



Sustainability is not a Humanism: Review Essay on Allan Stoekl's Bataille's Peak

Cameron Tonkinwise

To cite this article: Cameron Tonkinwise (2009) Sustainability is not a Humanism: Review Essay on Allan Stoekl's Bataille's Peak, Design Philosophy Papers, 7:1, 39-48

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/144871309X13968682694876>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 23



View related articles [↗](#)

REVIEW

Sustainability is not a Humanism

Review Essay on Allan Stoekl's
Bataille's Peak

Cameron Tonkinwise

Cameron Tonkinwise leads the Design Thinking and Sustainability program at Parsons The New School for Design and is on the Editorial Advisory Board of *Design Philosophy Papers*

This essay presents as review of Allan Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 250 pages].

“The challenge of the real of ecological threats is precisely to discover a mediator that will allow something new to be said, that will perhaps allow a *qualitatively new manner of thought and action* to inform a time (ours for example) in which the productive capacity of threats seem to outstrip any reasonable capacity for reflective (affective) response.”

Peter van Wyck, *Signs of Danger*¹

“How’s the Weather on Your Planet?”

Computers are wasteful, or as Jochai Benkler puts it,² they are ‘lumpy’, meaning that they come in fixed sizes

that are generally over-specified for an individual's work, let alone household, needs. All over the world, people share their computers' excess capacity, lending their processors overnight or over lunch to the search for extra-terrestrial life (SETI@Home).³ If someday, this networked super computer found something, some rationalisable pattern amongst the noise of the universe entropically expanding, it would be horrific; because then humanism – all that stems from taking the human, in its (never-really-)rational selfhood, to be universal – would be confirmed as true, as being homiotic with the truth of the universe. If there is anything else out there, it must be utterly unnoticeable to the arrogance of human perceptions and their technological extensions, so that the cultural and historical specificity of those humans can be exposed. For instance, if someone's computer one day detected a message, from an alien who is not so alien as to have a semiotic communication system, and technologies for broadcasting such messages, and the social psychology to have hoped that there were others like it elsewhere in the universe in order to undertake that broadcasting, would not that discovery validate our socio-technical systems, ones that are so inherently and unsustainably wasteful that they can be lent over lunch or overnight to a narcissism on the scale of the universe?

The converse of this way of thinking is something like the neo-materialism of eco-criticism. The latter is a sub-set of literary theory,⁴ a weed flourishing in the vandalized brownfields of deconstruction. It can take the form of correlating historical climactic information with seminal works of art. As a result, the depressiveness of a romantic's last poems, and the darkness of their metaphors, are interpreted not as some timeless creative insight into the human condition, but rather as the expression of a bitterly long winter seeded by global air pollution from an intense volcanic eruption in SE Asia. In that case, the notion of the human that such poetry seems to articulate, far from being a form consistent across the eternity of the universe, must now be recast as contingent on the weather of this or that place at this or that time. The human, according to the ecocritical ontology, is a condition that is inseparable from the varied environmental conditions of this planet, and this planet alone.

The End of Oil Man

To some extent, Allan Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak* is motivated by something like an eco-critical proposition: "fossil fuels then entail a double humanism: they are burned to serve, to magnify, to glorify the human... as transcendental referent, and they are produced solely through the free exercise of the [humanist] mind and will" (xv) and "up until now the development of thought, of philosophy, has been inseparable from the fossil fuel-powered growth curve, from 'civilization.'" (204) Stoekl's argument is

more than one of historical correlation – i.e., the oil-fuelled productivity of industrial modernization as the base that affords the leisure necessary to develop a humanist superstructure. It is more specific than that, having to do with the quite particular available-energy-intensity of fossil fuels. Drawing on Richard Heinberg's argument,⁵ Stoekl suggests that Peak Oil is not just about exhausting one amongst other energy sources, but the depletion of one of the only storable and transportable sources of energy readily accessible without significant prior 'energy investments.' There are plenty of other sources of energy, but they are more volatile, more dispersed, more variable or more embedded in other materials. All the human ingenuity of modernization has therefore been a gift of the almost unique potentiality contained in fossil fuels – the exuberance of the sun, captured by the inefficient but voluminous living of plants and animals, that are then sacrificed and toiled upon by the forbearance of the earth, over vast investments of time.

