

# Sacrifice as a Political Problem: Jan Patočka and Sacred Sociology

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**ABSTRACT.** The question arising from this article regards the meaning of sacrifice within the frame of Jan Patočka's philosophy. Is human sacrifice aimed at reinforcing an institution or state of things as in the case of the Unknown Soldier narrative, or is it rather – as Patočka maintained – an essentially destabilizing deed, which has the power to shatter people's knowledge and existence? In order to answer this question, I contrast Patočka's standpoint with those of Émile Durkheim and of the main representatives of the so-called "sacred sociology": Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille and other members of the Collège de sociologie. In conclusion, I show how Patočka's approach to the theme of sacrifice helps to understand whether and how a "proper sacrifice" can actually become an instrument of political dissent within human societies.

**KEYWORDS.** Sacrifice; Sacred Sociology; Political Dissent; Jan Patočka.

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Among the keywords that characterize Jan Patočka's later work, "sacrifice" is one of the most important and widely discussed. Although Patočka never dedicated a detailed investigation to this concept, the many references to sacrifice in some of his most celebrated works from the 1970s<sup>1</sup> became the object of thorough analyses from various commentators.<sup>2</sup>

During a discussion with his students that followed one of his later seminars, Patočka makes a distinction between what he called a "proper", authentic sacrifice, and what on the contrary represents for him an "improper", misused notion of sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> For Patočka, a proper sacrifice is a fundamentally destabilizing deed, which has the power to shatter people's knowledge and existence. By sacrificing themselves, humans realize a sort of "counter-performance" insofar as they do not achieve any specific purpose or advantageous outcome. Rather, by accomplishing this deed they reach «the extreme limit that the historical situation dictates to them, and that [they] have to accept».<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, a sacrifice is improper when it is intended to generate a profitable exchange – when its instrumental purpose consists not in shattering, but in re-establishing or reinforcing an institution or state of things. We might consider the famous line from Horace's ode – «Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori» (To die for one's fatherland is right and proper)<sup>5</sup> – as an example of this improper, institutionalized concept of sacrifice, for which the death of human beings is perceived as a tragic yet necessary event, which can therefore be accepted in view of a higher, collective good. On this view, the celebration of sacrifice facilitates a pacification and stabilisation of the social milieu.

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1 See Patočka 2002c, 101ff; 2002d, 147-60; 2002a, 374-423. References to sacrifice can also be found in Patočka's earlier works. See Patočka 2004a [1946], 130.

2 See Derrida 1999; Učnik 2011, 187-201; Melançon 2013; Dodd 2015, 23-30; Perryman-Holt 2015, 64-92; Alvis 2017.

3 Patočka 2002a, 421.

4 Patočka 2002a, 421.

5 See Horace 2014, 95.

This pacification is often grounded on the sacred body of the Unknown Soldier, or on the sacred body of the nation itself.<sup>6</sup> According to this interpretation, sacrifice has a normalizing and soothing function, which – instead of reaching “the extreme limits” of the human condition in history – tends to conceal the terrible conflicts that often characterize this condition by re-establishing peace through collective mourning.

The regular recurrence within history of this instrumental interpretation of sacrifice is easily demonstrated.<sup>7</sup> In the twentieth century, Horace’s line became a widespread maxim within national and military rhetoric and even today it remains visible on monuments and inscriptions – for instance at the front entrance to the Arlington Memorial Amphitheater in Virginia (US).<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, people who directly experienced the atrocities of warfare started to challenge this kind of interpretation. In their writings on war, English poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen repeatedly underlined, with tragic and ironic tones, the limits and hypocrisy of the rhetoric of sacrifice when contrasted with the actual experience of soldiers in the trenches.<sup>9</sup> Owen, in one of his most well-known poems, directly tackled Horace’s line, by calling it the “big lie” that people keep on telling children who are “ardent for some desperate glory” whilst having no idea what experiencing war truly means.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to this instrumental use of sacrifice, Patočka strived to identify a radically different, positive aspect of human sacrifice. This alternative characterization emerges, for example, in Patočka’s depiction of the “spiritual person” – who represents the opposite of

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6 For an investigation of the ritual of the unknown soldier, see WITTMAN 2011.

