

Georges Bataille and the Collège de Sociologie: An Encounter of Philosophy, Sociology, and Literature

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Abstract: This article explores the philosophical, sociological, and literary significance of the Collège de Sociologie (1937–1939), an intellectual movement led by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris in response to the sociopolitical upheaval of 1930s France. The Collège aimed to forge a “sacred sociology,” addressing the relationships between society, organism, and being, while countering the moral coldness of modernity. Influenced by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, along with Hegelian phenomenology interpreted by Alexandre Kojève, the Collège sought to blend sociological theory with avant-garde literary practices. It engaged with and critiqued surrealism, proposing a doctrine emphasizing the sacred and heterogeneous as antidotes to societal homogeneity. Despite its profound intellectual contributions, the movement grappled with internal tensions and controversial tactics, leaving behind a utopian yet critical legacy.

Keywords: Interwar period; Sacred sociology; France; Intellectual history; Avant-garde

The 1930s in France were a turbulent, tumultuous and exciting time. Perhaps this is why, for some writers, writing, in the sense of expressing only an individual feeling or an inner world, was not enough. It was necessary to get up, come out of the ivory tower, unite, speak in front of the audience and make oneself heard. There was in these men of letters a will, an ambition and a fantasy to become an ideologue, a politician, a repairer of society, which could seem so foreign to our contemporaries.

Led by Georges Bataille, with the assistance of Roger Caillois and Jules Monnerot, in November 1937, the Collège de Sociologie (1937–1939) bears witness to the existence of such writers and represents the active reaction of these writers sensitive to historical events that contain an insurmountable threat. It constitutes not only an intel-

lectual movement among others but a community of thought, a way of thinking; a group of writers (poets, philosophers, sociologists, ethnographers and literary critics) who are completely different from each other trying to form a single voice raising crucial questions about what should be the nature of power, democracy and the relationship between the individual and the community at a critical historical moment.¹

The subject of our study of the Collège de Sociologie is the modality of its functioning, the meaning of its thinking of the sacred, the historicity and at the same time the long-term effects of its ideas. Our essential aim is not to judge this movement, but to examine it under its different aspects and even to explain it more completely in order to give an objective but critical point of view on the Collège of Sociologie.

During its two years of existence, the main activity of the Collège de Sociologie takes the form of a series of lectures followed by a discussion, held in the Salle des Galeries du Livre, 15 rue Gay-Lussac in Paris. The lectures were held every Saturday evening for the first year and every Tuesday evening for the second year. In July 1937, *Acéphale* published a “Declaration on the Foundation of a Collège of Sociology,” signed by Georges Ambrosino, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Pierre Libra and Jules Monnerot. On November 20, 1937, the Collège de Sociologie was officially born with Bataille’s first lecture: “Sacred Sociology and the Relationships between Society, Organism and Being.” During these two years at the Collège de Sociologie, we see Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, Alexandre Kojève, Pierre Klossowski, Denis de Rougemont, Jean Paulhan, etc., take to the pulpit, depending on the day. In the audience, we also see Julien Benda sitting a few rows away from

¹ The organizers and participants were from various fields and they supported contradictory movements. The militant Nietzscheans such as Georges Bataille, members of the movement of personalism such as Denis de Rougemont, Paul-Louis Landsberg, supporters of Kierkegaard like Jean Wahl, Denis de Rougemont and Pierre Klossowski Michel and ethnographers such as Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois. The lectures were also attended by remarkable personalities of the time such as Julien Benda, Drieu La Rochelle, and Walter Benjamin.

Drieu la Rochelle, Walter Benjamin or Jean Wahl, who followed the speech sometimes with as much curiosity as consternation.

The Collège de Sociologie's initial purpose is to found a sacred sociology and to study the relationships between society, organism and being, that is, "the study of social existence in all its manifestations where the active presence of the sacred comes to light."¹ The reason for founding such a field of sociology for the members of the Collège de Sociologie is twofold: on the one hand, at the level of sociological research, the work accomplished by the contemporary study of social structures is limited and superficial in that it has been too limited to the analysis of so-called primitive societies while ignoring modern societies. On the other hand, the study of the latter must have a more significant scope. On the other hand, the founding of the Collège de Sociologie responds to an urgent need: democratic France needs a new moral value to confront the effectiveness of the totalitarian ideology that is in full swing. In other words, critical circumstances directly provide the external conditions for the birth of the enterprise.

