



On Social Vortexes

Contributions to a metaphorology of Georges Bataille's social ontology

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Georges Bataille's social ontology by examining underexplored aspects of his work through a historical-conceptual lens, particularly drawing on Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology. I argue that Bataille adopts vortexes from biological and astrophysical texts as a metaphor to represent society, thereby presenting an organicist perspective. This thesis will be demonstrated in three steps: first, I define the conceptual coordinates of the debate between mechanicism, vitalism and the emerging organicism during the early 20th century; second, I analyse the biological and astrophysical texts read and cited by Bataille where whirlwinds play a significant role; and third, I demonstrate how Bataille employs vortexes as a figure in his conceptualisation of society.

KEYWORDS:

Bataille, vortex, society,
organicism, metaphors

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ramos Mejía T. On Social
Vortexes. *Redescriptions:
Political Thought,
Conceptual History and
Feminist Theory*. 2025;
28(2): 176–190. DOI: [https:
//doi.org/10.33134/rds.476](https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.476)

Bataille is one of the most important writers of the 20th century, with an undeniable influence on contemporary continental philosophy. His work spans multiple literary genres, engages a wide range of themes, and crosses diverse disciplinary fields, yet it consistently centres on the affirmation of existence as an experience of excess, necessarily shared with others. Hence, the relevance of his social ontology, which has been the subject of sustained critical attention, is unclear. In this paper, I propose to examine a little-studied aspect of this ontology from a historical-conceptual perspective, drawing in particular on the work of the Padua School and Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology.

The Padua School of conceptual history offers a critical development of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*, stressing the power of concepts to transform historical experience. Chignola argues that conceptualisation both conveys tradition and disrupts it through critique and deconstruction, requiring a double gesture: first, identifying the conceptual fabric of the inherited linguistic horizon; second, locating the ruptures that enable conceptual creation and renew historical experience (2002, 2013). Blumenberg complements this perspective by situating metaphorology within conceptual history. Metaphors, like inherited language, are not merely descriptive but actively shape experience and facilitate new forms of conceptual creation (2020). Through this lens, metaphorology becomes a central tool for the Padua School's project of tracing sites of conceptual innovation and understanding how concepts emerge, transform and structure historical experience.

Bataille always rejected the compartmentalisation of knowledge. Based on the conviction that it is not possible to understand human existence without piercing the fence that separates the different fields of knowledge (see, for example, Bataille 1988 [1938a]), in his works, he moves unhesitatingly through diverse disciplines from which he drew concepts and images. I consider it worthwhile to study his work in the light of the Padua School of conceptual history and Blumenberg's framework, as both allow us to situate his elaborations within a broad conceptual-historical context and to identify areas of conceptual innovation. In what follows, I bring these perspectives to bear on a specific image central to Bataille's social ontology: the metaphor of the vortex.

I will focus on those works in which the French writer deploys his social theory and the texts he uses for its elaboration, situating them within the framework of the debate between mechanicism, vitalism and organicism in the field of biology in the first decades of the 20th century. I have decided to frame Bataillean social ontology in this debate for two interrelated reasons. First, in this context, the author of *Eroticism* incorporated notions and drew on images associated with disciplines adjacent to biology in different ways and degrees, such as physics, astrophysics, sociology and psychology; in addition, though to a lesser extent, he also engaged directly with biological texts. While Bataille was not a direct participant in this debate – and may not even have been aware of it – its conceptual coordinates nonetheless influenced his thinking. Second, this decision has a tactical sense: placing his work within the set of conceptual coordinates that structure this debate allows me to highlight aspects that have gone unnoticed and thus make his texts more intelligible.

The paper is structured in three parts. In accordance with my tactic, the first part defines mechanicism, vitalism and the emerging organicism in biology, also considering their intersections with other fields of knowledge, drawing on research in the philosophy of

biology. In the second part, I will examine texts that Bataille read for the elaboration or, at least, he read simultaneously with the elaboration of its social theory. These are references generally neglected by experts – namely, Arthur Eddington, Emile Belot and Georges Bohn. Throughout this second section, my focus will be on the figure that is repeated in almost all of them, which is that of the vortex. In the third section, I will study Bataille's social ontology, emphasising the place of the metaphor of the social vortex in it. This paper argues that Bataille draws on the image of vortices from diverse sources, including biology and astrophysics, to articulate an open organicist vision of society.

The most important works on Bataille's social ontology can be provisionally grouped into three overlapping lines of inquiry. The first emphasises figural motifs and spatial-dynamic structures; the second, affective and mimetic flows; and the third, historically informed readings of Bataille as a social theorist, situating his thought within the broader genealogies of French sociology and political philosophy.

