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Metamorphosis of the Sacrificial Victimization Imaginary Profile within the Framework of Late Modern Societies

Angel Enrique Carretero Pasin 

Department Philosophy and Anthropology, Faculty Philosophy, University Santiago de Compostela, Square Mazarelos, s/n, 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain; angelenrique.carretero@usc.es

Abstract: This article aims to unravel the why and the how of the imaginary profile of the emerging sacrificial victim in late modern societies. To do this, first, under the influence of the formulations proposed by the *French School of Sociology*, the nature and the functionality of an anthropological structure linked to a rituality of sacrificial victimization surviving in the historical course of western societies are investigated. Based on this, it analyzes the characterization of the imaginary paradigm of sacrificial victimization crystallized in modernity in contrast to the dominant one in the *Old Regime*. Finally, the sociological keys that would account for the unique morphology of the imaginary of sacrificial victimization that emerged in late modern societies are explored in the context of the generalization of a climate of violence that transforms any individual into a potential victim of sacrifice.

Keywords: imaginary; sacrifice; violence; rituality; collective communion; late modernity



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1. Introduction

To start with, it is worth highlighting that social sciences have not fully assumed the radicality of the *dictum* launched by Girard: “Sacrifice is the primary institution of human culture” (Girard 2012, p. 75). This work follows along the lines of this premise. The publication of *Totem and Taboo* by Freud—under the influence of Frazer—promoted a horizon to address the foundation both of the sacrificial rite and of the sacrificial component that remain latent in culture. It is well known that Freud developed the hypothesis according to which totemism would have emanated from a universal oedipal complex. In a dialog with the scholar in Semitism Robertson-Smith (1894), Freud (1988, pp. 173–209) argued that the shared meal ritual serves to fraternize. Some decades later, Lévi-Strauss (1964, p. 145) suggested something similar: totemism “founds an ethics” full of “prescriptions and prohibitions”, which “seems to result from the very frequent association of totemic representations, on the one hand, with food prohibitions and, on the other hand, with exogamy rules”. It seemed exceedingly surprising to Freud that totemic sacrifice should require full commitment on the part of the group. For him, the meal would represent the primeval act catalyzing religion—the crystallization of a social order supported on a communion of feelings of affection. Otherwise, evidence exists that sacrifice would have been justified in the symbolic order of primitive societies by the fact that everybody took part in that practice (Baudrillard 1980, pp. 156–62). Not by chance, its addressees were members of the royal dynasty who exercised the representation of the community and of the sacred at the same time (Frazer 1981, pp. 338–42).

Nonetheless, Mauss and Hubert’s thesis is the one marking a turning point in the vision about the sacrificial cult. The fertility of their approach lies in stressing what they call “unity” of the sacrificial rite—an anthropological structure which persists beyond morphology where sacrifice materializes. Mauss and Hubert endowed the theoretical status of sacrifice with solidity, moving away from the British anthropological tradition, which they accused of being arbitrary in its premises around totemism and inconsistent in its methodological principles. They understand sacrifice as an act which fosters a break

and a transformation in the participant's interiority, where *the sacrifice* comes into contact with *grace*, collecting—in return—some benefits at an individual, clan, tribe, or nation level (Mauss and Hubert 1970, p. 155). The sacrificial rite forces a communication between the sacred and the profane that uses the victim as an intermediary (Mauss and Hubert 1970, p. 244). Both spheres are scrupulously separated in everyday existence. An expiation and communion effect would simultaneously take place in sacrifice. A regenerative community redemption becomes distilled via immolation. Purity and cohesion would thus go hand in hand¹. The religious ceremony recharges those participating in the rite with emotional energy, making them enter a “collective communion”. The victim has the gift of irradiating that energy. Sacrifice “periodically renews the good, strong, terrible, and serious character which arises as one of the essential features of any social personality in the collectivity—represented by their gods. Therefore, the social norm is maintained without any danger for them, and without any decrease for the group” (Mauss and Hubert 1970, p. 248). By means of a thorough historical-anthropological journey, Mauss and Hubert leveled out an interpretive horizon so that, more than a decade later, Durkheim could underpin his hypothesis concerning the sacred; rite works with a view to reaffirm group conscience. The practicality of sacrifice will reside in its capacity to catalyze a collective space-time coexistence through the regeneration of a “communion of consciences”. Durkheim (1982, pp. 303–25) used the expression “positive cult” to describe a particularity of the sacrificial rite in accordance with a transitory abandonment of the profane universe by the faithful and an opening towards the universe of the sacred. The French scholar divided the ritual typology into two aspects: “communion” and “oblation”. In Durkheim's opinion, being the hypostasized and transfigured translation of society, the gods could not neglect human beings, since the survival of the former would, from time to time, depend on the latter, an inflamed “communion of consciences” which, episodically revived through ceremonial gestures, enables the community to show itself as “more alive” and “more real”.²

More or less heterodox continuators of the trail initiated by Mauss and Hubert emphasizes that the notions of sacrifice and violence are *per se* closely linked (Bataille 1987, pp. 81–97). In terms of homeostatic balance, war would be a healthy event, throwing the swarming violence accumulated inside a group at an external enemy that becomes the object of sacrificial destruction for the purpose of demarcating the acquiescence or the distance regarding this group entity. Clastres (2004) verified that the movement of violence towards an external figure served to reaffirm an unyielding difference of the group, especially of the one that tried to counter a drift towards its splitting. Primitive societies were made for war because it is in that scenario that their essence as a society takes shape. If the enemy did not exist, it would have to be invented. In human groups that, unlike others—e.g., *The Nuer*—lack resources to arbitrate between conflicting parties (Evans-Pritchard 1977, pp. 163–203), this violent *pathos* could be projected towards the figure of an internal enemy.

