

Entropology in the Philosophy of Georges Bataille

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In this article, the notion of *entropology* introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss is applied and developed in the context of Georges Bataille's anthropological philosophy: Bataille's project is defined as *entropological*. Four philosophical vectors are chosen for this: the theory of general economy, the concept of decay, the idea of extinction and the notion of inhumanism. The theory of general economy allows us to understand the imminent terrestrial nature of humanity and the negative – entropic – side of the capitalist economy. The concept of decay gives access to the thought of bodily disintegration and decomposition, which is temporality and mortality that split the subject. The idea of extinction speculates on the consequences of humanity's destructiveness, libidinally charged inertia, and the extreme perspective of entropy's impact on the planet. The notion of inhumanism suggests a radical rethinking of the human relationship with alienation and exteriority: Bataille's philosophy is reinterpreted as inhumanist. I conclude that the Lévi-Strauss's neologism – *entropology* – can be productively articulated and actualised within the framework of Bataille's philosophy.

Keywords: entropology, general economy, decay, extinction, inhumanism

INTRODUCTION

Georges Bataille is not only a philosopher and writer, but also an anthropologist. Anthropological insights, mostly related to the concept of human, can be considered as the core of Bataille's philosophical project. There are already a number of works examining Bataille's philosophy in an anthropological context. For example, in relation to primitive societies and mythology (Fechter 2007), God and religion in general (Goddard 2010), and also aesthetics, comparing Bataille with his comrades such as Pierre Klossowski (Bell 2015). In almost all cases the question of human, humanity's place in nature, human's indeterminacy, and the limits of human mind are dealt with.

Bataille relied heavily on classical French anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss. The relationship between them is still relevant in contemporary anthroposophy studies. For example, we can see new perspectives on Lévi-Strauss's influence on Bataille (Richman 2021). However, one aspect of this synthesis is still lacking attention. Lévi-Strauss considered the unstoppable destructiveness of human activity as a complex mechanism of civilisation. He wrote about the fact that humanity destroys and disintegrates the organisation of nature, which

is why humanity itself becomes unstable and chaotic. He equated such an inert condition, predicting the potential for the self-destruction and extinction of humanity, to the term *entropy* used in physics. ‘Anthropology could with advantage be changed into “entropology”, as the name of the discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestations of this process of disintegration’ (Lévi-Strauss 2011: 414).¹

This concept of *entropology*, which describes the nature-culture dissonance, the disintegration of the social system, and the tendencies of socioeconomic disorder, has already been used in the study of aesthetic practice in ecologically oriented literature (Gibbons 2019). My aim, however, is to apply, expand and radicalise the concept of entropology in the context of Bataille’s philosophical anthropology. Methodologically, this corresponds to an interdisciplinary approach consisting mainly of political economy, psychoanalysis and speculative philosophy. I have already attempted to apply this synthesis to Bataille (Tuomas 2023), but without focusing on anthropology. In order to do precisely this, I will use Bataille’s idea of general economy, the notion of decay, the theory of extinction and the concept of inhumanism. In this way, I will argue that the term *entropology* is suitable to think not only about the negative impact of humanity on the environment and itself, but also about the insufficiency and inadequacy of the traditional conception of human.

GENERAL ECONOMY

Waste, expenditure, consumption, sacrifice, loss, destruction and annihilation – a significant part of Bataille’s philosophical vocabulary – already suggests entropy. Especially if we talk about the excessive squandering of energy, such as wasting, consuming and spending. Such a discharge refers to the entropic structure. By prioritising excess, uselessness and unproductiveness, Bataille ‘inverted’ conventional political economy, which prioritised productivity, utility and scarcity. Bataille was concerned with a much wider field of economic exchange: much attention was paid to the Sun, religion, and the influence of libidinal impulses. One of the main points that Bataille sought to emphasise is the *immanent materiality* of the economy: the inseparability of capitalist processes from energy, resources, nature, Earth and cosmos.