First, considering scholars focusing on spatial and dynamic figures: although not directly addressing social ontology as such, Michel Foucault, for example, introduced the figure of the spiral to conceptualise the relationship between prohibition and transgression in Bataille's thinking – not as external opposition but as codependency and mutual realisation (Foucault in [Noys 2000, 2011](#)). Benjamin Noys – who takes up Foucault's suggestion – foregrounds Bataille's metaphor of the labyrinth, where movement around a centre produces an illusory stability that contrasts with social existence conceived instead as dispersed waves ([Bataille 1984; Noys 2000](#)), rather than as an image of an open totality. Moreover, [Denis Hollier, in his now-classic *Against Architecture* \(1992\)](#), shows that Bataille's architectural metaphors in pairs (museum-slaughterhouse, labyrinth-pyramid) express and reproduce the social itself, as the interplay of centrifugal and centripetal forces. These pairs, far from being mere analogies, concretise the poles of attraction and repulsion within the continuum of unproductive expenditure (1992).

A rather different perspective is provided by those who approach Bataille through contagious and affective dimensions. [Ffrench \(2007\)](#) has argued that Bataille's ontology of relation is structured by the movement or contagion of affective charge – also called communication – between bodies, which configures the possibility of community as an open process – though not limitless – rather than as a closed totality. [Lawtoo \(2011\)](#), taking up and expanding on Ffrench's insight, has insisted on the contagious (in terms of mimesis) and affective dimension of Bataille's notion of communication, bringing it to the problem of the genesis of the subject. Communication thus appears as a pre-verbal, immediate and mimetic experience that passes through bodies and constitutes the affective subject ([Lawtoo 2011](#)). Later on, he reads Bataille's heterology from this mimetic approach, highlighting how radical alterity paradoxically discloses affective continuity through mimetic contagion ([Lawtoo 2018](#)). In this case, attraction and repulsion are explained by the tension between dissolutive mimetic permeability and the differentiating horror that resists it. It is also noteworthy that Lawtoo associates the figure of the spiral with Bataille's own movement of thought ([Lawtoo 2016](#)).

Finally, [Arppe \(2014\)](#) and [Pellarin \(2015\)](#) offer broader, historically oriented readings of Bataille as a social theorist. Arppe situates him within the genealogy of French sociology (from Comte and Durkheim to Girard) to show how affectivity constitutes both the foundation and the threat of the social bond, thereby illuminating his reflections on

expenditure and violence as part of a longer sociological tradition concerned with regulating the ambivalence of collective passions. Pellarin, for his part, approaches Bataille through the history of political ideas, showing how his constant engagement with the social sciences informs a conception of the subject that is always on the limit of the useful, irreducibly traversed by expenditure.

While Pellarin briefly mentions the ‘swirling’ (2015, 185) structure of social order in Bataille, no study to date has examined the implications of the vortex metaphor for his social ontology. Against this backdrop, my analysis highlights how the image of the vortex not only resonates with the critical insights of the above-mentioned authors but also extends them by articulating mimetic flows and social totality in a unified framework.

The relevance of rereading Georges Bataille’s social ontology through the lens of the vortex metaphor is manifold. First and foremost, it illuminates the genesis and logic of the movements of attraction and repulsion that the author situates at the core of social existence. Bataille himself evokes this dynamic in striking terms: ‘our entire existence [...] is produced, hence, in a sort of swirling turbulence [*remous tumultueux*] where death and the most explosive tension of life are simultaneously at play’ (1988 [1938c], 123–124). This image of swirling turbulence already suggests a social vortex, where clashing flows give rise to a totality that is simultaneously open-ended and in perpetual becoming. Seen in this light, the metaphor reveals a gesture of conceptual invention that renders intelligible a vision of the social as simultaneously totalising, open-ended and in continuous transformation, capturing the dynamic interplay of forces at the heart of Bataille’s metaphor.

This vision, on the one hand, expresses an organicist approach that diverges from the closed, homogenising organicism of totalitarianism; on the other, it positions Bataille not merely as an heir to the French School of Sociology: by introducing a metaphor that renders the coexistence of openness and totalisation internally coherent, it places him as a thinker who actively reconfigures its legacy. Finally, the vortex metaphor articulates a convergence between the structural scale of social cohesion and the mimetic-affective flows, showing how attraction and repulsion operate simultaneously across the level of social whole and that of intersubjective processes. Taken together, then, the analysis of the vortex metaphor does more than provide a historically informed contextualisation of Bataille’s social ontology: it brings to light a latent dimension that deepens our understanding of his approach to the social.

