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Preliminary scientific report
UDC 316.253:316.32 Dirkem E.
DOI 10.7251/SOCEN1815109H
Accepted: 5th October, 2018

From Common Meal via Acéphale to Unsacrificeable

Abstract

In this article, the author introduces several approaches to the concept of sacrifice. It begins with the classic sociological approach of Émile Durkheim who in sacrifice remarks forming, strengthening and maintaining of a community. In his anthropological conception, Georges Bataille demonstrates that the production and accumulation of wealth are wrong moral principles and suggests a new moral practice of giving oneself without asking anything in return, which represents the only way to realize a society of equals. Such a society, in which there would be no leader or a singular sovereignty, he calls Acéphale. For Jean-Luc Nancy, sacrifice is impossible. Starting from a standpoint that the Being is nothing and that there is nothing except this worldly plurality, Nancy considers sacrifice impossible since there is no higher principle for which the sacrifice would be performed. Beside the standpoints of the above-mentioned theoreticians, this article also offers a theory of discipline and sacrifice for achieving a socially expected perfect appearance. In all the mentioned theories, non-classic dimension of sacrifice is demonstrated. In them sacrifice is performed as activity for achieving social unity, greater equality, socially expected appearance and it is also presented as something impossible.

Keywords: *sacrifice; Acéphale; Jean-Luc Nancy; ideal body; Georges Bataille; Émile Durkheim; sovereignty; headless community; inoperative community; unsacrificeable;*

From the outset of the cultural history, sacrifice has been a practice accompanying humankind. First religious cults were denoted by cultural practices of sacrifice to a greater principle with the intention to pacify Gods or

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to accomplish a sort of balance with the universe. Many sociologists and anthropologists dedicated a great deal of attention to this complex topic, finding in this phenomenon a foundation for forming social relations and structure. What a number of social theorists have perceived in this act was a social action, that is, they understood the act of sacrifice as a way through which individuals entered into social relations and a means by which members of the community were held together. Throughout the history, many thinkers attempted to connect all religious practices, and thus practice of sacrifice as a sphere of religious action, with social reality and thus explain the role of religion, as a way of understanding the emergence and maintenance of society. Using the examples from several social theories, this article will explore the contribution of a sacrifice in order to maintain the community.

Durkheim and sacrifice as a social issue

Émile Durkheim was one of the first social theorists who in the phenomenon of religion perceived social reality, denoting religion as “social things” (Durkheim, 1995: 9). For Durkheim, religion was a way of organizing the society and a process through which a man enters into social relations. Considering religion is formed and realized in a community, all religious viewpoints and thus collective viewpoints. “Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate mental states of those groups” (Durkheim, 1995: 9).

Durkheim takes similar standpoints when writing about the process of sacrifice. Namely, for him, sacrifice is a common i.e. a collective matter, through which individuals are included into a society. Just as religion kept members of a community or a society together, so was the act of sacrifice supposed to maintain the social cohesion. For Durkheim, sacrifice fortified both unity with God and kin. (Mizruchi, 1998: 53) In his analyses of sacrifice, Durkheim somewhat followed William Robertson Smith, who noticed that sacrifice wasn't only a bestowal, but a meal taken in common in which believers and God participate together, by which a cohesion among the members of a community is achieved. Durkheim indicates that meal taken in common creates artificial kinship among participants. For him, in the bodies of the members of a community, meal taken in common produces a sort of “sameness”, replacing thus the absence of common origin.

“And since food constantly remakes the substance of the body, shared food can create the same effects as shared origin”. (Durkheim, 1995: 341) In other

