



Information and Communication Technology and the Excess(es) of Information: An Introduction to Georges Bataille's General Economy

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abstract

Information and communication technologies constitute the backbone of many management control systems. Still, the nature of these new technologies is somewhat under-theorized. This paper aims at conceiving information and communication technologies as being based on what the French social theorist and philosopher Georges Bataille calls the *general economy*, an economic system based on consumption and expenditure rather than accumulation and scarcity. Contemporary information and communication technologies always already produce too much information, that is, amounts of information that exceed all human needs in terms of practical use or cognitive capacities. Therefore, there is always excess data or information that radically breaks with neo-classic economic assumptions such as the law of diminishing returns and scarcity. Bataille's *general economy* opens up alternative perspectives on contemporary information and communication technologies.

Introduction

Managerial activities have always, to some extent, been focused on the safeguarding of output from organizational efforts. From the early pioneers of management thinking such as Charles Babbage, Frederick W. Taylor and Henri Fayol, management is a practice of arranging, structuring, controlling and evaluating complex social organizational activities. At the bottom line, management deals with various forms of control; calculation of costs, accounting, discipline of workers. The last, say, 25 years, organizational activities have been extensively affected by the use of new technologies such as information and communication technologies (Bogard, 1996; Kallinikos, 1996a; Sotto, 1996; Valentine, 2000). Today, management control is mediated by technical-administrative systems that monitor, control and evaluate organizational activities (Zuboff, 1988). On-line reporting of productivity figures in manufacturing, sales support systems, monitoring of Internet use among employees are only a few applications in use today. Everyday organizational life is increasingly embedded in various technological systems. As opposed to earlier forms of managerial control, the new information technology-based management control systems are not subject to the same economic principles. For instance, the principle of diminishing economic returns

and scarcity does not apply in the same manner as during previous forms of control. Once the information technology systems are implemented, they enable a continuous supply of various organizational activities at low costs. The costs for analysis and storage of information are substantially lower than in other forms of management control systems. Today, organizational activities are essentially formulated in the binary code, in the 1/0 structure of computer languages. As the principles of diminishing returns and scarcity are no longer fully applicable in information technology mediated management control systems, the premises for managerial control need to be critically examined.

This paper argues that the writings of Georges Bataille (1988a, b) on what he calls the *general economy* enables a reconceptualization and a critique of contemporary management control practices and technologies. In general, the writings of Georges Bataille have received only limited attention in organization theory while Bataille is a highly influential and prominent thinker in continental, post-World War II French philosophy (Habermas, 1985; Hegarty, 2000; Noys, 2000; Richardson, 1994). Bataille's writings on transgression, eroticism and sacrifice have served as a major influence to a number of writers such as Foucault, Derrida, Barthes and Kristeva. This paper discusses the use of management control systems as being based on the principles of Bataille's general economy. It argues that information technology management control systems always produce an excess of information that is never interpreted and examined *in toto*; there is always too much information provided, that in itself creates problems in terms of analysis or storage. At the bottom line, information technology enables an excessive waste of information.

The paper is structured as follows: First, management control in organizations is discussed as being the totality of practices, techniques, technologies and standard operating procedures aiming at safeguarding output. Second, the notion of general economy formulated by Georges Bataille is examined. Next, the use of information and communication technologies is discussed as being the conspicuous overproduction of data and information. This overproduction implies that concepts developed in neo-classic economics such as scarcity and the law of diminishing returns are not applicable when aiming at understanding information and communication technologies. Finally some implications are discussed.

Management Control in Organizations

Management has always been a matter of control of organizational resources (Reed, 2001; Grey and Garsten, 2001; Jermier, 1998; Perrow, 1986). In contemporary organizations, in various ways departing from the ideal type Weberian bureaucratic model and becoming virtual, networked, 'postmodern' and so forth (Clegg, 1990; Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Jackson, 1999; Gulati, 1999; Schultze and Orlikowski, 2001), control is maintained in a number of ways. There are numerous apparatuses, practices and technologies of control implemented in contemporary organization. Some of them are overt and immediate while others are concealed and, to use Perrow's (1986) formulation, 'unobtrusive.' One form of control is based on accounting, auditing and

