

‘What Forced Men to Kill Their Own Kind in Religious Ceremonies’? Anthropology and Metaphysics of Sacrifice in the Work of Georges Bataille and René Girard

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Abstract

Traditionally used to designate bloody rituals practiced in so-called ‘primitive societies’, the notion of sacrifice is commonly understood as a strategic investment in which the renunciation of something valuable is compensated by a more advantageous return. Sharing such a functionalist perspective, social theorists describe sacrifice as a means to renewing social and/or religious bonds through the transgression of social and/or religious boundaries. However, social theorists do not explain why men need to renew such bonds – i.e. what lies behind the human desire to unite with the divine and why violence exists in the first place – and ultimately leave unresolved the question of sacrifice’s deep origins. This article examines how two French theorists, namely Georges Bataille and René Girard, attempt to overcome the theoretical constraints faced by their predecessors and offer an innovative answer to the question of sacrifice’s deep origins, providing Western functionalist sacrifice theories with an unprecedented depth.

Keywords: Sacrifice, Functionalism, Metaphysics, Georges Bataille, René Girard

Traditionally used to designate bloody rituals practiced in so-called ‘primitive societies’, the notion of sacrifice continues to fascinate most fields of modern theory – from theology, sociology and cultural studies, to literary criticism,

metaphysics, and film studies, to name but a few disciplines – but also the popular imagination. In both academic writings and popular discourses, sacrifice is commonly understood as a strategic *investment* in which the renunciation to something valuable is compensated by a more advantageous return (Mayblin 2014: 346-347). Like the chess player sacrifices the queen in order to win the game, parents sacrifice their comfort for their baby's wellbeing and soldiers sacrifice their lives for their country.

As Western social theory elucidates, with the notable contributions of Durkheim, Mauss, Frazer, Robertson Smith and more recently Turner and Bloch among many others, such a functionalist approach to sacrifice derives from the *utilitarian* understanding of sacrificial rituals across cultures and throughout history (Carter 2006: 2-4). Sacrificial rituals are indeed often described as a form of religious investment resonant of the Latin phrase *do ut des*, 'I give so that you will give'. In line with Mauss' theory of the gift, which highlights that receiving a gift implies an obligation to reciprocate, sacrifice establishes a long-term relation of mutual gift-giving – in other words, of debts and credits – between men and the divine (Mauss 1954: 12-13). With this in mind, the sacrificial destruction and consecration of a victim, thereby offered to the Gods, is thought to endear men to Gods and attract the latter's favours (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 9). Accordingly, sacrificial rituals consist of the strategic transgression of a *boundary* – that delimiting of the sacred from the profane, through the victim's consecration. This allows the renewal of a *bond* – uniting men to Gods – which I will refer to throughout this article as a 'religious bond'.

Moreover, for social theorists such as Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Mauss and more recently Merton, if sacrifice's expected function – or, as Merton puts it, 'manifest function' (1957: 60-69) – is to establish a link between men and the divine, its 'latent function' – i.e. function that is neither intended nor recognized – is to reunite men with their fellow community members (Ibid.; Durkheim 1973: 336; 340). For these theorists, sacrifice is first and foremost a *social* mechanism permitting the regulation of violence within human communities. The sacrificial killing is described as a major, yet institutionalized, transgression of social norms and prohibitions, which, through the catharsis it generates, momentarily purges men from their violent desires and reaffirms the *social* bond. Regardless of their insistence on sacrifice's latent or manifest function then, social theorists tend to describe sacrifice as a *technique* of renewal of a social and/or religious bond through the transgression of a social and/or religious boundary.

However, several theorists denounced the functionalist socio-anthropological theories of sacrifice as superficial. As the French theorist Georges Bataille argues, '[t]hese explanations accounted for the effects of sacrifice; they do not tell us what forced men to kill their own kind in religious ceremonies' (1986: 62). Similarly unsatisfied, the French theorist René Girard regrets that these accounts 'have nothing to say about the origins of sacrificial practice' (1979: 89). Social theorists indeed elucidate sacrifice in terms of its function, as a means to renewing social and/or religious bonds, but do not seek to explain *why* men need to renew such bonds – that is to say, what lies behind men's desire to unite with the divine and why violence exists in the first place. As Bataille concludes, social theories of sacrifice tend to 'reduce the why of things to contingency' (1986: 62). For Tiina Arppe, such a tendency

can be explained by the scientific constraints of social theory, which prevent socio-anthropologists and sociologists from raising – let alone addressing – the ‘unscientific’ questions that lie behind sacrifice’s function (2009: 36).