words, sacrifice is not a renouncement of a worldly, own, and giving oneself to a higher being, but a meal of a community of believers and God. This is not an ordinary and everyday meal, but a meal with a symbolically sacrificial meaning. Animal/meal being eaten is prepared in a particular way in which religious criteria are respected, and thus the meal transforms into a religious – sacrificially denoted meal. This way, the rite itself gains a sacred meaning. In that act, members of a community strengthen the bonds among themselves, and by eating the same food they load their bodies with the same matter thus creating a false impression of a natural-genetic bond among them. Durkheim considers sacrifice one of the fundamental ways through which the existence of God is proven. Religion is, for Durkheim, a social matter, i.e. a way through which individuals unite into a community. The existence of religion makes the existence of the society possible, but also *vice versa* “it is man who makes his gods” (Durkheim, 1995:341), which tells us that there is an interdependence between gods and men. It is men who make their gods endure and it is through gods that they themselves endure. (Durkheim, 1995: 341). Sacrifice is an act through which a community is formed, but also a need for the other demonstrated. It not only demonstrates a community of men and God, but also men being social beings. “No doubt, the men could not live without the gods; but on the other hand, the gods would die if they were not worshipped.” (Durkheim, 1995: 350). Man and God exist for each other, which confirms the man’s need to address a sacred, confirming thus his own existence. For a more precise explanation that the concept of sacrifice doesn’t have to be dying for something else, Durkheim indicates the *intichiuma* practice practiced by an Aborigine Australian community, in particular, Arunta tribe. Namely, in this rite, the purpose is “to ensure the well-being of the animal or plant species that serves as the totem of the clan“ (Durkheim, 1995: 331). In the basis of *intichiuma*, life and material principle is given priority. Considering plants and animals are man’s kin, he is obliged to encourage and extend their lives. Blood, therefore, represents one of the fundamental elements of the *intichiuma* rite. Considering totems (plants and animals) are considered man’s kin, he shares blood with them and thus the blood represents the active principle of the rite. According to this custom, members of the Australian tribe let blood into the water in order to increase the fish yield, into the rocks to increase the yield of kangaroos. A sick person is being rubbed with blood, to return to life. (Durkheim, 1995: 332-335). *Intichiuma* practice indicates that sacrifice is not performed for the higher principles, but for the development itself. Letting blood from one body into the other means the exchange of fluids for the purpose of growth, development and keeping other beings – plants, animals, but also a man himself alive. Letting the blood has also a social function, because

giving the life to a plant or an animal as the totem of the tribe, keeps the community together and strengthens the bonds among its members, indicating the importance of the act of solidarity.

Acéphale – Bataille or headless community

French thinker, George Bataille, developed his theory of sacrifice following the similar track as Durkheim. In his analyses of community, he tried to renew Rousseau's theory of direct sovereignty but also to affirm Nietzsche's standpoint about giving priority to the principle of life over the principles of divine and spiritual. One of the main objects of his reflections was a theory of headless or *Acéphale* society. Namely, Bataille was a founder and a member of a secret organization named *Acéphale* which advocated the idea of the absent ruler. *Acéphale* was a community founded on the principle of rejecting reduction to one principle, emphasizing the importance of the plurality of sovereignty. The term *headlessness* denoted a metaphor by which the relevance of a human being, community and worldly life were affirmed, rejecting at the same time higher and spiritual principles and eventually the existence of God as the unique principle that rules the world.

"The only society full of life and force, the only free society, is the *bi- or polycephalic* society that gives the fundamental antagonisms of life a constant explosive outlet, but one limited to the richest forms. The duality or multiplicity of heads tends to achieve in the same movement the *acephalic* character of existence, because the very principle of the head is the reduction to unity, the *reduction* of the world to God." (Bataille, 1985: 199). Bataille explained the concept of sacrifice through the process of consumption which, for him, represents the only correct practice and the best solution for the world governed by restrictions. The accumulation of capital creates a world in which it is important to own and in which social classifications are created by means of money. As opposed to that, through consumption and unconditional giving social classifications and conflicts are prevented. With this, Bataille confronts the theory of exchange advocated by the classical anthropologist Marcel Mauss, according to which reciprocal (conditional) exchange represents a way of maintaining a society especially in the conditions where the political power is absent. (Eriksen, 2004: 17) Expenditure or unconditional giving is a sacrifice for the sake of improvement of relations between the members of a community. According to Bataille, a community is a community of equals who sacrifice themselves for its sake, because they are unconditionally sacrificing themselves for it. "For Bataille, societies should be based on the giving,