In this respect, the most refined formulation is undoubtedly the one carried out by Girard (1983, pp. 9–45). Community expiation through the use of human victims had already attracted Frazer's attention in the late 19th century. He had identified it in Ancient

¹ Purity “finds, maintains or perfects a norm, an order, a health. It is understood that the sovereign will embody them” (Callois 1996, p. 55). A sacrifice is a rite exercised upon an animal that owns something divine. The immolated victim shows an ambivalent aura; it is chosen to be sacrificed precisely for being sacred. Purity and impurity are not mutually exclusive. In primitive languages, the verb “to purify” meant both “to cure” and “to exorcize.” In Rome, *sacer* designates who can or cannot be touched without being stained or staining. These two dissociated poles keep their ambivalence (Callois 1996, pp. 29–39). It is assumed that the sacrifice which consecrates the victim includes its destruction.

² In the threshold of pre-modern societies, rite has played in favor of collective communion, helping union to defeat disunity (Balandier 1996, pp. 28–35), taking advantage of the fact that, by means of rite, “norms and values are loaded with emotions, whereas basic and rude emotions are given dignity through their contact with social values” (Turner 1980, p. 33). The hermeneutics of sacrificial victimization is framed within such parameters. Thus, purity rites, in conflict with a metaphorical contamination, focus on fixing barriers to chaos, establishing “a link between order and disorder, being and non-being, form and shapelessness, life and death” (Douglas 1973, p. 19), insofar as they eagerly pursue to exorcize the indefinable as an anathema of evil nature, hence the fate suffered by figures labeled as witches or misfits people, illustrations of evil (Douglas 1978, pp. 134–50). For that reason, in order to avoid a profanation gesture in the sacrificial ceremony, the victims should rid themselves of any stain, the same as the priest, who is put on a level with the height of purity (Douglas 1973, pp. 73–74).

Greece, in the Saturnalia of the Roman Empire and in the primeval Aztec culture, revealing the contradictory divine halo which is inseparable from the men and the women chosen for sacrifice (Frazer 1981, pp. 651–66). Nevertheless, Girard tried to unravel the motivation behind sacrificial victimization by virtue of how a group fixes a violence born from a “mimetic rivalry” on somebody—a victim—who, if not within reach, would threaten their integrity. According to the force-idea, one can only deceive violence by offering it a substitutive bait in return. Thanks to sacrifice, internal violence is appeased, and the outbreak of brawls is canceled, thus activating a beneficial violence which offsets another harmful one. Wherever a set of tensions prevailed, it resulted in the emergence of a community unified around the unanimous hate aroused by one of its members.³ This confirms the existence of the “scapegoat”—foundational martyr-myth which gives strength to the group, the addressee on which the interwoven feelings of hate converge so as to preserve the social body, an enemy of the community that favors intragroup friendship at the cost of his curse and punishment.⁴ The role played by the sacrificial rite is summarized in taking man away from violence to protect him there from.⁵ Girard’s approach posed a remarkable anthropological challenge: “that of the sacral and victimizing nature of every culture, which uses a plethora of ways to mask that sacrality and *numinosity* and, of course, the historical victims and slaughterhouses, but which could neither exist nor survive without all of that” (Jiménez Lozano 1999, p. 13).⁶

Nonetheless, the theoretical line inspired in the *École Française de Sociologie*, overlapped on the theses of Mauss and Hubert and whose dissemination organ was *L’Année Sociologique*, did not succeed in becoming consolidated as the hegemonic paradigm. This made the theme of sacrifice head towards a certain degree of untimeliness. With the intention of revisiting the deepest structures of collective feeling, the spirit of this *École* was rescued years later by the *Sociology of the Sacred*, driven from the *Collège de Sociologie* (Bataille, Callois, Leiris . . .) and the heterodox magazine *Acéphale*. In recent times, an effort has once again been made to recover the significance of the Maussian (Durkheimian) perspective around the sacred ritual⁷ and, in parallel, to activate the socio-anthropological implications derived from the modulation of the sacrificial phenomenon in late modernity.⁸ In this context, the analytical hypothesis suggested here is one of a transition in the profile of the imaginary

³ This is in concomitance with what has happened in a family constellation based on a deteriorated communicative relationship that favors the outbreak of schizophrenia in a son/daughter on whom is fixed the status of “scapegoat” that unifies the family system, as was highlighted first by antipsychiatry and then by the Palo Alto School.

⁴ “Witch hunt” has been interpreted as a contemporary illustration for the invention of a common enemy that reinforces the sentiment of group unity along the lines of Durkheim’s approach (Bergesen 1978).

⁵ Something similar was defended by Canetti (1983, pp. 51–56) in his portrait of the “harassing masses”, whose anger is unleashed in public executions, where the crime upon the victim necessarily has to be collective, even if the hangman was its executive arm.