Throughout their respective works, Bataille and Girard repeatedly claimed their will to, as Bataille puts it, ‘get to the bottom of things’ by addressing the questions their predecessors left unresolved (1986: 62). This article examines how they attempt to do so through the overcoming of the scientific constraints of socio-anthropological theories. On the whole, I will try to demonstrate that both theorists successfully elucidate the deep ‘unscientific’ origins of sacrificial practice, ultimately providing Western functionalist sacrifice theories with an unprecedented depth and bridging the gap between two apparently incompatible socio-anthropological and metaphysical approaches to sacrifice.

Economical Versus “Aneconomical” Sacrifice

When looking at René Girard’s sacrifice theory, it first appears that, despite an innovative insistence on the mimetic nature of human relations, Girard’s theory remains an example of traditional functionalist logic. In line with his predecessors, Girard indeed describes sacrifice as a *social* mechanism permitting the regulation of violence within societies.¹ Violence, Girard argues, ensues from the mimetic relation of jealousy and rivalry that develops between community members and escalates until it generalizes into a violence of all against all (1979: 79-81). For Girard, men originally survived their own violence through the natural setting up of the scapegoat mechanism, which consists of the polarisation of this violence of all against all, onto one scapegoat, which is violently evicted from the community (Ibid.: 81-82). The cathartic power of such an event offers a partial fulfilment of men’s violent desires and momentarily reaffirms the social bond. Set up as the ritualized re-enactment of the scapegoat mechanism, sacrifice thus works as a ‘technique of cathartic appeasement’, based on the transgression of social prohibitions – through the killing of a surrogate victim – which renews the social bond (Ibid.: 99; 102). As such, Girard’s mimetic theory seems perfectly in line with the functionalist logic of his predecessors, also sharing its limits. As Girard insists, ‘[his] theory should be approached [...] as one approaches any scientific hypothesis’ (1979: 316). Like any social theory of sacrifice, Girard’s theory thus seems condemned to overlook what exceeds science’s scope, including the deep origins of sacrificial practice.

Unlike Girard, Georges Bataille never sought to build a *scientific* theory of sacrifice. On the contrary, preferring existential reflection to the use of scientific methods, Bataille insists throughout his works on the onto-metaphysical importance of sacrifice, which cannot be otherwise explored than by, as Bataille puts it, ‘bring[ing] into play the ultimate question of existence’ (1986: 64). Thereby liberated from any scientific constraint, Bataille is able to address, and indeed offers an answer to, metaphysical questions related to sacrifice, including that of its *raison d’être*. As Bataille argues, sacrifice exists simply because it is the very expression of what it means to be human, that is to say, to be neither an animal nor a God. For Bataille, the world is divided into two spheres: the transcendent order of things in which men live and the immanent realm of the sacred. Whereas the former is ruled by the restricted economy, which is turned towards the satisfaction of men’s animal needs and hence governed by

imperative utility, the latter escapes both utility and finitude. For Bataille, men have a particular status in relation to these two spheres: unlike other living beings in the transcendent order of things, they are not merely dominated by their physical needs and are thus able to make autonomous or, as Bataille puts it, 'sovereign' gestures, that exceed the rule of restricted economy (1990: 25). However, unlike divine entities, men's sovereignty is not absolute for it remains subjected to the inherent limits of the transcendent realm in which men live. In Bataille's theory, sacrifice is described as the very expression of such an in-between status, for sacrifice is a sovereign act that makes human finitude manifest.

