

The French Revolution and Sacrificial Violence

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Introduction

One cannot study the history of political ideas without confronting the perennial question of how to legitimately establish a political regime. Machiavelli's affirmation that political instauration seems inevitably tainted by violence is particularly relevant as we reflect on the events surrounding the momentous inauguration of the French Republic, especially as we consider the apparent inconsistencies inherent to the use of violence in instituting the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality and the rights of citizens. A great paradox of the French Revolution is how it "unleashed violence that reflected ancient ideas about bloodshed," while simultaneously helping to "give rise to one of the first modern republics."¹ According to Jesse Goldhammer, author of *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*, the revolutionary leaders reached for an ancient conception of sacrifice as a way to channel violence into political power and legitimacy, eventually spiraling into an abysmal cycle of sacrificial violence that would not halt until the 1794 execution of Robespierre.

Searching for guidance in their efforts to eliminate the French monarchy, the revolutionaries "discovered that ancient sacrificial crimes appeared necessary for the successful founding of new political regimes."² This is not to say that they in any way systematized their conceptions of violence into theoretical claims concerning sacrifice, but rather that the Revolution gave rise to very evident sacrificial practices and interpretations, which would only later be formally studied and theorized by political philosophers and commentators. The reason for their recuperation of these early sacrificial ideas and rituals, as we shall see, was founded on the fact that, in their eyes, sacrificial violence appeared to possess strategic "moral and didactic properties"³ which they understood to be crucial for "converting a nation of royal subjects into republican citizens."⁴ In step with the research done by Goldhammer, and as I shall attempt to demonstrate in this essay, a careful historical study of the French Revolution will provide adequate evidence that a selective reading of ancient Roman and Christian notions of sacrifice profoundly influenced how the revolutionaries both conducted and interpreted substantial acts of violence, thereby facilitating the process of conferring legitimacy to political power and the setting of boundaries for political identity.⁵ I shall then offer an analysis and critique of the idea of sacrificial violence as forming the basis of political transformation, centered primarily on Goldhammer's exploration of French thinkers Joseph de Maistre, Georges Sorel and Georges Bataille, as well as on the thought of the more contemporary French intellectual René Girard.

Defining Sacrifice

Sacrifice, a subcategory of violence, may be defined as an act that "renders holy or sacred," and which entails a process of "setting apart from the quotidian or profane."⁶ It is a way to generate a sense of reverence and fear — a form of violence that can break and form distinctions and boundaries between people and historical eras. Accordingly, and understandably, this form of violence tends to emerge during periods of crisis, when the status quo is being challenged and predictability is being threatened. In the midst of growing ambiguity about such seemingly fixed concepts as "social status, religious affiliation and political allegiance,"⁷ sacrificial bloodshed seems to unite people in the collective projection and appeasement of their

anger, while also demarcating clear boundaries and legitimizing particular claims to authority. The way it does that is by invoking a communal awe-struck, passionate, reverent and frenzied sense of simultaneous attraction, repulsion, loss and purification (especially effective in a culture well-versed in ancient mythology and religion), which in French history has been simply called “sublimity.”⁸

To more clearly understand the power of sacrificial violence in evoking these great feelings and resolving them in a way that produces greater social cohesion, it is helpful to briefly consider some “sacred terms of exchange, such as catharsis, expiation, and redemption,”⁹ which French revolutionaries regularly used to describe the effects of sacrifice. According to Goldhammer, Catharsis, of Greek origin, refers to purification or cleansing, and used to describe the “purging of emotional tension through an aesthetic experience.”¹⁰ Expiation, he continues, from the Latin *expiō*, involves an exchange that makes amends for a moral wrong and the purification of that which is defiled — a kind of “sacrificial settling of accounts.”¹¹ The term “redemption,” in turn, also of Latin root, “refers to sacrifice in a religious and economic sense,”¹² both as an experience of being unburdened, or released by the substitution of one life for another, and as a transaction that “involves the purchase of collective innocence,” release from “the demands of a creditor, or, more specifically, the purchase of one’s military discharge.”¹³ Together, these notions of catharsis, expiation and redemption, “demonstrate the importance of violent exchange for the achievement of sacred effects,”¹⁴ such as purification, salvation and veneration.