7 In her book, Wittman recalled the celebration that followed the death of 19 Italians, in the 2003 Nasiriyah bombing, to show an example of today’s instrumental use of the ritual and rhetoric of sacrifice.

8 [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Dulce\\_et\\_decorum\\_est\\_pro\\_patria\\_mori#/media/File:Memorial\\_Amphitheater\\_-\\_rear\\_pediment\\_-\\_Arlington\\_National\\_Cemetery\\_-\\_2011.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Dulce_et_decorum_est_pro_patria_mori#/media/File:Memorial_Amphitheater_-_rear_pediment_-_Arlington_National_Cemetery_-_2011.JPG).

9 For a general account of English poetry during the Great War, see JOHNSTON 1964; ROBERTS 2007.

10 See OWEN 1964, 55.

pro-government intellectuals, who are only concerned with their own success. A “spiritual person” is ready to sacrifice herself in order to «throw the problematicity of reality in the face of society».<sup>11</sup> This kind of sacrifice constitutes an extreme act of opposition to any attempt by those in power to portray a monolithic and simplistic image of social reality by concealing its inner conflicts and crises. The spiritual person is precisely the one who does not surrender to this normalized representation, and hence struggles to shed light on the most problematic aspects of today’s world. Sacrifice – the act of offering, if necessary even one’s own life, for no apparent profit – is for Patočka the means by which the spiritual person can demonstrate the most intimate aspect of her being.

The question arising from this double characterization of (proper/improper) sacrifice is the following: how is it possible that two utterly different meanings stem from the same phenomenon? On the one hand, sacrifice is understood as part of a process of pacification and normalization, and on the other hand sacrifice is seen as destabilization and conflict. I intend to answer this question by following a path that will range between philosophy, anthropology and the social sciences. Given the limited scope of this article, I do not aim to expound the extensive debate on sacrifice that animated twentieth-century intellectual culture. I will rather try to clarify Patočka’s understanding of sacrifice by showing the ways in which he draws upon previous anthropological and sociological investigations. To this end, I will mainly refer to Émile Durkheim, particularly his late work *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), which Patočka often quoted in his own writing.<sup>12</sup> I will also address other thinkers who in various ways inherited and renewed Durkheim’s studies on

11 PATOČKA 2002b, 366.

12 PATOČKA’S first reference to Durkheim dates back to 1946. See PATOČKA 2004b, 152. In 1967, he recollected – rather critically – Durkheim’s interpretation of myth. See PATOČKA 2004c, 400. In a series of lectures from 1974, he also briefly referred to Durkheim’s sociological analysis of the decline of Western civilization. In this regard, he suggested a parallelism between Durkheim and Masaryk, stemming from their works on suicide. See PATOČKA 2002e, 429. The most important references to Durkheim are in the *Heretical Essays*. See PATOČKA 2002c, 101-2, 111.

religion and society, such as Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, and the representatives of the so-called “sacred sociology”: Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille and other members of the Collège de sociologie.<sup>13</sup> An insight into Mircea Eliade’s and Elias Canetti’s reflections on the sacred and political power will complete the picture. In what follows, we shall see that ideas stemming from the investigations of all these thinkers are essential for understanding Patočka’s approach to the theme of sacrifice and also for better characterizing whether and how a “proper sacrifice” can actually become an instrument of political dissent within human societies.