NEITHER MACHINE NOR THE ELAN VITAL: LIFE AS SELF-ORGANISING MATTER

Authors such as [Haraway \(1976\)](#), [Hui \(2019\)](#) and [Mossio \(2024\)](#), to mention just a few with diverse trajectories, agree on the general conceptual coordinates that structure the relationships between mechanicism, vitalism and organicism. I frame this discussion around the metaphor of the vortex, which serves as a visual and conceptual tool within organicism to articulate a position beyond mechanistic linearity and vitalist transcendence.

Biological mechanicism, heir to Greek atomism and Newtonian physics, conceives the organism as an aggregate of elementary constituents whose operations, independently of each other, are explained by physico-chemical processes. As Haraway explains, ‘the parts of the machine are simple, unorganised and not intrinsically

altered if installed in a different place in the mechanism [...] *sum* means aggregate without additional principles or regularities specified or necessary to explain the animal-machine's operation' (Haraway 1976, 27). The fundamental metaphor of the mechanistic paradigm is the machine, most commonly exemplified by the human body conceived as a clock (Haraway 1976; Hui 2019). Vitalism, by contrast, conceives organisms as totalities whose properties determine the activity of the parts and attributes to them goal-oriented behaviour. Its specific feature is the invocation of a metaphysical entity – vital or spiritual force, extraordinary matter, vital *élan*, etc. – presented as the foundation of organic totality (Haraway 1976; Hui 2019).

Organicism emerged in the early 20th century as an attempt to overcome both paradigms: it rejects the aggregative model of mechanicism and the metaphysical postulates of vitalism, while retaining holism and teleology (Haraway 1976; Hui 2019). In Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the classic point of departure, an organism's parts do not exist by themselves but rather depend on each other, forming together the organic totality which, in turn, is both the condition of existence and the cause of existence for the parts. An organism is, thus, effect and cause of itself; it produces itself (Hui 2019; Kant 1987 [1790]; Mossio 2024; Toepfer 2024; Wolfe 2024). This recursive model echoes in 19th-century biology (Goethe, Cuvier, von Baer, Bernard) but consolidates only with 20th-century physics, when the equivalence between matter and energy allowed organisation itself to be conceived as an immanent property of matter (Haraway 1976).

Contemporary organicists such as Mossio define organisation as a regime of mutual dependence among differentiated parts forming a self-maintaining whole. Such systems are operationally closed yet thermodynamically open: they sustain themselves by channelling external flows of energy and matter (Mossio 2024). In other words, the operational closure that guarantees organic self-production requires thermodynamic openness – that is, the exchange of energy-matter with the environment to execute the self-determination circuit. Here, again, circular causality ensures recursive feedback between parts and whole (Hui 2019).

Organisms are, thus, open systems, which, 'unlike "self-organising" dissipative structures, [...] constrain and canalise the thermodynamic flow through the collective activity of their functional parts, which realise a specific form of mutual relationship' (Mossio 2024, 11). For Mossio, biological systems show greater stability and capacity to maintain themselves over time than non-biological self-organised physical structures, such as cosmic vortexes, by means of their regime of mutual dependence.¹ Vortexes, however, a specific case of self-organising physical structures, already appear as a metaphor for organicism in its origins. Schelling, for example, defines organisation as follows:

Organisation is to me nothing else than the stopped stream of causes and effects. Only where nature has not inhibited this current does it flow forward (in a straight line). Where nature inhibits the current, the current returns (in a circular line) to itself. Not all succession of causes and effects is excluded by the concept of the organism; this term denotes only a succession, which flows back within itself within certain limits. (Schelling in Hui 2019, 67)

For Schelling, organisms are defined by the interruption of the linear causality in the flow of inorganic nature, producing a circular movement as those of vortexes, which

function as a visual metaphor for recursive organisation ([Morin 1992, 1999](#)). Schelling explicitly uses this figure to illustrate the organic in its insertion into the becoming of nature:

The whirlpool is not something stationary, but rather constantly changeable and newly reproduced every moment. No product in nature is thus fixed but [is instead] produced in every moment by the power of the whole Nature. (We do not see the persistence [*Bestehen*], but the constant reproduction of the natural products.). (Schelling in [Hui 2019, 64](#))

Hui, in this regard, explains: ‘The visual example of the whirlpool demonstrates the becoming of the infinite of nature, and its manifestation in finite beings, and [it] situates them in a system in which finite beings are carried within the force of nature, whether it is generation or corruption’ (2019, 64–65). In short, for organicism, an organism is neither a mere collection of separate parts nor a totality animated by an external vital force. Rather, it is a self-referential movement embedded within the immanent flux of becoming. Within this framework, vortexes exemplify the organicist insight by illustrating how the convergence of flows generates a circular, self-sustaining structure that remains thermodynamically open, simultaneously stabilising the organism while allowing it to adapt and transform.

