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### ► To cite this version:

François De March. Sexuality in organizations: An approach based on Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism. *Society and Business Review, Emerald*, 2014, 9 (1), pp.74-84. <10.1108/SBR-02-2013-0018>. <hal-01385134>

**HAL Id: hal-01385134**

**<https://hal-upec-upem.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01385134>**

Submitted on 24 Oct 2016

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# Sexuality in Organizations

An approach based on Georges Bataille's theory of eroticism.

François De March

## Abstract :

**Purpose** - This article examines the theme of “sexuality in organizations” according to the theory of eroticism of Georges Bataille (1897-1962).

**Design/methodology/approach**- The author reviewed Bataille's essays in order to identify the salient points of his analysis of eroticism, before applying them to the organizations.

**Findings** – The anthropologic notions of prohibition and transgression (antagonistic yet complementary) facilitate a different view of the opposition formulated in critical management studies as between desexualization and resexualization. These notions also open up quite a number of lines of research in the analysis of the sexuality of organizations. **Research limitations/implications** – These lines of research call for further work particularly in the basic ground-work. **Originality/value** – Georges Bataille's insights have been used very rarely in organizational analysis, even those of critical stream in management. The theme of sexuality in organizations has been largely ignored by mainstream.

**Keywords** : Georges Bataille, sexuality in organization, eroticism, erotism, prohibition and transgression, taboos

## Introduction

The sexuality in organizations has been very little analysed by the current trends in management studies. Anglo-Saxon critics are practically the only ones to tackle this problem. Nevertheless, sexuality is an important subject, not only from the point of view of the inner workings of organizations (relationships between employees or between employees and their managers), but also that of the relationships between organisations and their external stakeholders (particularly their clients or the general public). Sexuality depends primarily on the cultural evolution of societies but also on a problematic proper to the organization. In this paper I draw attention to the thinking of a French writer, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) which has practically never been referred to in management studies. Can his thinking on Eroticism during the 1950s provide a theoretical basis for the analysis of sexuality in organizations? This question seems appropriate not only because Bataille has linked Eroticism to the history of Labour and

is one of Nietzsche's intellectual heritors but also because of his influence on authors such as Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, who are now seen as major influences on post-modern theories of organisations (Cooper, Burrell, 1988 ; Burrell, 1988 ; Cooper, 1989). But maybe there is a more important reason for taking note of Bataille's contributions: do they not provide a way of thinking about the apparently insoluble contradictions, in the theoretic texts on sexuality in organizations, between a sexuality as a force of resistance and a sexuality as the source of power of the oppressor?

First of all, I will detail the principal elements in this thinking around Eroticism before considering whether they could shed new light on the double evolution, desexualisation-resexualisation. Finally I will identify research possibilities on the sexuality of organizations consequent on this approach.

## **Eroticism: an anthropological phenomenon**

Bataille has many times stressed the differences between human and animal sexuality. Not only has human sexuality a strong cultural basis but it is also influenced by what Bataille called, in his first essay, "inner experience" (Bataille, 1988a): Eroticism is an 'inner experience' for man because human sexuality cannot be reduced just to the needs of reproduction. Other factors – not predominantly sexual – come into play, such as nudity, chastity, ethereal love, mystical love and even human nature itself. The evolution of Eroticism from animal to man has produced simultaneously three phenomena:

- The emergence of work and the subsequent utilisation of increasingly elaborate tools for that purpose
- The appearance of prohibitions with regard to cleanliness, sexuality and around death
- The knowledge of death with consequent interdictions such as murder and customs such as burial and funeral rites.

## **The prohibition-transgression coupling**

This pairing of prohibition and transgression is at the root of the contradictory nature of human eroticism in general.

On the one hand, the introduction of prohibitions had been a response to the need to limit violence which could interfere with the process of work and destroy social links.

More generally it reflected man's horror at his animal origins and thus of Nature. The promotion of such prohibitions was a way of stressing the human.