Bataille has called this variation of political economy *general economy*. Its operation is illustrated by the following words of Bataille: ‘An immense industrial network cannot be managed in the same way that one changes a tire... It expresses a circuit of cosmic energy on which it depends, which it cannot limit, and whose laws it cannot ignore without consequences’ (1991: 26). Since Bataille included a broad natural circulation, not only life but also death play an important role in general economy: it is not only an economy of creation but also an economy of destruction.² Not only a plus, but also a minus. Not only progress, but also decay. Not only extropy,³ but also entropy. In other words, Bataille marks the *negative* side of the economy as a material trace that always has its price. Sacrificing, losing, squandering and dissipating: all these processes outline the entropy of general economy.

Lévi-Strauss also applies here: ‘The first lesson of anthropology in economic matters is therefore that there is not a single form of economic activity but several, and they cannot

¹ Another application of the concept of entropy in Lévi-Straussian anthropology is worth mentioning: ‘A society is both a machine and the labor provided by that machine. Like a steam engine, it manufactures entropy; like a motor, it manufactures order’ (Lévi-Strauss 2013: 73–74).

² Perhaps the most eloquent example of the destructive economy in Bataille’s philosophy is war as ‘catastrophic expenditure of excess energy’ (1991: 23) and ‘orgies of wealth’ (1991: 37).

³ The opposite process to entropy, also called negentropy (negative entropy).

all be placed on a single continuum. Rather, they represent choices among possible solutions. Each has advantages, but a price must always be paid' (2013: 64). Also: 'Anthropology reminds the economist, <...> that human beings are not motivated purely and simply to always produce more. In their work, they also seek to satisfy aspirations rooted in their deepest nature: to find fulfillment as individuals, to leave their stamp on matter, to give an objective expression to their subjectivity through their work' (2013: 78). Lévi-Strauss summarises the essential highlights of Bataille's general economy: the devaluation of the imperative of production, the role of desire in the economy, the natural materiality of human and the useless surplus of the economy. However, this entropology still lacks the notion of decay, to which we will now move.

DECAY

In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life.

Karl Marx (Bataille 1985: 32)

If we define Bataille's project as an entropological one, decay takes on considerable importance. Decay allows us to look not only at ecological and climate trends on the planet, but also at the concept of human. In Bataille's context, decay is that which *cuts through* human wholeness and unity. As in the case of general economy, decay is integral and inextricable to human materiality. Decay is the autonomy of matter which haunts human, as a kind of *material horror*. Decay as an *incurable wound*. In other words, Bataille emphasises the constant threat of disintegration and decomposition to human – especially his body – as a temporally determined decay, eventually death. In this way, Bataille *de-idealizes* the concept of human and shows the 'base matter, [which] is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations' (Bataille 1985: 51).⁴ As B. Noys (1998) clarifies, base matter is related to filth, 'lowness', disgust, vileness and sub-humanity.

We can apply the latter motives to thinking about the human body and corporeality. Bodily secretions and excrement are an integral and necessary part of human life, but we tend to repress and taboo this part, in order to suppress our natural and animal origins.⁵ Exactly the same can be said about the temporality and mortality of our body, which is expressed by decay, as time devastates and destroys us. This reveals the nature within us as something wicked and shameful. Thus decay defines the world from which we come, and to which we constantly and compulsively return.⁶ So the horror of decay is related to both our death and our birth. In Bataille's words, decay falls on a person like a 'curse <...>, which we will never be

⁴ The anti-idealist synthesis of decay and matter was explicitly developed by R. Negarestani, a contemporary philosopher influenced by Bataille. For example: 'In decay, the path to perfection is a shortcut toward the perpetual degeneration of the ideal' (Negarestani 2008: 30). For a more detailed relation between Bataille and Negarestani, see Tuomas 2023.

⁵ Bataille's follower N. Land (1991) has argued that Kant's project of transcendental idealism was constructed precisely to defend reason against natural corporeality and animality. Therefore, Bataille's base materialism emerges as a radical opposition to the Kantian idealism of Enlightenment.

