

HUMAN SACRIFICE IN RATIONAL ECONOMY

CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE

Human sacrifice is typically assumed to be a “primitive” institution, one that long ago vanished from Western civilization. Unfortunately, quite the opposite is true: the institution of sacrifice lives on. Although much of it is hidden from view, it appears in unexpected forms and remains an essential part of everyday life, politics and economy in modern societies and, in particular, in the West.

A number of antique cultures — including the ancient Egyptians, the Aztecs, and various Hindu sects — learned to incorporate sacrifice into social life as a visible institution. The practice was legitimized through an association with religious or mystical necessity. Through sacrifice, the gods could be appeased, or even bribed to perform actions beyond the control of either the collective or the individual agent involved in the ritual killing. Sacrifice brought together in a concrete manner the worlds of the visible (sensual) and the invisible (spiritual). Anthropologists have speculated that the psychological benefit of this hyperreal performance lay in its power to relieve anxiety among participants by giving them a sense of control over nonrational elements of existence; or, that an obvious political/economic benefit of the ritual ordering of death could be found in its usefulness for the purposes of population management and social control. Some have also speculated that in cultures where rituals include cannibalism, human flesh may have been a much-needed source of protein. Such theories, while they do have some explanatory power, tend to miss the interconnection between the nonrational economy of death and the rational economy of surplus and waste. This willingness to ignore such a connection is one reason why sacrifice continues, unnoticed and incessant, as a standard institution in all cultures of advanced surplus economy.



Our propensity in the West for repressing the disturbing aspects of existence means that we are not likely to have a visible institution of sacrifice; the legitimizing effect that religion might provide for the practice has melted away under the heated process of rationalization. The social functions that human sacrifice once provided, however, must still be fulfilled. Bourgeois society, never content to discard any social action that can either generate profit or maintain social order, allows sacrifice to continue at the margins of visibility. Rather than eliminate the institution, society has driven sacrifice into the under-economy of taboo social relationships and bad objects which should never be brought to mind, viewed, or even named. This realm is one of the foundations upon which the capitalist empire of excess is built.

The under-economy is organized around two kinds of sacrifice, both of which have specific material and hyperreal effects in the over-economy: one is guided by the principle of excess, the other by the principle of autonomy. Sacrifice under the sign of excess is connected to two key economic processes — the production of more than is needed, on the one hand, and the consumption of more than is needed, on the other.

Consider, for example, the use of gasoline-driven motor vehicles, which most regard as an indispensable right. In light of this, the sacrifice of lives during the Gulf War was necessary in order to provide the Western war machine with a secure supply of fuel, and to ensure that “first world” citizens could fuel their cars at a reasonable cost. Though this justification is widely

accepted, our society nevertheless demands that political-economic sacrifice be left unmentioned. So, while the Gulf War and its sacrifices were officially sanctioned for the purpose of “liberating” Kuwait and stopping a “dictator” with militant delusions of grandeur, the economic imperative of the war remained hidden beneath its visible morality, and only briefly became visible through the intervention of leftist defiance and deviance.

While the war drew some attention to the under-economy sacrifices needed to maintain an excess supply of oil, little or no attention was paid to the deaths of the more than fifty thousand people each year in fatal auto accidents. This number remains acceptable to most of us in exchange for the freedom to drive — so long as the sacrifice it represents remains hidden and abstract.

Such statistics point toward the second variety of sacrifice, that which is guided by the principle of autonomy. This type of sacrifice, especially when visible, is evidently abhorrent to all political positions except the radical left (unlike sacrifice for excess, which is acceptable to all except the radical left.) For those who occupy this lonely political position, sacrifice is an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the liberation of desire — a compromise which must be accepted as one of the costs of freedom. For the greater the autonomy given individuals, the greater the sacrifice required. Death and autonomy (that is, the expression of desire) are inherently linked. Desire can take any emotional form, and thus it is difficult to accurately predict how it will manifest itself in action. A possibility



always exists that the action will be violent, and hence actively connected with mortality. There is a high degree of uncertainty associated with non-rational activity, and this tends to produce great anxiety; when reminders of our own mortality begin to surface, and the economy of sacrifice becomes more visible, hysteria and panic are, typically, not far behind. The alternative to facing up to this discomfort and uncertainty has traditionally been the surrender of individual sovereignty to the state apparatus, which is entrusted to legislate on what forms of social action will be considered acceptable. The greater the fear of the sacrifice required by autonomy, the more homogenous and repressed the social action required to allay the fear.