Historical Origins of French Sacrificial Violence

The way the militants of the French Revolution enacted and interpreted acts of sacrificial violence were particularly influenced by Roman and Christian traditions of sacrificial activity which involved two kinds of sacrificial archetypes: the scapegoat and the martyr. From the Roman historical tradition, one that the French revolutionaries felt a special affinity for and connection to, they derived a “unique understanding of political scapegoats from the story of Junius Brutus,”¹⁵ who assumed a “mythic status in the revolutionary imagination because he killed his two traitorous sons” and exiled the previous monarch “in order to found the first Roman Republic.”¹⁶ Hailed as a model of republican virtue, his bust adorned the National Assembly and Convention, festivals were held in his honor, and the French would often substitute his name for their children’s birth names.¹⁷

His descendent, Marcus Brutus, would later commit a similar act of sacrificial violence by assassinating his friend Julius Caesar for the salvation of the republic. Both men were venerated and embraced by the revolutionaries not only for their “selfless” willingness to sacrifice those whom they loved for the sake of the greater good, but also for having recognized the sacred power of ritual sacrifice in the forging of a new order, or, in the case of the latter Brutus, the re-capturing of a previous order. Both cases involved acts of sacrificial violence so extraordinary, so “sublime,” that their contemporaries could no longer look at their political structures in the same way. The story of Junius Brutus, moreover, “culminates in the sacrificial resolution of ambiguous authority and identity.”¹⁸ Upon executing his sons, Brutus uses the scapegoat mechanism to vindicate his “political fatherhood”¹⁹ while exemplifying the “republican virtue”²⁰ of the subordination of private interest to the public good, an idea undoubtedly present in Rousseau’s conception of the social contract, which depended upon individual deference to the sovereignty of the general will. Besides teaching its French admirers about the sacrificial violence required in the forging of a new political order, the figure of Brutus also permitted them to take solace in the fact that “they were not the first republicans to dispose of a monarch violently.”²¹

The second archetype adopted (and adapted) by the revolutionaries is found in the Judeo-Christian narrative of sacrificial expiation. Centuries of French Catholicism provided them with the shared language and symbolism necessary for publicly adjusting the sacrificial image of the martyr to their revolutionary goals. “Christ’s crucifixion,” contends Goldhammer, “demonstrated how martyrdom transformed blood sacrifice into a redemptive experience that fostered the birth of a universal, transcendent community. Symbolic Christian sacrificial rites, such as baptism and Holy Communion, provided the French with an important frame of reference for their violent rituals.”²² Contrary to the Roman ideal of a calculated and prudent surrender of part of one’s interest, the Christian martyr represented absolute surrender of oneself for the purification and unification of a community. Jesus, the supreme witness (from which comes the Greek root of the word martyr), demonstrated to his own witnesses the virtue of absolute self-sacrifice for the sake of the *corpus mysticum* (mystical body), thereby providing an interpretative framework for the sacrificial violence of the revolution as benefitting the new body of the republic.²³ This new body, however,

contrary to the Catholic body of which the sacrificial Christ is the unquestioned head, and contrary to the French monarchy, made legitimate by the transferring of this divine authority to the sublime head of state, was instead to be instead a metaphorical “headless” body of citizens, whereby this shared emotional recognition of divine sovereignty would no longer point towards the head, but rather emanate from the fraternal body towards itself. This exchange of authority was, of course, a daunting task, and one in which the use of sacrificial symbolism seemed indispensable to the leaders of the Revolution.