monitoring practices (Miller and O'Leary, 1987; Hoskin and Maeve, 1994; Power, 1994; Hopper and Macintosh, 1998; Pentland, 2000; Mouritsen, Larsen and Bukh, 2001). In control based on accounting techniques, a continuous polyvocal organizational reality is translated into mathematical figures, into productivity statistics, ratios and indicators that serves as a legitimate basis for decisions and performance evaluations (Kallinikos, 1996b: 22). Accounting is the most institutionalized and technical form of control and is primarily used to communicate organizational performance for the external environment (cf. Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Internal control of organizational activities is established through a variety of architectural, self-disciplinary and technological approaches as well as a number of accounting practices. Architectural control consists of the ordering and control of the organization's physical resources. Access to different departments or buildings may be restricted in order to enhance security and control and departments of an organization may be functionally organized. Self-discipline operates to establish shared goals among different organizational stakeholders such as shareholders, top management and employees (Rose, 1990; Sturdy, 1998, Fournier, 1998). Rather than imposing strict control on the employees, an entrepreneurial ethos is nourished wherein organizational participants are subject to what Du Gay (1996), with a concept coined by Deleuze (1992), calls *auto-surveillance*. Employees are integrated into a network of controlling and monitoring practices and activities that guide the day-to-day behaviour and nurtures an entrepreneurial mind-set emphasizing the individual's potentials for goal-oriented action. In addition, control is achieved through the use of information and control technology. Information and communication technology enables a radical reduction of transaction costs in the sharing of data, information and knowledge. But information and communication technologies also enable a detailed control of the users' day-to-day routines. To Zuboff (1988), computers can be used as panopticons that provide an online access to the employees' activities. Employees look into the computer but the computer also looks into the employees. Thus, information and communication technology enables more efficient use of resources while at the same time it can constitute a source of detailed control of organizational activities. A number of studies suggest that the use of computer-based monitoring and control of employees is used, at least with the intention, to enhance organizational performance (Cooper, 1992; Kidwell and Bennett, 1994; Sewell, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Ball and Wilson, 2000). But at the same time as computer-based systems are successful in some respects, they may fail in others. In short, computer-based management control systems have latent and manifest functions (Merton, 1957), intended and unintended consequences (Prasad, 1993). The computer increasingly becomes the interface between the employees' activities and top management and therefore the access to and control over computer-mediated data, information and knowledge becomes a contested area. Management control in post-bureaucratic, virtual, postmodern, networked, organizations is less obtrusive than say fifty years ago but is increasingly becoming conclusive and coherent as the information and communication technologies enables for more detailed monitoring of the individual's use of the technology. One such capacity for monitoring organizational practices is the surveillance of the information technology-based systems in use in organizations. For instance, individual e-mail accounts have been subject to managerial control and numerous organizations regularly control the employees' use of e-mails. Derrida writes:

[E]lectronic mail . . . even more than the fax, is on the way of transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limits between the private, the secret (private or public) and the public and phenomenal. It is not only a technique, in the ordinary and limited sense of the term: at an unprecedented rhythm, in a quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of production, of printing, of conversation, and of distraction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations. (1996: 17)

To Derrida, the monitoring of e-mail accounts implies that the dichotomy private and public is decomposed. The managerial control over information and communication technologies leads to the dissolution of the dichotomies private-public and inside-outside. In a society characterized by what Vattimo (1992) calls *transparency*, the possibility of direct inspection, there are no longer any privileged sites of privacy removed from a shared public sphere (cf. Hochschild, 1997). The private and the public coalesce. Thus, control of e-mail and Internet practices is not only the control of the employee *qua* organization member but of the individual as such. As e-mail software may be used for personal as well as professional purposes, the monitoring of e-mail accounts entails a number of political-juridical concerns that need to be addressed.

Management control is a multiplicity of activities and resources; it includes a wide variety of practices, techniques, technologies and routines and standard operation procedures. The unprecedented growth in use of advanced computer-based technologies does, however, demand a reformulation of some of the assumptions regarding management control. In the age of the smart machine, new practical, juridical, political and ethical problems are being formulated. Among other things, the nature of information and communication technologies needs to be further explored and theorized.