On the other hand, the negation of his animal nature represented by the prohibitions would in due course be reversed. This is what Bataille called "the overturn of alliances". In other words, having rejected his animal nature by creating these prohibitions, Man becoming constitutionally negative - indeed in permanent revolt against all "facts" limiting his independence - denied these very prohibitions in turn, which denial of prohibitions did not abolish them but rather *accompanied* them, thus giving rise to the notion of transgression. This transgression required the continuance of the prohibitions in order to develop its full force. This put it at the very heart of erotic pleasure<sup>1</sup>.

For Bataille, transgression was never a return to nature. Transgression of the rules established by the prohibitions was itself subject to rules and allowable only in certain situations: sexuality in marriage, murder in war or duel. Public festivals also fulfilled the role of episodic transgression as did carnivals or orgies or other disorders as at the time of the death of a king in archaic societies. Bataille summarised this complementary aspect of prohibition and transgression in a quote from one of Marcel Mauss' lectures: "Taboos are there to be violated".

However, this complementarity, springing from the ambivalent and contradictory nature of Man created some explosive situations if one of the two conditions was negated, as was the tendency of industrial capitalist societies in their attempt to suppress all transgression. In general, this action would lead to even greater and more catastrophic transgressions (world war, genocides, mass rape, slavery, sexual slavery.....).

## **Eroticism and prohibition – a history**

Bataille evoked the initiatory role of incest in all sexual prohibitions and, by reference to the work of Levi-Strauss, produced an interpretation associate with the potlatch of Mauss. The general sense of this prohibition was the giving of a daughter or a sister in marriage to a stranger in the course of a generalised exchange and formation of links with another community. However, the implied renouncement of sexual consummation by the giver led to an increase in 'sensual value' of the woman. Thus she seemed to represent, as in the potlatch, a luxury object which the giver sacrificed. And so the prohibition increased the sexual attractiveness of the woman, a desirable attribute of the woman now become sexual object. And as the giving of a woman in marriage necessarily implied that sexual intercourse could take place, there was also a partial transgression of the sexual prohibition. The marriage thus became at one and the same time a realisation of a prohibition and its transgression - one of the earliest forms of Eroticism. This origin of the marriage-relationship had been forgotten, which since then had been viewed as one based on custom and pecuniary benefit (that of cooperation in

production), which of course it was but not as the only or the main cause. This ambiguous aspect of marriage, at one and the same time marked by generosity and utilitarianism resembled that of “..potlatch, both the fulfilment of calculation and its excess” (Bataille, 1976b, p. 39). But it also demonstrates the unstable and changing nature of Eroticism, initially present in the institution of marriage, but now absent because it could not be bound by rules and custom.

This is how “..the aspect of economic association with a view to reproduction has become the dominant aspect of marriage” (Bataille, 1976b, p. 40). Bataille has also referred to other forms of Eroticism: nudity, agrarian orgies, prostitution, individual love, sacrifice, divine or mystic love and the boundless and murderous eroticism of Sade. In a general way he has been aware of the variability of the prohibitions ( for example those of the objects of incest or those of nudity) both in space and time and hence the variability of the transgressions. Eroticism cannot be defined as intangible fact – it can only be truly rendered as history.

### **The history of Eroticism cannot be separated from the history of Societies.**

Bataille had intended *L'Histoire de l'erotisme* to be the second volume of *La Part maudite*. In fact only the first volume, *La Consommation* (which is wrongly named *La Part maudite*) was finished and published in his lifetime. But this project was of great significance because Bataille linked the variations in eroticism to the history of societies and in particular to their economic history characterised by the conflict between accumulation and unproductive expenditure (which he called simply, expenditure). Thus, eroticism was one of the forms of unproductive expenditure, namely an expenditure of energy as pure loss. Precapitalist societies placed an importance on this expenditure, often shaped by religious motives. Thus pyramids, cathedrals and a multiplicity of religious festivals represented either work deflected from an economic utility or an interruption of such work. Some societies placed an equal importance on the eroticisation of relationships including forms such as ritual sacrifice as in the Aztec society. But with the arrival of capitalism and its protestant ideology, eliminating wasteful expenditure became primordial and as much energy as possible was consecrated to work and the accumulation of capital (Bataille 1988b). Puritanism contributed to the combat against excessive eroticism as also against luxurious and ostentatious expenditure: it condemned all “waste of time” equating it with waste of money.