Together, these two traditions, that of the Roman republican virtue of the stoic sacrifice of scapegoats, joined by that of the Christian sacrificial self-annihilation for the sake of the body, proved extremely useful for the revolutionaries in providing a psycho-social language for the interpretation of sacrificial violence as an instrument for conferring “sacred” legitimacy to the new political body, while concurrently unifying the people and setting boundaries between the old and new, and between the loyal and treasonous. Both traditions provide what Goldhammer calls “images of founding sacrifices,” namely “one who kills for the sake of a new political regime, and one who dies for the sake of a new spiritual community.”²⁴ Both traditions present “compelling images of political death: killing or dying for one’s political community.”²⁵ The story of Brutus illustrates how the ritual killing of sacrificial victims could foster the birth of a new republican regime, while Christianity provided the revolutionaries with “a framework for understanding how to offer their individual lives for the good of the whole nation.”²⁶

Sacrificial Violence in the French Revolution

It is imperative to note that at France’s very foundation the presence of Christian sacrificial themes and the transfer of authority is overwhelmingly evident. Clovis, who was to become the first French king, was the “hereditary pagan monarch of a Gallo-Roman territory stretching between Reims and Tours.”²⁷ His conversion to Catholicism, procured by his Christian wife, involved the rites of Mass and Baptism (both symbolically sacrificial), leading to the effective constitution of a “new source of authority and a new state entity, both embodied in the king.”²⁸ The enduring power of the sacrificial origin of the French monarchy can be clearly observed in the revolutionaries’ intentional defilement of the royal tombs in the Abbey of Saint-Denis. They in fact vandalized and desecrated the abbey on many occasions during the revolution, demonstrating an urgency to neutralize the sacred power of that gravesite, which had been originally itself consecrated by sacrificial violence, as well as, paradoxically, symbolically assuming that very power for themselves. The very “success of the legal abolition of royalty depended upon the elimination of its sacred authority.”²⁹ Naturally, as Goldhammer points out, “because French monarchical authority was born with Clovis’ conversion, (...) the French revolutionaries could not depend upon the church to sanctify their political aspirations.”³⁰ For this reason they felt the pressing need to somehow replace the popular religion with “an equally sacred, civil religion.”³¹

The first noteworthy instance of sacrificial violence in the French Revolution transpired in the summer of 1792, when collective anxiety and ambiguity about the legitimacy of popular sovereignty was pervasive. The National Assembly, though having obtained the power to legislate under the Constitution of 1791, continued to share sovereignty with the king, who maintained the power of veto.³² Outraged at the king’s vetoing of three Assembly decrees, a violent insurrection erupted on August 10, 1792, that targeted specific victims whose deaths would “highlight the awesome power of the people,”³³ thereby helping to resolve the ambiguity of political authority. The sacrificial nature of this episode can be appreciated by noting that the attacks were specifically directed against monarchical scapegoats, thus demonstrating a “vivid power of exchange, whereby the revolutionaries imagined that sacrificial victimization would permit them to assume the king’s sacred power and thus resolve the crisis of sovereignty.”³⁴

One of the most prominent victims of this uprising, an aristocratic journalist named François Louis Suleau, was sacrificially beheaded in lieu of resolving the “royalist/republican ambiguity.”³⁵ Displaying the conscious use of sacrificial language and symbolism from the very beginning, a French periodical described the scene, two days later, thusly: “The indignant people wanted them [Suleau et al.] to be delivered to their vengeance. The four alone, including M. Suleau and a priest, were sacrificed, and their heads carried on the end of a pike.”³⁶ The use of decapitation is of special importance because the French had traditionally understood the king as the head and the people as the body of French society. As a member of the aristocracy and a monarchist, Suleau fulfilled his sacrificial role as a kind of “surrogate for the king.”³⁷ Placing his decapitated head on a pike and parading it around “the seat of popular sovereignty, the Manège,” the revolutionaries enacted the “inversion of the flow of monarchical power,”³⁸ forcefully rejecting

royal authority and proudly claiming for themselves the prerogative of governance. In the words of Goldhammer, "Suleau's head, a sacrificial substitute for the "head" of state, belonged to the people."³⁹