⁶ Here it is easy to recognise a period of childhood, which is very important to psychoanalysis. Freud himself wrote about the innocence of a child who has not yet faced decay: 'The child knows nothing of the horrors of decay, of shivering in the cold grave, of the terror of the infinite Nothing, the thought of which the adult, as all the myths of the hereafter testify, finds so intolerable. The fear of death is alien to the child' (1997: 149).

able to shake off' (1993: 84). Finally, decay is 'responsible' for the split and fragmentation of human as a subject: we face an ambivalence when decay arouses 'mingled horror and fascination' (Bataille 1986: 56).⁷

We can name this entropic disintegration of human as a kind of *internal catastrophism*: a fatal fate encoded in human life. In other words, matter, nature, inorganicity, evolution, and earthly existence condemn us to decay. Bataille himself does not avoid the motif of catastrophe, for example, when writing about 'the skeleton [a]s the sign of [catastrophe], the outcome of decay' (1988b: 74).⁸ Decay, like general economy, raises the anthropological question of humanity to the cosmic level, thus involving the consideration of ontology. The latter is established as a materialist dialectics in Bataille's philosophy:⁹ 'Humanity *is* when it knows it isn't. Matter *is* insofar as it dissolves man and, in decay, reveals an absence' (1988a: 115). Again, negation and negativity are essential components of Bataille's entropology. Decay, as the penetration of non-existence into being, allows us to propose a telling aphorism: in Bataille's philosophy, *a human is as much as he decays*.

It should not be forgotten that Bataille was, to a large extent, a follower of Nietzsche. That is why, considering Nietzschean affirmationism, Bataille looked at decay affirmatively.¹⁰ Quoting Nietzsche himself: 'The affirmation of transience *and destruction*, the decisive feature of any Dionysian philosophy, saying "yes" to opposition and war, *becoming*, with a radical rejection of even the concept of "being"' (2007: 47–48). Also: 'The struggle, the agony, the annihilation of phenomena now seem necessary to us, in the context of the excess of countless forms of existence which crowd and push their way into life, of the overwhelming fertility of the world-will' (Nietzsche 2000: 91). Here we encounter both the ecstasy characteristic of Bataille and the establishment of the inevitability of decay. Decay destroys the boundary between animal and human, between nature and civilisation, between life and death. In the words of the aforementioned Negarestani: 'Through decay, life and death multiply and putrefy each other to no end' (2008: 184). By radicalising decay in the Nietzschean way, we reach the extreme of Bataille's entropology: the theory of extinction.

EXTINCTION

The world began without man and will end without him.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (2011: 413)

⁷ J. Kristeva (1982), drawing on Bataille, called the effect of the duality of repulsion and attraction, caused by decay and horror, as abject or abjection.

⁸ Referring to the skeleton as an internal temporality determined by nature and evolution, T. Moynihan, with the help of Bataille's theories, conceptualised the idea of spinal catastrophism. It illustrates the temporality of decay: 'The more conversant you are with time – that is to say, the more time inhabits you – the more painful life is going to be' (Moynihan 2019: 41).

⁹ Dialectics allow us to refine the Bataillean concept of entropology. For example, the influence of entropy on life manifests itself in the tension between stability and instability: 'Life is a result of disequilibrium and instability. Stable forms are needed to make it possible however. Going from one extreme to the other, from one desire to another, from a state of collapse to frantic tension if the movement speeds up, there can only be ruin and emptiness' (Bataille 1988a: 28).

¹⁰ On the other hand, a certain degree of affirmation is characteristic even of thinking that promotes rigorous negativity. E. Cioran confirms this paradox: 'There is no negator who is not famished for some catastrophic *yes*' (1986: 104).

If decay usually refers to the individual death of a person, extinction indicates the death of humanity as a species. And, at the same time, the end of the concept of human death: *the death of death*. If decay is the entropic human horizon operating in the paradigm of general economy, extinction is the end of any human horizon: the absolute limit. Bataille scholar S. Kendall notes the parallel that Bataille, while thinking about the transition of animal to human and the beginning of culture, is also thinking about the end of humanity. '[T]he notion of our death is not just any notion of death; it is a historically new notion of absolute, total death, of atomic and ecological planetary disaster. The notion of absolute death is not only the death of an individual; it is the death of the human species as a whole and potentially the death of all life on this planet' (Kendall 2005: 22). This possibility of extinction was discussed by Bataille as early as 1955, but it is undoubtedly more relevant today. The usual discourse about the climate crisis has once again been supplemented by the threat of a thermonuclear catastrophe.