⁶ Not everybody shares Girard’s conception of sacrificial anamnesis. Caillé (2000) has criticized him for having hypostasized mimetic desire as a cause of the sacrificial rite, obviating a previous symbolic reference crisis whose deficit would catalyze sacrificial victimization. Following Mauss, he situates the gift and the counter-gift as the essence of any social relationship, including the sacrificial one. Sacrifice is interpreted as an agonistic gift. This discrepancy is not new. He separates the thesis of Voltaire and De Maistre. “A large amount of evidence demonstrates that the first human victims were culprits condemned by the laws; since all nations have believed what, according to Caesar’s reports, was believed by druids; that the punishment of culprits was very pleasant for the divinity. The ancients thought that every crime committed in the State related to the nation, and that the culprit was consecrated and offered to the gods until, due to the shedding of blood, both he himself and the nation could be freed” (De Maistre 2019, p. 134). The Savoyard understood the sacrificial bloodshed as the reparation of an original evil concentrated on an innocent except for the fact that, unlike Girard, De Maistre conceives this act as a historical driver. Jesus of Nazareth matches this profile, the same as Louis XVI later. In turn, Hénaff (2002, pp. 251–67) envisages sacrifice as an offering to an invisible addressee in whom we wish to cause an anti-utilitarian response—the donation of *grace*. In his view, Girard’s pessimism would be betrayed by his faithfulness to Jesus of Nazareth’s sacrificial hermeneutics, making the mistake of confusing the fact of being the object of sacrifice with a victim and the sacrificial act with a victimization *tout court*. Girard (2012, pp. 75 and ff.) identified a concomitance between the characterization of sacrifice in Vedic religions (*veda* designates the science of sacrifice as the principle of this religion)—explicit in the book *Rig-Veda* and unraveled in its second stratum, *The Brahmana*—and Jesus of Nazareth’s crucifixion. However, for Hénaff, the substance of sacrifice points at a metaphysical context, a cosmic equilibrium between nature and culture which periodically reestablishes a meaning order for a human group. Without discrediting the proposals made by Caillé and by the same author together with Godbout (Godbout and Caillé 2000) as well as by Hénaff, considering the objective sought in this work, it seems advisable for us to follow the line advocated by Girard.

⁷ The contributions made by Delgado (2001, 2008), Páez (2002), Bergua (2007), Cerruti (2010), Juan (2013), and Lorio (2013) are of special interest.

⁸ Enriching contributions in this regard include those of Caillé (2000), Godbout and Caillé (2000), Hénaff (2002), Beriain (2007, 2009, 2017), Magdalena (2015), Le Breton (2017, 2018), and Delgado and Martín Delgado and López (2019).

associated with the sacrificial victim during late modernity with respect to the paradigmatic victimization of modernity whose genesis and outlining are specified below.

2. Method

A socio-historical genealogy serves to explain the structural transformations that trigger the emergence of a latemodern sacrificial paradigm, laying the emphasis on the factors driving it and, at the same time, on a socio-hermeneutics of the significance frameworks where a consequent intersubjectivity is forged. To that end, this work took as a reference the examination of the everyday implications induced at this level by the socio-anthropological analyses proposed through the selection of various authors whose focus of attention has been to highlight the disintegration suffered by the symbolic fabric meant to guarantee an intersubjective universe lived in common. This phenomenon—in turn caused by the establishment of modernity—became hyperbolically exacerbated within the context of latemodern social formations. Bearing in mind the above, a scrutiny is likewise performed of the reasons favoring a turn that marked a tipping point in such social formations when managing the violence harbored inside them and how that key turn is reflected in a modification of the profile corresponding to the most usual victimization praxis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Synopsis of the Sacrificial Victim Imaginary in Modernity

3.1.1. Basic Principles

Let us start from the idea that the western secularizing process did not extinguish the differentiation between profane and sacred domains. A more conceptually refined analysis about the nature of modernity betrays a maintenance of this differentiation, even though the substantivity of the sacred sphere is redefined under a forcibly immanent expression.⁹ Thus, two fundamental *numens* appear in the Modern Age:

- a. Nation-State: after the dismantling of the feudal power system, the nation-state arises as the organ meant to monitor intraterritorial disagreements (Elias 1989, pp. 229–53), becoming institutionalized as the representative of “legitimate violence” within a geographical perimeter (Weber 1993, pp. 43–44) and endorsed as a central body in charge of collective integration.
- b. Productivism: a “metaphysics of production” (Baudrillard 1996, pp. 53–61) in alliance with the industrialism unleashed by the bourgeoisie backed by the enthronization of the progress category, a secularized equivalent to divine providence (Bury 2009, pp. 32–40), and supported on the conviction that constant production growth will have positive effects in terms of public usefulness, well-being, and widespread happiness (Polanyi 1997, pp. 247–65).

