for both. Just as liberal spiritualism demanded a faith in reason, and from there moved to call for only an abstract faith, so fascism proclaims a revolt against science, a revolt against matter—a quest for happiness in sacrifice, etc.: but in both cases, it is really what is material that is the foundation of life.”

While Bataille is wary of media materials that peddle such man-on-the-street commonplaces, he seems to allow for the kind of sociological analysis that Ellul and Charbonneau subject them to.

But newspapers can only be queried to the extent that they are instructive about the significant currents of the social movement, which is to say that their data must be rigorously processed. And the man among a thousand must be viewed not so much as a source of movement but as an obstacle to currents that will necessarily have to pass through him. What seems to me devoid of meaning in this respect is to go and query, or at least silently look at the man in a thousand; it is to re-enter the atmosphere of the newspapers’ political information and to support the different representations that form under these conditions over against representations drawn from the contemplation of the comprehensive movement, such as what plays out in tragedy and the army. One might as well use X-rays to look for the desires stirring up a human being.

This suggests what Bataille’s answer would be to the “general problem” stated in point 4 of Ellul and Charbonneau’s personalist manifesto, as to whether “the value of man resides in the value of a man taken randomly in society”, like Bataille’s man among a thousand, “or in the value of the society in which a man lives.” The question is:

If, in short, society (whatever its abstract or practical but general defects) receives its value from the men of which it is composed, taken one by one, or if men all receive as a package [d’un bloc], on account of their adherence to a society, the abstract and general qualities foreseen for this society.

51 Bernard Charbonneau and Jacques Ellul, “Directives pour un manifeste personneliste,” 52-53.
52 Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 22.
53 Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”
54 Charbonneau and Ellul, “Directives pour un manifeste personneliste,” 50.
To Bataille, it was less a matter of awakening the conscious citizen in the normally passive news consumer shaped by commonplaces (as Ellul and Charbonneau hoped to do) than of cancelling the residual inertia of individuated beings as atoms within a fluid mass medium—not of mere information but of embodied social energy. For individuals stood in the way of the total mobilization of society as Émile Durkheim’s Grand Étre, the real object of religion in his classic sociological theory, which for Bataille became a greater being than any totalitarian movement could conjure up by militant, military methods. Fascism was not violent, not religious enough compared to the headless “body without organs” (to borrow Artaud’s phrase) of the tragic lynch mob, itching to come to a head around sacrificial victims. Its target was anything settled in a stable status, or anyone standing in the way of the contagious fusional communion that a secret society like Acephale was meant to foster and unleash against civilization. This was the new founding myth he was working out with a handful of fellow conspirators, the hidden esoteric side of an enterprise fronted by the more public stance of committed scientific investigation represented by the Collège de sociologie sacrée. Even there, Bataille readily announced that its aim was to recover “the equivalent of community in the guise of a universal god so as to endlessly extend sacrificial orgy,” fusing Dionysus and the crucified as models of a tragic host of bacchants and martyrs. For Ellul by contrast, writing over four decades later amidst a revival of Bataillean themes, “one must begin by destroying myths and beliefs” as the stuff of “a kind of surreal world which is the sine qua non of alienation” to passive social mobilization, the opposite of personal confrontation with the real world’s limitations as locus of both freedom and oppression. Eschewing “critical standards”, belief is a “childish and dangerous kind of behavior” that “can’t be reasoned with or contradicted”, as a sovereign passion then in Bataille’s sense; for as already implied in Ellul’s 1936 article, Bataille surely exemplifies how belief “overwhelms the minds of philosophers, leading them to postulate a solid foundation in the void or the universal dominion of absurdity.” It underwrites “the contemporary passion for destruction”, the transgressive Dionysian “madness of the bacchantes” which, “like the cultural revolution in China, spares nothing. Both are models of belief” in altered states fueled by alternate facts, “steering ever more directly toward death, nothingness, the void, instead of toward the gentle lure of a real, freely chosen good” in contrast to faith as a responsible commitment to an unobjectifiable truth to be embodied in a critical wrestling with concrete reality. For Ellul, the “free play” of belief is only more blatantly revealed by “this wave of nihilism” he describes in terms befitting Bataille’s erotic mysticism of evil, namely as “the negation of humanity and the undertow pulling it out into the unnamable, in the literal sense of the world.” Even though he is “not talking about exceptional cases”

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57 Ibid., 47.
58 Ibid., 45.
59 Ibid., 46.
like “the mass delirium of Hitlerism”\textsuperscript{60}, Ellul describes this belief in “a possible escape into annihilation”\textsuperscript{61} in terms of the same mass dynamics Bataille had spelled out to account for fascism, except that, far from celebrating this whirlpool, he can write:

I’m alarmed by this submissive willingness to let oneself be carried along by the lethal flood waters of the crowd, of a system, a whole society, or a maelstrom of images and sounds; to conform, collapse, find one’s identity by losing oneself, to be other than oneself by being nothing at all.\textsuperscript{62}

In the context of pre-war European society, if Bataille conceded it was impossible “to neglect these newspapers and this man among a thousand”, it was to raise the “fundamental problem immediately tied” to the principles he formulated about the material components (particles or people) of composite entities such as society, and the intensity of their drive to lose themselves in the vortex of the latter’s comprehensive movement. “Sometimes the movement of composition is so strong that matter (i.e., individuals and their specific needs) only counters it with a light obstacle, barely a brake. Sometimes the movement is weak and matter weighs heavily.” Since the “intensity of the movement that gathers men” waxes and wanes, the central issue of today’s world is to know to what phase it belongs. “In other words, do the man among a thousand and the newspapers’ vulgar representations that also elude the social comprehensive movement have more or less importance than in former times?” Bataille’s answer is to welcome the postwar intensification of social aggregates, even though “it goes without saying that the intensity of the sacred foci \textit{[foyers sacrés]} that still exist today has decreased: that the Church, the nobility, the monarchy have lost nearly all their power to convince.”\textsuperscript{63} Yet such cases are not enough “to conclude that the intensity of a society’s comprehensive movement is decreasing”, since, after its apogee, “any sacred institution declines in a constant manner. It can grow in extent even as it decreases in intensity, but this is not what matters.” More that “the birth of new institutions can accompany their decline.”\textsuperscript{64} This did not really happen in the West after the Middle Ages until the Great War, in whose wake there arose “powerful movements generating foci of extreme intensity. The current state could therefore be located a little beyond the lowest point of decline.”\textsuperscript{65} Over the previous twenty years, the man on the street and his small interests had been shown to be of little weight when caught in an intense movement like a molecule in a strong wave. Even in the unlikely event that there was to be no new wave after those of communism and fascism, it was now clear that no wall was keeping out such upsurges of the sacred. “The coast is clear: what superficial attention represents as reality is but the expression of heaviness, and earthly heaviness

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 50.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 46-47.
\textsuperscript{63} Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
has always been powerless against life.”

For “the comprehensive movement’s waning in intensity does not mean that, generally speaking, inertia is spreading in society.”

For one thing, Bataille maintained, there was no doubt that current civilization was experiencing unrest “at least as great as that of the Middle Ages.” But it had to be distinguished from the comprehensive movement, as a disintegrative process due to its lessened intensity, which allowed individual and especially functional movements to increase and stand out more and more against the backdrop of the “mouvement d’ensemble”. Bataille was reluctant to portray “a growing intensity of individual movements” as a “phenomenon of decadence”; a life of unbridled passion was what he stood for after all. “But the growing intensity of functional movements that are by definition servile, by definition subordinate, is far more serious. That means that the useful prevails little by little over existence, that existence is being slowly subordinated and enslaved.”