sharing and expenditure of wealth so that wealth cannot accumulate to create destructive social divisions, hierarchies and the military, industrial and State resources that enact these hierarchies” (Pawlet, 2016: xxi). For Bataille, sacrifice means being an equal member of a community by disowning the owned and giving or spending that property. He deems that only through unconditional expenditure one becomes equal with other members of a community. Just because in that act nothing is asked in return, sacrifice turns the man away from his dependence on commodity and material wealth and directs him towards another man. “Sacrifice is the movement of violent liberation from servility, the collapse of transcendence” (Land, 1992: xii). Due to saving him from transcendence, sacrifice makes a man human or in Nietzsche’s words, overman (*Übermensch*).

„To sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give.“ (Bataille, 1989: 49). Bataille thought that consumption and giving oneself connects people into a community. By giving oneself, by relinquishing what they own, people come into relation with each other. However, it is important to emphasize that, for Bataille, giving oneself doesn’t mean sacrificing for a greater ideal or principle. Giving oneself means self-sacrificing in order to communicate with others, and thus the community is created through consumption. The famous sentence, repeated through most of Jean-Luc Nancy’s works, considered to belong to Georges Bataille (although there are no precise data in which of Bataille’s works it was stated) and which explains his concept of community is “Community of those without community”. The sentence indicates that the property or ownership is the only problem in forming a community. A community is formed only when no one takes the right to it, but is created through sacrifice, i.e. by giving oneself. Therefore, Bataille claims that: “Consumption is the way in which *separate* beings communicate” (Bataille, 1988: 58).

Sacrifice for an Ideal body

In contemporary era, sacrifice ceases to be only the activity through which a balance between a mortal being and the eternal universe is established, instead it becomes related to our everyday and real life. In contemporary life, maintaining a healthy life becomes an excuse serving as a mask for realization of an ideal body appearance. Since in the modern times consumption and fashion gain an increasing importance so does the individual start to subjugate himself to the rules and discipline in order to realize a body the society expects. Body becomes an all the more important entity by means of which

subject's health condition is checked. The health is therefore maintained by regular trainings, going to fitness rooms, jogging, body building and eventually regular and healthy food, by means of which a healthy life/body is achieved. "Fitness, exercise and jogging are part of a new ascetism wherein personal deprivation is culturally recycled. California is home to the fitness boom, the triathlon and extreme sports, each of which idealizes the savage, punished, sacrificed body" (Giulianotti, 2004: 229). All these practices represent a new form of ritual, constantly repeating activities by which the body gives itself to the sacrificial logic by which it is sacrificed in order to achieve the appearance the standardized society expects. Already in the 19th century British culture body appearance and health become inseparable phenomena. "During the mid-19th century in Britain, sport became linked with the public school system's new regimen of the body, that is, health, diet, appearance, work and rest, and sexuality" (C. Cole, 2004: 213). In other words, body becomes a way of contemporary sacrificial activity by which one achieves what a society expects from the body.

Impossibility of sacrifice

In Nancy's theory, as in Bataille's, community represents one of the most relevant objects of considerations. In it, each object should be observed as a plurality and thus both the individual and the community represent an aggregation of constantly interchanging characteristics. In that sense, a community cannot be determined as an aggregation of individuals gathered around a common idea. On the contrary, because it consists of a plurality of individuals characterized by the constantly interchanging meanings and characteristics, community cannot be described as finite and absolute. Since it is a constant process of changing meanings, the distinctions and characteristics a community can be called inoperative. Regardless of nationalisms, ethnic divisions, separatisms, according to Nancy, the inoperative community is authentic community we live. This community consists of individuals characterized by the aggregation of constantly interchangeable and, most importantly, finite senses, and thus is finitude the fundamental definition of existence. "It is the community of finite human beings, and as such it is itself finite community". (Nancy, 1991: 26-27) Sense and essence of the existence cannot be reduced to God, idea and/or cause, since it has no eternal and unchangeable characteristics but is determined by constant interchanging of finite senses and characteristics.