## 1. The Emergence of Heterogeneity

In one of his private seminars from the 1970s, Patočka asks: what can save today’s humanity from the violent situation into which the so-called “technical age” has forced it? To answer this question, he refers back to a passage from Hölderlin’s poem *Patmos*.<sup>14</sup> This is a well-known passage which Heidegger also draws on in his writings on technology. «But where danger threatens / That which saves from it also grows».<sup>15</sup> With this quote Patočka wants to underline how the only way to resolve the existential conflict that characterizes today’s humanity is *through conflict itself*. Only by radicalizing and expanding the conflict to its extreme can humans think of truly overcoming it: «To resolve conflict with conflict would mean to reach the limit of exhausting life; not only emptying life of its singular contents,

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13 References to Caillois and Bataille are both present in Patočka’s works. See PATOČKA 1996b, 230, where he referred to Caillois’ ideas of “*imperative de connaissance*” and “*instinct d’abandon*”. See CAILLOIS 1935, 5-10. See also PATOČKA 1996a, 285, where he mentions Bataille as one of the representatives of the “mystical inclinations” of contemporary philosophy. Patočka refers to Bataille also in two letters to Václav Ritter, dated 9 June 1951 and 22 May 1952. In the second one, he asks Ritter about his opinion on Bataille’s article «L’inceste et le passage de l’animal à l’homme» (see BATAILLE 1951).

14 PATOČKA 2002a, 389.

15 «Wo aber Gefahr ist / wächst das Rettende auch», Friedrich Hölderlin, *Patmos* (1803). See also HEIDEGGER, 2013, 42.

remaining forever clinging to it, but pushing oneself to the extreme limit».<sup>16</sup> Sacrifice is precisely what makes this extreme radicalization possible: «[...] It is not the wait for a favour, but an advance to the furthest limit of alienation, where mystery is conserved, but man effectively *sacrifices* himself for this conservation».<sup>17</sup>

According to Patočka, people who are willing to sacrifice themselves in such an extreme way do not simply aim at overcoming the conflict which characterizes their existences; they rather choose sacrifice precisely to *show* this conflict. This conflict is essentially the conflict between, on the one hand, the tendency of the technical age to monopolize every aspect of life, and on the other the human resilience against this form of violent control. Paradoxically, in order to reject this monopolization of the self, humans must be willing to sacrifice themselves. Only in this way can they regain – in a tragic, yet no less powerful manner – full control of their own existence: namely, control over their life as well as over their own death. In light of this perspective, we can also understand why Patočka described the final stage of human existential development in terms of «self-finding in self-surrender».<sup>18</sup> In order to reach a complete self-achievement, humans have to surrender themselves – that is to say, sacrifice everything that they own, even their own existence. Only by doing this can they regain authentic control over themselves.

This element of utter surrendering in Patočka's idea of sacrifice might suggest an analogy with the kenotic motif, which is widespread within Christian theology and takes the shape of a mystical self-emptying of the self.<sup>19</sup> However, Patočka rejects this interpretation as he clearly underlines that his idea of sacrifice does *not* involve any

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16 PATOČKA 2002a, 392.

17 PATOČKA 2002a, 393. Italics are mine.

18 See PATOČKA 2009, 233.

19 On the topic of *kénōsis* (annihilation, self-emptying) see, for example, the Epistle of Paul to the Philippians 2:7. It is worth underlining that the meaning of *kénōsis* in Philippians 2:7 as well as in the Gospels does not imply neither a superiority of transcendence over immanence nor a critique of finitude and a subsequent detachment from the world. This aspect rather emerged and became central in medieval speculative mysticism. See on this, for instance, DUBILET 2018.

escape from the world and its dramatic character. Only a *worldly* sacrifice, involving people's concrete existence, can actually shatter reality and reveal its falsifications.<sup>20</sup> In order to understand how the function of sacrifice can be practical and political, and not merely symbolic, it is helpful to consider how anthropology and the social sciences addressed the idea and practice of sacrificing in the context of indigenous peoples.<sup>21</sup> By recalling this topic, which Patočka regards as central to his definition of sacredness and sacrifice, it also becomes possible to examine his idea of "proper sacrifice" in a new light, helping to clarify the ambiguities that this concept might entail.