As a reinforcement of their inviolability, both *numens* boast about the use of ceremonies clad with an aura of solemnity and subject to a marked time periodicity. Their role consists in reaffirming a unanimous commitment to sacrality that they carry with them in the impulse to an acquiescence around them that re-establishes the vitality of the collective tie. In return, those *numens* demand a sacrifice of individual consciences to their *desideratum*. The functional significance of both *numens* simultaneously clarifies the

⁹ The immanence/transcendence code, the foundation of religion, goes beyond the opposition-based semantics of mundane and *supramundane* order (Luhmann 2007, pp. 49–100). Once this code has been recognized, the umbilical cord that links emotional community and sacrifice becomes evident in the foundational speeches of the North American nation in tribute to its martyr heroes out of consideration for the redemption of a national unity (Bellah 1967) as well as the aggrandizement of patriotic sacrifice in the interest of the survival of the nation, contemplated as a mystical *supraindividual* brotherhood that guards the memory of their sacrificed ones in war (Anderson 1993). For this reason, we agree with Gutiérrez Martínez (2010) on the urgent need to undertake an epistemic rethinking of religiousness assigning importance to the meaning of belief, in an elastic sense, within the heart of modernity.

socio-anthropological codes involved not only in a “metamorphosis of the sacred”¹⁰ but also, more importantly, in their classification within a constellation of sacrificial plexuses.¹¹

The utilization of the word “metamorphosis” refers here to an expressiveness of historic-cultural forms where something essential and underlying remains. The elucidation of that something would perhaps take us to the notion of archetype, conceived as a “dynamic structure” which, subject to modification, shapes a cultural model (Durand 1982, p. 57), or to that of “semantic basin”, which gives new meaning to an immemorial, original, and primordial background adhered to nascent national currents (Durand 1996, pp. 85–136). Others have opted for a related word—“transfiguration”—to point at something similar (Maffesoli 2005), turning *formism* into a hermeneutics that sheds light on the changing appearance of things *por ricorso* to the invariant (Maffesoli 1993, pp. 79–96). A re-signification of the sameness of “forms” after the diversity of “contents” is indeed sought (Simmel 1986, pp. 11–37). Whatever the term chosen, it evidences the survival of a sacrificial structure, together with a consequent victimization phenomenology, in social formations where *prima facie* the umbilical cord with religion would have been short-circuited.

3.1.2. Sacrifice and Dissent

Modulation of sacrificial victimization: the assimilation of dissidence with evil is as little original as the formulas devised to control it (Carretero 2016).¹² Control practices are intensified with the arrival of the Modern Age, though. The dissident difference, a readapted format of evil, is labeled as enmity against a society objectivized in the State. Evil comes to be identified with an imperfection punished by the ontological totalitarianism expressed in the modern *numens* (Maffesoli 2002, pp. 73–109). Dissidence is assessed according to a correct or anomalous fit in the roles tolerated from the prerogatives urged by a modern evolutionary logic handled in time to a functional differentiation of its political and economic subsystems (Luhmann 1998, pp. 71–98). The imaginary profile of the sacrificial victim in modernity stems from a fault in systemic adequacy with respect to the directive of its *numens*.¹³ With the Declaration of Rights of Man and of the Citizen, except for the countries whose criminal code accepted the validity of death penalty, the self-affirmation of the “communion of consciences” around “the social divine” (Durkheim) appeals to a standardized exclusion strategy under a space-time lockup as a sacrificial canon. Goffman (1972) and Foucault (1994) showed the true relevance of a de-culturing type of rituality which annuls the self, parallel to the confinement of individuals in the modern—“total”—disciplinary institutions, designed with a focus on isolation, i.e., psychiatric hospitals and prison facilities.¹⁴

Perhaps nobody dissected *la coupure* in the strategies of political power from the *Ancien Régime* to the consolidation of modernity better than Foucault (1994, pp. 11–37). His description of the punishment imposed upon Damians—a figure who supposedly carried

¹⁰ See Estruch (1994), Prades (1998), Sánchez Capdequí (1998), Delgado (1999), Carretero (2003), and Sánchez Capdequí and Carretero (2006) in this regard.

¹¹ Suggestive readings include Hénaff (2002), Beriain (2007, 2017), Casquete (2007), and Díez de Velasco (2008).

¹² So a sacrificial exorcism focused on difference eases the tensions inside a group and strengthens its stability. For example, in the Greek tragedy, Antigone, Phaedra, or Orestes are sanctified and, at the same time, sacrificed for having committed sacrilege against the established *numens* against a Law-founding “mythical violence” (Benjamin 1998, pp. 44–45). Euripides’ play shows characters misgoverned by a demonic *thymós* that leads to their doom—the affront to the city spirit (Dodds 2006, pp. 171–94). Rome gives way to the show of the Roman circus as a demonstration of fear about deviationists, misfits, and heretics. In the Middle Ages, the detachment of behavior from the expectations of the normative order is the object of inquisitorial repression. The accusation of witchcraft is its clearest illustration (Caro Baroja 1970, pp. 183–282), (Duvignaud 1979, pp. 176–87). Philip II and Luther, Catholics and Protestants, did agree on this point. During the Contemporary Age, the figure of the libertarian concentrates the reprisal of society against an anomic difference (Duvignaud 1990, pp. 125–45). In general, a mis-shaped social image is penalized as an a-social or an anti-social alarm, transforming the individuals who transmit it into “scapegoats” as a personification of evil, attacking group harmony, and questioning their certainties (Ferro 1984, pp. 373–81). The treatment given to the Jewish community was due to similar causes (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1984, pp. 15–24). Sacrificial exemplifications which embody the ancestral fight waged between good and evil, order and disorder.

¹³ Its dystopic face is Auschwitz with Eichmann as the perversity in its effectiveness (Arendt 2012).