Under these conditions, dis-integrated individuals only escape the compulsion inherent in being part of the “mouvement d’ensemble” to enter the gravitational field of some functional movement. In the Middle Ages, what Bataille calls “mouvement fonctionnel corresponded to corporations, to the various trade guilds”, which were also more than that, as total, “genuine existences gravitating around a sacred focus analogous to that of society as a whole. They could have a shrine, a sacred patron, in the guise of a saint (the Latin word sanctus means sacred), festivals of a religious character. They were not even clearly distinguished from the secret societies, the brotherhoods” such as freemasonry, on which Bataille had given a lecture to the Collège de sociologie sacrée on March 19, 1938, and that remained a model for both its exoteric and esoteric ventures. By borrowing their existential themes from society as a whole (“la société globale”), “corporations acknowledged their subordinate character insofar as their action was functional but, at the same time, they partook by their emblems and their festivals in society’s total existence, its mouvement d’ensemble.” This is what the trade guilds that succeeded corporations ceased to do, “denying any reality to the comprehensive existence they had used to work for.” Bataille did not want to be confused with a reactionary who defends the past, but still wanted to lament this development as a “deplorable deficit”, leading workers in the most general sense to make of work itself the goal of human activity, unsubordinated to any reality outside it (as Ellul too deplored in his lifelong critique of the religion of work). “In other words, they confused function with existence”, drawing human life into the realm of economics, which for Bataille was that of servitude. Under these conditions, the individual only escaped the “mouvement d’ensemble social” to enter into an equally great servitude, fusing with a hypertrophic functional movement, whose mere empty automatism was a poor substitute for full existence.

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
III. The Pre-Fascist Mentality Viewed Through the Prism of Durkheim’s Two Forms of Social Solidarity

For Bataille, existence can only be full inasmuch as it ceases to be partial, reaching beyond individuality or its maintenance through function as indirect service of something else. This fullness is only approached when passionately heightened individuality flips into unmediated communion with the social whole as “conscience collective”, to use Émile Durkheim’s term about the elemental, undifferentiated form of being that comes to the fore in premodern anthropological conditions, first and foremost as the sacred. Bataille agrees in this with Roger Caillois, who spoke of neo-organicism and biologism in his November 20, 1937 inaugural lecture on “sacred sociology”, preceding Bataille’s take on the relationship between “society”, “organism”, and “being”. Both Collège founders claim to follow Durkheim in “seeing in the social fact something other than the sum total of individual actions.” In his six lectures since November 1937, Bataille had tried to “represent society as a field of forces whose passage can admittedly be detected in us, but of forces at any rate exterior to the needs and the conscious will of each individual.”

I have emphasized the fact that at each degree of beings, from the atom to the molecule, from the polymolecular formation to the micellar formation, from the cell to the organism and to society, the compositions are different from the sum of components, in that a comprehensive movement [mouvement d’ensemble] gathers them.

Life is not a distinct principle from this standpoint that “topples the wall that used to separate the organic world from the inorganic world, life from so-called inert matter”—hence the sustained use of hair, a distributed body part that is neither alive nor dead, as an analogy for the relationship between individuals and society. The former’s vital propensity to be subsumed in the latter’s broader sweep is what allows Bataille to celebrate tragic death as fusional loss in that human phase of the general economy of cosmic immanence’s glorious wastage. It could also take the privileged shape of ritual self-sacrifice like that for which Bataille was keen to volunteer as willing victim for his Acéphale secret society, if only willing executioners had also been found among other members. There are echoes of Bataille’s death wish in Ellul’s focus, in a chapter entitled “Believing in Death”, on “the man whom some propose as a model and contemporary hero—Yukio Mishima. Blessed with so many gifts” and worldly prestige as a bold literary explorer of mystical realms of eroticized

70 See the introduction and chapter one of Alexander Irwin’s book on Bataille for an extensive discussion of his debt to the sociology of Émile Durkheim, that makes one suspect he simply borrowed from its opposition of the right (“regal”) and left (“sinister”) sacred the two terms of a dichotomy within the sacred (where the former supports and the latter disrupts the integrity of the social whole) that characterized his own “heterological” theory of it, as I suggested in my review essay “Alexander Irwin, Saints of the Impossible: Bataille, Weil, and the Politics of the Sacred. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002,”H-France Review, Vol. 3, No. 131 (November 2003): 583, http://h-france.net/vol3reviews/roy.html.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.
transgression akin to Bataille’s fantasies, Mishima was itching to waste it all in a long-planned, carefully choreographed blaze of glory. He finally “committed ritual suicide in 1970” as part of a symbolic coup attempt by his personal death cult: the paramilitary Shield Society, “thus ending his combat against the mediocrity of our time”; as though “the only way to bear witness” to “ancient heroic values” was “by following them through the act of hara-kiri” rather than seeking to find concrete ways of meaningfully embodying them in alternate social forms suited to a new context. Such a down-to-earth orientation, so indispensable to Gascon personalists, was likewise lacking from Bataille’s prewar endeavours. There, the esoteric sacrificial mystique of Acéphale was only complemented by the exoteric doctrinal research of the Collège de sociologie sacrée.

Within this theoretical framework, if “existence undergoes a change in nature every time it goes from one plane of composition to the plane of composition above it”, “from one end of natural forms to the other, beings would occur as the composition of simpler elements and sociology would only be one of the chapters, exactly the terminal chapter, of composite ontology, of the study of composite beings to which would boil down the study of being – that is, in other words, philosophy.” Having as its horizon the study of that total, supreme being that is the Great Being of society, sociology also acquires the sacred character of a religion for Bataille. Theory is thus groundwork for society to become religious as such, without transcendence or revelation, through an inner experience of violent upheaval. This is what Bataille means by revolution (in both a molecular and an emotional sense, as in the Hungarian word for it: forradalom, lit. “boiling water, seething”), more than any specific institutional change per se, such as the alternative social arrangements personalists sought to initiate to foster particularized human existence at every level.

Bataille is adding a heavy normative emphasis of his own to a physicalist representation of the relation between individual and society that, like Ellul as we shall see, he found in Durkheim’s sociology, namely the distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. Durkheim contrasts “two forms of consciousness: one which is common to our group as a whole, which, consequently, is not ourself, but society living and acting within us; the other, on the other hand, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual.”

Solidarity which comes from resemblance is at its maximum when the conscience collective completely envelops our whole consciousness and coincides in all points with it. But, at that moment, our individuality is nil. It can develop only if the community takes a lesser part of us. There are, here, two contrary forces, one centripetal, the other centrifugal, which cannot flourish at the same time. … If we have a strong inclination to think and act for ourselves, we cannot be as strongly inclined to think and act as others do. … Moreover, at the moment when this latter

73 Ellul, Living Faith, 46.
74 Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”
solidarity exercises its force, our personality vanishes, by definition, one might say, for we are no longer ourselves, but the collective being. The social molecules which cohere in this way can act together only in so far as they have no action of their own, as with the molecules of inorganic bodies. That is why we propose to call this form of solidarity ‘mechanical’. The term does not signify that it is produced by mechanical and artificial means. We call it that only by analogy to the cohesion which unites the elements of an inorganic body, as contrasted to that which forms a unity out of the elements of a living body.\textsuperscript{76}

The latter is termed organic because its individualized cells are arranged into complementary, mutually dependent functional groupings called organs, that make a body cohere only insofar as that particular kind of solidarity of distinct parts is maintained within it at all interrelated levels As “a system of differentiated and specialised functions which are united in definite relationships”\textsuperscript{77}, it can be contrasted with a fluid lump only held together by inertia and momentum, like water mechanically gathering at the bottom of a spinning pail. Durkheim insisted that “we cannot, at one and the same time, develop ourselves in two opposite senses”\textsuperscript{78} even though these “two societies” are “two aspects of one and the same reality”\textsuperscript{79}. Ellul however denied this dilemma, as a personalist for whom the development of individuality went hand in hand with the conscious building of both vernacular and voluntary community — something the review \textit{Esprit} saw fit to emphasize by claiming to stand for “communitarian personalism”, but which went without saying in the Ordre Nouveau group, whose “revolutionary” concept of “personalism” \textit{Esprit} took over after initial misgivings, having added this pleonastic proviso to avoid any confusion with individualism.\textsuperscript{80} In the Gascon personalists’ 1938 Peyranère camp, where they defined their own distinctive profile after splitting from the national \textit{Esprit} movement, Ellul may have contributed to “Reflections and Proposals on Community”, where, after a section on “Religious life” stated it could be created by a group of men (unlike a religion), a section on “Solitude” underlined its solidarity with Community:

In a society such as ours where dissociation is in full swing, where man is at once very atomised and very collectivised, a spiritual life can only take shape in opposition to this world, being marked by solitude and by community.