In the fifth of his *Heretical Essays*, Patočka highlights how one of the fundamental contrasts that regulates the world is that between the profane and the sacred; that is, between what on the one hand belongs to everyday life and what, on the other hand, constitutes the exceptional and unexpected traits of human existence. Since the most ancient forms of human society emerged, the equilibrium between the sacred and the profane has essentially informed both the lives of individuals and the nature of social institutions. According to Patočka, this equilibrium ends up changing in early modernity – correlating with the gradual emergence of a new form of political power that aims at dissolving any substantial difference between what is sacred and what is profane.<sup>22</sup>

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20 To a student asking whether his insight into conflict and sacrifice, as it emerged in the afore-mentioned «Čtyři semináře», could correspond to a «turn towards mystical ends», Patočka answered that this was not the case, since «[he] would see the matter in a pragmatic, common way» (see PATOČKA 2002a, 393). This is why I don't think that Patočka's idea of authentic sacrifice can be interpreted from an exclusively religious standpoint, as if "authentic sacrifice" could only mean re-enacting the *imitatio Christi*. Nonetheless, the influence of Christian theology and intellectual heritage on the way in which Patočka addressed the theme of sacrifice is indisputable. See on this especially PATOČKA 2002d, 147-60, where the difference between prehistoric and Christian sacrifice (and the primacy of the latter over the former) is particularly emphasized. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for having raised this point.

21 I deliberately choose to use the term "indigenous", in order to refer to native tribes and social groups, instead of "primitive", even though the latter often recurs in the works of Durkheim and Caillouis.

22 The elimination of every qualitative difference within social life is at the core of the idea

The dynamics that regulate the complex relationship between the sacred and the profane are at the centre of Émile Durkheim's sociology of religion.<sup>23</sup> According to Durkheim, what characterizes the life of indigenous peoples is the fact that for them any hierarchy between the sacred and the profane is inconceivable. For these peoples, the principle that regulates the relationship between these two domains is not hierarchical, but rather based on absolute heterogeneity. The sacred and the profane are rigidly separated: «In the history of human thought, there is no other example of two categories of things as profoundly differentiated or as radically opposed to one another».<sup>24</sup> Yet Durkheim shows how these two categories are also inextricably bound to each other. This peculiar bond, which involves both separation and contact, is exemplified by the act of sacrificing, which straddles the threshold between these two realms.<sup>25</sup> This peculiar character of sacrifice is present in its etymology: "sacrifice" means "sacrum facere" – transforming something that is profane into something sacred by momentarily breaking the division between the two domains.

Looking at the habits and rituals of indigenous tribes, one can easily recognize how the sacred and the profane are for them both constitutive elements of reality. Their juxtaposition is not merely symbolic, but essential in the development of worldly affairs – to the extent that they are the fundamental ground of all that exists. To show this, Durkheim specifically referred to the habits and rituals of the Warramunga tribe, as they were first described in Spencer and Gillen's *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899).<sup>26</sup> Of all the rituals of the Warramunga, the *Nathagura*, or Fire Ceremony, is probably the one

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of "supercivilization", which Patočka introduced in the 1950s. See, PATOČKA 1996a, 243-302.

23 William E. Paden underlined how for Durkheim "the sacred" does not entail any idea of transcendence, mystery, or power. Rather, by sacred Durkheim meant «an index of a system of behavior and representation which follows its own rules». PADEN 1991, 11.

24 DURKHEIM 1995, 36.

25 On the characterization of sacrifice as the threshold between sacred and profane, see also MAUSS & HUBERT 1981 [1899].