This same kind of sacrificial violence is exemplified, in the same August insurrection, by the merciless massacre of about 900 of the king's Swiss Guards. "Unable to vent their violence upon its intended object ... the revolutionaries chose victims who best symbolized the sovereign power of the king and whose deaths would serve to unify the people."⁴⁰ This particular effect is demonstrated by reports that the abrupt and ferocious violence towards the Swiss Guard was accompanied by cries of *Vive la nation*, certainly a conscious replacement for the common *Vive le roi*. A 19th century French historian, Loius Mortimer-Ternaux, reports that "the Swiss were cut into pieces" while prostitutes "performed indecent acts on the bodies" of the dead inside the queen's bedroom.⁴¹ Granier de Cassagnac, another historian, depicts, in what is a grotesque display of sacrificial exchange, "scenes of revolutionaries eating the raw and roasted flesh of the Swiss, including a vivid account of one Arthur who consumed a fresh heart placed in a flaming glass of eau de vie."⁴² So great was their rage on that occasion that they reportedly started killing dogs when they ran out of people.⁴³ Similar to Brutus' sons, "whose deaths conferred [him] political legitimacy," monarchist scapegoats substituted for the king, allowing for a "dramatic, violent exchange whereby French citizens came to believe that sacrifice would permit them to appropriate the king's divine power."⁴⁴ Louis XVI, as a result of these events, was forced to abdicate, effectively ending more than a thousand years of French monarchy.⁴⁵

Apart from providing the revolutionaries with imagery that helped them "appropriate the sublime, sacred traditions"⁴⁶ of the past for their own purposes, these drastic abandonments of death taboos "served to clothe popular vengeance with majesty, allowing the will of the people to attain the same quality of fear and respect as that of Louis XVI."⁴⁷ This outcome was similarly achieved in the September Massacres, less than a month after the insurrection, when small groups of French revolutionaries broke into Parisian jails and slaughtered more than 1,000 prisoners, this time displaying the "punitive function of sacrifice."⁴⁸ This violence, rather than contesting monarchical power as on the insurrection, served instead to essentially guard, or preserve, growing republican influence and authority. "In this respect," concludes Goldhammer, "the September Massacres are akin to torture practices under the Old Regime, which were used to enforce divine right."⁴⁹ The implication, then, is that the revolutionaries "recognized the Republic's legality as well as their 'right' to play the same sacrificial role as the king's executioner."⁵⁰ It is telling that the massacre took place on the very day that Verdun fell to the Prussians, as it served as an indication of the people's desire to purge their society from the possible "contamination" of "impure" royalists, anti-revolutionaries and petty criminals, who all represented, in the words of a French journalist of the time, "the scoundrels who pollute the earth."⁵¹ The result of this impulse, of course, was violence very similar to that of the insurrection, including the presence of cannibalism and "festivals of carnage," as well as "violent, drunk men mixing blood and wine,"⁵² save the distinction that, in this case, victims were actually exposed to mock judicial proceedings before being subjected to their punitive sacrifice.⁵³

The regicide of Louis XVI was, of course, the most important sacrifice of the French Revolution, seeing as he effectively represented both God and the French society itself. More than the mere assassination of a king, which would not have had the same sacrificial effect for the revolutionaries, Louis was tried for treason and executed at the guillotine — a very sacred act that demarcated the violent founding of the French Republic.⁵⁴ "On January 21, 1793," affirms Goldhammer, "when the new nation sacrificed the embodiment of the old, it mounted a successful challenge to this divine authority through a violent process of sacred exchange."⁵⁵ The social and psychological trauma and disorientation caused by this assassination of the French populace's quintessential "father" has been argued to be one of the leading underlying motives for the Terror later unleashed.⁵⁶ Louis, himself aware of the sacrificial significance of the moment, participated in his own martyrdom by exclaiming, moments before his execution, "Frenchmen, you see your king ready to die for you. May my blood cement your happiness. I die innocent of all of which I am accused."⁵⁷ "Despite the king's effort to be a martyr," continues the author, "the French monarchy ended precisely the way it began: by baptism. The French became royal subjects when Clovis was baptized with holy water; they became republican citizens when they baptized themselves in the king's blood. Like holy water, the king's blood was sacred."⁵⁸ Robespierre himself recognized the sacred power of the regicide in establishing authority and consolidating identity when he stated that the sacrifice had "dismayed the aristocracy, destroyed royalist superstition, and created the republic," while also imparting "tremendous character to the National Convention" and rendering it "worthy of the confidence of the French people."⁵⁹