Georges Bataille and the General Economy

Georges Bataille is one of the most influential philosophers and cultural theorists in French twentieth century thinking (see e.g. Derrida, 1998; Habermas, 1985; Foucault, 1998) whose writings have been referred to by amongst others Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Kristeva. Throughout his life, Bataille worked as a librarian at the National Library in Paris but he also wrote extensively on a number of topics. The scope of Bataille's writings makes him a complex figure complicated to pin down in ready-made categories; Bataille is by no means a systematic philosopher and it is notoriously hard, some writers like Noys (2000) would say, to find coherent theories in his texts. Barthes writes: "How do you classify a writer like Georges Bataille? Novelist, poet, essayist, economist, philosopher, mystic? The answer is difficult that the literary manuals generally prefer to forget about Bataille who, in fact, wrote texts, perhaps continuously one single text" (Barthes, 1977: 153). Notions such as transgression, sacrifice, eroticism and expenditure are all marked by Bataille's thinking and what his writings represent is an original treatment of a number of themes. Rather than being a 'philosopher of systems,' such as the great German idealist philosophers Kant and Hegel, Bataille acknowledges the ambiguities, fissures and inconsistencies of the human experience. Bataille (1989a: 11) writes: "A philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site". To Bataille, loss of meaning and loss of identity, ecstasy,

transgression and waste are ‘inner experiences’ wherein human beings experience and face the limits of subjectivity. “Being is in the world so *uncertain* that I can project it where I wish — outside of me” (Bataille, 1988c: 82). Among other things, Bataille can be seen as a philosopher of the excluded, of eroticism and transgression, of deeply embedded human needs for excess and ecstasy, of experiences of being outside of oneself, of the abject and the disgusting (see for instance, Bataille, 1985, 1987, 1988c, 1989b; Grosz, 2001: 153). In addition, Bataille’s fiction, his erotic novels and short stories often seek to experiment with the limits and possibilities of human experience. However, Bataille can also be seen as a social theorist in the Durkheimian tradition (cf. Habermas, 1985: 215; Hancock, 1999) emphasizing reciprocity and mutual social interdependencies, but as being a Durkheimian that seeks to ‘overcome’ Durkheim and extend the views on human experience beyond the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane and functional social arrangements. Bataille’s post-Hegelian and post-Durkheimian thinking of negativity has thus destructive effects on society as the very idea of reciprocity and exchange is being subject to criticism (cf. Derrida, 1992); gifts and exchanges presuppose a restricted economy, an economy of scarcity that Bataille is substituting for a general economy of abundance and expenditure (Bataille, 1988a,b). Bataille’s writing on the general economy, his generic economic theory based on expenditure, solar energy, waste, consumption, and loss, instead of economic accumulation and regimes of distribution and allocation, represents a theory of society and human experience that completes, and extends beyond, the utilitarian and functionalist framework offered by Durkheim and his followers.

Bataille’s texts are only rarely cited or referenced in organization theory. This is somewhat surprising considering the substantial interest in postmodern and poststructuralist theory in organization studies since at least the latter half of the 1980s (triggered by the publication of Cooper and Burrell’s series of papers on postmodern writers, see e.g. Cooper and Burrell, 1988). Writers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida, and — perhaps the most widely used so-called postmodern theorist — Foucault have increasingly been adopted in organization theory (e.g. Hassard and Parker, 1993; Boje, Gephart and Thatchenkery, 1996; Kilduff, 1993; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Chia, 1999). Still, there is an absence of Bataille in organization theory. The organization theory texts that make reference to Bataille have for instance examined the notion of transgression (Styhre, 2000; O’Shea, 2001), eroticism (Brewis and Linstead, 2000), or discussed Bataille’s general economy (Nodoushani, 1999). Notwithstanding the limited impact of Bataille in organization theory to date, there are a number of topics addressed in Bataille’s writing that deserves attention in the field. For instance, the principles of what Bataille calls the general economy raise a few interesting questions regarding utilitarian theories underlying most contemporary economic theory. Organization theory, being heavily indebted to (albeit not always explicitly recognizing) influences from economics and rational choice theory and making use of the image of *homo oeconomicus* as a generic model for agency, may benefit from reflecting upon its own assumptions. What is interesting about Bataille’s notion of the general economy is that it seeks to depart from an economic model that assumes scarcity as one of its axioms. Thus, Bataille enables alternative views on economic activities such as managerial practice.