War and Genocide

Sacrifice has always been understood as a necessary component of war. Typically, the youth of a culture are sent into battle as cannon fodder, while the support structure of the war machine bemoans their loss, and compensates their victimization by granting them the status of patriots or heroes. The connection between the spirit world and sacrifice may be lost, but here it is replaced by metaphysical notions of national principles (progress, democracy, free markets, etcetera.). The lack of any absolute grounding for these "sacred" principles is obfuscated by spectacles and distractions: parades, military funerals, monuments, TV specials, and so on. At the same time, the rationalized contract — that the sacrifice of x amount people will yield y amount of profit, prestige, land and other sacrificial victims

— is well known, but unmentionable. This silence alternatively serves as a means of avoiding the dissonance of moral contradiction, or as a means of avoiding negative sanctions.

The necessity of sacrifice as manifest in genocide is candidly explained by Fascist social philosophy. Since social solidarity through similarity of soul (manifest as a common institution of religion) is no longer possible in an enlightened age, other means must be used to bring an economically differentiated society together into a cohesive unit. Religious solidarity can be replaced by genetic solidarity: by eliminating (via ethnic cleansing) all or some of those not up to (genetic) code. In addition, as the Fascists saw, considerable social pressures will be neutralized if this elimination of a given population opens new geographic territory where the correctly coded underclass can relocate. In the philosophy of leftist authoritarians (Stalin, Pol Pot, etc.), an ideological code replaces the genetic code as the basis for solidarity. The notion of ideological inferiority, in combination with a spectacular support structure, creates the possibility for making rationalized mass sacrifice palatable both morally and economically. There is no doubt that modern technological advancements have truly improved on the efficiency of the primitive model of sacrifice by adding rationalized extermination: both in terms of the numbers sacrificed and the speed with which modern necropolises can be constructed.

There is little reason to continue describing the emergence of sacrifice into the realm of the visible. Anyone who has reflected on these mani-

festations for even a moment knows the patterns. What is not typically understood is that these epic forms of sacrifice, such as genocide, do not exhaust the list. These are only the “final solutions” — pathological manifestations of an under-economy that is always swirling with death.

Automatic Garage Door Openers

Every commodity has a degree of risk attached to it, and the possibility for loss of life always exists. Most people manage to keep the uncertainty of life at a reasonable distance, and thereby save themselves the anxiety of constantly wondering whether it is about to end. Yet some cannot keep mortality out of their minds. One situation that conjures this unfortunate state of consciousness is when one loses an intimate to sacrifice. In this case, the object associated with that sacrifice typically becomes regarded as abject by the individual suffering the loss. Often, aggregates of individuals who project death onto the same object form organizations which attempt to reveal the particular sacrifice signified by the fetish object, as well as attempting to destroy the abject object itself.

Much confusion has arisen recently over the nature of the abject. Given recent literature and art exhibitions on the subject, one would think that the abject is defined only by bourgeois repulsion toward the “filth” of homelessness, or toward “perverted” sexual activities. Such things are but one tiny aspect of the abject, if they are in the realm of the abject at all. (In fact, extreme sexual practices may well be a means to escape the abject rather than a means of participation in it.) Any

object that mediates the affective apprehension of mortality can become a *temporary* manifestation of the abject. The abject is liquid, sliding into existence at one moment, only to evaporate into nothingness the next. Abject objects are everywhere: they may be safety pins, telephone cords, or automatic garage door openers.

Consider the following scenario: a child wanders into a garage with an automatic garage door opener. While the child is standing in the liminal space between garage and driveway, the garage door is accidentally activated, drops down on the child’s head, and breaks his or her neck. What will follow? A cry of alarm will arise, announcing the need to ban the automatic garage door (now in a state of limited fetishization). An organization of people who have had loved ones killed by automatic garage doors is formed. The members go to Congress to ask for a law to ban automatic garage doors. Their arguments are simple: “If banning garage doors saves one life, just *one*, it will be worth it;” and “Automatic garage doors are killing our children!” In one possible scenario they are perceived as crackpots and denied legislation.