Shortly after the death of Louis began the infamous Reign of Terror — the most severe stage of sacrificial bloodshed, also marking the "first time in history that the practice of sacrificial violence became formalized and routine."⁶⁰ The Terror, of course still associated with notions such as secret police, social paralysis,

paranoia, excessive violence and unchecked state power, involved the public execution of those perceived to be enemies of the revolution, in “an effort to purify the newly founded republic.”⁶¹ In step with the sacrificial themes of purging and cleansing, Camille Desmoulins sustains that “with every passing year the national representation grows purer.”⁶² The Terror, contends Goldhammer, “legalized sacrifice in order to regenerate the sacred basis of state legitimacy, which originated during the regicide.”⁶³ Despite this attempt, however, evidence suggests that the Terror produced precisely the opposite effect, soon being perceived with repulsive negativity as the Republic’s “greatest source of contamination.”⁶⁴

Republican dictatorship at last came to an end, as did years of unremitting sacrificial violence, on the famous Ninth of Thermidor, Year II (1794), when the second and final “regicide” of the French Revolution took place with the execution of Maximillian Robespierre, thus resolving the political ambiguity created when the king lost his head and the Terror was unleashed.⁶⁵ Goldhammer informs us that “as Robespierre became increasingly obsessed with his own death, he articulated the quintessential republican founder’s fantasy: to die for the people... [as a] revolutionary martyr, immortalized for eternity.”⁶⁶ It is ironic, as he points out, that “Robespierre hoped that martyrdom would grant him immortality, a distinction that he desperately wanted to forbid the king.”⁶⁷ In the same way that the people denied Louis XVI his innocence, however, it would also ultimately be denied to their republican leader, who in their eyes also became a paradigmatic scapegoat, “blamed for everything wrong with the Revolution.”⁶⁸ “In essence,” concludes Goldhammer, “Louis was the scapegoat of an aristocratic society in the throes of a social and political revolution. In contrast, Robespierre was the scapegoat of a republic seeking to reaffirm the principles of its recent birth.”⁶⁹ Robespierre himself, in a letter to his sister just months before his death, poetically expressed his condition in this way:

The sole torment of the just, at his last hour,
And the only one that will tear me apart,
It is to see, while dying, the pale and somber desire
To distill shame and infamy on my brow,
To die for the people and yet be abhorred for it.⁷⁰

Analysis and Critique

Goldhammer’s insistence, in agreement with a number of earlier French thinkers, on a conscious presence of the sacrificial motif in the events of the French Revolution has certainly not gone without contention. Critics of his scholarship have accused him of a biased reading of history that unconvincingly seeks to conform the facts to his sacrificial interpretations.⁷¹ One critical suggestion is that instead of the conscious invocation of sacrificial imagery, “the revolutionaries, who shared the same cultural and symbolic universe as their adversaries, used these concepts and rhetoric specifically in order to blaspheme, mock, insult, and provoke their enemies,”⁷² as exemplified by their reference to the executions by guillotine as the “Red Mass” or by their desecration of the royal tombs.⁷³ “The idea,” the critique continues, “that Louis’ execution would constitute the foundational act of the French Republic does not – certainly in the absence of more persuasive evidence – imply anything more dark and mysterious (and anything *less* urgent) than the need to eliminate decisively and forever a rival principle of sovereignty that was instantiated in the person of the king.”⁷⁴ This line of reasoning seems, to me, less convincing than Goldhammer’s own detailed and well-founded argument, considering, for example, the author’s own affirmation in his introductory chapter that “there was no revolutionary theory of sacrifice,” but “only sacrificial practices and interpretations.”⁷⁵ These practices and interpretations, I contend, are compellingly evidenced by the utter abundance of very obvious sacrificial imagery, language and acts that are explored by the scholar, a small sample of which I have briefly presented in the preceding pages.