The principles of the general economy are developed in Bataille's three volume work *The accursed share* [*La part maudite*] (Bataille, 1988a,b). Bataille aims at developing an economic theory that is not solely focused on production, accumulation and distribution, i.e., assumes scarcity, but emphasizes expenditure, solar energy, waste, loss, and consumption (in various forms) as its driving force. Best and Kellner write:

Bataille . . . championed the realm of heterogeneity, the ecstatic and explosive forces of religious fervour, sexuality, and intoxicated experience that subvert and transgress the instrumental rationality and normalcy of bourgeois culture. Against the rationalist outlook of political economy and philosophy, Bataille sought a transcendence of utilitarian production and needs, while celebrating a 'general economy' of consumption, waste, and expenditure as liberatory. (1991: 35)

To Bataille, economists underrate the importance of expenditure and waste in the economy. The primus motor of economic activities is not production and accumulation but the use of and the movement of economic resources. Therefore, Bataille attempts an 'overturning' of dominant economic principles. Bataille writes:

I will simply state, without waiting further, that the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles — the overturning of the ethics that grounds them. Changing from the perspectives of *restrictive* economy to those of *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking — and of ethics. (1988a: 25)

By turning the focus from the realm of production, work and accumulation to the practices of expenditure, consumption, loss, and waste, Bataille hopes to overcome the ethics and practices of the restricted economy in order to open up for new thinking and activities. Derrida writes: "General economy folds those horizons and figures ["of knowledge and its figures of meaning"] so that they will be related not to a basis, but to the non-basis of expenditure, not to the *telos* of meaning, but to *indefinite* destruction of value" (Derrida, 1998: 123). The general economy, as opposed to the restricted economy, postulates that there is an abundance of resources with extended potential for expenditure. Bennington writes on Bataille's principles of the general economy:

[A]ny circumscribed system receives more 'energy' from its surrounding milieu than it can profitably use up in simply maintaining its existence. Part of the excess (the 'luxury' with respect to what is strictly necessary) can be used in the growth of that system, but then the growth reaches its limits . . . then the excess must be lost or destroyed or consumed without profit. (1995: 48)

In his argument, Bataille makes numerous references to anthropology, for instance the Aztec's practices of sacrifice and the various forms of reciprocal economic transactions that take place in tribal societies. To Bataille, the general economy represents an alternative economic regime departing from the economic system dominating capitalist societies at present. The general economy acknowledges the excesses and expenditure present in all societies. Thus, the 'Copernican transformation.' Hegarty writes:

The realm beyond this ["work, religion, utility (party) politics, laws, taboos, reproductive sex, truth, knowledge"] is that of excess: eroticism, death, festivals, transgression, drunkenness, laughter, the dissolution of truth and knowledge. This realm of excess is the general economy, but the general economy is also the process whereby the homogeneous realm interacts with excessive phenomena. (2000: 33)

The general economy can thus be conceptualized as a Dionysian economic model; "Dionysos is the god of the feast, the god of religious transgression", Bataille (1989b:

71) writes. Bataille's Nietzschean influences (see Bataille, 1962; Nietzsche, 1967) are here manifested in the belief in excesses and transgression as being important components in any economic model. The dominant neoclassic economic principles are fundamentally based on a protestant ethic of accumulation, law, order and taboos (cf. Weber, 1992; Whyte, 1956); Today's capitalism, Goux (1998: 199) writes, "has come a long way from the Calvinist ethic that presided at its beginning". He continues:

Productive expenditure now entirely dominates social life. In a desacralized world, where human labor is guided in the short and long term by the imperative of utility, the surplus has lost its meaning of glorious consumption and becomes capital to be reinvested productively, or constantly multiplying surplus-value. (1998: 198)