Bataille's intention is that anthropology must study not only humanity, but also the threatening extreme of the extinction or annihilation of the human species. In other words, the beginning of humanity allows us to know the end of humanity. So Bataille's anthropology is not only an anthropology of decay, but also an anthropology of extinction. Here again, the idea of general economy is useful, which the already mentioned Moynihan, who explores the history of the idea of the extinction of humanity, retroactively connects with Marquis de Sade, the first thinker who openly advocated the extinction of humanity.¹¹ Bataille, however much inspiration he took from Sade, did not go that far. Still, according to Moynihan, Sade broke with the moral norms of his time by calling for the investment of desire in the 'general economy of cosmological orgy <...>: engaging in luxuriant wastefulness and impelling, thereby, the inevitable annihilation of humanity at the hands of sovereign nature' (Moynihan 2018: 145). We see that general economy expands the scale of the economy to such an extent that it is able to include not only decay but also extinction.

Sade's desire for extinction manifested itself during the violent period of the French Revolution: the era during which capitalism finally came to dominate. Today, more than two centuries later, it is becoming increasingly clear that capitalism, while exhausting the planet and spreading entropy, is facing its limits more and more aggressively, thus bringing humanity closer to extinction. T. McGowan argues that 'the entropy law <...> portends not just human extinction <...> but the end of all movement in a total diffusion of energy. <...> The entropy law is antithetical to the basic functioning of capitalism [and] signals the limits of newness, and capitalism subsists on nothing but newness' (2016: 138–139). In this way, the immanent negativity conceptualised by Bataille is substantiated as entropy materially introduced into general economy. Consequently, Bataille's entropology, by including entropic decay in the excesses of capitalism, allows us to consider the extinction of humanity as the presumed end result of decay.

Capitalism accelerates, but at the same time it also causes inertia: as we remember, Lévi-Strauss equated inertia with entropy. J. Baudrillard, who was heavily influenced by Bataille and is best known for theorising media and technology, is particularly relevant here. Baudrillard wrote about the decay and disappearance of meaning, linking entropy to information excess: '[I]nformation dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state

¹¹ The aforementioned Land claims that Kant, Sade's contemporary, felt an even fiercer 'thirst for extinction' (1991: 78), but Kant, of course, did not declare it directly. On the other hand, the similarity between Kant and Sade has already become worn out in psychoanalysis, especially when looking at the contributions of Jacques Lacan and his follower Slavoj Žižek.

dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but, on the contrary, to total entropy' (1994: 81).¹² Also he wrote the following: 'Energetic impasse. Point of inertia. A destiny of inertia for a saturated world. The phenomena of inertia are accelerating <...>. It is this point of inertia and what happens outside this point of inertia that today is fascinating, enthralling' (Baudrillard 1994: 161–162).¹³ Like Sade, Baudrillard articulates the libidinal function of extinction:¹⁴ the perverse desire to extinct. Inertia as submission to annihilation. This libido devoted to extinction can act as a demonic contagion that modifies the notion of human, so this leads us to the concept of inhumanism.

INHUMANISM

Bataille referred to decay as having an 'active virulence' (1993: 80). Like the libidinal desire for extinction, decay also operates through mimetic and affective contagion: decay suggests that entropy spreads and multiplies like a metastasis. Instances of this viral logic recur frequently in Bataille's writings: contagion, intoxication, infection, invasion and infiltration. This means that there are entities that possess a person like a demon: a person is affected *from within* and *through the inside*. For example, Bataille writes that capitalism functions 'in the way that Satan inhabits the soul of someone possessed, unbeknown to him, or that the possessed, without knowing it' (1991: 136). In this way, a person's relationship with what is alien is rethought. In this case, alienation settles and dwells in a person: a person is subjugated to an 'alien'. Decay is precisely such an agent that transforms the human body into something alien. Because of this alienation acting on the inside, we can also call entropology *xenoanthropology*.