The implication is that humans will not be able simply to invent some other source of energy, because modern human inventiveness has been taking the form of a product of oil, a misattribution of capacity from the energy source to its exploiter. The radical proposition here is that there will be no 'we, humans' post-oil. There will not be some ingeniously ahistorical figure technologizing his way from one period's source of energy to the next:

There are not a lot of docile energy sources that allow themselves to be quantified and put to work... Most energy sources instead call attention to human finitude in that they are *insubordinate to the human command to become high-grade power*. They are the affirmation of the fundamental limitation in the quantity of available refinable energy sources; this is energy that does not lend itself to simple stockpiling and use. (215)

At some point the hubris of Man – the belief that the energy of the universe serves no other purpose than to be appropriable and 'serve Man,' that grotesque and phantasmic signifier – runs up against a profound barrier: there is an enormous amount of energy *that is not servile*. It spirals out of celestial bodies, it blows away in the wind, it courses uselessly through our bodies. Its expenditure is our finitude (our mortality), and its finitude – in the sense that heterogeneous energy opens the possibility but also defines the limits of the homogenous energy that *can* serve – is our expenditure (our waste of effort, of time, of our own self-satisfaction). (224)

What form then will future earth-dwellers, forevermore exposed to their own finitude by the loss of ready-to-hand energy, take?

Perhaps, given the variabilities and limits of their alternative energy sources, they will be much more historically sensitive sets of humans. Maybe the worst techno-imperial (aspects of) modern humans will have been consumed with the last of the oil, or wiped out in a global warming flood, and what will remain will be decent sorts of humans, more humble and therefore sensitive to their environs.

Of course this is just the hope that there is a good form of humanism that can be cleansed of the bad form. But how separable is the one from the other?

The narrative of the emergence of a more adaptive human that I just quickly envisioned is a highly behaviorist one: new environmental conditions removing humans from their techno-imperial humanism. Such a transformation does not happen out of choice, out of an enlightened will to change; it is rather forced upon us humans by the depletion of concentrated energy sources. As a result, this more sustainable form of human is in fact more animalistic, more like a species that, lacking the self-transformational power of learning, only changes under the force of environmental change.

This is why those influenced by Giorgio Agamben worry that discourses such as sustainability risk being a biopolitics of bare life, reducing humans to survivalists.⁶ If no longer able to afford the creature comforts of a consumerist culture, humans look like they will have to fall back into the privative animality of simple existences. There is a philosophic concern therefore that 'downshifting' will lead to the erosion of human transcendence. If Hannah Arendt had lived to see the rise of ecological politics for example, she would probably have judged it to be not the reversal of consumerism, which privatized the public sphere of action with the economies of work, but as its extension, now returning the human condition to the silenced cycle of labor.⁷ Advocates of 'alternative' lifestyles argue that withdrawal from marketized social systems free up time for 'action' in Arendt's political sense, yet invariably such 'communities' remain insular – if there are debates, they tend to be instrumental ones, about this or that activity necessary for the community's continuance.

Humanist Technics

Stoekl's book speaks precisely to these questions. The most intriguing chapter in the book from the perspective of an exegetical history of philosophy is the one that plays off Bataille and Heidegger. Stoekl focuses on the Heidegger of 'The Question Concerning Technology'. What most take from this lecture is Heidegger's critique of technologism as the 'challenging-forth' of beings into mere 'resources' – *Gestell*. This interpretation of Heidegger reduces his understanding of technology to one of commoditization. From this perspective, sustainability is merely

further stockpiling, and for this reason many Heideggerian deep ecologists dismiss sustainability as just more managerialism.⁸

Stoekl emphasizes two points of Heidegger's critique of technology that allow him to move beyond these reactions. He firstly draws attention to the fact that Heidegger is worried not about *Gestell* per se, but about the way *Gestell* involves the reinforcement and aggrandizement of the human subject. The problem with sustainability then is not just that it is still a type of *Gestell* but that it is still a type of humanism:

The sustainability proponents imagine a standing reserve that would somehow not deplete but rather conserve the resources that go into it. 'Humanity' would appropriate and store those resources in such a way that they would be perpetually ready to hand. But nature would still consist of a reserve to be trapped and resources to be expended; the goal of the operation would still be the furthering of the stable human subject, the master of its domain. (133)

The clearest example of this are the religious claims to authentic self-being made by the 'voluntary simplicity' movement. To be true to ones own self, one needs to sacrifice ones consumerist 'false needs.' From Stoekl's Batailleian perspective, these are of course not real sacrifices, which is why they only further the reign of the human subject, rather than expose it to other ways of being. Cruelly, Stoekl argues that there is almost no difference philosophically between those promoting less consumerist lifestyles and those neoconservatives who defend the automobile as the ultimate expression of an Aristotelean-Kantian autonomy: "the problem with both of these approaches is that they justify car loving or car hating through appeals to the self: its freedom, autonomy, authenticity." (125)

To draw out of Heidegger's critique a version of sustainability that would no longer be so humanist, Stoekl secondly draws attention to Heidegger's discussion of the making of a silver-chalice in the 'Question Concerning Technology'. Stoekl insists that Heidegger's choice of example for explaining Greek *techne* and Aristotle's four causes is not contingent. The chalice is an explicitly religious object: it is not a useless artwork – it must have a designed form to service the gathering of liquid – but nor is it merely a useful household item – its design articulates that it does more than merely enable holding and transporting liquids, that it is a fundamental part of a ritual, a sacrifice, quite literally. This means that its material cause, the silver that resources its physicalization, is not being stockpiled in a merely instrumental way, but is rather lending itself to an act of excess, wasteful in one sense (of the animal that is sacrificed), and not entirely recouped in the other (in that there is no mere exchange relation with the gods). Insofar

as 'The Question Concerning Technology' holds this instance of Greek *techne* up as an exemplar of what is being concealed by modern technologism, Heidegger appears to be advocating Bataillean sacrifice. But, Stoekl insists, in this case, Heidegger is also a corrective to Bataille, whose enamourment of transgression tends to blind him to the fact that all such acts still require more instrumental preparation, i.e., a form of *Gestell*:

But seeing the connection between the chalice and Rhine power (both entailing energy conservation and expenditure) also helps us see the difference, one that can be derived from Heidegger and that brings a useful correction to Bataille. Ritual – sacrifice – entails a production and consumption of energy that is not stockpiled or quantified in the same way as are raw materials or energy resources used in industrial energy. This energy is not and cannot be simply quantified, measured and doled out in a Marshall Plan; like the 'formless' matter it animates, it does not go to the production of a coherent and meaningful (ideal) universe, be it a universe of God or science. We might call this energy 'heterogeneous' in opposition to the energy that is merely the power to do work and generate (apparent) order. This 'other' energy is energy of the body, of useless body motion in deleterious time; it is inseparable from the putting into question of the coherence of the body, of the self, and of God, that supreme self. (135)

Sustained for Waste

With this, Stoekl arrives at his central argument: that sustainability, in terms of resource consumption, must not be pursued directly. Rather, sustainability must be what arises alongside the Bataillean project of becoming beyond-humanist:

Just as in *The Accursed Share*, where the survival of the planet will be the unforeseen, unintended consequence of a gift-giving (energy expenditure) oriented not around weapons buildup but around a squandering (give-away) of wealth, so too in the future we can posit sustainability as an unintended aftereffect of a politics of giving. Such a politics would entail not a cult of resource conservation and austere selfhood but, instead, a sacrificial practice of exulted expenditure and irresistible glory. (142)

The world is sustained as a fundamentally unplanned aftereffect of the tendency to expend. Unplanned not in the sense that recycling, reuse and so on, are to be ignored, but in that they are inseparable from and a consequence of, a blind spending of the intimate world. The logic of conservation, in other words, is inseparable from expenditure: we conserve in order to spend, gloriously. (144)

In terms of the philosophers he is marshaling, this argument seems innovative yet plausible. But the real test is what would count as an example of this. Stoekl takes as his model the hunting of animals, which, even in so-called subsistence societies, are never merely instrumental acts of survival, but sovereign rites that (just happen to) also provide sustenance (175-7). What are the design equivalents of hunting?