In conclusion, Goux (1998) puts forth an argument against Bataille and claims that "no society has 'wasted' as much as contemporary capitalism" (Goux, 1998: 199). The Dionysian image of the economy as being based on forms of expenditure uproots the very principles of our utilitarian economic thinking. Thus, "loss, waste, expenditure, sacrifice etc." are "more important, more meaningful than accumulation." (Hegarty, 2000: 39). "Bataille's target is utility, in its root", Baudrillard (1998a: 192) remarks. Bataille's 'reversal of thinking' against utility was later formulated in new terms by Baudrillard (1998b) in *The Consumer Society*. Baudrillard argues, in accordance with Bataille's idea, that consumption is far more important than production in the contemporary consumer society. In a most Durkheimian argument, Baudrillard even claims that consumption is not a free choice in the consumer society but that it is an instituted practice. Consumption is thus an imperative, a duty rather than an act of liberation of desire or a fulfilment of needs. Consumption is therefore expanding outside any conceivable 'practical' human need. In a similar manner, the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (2000) argues that the contemporary consumer society is by no means an 'affluent society' — a phrase popularized by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith in 1958 — since an affluent society, at least in one useful definition, is a society where all needs and expectations are fulfilled or met. In a pre-modern society expectations and needs are rather modest, while in the consumer society there is no rest from desires and expectations. In the consumer society, Baudrillard argues, consumption is continuous and never-ending. Bataille's theory of the general economy is, in Noys' (2000: 111) sceptical view, a rather 'weird' combination of anthropology, scientific knowledge and other ideas that attracted his interest. Needless to say, the 'theory' (to follow Noys, 2000) did not achieve much attention from scholars and certainly not among economists. The principles of the general economy remain to a large extent an unfinished grand intellectual project whose axioms and theorems were never fully developed, nor accepted as an adequate basis for a new economic theory. The vision of the general economy appears as an outcome from a number of different interests that Bataille wants to combine into a coherent model. But one of the weaknesses (or strengths, depending on one's preferences) is that his thinking is never expressed in terms of 'theories' or 'models,' but are formulated as loosely coupled and highly disparate elements of thoughts. This makes Bataille a challenge to read and to make use of in empirical research. There is very little, almost nothing, in his writings on how Bataille's ideas are to be employed in empirical research.

Nevertheless, the basic idea of the general economy, the shift in focus from production and accumulation to expenditure and consumption is a most important contribution to a

reconceptualization or '*détournement*' of technical-instrumental or utilitarian rationality. The principles of the general economy are applicable when examining a number of social phenomena. In this case, information technology mediated management control can be examined from the view of the general economy.

Information Technology and the General Economy

During the last 20 years of the twentieth century Western society underwent a change from a disciplinary society to what Bogard (1996) calls a *telematic society* (see also Lyon, 1994). The disciplinary society is based on architectural discipline — its ideal type model is the Benthamian panopticon that enables a visual inspection and control (Foucault, 1977) — while the telematic society is based on complementary forms of information technology-based forms of surveillance. The disciplinary society is based on certain principles of order and architectural structure in factories, schools, hospitals, while the telematic society of surveillance is based on the use of various forms of technological apparatuses. The disciplinary society manifests its disciplinary outline — it is often possible to see and be aware of the disciplinary practices — while in the telematic society the mechanisms for control are always continuous and partly concealed. Information technology produces enormous amounts of information that could be used to control the individual. For instance, think about the number of e-mails sent every day in major companies such as General Motors. The continuous production of information (or rather 'data' that could be turned into information) is both a strength and a weakness of information technology. It enables a considerable amount of information, but it does not really provide any answers on how this information is to be interpreted (cf. Luhmann's, 2000, analysis of media).

In his analysis of the Internet, one of the most celebrated 'embodiments' of contemporary information technology, Poster (2001) argues that the Internet is, as opposed to other forms of artifacts and markets, based on the principle of sharing. Poster (2001: 58) writes that "uploading a file or posting a message on a Usenet group in a answer to a query is best understood as a contribution to all users for no direct reward. The act of sharing is little recognized in economies characterized by commodity exchange but is unique to the Internet." Another example of the sharing ethos of information technology is the emergence of the Linux system, developed and thereafter freely shared by the Finnish 'computer genius' (to use the commonplace tabloid formulation) Linus Thorvalds. Linux, which today is depicted as a substantial threat to the Microsoft market dominance, is acclaimed for being developed by Thorvalds and others without any incentive of personal financial gain in mind. The realm of information technology thus appears, in some cases — it may be that they are only marginal and insignificant — as being guided by different economic principles. The *homo oeconomicus*' strict emphasis on utility and personal benefits detached from the social community appears as a somewhat inadequate model to explain this behaviour (cf. Granovetter, 1985). Information technology also has the capacity to produce, store and give access to considerable amounts of information. In the case of production of e-mails, various categories of stakeholders such as policy makers, managers and, say, historians are puzzled about the use and significance of e-mails. To policy makers, e-

mails may be of juridical or political interest and thus it may be that they should be stored in case they eventually prove to contain useful information. Senior managers are trying to determine whether e-mail correspondence should be controlled, and finally historians have not decided whether e-mails should be placed in the archives for the benefit of future researchers. In summary, information technology opens up a domain wherein there is an excess production of information and where information is shared. The principle of sharing and the principle of excess cannot be fully conceptualized through the dominant economic principles of scarcity of resources and utilitarian models.