Following Nietzsche, Bataille thinks intensively about what is 'inhuman' (1988b: xxx-i).¹⁵ For him, this inhumanity corresponds to communication with exteriority and outside-ness: the Unknown. Bataille aims to open up to this Outside and let the 'demon' inside '[to feel the] complicity in: despair, madness, love, supplication. Inhuman, disheveled joy of *communication* <...>. Laughter, dizziness, vertigo, nausea, loss of self to the point of death' (Bataille 1988b: 37). It is this loss of self, as a kind of (self-)dehumanisation, that expresses

¹² Lévi-Strauss wrote similarly: '[O]ur societies make a great deal of entropy. They dissipate their strength and exhaust themselves in the social conflicts, political struggles, and psychological tensions they produce in individuals. And the values on which they rested at the start inevitably wear thin. One could almost say that our societies gradually lose their underlying structure and tend to shatter, to reduce the individuals that compose them to the condition of interchangeable and anonymous atoms' (2013: 74).

¹³ The already mentioned Noys emphasises Baudrillard's theory of 'catastrophic and entropic negativity that floods back into the system causing it to implode' (Noys 2014: 4). Since Baudrillard views these processes favourably, he, like Bataille, can easily be attributed to the previously discussed Nietzschean affirmationism.

¹⁴ Freud wrote that what is inherent in the logic of desire is 'the inertia of the libido, [and] the latter's unwillingness to give up an old position for a new one' (2002: 56). As for the link between libido, entropy and economy, the insights of S. Tomšič are appropriate here: 'The epistemological tool that provides an insight into the structure of the libidinal and the social economy is the second law of thermodynamics, <...> introducing the notion of entropy. <...> The capitalist social link is structured like entropy' (2015: 70).

¹⁵ Land also traces the inhumanist trajectory of Nietzsche and Bataille: 'Nietzsche's genealogy of inhuman desire <...> feeds in turn into Bataille's base materialism' (Land 1992: 8). The features of inhumanism are also identified in Nietzsche's concept of art, which Land defines in Bataille's terminology: 'Nietzsche [is] thinking about art [as] the inhuman squandering that guides and ruins it' (Land 1992: 22). For a more detailed relation between Bataille and Land, see Tuomas 2023.

an entropic subjectivity that allows Bataille's entropological project to be defined not as anti-humanist or post-humanist, but rather as *inhumanist*. The classical – humanist – definition of human is being eroded and collapsed because we have to reflect the forces that work *through* human. Therefore, we can describe inhumanism as paradoxes of *internal exteriority* and *intimate alienation*.

Inhumanism decentralises and displaces human in a similar way to general economy defined by Bataille: it shows the insignificance of human in the natural, earthly and cosmic context. Also, the indifference of these elements towards human. Like general economy, inhumanism provides an anti-anthropocentric approach to examining the idea of human by relating it to material processes. In addition, we can also call Bataille's inhumanist entropology *collapsology*. On the one hand, because general economy foresees the potential of decay and entropy to cause social collapse. On the other hand, because when thinking inhumanistically, the human himself collapses from the inside. Human, using Baudrillard's vocabulary, undergoes an 'implosion' (1994: 72). Or, to borrow Bataille's own conception, human is being thought *heterogeneously* (1988a: 141). We no longer think of human homogeneity and self-sufficiency: otherness and alienation are included. Human is disintegrated, decomposed and 'dispersed'. He exists insofar as he immanently negates himself.

Finally, Bataille's inhumanist entropology questions the pretension of the anthropology itself to capture the human and clearly demarcate him as an object. Therefore, entropology, following general economy, focuses on broader processes, especially those related to capitalism. Human is extremely fragile and vulnerable being, but under the conditions of capitalism, he becomes an unstoppable machine of destruction: humanity creates and destroys, disrupts nature and sows disorder. Human activity is by itself decomposition and disharmony, hence entropy. Taking into account the discussed perspective of extinction, entropology also suggests the paradox of *anthropology without the human*, which we can speculatively vary as *anthropology after the human* or *anthropology without anthropologists*. For now, entropology serves us in that it allows us to articulate the materialist dialectics of human coexistence with the environment. The latter is illustrated by the following words of M. Fisher: 'The human condition [is] grotesque, since the human animal is the one that does not fit in, the freak of nature who has no place in the natural order and is capable of recombining nature's products into hideous new forms' (2016: 35).

