

AIDS and Sacrifice: A Discussion of René Girard's Scapegoat Theory of Sacrifice, Jean-Luc Nancy's Unsacrificeable, and Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer

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Abstract: This paper seeks to build upon René Girard's scapegoat theory of sacrifice and group cohesion by considering post modern theories of sacrifice and society. It will explore the difficulty in applying a discourse of sacrifice when discussing contemporary political issues, or politically charged issues effecting minorities. By critically examining these theorists, I hope to distinguish between a religious theory of sacrifice and a modern theory explaining the relation of the 'post-political' subject to society and the state.

Introduction

The AIDS crisis is a global force, affecting people and communities worldwide. The historical trajectory of the AIDS crisis, specifically within the gay community of North America, has taken strange turns, hugely affecting peoples' lives and their understanding of the virus. Metaphors describing the virus have shifted to produce social fear and political action (defensive and offensive); these metaphors generate meaning used to target and exclude certain social groups. In René Girard's scapegoat theory of sacrifice we see how outbursts of mob violence on targeted individuals maintains and strengthens community solidarity while relieving social pressures. This essay uses Girard's theory as a starting point, eventually relating his scapegoat theory with other works also theorizing on matters of fluidity, danger, pollution, and abjection. Certain theories are contradictory to Girard's work, while others are complimentary; in both cases, they strengthen his theory by challenging it and adding to its breadth of possibilities. Subsequently, this essay will analyze Judith Butler's concept of the socially unintelligible and unmournable as it relates to AIDS and scapegoating in order to emphasize the political dimension of Girard's theory.

The second half of the essay will focus on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the unsacrificeable to consider the problems associated in applying Girard's theory to the modern west. In Nancy's work, sacrifice itself is sacrificed with the construction of the modern west: there is no remedy for traditional sacrifice. Although the psychosocial act of scapegoating exists within the historical trajectory of the North American AIDS crisis, it does not translate into the traditional understanding of sacrifice. Traditionally, sacrifice existed on a very different plain from what we observe today in North American society; human and animal rights, civil rights, and increased ethical awareness act as today's stabilizers. In more literal terms, if we were to imagine performing a traditional sacrifice in today's context, we would observe the eventual sacrifice of anyone belonging to minority or "misfit" social groups, such as individuals suffering from AIDS, and the final justification of the sacrifice would be that it maintains social cohesion. This, of course, is anathema. The idea of sacrifice in the west has been eradicated with the machinery of Auschwitz (the mass production of the mass grave), and the millions of deaths caused by AIDS. Both the scale and the ethical dimensions of these deaths have altered the concept and application of sacrifice, especially in the west.

The final section of the essay is a discussion of Giorgio Agamben's use of the roman category of *homo sacer* to understand the modern post-political subject. It will also examine Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* (2002), and Slavoj Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002), as they build upon Agamben's *homo sacer*. For Butler, the purpose of understanding the modern post-political subject is to renegotiate the boundaries of social intelligibility and avoid the exclusion or relegation of any individual to the status of *homo sacer* versus citizen. In contrast, Zizek stresses that all people in the post-political era are *homo sacer*, and the category of "state citizen" acts to conceal the new commonality of *homo sacer*. This helps distinguish a particular social complexity of AIDS: theories of scapegoating and mob violence exist in the same space as aid and charity. For example, Zizek understands *homo sacer* as someone who is all at once pitied, in need of charity (e.g. refugees, the homeless), and a victim of state violence (e.g. economic policies, war). Thus, it becomes clear that when applying Girard's scapegoat theory to Nancy's unsacrificeable and Agamben's *homo sacer*, the psychosocial scapegoat theory of sacrifice in the modern west is

no longer a theory of sacrifice; it is a secular theory of group cohesion and exclusion.