Assuming, however, that one is in sympathetic to Goldhammer’s contentions, the question quickly surfaces in respect to the morality and, indeed, the effectiveness of this appropriation of sacrificial language and behavior in the forging of new political orders. As the author contends, “a ‘uniquely French debate over the role of sacrifice in the task of modern political foundation’ (p. 1) originated with the French Revolution,”⁷⁶ only receiving “theoretical formulation at the hands of the Catholic arch-conservative Joseph de Maistre, who then was followed by Georges Sorel and Georges Bataille, with the latter’s thought standing, implicitly at any rate, as the culmination of the discourse.”⁷⁷ In spite of eventual disagreements, especially in the fields

of politics and morality, these thinkers all agreed, in opposition to the revolutionaries, "albeit for different reasons, that sacrificial violence is incompatible with the task of creating political novelty."⁷⁸

Joseph De Maistre, a Catholic royalist and vocal critic of the Revolution, strikingly transformed the sacrificial language of the revolutionaries into a "counterrevolutionary manifesto," by contending that "the purpose of revolutionary violence was to regenerate the morality of the French people, leading them from republican sin to monarchist salvation."⁷⁹ Ultimately, contends Maistre, sacrificial violence may result in moral and political renewal but not political foundation, something that can only be effected by God. "Maistre argues that revolutionary violence achieves moral restoration only when it is an expression of divine punishment."⁸⁰ His ultimate response to the revolutionaries is that "lasting, legitimate sovereignty always begins through miraculous political creation," as "human beings cannot make politics; they can, however, regenerate decadent politics by spilling blood."⁸¹ Furthermore, while Maistre is adamant in his hatred of sacrificial scapegoating, he "continues to celebrate the value of self-sacrifice—both real and symbolic—for the perpetuation of monarchism and Catholicism,"⁸² thus creating a distinction between "good" and "bad" instances of sacrificial violence. Goldhammer sharply criticizes this view, accusing it of being inconsistent and continuing to inspire sacrificial bloodshed instead of tempering it.⁸³

A similar kind of critique is then directed by Goldhammer at the Marxist intellectual Georges Sorel, whose most prominent works were published in the early years of the 20th century. Sorel construed the Terror as an authoritarian state instrument against the people, while admitting that some form of violence would always be a necessary component of class struggle.⁸⁴ The thinker, in his anarcho-syndicalist phase, justifies proletarian sacrificial martyrdom for the way it can "steel the will of the workers and alert society to their plight."⁸⁵ He in fact posited an ideal of limited violence which took the form of "the worker's martyrdom, the self-sacrifice of the few," which, as "sublime bloodshed might regenerate morality, but without the terror anticipated by the French Revolutionaries and Maistre."⁸⁶

The last thinker to be considered by Goldhammer, Georges Bataille, in contrast with the previous authors, refused to ascribe any creative capacity to sacrificial violence. He turns to sacrifice, instead, not to establish political community, but to dispute the very legitimacy of the modern political project.⁸⁷ Rather than marking the beginning of something new, according to Bataille sacrificial violence produces only ruptures and damages, facilitating only the formation of a community built around loss, left in a "violent and ecstatic state of permanent alternation between purity and impurity."⁸⁸ He further argues that "erotic and textual self-loss will undo the bourgeois self and thus allow for the forging of new, metapolitical community whose 'foundation' remains permanently destabilized."⁸⁹ Mostly in agreement with Bataille, Goldhammer nevertheless offers the criticism that for the author community seems to begin "with the violation of the limits that make politics possible, and, tragically, it must exist in a permanent state of violation."⁹⁰