Another scenario, oddly enough, could have the exact opposite ending. Once an object is claimed to be abject by a credible organization, its role in the over-economy is reassessed. If the object is deemed profitable, and much beloved, or if it provides efficiency in everyday life, then its connection to sacrifice will once again be repressed, and the object will retain its place in the pantheon of either convenience or luxury. Lots of lobbying, spectacular actions, and other tactics

of influence will be used to either destroy or save the contested object's image. Whichever occurs, the perception that triumphs in the legislative process is primarily a product of hyperreality.

If the object's abject status cannot be spectacularly sustained at a social level, then containment strategies are often used. For instance, many people drown in swimming pools each year, and yet swimming pools (or even better, bodies of water) are not banned. Rather, they are contained. Laws are passed requiring locked fences around pools; but, the *fenced* pool does not conjure associations with death. Such is also the case with helmet laws for motorcyclists or seat belt laws for drivers. These laws help us to disassociate motorcycles and cars from the under-economy, and keep them clean and visible in the over-economy. At the same time, we know that more than fifty thousand will die in the United States this year in motor vehicle mishaps.

Recognition of the car as an abject object is extremely temporary. Much care has been taken by the state to mediate the temporary abject relationships between subject and auto. Signs of safety abound — traffic laws, safety inspections, the highway code — and so the auto is disassociated even further from death. Even more importantly, however, is the vague intuition of the fairness surrounding this variety of sacrifice. The victims of this ritual seem to be selected by lot. If one has a spatial connection to cars, one enters the dead pool. The greater one's association with the object, the greater the chance of personal sacrifice. Those who love the mechanical extensions of existence as cyborg, and use

their engines to explore speeds that defy the intentions of the flesh, are those willing to trade their lives for forbidden sensations. Mix this desire with rationalized indulgence in various intoxicants and the probability of death continues to rise, as does the intensity of pleasure. Unfortunately the intensity of the violence that often accompanies this sensual exploration is so great that others who are not pursuing a foretaste of paradise are also swept into the vortex of mortality. The secondary victim, rewarded at best only by the freedom to drive, is chosen at random, so again sacrifice lurks under the sign of blind occurrence (the lattice of coincidence).

Eat a Grape

Some manifestations of sacrifice seem to have a less benign aura. Victims can be chosen on the basis of extreme prejudice. For example, many people enjoy eating grapes. Because eating grapes is pleasurable, people are happiest when they can buy them at a low price, and have continuous access to them.

The production techniques needed for continuous bumper crops require that pesticides be used. Small doses of pesticides are not considered dangerous to humans, and so the grape consumer worries little about them, and is happy with the excess of production. Costs remain low partly because of the use of pesticides, but also because of the use of inexpensive human labor to harvest the grapes. Unfortunately, the underclass members who must sell their low-cost labor to the grape-producing employers are exposed to toxic doses of pesti-

cide. Excess collects its souls through the painful process of slow poisoning. To complicate matters further, this class of sacrificial victims tends to have a similar ethnic heritage. For this altar, victims clearly are *not* selected by lot.

In this particular case, the under-economy remains well hidden. Who thinks about those who died to produce grapes when purchasing or eating them? Who considers a grape an abject object, besides this particular labor group caught in the invisibility of the under-economy? As individuals, it is quite uncomfortable for us to think about those who died for our (grape eating) pleasure, and so the mechanisms to support repression are well deployed. Work laws with regard to “aliens” are quite strict: an employer has no problem deporting those who might break the silence and shed light on the taboo of sacrifice. Unofficial negative sanctions are also useful: visit a local United Farm Workers office along the Rio Grande valley, where the bullet holes in the building are quite intentional. Thus, labor as commodity supplies a significant part of the grim harvest of excess.