THE VORTEX IN BATAILLEAN SOURCES

Schelling was not the only philosopher to use the image of vortexes; whether as metaphors, as concepts or as a result of the description of physical phenomena, they appear frequently in the history of philosophy, physics and even biology. Long before him, they were used in the philosophy of nature since the pre-Socratics – Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Democritus – but also in Plato and Aristotle. In turn, none other than Descartes used the figure of the vortex in the elaboration of his cosmogony. Finally, there was a theory of the constitution of matter from vortexes created and defended by William Thomson, William Hicks and J. J. Thomson, which was also very relevant in the late 19th century, especially in British philosophy of nature ([Kragh 2002](#)).

The vortexes reached Bataille through different channels; they were present, for instance, in *Le problème du devenir et la notion de la matière dans la philosophie grecque*, where Arthur [Rivaud \(1905\)](#) highlights the place of vortexes among the atomists, for whom the whirling motion of matter produces the cosmos.² Similarly, Henri Bergson refers to Thomson’s vortex theory in *Matter and Memory*.³ Curiously, however, it seems to have been the Cartesian vortexes that inspired Bataille most directly, albeit indirectly. According to Descartes’ cosmogony, the universe is full of tiny particles that form infinite vortexes in constant interaction that create and move heavy bodies (see [Descartes 1985 \[1640\]](#), 248–266). The Cartesian model is distinguished from Newtonian cosmogony, which asserts that the motion of celestial bodies is explained by the law of universal gravitation ([Tanton and Curtis 2003](#)). The opposition between these two theories also appears in some of the texts that Bataille consulted, such as the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, where [Lenoir \(1923\)](#) and [Brunschwig \(1922\)](#) mention the tension between Cartesian and Newtonian cosmogonies.⁴ This constellation of references situates Bataille within a broader conceptual history in which the vortex functions as a privileged figure for thinking the genesis of order out of turbulence.

That said, two names occupy a central place in this respect for Bataille's conceptualisation. One of them is Emile Belot, French engineer and astrophysicist, author of a theory on the origin of the planets and stars called 'cosmogonie tourbellinaire'. He never abandoned his dualistic and antagonistic theory on the origin of the stars, which he presented in 'Essai de cosmogonie tourbillonnaire: l'origine dualiste des mondes', published in 1911, and summarised in 'Les idées cosmogoniques modernes', an article published July 1912 in *the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*.⁵ Belot criticises monistic theories that explain the origin of stars on the basis of a primitive homogeneous chaos. He states that 'everywhere, we find systematic overall movements [*mouvements d'ensemble*] in the nebulae, in the currents of stars' (Belot 1978 [1912], 517). That's why he defends the 'doctrine of Descartes' whirlwinds', which 'involves a dualism' because 'an antagonistic current of bodies is necessary to create a whirlwind' (Belot 1978 [1912], 526–529). Further on, Belot adds: 'Thus, the existence of a swirling nucleus [*noyau tourbillonnaire*] in the stars corroborates the presumption of their dualistic formation' (Belot 1978 [1912], 529). Like Descartes, he believes that the celestial bodies, including those that make up the solar system, are the result of 'generative whirlwinds' (Belot 1978 [1912], 530). Belot maintains that there is a pre-eminence of repulsive forces over attractive ones, and claims that Newtonian mechanics only focuses on the latter, which represent a second phase 'when the attraction fixes the condensed stars in positions of relative stability' (Belot 1978 [1912], 535), concealing their initial cause.

Vortexes also appear in Arthur Stanley Eddington's texts, one of the most important astrophysicists of the 20th century and a highly successful populariser of both relativity theory and quantum mechanics (Gherab-Martin 2013). His works circulated, among others, in the surrealist movement, and it seems it was through this channel that his texts reached Bataille (Parkinson 2008). There is one text in particular that Bataille quotes (see Bataille 1970, 515; Bataille 2023 [1973], 58): 'The Rotation of the Galaxy' (1930), where Eddington describes our galaxy as a swarm of particles, gas and stars rotating around its centre, distributed as 'transient eddies in a whirlpool, continually forming and dissipating' (Eddington 1930, 20). The rotation of this 'whirlpool nebula' (Eddington 1930, 15) is fast enough so that this gas does not collapse into a dense nebula at the centre as a result of the pull of gravity (Eddington 1930). This is why Eddington states 'that such disc-shaped arrangements of matter are precarious, and that their stability should not be relied upon' (1930, 30). In short, for Eddington, our Galaxy is a cosmic vortex composed of stars and gas caused by the meeting of opposing forces, which has a transient and weak stability (Eddington 1930). For Eddington, as for Belot, cosmic vortexes are explained as the effect of attractive and repulsive forces.