Stoekl's key examples are recycling and cycling. The former, via Agnes Varda's 2000 film *The Gleaners and I*, is re-presented as a perverse pleasure in the materiality of waste: "not just a practical reuse of a salvaged standing reserve (...) but, more profoundly, a kind of erotic reinvestment and disinvestment, in which the object takes on a meaning that defeats our demand that it be a simple tool, a simple means to the ends of status, individuality, comfort." (148)

Stoekl's example of recycling is exactly what the industry has been trying to escape: the ostentatiously reused material, refusing to withdraw back into a second-useful-life by reasserting its physical worn-down-ness. Compared to those (chemically, and so most energy intensively) recycled materials that are indistinguishable from their virgin counterparts (which then need over-designed signage to advertise their make-up), Stoekl's recycled materials clearly demand further sacrifice by users, whether this be a destruction of their taste regimes, or an obstruction to their physical comfort when using the material.

In the case of cycling, the pleasure of this sacrifice comes to the fore:

the cyclist knows her waste, revels in it, and revels in all the things she defies (and defiles) in the current economic conjuncture: not only fossil fuel use, but the logic of obesity, the regime of spectator sports (only hyperconsuming athletes are allowed physical exertion), the segregation of society by physical space and social class, the degradation of the environment in support of the production, use and disposal of cars, and the economy of 'growth' dependent on the use of ever greater quantities of depletable resources...

Walking and cycling year-round, if judged by the contemporary standards of comfort and well-being, are a ridiculous waste of time and effort; they condemn one to a harrowing descent into 'discomfort.' Arriving sweaty at one's job at the Department of the Treasury, after having cycled sixteen miles from Bethesda, Maryland, is the indication of a grossly inefficient expenditure of time and effort that would be better invested in tending to the details of the American economy. The worker who does this sort of thing is participating in another economy at the moment

he or she works for the larger, inanimate fuel-fed economy headquartered in Washington, D.C. The expenditure of personal energy is nevertheless tied to an immediate pleasure, a *jouissance*, of spending set against the great closed ('global') economy of the world. The cyclist's body, from the perspective of triumphant autonomist culture, is little more than an open wound, screaming for a rich energy input of fossil fuel and exposed to the contempt or aggression of the world. It is only if we see the renunciation or abandonment of the car and the affirmation of muscles, in and as an economy of difference and knowledge – impossible knowledge – that this act can be put in perspective. Bodily movement as transportation, display, dance, exhaustion, passion, 'communication,' all together, in a labyrinthine urban space made dense and polysemic by the different sensory modalities of ecstatic expenditure – all this entails reinscription of 'freedom,' its reassignment from the sociotechnical frame previously associated with the regime of hyperconsumption, social standing and fuel depletion. (192)

I have quoted at length to show how Stoekl revels somewhat performatively in this argument, and there is indeed much here to proliferate and interrogate. At the least, Stoekl is very importantly, it seems to me, restoring the question of the body to the otherwise quite cerebral issue of sustainability, and in so doing, deconstructing sustainability's unquestioned humanism, which has always been fundamentally disembodied. But there is another aspect of this argument that I would like foreground.