The primary commodity of the underclass is labor, or perhaps (to be more accurate) potential labor. And, the supply of labor must always exceed the demand for it. Should there be a national crisis, or an economic boom in a particular industry, a labor pool must be immediately available from which the state may draw soldiers or from which employers may recruit workers. Marx explained this process as capitalism’s creation of a reserve labor army. During long periods of unemployment, potential work-

ers are housed in ghetto conditions — a spatial lock-down noted for its economically desperate conditions. Assuming that no emergency or boom occurs, only a few reserve workers are drafted into the low end of the workplace, while the majority are wasted. Lack of health care, inadequate diet, and violent competition over limited resources are the implements of sacrifice. Like the sacrificial pool of farm workers, the reserve labor army in the United States is disproportionately constituted by minorities. From a conservative point of view, when the scope of this bitter harvest extends beyond the realm of the spatial lock-down, new mechanisms to reinstate the opaque boundary between the over-economy and under-economy become necessary. For example, calls to bring back “family values” function as euphemistic plea to push back into the darkness the horror of such sacrifice for excess. “Family values” is as a euphemism for a militant reoccupation of the visible by the forces of social order, and in no way should be misconstrued as a call to abolish the under-economy — quite the opposite. Such representation is in fact yet another spectacular means to perpetuate and strengthen the shadowy border between the two economies.

Sociopathic Killers

It is a popular perception that sociopathic killers are terrorists devoid of political intentionality. Like terrorists, sociopaths tend to bring out the worst in people, as well as in governments. Terrorists and killers force people to confront the abject in an unstable situation

where the horror of the abject seems to consume all that is visible — and reveal the malevolent foundation of a hyper-rationalized political-economy. When this process continues for long enough, panic and hysteria are bound to follow. These nonrational impulses are unacceptable in rational society, and yet so many decisions are made in reference to them. The fear of killers surpasses the fear of terrorists — having a political agenda at least makes the latter somewhat predictable, while sociopaths have no intelligible agenda. They are the very icon of the under-economy. They are a frightening reminder that *anyone* can be a sacrificial victim. Rational argument means nothing when a killer bursts into visibility. Dying in a car accident is far more probable than being the victim of a killer, and yet while the news of a killer on the loose inspires panic, the news of a fatal traffic accident — so long as no intimate is involved — evokes indifference. When one is faced with a killer, individual autonomy seems to come at too high a price. The idea of passively existing at one moment and then being violently thrown into nonexistence the next, makes people want to give their sovereignty to a protector. The police state offers the illusion of total order, a place where such occurrences are (seemingly) impossible, whereas, in fact, the opposite is true. The police state dramatically increases the odds of violent death. Unlike the nonrational (and hence unpredictable) sociopath, the police state has instrumental reasons for killing (for example, its own self-perpetuation.) Giving it the sovereignty to treat life as it pleases only

increases the odds of untimely death for everybody (although for malcontents and marginals, the odds are extraordinarily increased.) But the hysterical group, caught up in the panic of crime spree hype, has never been known for cool thinking. Is it any wonder that crime bills are passed on the heels of media-scrutinized deaths, or that contemporary campaign platforms are saturated with “tough on crime” rhetoric? Serial killers, macho gang kids, and armed mad junkies cannot be stopped by more police, by tougher sentencing, and/or by more jails. Those who live in the under-economy (or is it “those who fulfill the stereotypes of over-economy hyperreality”?) cannot be deterred by the disciplinary apparatus of the over-economy, such as fear of capital punishment; that apparatus only works to repress the desires and deter the actions of those who are already members in good standing of the over-economy itself.

Spectator Sports

Not all sacrifices end in death. Some victims need only be maimed to fulfill their sacrificial function. Sports is an excellent example. Some may object that sporting practices exist under a rationalized contract: professionals are well compensated for the damage done to their bodies. Perhaps this class of sacrificial lambs do lie on the altar voluntarily, since prior to their pain they are treated as kings, given a foretaste of paradise, and therefore their fate is not so grim. But what about all the victims sacrificed to produce this royalty? The quality of sports entertainment demanded by consumers is

unquestionably high. Direct participation requires a lifetime of training (although spectacular participation also requires a long indoctrination process), and sometimes bio-modification through mechanical or synthetic means is even necessary. Since the question of who will mature to join the athletic elite has no certain answers, large numbers of people must begin the grooming process early on so the pool of potential talent is large enough to yield the very finest athletes. The leftovers from this process must be wasted. Most escape the grooming process no worse for wear, happy to have participated in it; however, some do not fare so well. Among this class of throwaways are the sacrificially maimed. They are of all ages: peewees, middle schoolers, high schoolers, and collegiates parade in a stream of bio-destruction. Joints, limbs, bones, ligaments, and more are torn, ripped, and shattered. Unlike their professional counterparts, these victims receive no compensation other than the fun they had on the way to the altar.