Finally, vortexes are also present in the biological works of Georges Bohn. In *La forme et le mouvement* (1921) – a book that Bataille also read⁶ – Bohn explores the genesis of forms, or morphogenesis, of living organisms. At the core of the paradigm shift in physics and in biology, he at first frames his approach in mechanistic-reductionist terms; nevertheless, examining the text in detail, it is possible to identify conceptual twists that seem to take the author in a different direction.

Thus, Bohn states, on the one hand, that the form of living organisms result from 'the laws of chemical mechanics' (1921, 8). However, on the other hand, we note a significant slippage of perspective, almost immediately: 'In this book, I have another, and perhaps more fruitful, point of view. Instead of considering living beings as *aggregates of chemical substances*, I am going to consider you as *systems of forces*,

of movements' (Bohn 1921, 9). Later on, he expresses himself in a similar way, stating that, instead of seeing living beings as 'multitudes of chemical substances', he prefers to conceive them as 'systems of force, as the seat of directed movements, ordered according to a certain plan' (Bohn 1921, 64). The opposition between aggregate or multitudes of chemical substances and ordered systems of forces is relevant in the framework of the paradigm shift from mechanicism–vitalism dualism to its overcoming in organicism. The notions of 'order' and 'plan' suggest that the forces interacting in that system are organised according to a certain goal. Thus, while it is true that Bohn's proposal cannot be considered fully organicist, it is undeniable that it distances itself from the mechanistic–reductionist approach and deviates in the direction of the emerging paradigm.

The adoption of this approach is always presented as an experimental hypothesis and includes a strong metaphorical burden, openly defended by the author.⁷ In fact, in addition to the system of forces' metaphor, Bohn uses the figure of the vortices: 'I shall be led, in the course of this book, to consider living beings [...] as vibrating swirling [*tourbillonnaire*] systems, as systems of lines of force' (Bohn 1921, 36). Thus, for the French biologist, living beings are not aggregates of particles, but vibrating, swirling systems, governed by 'internal forces' (Bohn 1921, 10). These swirling systems result from the specific property of living particles to transmit or communicate to each other their motion (Bohn 1921), which are in 'mutual orientation', meaning they tend to move 'in relation to each other' (Bohn 1921, 64). In a word, vibrating living particles propagate their movement to each other, creating the vortex dynamic that shapes the organic whole.

In view of the above, I claim that Bohn's position, especially considering the sense of its metaphorical content, expresses a conceptual tension in accordance with a context of paradigm shift and conceptual creation in which he wrote this paper. On the one hand, this metaphor, according to which organisms are systems of ordered forces forming vortices, includes organicism's notions of totality, organisation and self-reference. Moreover, as we have seen, also the idea of mutual orientation of the constituents of the living organisms can be related to the notion of mutual dependence, a key element of the emerging paradigm. However, there is no clear causality of the organic totality over the constituents, since the author tends to explain the swirling movement only on the basis of the mutual orientation of the particles. In view of the above, although Bohn is not an organicist, some of his ideas and the images he uses indicate an organicist direction.

Having established the significance of the whirlwind as both an organicist metaphor and a foundation of cosmic beings within the texts that influenced Bataille, we now turn to examine how this imagery emerges and operates within his own writings. By tracing the use of this notion in Bataille's work, I aim to uncover the ways in which the whirlwind serves as a conceptual tool to articulate his social ontology.

GEORGES BATAILLE'S SOCIAL VORTEX

The sources indicate that the vortex image took hold in his work gradually. During the 1930s, the author often seems to have it in mind without using the word *vortex* or *whirlwind*. This is the case, for example, of the famous article, key in all of Bataille's social theory, 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1984 [1933]). In this work, Bataille argues that human activity is organised into two main categories: utilitarian and expenditure activities. On the one hand, the domain of the useful is made up of activities oriented

towards the maintenance and reproduction of lives. On the other hand, expenditure is made up of 'unproductive expenditures', – that is, 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality) [...] activities which [...] have no end beyond themselves' (Bataille 1984 [1933]), 169). Expenditure is constituted by those activities of destruction of energy and matter, including wealth, without a utilitarian sense. While utilitarian activities are oriented towards the accumulation of matter-energy for the preservation of life, in expenditure practices, the emphasis is on the useless loss.