26 See GILLEN & SPENCER 1969.



that best demonstrates how for this tribe «two heterogeneous and incommensurable worlds exist in fact[.] In one world [man] languidly carries on his daily life; the other is one that he cannot enter without abruptly entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy».<sup>27</sup> Commenting in the fifth of his heretical essays on Durkheim's reference to this example, Patočka also underlines how addressing such phenomena might help to overcome the modern «positivist prejudice that attributes to the everyday world a primacy over the other world». Understanding how indigenous peoples address the idea of the sacred and of sacrifice can help today's humanity re-learn how to live «through the whole opposition of the sacred and the profane»,<sup>28</sup> which is precisely what Patočka thinks modern political power has precluded. By saying this, Patočka is in no way urging a relapse into the crude dichotomy between the sacred and the profane that characterize indigenous societies. Living through the opposition of the sacred and the profane rather means for him acknowledging that no one can interpret the world on the basis of one single paradigm (be it religious, philosophical, or political) and that a more comprehensive analysis is needed in order to fully disclose its complexity.

As the case of sacrifice suggests, a profound ambiguity lies at the core of the relationship between the sacred and the profane. These two domains are indeed rigidly separated, and yet interconnected and present within social life, the functioning of which is continuously regulated by moments of both sacralisation and profanation. This same ambiguity is also at the core of the analysis of Roger Caillois in his 1939 book *L'homme et le sacré*.<sup>29</sup> Caillois, a student of George Dumézil and Marcel Mauss and one of the founders of the Collège de Sociologie,<sup>30</sup> highlighted how this ambiguity does not only inflect the

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27 DURKHEIM 1995, 220.

28 PATOČKA 2002c, 103.

29 CAILLOIS 2001.

30 Regarding the foundation and history of the Collège, see FALASCA-ZAMPONI 2011; HOLLIER 1995; About the appropriation of Durkheim's sociology of religion by the members of the Collège, see RICHMAN, 2002; 1995, 59-76.

relationship between the sacred and the profane – as Durkheim maintained – but emerges also within the very idea of the sacred itself. Indeed the “sacred” is not a property, but rather a force, always involving a polarity between opposed elements. In the observer, the sacred generates both desire and fear. Both Greek and Latin words for “sacred” reveal this internal tension. The Greek term *húgos* means both sacrifice and sacrilege while the Latin term *sacer* stands for what is holy but also for what is cursed.<sup>31</sup> This dual nature, which involves both attraction and repulsion, characterizes every aspect of sacred being. This dyadic character is precisely what modern political power – which for Patočka is grounded on the idea of rational order and discipline – utterly represses and conceals. According to Mircea Eliade, who addressed this issue in *Das Heilige und das Profane* (1956), the existence (or non-existence) of this duality represents the biggest difference between primitive and modern societies.<sup>32</sup> In the modern period political struggles are aimed at attaining absolute power,<sup>33</sup> whereas in primitive societies such a univocal and monolithic power, by which all differences are neutralized, was rather seen as cause of confusion – insofar as it reminded people of the primordial chaos, rather than an organized political system. From this perspective, the origin of human communities is not caused by the emergence of a univocal authority, but rather lies on a principle of duality and opposition.<sup>34</sup> The social and political life of indigenous peoples is determined by regular irruptions of the sacred within everyday life, which gives rise to distinctions and juxtapositions constructed within reality itself. Sacrifice becomes seen as the fundamental instrument that regulates these irruptions.

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31 See ERNOUT & MEILLET 2001, 585-7. Quoted in CAILLOIS 2001, 35.

32 See ELIADE 1987. Several interpreters showed how Durkheim's and Caillois' investigations had a major impact on Eliade's interpretation of the idea of the sacred. See HANEGRAAF 1999, 356; PADEN 1991, 22.

33 In his essay on the idea of supercivilization, Patočka pinpointed how the phrase from the Gospel of John: *ut omnes unum sint*, exemplifies this political aim at establishing a perfect unity which is for him at the core of the modern idea of political power. See PATOČKA 1996a, 263.