The Scapegoat, Pollution, and the Ungrieveable

Girard is confident his scapegoat theory is an account of the origin of religion. In a lecture he conducted on scapegoating in the ancient city of Catalhoyuk – the oldest and largest Neolithic city found to date – Girard presented wall paintings depicting a number of hunting scenes. These paintings proved for Girard that animal sacrifice, as a means to restoring balance within the community, existed as far back as 8000 years when Catalhoyuk still stood. The mob was illustrated with various injuries not necessarily related to the hunt, though most likely symbolizing conflict within the society. They engaged in crowding tactics to overwhelm the animal as their small obsidian daggers worked best at close range (long range weapons did not exist at the time). In the act of the hunt, any violence or tension existing within the community shifted to the animal (Girard 2009). In addition, the sheer size of the animal illustrated within the paintings reflects another point made in *Violent Origins*: the scapegoat is perceived as powerful, and as the victimizer of the community (Girard 1987, 91). A role reversal ensues where the justification of the mob murder authorizes the assault: the logic of the mob is “the logic of nonconscious scapegoating in its most brutal form” (Girard 1987, 85). The selection of the scapegoat is seemingly without reason, random, “nonconscious”. For example, when minorities are targeted as the cause of outbreaks of contagious disease (if social order and cohesion are threatened) the mob will kill, fully believing their target is a real threat (the manifestation of the scapegoat is nonconscious), and after-the-fact they will feel confident they acted justly in averting real danger:

The truth is that there never was a righteous community justly mobilized against a dangerous enemy; rather, there was an outbreak of food poisoning, perhaps, or some epidemic, or a panic caused by something else, or by nothing at all, which dissolved the community into a crazy mob. Then, like all mobs, this one turned to violence: the people picked the first available victim, the

likeliest scapegoat, the visiting stranger, but they never found out what really caused their violence; they believed in their own story too much (Girard 1987, 98).

The victim is then given a place in myth, either as a founder or an innovator, and is described as offering something sacred or novel. The victim is vindicated as much as the narrative allows the mob to emerge with a good reputation.

When compared to Susan Sontag's work, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, we observe the metaphor of AIDS as a "plague" inextricably linked to outsiders or foreigners. AIDS in America is linked to Africa, "the dark continent". In the East (the former Soviet Union and Africa) the "conspiracy theory" of the disease as being produced in a CIA lab in Maryland, U.S.A., remains one of the main origin stories of AIDS (Sontag 1989, 139-141). "[Plague]" is the principle metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood. And because of AIDS, the popular misidentification of cancer as an epidemic, even a plague, seems to be receding [written in 1989]: AIDS has banalized cancer" (Sontag 1989, 132). In North America, homosexuals are the main group blamed for the origin of the disease (first known or recorded international cases were homosexuals). Even though it is less common to talk about AIDS phobia today, it is not difficult to remember the link between homophobia and the fear of AIDS throughout the 1980's and 1990's.

In relating this part of the discussion to Girard's theory, we seem to encounter the "chicken or the egg" dilemma. What came first: homophobic exclusion or AIDS panic? Although this question is unanswerable, not to mention a distraction from the more important points, it does reflect the vast confusion underlying the AIDS crisis. In effect, AIDS panic increased homophobic exclusion and violence, while also shining the public spotlight on the gay subculture. With respect to the fear of disease and infection, Girard makes an interesting point: the question should not be whether there was an *original* plague or disease. There is a different kind of scapegoating at play here, one lacking random nonconscious outbursts. Girard writes about another kind of quest to find scapegoats: "A community that actively seeks and finds scapegoats is usually a community troubled by dissension or by some real or imaginary disaster" (Girard 1987, 103). The complexities of modern society force us to use this alternative method of scapegoating where we

seek to displace fears and tensions stemming from social problems onto specific victims.

In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes about the body, and more specifically she writes about bodily fluids and contamination. As Sontag argues, AIDS has a dual metaphor of invasion and contamination (Sontag 1989, 105). Grosz uses the Mary Douglas' concept of 'dirt' in *Purity and Danger*, Julia Kristeva's 'abject' outlined in *Powers and Horrors*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's 'viscous' in *Being and Nothingness*. For Douglas, dirt is matter out of place, destabilizing normative boundaries and acting to "befuddle order". Similar to Douglas' ideas of disrupting order, Kristeva theorizes three categories of abjection: abjection to food (the fear of bodily incorporation), abjection to waste (manifested in fear of death and the corpse), and abjection to signs of sexual difference (Grosz 1994, 192). Fluids are important for understanding contagion: "fluids attest to the permeability of the body": a kind of fear that the body will collapse into this other body (Grosz 1994, 193). Fluids blur the corporeal mapping of how we symbolically understand or construct our bodies (the imaginary limit of where our bodies begin and end). As for Sartre, the viscous represents a middle ground between solid and liquid (e.g.: a child who dips his hand in honey); it is sticky, gross, and difficult to clean off. According to Douglas, the viscous represents the *vagina dentata* (the horror of the feminine), or, as Sartre has said, it represents an overly possessive dog or mistress.