\textsuperscript{76} Id.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 138.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 139.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 138.

The choice of one’s solitude belongs to each one of us. It can take on a mystical character as much as the form of pure meditation.

It is in solitary meditation that man reaches his intimacy and the secret of his being.\textsuperscript{81} Bataille would develop his own method of meditation as a path of inner experience during the war, in a context of dialogue with the Peyranère group’s Bernard Charbonneau and Pierre Prévost, an Ordre Nouveau militant who was the linchpin between these circles. But before the war, Bataille’s emphasis was on reaching intimacy with one’s being in fusional continuity with the Great Being of society as an ebullient flow, in sacrificial paroxysms where the reified confines of individuality gave out in the communicating vessels of conscience collective. In Durkheimian terms, a way back to the primitive conditions of intensified mechanical solidarity in communion with universal flow was found as the only escape from the individual’s alienation to specialized functions and self-identity in liberalism’s purportedly organic society. By contrast, for Ellul, “\textit{there is no opposition between individualism (or rather personalism) and universalism, as the fascisms would have it. One cannot separate the individual from the whole social group and the evolution of this group.}”\textsuperscript{82} To presume an either/or choice between individual conscience and conscience collective, and to only respect the former as a disposable springboard to the latter, was to remain beholden to a liberal paradigm Durkheim himself had striven to overcome in his approach to socialism (as opposed to communism, the default option of radical intellectuals around Bataille). As Ellul explained:

To have attempted this separation and wanted to consider the individual in himself, on the one hand, and the society in itself on the other, was tantamount, within an artificial ideology, to separating two necessary elements of a synthesis. One lost sight at that point of the existence of this synthesis, and these detached elements were viewed as though they had a life of their own, identical to their real life. It was supposed that the individual taken in his pure state was identical to the individual immersed in society—and the laws that were derived by reasoning about this isolated individual were thought to rightfully apply to the social individual. The same error, only in reverse, was happening with society: a society without people, living by and for itself and which revealed laws of the social body without repercussions, it seemed, on the individuals composing it. When fascism proclaimed the superiority of the social body and of the State, it was merely asserting more forcefully this separation that liberalism has prepared in favour of the individual.\textsuperscript{83}

Let us recall that two kinds of solidarity need to be distinguished (with Durkheim, I take the distinction under its most primitive form): a mechanical solidarity and an organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity, the individual is coagulated to society, directly, with identical prejudices;

\textsuperscript{81} “Réflexions et propositions sur la communauté”. Typescript page.
\textsuperscript{82} Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 37-38.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 38.
he almost completely alienates his personality in favour of society—and the word ‘alienate’ seems false because it is not by a voluntary act, but by his very nature that the individual thus finds himself subject to society. It is not a question of a choice but of a state; at this moment, the individual is as it were unaware of himself; he is part of a collective consciousness of which he is but a momentary expression.

The collective consciousness thus plays a double role in relation to the individual conscience: on the one hand, it plays the role of a kind of indisputable and transcendent natural law which completely dominates individuals, for whom it is a kind of untouchable truth; on the other hand, it totally integrates the individual consciences and leaves them no freedom of action and of judgement. They cannot judge except via the criteria of the collective consciousness. In short, this mechanical solidarity is characterized by three features: first of all, by the fact that the individual is directly tied to the society as a whole, and this without intermediaries; then by the fact that all his materials and methods of thought are provided to him by the collective consciousness; finally, by the fact that the more this collective grows, the more the personalities of the members of the group diminish.

The most complete expression of this in society is penal law, as an expression of repressive law in general: repressive sanctions are, in this form of society, the means to protect social resemblances: if there is repression, it is because there is a crime, and this crime consists essentially in a rupture of the mechanical equilibrium, of mechanical solidarity—…

Opposite this mechanical solidarity, we have organic solidarity: …1. The individual here is no longer directly tied to society as a whole but to its parts. 2. Collective beliefs are differentiated according to the functions that need to be fulfilled. There is a parallel strengthening of the personality and of organic solidarity. 3. Finally, the model expression of this solidarity is to be found in restorative law—that is, the law which expresses an equilibrium between individuals taken as particular individuals—as in civic law, for example. The model par excellence of restorative law is the contract. …

I will return in conclusion to Ellul’s personalist interpretation of Durkheim’s organic solidarity. Let us note for now that, like Bataille, in tracing the waxing, waning, and eventual resurgence of the comprehensive social movement’s intensity, Ellul holds that “there is no necessary chronological succession from the first type to the second. Neither of the two is tied to a specific social type: for instance, the mechanical solidarity of an authoritarian society, the organic solidarity of a liberal society.” (Curiously, any discussion of the creative reception of Durkheim’s

84 Ibid., 36-37.
85 Ibid., 37.
categories in non-academic, “non-conformist” intellectual circles like Ellul’s and Bataille’s seems to be lacking from the literature on the father of French social sciences. Thus, in 1962, Ellul will say of “local groups” that, because they “are organic and have a well-structured material, spiritual, and emotional life, they are not easily penetrated by propaganda.” In his classic book on the subject, he gave as examples soldiers and party militants, as well as peasants who, according to Goebbels and as Lenin already knew, “could be reached only if their structured milieu was shattered.” This began spontaneously with the spread of economic development along with its liberal assumptions.

Such conditions make an individualist society fertile ground for modern propaganda. The permanent uncertainty, the social mobility, the absence of sociological protection and of traditional frames of reference — all these inevitably provide propaganda with a malleable environment that can be fed information from the outside and conditioned at will.

Before the war, Ellul already shows how this very plasticity makes liberal society ripe for crystallization of some of its inherent features under a fascist regime that merely brings them to a head. “What I propose to do here is precisely to investigate whether, through its forms, words, and expressions, it genuinely stands in opposition to liberalism or if there is a continuous current, an effective fusion of liberalism into fascism.” He sees the former flowing into the latter wherever we find these measures of policing and violence, this desire to curb the laws of parliament in the government’s favour, statutory law and full powers, a systematic panic obtained by a slow pressure of newspapers on the common mentality, attacks against all dissident thought and expressions of this thought, the limitation of the freedom of speech and of the right of assembly, the restriction of the right to strike and protest, etc. All these de facto measures already constitute fascism. They are the expression in reality of a state that fascism will do nothing but stabilise, legalise. But this state is not admissible unless some prior preparation has come into play to form minds — and this is the formation of a pre-fascist mentality. In short, we can consider that the establishment of fascism happens thus: creation of a pre-fascist mentality — taking of fascist measures — Fascism — creation of a doctrine. Of course, I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the first two phases are unaware of their fascist character.