34 See ELIADE 1987, 23.

This conception has a crucial political implication, as it entails understanding the world not on the basis of unity, but according to a principle of substantial duality. According to this interpretation, difference is not perceived as mere broken unity. On the contrary, every unity is nothing but a recomposed difference: the “two” always precedes the “one”. This schema contrasts with the way in which humanity has conceived of politics since the age of classical civilizations up until the modern period – namely, as a way to establish an absolute *imperium* (a unique source of power). From the perspective of such a system, the logic of the sacred, fundamental to indigenous peoples, cannot be comprehended and is in fact perceived as a threat to the stability of the system. This explains why sacrifice acquired a different meaning in modernity. For indigenous peoples, sacrifice represents an essential way of regulating the social through the continuous reassertion of the duality of sacred/profane. For the moderns, by contrast, sacrifice is a destabilizing phenomenon that inevitably causes an internal shattering of the (assumed) unity upon which the (modern) idea of the political is premised, and it therefore must be neutralized at all costs.

The indigenous acknowledgement of the duality sacred/profane as the fundamental ground of their life-world has consequences for the structure of these societies. This is a point which Caillois stresses in particular, referring back to the original studies of Hubert and Mauss.<sup>35</sup> The life of a totemic community, such as the tribes of central Australia, is regulated by a systematic antagonism between the different “phratries” which compose this community. In such a community, each phratry is linked to a totem, which is usually portrayed as an animal. Everything in the surrounding world that can be linked to that animal (the places where it lives and takes shelter, the food that it eats, etc.) belongs to the phratry and can be used only by its members. This entails a concrete partition of the world on the basis of this totemic system. This division, however, involves a communication between the

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35 See, in particular, DURKHEIM & MAUSS 1901-1902; 1906. About the contribution of Hubert and Mauss to Durkheim’s analysis of the sacred, see ISAMBERT 1976.

parts. For example, the members of a phratry cannot eat their totemic animal, which is sacred to them. On the contrary, members of other phratries can exploit this animal without incurring any trouble. This schema also works in a similar manner in the regulation of sexual and reproductive activities. This shows how for these tribes the essentially dyadic structure of society is what guarantees the good functioning of the world. Breaking these rules would mean dooming the world to destruction and chaos. The peculiarity of this structure consists precisely in the fact that it is not grounded on any idea of unity and hierarchy, but rather on a principle of complexity and duality – that is, on the same principle that regulates the division between sacred and profane. In this context, the “imperium”, i.e. the authority, is not held by a person or by a party, but is guaranteed by the entirety of those sacred rules and prescriptions to which every element of these societies is subjected.

## 2. The Loss of the Sacred

The social structure described above mutates over time. The more numerous and complex social structures become, the harder it is to preserve the complementary character of the sacred/profane schema. Caillois acknowledges how, already in the case of several indigenous tribes, for instance the native American tribe of the Zuñi, the division of the community into phratries survives only within myths.<sup>36</sup> This fundamental transformation corresponds, for Caillois, with the “genesis of power” – namely, with the emergence of modern political power in the current usage of the term. According to this new model of social life, the principle of supremacy of single individuals, or certain groups, over all others is substituted for the relationship of complementarity between equal parts.

The emergence of the figure of the sacred chief within indigenous groups most clearly represents this societal change. Initially, the social

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<sup>36</sup> CAILLOIS 2001, 88.

role of the chief is characterized by a complex series of restrictions and prohibitions, which inevitably end up limiting his field of action. Insofar as the chief is regarded as sacred by his people, all contact with him must be subjected to strict rituals that regulate his entire existence, so that his figure ends up resembling one of a prisoner rather than that of a king: «The ideal is that he does nothing at all; that he reigns but not governs. The simple and regular diffusion of his holy energy renders his beneficent influence efficacious».<sup>37</sup> This situation changes as soon as the sovereign ceases to play a circumscribed role within a societal scheme still governed by the constant intermingling between the sacred and the profane, and starts claiming an exclusive hold upon everything that is sacred. In this new situation, the leader is no more subjected to all the aforementioned rules. Rather, his absolute sacredness translates into the capacity to transcend all limits and prescriptions, which are now exclusively imposed upon his subjects. The condition of equilibrium and heterogeneity that characterized the structure of the phratries is therefore broken by the emergence of a new master-slave dialectic, whose essence is not constituted by the respect and distance between actors, but by the subjugation of the weakest by the strongest.