Seminal fluid does not contain the same sense of contagion or symbolic abjection associated with the viscous (female fluids: menstrual blood). In the public discourse on AIDS, this notion is especially relevant to anal sex; the blood from the penetrated anus represents more of a threat than the seminal fluids of the penetrator. The bodily fluids of men are not considered contaminating in the same manner as the bodily fluids of women. For example, education and AIDS issues have taught women to take on more responsibility in safe sex practices, as it is usually framed as a woman's health issue. According to Grosz, even though AIDS is traced throughout the gay community, from bisexuals to heterosexuals, "[men] seem to refuse to believe that their body fluids are the contaminants" (Grosz 1994, 197). And yet, paradoxically, the cleanliness of a woman is judged by the amount of men she has been in contact with – she is treated as a sort of sponge or

“conduit of other men’s dirt” (Grosz 1994, 197). Part of the problem lies in men fearing those aspects of sexuality dealing with feminine fluids, as well as their fear of being associated with fluidity. According to Grosz, this dilemma can be re-worked by understanding certain sexual practices of gay men (though, she is not stating gay sexuality is the ultimate paradigm, as exploitative and violent forms of gay sexuality also exist). Nonetheless, certain gay male practices construct a “conduit of flows”, which does not seek to cast off masculinity “as the transsexual does”, rather, it attempts to affirm it (Grosz 1994, 198). In referring to Douglas’ concept of dirt, one can observe the quick, almost panic-like act, of men washing and separating from the female body after intercourse. This could potentially represent the need to regain control as the separation of fluidity with male pleasure alienates men from their sexuality, replacing it with a type of sexual deviance: anonymous sex, violent sex, penis as a weapon (weapons constructed like penises) and violent sexual acts against children (Grosz 1994, 199). Grosz argues men must take “responsibility for and pleasure in” their bodily fluids, and accept the sexual specificity and limit of their bodies (Grosz 1994, 202). This is even more apparent in the debate to criminalize the non-disclosure of HIV/AIDS, as in the famous case out of Vancouver sparking the debate over criminalization in Canada. Two men who were the “tops” sought to charge the man who “bottomed” for not disclosing, even though protection was used and neither of the men contracted the disease. In closing, Grosz postulates that women (or the feminine) are considered the dangerous foreigners threatening the male body with contagion. As Sontag notes, “a polluting person is always wrong, as [Mary] Douglas has observed [but] the inverse is also true: a person judged to be wrong is regarded as, at least potentially, a source of pollution” (Sontag 1989, 136).

We can detect an important social problem when relating these theories to Girard’s theory on scapegoating: in many social systems sexuality is equated with deviance and considered a threat to social cohesion. When we consider theories on fluidity and female sexuality, as well as homosexuality, it would seem the easiest targets for scapegoating are women and gay men, as both groups wander outside the normative boundaries of a fiercely heterosexual male-centered social system. In referring to Sontag and the AIDS crisis, we observe sexuality emerging as the new “disease-spronged register of fear in which everyone

now lives” (Sontag 1989, 161). Traditional American morals are reinforced as these “deviant” populations of “threatening” sexualities are targeted as polluting and diseased. Thus, the mob murder is represented as indifference to the massive loss of lives from AIDS – the murder is indirect, or of the “third degree” – as people are often ignorant and fearful of what they do not understand, choosing instead to distance themselves from the issue and from those affected by AIDS. On numerous occasions, Larry Kramer, famous AIDS activist and founder of the very first AIDS organization, The Gay Man’s Health Crisis, stated that during the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic, President Ronald Regan’s “seven years of silence” helped create (or created) the AIDS crisis, as well as the misunderstanding and indifference that ensued:

It should therefore come as no surprise that when HIV came along they, this cabal, facilitated its rapid deployment and continues to do so. Before even making the feeblest attempt to commence any miniscule response or inquiry into what their press was not reporting, which they most certainly knew about themselves, they waited till masses of us had already been exposed to the whatever it was [sic]. We, on the other hand, chose to not believe that the whatever it was was a virus until this was incontestably proved [sic]. But they knew what it was, or were willing to take the chance and hope that it was, and they just sat back and waited. Their wildest dreams then started to come true. The faggots were disappearing and they were doing it to themselves! (Kramer 2005, 66).