However, in an unfinished and unpublished version of the first volume of *La Part Maudite*, entitled *La Limite de l'utile*, Bataille had anticipated an evolution of capitalism which would endogenize certain unproductive expenditures principally from

commercial interests (leisure, cinema, development of various services etc...): he was referring to a “*degradation of expenditure*”. He had also indicated that the speculator, placer of bets, foreign to the system, would nevertheless become the emblem of such mature capitalism (Bataille 1976a). These thoughts could well be transposed to the evolution of eroticism as will be seen later on.

## **The paradox of Eroticism due to its proximity to Death**

“Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death”  
(Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 11).

This famous quote gives a complete summary of the paradox of eroticism.

Bataille expands on this by starting from the mechanisms of reproduction of living things, both asexual and sexual. In the first case a moment of continuity is produced by a discontinuous being. An initial cell divides in two at a certain moment of its development (scissiparity mechanism). If the two beings produced by this splitting are themselves discontinuous, the moment of separation (which is also that of the death of the initial cell) is a moment of continuity. In the second case – sexual reproduction – the two discontinuous beings, even if they do not die at the moment of coupling, lead to a fusion of the ovum and the spermatozoon which results in a continuity at the moment of their disappearance (death) as two separate beings.

In his erotic behaviour Man, being sexual, is indebted for this moment of continuity resulting from the death of the separate organisms which has led to his birth, and he will be nostalgic for this lost continuity<sup>2</sup>, which is expressed in the three forms of eroticism which Bataille has outlined:

- The first is the eroticism of the body in which the being stripped naked becomes a metaphor for being put to death; orgasm, commonly called “the little death” is one example of this link between eroticism and death. Sade’s representations illustrate this proximity between extreme eroticism and murder and violence. By coming together with the loved one, the eroticism of the body tends to dissolve the individuality of the discontinuous beings and opens a “communication” which restores the continuity which has been lost. But this is only transitory and the discontinuity of beings, both separate and self-centred, remains fundamental.
- The eroticism of the heart gives a perspective on an even stronger continuity and arouses an irregularity and violence even greater than the one before :

“The likelihood of suffering is all the greater since suffering alone reveals the total significance of the beloved object. Possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess.

If the lover cannot possess the beloved, he will sometimes think of killing her; often he would rather kill her than lose her. Or else he may wish to die himself. Behind these frenzied notions is the glimpse of a continuity possible through the beloved” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 20).

- The third form, sacral eroticism, has its origins in the ancient practice of sacrifice. In the past, when animals were respected sometimes more than men, and when they symbolised a divine element, the first sacrifices were of animals. Later on, as respect for animals diminished (at the same time as animals became important as tools for working the land) human beings were sacrificed instead and finally, with the advent of civilization, once again animals replaced humans as sacrificial victims. The sacrifice has the characteristic of revealing the continuity of being to those involved in its occurrence by making them participate in the killing of the victim – this cannot be so for he who is put to death. This participation in the continuity of being is the Sacred :

“This sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 22).

In sacrifice, the action of putting to death, delivers up the victim to the limitless sphere of the Sacred and resembles that of the lover stripping bare the woman he desires to penetrate:

“The woman in the hands of her assailant is despoiled of her being. With her modesty she loses the firm barrier that once separated her from others and made her impenetrable. She is brusquely laid open to the violence of the sexual urges set loose in the organs of reproduction; she is laid open to the impersonal violence that overwhelms her from without” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 90).

But what links the sexual act and the sacrificial one is the carnality that both reveal:

“Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered blind of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by a violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the

absence of controlling will. Flesh is the extravagance within us set up against the law of decency” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 92).

This sacred eroticism (which apart from that in sacrifice, included sacral prostitution and the rituals of defloration by the priests) has been suppressed by Christianity, which has linked it to the impure and the Evil through the symbol of the Devil before finally throwing it out into the secular sphere.

The link between eroticism and death can be discerned in two other characteristics which Bataille called “the Phaedra complex” and the human tendency to lose oneself and to self-consume. The Phaedra complex is the paradoxical appeal of horror, its link with desire. The tendency to lose one-self is a constant in Bataille’s thinking expressed by the notion of “expenditure”.