¹⁴ It is revealing that the only shelter for the implementation of the *communitas*—an authenticity connection that was unfathomable for society’s systemic-structural organization—has been the field of mysticism (Turner 1988, pp. 143–44), (Foucault 2006, pp. 256–57), or that those “a-structural” symptoms which interfered with the technical efficacy of modern society were outlawed as unacceptable (Duvignaud 1979, pp. 176–77).

out an attempt against the life of the French king in 1757—represents the vengeance of the State’s legal bodies towards the corporeality of those who infringed upon a sacralized norm at the dawn of the modern world.¹⁵ The torture inflicted upon Damiens reflects the sacrificial execution that was paradigmatic of the *Ancien Régime*. His status as a sacrificial victim has to do with his aggression against the embodiment of the sacred in a human figure according to the dominant metaphysical-political worldview. A sacrality into which the proclamation of inviolability in the unity of the collective body would be translated. An inviolability protected by a “pastoral power”—gestated in the ideological orbit of Christianity—is subsumed by the *governmentality* of the Modern State (Foucault 2006, pp. 293–326). The graduation of the punishment is toned down between 1760 and 1840. In parallel, a qualitative increase of disciplinary power takes place in the heart of a set of modern institutions which, driven by a disguised normalizing purpose, resort to the legitimacy granted to some emerging expert fields of knowledge that enjoy the approval of a new “truth regime” (Foucault 1992, pp. 175–89).¹⁶

Dictated by the postulates of industrialism, the reprisal unleashed upon another hypothetical Damiens is oriented towards the field of subjectivity. The treatment given to madness, with an uncomfortable accommodation in the carving of the *dictum* of modern *numens*, follows a course resembling the violation of the legal framework (Foucault 1967, pp. 76–175). Both realities—madness and crime—illustrate the threat of something that is *a-social*, a shadow of “undifferentiated heterogeneity” opposed to any rule (Bataille 1993, pp. 27–32) and untranslatable from modern systemic patterns. For that reason, the dysfunctional *a-social* ones, those who do not make pacts or owe a commitment or debt to the aforesaid *numens*, are expelled from the community via their isolation; in sum, they are sacrificed by means of reclusion.¹⁷ The State is the organ exclusively entrusted to play the role of *sacrificer*, responsible for purging a hint of anomaly that can be put on a level with a disorder which has ever since been seen as excrescence. The modern victimization imaginary profile is edified on these pillars.¹⁸

3.2. Metamorphosis of Sacrificial Victimization in the Imaginary of Latemodern Societies

3.2.1. Main Sociological Factors Contributing to the Mutation of Sacrificial Mythology

The analytical hypothesis proposed by this metamorphosis makes it necessary to address the following aspects:

- a. Self-affirmation for the cult of the self: favored by the rise of liberalism, the deployment of modern society enthroned the will of the self, dismantling a shared

¹⁵ In the Middle Ages, body whipping, mutilation, and burning were usual sentences imposed upon whoever violated the sanctity of the law, especially the right of ownership, a type of sentence which continued until well into the 16th century. In England, with a population of three million inhabitants, 72,000 thieves were hanged during the reign of Henry VIII. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, vagabonds were simultaneously lynched in rows of 300 to 400 (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1984, p. 20).

¹⁶ Until well into the 18th century, the poor, beggars, and vagabonds, a population formerly recruited for wars with neither a citizenship status nor an official useful activity and consequently prone to crime, had as their destination work in the galleys, deportation in the mines of the American continent and correctional institutions, faithfully following a combined confinement and productivity logic in a protohistory of prisons (Rusche and Kirchheimer 1984, pp. 46–71).

¹⁷ No sacrificial anathema is applied to poverty, despite its dysfunctionality. Unlike a criminal or a madman, the poor man is recognized in his individualized condition, not with the aim of subjecting him to an institutional normalization as an entirely *a-social* being. This is so because, in spite of having broken his bond with the productive *numen*, he has not completely broken his tie with the State. In fact, “he acquires the condition as a poor man only when he is assisted” (Simmel 2011, p. 87). His extraterritoriality is not the one of a medieval poor man—who survived attached to the theological meaning of alms; it does not imply a loss of ties with the collective unit, i.e., with the State’s duty to find formulas for his governmental integration through aid or charity institutions. “However, this isolation does not mean a separation, an exclusion; instead, it entails a particular connection with the whole which would be different without this element” (Simmel 2011, p. 81).

¹⁸ Enquiring into the origin of the condemnation of the modern era for its *a-social* approach, some continuators of Foucaultian biopolitics have gone further. The path drawn by Agamben (1998, pp. 151 and ff.) rethinks a sacrificial myth which, rooted in the essence of western culture, is transposed to the idiosyncrasy of modernity. Esposito (2003, pp. 30–34) has recognized the existence in the genesis of the *communitas* of a *munus*, a debt, a common duty, or an oath that carries with it a sacrifice of subjectivity. This means that the latter is no longer its own master, being stripped within an absence of binding content riddled with nihilism. The *communitas* would be an aggregate of individuals grouped together around that debt or duty where they banish themselves. Sacrificial victimization arises from an original sacrifice of the community which, because of its existence, becomes objectivized in an exterior manifestation and thus relinquishes its authenticity.

symbolic universe which underpins the community link. The disappearance of binding contents resulted from the slogan hoisted by modernity, according to which the responsibility of each person's destiny exclusively depends on himself (Bell 1987), (Bellah et al. 1989). In the absence of a functional replacement for the normative entities protected by tradition, the alternative to the exacerbation of individualized freedom generates a latent opposition of everybody against everybody else monitored by the State, in parallel to the generalization of a quartering of emotionality inside the self (Elias 1989).