CONCLUSIONS

Bataille's theory of general economy allows us to think about the immanent materiality of the capitalist economy, involving a matrix of destruction, decay and extinction. It is the negative side of the economy. I sought to demonstrate that negation and negativity are necessary components of Bataille's entropology. General economy reveals not only the material, but also the libidinal, natural, earthly and cosmic determination of human. This materiality of human is exposed by Bataille's conceptualisation of decay: especially as bodily disintegration and decomposition. Decay *temporalises* a person and *deidealises* him. Decay also splits the subject and uncovers its contradictions, which is part of Bataille's materialist dialectics. I called this entropic subjectivity *internal catastrophism* and suggested an aphorism for Bataille's ontology: *a human is as much as he decays*.

Bataille's entropology studies not only humanity, but also the extinction of the human species: the beginning of human allows us to know the end of human. As I have attempted to show, Bataille's entropology includes not only decay, but also extinction. We are reminded of

the latter by the inertial dynamics of capitalism, which wastes the planet. Furthermore, desire and libido can act as a demonically possessing – affectively contagious – entity. This intoxication, theorised by Bataille, allows us to define Bataille's direction as inhumanism: human is affected *from within* and *through the inside*. Inhumanism identifies external and alien forces acting *through* human. I define inhumanism as paradoxes of *internal exteriority* and *intimate alienation*. As a result, I specify this anti-anthropocentric Bataillean entropology as *xenoanthropology* and *collapsology*, as it envisions entropy's potential to cause both social and conceptual collapse of human(ity).

Bataille's entropology questions anthropology as such. Entropology radically decentralises the human being and focuses on broader processes, especially capitalism. Since I have included the vector of extinction, I have speculatively distinguished the paradoxes of *anthropology without the human*, *anthropology after the human*, and *anthropology without anthropologists*. After considering the perspectives of general economy, decay, extinction and inhumanism, I conclude that the concept of entropology proposed by Lévi-Strauss can be adapted, expanded and radicalised in the context of Bataille's philosophical anthropology. Bataille's entropology provides an opportunity to think not only about the self-destructive relationship of humanity with the environment, but also the insufficiency and inadequacy of the traditional – humanist – conception of human.

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Entropologija Georgeso Bataille'o filosofijoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje Claude'o Lévi-Strausso įvestas entropologijos terminas taikomas ir plėtojamas antropologinės Georgeso Bataille'o filosofijos kontekste: G. Bataille'o projektas apibrėžiamas kaip entropologinis. Tam pasirenkami keturi vektoriai: bendrosios ekonomijos teorija, nyksmo konceptas, išnykimo idėja ir inhumanizmo sąvoka. Bendrosios ekonomijos teorija leidžia suprasti imanentinį žmogaus gamtiškumą–žemiškumą ir negatyvią – entropišką – kapitalistinės ekonomikos pusę. Nyksmo konceptas atveria priegą prie kūniškos dezintegracijos ir dekompozicijos – subjektą skaldančio įlaikinto mirtingumo. Išnykimo idėja spekuliuoja apie žmonijos destruktivumo pasekmes, libidiškai įkrautą inerciją ir kraštutinę entropijos poveikio planetai perspektyvą. Inhumanizmo sąvoka siūlo radikaliai permąstyti žmogaus santykį su tuo, kas svetima ir išoriška: G. Bataille'o filosofija perinterpretuojama kaip inhumanistinė. Daroma išvada, kad C. Lévi-Strausso entropologijos naujadaras gali būti produktyviai artikuliuojamas ir aktualizuojamas remiantis G. Bataille'o filosofija.

Raktažodžiai: entropologija, bendroji ekonomija, nyksmas, išnykimas, inhumanizmas