We can conceive of the “dark event” (Girard defines it as the event of the collective murder) as the social inaction justified by traditional American morals and values, and the maintaining of the status quo. We can extend this argument to Judith Butler’s theory on the socially unintelligible and the ungrieveable, representing Butler’s earlier work on gender and queer theory (which bodies are socially intelligible and recognizable in relation to established conceptions of gender binaries), and her more recent work on war and violence (when is a life grieveable?), both of which we will consider at a later point.

Girard claims the collectively murdered victim is one who teaches a new art or technique to the community “or is somehow responsible for this innovation” (Girard 1987, 120). This can be applied to the new, more inclusive, concepts of gender and sexuality advocated by the gay community which, in their early beginnings, experienced a great deal of violence and animosity (with respect to AIDS and gay rights) from those “defending” convention. However, in the last few decades we have witnessed, and continue to witness, the emergence of a new status quo or understanding of human sexuality: “in all these instances, some great good befalls the culture as a result of some unanimous violence against someone viewed as the benefactor as well as the original malefactor” (Girard 1987, 120). Thus, a new understanding emerges within society as gay lifestyle alternatives are acknowledged, and eventually legitimized, as a normal part of society. This “journey” of something once ostracized becoming legitimized places AIDS within the modern sacrificial arena: AIDS becomes a sacrifice for greater freedom where the noble suffering of AIDS victims makes them martyrs for the cause. We will consider the problems with this particular outlook at a later point when we examine the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

Understanding AIDS as a sacrifice for greater freedom is a rather recent secular myth representing the founding of modern freedoms; however, it does not easily translate into Girard’s theory. As Butler notes in *Prekarious Life*, the socially unintelligible is also the unmournable. The names of those who die are unprintable. The obituary acts as a key component in nation-building. Those included within the obituaries become the primary signifiers of what counts as a valid life: “it is not just that a death is poorly marked, but that it is unmarkable” (Butler 2004, 35). Publicizing the names of individuals who died of AIDS, or individuals murdered because of their sexual orientation, is usually avoided within traditional American media due to the general public and mainstream media feeling distressed by the “awkward” or “offensive” circumstances surrounding the deaths: “What might be “offensive” about the public avowal of sorrow and loss, such that memorials would function as offensive speech?” (Butler 2004, 35). Around the time of Mathew Sheppard’s death, public discourse was unable to process the significance of the event. Certain subcultural media networks managed to inform the gay community about

Matthew Sheppard's murder; however, it was not until over a decade later, with the passing of the "Matthew Sheppard Act" in the United States hate crime legislation that his name would enter into public discourse. Thus, the collective murder is eventually memorialized within myth, or becomes its own myth. With respect to those who died of AIDS, various progressive acts of remembering occur, for instance the AIDS quilt project raises awareness, compassion, and understanding for AIDS victims and their families, making it a normative national act of emblematic memory. In this manner, the AIDS panic and its related homophobia of the 1980's and 1990's is absorbed and transformed into a new national historical narrative.

Modernity, Christianity, and the Unsacrificeable

Thus far, we have examined scapegoating as a psychosocial process caused by fear of social disorder and bodily contamination. For Girard, its origins stem from mob violence in primitive society; mob violence placated social tensions and maintained order. Girard argues the origin of religion lies in this recurring event. Furthermore, this event represents a theory for sacrifice as the first form of religious (ritual) practice.

Girard's theory postulates the behaviour of people in early communities and their establishment of religion and myth. Although, his theory does not easily translate within the modern western world, nor does it coincide with the view of scapegoating prevalent throughout this essay. In the west, scapegoating must reconcile with modern secular mythical constructions, which deviate from the context of scapegoating in Girard's theory. In order to explain this deviation, we will examine the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, particularly his notion of the Unsacrificeable. Nancy argues sacrifice is an impossibility in the modern west, as the west was created out of "giving up" or "letting go" of sacrificial practices (Christ being the ultimate and final sacrifice). The complex layers that have shaped and defined the AIDS crisis are applied to Nancy's theory of the Unsacrificeable, as well as to Avital Ronell's ideas on the treatment of illness, suffering, and sacrifice in the west as it relates to the suffering of Christ.