- b. Dismantling of confidence-building entities: complexity has enlarged its breadth. The possibilities about what the world is and might be have multiplied. This favors the arrival of uninvited guests such as excessive instability and uncertainty as an added price to contingency. Luhmann (1996, pp. 5–80) has understood that the *raison d'être* for social subsystems is the fight against complexity using systemic formulas meant to reduce it and helping make the world become simpler and commonly familiar. Confidence reduces complexity. With modernity, the advance of complexity exceeded the familiarity framework that served as the pillar of confidence in traditional societies. This confidence, based on an expectation of continuity in the behavior with others in the context of everyday interaction (Goffman 1981), came to be a risky undertaking everywhere. The formulas for confidence which depend on familiarity turned useless, their task being transferred to the systemic sphere, which does not prevent the latter from revealing more than sporadically its inability to control complexity and to encourage intersubjective communication.
- c. Evolution in the control modality: the control supported on the inclusion/exclusion binomial stopped being a functional priority. Its new strategies are redirected towards a full inclusion outside which nobody can situate themselves. The enemy that needs to be fought continues to be systemic dysfunctionality, though the formula to confront it aims at a biopolitical configuration of subjectivities which is not going to require reclusion insofar as the devices that play a prominent role in maximizing control find not only discipline and punishment but also quartering unnecessary (Deleuze 1995, pp. 403–40).

3.2.2. De-Ceremonialization and Democratization of Sacrificial Victimization

It is well known that the Modern Age turned the State into the institution *par excellence* when it came to guaranteeing the representation of the social sphere, an institution that manages that sort of unacceptable praxis from the key *numens* around which the modern collective communion is structured. As seen above, the monopoly of social control rested upon the State by means of a peculiarly expiatory institutional exercise.

Thus, late modern societies redefine sacrificial phenomenology. They show a de-commitment of the control by the State along with a delegation of its exercise to the will of each individual. The disarticulation of the role played by the State as a fixed center of gravity in the supervision of the social context correlates with the weakening of its institutional authority in the transmission of normativity as well as in the framing of a systemic integration freed from a moral concordance (Luhmann 1998, pp. 197–212). Consequently, institutionalized rites—vested with a halo of solemnity and oriented to reaffirming the axiomatic values of collective conscience—enter a spiral of wear and disaffection.¹⁹ Sacrificial rites—as a subclass of institutionalized rites—break down. Until well into modernity, when such a ritual desire still remains alive, the wealth of violence accumulated inside a group, the “collective shadow” self-denied therein (Jung 1966), had been exorcized through a twofold channeling, internally by the catharsis periodically triggered in festivities and at an external level by a projection—evoking patriotism—towards warfare. The degradation

¹⁹ “I will define ritualism—Douglas said—as an impassioned appreciation of symbolic action which materializes, firstly in the belief in the effectiveness of the instituted signs, and secondly in the sensibility regarding the condensed symbols” (Douglas 1978, p. 22).

in the authority of the common rites goes hand in hand with a de-regulation of sacrificial ritualism incorporated into the day-to-day praxis.

An enlightening approach to this de-regulation is provided by Michaud (1980, pp. 73–96), in whose opinion the social sphere has experienced a situation of ambiguity since modernity—the artifice of its maintenance without the support of an adherence, building a sensibility “in which a society exists because it is not possible to do without it but, at the same time, there is no longer a society” (Michaud 1980, p. 186). Under the monopoly of usefulness and the obsession with security as a guest, the social bond ends up deteriorating, curtailed in the format of a mere contractual interdependence. Michaud explains how the progress of modernity caused a *décalage* in the normative sphere by removing the rank of absoluteness linked to the institutional frameworks with consensual weight. This debilitated the chances for the emergence of a normative-referential criterion that could settle the unrest which arises inside every human group with the aim of getting self-vaccinated before an internal fracture resulting from the proliferation of revenges dictated by the random will of each individual. The toll is a caricatured collective conscience.

Late modernity deepens the blurring of the “fixed point” as a coordinating axis for the social sphere, thus favoring the tendency to a diverse, subjective, and variable assessment of every event. The radical relativization of the “fixed point” results in powerlessness to keep internal violence at bay, a situation favored by the fact that each social actor feels that they have a preferential right to claim the status of “fixed point” for their world interpretation scheme with no other legitimacy than the one based on belief or desire, i.e., “violence is the unilaterality in the affirmation of an individual or of a group in the social sphere conceived as playing games with those unilateral attitudes; in other words, an economy of violence; or expressed differently, a world without rules, without stability, and eventually without any predictability whatsoever” (Michaud 1980, p. 185). This final landscape results from a dis-involvement in relation to the moral sacrifice demanded by the “fixed point”. After the institutionalism of normative rules has disappeared, the hostility between wills turns into fate, into an orgy of enmities with neither measure nor purpose reoriented towards the very heart of the collectivity. This serves to temporarily dispel the situations of structural unease emanated from a misunderstanding that contaminates social relationships, concealing what we do not want to see—the dissolution of the social sphere.²⁰