88 Ibid., 93.
89 Ibid., 92.
91 Id.
This is where Ellul brings in, “aside from the division between organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity, the notion of mass which combines with it, insofar as it could represent one just as well as the other.”92 Thus, as he will point out in his Propaganda book, “nineteenth-century individualist society came about through the disintegration of such small groups as the family or the church” as social types respectively grounded in the mechanical and the organic model.

Once these groups lost their importance, the individual was left substantially isolated. He was plunged into a new environment, generally urban, and thereby ‘uprooted’. … An individual thus uprooted can only be part of a mass. He is on his own, and individualist thinking asks of him something he has never been required to do before: that he, the individual, become the measure of all things. Thus he begins to judge everything for himself. In fact he must make his own judgments. He is thrown entirely on his own resources; he can find criteria only in himself. He is clearly responsible for his own decisions, both personal and social. He becomes the beginning and the end of everything. Before him there was nothing; after him there will be nothing.93

Individuals freshly torn from cohesive local settings (with their varied but stable mixes of mechanical and organic features) desperately seek a short-term unity that Ellul already highlighted in his prewar analysis of the liberal breeding ground of fascism and related phenomena.

In order for there to be a mass, three conditions have to be met: a group of people differing in condition, nature, etc.—who entertain some representation of unity—but that this unity not be of a long-term necessary character: to be distinguished therefore from the crowd, or from the horde. The meshing representation of the unity of all the individuals of the mass can have very different reasons: a common interest, an economic or social situation (e.g., a group of unemployed people), a feeling caused by the outside world, either of satisfaction or of discontent (e.g., the crowds of February 6).94

Ellul is referring to the 1934 antiparliamentary riot in Paris that many viewed as an attempted fascist coup. He and Charbonneau came especially from Bordeaux to take part a week later in antifascist counter-protests that would lead to the formation of the Popular Front. Ellul no doubt had this national trauma in mind when he proceeded “to distinguish between abstract masses and concrete masses. Abstract masses are those which passively receive influences or suggestions from outside—influences and suggestions identical for all. They are but a mass whose expression resides: 1. outwardly, in statistics; 2. inwardly, in the reaction that an individual within this mass can have to a phenomenon—a reaction that happens to be identical to that

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92 Ibid., 38.
93 Ellul, Propaganda, 92.
94 Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 39.
of any individual in this mass; e.g. the viewers of a film, the readers of a newspaper (Gurvitch\textsuperscript{95})\textsuperscript{96} That is, the same people whom Bataille dismissed as the “man among a thousand”. Unlike in Germany, where they had coalesced into an intense \textit{mouvement d’ensemble} around the otherwise insignificant figurehead of Adolf Hitler, in liberal countries like France (or indeed within the global reach of today’s social media), “their mass is indeed abstract, because they have no idea of the identity of their reactions, their role consisting in no longer being anything but a receptor which will in turn emit certain stimuli; their representations will only be a coming to consciousness of this mass, and not a break in it” such as would allow conscious individuality to emerge. “However, this coming to consciousness would risk preventing the passage from abstract mass to \textit{concrete mass},” constituting an obstacle to the flow of the comprehensive movement that Bataille recognized in fascism, but wished to outdo with a \textit{mouvement d’ensemble} of his own making that dispensed with a head: that which \textit{Acéphale} was meant to set in motion. Ellul locates this inchoate abstract mass in liberalism’s mass society, traversed as it is by a merry-go-round of low-level interchangeable stimuli that give it any shape in turn, like plastic as raw material for any imprint Technique requires.

For let us suppose that an individual’s life sees, in uninterrupted succession, the creation and destruction of participation in various masses (office, cinema, café, newspaper, jazz); we will see gradually taking place the production of a complete integration of the individual in these successive masses—a mechanical solidarity is born. If we now suppose that such an individual receives a sufficiently strong stimulus within whatever given mass to proceed to exteriorisation, and, for example, to action, since he is in the same state as all the individuals who make up this very precise mass (like the reader of the daily news [Bataille’s “\textit{l’homme entre mille}” again! —CR]), all the individuals of this mass will respond identically to this stimulus; even without an individual command, all the readers of \textit{L’Action Française} will congregate at the Place de la Concorde on Feb. 6 [not unlike right-wing social media addicts at the US Capitol on Jan. 6! —CR].\textsuperscript{97}

To paraphrase Bataille and Durkheim, even without a head (a \textit{chef}, from Latin \textit{caput}), a heightened level of focussed intensity will make a different entity out of the loose flotsam of liberal society, no longer organic once it has turned into mass society. It is then just waiting for a tipping point to shift to a new mechanical phase, structure, and dynamics in the maelstrom of fascism as \textit{conscience collective}. “If all individuals belong to identical masses which take up their life entirely, if, consequently, they live in a state of abstract mechanical solidarity, and if these individuals receive the

\textsuperscript{95} Georges Gurvitch (1894-1965) was a Russian-born French specialist of the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of law, of which he distinguished a wide variety according to types of social interaction, also stressing social rights as a complement to individual rights.

\textsuperscript{96} Ellul. “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 39.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
necessary stimulus, they all react in the same direction, but this will no longer be here in their behaviour of one evening, this will be a global exteriorisation in their life itself. Something like an autonomous comprehensive movement, as Bataille liked to describe such “social current” as the individual “may be caught up in,” “thus becoming easy prey for propaganda” according to Ellul.

As a member of a small group he was fairly well protected from collective influences, customs, and suggestions. He was relatively unaffected by changes in the society at large. He obeyed only if his entire group obeyed. This does not mean that he was freer, but only that he was determined by his local environment and by his restricted group, and very little by broad ideological influences or collective psychic stimuli. The common error was to believe that if the individual were liberated from the smaller organic groups he would be set free. But in actual fact he was exposed to the influence of mass currents, to the influence of the state, and direct integration into mass society.

Given the right battery of coordinated stimuli, individuals are then ready to “become the expression, no longer of a series of abstract masses, but of a series of actual, realised, concrete masses, which is exactly what is called fascism.” As Hannah Arendt, in a 1974 interview, would also explain the collective reversal of social prohibitions about killing, “this is the much talked about Gleichschaltung — the coordination process. You are coordinated not with the powers that be, but with your neighbor — coordinated with the majority. But instead of communicating with the other you are now glued to him. And you feel of course marvelous. Totalitarianism appeals to the very dangerous emotional needs of people who live in complete isolation and in fear of one another.” This description might also fit Bataille’s peculiar brand of antifascism, looking forward to a similar but even more intense mass dynamic of lynch-mob fusion with one’s fellows as interchangeable (“semblables”), so that André Breton even called it a “surfascisme” at the time. And while Acéphale’s fantasized mouvement d’ensemble was driven by a tragic sense of existence, enacted in the sacrifice of individuals to the unanimous undifferentiated community, fascism too, “being destined to express exactly the desire of a crowd, could not offer it an optimist doctrine since this crowd was drawn to pessimism, not only by a taste for thrills, but still more by the sense of latent crisis; neither could it explain to the crowd the reasons to despair: this would have assumed that the crowd could understand, and for that matter, it would have had to be unpleasantly precise.”