For both Nancy and Girard, the sacrifices of both Socrates and Christ marked the sacrificing of sacrifice itself in

the west. The onto-theology essentially replaces sacrifice, yet it also points to the transformation of sacrifice – a metamorphosis – as sacrifice remains an underlying system within the theology of the crucifixion and the drinking of hemlock, though it transforms into a new reproduction (mimesis). It is not simply an evolution of sacrifice, it is a mimetic rupture: “the mimetic rupture of Western sacrifice (or, if you prefer *to* Western sacrifice...) suggests a *new* sacrifice, one distinguished by a number of characteristics” (Nancy 2003, 55). This rupture, or breakthrough from previous understandings, creates new characteristics to define sacrifice in the west. First, it is always self-sacrifice (as seen in both Socrates and Christ’s willingness to participate in their own deaths); second, it is done for all (seen as a universal act); third, sacrifice is the essence of all sacrifice (the virtue of its uniqueness is what elevates it to the very essence of sacrifice); and finally, “the truth of sacrifice *sublates*, along with “the flesh that perishes”, the sacrificial moment of sacrifice itself. And this is precisely why Western sacrifice is basically an overcoming of sacrifice, its dialectical and infinite overcoming” (Nancy 2003, 58). Within the context of the religious traditions of onto-theology, sacrifice only exists in its figurative form; it is related to the figures of Christ and Socrates. To consider sacrifice as anything else would be to justify or condone random acts of violence (e.g.: the debate between the use of ‘The Holocaust’ or ‘The Shoah’).

In examining sacrifice as it relates to the Holocaust, Nancy detects the self-sacrificing principle within the Nazi agenda in creating the Aryan vs. Jew sentiment. In Nazi Germany, the Aryan was depicted as self-sacrificing – the one willing to die for his race; “he is thus not merely one who sacrifices himself but is, in essence, sacrifice *itself*, sacrifice *as such*” (Nancy 2003, 70). In this sense, there is nothing to be sacrificed “he has only to eliminate what is not himself, what is not living sacrifice” by *acting* on behalf of Nazi ideology. Jews, on the other hand, were depicted as shamelessly self-preserving, not worthy of sacrifice as there was nothing to appropriate from them. Yet, what happened to the Jews was a sacrifice. It was also an uncontrolled act of violence that cannot be commemorated: “this is a glorious page of our history, never written and never to be written” (Himmler quoted in Nancy 2003, 70). It is a sacrifice that must also sacrifice any memorial; for the victims it is the most intolerable, while for the executioners “it is a matter of the

most silent, inner sacrifice” (Nancy 2003, 70). This shift describes the transformation of sacrifice in the west. For Nancy, it is the second rupture because it represents “the eclipse” of western sacrifice, that is, it represents an interruption of sacrifice: “in place of immolation there is no more immolation” (Nancy 2003, 71).

What the camps represent, then, is the sham of modern sacrifice; the “age of technology” is precisely the age when sacrifice ends:

‘... immolation, slaughter...’ We can no longer distinguish between them. Immolation has itself been put to death. ‘Godless,’ ‘sham’ sacrifice has forfeited all right and all dignity. Transgression transappropriates nothing. Or, rather, appropriating nothing more than the this: the victim as cadaver, the expanse of the mass grave, and the other (for whom the name of ‘executioner’ is hardly fitting) as a pure instrument in the mass production of the mass grave. As such the decomposition of sacrifice not only proves to be entirely possible thanks to technological means, but also declares itself an exemplary, hideously exemplary, figure of technology. This doesn’t necessarily involve a condemnation of the ‘technology.’ Quite the opposite. What is *hideously* exemplary here (that is, if I can put it this way, hideous in exemplary fashion) is that ‘technology’ is presented as the operation of a kind of sacrifice, or of the last secret of sacrifice, even though sacrifice decomposed within it (Nancy 2003, 72).

Nancy stresses that the economy of sacrifice has died in the west. It has “decomposed” along with the ending of the sacrificial operation itself, and was transformed by the technological apparatus of the “mass production of the mass grave” in the camps. Nothing is sacrificed in the process of sacrifice; existence – the essence of life – can either be destroyed or shared: “it will fall to us to say there is no “true” sacrifice, that real existence is unsacrificeable, that the truth of existence is to *be* unsacrificeable” (Nancy 2003, 77). This notion of “sacrificed to nothing” also relates to the AIDS quilt and the issue of emblematic memory. Dying of AIDS is a horribly painful thing (a social death that precedes the actual onslaught of physical

symptoms). Attempting to create social meaning through a concept of sacrifice demonstrates a total disregard for the complex and sensitive nature of AIDS issues, especially if one considers the tumultuous history of the AIDS crisis, and in many cases, society's deliberate alienation of AIDS victims. When AIDS education and charities spread the message: "they died so we don't have to", one can only be reminded of those who suffered, and continue to suffer, in large part from the lack of support for, and understanding of, AIDS in North America.