However, these two types of practices do not have the same value for Bataille, since, for him, expenditure is the foundation and the sense of human life, considered as an open system. In Bataille's view,

human life cannot in any way be limited to the closed systems [...]. The immense travail of recklessness, discharge and upheaval that constitutes life could be expressed by stating that life starts only with the deficit of these systems; at least what it allows in the way of order and reserve has meaning only from the moment when the ordered and reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for. (Bataille 1984 [1933], 170–180)

Bataille does not yet speak in terms of whirlwinds or vortexes; however, he defines human life as a system in deficit, open, like vortexes, which thus accumulates to lose matter-energy.

Towards the end of the 1930s, between 1937 and 1940, the vortex image becomes more present, albeit implicitly, in my view, partly due to the influence of Emile Belot. In the context of the College of Sociology⁸ he quotes the French astrophysicist for the first and only time (see Bataille and Caillois 1988 [1937], 77–78). In the cited article, 'Le rôle capitale de la astrophysique dans la cosmogonie' (1937), Belot summarises the dualistic and swirling theory of the origin of cosmic beings⁹ and, in the last section, entitled 'Biogenetique et biologie des etres cosmiques ou non dans les univers', extends this theory to the field of biology. Belot argues that all beings in the universe, cosmic and living organisms, have a dualistic origin, an abrupt '*fertilisation and birth*', which, in addition to other shared features, proves that '*there exists in our universe a unity of genetic plan for all cosmic or living beings*' (Belot 1937, 82). Relying on this speculation, Bataille states that every cosmic or terrestrial being is composite, i.e. complex, involving, thus, addition and differentiation (Bataille 1988 [1937]). That which aggregates the parts giving birth to a differentiated being is what Bataille calls *overall movement*.

This is evident, for example, in 'Les mangeurs d'étoiles', a short article from 1940, dedicated to André Masson. Bataille argues that Masson, as a painter, is a genius insofar as he has the capacity to create 'an existence different from anything that, until then, had been able to come into the world', and, immediately, he adds: 'It is true that nothing new comes into being; nevertheless, the moment arrives when *something else* [quelque chose de plus] is added to the hitherto isolated elements: an *overall movement* [movement d'ensemble] brings them together and unifies them; thus a life begins, individual, but made up of elements that were previously dispersed' (Bataille 1970 [1940], 564). As can be read, with a lexicon that resonates with Belot and Eddington, Bataille establishes a relation of equivalence between 'existence', 'life',

and ‘overall movement’, opposed to the ‘isolated elements’. This general principle also applies to society, conceived as an overall movement that has a vortex form.

In order to grasp this crucial point, we must take a moment to focus on the conferences given for the College of Sociology. In his first conference, that in which he quotes Belot, he proposes ‘some general reflections [...] of a metaphysical order, specifically of an ontological order on the nature of society. Is society a being? Is it an organism? Or, is it simply the sum of individuals?’ (Bataille 1988 [1937], 73). His answer is, first of all, classically Durkheimian: society is more than the sum of its parts, individuals. Nevertheless, as Hollier correctly points out, Bataille adds something by saying that the ‘more’ is precisely the movement of society (1988) or, more precisely, society as movement. In other words, Bataille affirms that society is characterised by its overall movement: a *communifying movement* [mouvement communiel] that imposes on individuals, brings them together and transforms them into social beings (Bataille 1988 [1937]). The movement of the social whole is, thus, governed by its own legality, and cannot be explained by the action of individuals taken in isolation, as it would be in a mechanistic perspective.

The key point is that the movement of the whole that defines society is a circular movement. Society is, for Bataille, an overall movement rotating around what he calls a ‘sacred nucleus’, that is, those areas of society where regulated expenditure practices take place. The overall rotating movement is the result of the feelings of repulsion and, at the same time, attraction that this expenditure nucleus provokes (Bataille 1988 [1938b]; Bataille 1988 [1938c]). There is a balance between attraction and repulsion that recalls the equilibrium between the centrifugal force of gravity and the centripetal forces which maintain cosmic vortices. However, in the case of the social vortex, this balance is produced as a result of the interaction of a dissipative, expenditure impulse on which an interdiction is imposed:

We cannot live without breaking the barriers we must give to our need to expend, barriers that look no less frightening than death. Our entire existence (which comes down to saying all our expenditures) is produced, hence, in a sort of swirling turbulence [*remous tumultueux*] where death and the most explosive tension of life are simultaneously at play. This stir [*remous*] is essentially what is produced in the centre of each individualised whole that it forms. (Bataille 1988 [1938c], 123–124)

In the ephemeral *Société de psychologie collective*,¹⁰ he puts it as follows: ‘it seems that things happen as if the meeting of similar [*semblable*] elements but with different tensions has the power to trigger explosions [*déflagrations*]. The lowest possible tension or [...] greatest depression is obviously the fact of death. It should not surprise us if this is so that the representation of death has the power to trigger laughter’ (Bataille 1970 [1938b], 287). As a result of this interplay, each individual subject moves in the ‘orbit of the central nucleus’ (Bataille 1988 [1938b], 107), also called ‘centres of social gravitation’ (Bataille 1988 [1939], 326), which are ‘at the heart of human movements’ (Bataille 1988 [1938b], 106). As can be read, society, for Bataille, is a circular movement similar to that of a whirlwind not only because of its dynamics but also because of its dualistic origin. As in the case of Belot’s whirlwinds – and whirlwinds in general – for Bataille, the overall recursive movement is the effect of the meeting of a flow with a barrier that produces the social vortex by gathering multiple individuals. This metaphor allows Bataille to give intelligibility to his idea of the imperative of

expenditure as the foundation of the social: the imperative of expenditure, operating with a limiting barrier, produces the overall movement. This barrier, then, rather than simply limiting, *delimits*, makes a social being emerge from dissipative impulse.

After the College of Sociology, the social vortex appears more explicitly and goes beyond the description of the social totality: it also reaches human individuals. In the drafts of what was later published as *The Accursed Share*, which were gathered under the name *The Limit of the Useful*, he uses the term ‘whirlwind’ to describe social and individual beings. He claims that a ‘social being [...] does not sit easily with the principles that underlie the idea of consciousness as an indivisible moral entity’ because ‘if there is some unity in a being’s presence, it is held in whirling eddies, in circuits that stabilise and tend to close in on them’ (Bataille 2023 [1974], 96–97). We also read: ‘I can regard this life that belongs to me as a relatively stable vortex: this vortex ceaselessly collides with others that resemble it. These others alter its course just as it alters theirs. The movements of force or light going from me to my fellow – or from my fellow to me – matter no less – ultimately, they matter even more – than the interior convulsion of existence’ (Bataille 2023 [1974], 100–101). Finally, In *Inner Experience*, Bataille claims ‘your life is not limited to that ungraspable inner streaming; it streams to the outside as well and opens itself incessantly to what flows out or surges forth towards it. The lasting vortex which constitutes you runs up against similar vortexes with which it forms a vast figure, animated by a measured agitation’ (Bataille 1988b [1953], 94). According to Bataille’s social ontology, society is a vortex movement composed of smaller vortexes, the particular subjects inscribed in the social becoming. In a word, society is represented as a whirlwind of whirlwinds.

It is worth noting, finally, that individual subjects are not simply passive objects of socio-vortical becoming since they function as a ‘stopping point favouring repercussion [*rejaillissement*]’ (Bataille 1988b, 94). To put it in another way, for Bataille, the social vortexes are not imposed mechanically on the subjects because these individuals ‘vortexes reinforce the overall movement. In other words, the movement of the social totality imposes itself on the subjects and is contagious from one to the other (Bataille 1988 [1938b]), in a similar sense to that given by Bohn to the contagion of the movement of the organisms’ particles.

Moreover, the vortex-like encounter extends to relationships between subjects: the mimetic or communication flow does not merely pass through two bodies, but a small vortex emerges between them, sustaining the peripheral continuity of the social whole. This is because the encounter with others is a contagion and a boundary, not so much in the sense of an attenuating factor, but rather, on the contrary, it is the barrier that the flow needs to reproduce itself as a vortex. This dynamic is captured in Bataille’s remark on ‘secondary circulation’ or peripheral forms of expenditure ‘when men take *roundabout* ways to laugh together at [sneaky] representations of death or when, erotically, they are thrown toward each other by images that are like wounds open on life’ (Bataille 1988c, 124, my emphasis). This gives us a significant image to understand how the social, for Bataille, has an almost fractal and dynamic character, in which swirling patterns of mimetic interaction at the intersubjective level replicate across scales, contributing directly to the movement of the social whole – a fractal vortex of vortexes. It is notable, in this sense, that Lawtoo (2011) recognised the vortex-like intersubjective dynamic in Janet, which he identified as a source for Bataille’s conception of social interaction. In this way, the mimetic dimension and the social totality are not separate but mutually constitutive aspects of the same circulatory flow of affects.