### **Eroticism presents an epistemological problem**

Eroticism, more than any other theme in the domain of human and social sciences, cannot be understood with the positivist methods of the natural sciences, which always distance the object of study from the subjective in an attempt to maintain objectivity and impartiality. Bataille, on the other hand, insists on defending a later method of study similar to that of the constructivists and interpretivists:

“...if I sometimes speak as a man of science, I only seem to do so. The scientist speaks from outside, like an anatomist busy on a brain (...) My theme is the subjective experience of religion, as a theologian’s is of theology” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], pp. 31-32)

In the same way as he wrote “Eroticism is one aspect of inner life of man”, Bataille thought that “Eroticism is primarily a religious matter”. Obviously he is not referring to revealed monotheistic religions but rather to human religiosity quite separate from all defined religions :

“I can concern myself with religion in this sense not like a schoolteacher giving a historical account of it, mentioning the Brahmin among others, but like the Brahmin himself (...) I am describing an experience without reference to any special body of belief, being concerned essentially to communicate an inner experience – religious experience, as I see it – outside the pale of specific religions” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], pp. 33-34)

To reinforce this point Bataille referred critically to the mass of statistics collected in the Kinsey report on the sexuality of American men and women, published between 1948 and 1954. He stressed the disquiet caused by reading about the time taken –



observer with watch in hand - for a young child to arrive at orgasm: this disquiet revealed the incompatibility between the observation and the thing observed, that of a method of observation appropriate for things and an obtrusive violence of privacy. (Bataille, 1986 [1957], pp. 149-163).

Finally one needs to raise a question which is at the heart of Bataille's thinking : scientific or even philosophic discourse has a tendency to intellectualize and rationalize all his objects of study. From the moment when knowledge of erotic phenomena brings into play "inner experience" and requires a fusion of the subject and object, it is literature and its poetic form which are best able to "communicate" the emotions which eroticism engenders (Bataille, 2001). Bataille himself illustrated this point of view in his fictional texts which have all centred on erotic excess. This recourse to fiction did not exclude a "philosophic" type of communication which Bataille has never shunned. Neither did he disparage a historical approach or even one based on traditional statistics, on condition of being able to relativize them by always problematizing their meaning. But conscience as he was that words and language were responsible for inauthentic "communication", he excused himself in advance from using them giving as reason the impossibility for man to avoid language even when he wanted to evoke silence (Bataille, 1988a).

### **The debate within organizational analysis between desexualisation and resexualisation : a liberating sexuality or an oppressive one ? Contribution to the discussion using Bataille's notions of prohibition and transgression.**

It is obviously not possible, in this paper, to cover all the debates which have taken place around the sexuality of organizations but, rather, simply to ask whether Bataille's thinking around Eroticism, in terms of prohibition and transgression, could not be used to provide a new way of looking at the opposition of desexualisation and resexualisation.

The starting point has been Burrell's text of 1984 in which he described the process of desexualisation of organizations since the 14<sup>th</sup> century consisting of four factors (Burrell, 1984):

- The process of civilization described by Norbert Elias.
- The growing importance of Christian religious morality.
- The development of organizations of bureaucratic type, in Weber's sense, with a view to rationalize human behavior with manipulative intent.
- An increasingly tight control of body and time by capitalism, so as to increase the productivity of labour

He showed that this process had met with resistance by giving a number of examples (homosexuality in the British navy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, sexuality in the Nazi concentration camps, women's homosexuality in prisons, sexual relations in the coal mines...). This desexualisation was also manifest in the absence of a sexual dimension in the great majority of studies and organizational researches, especially in the main stream.

Burrell wondered later (Burrell, 1992) whether resexualisation might not help in harmonizing relations within organizations without necessarily leading to phenomena of oppression of women by men (sexual harassment, discrimination) as many feminist writings tended to suggest (Collinson, Collinson, 1989; DiTomaso, 1989) or to the utilization of women as sexual objects or to their exploitation in advertisements or more generally in their relations with the clients. In the same way, Fleming noted that sexuality in contemporary organizations is a multilevelled combination of employees' resistance and managerial control (Fleming, 2007).