Nonetheless, since the tragical thing is the shadow battered in the circle of the political prophylaxis urged by modernity, seeking to offset this, late modern societies focus on maximizing security, on indefatigably striving to reach a “zero risk” situation, and on removing antagonism at any rate, thus legitimizing themselves in accordance with the motto of a “perfection-oriented fanaticism” (Baudry 1986, p. 12), in short, demonizing conflict, putting it on a level with a germ of harmful violence, and all of this weighted by the silencing of a violence that is endogenous to the actual social system—the one obsessed with reaching at all costs the fiction of a complete pacification of the social context (Baudry 1986, pp. 11–15; 2004, pp. 25–66). Once the conflict has been deprived of ritual formulae, a deadly de-vitalization of the social sphere is sown (Baudry 1986, p. 13), quarantining an “irrepressible desire to live” which is synonymous with creative and renewing disorder (Maffesoli 1984, p. 12) and seeing how a sordid floating violence—permanently about to break out—keeps growing in the ambiance. The typology of sacrificial victimization is consequently framed within an—even sometimes excessive—emphasis

²⁰ This de-ritualized and democratized sacrificial practice, which comes as a result of negating the social aspects, coincides with a desire to embrace the vertigo of anomie. It does not matter which expression is used: “external phenomena” harboring a “radical alterity” under a motive to reencounter with “the cursed part” (Bataille) exorcized without a homeostatic replacement in modern culture (Baudrillard 1991, pp. 123 and ff.); “the obscene” as an exhibition of excrement at the height of indifference to modern values (Baudrillard 1984, pp. 51–73); “wild sacred” as a rebound when faced with an instituted world where the sacred prevails in a tamed format (Bastide 1997, pp. 209 and ff.) or the violence that goes against *political rationality* (Carretero 2009). This anomic expressiveness would be betraying something paradoxical: “at the same time, loss of meaning and construction of meaning; de-subjektivization, but also subjektivization: (Wieviorka 2001, p. 346). One could state that the nihilist experience around the premises of modernity exacerbates variations of anomic meaning inextricably linked to that modernity.

on negating the social context, eradicating any possible ritualism able to forge a collective communion.²¹

3.2.3. New Liturgical Representation of Sacrificial Victimization

In late modern societies, the media-virtual universe is the stage which serves to project archetypal anthropological structures that serve as a resonance box for the ghosts that inhabit the collective imaginary.²² A new public square where the everyday magma is “hypervisualized” (Imbert 2001) and where the aforesaid universe simultaneously pervades it. The ritual element is not immune to the rules of the game which apply to media-digital representation, being absorbed by its scenography, at the cost of being stripped to some extent of its solemnity. With it, the idiosyncrasy of sacrificial victimization adapts to the liturgical format of mass culture codes.

We can firstly deal with the fragility of the established meaning where daily life bathes (Schütz 1962; Berger and Luckmann 1986). Heidegger argued that everydayness relies upon a frail film made up of “gossip talk”—an anonymous, unfounded language which permeates it, a circulating speech whose authority rests upon repeating something with no support other than the fact of having been said before and the only purpose of which consists in extending a packaged interpretation of the world within reach of anybody. The everyday world is supported on a “gossip talk” which contaminates both how the world is seen and the way in which it must be seen (Heidegger 2000, pp. 186–200). The German thinker refers to this “flattening” of possibilities under the domination of a “One” using the word “publicity”, a reading of the world which comprises what is taken for granted and what is accessible to everybody. A world of meanings built from “gossip talk” is anchored in insecure certainties, which makes it easier for tittle-tattle to appropriate everydayness. Elias and Scotson (2016, pp. 168–85) show how that world reinforces cohesion between individuals and how its effectiveness lies in being a twisted half-truth. It can be described as an a-structural weapon to strengthen social control, delving deeper into the disruption that a specific behavior represents with respect to conventional standards. Gossip unifies behaviors pursuant to prejudices which are reluctant to problematize arguments. Something similar takes place in the gossip talk converted into a micro-sociological category, a way of “speaking idly for talk’s sake”, enjoying what one does not have and letting oneself be dragged by the fascination of alterity, being captivated by the life of the other (Imbert 1992, pp. 118–225). The reign of “idle talk” additionally harbors rumor, the energy of which consists in believing what we want to believe a priori, i.e., in a peculiar willingness to believe, and whose operability rests upon a deregulated management of information through informal spaces (Morin 1969). As a common denominator, tittle-tattle, gossip, or rumor are communicative resources of unproductive economy (Imbert 1992, p. 119) which make possible the emergence of a common synergy around something within a situation of semi-opacity. The secret assumption of that something allows a variety of individuals to meet and ultimately become interwoven in a mutual tuning of affections. To this is added a sociability lazily based on habit and custom, including feast, chat, bland conversation, verbosity, or friendship computer networks, testimonies of a “subterranean centrality”

²¹ The de-institutionalization of sacrificial rituality leads to a widespread expansion of self-sacrificial behaviors where health is put to the test. Le Breton (2018) has shown a range of sacrificial practices amongst young generations which would have eliminated the role foreseen by *les rites de passage* to the adult universe. These generations recover a trace of sacrality deprived of collective substance that tries to transgress the instituted *numens* with no material benefit in return, the mark left by the primitive sacrificial act surviving, where what has been sacrificed encourages a transformation of the subject’s interiority self with a view to build and reconstruct his identity, a youthful identity parasitized by an unease which refers us back to the access to an excessive normalizing zeal of the adult world without relinquishing the intensity of young life, added to the non-existence of ways established for its channeling, which in turn induces the emergence of a personalized sacrificial rituality that feeds a paroxysm of risk and physical self-harm. Young people would be shaping a particular identity meaning stamped as a mark through a wound on the skin or succumbing to damaging behaviors (Le Breton 2017, pp. 37–82).