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98 Ibid., 39-40.
99 Ellul, Propaganda, 92.
100 Ibid.
103 Ellul. “Fascism, Son of Liberalism,” 16.
And so, it portrayed itself as a pessimist doctrine: ‘all is lost, except through fascism; we have no more faith in saints nor in the apostles, we have no more faith in happiness nor in salvation; everything is going badly—and everything has to go badly; we should leave material happiness to vile materialists, man should live from the ideal and not from bread; everything is in decline, culture and civilization, we must nevertheless fight to establish an order where these decadent cultures and civilisations would be banished.’ And it is always pleasant to reconstruct an order on new bases, even if we do not really know what they are. But then we should be aware, given the importance of this common mentality which fascism secretes, that this is possible in all countries: we cannot say that we will never allow this oppression in France, or that in England fascism is foreign to tradition. These elements which form the pre-fascist mentality, like the style of Le Corbusier, are found to be identical in all countries.104

They are a built-in feature of technological society, as faithfully expressing the plasticity of resources (including human resources) it methodically mobilizes as the modernist International Style does in architecture to signal its global reach. Giving any shape to a formless mass to master it at a granular level by immediately efficient means is a hallmark of “the primacy of technique: for method is nothing other than a technique of the intelligence. There again, technique triumphs over the human. Now this passage from system to method exactly characterizes, from an intellectual point of view, the passage from liberalism to fascism. ... The liberal intellectual perversion105, its intellectual treason, necessarily entails the turn towards a strict rule which will be codified, certified by fascism. It thus completes the radical scission between thought and life”106 introduced by liberalism. Just as concrete life “is enslaved to certain methods and certain techniques which must rigorously direct it”, “the liberal State has slowly killed, by uselessness, by equality, by the all-too-tempting play which intellectuals are ever expected to indulge in, all power of thought.” Now that thinking has become risk-free, divorced from embodiment in action, “the real and precise coming to consciousness of the power of thought by the one who thinks it is made incalculably more difficult,” since it “no longer has any repercussion on his person,” aside from being drowned “in floods of books.”107

No discrimination is made anymore between the urgent and the unreal because the urgent has itself become unreal; the one no longer has any more consequences than the other, and the proclamation of a truth has no more importance than whatever is hatched by imagination. By proclaiming freedom of thought, liberal society has freed itself from thought.108

104 Ibid., 16-17.  
105 Ellul’s text is actually a continuation of one by Charbonneau entitled “La perversion libérale” that appeared in the previous Bulletin du groupe de Bordeaux des Amis d’Esprit, No. 3.  
107 Ibid., 20.  
108 Ibid.
It is easy to grasp what Ellul was talking about in a post-truth world brought about by advanced technology’s social networks, where fascism is reborn from the very triumph of global liberalism. “And so we find ourselves back in the heart of our question: *fascism appears, from the standpoint of forms of sociability, as a transformation of abstract masses into concrete masses* that “liberalism and individualism prepare … by an ever-growing mechanical solidarity.”

For it may well be said that all liberals were wrong in thinking that their doctrine led to increased individual self-awareness. Instead of seeing man, they saw stick-figure outlines of man, and their doctrines were based on these stick-figure outlines. The break in the frameworks that was attempted in the name of these outlines has only yielded a nearly pathological void. All the systems that the recognition of a sovereignty should have allowed to operate have disappeared. And the constitutional bodies that are collapsing due to liberal individualism now yield a brutal opposition between the individual and the sole sovereignty of the State—the sub-groups still resisting: family, are atrophied. Now here we are really dealing with one of the features of a mechanical society. By virtue of liberalism. And instead of finding ourselves in a *civitas solis*, we find ourselves dealing with a model of society which Durkheim assumed could only be found among Australians and Fuegians.¹⁰⁹

Interestingly, these are just the kind of “primitive” societies Georges Bataille’s first review *Documents* is famous for bringing to the forefront of avant-garde doctrinal discussions, as a model of passionate communal immediacy for modern societies to emulate as they broke the shackles of superficial liberal conformity to the “stick-figure” ideal of the rational individual. But Ellul thought that this segue from technological society to archaic or exotic cultures was, from a sociological point of view, a kind of paradoxical homecoming, unfolding at the cutting edge of its mainstream rather than as an alternative to be pulled from distant or revolutionary margins. For “liberalism has brought about a social amorphism which is probably without historical precedent”, deeper than the one ascribed by Durkheim to primitive segmental groupings based on resemblance and “mechanical” interchangeability, prior to the division of labour that gave play to individuality amidst a variety of “organic” functional groupings. These are precisely what liberal society has displaced with “the creation of these abstract masses … where the life of man is wrapped within a series of overlapping circles which totally absorb the individual”: “Café group and club group, sports group and occupational group”, whose apparent diversity conceals the fundamental uniformity of casual interchangeability. When mass man “takes on one character in one place, and another character in another milieu”, “he is no longer himself, he is essentially the social man, obtained by preventative means”¹¹⁰ of technical conformity and media seduction. They take over


¹¹⁰ Ibid., 41.
Mass Movements, the Sacred, and Personhood in Ellul and Bataille

from the repressive function associated with mechanical solidarity in ensuring a more far-reaching resemblance between all members of society.

In the name of common sense, in the name of the common good, in the name of common morality, a type of common man (homo rationalis vulgaris, as the Petit Larousse will one day call it) tends to be created. And we tend toward this both voluntarily and involuntarily: voluntarily by the creation of an internationalism of morality, of law, of civilisation, of literature, of art which gives averages of morality, juridical statistics to determine the value of a legal rule, a priori-ism in civilisation, all-purpose literature and utilitarian surrealism in art. Notions either too abstract or too elementary, obedient at once to the oft-denounced scission between the real and thought, and to the belief in the superiority of large numbers. … A million men cannot be wrong, declares a shaving cream whose name I forget. Accepted truths. Opening a newspaper is enough to breathe this air—a women’s advice column or matrimonial personal ads.111

“This ideal man once created, its model will be spread on every occasion, by the enormous means of persuasion at our disposal”, as “the one from whom society no longer has anything to fear, who, on the contrary, can only stabilise it—and this is certainly what will happen.”112

In this neo-mechanical society, the shock that will bring about the appearance of concrete masses will be all the easier as the amorphism will be more complete. And likewise, the notions of sacrifice and heroism will be all the more easily exalted as the individual will have lost a sense of his own value. Fascism appears, from the social standpoint, as a better-arranged amorphism, more voluntary than the other, liberal one, but of the same nature, belonging to the same type of society. A type which could be called inferior, even though it is rather difficult to pass a value judgement on social forms; for it is a type of mass which will never attain the superior type of the group, since there is no genuine organic solidarity in this inchoate society, and still less that of the abstract collective, which assumes a personal and individual coming to consciousness for everybody of the mission that the group may have to fulfil. Of course, this can seem paradoxical after what I have said of the mass, which is an essentially temporary gathering—but we must not forget either that the technical means at the disposal of governments allow them to keep crowds in this state of artificial and temporary union, as in a kind of icebox. There is a constant recreation of the mass by exterior means.113

111 Ibid., 40-41.
112 Ibid., 41.
113 Ibid., 41-42.
This leaves passive masses to be domesticated for productive purposes and mobilized for political power, as by a charismatic leader identified with the man in the street, leaving individuals unmoored from all other sacred touchstones, as well as any meaningful functional differentiation such as would allow them to become themselves within conscious, organic solidarity on a human scale, as per Ellul’s personalist vision of community. Bataille however feels that there is still too much organic solidarity of divided, functional labour in the revolutionary regime that arises in reaction to capitalist society in the name of the masses. He hopes to rekindle their mobilization as a sacred whole in mechanical solidarity, as a way out of modernity’s dissociation into profane utilitarianism and individuation.