Avital Ronell's treatment of the ill and sick body is also applicable to what we know and say both about AIDS and modern sacrifice in the west. There are limits to the body, especially a body affected by illness; illness can limit our definition of ourselves and what we believe we can become. Illness can also be an unbelievably real traumatic experience: the "its-not-happening experience" *is* reality (Ronell 2002, 191). Ronell considers the experience of the body as a type of epistemological reference *without* meaning. More specifically, we are unaware of our bodies except under the piercing encounters of pain and mortification, or throughout the sensations of our youth. We become aware of our bodies only when under extreme instances of pleasure and pain (*jouissance*).

But is there an object to the revelations provoked by illness, is anything learned or understood. Or is not illness the stealth master, the teacher whose lessons are unremittingly vague yet purposeful ... Your body, localized to its place of pathology, reminds you of how it used to make itself invisible, a point or pulsation in the unconscious. When it was on your side, it carried you by leaving itself behind. Maybe you had cut your finger or banged your knee. A spider bite. Little things that would signal, as if by metonymy 'Honey! I'm Home! I'm your home.' Now your body prevails in a reproachful sort of way. And there is nothing for you to know (There are charts and medical histories, comparative analyses, information and data, prognosis and projections, all cognitive stammers in the face of illness). You understand yourself as dead meat, repeating the ancient cry of abandonment and knowing that this time, this time it's for real, you have been forsaken. Forget about getting past this (Ronell 2002, 181).

If pain provides a revelatory encounter with the body and the body simply *is* and *knows* without us being aware of what it *is* and what it *knows* (an experience that cannot be translated or interpreted without the use of metaphor: “it feels as though my head were splitting open”), then pain also exists “unjustifiably”. According to Ronell and Nancy, the “historicity of the wound” and “blood making sense” is a western Christian inheritance operating in our cultural imagination (Ronell 2002, 189). This is not to say other religions and cultures do not have theories that create meaning out of pain, but in western discourse this meaning-making always assumes a Christian element. Yet, “pain abhors meaning”, therefore, pain cannot be described; furthermore, this experience of the body cannot be transferred: “one can only bear witness and offer testimony” (Ronell 2002, 191). According to Ronell, then, it is not enough to simply consider the body an epistemological resource when forming a theory of sacrifice for AIDS; we must ask ourselves what validates and legitimizes our discourse of the body. Within Ronell’s work (influenced by Derrida’s postmodern deconstruction of texts) personal accounts and literature become the *only* tangible resource one can learn: medical accounts, though useful to doctors in the treatment of illness, cannot express the complexity of lived embodied experience. This is especially true of AIDS memoirs, which are key texts for constructing historical narratives that would otherwise be unavailable within the discourse of the general public. For example, the book, *Forbidden Passages*, is a collection of stories about AIDS in America banned throughout Canada in the 1980’s and early 1990’s due to their sexually explicit content.

Earlier I mentioned that our understanding of pain and illness is influenced by the Christian understanding of sacrifice and pain. Furthermore, the forsaken element of the ill body, which imitates “Christ in the Garden”, can relate the AIDS crisis to western sacrifice. This observation would precede Nancy’s idea of the second rupture occurring in the concentration camps, since Nancy describes the second rupture as the death of sacrifice. For Ronell, however, the inherited or remnant Christian meaning of pain continues to create the body as sacrificeable, that is, “the residue of sacrificeability is due in part to [the body retaining and persisting in making sense]”; although pain abhors meaning, the crashing down of pain on the body creates a sudden

resurgence of being: “I’m not well, I’m in trouble, [but, or] therefore I am” (Ronell 2002, 188 and 190). However, Ronell and Nancy both agree the sacrificed bodies are sacrificed to nothing, and the wound is simply a wound. Both the wound and the sacrifice were despiritualized following the rupture of the camps. We can no longer interpret the religious significance of sacrifice as pious people once did; we must now apply a reductionist ideology that locates the purpose of the sacrificial body in the political: the number (quantity) of those who died and how they can serve political purposes. In this way, to speak of those who died of AIDS (like those who died in the camps) in terms of sacrifice is inappropriate because it is a way to further political means.