²² In this direction, see Morin (1966), Balandier (1994), Imbert (2002), Carretero (2007), Martínez-Lucena and Barraycoa (2012), and Martínez-Lucena et al. (2019).

which, in addition to being inertial and surreptitious, can hardly be integrated into rigid institutional frameworks (Maffesoli 1990, pp. 52–67).²³

We find ourselves before an everyday opaque *locus* from the epistemic thresholds of the social pact, rarely metabolized from formal control devices. The consensus link is grounded on a systemic–structural domain of a political–legal nature, albeit simultaneously in this informal and a-institutional *locus* rooted in everydayness. Simmel expressed it as follows: “Men look at one another, are jealous of one another, write letters to one another, eat together, are kind or unkind to one another, apart from any visible interest; the gratitude generated by an altruistic service has the power of an unbreakable bond, a man asks another for directions, men get dressed and do themselves up for one another, and all of these as well as a thousand other momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or fertile relationships, which take place between one individual and another, and from which we have arbitrarily singled out these examples, mutually link us at all times” (Simmel 1986, pp. 29–30). It is in this daily *locus* thrown onto the media-digital resonance box, where sociability is done and undone within an endless variety of “microscopic-molecular processes” (Simmel 1986), that late modernity essentially relocates the sacrificial phenomenology inherent to every culture in a self-backfed, restless, ending return trip from everydayness to the media-digital context. The forces of evil, at other times contained as elements violating the normative order, are not averted but are exhibited without any restrictions. This allows for the catharsis of endogenous violence (Girard) to be recycled under the form of a publicized catharsis released onto the media scene (Imbert 1992) and later onto the digital one. The outcome is a democratized face of the sacrificial praxis. Thus, mass media, social networking sites, or TV sets appear as platforms which project a sacrificial ghost in search of scapegoats. In late modern culture, nobody is expressly assigned the role of *sacrificer* and, at the same time, that role is assigned to everybody, the spirit of sacrificial victimization being stripped of any halo of sacrality.²⁴

This is attested by the wide range of conspiracies, accusations, or stigmatizations encouraged by a merely phobic motivation. The rise of expressiveness correlates with the decline in the authority of institutional devices and, in parallel, with the inclination to a coexistence that is slave to the whims of subjectivism. Nobody would be excluded from this, since anybody could be half-judged by anybody else. The novelty of this phenomenon resides in its latent or low-intensity nature. Within this imaginary profile of victimization, despite the awareness of its wear and tear, the *numens* of modernity continue to be perceived as inviolable and obeyed without any reservations. The only problem lies in the fact that the enemy to be fought is not a dissidence cowering in difference, a situation systemically subsumed without any major difficulty in terms of a “different identity”. On the contrary, it is a shadow of identity ambiguity which encumbers the transparency of the communicational flow on which sociability depends. If geometry arises as the archetype of the modern mind (Bauman 1995, p. 91), that aspect which resists being categorized upsets the confidence and instills uncertainty and insecurity within non-regulated interaction spaces. Its consummation is an abundance of attitudes governed by intolerance when not by a crusade spirit, a globalized village spirit where anybody can *in potential* become a sacrificial victim, the target of an indefinite victimization which hovers around. A ghost of distrust, in an osmosis between the media-digital sphere and everydayness, is fixed upon individuals whose main source of risk is the entanglement in a coexistence mediated by distancing, the one in which no “dense sociability” exists (Bauman 1995, p. 103), where everybody is a foreigner in everybody else’s eyes. A sacrificial dimension is preserved—the aspiration to reach an expiation goal which acquits the collectivity within a purpose of

²³ “Why are people more interested in the gossip talk about Juan Guerra than in the speeches of political leaders? Because the former produces social cohesion and the latter do not: mass media are not only reservoirs of gossip, supermarkets which nourish tittle-tattle (in today’s “global village”, gossip talk about “celebrities” of art or politics plays the same role that gossip talk about the priest or the pharmacist used to fulfil in the old “global village”)” (Ibáñez 1990, pp. 18–19).

²⁴ Hanging like a sword of Damocles over any individual and favoring a “neighborocracy”, the neighborhood status which, assuming the control role, prevails over the citizenship status (Rodríguez Alzueta 2019).

catharsis which can put an end to the hostilities that cast a shadow over it day in day out, frightening away evil and trying to make the good reign attempt to restore a communion of consciences, more apparent than effective, dramatized on the media-digital universe.

4. Conclusions

According to the *numens* enhanced by modernity with the aim of consolidating a collective communion, emphasis has been placed on the persistence of an anthropological structure which, linked to sacrificial victimization, would have materialized in the former as a reclusion strategy. We elucidated the metamorphosis operated in the sacrificial imaginary of late modernity which is exposed to a de-institutionalized and a de-regulated ritual physiognomy inserted in a control logic consummated in an atmosphere of victimization channeled by social relationships which are favored by the complicity of a media-digital feedback. Evidence was provided not only to know why the characterization of this victimization constitutes a contrived attempt to achieve expiation—since it is not based on any real communion whatsoever—but also why, for this same reason, it would be doomed to failure in this task. Attention was equally paid to the fact that the reason for this failure can be found in the absence of commonly endorsed rites, in keeping with the exacerbation of a state that denies the social sphere and causes substantial damages in the collective link, and with a particular set of clearly unsuccessful strategies implemented for the purpose of filling the void in the former.

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