On the one hand, adopting what has been called an 'aneconomical' perspective in opposition with his socio-anthropological predecessors (Keenan 2005: 1), Bataille insists that sacrifice is not valuable for its supposed function, but in itself. For Bataille, sacrifice has no function and it is precisely why sacrifice is so important. Having no function, the sacrificial killing consists in the destruction *for nothing* of a valuable victim, an act of pure loss expenditure that fundamentally goes against the utilitarian rule of the restricted economy and hence appears 'a *sovereign, autonomous* manner of being' (Bataille 1990: 25). As such sacrifice makes men's sovereignty manifest. Yet, on the other hand, because sacrifice consists in the spectacle of what Bataille calls 'life's necessary game with death' through the public killing of a victim (1986: 62), sacrifice also sheds light on human finitude. For Bataille then, '[t]he sacrificial gesture is what [Man] humanly is', for it makes men's separation from both animality and immanence manifest (1990: 25). With this statement, Bataille offers an answer to sacrifice's 'unscientific' origins.

However, one might object that such an answer does not match the question left unresolved by socio-anthropological theories of sacrifice. Whereas, unlike Girard, Bataille offers an explanation to sacrifice's deep origins, he does so adopting a perspective that is incompatible with the functionalism of socio-anthropological theories of sacrifice. Indeed, the question left to answer in the latter is that of the 'unscientific' origins of the sacrificial dynamics of renewal of bonds through the transgression of boundaries – in other words, why men find the need to renew divine and social bonds. On the contrary, describing sacrifice aneconomically as pure loss expenditure or, as Bataille puts it, 'the antithesis of production' (1989: 49), Bataille's theory denies any return on sacrificial investment. For Bataille, sacrifice is inoperative: it is a transgression of boundaries that however produces *nothing*, let alone the renewal of bonds. As Bataille insists, sacrifice is 'the fall into the void, and *nothing*, neither in the fall nor in the void is revealed' (1988: 50, emphasis added). Accordingly, Bataille's theory does not answer the question left unresolved by socio-anthropological functionalist theories of sacrifice, for it responds to an opposite imperative of inoperativity. On the whole, being limited by their respective attachment to sacrifice's inoperativity and scientific objectivity, neither Bataille nor Girard seems able to explain why men seek to renew the bonds that unite them with the divine and with their fellow community members.

'The New Darwin of the Human Sciences'

A closer look at Girard's theory, however, casts doubt upon his claimed scientific objectivity (de Heusch 1982: 19; White 1978: 4-5; 7). In early

works such as *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* but also later in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard builds his understanding of sacrifice on the sacrificial motifs and patterns he identifies in famous novels by Proust, Dostoevsky, Stendhal or Flaubert, in Sophoclean and Euripidean tragedy, as well as in Christian Gospels and Freudian myths, among other cultural sources. Rather than using anthropological data and scientific reasoning, Girard adopts what can be described as a cultural perspective, based on existential reflection and literary criticism. Moreover, in his later works such as in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), theological ponderings underlie and even often outweigh anthropological analyses. As a result, many anthropologists and scholars, particularly in France, refuse to recognize Girard's work as anthropological and prefer to classify it as a theoretical hybrid, at the crossroad between literary critique, cultural theory, theology and philosophical anthropology (de Heusch 1982; White 1978). Stressing Girard's interdisciplinary perspective, Michel Serres received Girard into the Académie Française as 'the new Darwin of the human sciences' (2009: 5).

Despite his claimed scientific objectivity and socio-anthropological approach, Girard thus appears theoretically flexible enough to address questions that exceed science's scope. One crucial 'unscientific' question Girard elucidates throughout his works is that of the origins of violence. Girard's first insights on that issue can be found in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* in which Girard argues that human desire is fundamentally imitative (1965: 83). More precisely, Girard highlights that man imitates an Other which he or she thinks is *metaphysically autonomous*; any demand arising from the Other's self indeed seems to be satisfied by his or her self (Ibid.: 56). However, as Girard points out, the Other's metaphysical autonomy is an illusion: since men are inextricably limited, autonomy is out of human reach (Ibid.: 16; 283). Men are thus condemned to imitate each other in a desperate attempt to reach a state of fundamentally impossible metaphysical autonomy. As Anthony Traylor suggests, such desire to escape the 'curse' of mankind, as Girard puts it (1965: 271), is a 'defining mark of the human condition' (2014): being human means simultaneously being limited and incessantly trying to overcome human finitude through the imitation of an illusion.