Bataille's general economy privileges expenditure, consumption, loss, waste and transgression at the expense of production, accumulation and scarcity. Wherever there is information technology in use – the distinguishing mark of the telematic society – there is always already an overproduction of information. Enormous amounts of productivity figures, e-mails, statistics, bits and pixels are produced on an everyday basis. As there is no significant increasing costs per new information unit in the use of information technology, there is a continuous production of more information. Therefore, there are always excesses of information whenever advanced information technology appears; the information provided extends any conceivable need and certainly the cognitive capacities of human beings (Simon, 1957). The technological-administrative apparatuses continuously monitoring and controlling organizational activities are, to use Virilio's (1994) concept, *vision machines* whose gaze reaches beyond the capacities of the human body. These instruments for a smooth logistics of perception provide us with considerable amounts of information that we cannot decide how to handle. Knorr Cetina (1999) reports from her studies of micro-biology and experimental physics that the laboratory equipment provided much more information than the researchers were able to decode. The residual label for this information was *noise*, that is “[r]andom, unpredictable, and undesirable signals in a detector and in the electronics of the apparatus that masks the *desired* information” (Knorr Cetina, 1999: 51, emphasis added). Physicists had to deal with this ‘undesirable’ information in order to construct the knowledge aimed for. The machinery is always too blunt; it cannot simply provide only what is desirable to us but gives us all information — ‘undesirable’ noise, noise that does not carry any informational content itself but still serve as the framework in which information is being formed (see Serres, 1982, 1995) — that is being registered. The same situation faced by the physicists studied by Knorr Cetina (1999), the presence of undesirable information, appear to most users of advanced information technologies. How can a manager *ex ante* know what e-mails or productivity reports are valuable sources for investigation and what are insignificant noise? The Bataillean thinking on excess, non-knowledge, and transgression may help us rephrase such questions in terms of the general economy. The bifurcations between knowledge and non-knowledge, sense and non-sense are of great managerial as well as theoretical interest. From the perspective of Bataille, technology does not advance society as much as promised because knowledge and communication can never be pure and fully structured but is always made up of incommensurable components and fragments, bits and pieces (cf. Luhmann, 1995). Information and communication technology enables excesses of information but it can not safeguard meaning and sense.

Discussion

In the general economy outlined by Bataille there is always expenditure, waste and loss. In the use of information technology as a means for managerial control, there is likewise waste of time and energy when monitoring and analyzing the continuous production of information and data provided. As a consequence, management control is not a matter of use of scarce resources in terms of collecting and storing information but rather in terms of making this information meaningful, in turning information into knowledge, to code continuous information into categories (Boisot, 1998). Thus, the concepts of information and management control need to be critically examined. What are really the consequences and rationales for information technology mediated management control? Is it implemented to actually control and monitor the activities of an organization or is it subject to mimetic and normative isomorphisms (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) where management control is a fashionable mode (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999) to demonstrate rational applications and practices? What are the objectives of management control? Is it the outside world, the organizational practices, or is management control autopoietic (Maturana and Varela, 1980; Luhmann, 1995) in terms of being based on assumptions and outcomes that derive from the control system itself (Macintosh, Shearer, Thornton and Welker, 2000)? What is, in short, the relation between organizational activities and the information provided by the various management control systems that are in use in organizations. In the perspective of the general economy, management control systems are based on expenditure, waste and excess; Management control is beyond — in the meaning of ‘extending outside of’, ‘overcoming’— any practical utility, any day-to-day routines and practices, any rational model of organization. Management control systems offer a conspicuous overproduction of information (bits, pixels, files, and other information units expressed in the binary code) that is never rendered any utility or meaningful significance; the expenditure and waste of resources produces a loss of meaning. Only a fraction of the information provided by the managerial control systems, the vision machines of management, is employed when making decisions or when solving practical problems (Brunsson, 1982). The superfluous information is stored for later (unlikely) use or is simply eradicated (the ‘delete’ function of the e-mail programme and other software applications). The principle of abundance, expenditure and waste is applicable when making sense out of the ubiquitous use of management control systems. These systems extend beyond both human capacities for cognition and practical use. They are embedded in the general economy rather than the restricted economy of the dominating economic doctrine. As a consequence, management control systems are never wholly embedded in an utilitarian, technical-instrumental economic rationality based on scarcity, but need to be conceptualized as being machineries of expenditure, waste and loss. Overproduction of meaning leads to the loss of meaning; knowledge is dwelling in the neighbourhood of non-knowledge, sense and non-sense are continuously unfolding (Bataille, 1988c: 101). The transgressions and bifurcations enabling excess are inherent to management control systems. Management control systems are devices for continuous production of meaning but their consequences are stretching beyond the technical-instrumental rationality that serves as their fundament and guiding principle. Thus the general economy can be used as an analytical framework for the examination of such an overcoming of the rationality of the restricted economy. In Bataille’s thinking, reciprocity, exchange and the system of the restricted economy are stretched