IV. The Ambiguous Return of the Repressed Sacred in Post-Revolutionary Russia

For Ellul, even though fascism is economically to be “classified among the capitalist systems”, “we must not neglect the fact that it is established according to methods, on bases, with means and an aim which it holds in common with communism. Communism, too, is a formal negation of liberalism—and perhaps it, too, is its son.” But he adds in parentheses that “to discuss this would lead us too far afield,”\(^{114}\) so he refrains from doing so in an article dedicated to fascism. Ellul would venture into a more sweeping treatment of all modern forms of the political sacred in 1973 in *Les Nouveaux Possédés*, underlining that neither Hitler nor Stalin were individual aberrations as rogue sociopaths; more like contingent particles of the mass that allowed its “comprehensive movement” (in Bataille’s terms) to fully manifest on the ideal breeding ground of modern society. “They were the exact incarnation of what could be done at a given moment of time in the political life. These are not accidents, which one hopes are over and done with. We continue to live exactly in their impetus.”\(^{115}\) Ellul elaborates on the premise of his 1936 article on “Fascism as Liberalism’s Child,” this time with an explicit focus on the sacred, conceived in a sense consonant with Bataille’s, only that he sets the bar lower for ascribing this feature to the liberal State already, as revealed by the Great War.

It was not fascism which arbitrarily and stupidly made a sacred out of the state, pasting it onto a different reality for decorative and propaganda purposes. Rather, the other way around, fascism was made possible because the modern state had once again become sacred. More than anything else, more than economic or social conditions, more than class or other struggles, it was the fact of the sacredness of the state which incited and brought about the fascisms. Otherwise, how explain [*sic*] the fact that the Bolshevik state became the same as the fascist state, though it arose out of very different economic situations and ideologies, and had opposing aims? How

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 14.

explain *sic* the fact that the modern state structure imposed itself on all the communist nations, and recently on China and Cuba?

That is where the mystery of political power is today. In its universality, in its combination of transcendence and proximity, we once again encounter the classic sacred. This was already forecast by a twofold ideological movement during the very period when, through the “enlightenment” and the French Revolution, it was thought that one was advancing gloriously toward an era of the decline of power (liberalism), an era of desacralization (elimination of the charismatic king) and of rationalism (institutions and administration).\(^{116}\)

... And yet, in the nineteenth century, after the period of the desacralizing determination to reduce the state to its role of management and law, we have seen the sacred rise again irresistibly.

The executioner state is total. It demands every sacrifice and disposes of everything. It is a machine which is both farseeing and blind, a perfect stand-in for the deity.\(^ {117}\)

Bataille’s only problem with this all-consuming sacrificial function was that it was compromised with the monopoly of a State machinery that sanitized it, putting a damper on its sacred character, which Ellul contrariwise though enshrined by it. Near the conclusion of his public talk to the Collège de sociologie on the sacred in contemporary society, when Bataille’s attention shifts from fascism to Russian communism, he expresses concern about the militaristic master/slave relationship it soon revived. For this turn to the sacred, albeit a welcome departure from the mundane rationale of labour issues, was not intense enough to his taste, but still akin to fascist countermeasures as half-measures on the way to collective ecstasy. The labour movement itself is seen in this sacred light as an ambiguous product of “general decomposition in the face of the void left by the withering of any deep existence”, that is of tragic intimacy with death, the province of religion. In the process, “the world of work has split into two opposed camps.” On one side, profiteers have the means to preserve “a pious memory of forms of strong existence from the past”, e.g., traditional religion, aristocratic affectations and high culture, and remain tied above all to the maintenance of such remaining forms as can still secure the social structure needed for exploitative profit. The exploited make up the opposite camp, as “strangers hostile to any structure,” knowing strictly no other human value than their own as reduced to work. Thus was born “current society, in which the dominant fact has become work, as it has usurped the place of deep existence, as it serves as an anesthetic, introducing as a result empty human relations without reserve, peppered with pleasures devoid of intensity”, such as cheap laughs.\(^ {118}\)

Everything is fine as long as this balance remains feasible. But once “conditions bring about a collapse of the old structure, a new *mouvement d’ensemble* must be

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 81.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 80-81.

\(^{118}\) Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”
reconstituted … from the only remaining reality, namely work.” “A world unto itself
in the state of decomposition”, by which Bataille no doubt means that of alienation
from the composite being of the mouvement d’ensemble, labour comes to discover that
it lacks a substantive principle of its own once its political agent, the party, comes to
power, taking on a sacred character as the vortex of a comprehensive social
movement. Contrary to the received wisdom that portrays the Russian Civil War as
detrimental to “the organisation of a new social existence”, for Bataille, the opposite
is true. “It was only through military struggle that the new world could be born.” It
is not through work that the workers’ party became “a form of organisation already
possessing a certain character of totality. It is in the course of struggle that a flag
appeared to rally the crowd” and that people died to give it a sacred value. “It is in
the intensity of military struggle that the party condensed as a focus of existence for
society as a whole.”

And yet, the workers’ party initially understood itself as their expression, a vector
for their sovereignty that would not draw its movement from itself, wanting it to be
the very movement of production. On its own, “it had strength, being action and
struggle, but it had no meaning”, being but “the servant of work”, something Bataille
deemed impossible for a living “central organisation of society,” on the basis of his
“formal distinction between comprehensive movement and functional movement”,
corresponding to the sacred totalitarian movement and the profane labour
movement respectively. At the price of “ever-increasing hypocrisy,” the “structural
evolution” of Soviet power kept little trace of its initial formation in the course of its
transformation from what had merely been “a function of a function” into full
existence, from “the organisation of the workers’ struggle into a living, existing,
violently dynamic social reality”. However, the violence that made it real lacked a
critical ritual foundation in the murder of the king that makes a revolutionary
movement the equivalent of that of tragedy, with which the world of work is
incompatible. For unlike the execution of Louis XVI as a foundational sacrifice for
the revolutionary French nation, that of the czar was casual and secret. Power was
thus conferred to labour as continuous productive accumulation rather than to the
people unanimously joined in the king’s murder in a primal scene of sacrificial
violence as sovereign wasteful expenditure, the focus of a comprehensive movement
encompassing society and the cosmos. The substitution of this glorious religious act
with mere economic activity went counter to “natural force currents” and was
doomed to fail, as shown by Lenin’s eventual divinization as liberating hero – i.e., as
the murderer of the king. As Ellul would note in The New Demons, stigmatizing the
very historical parallels that positively fascinated Bataille and Caillois at the Collège
de sociologie sacrée (the Jesuit and Teutonic orders):

There was established a popular religion of the political power,
which was all the more indispensable since that power had killed
the czar, an inexpiable sacrilege which causes the sacred to redound to
the murderer.

That transfer was to be the turning point in the creation of a

119 Ibid.
materialistic religion, endowing with faith a system which was waiting to become religious. The outward works of Lenin, his establishment of a party on the model of the Jesuit Order and in the image of the Order of the Knights of the Sword (he said so himself), the accentuation of the role of the proletariat and the elevation of the writings of Marx; the outward works of Stalin, establishing a liturgy, dogmatics, an inquisition of heretics—all those things went to confirm this religion very rapidly. It was organized by the exact procedures followed by Christianity itself. It ended in the “materialistic replica, a striking morphological similitude, of Roman Catholicism.”

For Ellul, this transformation into a religion, on the model of the sacred State whether ancient or modern, was the great betrayal of Christianity. For Bataille by contrast, the imperial church that was the Soviet party-State was not religious enough. It relegated to the realm of rhetoric the revolutionary tragic foundation of power, leaving the social field to be completely filled up by military institutions of both an externally aggressive and internally repressive nature. Since tragic elements could not gel, having “abdicated from the outset before the so-called reality of work”, power took on an almost exclusively military structure, incapable of creating a world, as only sacrificial violence could do. It thus drifted towards “the values naturally associated with the military order, the fatherland, the commemoration of the past and of its powers.” The party’s own evolution toward “the totality of existence” involved militarization and the adoption of an autocratic head (“chef”): Stalin, who came out of Lenin’s hallowed shadow as hero to become father of peoples like the czar. At the same time, “labour’s functional movement” lost its claim to autonomy under cover of “the lyricism of the five-year plan that drew workers in an endeavour going beyond mere work”: the frantic development of heavy industry, unproductive in the short term, that only made sense in terms of the Red Army’s power.