When it comes to sacrifice, Nancy considers the entire history of humankind that of interchanging efforts to imitate one fundamental sacrifice. That way, sacrifice represents a relation towards higher principles, idea, God, something above the ordinariness of life with which a man needs to call a truce and establish order and harmony. While the old religions had their relation towards sacrifice, which was a “pure economy of exchange between man and divine powers” (Nancy, 2003:61), with the emergence of Christianity the relation towards this practice is changing. Here, Nancy gives examples of Socrates and Christ who do not sacrifice themselves for an ideal or community but through that practice they affirm themselves and their existence. For Nancy, the beginning of the new sacrifice, which can be called self-sacrifice, in the figures of Socrates and Christ is “institution of absolute economy of absolute subjectivity” and it can only “reappropriate or transappropriate itself infinitely” (Nancy, 2003: 62). In other words, the new sacrifice which appears with the Christianity becomes a relation of the sacrificed towards himself with the final outcome being affirmation of himself. The entire history of politics, especially totalitarian one, can be comprehended as the politics of sacrifice: by being in a community, an individual sacrifices himself for the state and the government.² By accepting the existence of a practice of sacrifice the image of the world is established as the one in which two principles which characterize the world, operate: eternity and changeability. Starting from Heidegger’s theory, Nancy realizes that the existence is finite and that it is denoted by the Being-towards-death. Through the relation towards death, the existence becomes self-purposive and not the instrument for realization of other higher goals. “‘existence is offered’, means finitude of existence” (Nancy, 2003; 74). In analyzing the concept of sacrifice Nancy departs from Heidegger’s understanding of Being, according to which “The essence of Dasein lies in its existence”, meaning that the essence is nowhere outside or beyond this world, but in the existence itself. For Nancy, this is unsustainable since the essence is not one, but a constantly changing plurality by which it can no longer be defined as the essence. Thus, existence has no relation towards the essence or Being, but is *offered*. Existence has no relation towards essence or anything spiritual or a higher cause, because it is material and plural. What does that mean in terms of sacrifice?

That means the existence is thrown into the world and that it happens and that it cannot be sacrificed because “nothing, no being, no subject, precedes its being thrown” (Nancy, 2003: 75). From this, it is clear that the existence

² Here, it is important to emphasize that for Nancy totalitarian politics is every politics in which there is no balanced relation between politics and the political. In Nancy’s wording, a community in which such a relation exists is called inoperative (unworked) community.

can only be understood as something offered to the world and to the God or the higher principle. Since it is plural, existence has the relation only towards the constant interchange of finite characteristics and senses. Outside the existence there is only Nothing which, according to Nancy, affirms the finitude (Nancy, 2003: 75). Inoperative community can be understood as non-totalitarian and thus non-sacrificing, because singular beings are finite beings and there is nothing before or after their lives and therefore they have nothing to sacrifice for.

At the End

Sacrifice is one of the ways in which the individual reconciles with the universe, however it is also the indicator that not only the communication between god and man exists, but that communication is the way of man's existence in the world. In this article several approaches to the concept of sacrifice were presented: classic sociological concept in which, on the example of Emile Durkheim, it could be noticed that sacrifice and any other form of religious practice is not acting towards God nor for some higher principles, instead it is a social activity, through which, among others, people integrate into a community. The same can be noticed in Bataille for whom sacrifice represents the practice of giving oneself (expenditure) for the sake of maintaining community. In both one can see that sacrifice has no spiritual outcome but is deeply related to the materiality of the world. Similar understanding is found in the modern socio-cultural analysis of sacrifice to achieve a perfect appearance, in which a man sacrifices himself to be an adequate member of a community. In Nancy, on the other hand, an impossibility of sacrifice is found, because community and plurality precede any form of giving oneself to a principle. Sacrifice indicates that the world is an inoperative (workless) community and people sacrifice themselves for it. In other words, if there is no higher principle sacrifice can thus be an activity of relinquishment for the sake of the other. Constant consumption without appropriation is relinquishment from the own to give to the other. If there is no God or essence existence has nothing to sacrifice itself for since there is no other in this exchange. In that sense, the characteristics of the existence can be understood to be the unsacrificeable, unsacrificeable for a higher principle or, maybe, sacrificial, but only for a man or this world.

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