Bataille's thinking allows both these aspects of the sexuality of organizations to be considered at the same time. On the one hand, the original work of Burrell on the attempts to eradicate sexuality is consistent with Bataille's remarks on the role of monotheistic religions and of capitalism in the strengthening of sexual prohibitions. On the other, Bataille has always been careful not to idealise "sexual liberation". The prohibitions were indispensable for humanizing societies. The need for caution in handling the possibility of transgression of these prohibitions was never far from his thoughts, which is a way of saying that sexuality always represents a menace, a source of violence which can be visited on women but also on all those who may be vulnerable through weakness in any given situation (some men, children). Yet again, the negation of sexuality, apart from making men slaves to utility, can lead to a savage return of menacing forms of sexuality (for women as well) or more generally lead to violent explosions.

### **Research pathways in the analysis of organizations which could flow from Bataille's thinking**

More generally, Bataille's thinking could provide a theoretical basis for reflecting on the different aspects of sexuality in organizations. I will sketch out briefly, here, some research pathways that would be worth exploring :

- To start with, all those aspects of eroticism which are not directly sexual. They have already been studied intensively as in the relationship between leadership and seduction (Calas, Smircich, 1991), but the subtleties of Bataille's thinking

on the psychological dimension of eroticism as “interior experience” could, no doubt, be fruitful.

- There is also the link between socio-economic evolution and that of sexuality. The period of relative prosperity in the Western world after the second World War, as well as leading to the Keynesian and Fordist economic policies, was also associated with a progressive relaxation of sexual prohibitions (without abolishing them entirely) between the 1960s and the early 1970s. This is illustrated by the more frequent appearance of nudity (mostly feminine) in the media and in advertising. Conversely, since the end of the 1970s, it has been observed that prohibitions were renewed following the persistence of a long-lasting economic crisis and the subsequent introduction of the neo-liberal politics of austerity.
- Elsewhere, these links with socio-economic evolution are complex. One of the aspects of the crisis is the saturation of a certain number of traditional markets. Under these conditions it is tempting for businesses to seek to open other markets. This has provoked a large commercialization of pornographic products, and in some countries, of prostitution. This illustrates what Bataille meant by the *degradation* of expenditure in mature capitalism (Bataille, 1976a, pp. 223-230), that is to say that expenditure once largely unproductive and subject to prohibition, could be re-inserted in the production of goods and services and could give rise to legal organizations.
- Another aspect of the evolution of eroticism would be that of the extension of all types of prohibition (not only sexual) in the context of globalization of capital of goods and of men and hence the development of an informal economy and its organizations. Bataille drew attention to the link between eroticism and the underworld and, more generally, that between sexuality and crime and that between crime and transgression of laws. This is obvious in the case of pimping or human trafficking for the purposes of prostitution. But Bataille was thinking more particularly of the much greater frequency of orgasm in members of the underworld (which could be explained by the fact that they were not in employment) as had been revealed in the Kinsey report. In the same way he related the “sexual excitation of the burglar” to the fact that Sade had underscored the relationship between “irregular morality”, that which “revolted conscience” and voluptuousness :

“De Sade finds it equally possible to seek satisfaction through murder or torture in the course of a debauché, or by ruining a family or a country, or even just by stealing. Independently of de Sade, the sexual excitement of burglars has not escaped notice. But no one before him had grasped the

general mechanism linking the reflex actions of erection and ejaculation with the transgression of the law” (Bataille, 1986 [1957], p. 196 )