The outcome of this process is the loss of the sacred as a constitutive part of social life. Insofar as sacredness becomes a privilege solely of an elite group of rulers, everything that falls outside of this elite becomes purely profane. The principle of violent authority is substituted for the principle of collaboration amongst social actors. The sacred leader now holds all power, whilst common people – whose lives and activities have lost any sacred characterization – end up being at his complete mercy. The consequence of the expulsion of the sacred from public life is that the sacred ends up being estranged from concrete human existence. According to Patočka, this evacuation leads to the sacred becoming a prerogative of religious discourse: «Religion is not the sacred, nor does it arise directly from the experience of sacral orgies and rites; rather, it is where the sacred qua

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37 CAILLOIS 2001, 93.

demonic is being explicitly overcome. Sacral experiences become religious as soon as there is an attempt to introduce responsibility into the sacred or to regulate the sacred thereby». <sup>38</sup> This phenomenon corresponds to the rise of monotheisms, according to which God is no longer seen as a present and active force within social life but instead as something essentially distant and inscrutable; a mystery which man can try to decipher only through the mediation of liturgy. <sup>39</sup> God's withdrawal from the world can be interpreted precisely as a human attempt to justify the growing desacralisation of historical reality, itself caused by the rise of political forces. Referring to this phenomenon, Patočka claims that the great novelty of Christianity consisted in the introduction of an idea of absolute transcendence. This novelty goes hand in hand with the rise of the first great political projects of humanity, which aimed at establishing a dominion over the world. Inasmuch as the world became purely profane – following God's withdrawal – nothing prevents humans from attempting to dominate this world, which is no longer protected by any sacred prohibition. «The distancing of humans from 'nature', which is no longer the locus of being human but rather something from which humans are separated by their unique unmediated relation, their relation to God, now enables them to perceive this 'nature' as an 'object'». <sup>40</sup>

The dismissal of the sacred, which for both Patočka and Caillois comes hand in hand with the rise of modern political power, has further consequences. According to Patočka, what gets lost in the so-called "technical age" is the distinction between work days and holy days: between the time of profane labor and the time of holy celebration. <sup>41</sup> Like the dualism between the sacred and the profane, with which it is tightly connected, the dualism between work days and holy days also constitutes a fundamental social component for

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38 Patočka 2002c, 103.

39 This idea of the "sacred" is directly opposed to the Durkheimian paradigm, which understood the sacred as a category of world classification and ritual behavior and not as a transcendent and inscrutable principle. See on this PADEN 1991, 12.

40 Patočka 2002c, 110.

41 Patočka 2002c, 98ff.

indigenous peoples. In his analysis of the formation and functioning of human crowds, Elias Canetti acknowledges the social importance of this phenomenon.<sup>42</sup> According to Canetti's interpretation, human, political communities are able to preserve their internal structure and order as long as its members undergo a series of regulations and prescriptions. This preservation is not painless and has the effect of a burden (which Canetti calls a "sting") upon the existence of the members of the community. At some point, this burden inevitably becomes intolerable, and humans have to find a way to discharge it. Whenever a society is unable to find a peaceful way of discharging this burden of stings, the phenomenon of the "reversal crowd" appears, which ends up overturning the existing establishment. Canetti points out how this idea of dramatic reversal is widespread in human history and can be easily detected in very distant cultural traditions: from Hinduism to Christianity.<sup>43</sup> In order to avoid the irruption of such dramatic reversals, indigenous peoples resorted to collective festivals. Caillois, whose insights on this topic parallel those of Canetti's,<sup>44</sup> underlines how for these peoples the festival consists of a complete, controlled and temporary overturning of all the prescriptions that normally regulate community life. By celebrating, humans are allowed to break the rules and enter – even though only momentarily – the space of the sacred. In so doing, they can free themselves from the burdens that loom over their lives and that threaten to subvert the social equilibrium. The aim of the festival is to rebuild the order of the world. Suspending the distinction between the sacred and the profane means artificially recreating the condition of that primordial chaos from which every human community stems.