Keeping in mind what we discussed so far, it is clear we cannot label the atrocities of the concentration camps, or the tragic and unjust circumstances of AIDS victims, as examples of the traditional Girardian scapegoat theory. There are key elements of Girard’s theory missing within these particular cases. For example, they are not, and were not, unconscious acts of mob violence – both groups were consciously targeted by society at large. Girard’s theory is certainly appropriate for describing the origins of sacrifice, though the complex historical underpinnings of the modern west make it impossible to say that the targeted Jews of Europe in the mid-twentieth century, or the targeted homosexuals of the 1980’s, were sacrifices performed to maintain social cohesion. This is not to say that these groups are not, and were not, considered scapegoats in the most general sense of the term. What it demonstrates is the lack of correlation between these groups and Girard’s scapegoat theory. The mass grave sites of the concentration camps and the millions of fabric panels of the AIDS quilt project represent objects bereft of trickle-down-symbolism – they represent breakthroughs ushering in possibilities of new political understandings. Of course, one could argue the religious is political. Perhaps the possibility of new political understandings also represents some new form of religious or sacrificial understanding. However, this essay does not refer to modern notions of religion and sacrifice. It refers to a very formal understanding of them. Although I do not wish to create a binary between the religious and the political, I argue that to give these events a religious (or higher) meaning lessens the hideous reality of the events themselves. There are, however, certain aspects of Girard’s theory that still apply: these events of

mass collective violence become secularly mythologized through the creation of a new political understanding. For example, following The Holocaust was the Declaration of Human Rights and the founding of the state of Israel. The effects of the AIDS crisis on the gay community created a need to educate the general public, which encouraged understanding, awareness, and the need for gay rights – these events created the political will for change. With this in mind, they do represent certain elements of Girard's theory of sacrifice. However, if we consider Nancy's theory of the historicity of sacrifice, it would be inaccurate and grossly inappropriate to apply the term sacrifice to the AIDS crisis and to the persecution of Jews during the Second World War.

Homo Sacer: Killed but not Sacrificed

Earlier we examined the works of Jean-Luc Nancy and Avital Ronell, both examining the notion of being sacrificed for nothing. Giorgio Agamben's reworking of the roman category of *homo sacer* encourages a more in depth understanding of this idea of being sacrificed for nothing. In ancient Rome, transgressing the law or erring from appropriate citizenship meant one was consigned the social status of *homo sacer* (literal meaning: sacred person), which justified their killing, though the killing was not regarded as a sacrifice. According to Agamben, the reason for this is rooted in two concepts: the rule of exclusion where the sovereign is not subject to its own laws, and Foucault's notions of biopower or biopolitics, which represents controlling life, or more accurately, controlling people through the positive production of subjectivity and discourses on life and health. In light of these concepts, Hannah Arendt's description of the concentration camps comes to symbolize the way citizenship was stripped from Jews. In the same manner, Agamben notes the fear of being labelled as *der Musselmann* (the Muslim). According to Arendt, the emergence of the totalitarian state can at any point strip citizenship from individuals; the stripping of citizenship represents a negative prohibition against characters and actions in totalitarianism. Agamben takes this one step further with Foucault's notion of biopolitics. With respect to the positive production of subjects and biopower (characteristic of democracy), Agamben argues

that all citizens are now relegated to the status of *homo sacer*, thus losing the status of citizen, and becoming the non-citizen whose killing can be justified. Agamben defines the sacred person as someone who can be killed but not sacrificed – a paradox operating in the view that people reduced to mere biological life have no political significance (characteristic of the post-political world).

In her book, *Antigone's Claim*, Judith Butler argues we must expand the notion of citizen by broadening what is socially intelligible, that is, renegotiating the limits of social intelligibility to encompass those relegated to the status of *homo sacer*. However, in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek claims this is impossible as Agamben argues everyone is relegated to the status of *homo sacer*; therefore, it is not a question of who is, and who is not, a citizen. Citizenship is the secondary characteristic of biopower that comes to cover the new universal commonality of all human life as *homo sacer*:

What if the true problem is not the fragile status of the excluded but, rather, the fact that, on the most elementary level, we are *all* 'excluded' in the sense that our most elementary, 'zero' position is that of an object of biopolitics, and that possible political and citizenship rights are given to us as a secondary gesture, in accordance with biopolitical strategic considerations? (Žižek 2002, 95).