Here Ellul and Charbonneau had instead taken at face value the productivist rationale for the five-year plan as the justification for the sacrifices it demanded. In point 24 of their 1935 manifesto, they state:

In the communist state, man is only given as an ideal economic production and its increase. All individual freedom is suppressed for the sake of social production. The entire happiness of man is summarized in two terms: on the one hand: to produce more — on the other hand: comfort and everything must normally stop there. Here, the mystique is created by statistics, sacrifice is demanded in the name of tons of coal.
Ostensibly utilitarian productivism itself had become a sacred value, an all-consumining Moloch, even more unabashedly than under capitalism. But for Bataille, perhaps without realizing it, no people has ever “sacrificed so much to its military organization as the Russian world—officially the world of work,” of servile calculative usefulness, the opposite of sacrifice. Not that for Bataille the military had the monopoly on sacrifice that current dictatorships claimed, by any means. In his lecture about “The Sacred Sociology of Today’s World,” he did not have time to elaborate on other aspects of “the play of sacred forces as it has developed nowadays” but thought he had explained what its wellsprings were. “The development of functional activity has reduced to practically nothing the mouvement d’ensemble, deep and real social existence”, so much so that any organization is affected, lacking the ability to stabilize over time. Ellul might have replied that the coercion of constant change and an internalized pressure to go with the flow willy-nilly translated into a paradoxical freezing of social life as a superficially variegated, endlessly plastic medium for arbitrary shaping and reshaping by the productivist consumer demands of unchallenged technological society, always assumed as self-justifying framework of modern life. Be that as it may, according to Bataille, a rupture having occurred in its regular development in one place: Russia, society had had to wholly reconstitute itself by putting the world of work under the yoke of the military world. Elsewhere, the threat of a similar rupture alone had been enough to bring about the kind of direct subjugation that precedes any destruction, under the name of fascism or national-socialism. However, whether it was established through subjugation or “destruction” (whatever that might have meant) of the economic function of work, Bataille insisted that “the domination of the military spirit was necessarily fragile and that the spirit of tragedy would necessarily win out in the long run—without our being able to foresee in what way.” This act of faith in a headless, heedless future of roving, raving mobs sounded an apt note on which Bataille could bring to a close the first year of lectures of the Collège de sociologie sacrée, “having given sufficient reasons for our endeavour.”

And finally, I would like to emphasize what characterizes very precisely what we would have put at stake. We have not just attempted to apply the sociological data obtained to the world in which we live. It has been necessary to tackle a central question affecting existence. Our effort can in no way be parted from care for existence and for existence in its totality as opposed …

Here the manuscript of “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain” abruptly ends mid-sentence.

123 Georges Bataille, “La sociologie sacrée du monde contemporain.”
124 Ibid.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
Conclusion: Social Totality or Personal Wholeness—What Sacrifice for Which Solidarity?

It is not difficult to complete Bataille’s concluding train of thought. The partial existence of finite individuals is opposed to the continuous flow of cosmic existence as concentrated in an undifferentiated social mass when it is mobilized in focussed sacrificial violence. The latter is the only way out of the existential prison of the possessive individual, just as deliberate waste is the only alternative to calculativeness, and sadomasochistic ecstasy provides ultimate release from self-conscious isolation, while self-control gives way to loss of self in the sovereignty of collective savagery. As Ellul always suspected, portraying surrealist provocateur types as prime examples of bourgeois neurosis, in its seeming radicalism, Bataille’s anthropology thus remains beholden to liberal assumptions. For he concedes too much reality to a shallow notion of subjecthood as rational self-ownership, and consequently, to the conflation of everything outside its narrow confines with a seething chaos which modern man both fears and secretly envies in the poverty of his empty wealth of goods and knowledge. In his materialist sociological physics, Bataille tellingly identifies “individual” and “atom”, etymological synonyms from Latin and Greek roots for an indivisible unit, which is precisely the anthropology that personalists pointedly rejected with the liberal concept of individuals that add up in the statistical masses of both market capitalism and state totalitarianism of all stripes; their wager was to approach social thought from the existential premise of the person as relational nexus of conscious, free agency within collective networks and settings of different scales and textures, from the local and the natural to the civilizational and the universal. Bataille for his part essentially switches signs between good and evil within the old modern constructs and liberal caricatures of the civilized and the primitive, polite society and the seething horde, the bourgeois individual and the rebel mob. Ellul saw such a move as typical of liberalism, and easy for it to digest, accounting for both surrealism and fascism, so that Bataille’s thought can appear as a bridge between the two. It is a self-conscious intellectual’s compensatory mystique of the mass that fits right in within Ellul’s account of liberalism as the engineering of indifference between everything and its opposite, promoting dramatic reversals between extreme poles for the purposes of mobilization of the full spectrum of human possibilities, down to the very antinomies it exacerbates, as part of the resources that fuel technology’s self-increasing process. The kind of posthumanist radicalism of which Bataille remains the revered godfather could thus run its course in liberal academic and artistic culture alongside the ebb-and-flow of historic fascism and communism. It keeps providing a highbrow adjunct to the pop-cultural work of the media that have become ever more adept at generating abstract masses, to the point where these again become ready to coalesce as concrete masses, in new forms of fascism.

The full blossoming of media dynamics has thus overtaken deconstructive philosophies of desire in perfecting liberalism’s indifference to truth and reality, which technological “progress” makes easy to dismiss as artificial constructs.\textsuperscript{127} Yet

\textsuperscript{127} See Christian Roy, “Liberalism and the State in French and Canadian Technocritical Discourses: Intersections and Contrasts Between George Grant and the Bordeaux School”,

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they leave a vacuum—not to say a God-shaped hole—ready to be filled by the transgressive mass appeal of fantasized escape from alienated finite selves into vicarious, larger-than-life embodiments of a lawless, undifferentiated Grand Étre. Dispensing with the functional interplay of institutions in “organic solidarity” enables their discursive conflation with the bureaucratic machinations of a globalist “Deep State” as mythic decoy for the unexamined business-as-usual of advanced capitalism. The system still thrives on the resulting consolidation of abstract masses within both ever-narrower consumer niches and vast overarching markets, each made all the more structurally homogeneous as the mimetic rivalries they are built upon increase, be it under the flags of rainbow diversity or of racial/religious defensiveness. Although “Leninism-Stalinism and nazism were precursors which have shown us the way,”128“what we have here is not the rise of fascism, but the transformation of political relativity into a religious absolute,” as Ellul wrote about the Vietnam War era, in words which remain eerily relevant, being applicable to a range of different actors in more current contexts.