beyond its instituted practices in order to theorize the inner experiences of human being. Bataille acknowledges the negativity inherent to human experience: "Man does not live on bread alone, but also on poison" (Bataille, 1988c: 200).

Conclusion

The writings of Georges Bataille have had only a limited impact on organization theory. Taking into account the considerable interest for postmodern and poststructuralist theory in the field, the modest interest in Bataille's thinking to date is noteworthy. Bataille is, along with philosophers and theorists of his generation such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot, among the most influential thinkers in French and continental twentieth century philosophy (Habermas, 1985). Nevertheless, in an Anglo-American intellectual context, Bataille still appears to be somewhat obscure. An explanation for this may be that Bataille's writings are not easily accessible; his texts are not characterized by stringent, systematic reasoning, and there is a lack of coherent, clearly articulated and fully developed theories in the conventional meaning of theory. In this paper, the use of information and communication technologies in terms of management control systems has been examined from the view of what Bataille calls the general economy, a set of economic principles based on abundance, expenditure, waste, and loss rather than scarcity and accumulation and distribution of resources. Information and communication technologies always produce excess data and information in the binary code as bits, pixels and documents. The data and information provided by the technological-administrative apparatus in contemporary organizations significantly exceeds all cognitive and practical human needs. In that respect, information and communication technology is in harmony with the mechanisms of the consumer society wherein consumption is by no means solely based on needs but is rather embedded in the circulation of capital and the consumption of signs and inscribed artifacts. In contemporary consumer society, the notion of utility may become an empty signifier. Thus, the loss of meaning of the concept of utility is directly related to the excess of utility; meaning is what is at stake when there is too much meaning produced. Consumption as well as the production of computer-mediated data and information is always, in terms of utility, *excessive*. It extends far beyond what we may refer to as need.

The encounter with information and communication technologies is a human experience of fairly recent date (Poster, 2001; Bogard, 1996; Featherstone and Burrows, 1995). There is a need to develop a broader and deeper practical and theoretical understanding on how these advanced technologies affect social formations and how human cognition, perception and emotionality are shaped and determined by such artifacts. As writers such as Derrida (1996) and Poster (2001) argue, advanced information and communication technologies eliminate taken for granted dichotomies such as public-private, consumer-producer and inside-outside. Thus, these newly developed technologies may offer opportunities for an epistemological break with the technical-instrumental reason that serves as the basis for most economic and administrative theories. In organization theory, information and communication technology is approached as if these technologies were of the same nature as previous artifacts. It may

be that information and communication technologies have opportunities to interact with human beings in ways that render the taken for granted views on technology as being artifacts subject to control obsolete. Hence the importance of writers such as Georges Bataille that offer new conceptual frameworks for analyses of new emergent technologies that seeks to overturn and reach beyond the functionalist and technical-instrumental rationality instituted by classic social theory. The managerial and organizational implications of information and communication technologies have a great potential and we are only seeing its first consequences in terms of the emergence of virtual organization (see e.g. Jackson, 1999; Schultze and Orlikowski, 2001). In the future, the very ideas of management and organization may be radically altered as a consequence of the new possibilities derived from information and communication technologies, the Internet, and virtual reality.

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