The post-political represents the closing together of the political subject and the mere biological person so there is no longer the possibility of political action where the liberal democratic project represents the Hegelian "end of history" (as proposed by Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Berlin Wall).

The significance of this concept as it relates to AIDS is that medical discourses on health and life (which represent key themes of biopolitical control) function to stave off subversive life alternatives. In this sense, the famous historical gay statement "before the AIDS crisis no self respecting gay man would practice monogamy" perfectly reflects the nature of biopolitics. If we examine this through Hegelian dialectics, the *thesis* of heterosexual monogamy is challenged by the *antithesis* of gay sexual subculture, and sublates into the *synthesis* of gay marriage. The radical nature of the antithesis is sublated into the

synthesis, yet the function of biopower also serves to limit this radicalism. In *No Future*, queer theorist Lee Edelman demonstrates how the figure of the child enters into the picture to secure future policy and state legislation. He quotes sex columnist Dan Savage's recent statements on gay marriage: "gay parents are not only making a commitment to our political future, but to the future, period... and many of us have decided we want to fill our time with something more meaningful than sit-ups, circuit parties and designer drugs" (Savage quoted in Edelman 2004, 75). Sit-ups and circuit parties represent the antithesis. This antithesis is further marginalized as a legitimate life choice because of AIDS paranoia, and the reproductive norm appropriated by the new gay married couple becomes the new status quo.

The image of *homo sacer* demonstrates the ambivalent attitude of the state and populace toward the lives of all individuals, especially those belonging to the gay community. "[Perhaps] the ultimate treatment of the "local population" as *homo sacer* is that of the American war plane flying above Afghanistan – one is never sure what it will drop, bombs or food parcels" (Zizek 2002, 94). In the past few years we have seen the establishment and acknowledgment of the institution of gay marriage in Canada. We also see the effort to ban gay organ donation, and sustained laws against homosexuals donating blood. During the earlier years of the AIDS crisis in the United States, there was a total lack of concern for the lives of gay men, but by the 1990's we observed programs for free drugs and a decrease in FDA approval time for new retroviral drugs. Although these examples were only made possible through a great deal of social and political activity, the fluctuating acceptance and resistance of the state to these demands demonstrates their ambivalence towards both gay people and the general public. While new AIDS drug legislation was being passed, Bill Clinton passed the "don't ask don't tell" military policy. Meanwhile, private sector voluntarism (contemporary NGO culture) fills the growing lack of state care for its citizens. In a recent Oprah Winfrey show honouring "heroes of the financial crisis", Oprah features individuals who initiated programs within their communities to purchase foreclosed homes and offer free clinics. It was shocking and upsetting to see this display without any sort of political critique, as if to say it is not the job of private citizens to fix such problems. Such actions

(and messages) create a buffer between citizens and political activism (e.g.: professionalization of activism in the form of the NGO). According to Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, the NGO represents a recoding and re-territorialization of the United States doctrine of Manifest Destiny; the organizations help further foreign and domestic policies of the modern repressive state. The structure of the NGO and other charitable networks clean up the mess of state exclusion and violence (caused by the economic policies of the state), while in the twenty-first century the state becomes the key institution representing total unaccountability.

Conclusion

Scapegoating appears as a political process in the current secular-political context of North America, and is not the sacrificial process outlined by René Girard. It is not meant to target a random group of people in order to maintain social cohesion; instead, it limits social change by maintaining the status quo and controlling those individuals refusing (or accused of refusing) to follow convention or social norms. Jean-Luc Nancy and Avital Ronell argue that the term sacrifice cannot be used in the modern west without contradictions and inconsistencies, as we have moved away from traditional (formal) acts of sacrifice. The term is merely a figurative remnant of religion, only serving to represent certain aspects of the modern period, particularly self-sacrifice and modern appropriations of religious suffering. Furthermore, the figure of *homo sacer* represents a more nuanced and applicable term than “sacrificed scapegoat”, as the state is less an agent of redistribution and more an agent of repression in its biopolitical control of subjects.

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