The bitter dispute which has so transformed the United States over the past ten years is the convulsed visage of this “religionizing.” A state which is less and less able to tolerate opposition, which employs increasingly totalitarian methods, cannot justify itself except on the basis of a political religion. The opposition is no longer willing to play the democratic game, but expresses itself in violence, turning political decision into an ultimate, and political action into the criterion of good and evil. Youth dedicates itself and execrates others, expressing extreme judgments in connection with every political action.129

Given the way intensified “mechanical solidarity” tends to crystallize in familiar contours around sacralized figures and against easy scapegoating targets, Bataille’s long-term hope for an unregimented form of revived primitive collective on a world scale thus seems misplaced. Even barring its predictable capture by State or partisan agents, such anarchic violence sooner or later gravitates towards warlordism and organized crime, often paired with some crude form of organized religion. Bataille’s acephalic visions of excess are just an alternative, surrealist side current within liberal society, that serves to add the panache of “edgy” cultural capital to its mainstream’s drift towards fascism, itself a more straightforward expression of a shared desire to merge as a mass in a mindless surge of raw, violent power. Ellul would stress in The New Demons a point he already sketched in the 1940s in writing La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle, drawing on Caïlois’s 1939 book L’Homme et le sacré to underline that the sacred finds its supreme expression in the festival, which therefore has a key religious function in society, even in an ostensibly secularized...
one. Ellul denies its fashionable status as “the revolutionary means par excellence” of “putting down modern society,” often claimed by Bataille’s countercultural heirs, since unrelenting festiveness is a hallmark of consumer society. With Jean Brun, Ellul maintains that it “results precisely from the structures of the technological society of which it forms a part. Time and space have vanished, thanks to the resources of the media. By reason of that fact, we are living in a simultaneous happening, as McLuhan says. Our society itself produces these raging throngs, and it is creating Dionysian man. Far from its being a reaction against technocratic bureaucracy, it is a product of it and a way for it to survive,” pioneered and perfected by fascist regimes, and all those that still “make politics into a perpetual festival, in which exaltation and beauty are found only in the throes of struggle and violence,” from Mao’s Cultural Revolution to Trump’s promise to the base that his assault on the center of liberal institutions would be “wild”—an entertainment value he worked to a religious frenzy surpassing the staged rituals of the wrestling matches he used to sponsor.

To be sure, as Charbonneau put it, “revolutionary action will always burst forth in the eyes of routine as an inexplicable bomb; it is in this sense that anarchist attacks have had revolutionary meaning; hemmed in on all sides by a liberal understanding, they had only seen one thing that could provoke it: blood. But imagination only destroys because it wants to create”, so that the revolutionary is like a pioneer who works the ground to sow the seeds of new growth. In this spirit, Ellul’s Christian anarchist espérance thus avoids the dead end of unchecked revolutionary violence as an end in itself: Bataille’s unproductive and therefore sacred sovereign waste, uncreative as a perversely self-indulgent, sterile exercise in wanton destruction of all possible selves as fodder for mass frenzy. Ellul relies instead on the person’s conscious play amidst the multiple centers and groupings of various scales, and forms of sociability premised on human agency and choice, as allowed by an organic solidarity that precludes gelling in a single undifferentiated whole. There, “individuals retain their personality, and organic solidarity is even intensified by the increase in individuals’ personality. For it assumes a coming to consciousness of social necessity” that is not tantamount to alienating servitude as for Bataille, but requires free service, “a kind of voluntary act”: “the sacrifice of part of the person to society”—not of the whole person to sacralized community. The point is to allow all members of society their own access to a personal core that remains irreducible to the necessities of material self-preservation, to which wage labour remains beholden, like slavery. “But this assumes a much more nuanced, less general, and less abstract collective” than that of the primitive clan or the modern mass. “Society can no longer be a whole, but it will be fractioned into numerous sub-groups in which individuals will find” room for self-realization through a socially embedded calling of their own: “their centre” within a “graduated autonomy, going from the complete autonomy of one part of his person to a complete adherence to society through adherence to beliefs of varying

130 Ibid., 182-3 (citing Brun about fascism).
131 Untitled typescript accompanying the text “Réformisme et action révolutionnaire” in Charbonneau’s papers.
degrees of generality”. Considered commitments and conscious choices are here “formed little by little as a creation of the will. They thus no longer appear as an abstract and superior element” like Durkheim’s sacred as cypher for the social Grand Étre, or Bataille’s sacred fusion through it with unbounded material continuity, “but as immediate and concrete”; for the person, that is, as opposed to the masses fascism makes concrete as mobilized resources, or the mobs any violent upheaval unleashes. Here, “there is a parallel strengthening of the personality and of organic solidarity” in Ellul’s personalist understanding, which subordinates “the functions that need to be fulfilled” to concrete agents, rather than making them abstract individual units as disposable cogs of mass production and statistical data of consumer surveys, like technological society always does, whether liberal, communist or fascist in flavour.

Like Bataille, Ellul seeks to restore genuine personal risk; but this cannot be a sacrificial death wish that eschews it for the certainty of self-chosen demise as perverse substitute for the deceptive reassurance of comfortable self-preservation. He locates risk in life choices in small-scale, concrete settings, rather than in courting violent death by losing oneself in the raving “useless passion” (to borrow Sartre’s definition of man) of an ecstatic collective, made one as the sacred. To Ellul, the social sacred, whether orgiastic or dictatorial, is the enemy of the free and responsible person as the sole meaningful whole, the subject who finds solidarity and communion beyond self, as the versatile center of fluidly organic, overlapping functional groups. Such a person is not to be confused with Bataille’s individual as an interchangeable “atomic” particle within a composite totality, whose “sacred” or technocratic features Ellul equally rejected as indistinguishable forms of alienating mechanical solidarity. “Because a person is not expressed by a number”, as in the statistics on which liberal societies and their totalitarian offshoots are based, “but on speech that springs from the heart’s abundance.” This personal generosity cannot be confused with dehumanizing waste as it is in Bataille’s nihilistic misconstrual of the gift (to be contrasted with its more faithfully Maussian, broadly antiutilitarian understanding by his personalist co-worker and occasional collaborator Arnaud Dandieu). For Ellul, the generous gift is better represented “by the attention of another person, by the gravity of love,” by hard contact with what a person can touch in the world. Left out of touch with it by liberal conditioning, even a radical intellectual like Bataille is stuck in “the situation of a madman who no longer has a world of his own and who acts in terms of this absence,” to apply to him some

132 Ellul, “Fascism, Son of Liberalism”, 37.
pointed arguments from an Ellul text written around the same time as Bataille’s 1938 lecture on “the sacred sociology of today’s world”.

Over against mad action that has no basis anywhere, we must deeply root our action in our doctrine and in our person. There are specific and obligating goals that are put before us outside of ourselves and that are yet in ourselves—these goals are permanent realities to be constantly rediscovered and readjusted—realities of justice and truth, of non-security [insécurité], of freedom—\textsuperscript{136}

However, “these words are so worn out” from their liberal use “that we no longer know the value of these coinages — but they have made themselves known from what is rough and violent about them”. Here Ellul, like Charbonneau, is referring to a spiritual violence that has nothing to do with the kinds of “titanic upheaval” (to use Ellul’s own phrase in his “Fascism” article) of sacrificial bloodletting Bataille has in mind. “Over against gigantic action, arm’s-reach action—that which can be performed everyday on all those around us—”, “to change the life of the individual who is near us—”, by making him “understand the living value, that which brutally goes through him, of these words he has often read in the paper between two helpings of beef stew.”\textsuperscript{137}

We must act on men, without coercing persons, without breaking down their doors, presenting them only these things that are so basic that nobody ever looks at them anymore, taking them to the brink of taking seriously the eternity of the spirit and love for the neighbour.\textsuperscript{138}

Building on this post-Christian legacy of discreet sacrificial witness, retrieved from the suppressed ethical core of derivative liberal values, “…any act, however humble and tiny, is thus efficacious when it is performed according to this doctrine”\textsuperscript{139}, which I have termed “Gascon personalism”\textsuperscript{140}; more so, Ellul insists, “than an entire life of big helter-skelter gestures”\textsuperscript{141}, such as what has often passed for radical commitment in intellectual circles, down to those that still look up to Bataille’s materialist religion of violent excess as the only way out of the liberal consensus. Born like it under even worse pressures of polarized mass mobilization than those we now know, the quiet faithfulness of Ellul and Charbonneau to measured local action anchored in a global vision: that of personal realization of timeless truths, has left fascinating documents of its grassroots genesis—enough to allow a long-overlooked other path through liberal stasis and social crisis to re-emerge as a serious alternative to both right and left poles of posthumanist accelerationism.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{141} Jacques Ellul, “L’action mesurée dans la Révolution.”
References