- Another research pathway would be the analysis of the evolution of organizations when their purpose changes from prohibition to legality (which is the case in certain European countries for prostitution and drug abuse which when they acquired a legal status represent a form of institutionalization of transgression as was the case with marriage in ancient times). It is important to note that this removal of prohibitions is not absolute and rather corresponds to a limiting of transgression: in Germany, where brothels have been authorized, pimping remains illegal and this activity is limited to renting brothels to the prostitutes.
- There could also be studies on the links between prohibition with regard to cleanliness and sexual prohibitions, in a multicultural perspective for those organisations which are internationalised.
- A general approach to the evolution of prohibitions and its consequences for organisations could also investigate the following phenomena :
  - The removal in Western countries of certain prohibitions notably religious but not limited to these. For example, prohibitions against certain minority-interest sexual preferences such as homosexuality, fellation or sodomy have lessened. This has led to demands which are not only for non-discrimination but also for the institutionalisation, as in the case of the call for legalisation of marriage for homosexuals on the basis of the principle of equality. This is already established in many European countries. These institutionalisations are effectively framing of transgression and a reduction of its subversive force.
  - The continuation, even reinforcement of severe sexual prohibitions in certain non-secular countries, on the basis of religious principle.
  - In the same way the importation or the encountering of these prohibitions in countries of immigration which do not have them, creates political and organisational difficulties (swimming pools reserved for women only, refusal of certain medical procedures...).
  - The concentration in Western countries of sexual prohibitions on paedophilia (replacing incest prohibition) and on various forms of violence against women or homosexuals (rape, harassment, discrimination...), prohibitions which have resulted from the mobilisation and demands of those groups involved in the defence of those discriminated against (feminists, homosexuals, child-protection groups...).

- This concentration on these prohibitions has reinforced and aggravated their penalisation. It has even resulted in certain cases in serious miscarriages of justice (sentencing then suicide of persons unjustly accused, climate of suspicion...).
- Even symbolic transgression of these prohibitions, which Bataille thought was a “human” way of transgression, was penalised. Thus literature evoking paedophilic acts led to judicial hearings and even when there was no guilty verdict, attracted opprobrium.
- The way in which organisations have to reckon with these evolutions in their politics of communication (avoid or withdraw advertisements which might be deemed discriminating or insulting, being prudent about the exposure of children to risk but also accepting minor transgressions which could increase the attraction of their products...), in their politics relating to workers (respecting diverse anti-discriminatory rules...) and with adapting them to the diversity of prohibitions in different countries and according to their differing aims – also deserves analysis.
- My last point is not the simplest and is epistemological in nature : the analysis of questions around something as intimate as sexuality needs not only a positivist approach but without doubt a personal subjective involvement of the researchers. Bataille realised this, studying sexuality, as he did, from the point of view of man and even from the point of view of his “own coming to the boil”. In this domain, it is certain that differences of perceptive sensibility exist between the two sexes and depending on the sexual orientation of each individual. This can lead to a point of view largely relativist which, at one and the same time is a difficulty, but can also be an advantage, having a tendency to promote tolerance in the dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to describe the elements of Georges Bataille’s thinking, which could help in the analysis of sexuality in organisations. Several points follow from this survey. For Bataille, human sexuality, which can in no way be reduced to biological phenomena, cannot be separated from an anthropological approach. These notions of prohibition and transgression which appear following the evolution of animal to man are two opposing and complementary terms which facilitate thinking about human sexuality even in its aspects not directly sexual. They are variable, both in their objectives and forms, in time and in space. It suggests a way of thinking about

Eroticism as a history which is not to be separated from a history of societies in all its dimensions, especially the economic one. The notions of prohibition and the transgression recall the opposition between the accumulation of resources and expenditure, this is to say in the service of survival and economic growth on the one hand and on the other, the desire man has for glorious loss. But above all they signify the always contradictory character of human experience. Contemporary societies and organisations are characterised by a major break-up between themselves in which desexualisation and resexualisation are composed through time and space in accordance with economic, political and religious factors and the claims of groups at one and the same time discriminated against or dominated. In this context an analysis in terms of prohibition and transgression seems to be pertinent enough to attempt to give some meaning to the different elements of the puzzle.

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#### Notes :

<sup>1</sup> Bataille was opposed to those who spoke of “sexual liberation” by claiming a “return to nature”.

<sup>2</sup> These references although different, recalled the biological foundations of the death wish of Freud: the goal of life was « an *old* state of things, an initial state of which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads (...) everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – (...) ‘*the aim of all life is death*’(...) ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’ » (Freud, 1955 [1920], p. 38)

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