In this case, maiming can serve a double function. Those who fail to become participant athletes still bring profit to the developers of professional sports in a manner beyond offering themselves as material to the sports manufacturing machine. Since these sacrificial victims (the failed athletes) are not ordinarily killed (although such errors do occasionally happen), they become potential perfect spectators. The sacrificially disabled are deeply interested in their sport of choice, perhaps even nostalgic for it, and because they cannot play, they are even

more willing to pay to watch it being played. The sports industry not only gets product (athletes) from institutionalized sports, but also has its market developed for it free of charge. The harvesting of so many youths for the purpose of developing a sport that can only be watched is surely a sign of the love and sincere desire for the activity. However, it may be a more profound sign of the North American love for an ocular order of passivity.



Human sacrifice is a permanent feature of complex society. Regardless of how severe the order imposed on a society, some people will meet an untimely end in order to fulfill the demands of production/consumption. Regardless of how free a society is, some people will meet an untimely end due to desire's close association with death. Neither a perfectly regimented society nor a perfectly free one would escape the necessity of sacrifice, although the signs under which sacrifice functioned would vary tremendously. The question that must be asked is: if sacrifice is a cultural constant, which is preferable, sacrifice for the sake of individual autonomy, or sacrifice for a social order of rationalized overproduction? While the side of order offers the illusion of security and the reality of efficiency, the repressive conditions imposed by the state, and the mental persecution of persistently frustrated desire, make this selection the choice of cowards or of those who have control over the means of production, service and consumption. Sacrifice under such intensely rationalized con-

ditions happens much more frequently and effects greater numbers per sacrificial event. Further, the sacrificial victims tend to come from a pool that is determined by circumscribed social characteristics. Under this regime, we transform ourselves from autonomous humans into human automatons.

Hence, it would seem better to choose sacrifice for autonomy, and yet the choice is not perfectly clear. Such a preference would mean that programs of mass rationalized sacrifice (genocide) would be decreased, but that micro episodes of sacrifice (murder or accident) would not cease, and could possibly even increase. The idea that the state is the cause of all the world's trouble, and that if it were done away with the natural goodness of people would flourish — the traditional anarchist view — seems a bit naive. Although the troubles brought into the world by the state cannot even be exaggerated, grievous harm can also be worked through the free desiring agent. The egoistic nature of desire can bring about the very type of social catastrophe generally reserved for the state. In this manner, anarchy and fascism have had an ongoing flirtation with each other. In the name of liberated desire, great cruelty has been inflicted on people. For example, in North America, the household has historically been a free zone for the head of the household (and to a lesser extent for other household members). Relatively free from the tyranny of state surveillance, the household has also been a site of great social upheaval: all sorts of violence and abuse have occurred in this location. This disaster is doubled when one con-

siders that the victims of domestic violence tend to be women and children — victims of violence selected by ascription. For this reason, many “feminists” have opted to side with the state, calling for a more repressive society. Some would say (and this argument is reasonable) that the abusers are only expressing frustration and alienation caused by interaction with an exploitive political-economic structure, and that if state oppression were lessened, the occurrence of abuse in temporary free zones would also decrease. This too seems a reasonable possibility; however, a complete end to the violence seems unlikely. Fulfilling desire is not just a matter of empowerment, but also one of overpowering. For this reason, anarchists (using the word in its broadest sense) such as Nietzsche, Bataille, Sorel, and Bakunin at times became (or praised, in the case of Bataille) the authoritarians that they scorned.

On the psychological level, to choose liberation requires the participant to accept or at least cope with the abject. Much is asked of a person within secular society when s/he is told not to fear death, and to accept the fate of sacrifice should it come. Nor is it easy to accept the notion that violence (in the practical sense of the term) is not categorically evil, but that within certain contexts it can be empowering for all parties. Indeed, the decision is difficult, but CAE would still rather face the anarcho-fascist problem of slippage, and cope with the visibility of the abject, than live as an abstraction within the authoritarian yoke of efficiency under the vision of state-sponsored hyperreality.