In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard describes violence as a destructive evolution of human mimetic interaction (1979: 79-81). Linking the metaphysical reflection on human desire developed in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* with the socio-anthropological analyses of *Violence and the Sacred*, it thus appears that violence is an expression of men's onto-metaphysical nature.² By extension, sacrifice's *social* function – the regulation of violence – is a response to the destructive potential of men's metaphysical identity. As such, Girard offers a cross-disciplinary answer to the 'why' of sacrifice's function: men need to renew the social bond because the latter is threatened by human nature. This is why James Alison insists that what one can learn from Girard's interdisciplinary theory is that '[w]e didn't invent sacrifice; sacrifice invented us' (2013). In other words, men did not invent sacrifice as a mechanism to serve future ends; sacrifice invented us for it is what allows us to exist as human beings. In a way which is reminiscent of Bataille's *aneconomical* valorization of sacrifice as 'what [Man] humanly is' (1990: 25), Girard shows that behind the social function of the sacrificial dynamics of transgression of boundaries and renewal of bonds lies a metaphysical *raison d'être*: sacrifice makes human nature

possible and manifest. However unlike Bataille, Girard manages to combine a socio-anthropological approach with the theoretical flexibility of metaphysical reflection and, crucially, makes a functionalist perspective compatible with what I consider an aneconomical undertone, allowing him to successfully elucidate the so far overlooked metaphysical *raison d'être* of the sacrificial dynamics of renewal of bonds through the transgression of boundaries.

Imperative Inoperativity and Unavoidable Utility

However, as is clear from the many critical debates it has sparked over the past few decades, Bataille's systematic rejection of functionalism is highly nuanced. Indeed, when looking at Bataille's theory in more detail, it appears that, contradicting his claim that sacrifice produces *nothing*, two sacrificial outcomes can be identified. On the one hand, one can sense throughout Bataille's theory that sacrifice establishes a form of bond between men and the sacred through the exposure of men to immanence. As it has already been highlighted, what separates immanence from transcendence in Bataille's theory is the fact that the former exceeds the rules of imperative utility while the latter submits to it. As a sovereign act performed within the limits of the transcendent order of things, sacrifice brings immanent meaning within the transcendent order of things and thereby exposes men to immanence, creating what can be described as a bond between men and the sacred.

On the other hand, Bataille acknowledges throughout his works that sacrifice momentarily dismisses the violence that puts humanity at risk, which Zeynep Direk calls 'transcendent violence' (2004: 30). In a way which is reminiscent of Marx, Bataille argues that humanity is threatened by the intrinsic alienating violence of the restricted economy. Under such an economy of imperative utility, men indeed lose their status of subject to become mere objects of production. As Bataille highlights, '[t]he farmer is not a man: he is a plough of the one who eats the bread. At the limit, the act of the eater himself is already agricultural labour, to which he furnishes the energy' (1989: 42). However, Bataille argues, since sacrifice precisely breaches the rule of utility, it 'draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice' (Ibid.: 43), in other words, to immanence. As such, sacrifice momentarily dismisses the alienating transcendent violence and de-objectifies the victim, as well as, through the cathartic power of such event, the entire community (Ibid.: 43-4). Crucially, for Bataille, men's renewed awareness of their humanity, which they discover by contrast with the objects they had become, develops as a contagious communication between men, putting them into relation and creating a form of social bond (Bataille 1988: 57; 194).

In his works, Bataille thus acknowledges that sacrifice has three effects, which in fact matches the two social and religious functions identified by social theory: sacrifice exposes men to immanence, creating a form of bond between men and the sacred, dismisses the violence that puts humanity at risks and initiates the contagion of human self-consciousness, which unites men within a form of social bond. However, as it has been pointed out, Bataille's theory is particularly famous for describing sacrifice as 'the antithesis of production' (1989: 49). The question that remains then is whether, for Bataille, sacrifice produces something or not. This is, I think, the cornerstone of Bataille's complex theory; what makes it so powerful and yet equivocal. Paradoxically,

Bataille simultaneously conveys within his theory the simultaneous imperative inoperativity and unavoidable utility of sacrifice. My sense is that the clue to such a complex debate can be found in the difference that Bataille maintains throughout his works – not without difficulty – between sacrifice's *effect* and sacrifice's *function*.