CONCLUSION: AN ORGANICIST METAPHOR FOR A SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

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DOI: 10.33134/rds.476

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In view of the above, I argue that Bataille takes the vortexes from the pre-given knowledge that constitutes his historical–conceptual context – especially the cosmic whirlwinds of Belot and Eddington, but also the organic vortexes of Bohn – and reworks it into the core of his social ontology. Vortexes appear more or less constantly, albeit latently or secondarily, throughout the history of philosophy and science. They reach Bataille through biology and astrophysics, but he takes them to go beyond that scope and grounds them in his social ontology. This is a gesture of conceptual creation in Chignola’s and Blumenberg’s terms by which Bataille can imagine society as a bounded totality, like the French School of Sociology, while at the same time emphasising its dynamic, self-referential and open-ended character. By insisting on this instability and unbalancing openness, Bataille distances himself from the totalitarian image of society as a closed whole. Instead, the vortex metaphor makes it possible to think of the social as a totality in constant transformation through its turbulent relations with other societies.

I assert, moreover, that it is an organicist metaphor. As we saw in Schelling, organisms – like Bataille’s society – emerge from the encounter between a flow and a barrier, generating a dynamic and self-organising whole. This reflects Bataille’s attempt to conceive society without recourse to metaphysical entities but in accordance with the dynamics of the movement of energy-matter. Moreover, social totality is not only imposed vertically on its constituents, but, as in Bohn’s organic particles, it spreads contagiously across singular subjects, whose very existence as social beings depends on reciprocal relations that form, in turn, small vortexes that reinforce the overall movement. In short, there is an idea of totality which imposes itself on the parts which, in turn, infect the movement and reinforce the social totality.

In addition, Bataille’s insistence on thinking of society as the result of the conjugation of attractive and repulsive forces gains new clarity in light of the vortex metaphor. It shows how these forces depend on each other and how their interplay produces the social whole. The cohesion created by attraction would collapse without the stabilising effect of repulsion, while the dispersive tension of repulsion is given direction and coherence by attraction. This interdependence generates a precarious dynamic equilibrium, allowing the swirling social totality in Bataille to remain both bounded and dynamically evolving.

As Blumenberg explains, metaphors do not fulfil the concept requirement; they are often vague and ambiguous, and this is the case with the social vortex. Although difficult to operationalise as a concept for empirical research, the metaphor nonetheless discloses a latent dimension of Bataille’s thought: a way of conceiving social existence that resists absolute closure and the mere openness assertion. Future research should therefore not only explore the complex transition from metaphor to concept but also assess the critical and political potential of the vortex image.

NOTES

- 1 At the same time, biological organisation is not unique to organisms. Some work argues that ecosystems are too. See C. N. El-Hani et al. 2024.
- 2 Bataille borrowed this book from the Bibliothèque nationale de France in October 1927 (see Bataille 1988, 567).

- 3 According to this theory, explains Bergson, ‘what we term an atom he makes into a vortex ring, ever whirling in this continuity, and owing its properties to its circular form, its existence and, consequently, its individuality to its motion’ (Bergson 2005 [1896]), 201). This book was borrowed by Bataille in March 1927 (See Bataille 1988, 565).
- 4 The first reference corresponds to a borrowing in June 1927, and the second corresponds to a borrowing in May 1928 from the BNF (See Bataille 1988, 566, 569).
- 5 For biographical details, see Frages 2014, 32–42.
- 6 This book was borrowed by Bataille in August 1930 (see Bataille 1988, 573).
- 7 See Bohn 1921, 94.
- 8 A famous intellectual and political group created by Bataille together with Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris at the end of the 1930s, which ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Second World War. For details on the foundation and history of the College, see Surya 2002, 261–270.
- 9 In a section entitled ‘Naissance et évolution des étoiles’, Belot synthesises it in these words: ‘Originally, black nebulae were found in various parts of space [...]. The meeting of two fluids always produces vortices. Thus, space was filled with immense nebulous vortices like waterspouts [...]. By gravitational condensation towards its centre of gravity, each vortex produced a supergiant star capable of rotating around the axis of the original vortex’ (1937, 75).
- 10 For details on the foundation and history of the *Société de psychologie collective*, see Surya 2002, 538.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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 DOI: 10.33134/rds.476

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ramos Mejía T. On Social Vortexes. *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*. 2025; 28(2): 176–190. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.476>

Submitted: 22 December 2024

Accepted: 7 September 2025

Published: 2 December 2025

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Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.