That said, at the theoretical level, the goal is to found a new science. But in practice, what the Collège de Sociologie seeks is to find a way to release or bring forth "sources of warmth for French society whose moral coldness" dominates collective life. In other words, behind the theoretical attempt to establish a sacred sociology, the work of the Collège de Sociologie must imply a real result, according to its members. Sacred sociology is therefore in the sense of a new doctrine. In the production of the thought of the Collège de Sociologie, the sociological discovery made essentially by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss plays the leading role; apart from sociology, we would like to point out that the thoughts of Nietzsche and Bergson and German phenomenology, having power or the sacred as their center, also constitute important references. This large theoretical baggage and the political requirement decide that the enterprise, starting from sociology, will nevertheless refuse to remain confined within

¹ Denis Hollier, "The Declaration on the Foundation of a College of Sociology," *Acéphale*, double issue 3-4, July, 1937, 26. Reprinted in *Le Collège de Sociologie* (Gallimard, 1995), 27.

the framework of the sociological tradition of the French school.

We would like to first clarify that, behind the diversity of its inspirers, the complexity of its components and the richness of its philosophical, social, literary and political ideas, the Collège de Sociologie is above all a literary movement. More precisely, it is a literary movement with great social concern and high intellectualism. There is no doubt that the writers who participated in the founding of the Collège or gave lectures there are by definition “men of letters.” This means that the Collège de Sociologie essentially implies a social vocation of certain writers at a time when the modern world is undergoing a crisis, reaching a critical point. This statement is based on our following arguments. First, in the main ideas that have been advocated by its members, it is a question of literature, history, anthropology, politics and sociology. “The problem of literature,” precisely the disadvantage of literature in comparison with other disciplines, is not only the object of their study, but constitutes for them the decisive reason for undertaking a “sociological activity.” From their point of view, the decline in the prestige of literature lies in its highly individual nature: it is only the decadence of myth. Consequently, it is incapable of creating a community, a morality that is commonly approved and shared. In short, literature lacks a sacred dimension.

Then, although the Collège de Sociologie cherishes the ambition of going beyond the limits of literature, it does not escape becoming itself a literary discourse, or an avant-garde literary discourse. Its avant-garde character is due not only to the surrealist experiences of some of its members but to the audacity of its ideals and the break of its ideals with its time. More precisely, the Collège de Sociologie, born in the wake of surrealism, produces ideas or proposes solutions that are incompatible with the circumstances essentially, the principles of the modern world. The majority of the participants or speakers (Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, Denis de Rougemont, Pierre Klossowski and Jean Paulhan), who are above all writers, are more

or less influenced by surrealism which enjoys extreme popularity in the field of the sensibility of the time, not to mention the fact that Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris are former surrealists. The birth of the Collège de Sociologie is inseparable from the polemics of its members with surrealism. Cut off by the war, it constitutes in fact the last stage of a genealogy of ephemeral avant-garde movements and reviews which, from *Contre-Attaque* to *Inquisitions* then to *Acéphale*, all developed in the wake of surrealism.

Roger Caillois, after two years of participation in the movement, severely criticized surrealism. For him, it was an intellectual trial of art: if surrealism did not succeed in creating a myth or becoming a true scientific activity, it was for profound reasons that were related to the very nature of its literary dimension. “You are decidedly on the side of intuition, poetry, art, and their privileges. [...] I have adopted the opposite bias,”¹ he declared to André Breton. Leaving surrealism, the young intellectual Caillois devoted most of his pre-war writing to the search for a doctrine, knowledge that could go beyond the limits of surrealism. The founding of the Collège de Sociologie is among these attempts. In Georges Bataille, the beginning of his intellectual journey is marked by his unequal struggle against surrealism. What he reproaches surrealism for is not only that it seeks a kind of literary vanity, but that it dramatizes idealist ideology and thus denies the essence of human knowledge. By affirming that automatic writing cuts against the man with double feeling, Bataille confronts the idealism of surrealism with its “low materialism.” According to him, materialism “is above all the stubborn negation of idealism,” and “low materialism” marks a heterodoxy less in conformity with the established intellectual order, while allowing intelligence to escape the constraint of idealism.” Indeed, he addresses an ontological critique to surrealism.

The perspective from which Bataille and Caillois attack surrealism is different, but the common aspect of their critique is that surrealism, instead of constructing a universal doctrine applicable to different domains, asserts itself as partial and incom-

¹ Roger Caillois, “Procès intellectuel de l’art,” [Lettre à André Breton] in *Approches de l’imaginaire*, le 27 Décembre, 1934, 36.

plete. It is certain that the critique of Bataille and that of Caillois also imply the intention to compete with surrealism: the Collège de Sociologie should overcome the defects of surrealism, that is, the defects of literature. But how?

As we know, the Collège was situated at a historical moment when different ideas were flying around: Dada, surrealism, communism, fascism... It is also a time when sociology continues to charm the intellectual milieu and the new ethnology announces its advent. If we put aside the complex character of the thinking of the Collège de Sociologie, introduced both by the diversity of the subjects treated and the divergences between the main founders, the Collège is essentially nourished, among these ideas in full bloom, by French sociology and Hegelian phenomenology.