Ultimately, for Goldhammer, each of the authors discussed, though thinking about sacrifice in very distinct ways, "places a version of sacrificial violence in the service of modern political change and redemption... In this way, they tragically and ironically repeat in the realm of theory the same error unintentionally committed by the French Revolutionaries when they attempted to save the Republic through Terror."⁹¹ Goldhammer's conclusion, then, seems to suggest that attributing a political foundational role to sacrificial violence is bound to be destructive and, indeed, disastrous, in terms of the potential cycle of violence it may catalyze. Nonetheless, it does seem to be the case that in spite of the escalation of violence it promotes, acts of sacrificial violence and the use of sacrificial imagery paradoxically prove to be historically effective, though not always in the ways intended, in demarcating political power and communal identity.

The question of sacrificial violence, then, becomes a question of ethics, to which the more contemporary French thinker René Girard offers some insights. In one of his articles, the author notably states: "Our world both saves more victims than any previous world and kills more victims than any previous world. The 20th century not only had the greatest wars in human history, but it was the century of death camps, genocides, and nuclear weapons. And every day, it seems, new and even worse threats confront us (...). How can these two aspects characterize our world simultaneously?"⁹² By way of attempting to address this complex question, he notes that "the violence that is slowly undermined by the biblical demystification of sacrifice is sacrificial violence, in other words, the violence that "contains" violence and has long kept the worst forms of violence in check and, to a certain extent, still does. We are always in debt to sacrificial violence, therefore, and when we get rid of it in a great burst of self- righteous indignation against hypocrisy, it may be a worse violence that, unwittingly, we help unleash."⁹³ The modern world, then, according to this view, sees the co-existence of the old sacrificial victimization mechanism with what he understands as the uniquely

demystifying power of Christianity, which itself exposes the fact that sacrificial violence is directed towards an innocent victim.

In fact, for Girard, “the elimination of sacrificial violence is not simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’; it is an ambiguous and ambivalent progress in the struggle against violence, which may include regressive aspects if the human beings whom this violence restrained in the past become more violent as a result of this development.”⁹⁴ Consequently, “the peace that has been available to us until recently often rests on a sacrificial violence, which is no longer present in the form of blood sacrifice, of course, in this country, but in institutions such as the police, the American army, the superior American power, and the respect it still inspires throughout the world.”⁹⁵ “When one eliminates the violence of sacrifice,” he continues, “or even weakens it, one cannot avoid weakening the peaceful effects of this violence just as much as the violent aspects.”⁹⁶ Though unable to fully explore them or their implications in this paper, I believe Girard’s arguments to be most convincing, as he states explicitly what I think many people also believe, though sometimes half-consciously or secretly. I ultimately agree with the author in his conclusion that “the violence we would love to transfer to religion is really our own, and we must confront it directly. To turn religions into the scapegoats of our own violence can only backfire in the end.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

As I have attempted to demonstrate, echoing Goldhammer’s convincing argument, the powerful and prevalent language and imagery of sacrificial traditions found in ancient Roman and Christian narratives, “helped the revolutionaries to appropriate the sublime”⁹⁸ and the sacred for the purpose of cementing a new political order and clearly demarcating periods and identities. If their efforts were indeed successful or not in forging a lasting Republic, and whether they were in fact required or even ethical, is a conversation beyond the scope of this presentation. It does seem evident, however, that at least in regards to its profound effects in the French masses, sacrificial violence was not only very effective in bringing about the revolutionaries’ objectives, it was also extremely lasting – a point for which there might be no better illustration than the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, written during the period of Revolution, which in its refrain perfectly captures the enduring “importance of sacrifice for the revolutionary imagination”⁹⁹:

*To arms, citizens!
Form your battalions,
March on, march on!
May their impure blood
Water our fields.*¹⁰⁰

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