Sacrificial Needs

As I indicated before, there is a real danger in hoping that the resource constraints of something like Peak Oil will be our savior. On the one hand what is dangerous in this argument is how it profoundly dehumanizes us, reducing us to one amongst other species structurally determined by our biophysical systems. We must therefore *resolve* to be sustainable if we are not merely to be sustained in our most minimal version of being human, if we manage to be sustained at all. This is the more Nietzschean side of Stoekl's Bataille argument: "The future, then, is not 'small' or 'simple; it is not an era of 'lowered expectations.' It is, rather, an era of *base* expectations, a swerve through and against a simple movement up (God) and down (simplicity)." (193)

On the other hand, there is a more pragmatic side to this argument. To suggest that future conditions such as resource scarcity will reveal the falseness of our consumer needs and the erroneousness of industrial wastage, so that they can then be simply dismissed in the name of a simpler existence serviced

by a more efficient economy, is a strong misunderstanding of how and why our societies are so unsustainable. If we consume too much and waste too much despite thinking of ourselves as economically rational, it is not because we are just irrational or duped; it is because we each do pursue excessive pleasures, the ecstasy that is only possible from being embodied creatures for whom mere survival is not enough. Or as Ortega says, “Humans are animals for whom only the superfluous is necessary.”⁹ It is not necessary that such excesses primarily take the form of consumer commodities mass manufactured in linear economies, but such excesses are necessary, as is their materiality.

This is a pragmatic point because it entails that shifting people from current lifestyles and systems requires:

- a) acknowledging that people are heavily invested in, in the psychological sense (i.e., cathected to), the current setup; that change is going to involve a very real and physically felt sacrifice; that there is no ‘green is easy’¹⁰
- b) the recognition that what we shift to must be seen to be a source of other ecstasies; not a more pleasurable lifestyle, but a way of living that has its own share of risk and challenge, its own new forms of transgression and excess.

Stoekl’s book is important for piloting these points. In both cases, his argument has all the problems of a first attempt. Whilst his version of a) never falls into facile claims about addictive consumerism being ‘human nature,’ Stoekl does run a fine line when trying to distinguish Bataille’s wastefulness from consumer capitalism’s sacrificial wastefulness:

while the waste of contemporary mechanized consumerism (la consommation) is not the expenditure (la dépense) and burn-off (la consommation) affirmed by Bataille, there nevertheless is an obvious connection... While the ‘intimate world of Bataille is radically different from a consumerist utopia, nevertheless the latter, in its profligacy, retains a vestige of a more profound expenditure, one that cannot be simply be done away with... To argue that the affirmation of sustainability means the renunciation of all sacrificial, atheological, or erotic (in Bataille’s sense) urges is to call for a ‘closed economy’... People want profligacy, which they identify with freedom, precisely because it is a nevertheless minor, deluded version of a more profound ‘tendency to expend.’ (121–2)

Even more complex is what takes up more than half the book, which I have not discussed, namely Stoekl’s attempt to distinguish Bataille’s materialist (non)religion, from contemporary reimpassioned fundamentalism.

Similarly, whilst again avoiding the current inane of calling for sustainability to be made 'more sexy,' his choices of examples of b) are clearly personal and so not always strategic in having wider infectious appeal.

This is a very important book though: one that at last brings the creative intelligence of post-war continental philosophy – a usefully useless action if ever there was one – to always-too-instrumental thinking about sustainability. The outcomes are significant for new philosophical and strategic accounts of what to sustain about human being; of what alien ways of human being we should be resolving to sustain on this planet.

Notes

1. Peter van Wyck *Signs of Danger: Waste, Trauma and Nuclear Threat* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005], cited by Stoekl p. 234.
2. Jochai Benkler 'On Sharing Nicely: On Shareable Goods and the Emergence of Sharing as a Modality of Economic Production' *Yale Law Journal* Vol. 144, No. 2 (2004).
3. <http://setiathome.berkeley.edu/>
4. See for example Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm Eds *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* [London: University of Georgia, 1996].
5. Richard Heinberg *The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Society* [Gabriola Island: New Society, 2003].
6. Giorgio Agamben *The Open: Man and Animal* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004].
7. Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958].
8. See Michael Zimmerman's *Contesting Earth's Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997].
9. Cited by Ignacio Gotz 'On Person, Technology and Education' *Educational Theory* Vol. 51, No.1 (2001).
10. See for example Michael Maniates 'Going Green? Easy Doesn't Do It' *Washington Post* Thursday, November 22, 2007, available via Maniates' website: <http://webpub.alleggheny.edu/employee/m/mmaniate/es/maniates.htm>.