As I have already pointed out, Bataille, throughout his works, argues that sacrifice is 'what [Man] humanly is', for sacrifice is, like Man, paradoxically both sovereign and limited (1990: 25). As a sovereign act, sacrifice escapes the imperative utility of restricted economy, which is why Bataille insists that sacrifice is 'the antithesis of production' (1989: 49). However, this is not to say that sacrifice produces nothing: it simply means that sacrifice produces nothing intended to serve future ends. Indeed, because sacrifice is submitted to the material finite conditions of the transcendent order of things, it inevitably has practical effects upon the latter, which however are produced without expected function since they ensue from a sovereign act. Here lies the subtlety of Bataille's theory. As Bataille further elucidates in 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', sacrifice's effects only take useful meaning once interpreted by human intelligence, which Bataille describes as a 'function[...] of servile labors' (1990: 25). As Bataille argues, 'to the extent that discourse informs it, what is *sovereign* is given in terms of *servitude*' (Ibid.: 25-26, Bataille's italics). Human intelligence thus only interprets the effects of sacrifice *a posteriori*, misunderstanding the real intrinsic importance of sacrifice. As Bataille concludes, 'the pure revelation of Man to himself [...] passes from sovereignty to the primacy of servile ends' (Ibid.: 26). Accordingly, Bataille does not elucidate the deep origins of sacrifice's function through an exploration of the metaphysical roots of such function, like Girard does, but through the analysis of men's functionalist intelligence.

For Bataille, if sacrifice has been used throughout history and across cultures as a means to renew the bond uniting men with the divine and with their fellow community members, it is simply because men gave a useful meaning to sacrifice's effects – hence a useful *raison d'être* to sacrificial practice. Men interpret sacrifice as useful for the survival of their societies – which corresponds to sacrifice's traditional social function – and for possibly overcoming their unbearable finitude, through the establishment of a link between humanity and the divine, which corresponds to sacrifice's traditional religious function. To paraphrase Bataille, 'what forced men to kill their own kind in religious ceremonies' is thus both the fact that sacrifice is what being human means, and that men interpreted such human truth in useful terms. The sacrificial practice appears, in Bataille's theory, to be simultaneously driven by an aneconomical and economical imperative (1986: 62). Bataille thus manages to conciliate within his theory both the deep aneconomical onto-metaphysical *raison d'être* of sacrifice – the fact that it is 'what [Man] humanly is' (1990: 25) – and the traditional functionalist understanding of sacrifice, which he elucidates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout their respective works, both Bataille and Girard propose compelling methods through which one can 'get to the bottom of things' when it comes to the question of sacrifice's *raison d'être* (Bataille 1986: 62). While, for Girard, one can trace sacrifice's deep origins back to the metaphysical origins of violence, which lie in the unbearable yet inextricable

finitude of human existence, Bataille suggests that sacrifice corresponds to 'what [Man] humanly is', as much as the functionalist interpretation of sacrifice derives from what being human means. As such, even if they ensue from two opposite perspectives, corresponding to two different traditions of aneconomism and functionalism, Bataille and Girard's theories reach a similar conclusion: sacrifice is constitutive of being human. Making a step towards one another, Bataille and Girard account for the traditional socio-anthropological analyses of their predecessors, while making them both more nuanced and comprehensive through the identification of sacrifice's metaphysical and aneconomical *raison d'être*. In so doing, they provide Western functionalist sacrifice theories with an unprecedented depth and bridge the gap between two apparently incompatible socio-anthropological and metaphysical approaches to sacrifice.

Endnotes

1 Focusing on sacrifice's social function, Girard only pays little attention to sacrifice's manifest religious function identified by his predecessors. For Girard, '[s]acrifice deals with humankind, and it is in human terms [not religious terms] that we must attempt to comprehend it' (1979: 90).

2 This is not to say that mimetic violence is the only expression of human nature – even if it is the most common one. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard argues that Jesus' death highlighted the possibility of a mimesis of love, which should replace men's usually violent mimesis.

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Biography

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