First of all, the influence of French sociology is considerable. Among others, the thinking of the two sociologists Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss plays a decisive role, but at the same time very different. It is certain that the purely sociological fruits of Durkheimian sociology, notably the great discovery of religion, have an undeniable meaning for the points of view of the Collège; we know for example that Bataille meditated deeply on Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and thus formed his thinking on religion. But it is above all the activism contained in Durkheim's sociology that sets the moral tone of the Collège. "Writers and scholars are citizens; it is therefore obvious that they have a strict duty to participate in public life. It remains to be seen in what form and to what extent," declares Durkheim, taking into account the relationship of intellectuals to action.¹ The foundation of the Collège de Sociologie is a response to the Durkheimian imperative of a commitment that is not that of the professional politician but of the privileged citizen. Caillois' activism constitutes a good example of fidelity to the Durkheimian imperative. Caillois is even more demanding: the intellectual must be as disinterested and as indispensable to political life as the cleric in ancient societies standing by the feudatory to approve or disavow his govern-

¹ Émile Durkheim, *La science sociale et l'action*, introduction and présentation by Jean-Claude Filloux (Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), 279.

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Mauss continues to point out that so-called primitive societies are welded around the sacred. This thesis penetrates deeply into the minds of the founding members of the Collège de Sociologie, who seek to repair the loosening of the current bonds of society. That said, French sociology plays a dual role in the founding of the Collège: it cultivates the activism of the Collège and at the same time indicates a path for it to follow.

Yet by broadly accepting Mauss' thesis, the Collège places the emphasis of its study on the left pole of the sacred. First, the functional hopes that the Collège de Sociologie attributes to the sacred correspond more to the characteristics of *mana* than to those of the sacred itself: in other words, the Collège de Sociologie sees in the sacred first of all the source of a mystical, magical, transmissible and contagious power, which will lead to a spiritual power. That said, spiritual power according to the conception of the Collège is of an irrational nature: it establishes community cohesion, arouses popular dynamism and calls for momentum. It is an absolute and immediate power. It is conceived as a rival thought of totalitarianism, especially German Nazism, in that it represents a manifestation of a religious unconscious repressed by modern society. Then, for the members of the Collège de Sociologie, especially for Bataille, the sacred establishes the social bond, that is to say that they accept Mauss's thesis identifying the sacred with the social. But on the other hand, they consider that the sacred can also be the antisocial against the established order. "It is remarkable that, considered within the limits of current times, the category of the sacred rarely appears to be linked to cohesion; on the contrary, it most often appears antisocial. The sacred – or heterogeneous – elements which, in other conditions, founded this cohesion, instead of constituting society, the social bond, could just as well be nothing more than its subversion," asserts Bataille.¹

To what extent is this antithesis justified? First, the conditions determine the consequences. The given world, that is, industrial society, is considered as a society

¹ Georges Bataille, "Le sens moral de la sociologie," *Critique* no. 1, in *Œuvres Complètes*, tome XI, *Article 1*, 1944-1949, 1988, 61.

tending to reduce itself to homogeneity. “Homogeneity” here means “commensurability of elements” and “consciousness of this commensurability.” For Bataille, the productive society, the useful society is the exemplary model of social homogeneity, while the sacred elements are considered heterogeneous and generally take on a subversive value. The heterogeneous, irreducible to assimilation by nature, achieves the reversal of values. In Bataille’s thesis, we see a marked shift from the sacred in the general sense to the “left” sacred. As we know, in accordance with Durkheim’s schema, the sacred has two poles in that it contains pure elements and at the same time impure elements. The pure and the impure imply the respective functions of cohesion and dissolution. Compared to the pure, which presides over order and the norm, the impure is responsible for effervescence, disorder, fever. It is obvious that the sacred essentially takes the left dimension in the thought of the Collège de Sociologie.

Several of Caillois’ texts from the 1930s show that the author is preoccupied with the idea of “oversocialization,” the founding of a new order and a militant orthodoxy. More precisely, the Luciferian spirit and the feeling of revolt are at the center of his social reflection. Despite the divergences on the aims of the Collège de Sociologie between Bataille and him, their starting point turns out to be identical. “Le vent d’hiver” explicitly expresses Caillois’ ambition to found a new doctrine that would provide both a ferment of dissolution of the established structure and a beginning of a recomposition of the living forces.

Behind the transgression of Durkheim’s schema, there is the negativity of Hegelian phenomenology, more precisely that of Hegelian phenomenology interpreted by Alexandre Kojève. Between 1933 and 1939, in Paris, one of the great intellectual events was the Seminar on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, given by Alexandre Kojève. The following people attended this seminar: Raymond Queneau, Jacques Lacan, Raymond Aron, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roger Caillois, André Breton, etc. Bataille attended the Seminar consistently and said he was upset when he left the conferences.

Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's phenomenology is personal and passionate. The interest of Hegelian negation, according to Kojève, lies in the fact that it is not purely destructive, but on the contrary constitutes the dialectical way to access the positive content of the Self. This Self "will be (in the future) what it has become by the negation (in the present) of what it has been (in the past), this negation being carried out with a view to what it will become,"¹ while all action is negative. Negativity is realized in and through Action or as Action. More precisely, negation or negating action means to deny, and to transcend by denying it, the given reality of man. In other words, the end of negation is creation.

Bataille's entire metaphysical system will be fundamentally marked by this thesis of negativity. The meaning that destruction takes on in Bataille's thought becomes the key argument for understanding his reflection on death, eroticism, sacrifice, and the general economy. The notion of the sacred is defined in particular by Bataille as a pushed negativity, precisely in that the sacred constitutes for him an act of consummation. "[The sacred] threatens to break the dikes, to oppose to productive activity the precipitous and contagious movement of a consummation of pure glory. The sacred is precisely comparable to the flame that destroys wood by consuming it", argues Bataille.² The importance of negativity in Bataille's eyes leads him to increasingly identify the sacred with death – the extreme form of destruction. And his thinking leads to a thinking of mysticism, madness, death, which seems to Caillois difficult to reconcile with the principles from which the Collège de Sociologie starts. So, if the Collège de Sociologie had not been interrupted by the war, it would also have risked being dissolved due to the deep differences in orientation between its main initiators.

The activism of the Collège de Sociologie and its "disconcerting" ideas cannot be understood if we do not place them in the political and cultural context of the time, as we indicated at the beginning of our introduction. The desire to create momentum,

¹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes*, réunies et publiées par Raymond Queneau (Gallimard, 1947), 13-14.

² Georges Bataille, "Le sacrifice, la fête et les principes du monde sacré," *Œuvres Complètes*, tome VII, *Théorie de la religion*, 1970, 313.

the popular effervescence, the will to found a new order dominated by the spirit of a hierarchy of beings and the highlighting of the heterogeneous aspect of the sacred can lead one to suspect something like a fascist quest for greatness. The members of the Collège de Sociologie can be criticized for their lack of rationalism, their blindness and the ambiguity of their positions. Yet on the other hand, all these faults are understandable in that no one knew clearly at the time how far the madness of Nazism could go.

The ambiguity can also be removed by the fact that it is a mimetic tactic, explained by Caillois on several occasions and in different texts. The essence of this tactic is a counter-attack strategy: instead of letting oneself be enslaved, one rises up and fights against the enemy with the latter's weapon. This strategy is not a betrayal of one's own principles; on the contrary, it is a question of adapting them to the critical nature of the circumstances. This unreasonable idea was considered suspect, even warmongering, by a large number of Parisian intellectuals in 1938.

In fact, one might wonder whether the strategy of the Collège de Sociologie does not have a naive, blind side. In other words, the position of the Collège de Sociologie and its proposal to adopt fascist techniques without allowing itself to be contaminated by the ideology itself implies a strongly utopian dimension. From this point of view, the Collège de Sociologie ultimately reveals itself to be a literary and avant-garde discourse in the broadest sense. And because of the utopianism contained in its ideas and the fundamentally literary nature of its questioning, the Collège de Sociologie reveals for us on the one hand a heroism of writers who have failed in relation to their society, and on the other hand, a critical myth which "deferring to infinity its possibilities of realization, leads to the deepening of thought and language in the exercise of writing."¹

Bataille's philosophical system is a-systematic. There are binaries in Bataille's philosophy as his work often explores contradictions and impossibilities, particularly

¹ Jean-Michel Heimonet, "Des 'mythes humiliés' aux 'mythes triomphants.'" Essai de mythologie comparée: Roger Caillois, Jules Monnerot," in *Roger Caillois, la pensée aventurée* (sous the direction of Laurent Jenny, 1992), 92.

through the lens of sacred and profane binaries. Second, it concerns mysticism and extremity. Bataille ties mystical experiences to extreme states that push the boundaries of human consciousness, often linking them to religious ecstasy and the impossible aspiration of becoming “everything.” Third, it is the link between sacrifice and the sacred. Sacrifice is central to Bataille’s concept of the sacred, representing an unproductive expenditure that contrasts with the profane world’s focus on utility and productivity. Fourth, it is on religion and atheism. Bataille’s relationship with religion is complex; he is both dismissive of and fascinated by it. He critiques Christian dogma while being drawn to religious ecstasy and rituals. Last, the pair of continuity and discontinuity in his discussion. Bataille identifies a universal desire for continuity, which is often sought through experiences like sacrifice, eroticism, and mystical bliss, despite the inherent fear of losing one’s individual self.

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