The most important moment of the festival – the moment in which it

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42 See in particular Canetti's description of the Muharram Festival of the Shiites in CANETTI 1962, 146ff.

43 To demonstrate this point, Canetti refers back to the Shatapatha-Brahmana as an example: «For whatever food man eats in this world, by that food he is eaten in the next world». CANETTI 1962, 324.

44 Adorno pointed out this similarity during a radio conversation with Canetti in 1962. CANETTI & ADORNO 1996, 14.

culminates and comes to an end – is sacrifice. By means of the act of sacrificing (either their most precious belongings or even their own lives), people can finally overcome the division between these two realms and therefore re-establish this same division on a new level – having discharged any and all accumulated burdens. This interpretation finds its roots in Hegel's analysis of sacrifice, as it appears in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel, sacrifice constitutes the moment in which the cult stops being an abstract entity and becomes real: «The act of the Cult itself begins, therefore, with the pure *surrender* of a possession which the owner, apparently without any profit whatever to himself, pours away or lets rise up in smoke. In so doing, he [...] renounces [his] personality and the return of his act into himself».<sup>45</sup> We can easily detect here the same aspect of self-surrendering that is also central to Patočka's understanding of sacrifice.<sup>46</sup> By giving up their own individualities, belongings, possessions – and, in some cases, their own lives – during the festival frenzy, humans can finally cast aside the burdens that mark their everyday existence and start a new life.

This mechanism ends up changing with the emergence of what Patočka defines as 'supercivilization' or the 'technical age': the age in which humanity takes on the endless accumulation of power as the ultimate political goal. Since one of the main characteristics of this age is the elimination of any distinction between the sacred and the profane, and therefore also between a work day and a holy day, it follows that in this context there is no way to discharge the accumulated social burdens that remain dangerously present within society. What is the consequence of this inability to discharge? Canetti answers this question by showing that individuals who are incapable of getting rid of their "stings" end up as schizophrenics. In other words, when individuals are unable to surrender their individuality and blend into the crowd that animates the festival, they end up

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45 HEGEL 1977, 434.

46 It is worth remembering that Patočka translated Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* into Czech in 1960. See HEGEL 1960.



finding this crowd inside of themselves – in the labyrinth of their mind.<sup>47</sup> Patočka's analysis of the dialectics of supercivilization shows how the same logic also applies on a larger scale: a civilization which is unable to recognize and discharge its internal tensions seems to be doomed to the same schizophrenic hysteria described by Canetti. The supercivilization essay dates back to the 1950s, when Czechoslovakia was facing the hardest years of Stalinism. It is within this context that Patočka describes the debilitation to which civilization succumbs whenever it tries to conceal its inner political conflicts rather than facing them directly. This concealment causes a schizophrenic dichotomy between private and public life.

The realization of the old idea of the unity of the human – of the abolition of the contradiction between public and private (Hegel's state and civil society) – seems to undergo a mutation in the opposite direction. Externally the contrast is actually fixed, as no one has the opportunity to build a solid private dimension any more. Nonetheless, in no way does this entail the cancellation of the difference between the private opinion and the point of view that is publically manifested. On the contrary, humans are more torn apart than ever by the principle of their private (economic) interest.<sup>48</sup>

What emerges from this is a condition of widespread social hypocrisy, which political dissidents such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Václav Havel, and Leszek Kołakowski later referred to as "institutionalized lying", or "living in a lie".<sup>49</sup> In this peculiar historical situation the political function of sacrifice also changes. We saw how sacrifice can be defined as a force which lies on the threshold between the sacred and the profane, always regulating both their proximity and their division. Whenever it is carried out within modern civilization – which collapses the sharp division between the sacred and the profane

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47 See CANETTI 1962, 321ff.

48 PATOČKA 1996a, 263.

49 See, in particular, SOLŽENICYN 2004; KOŁAKOWSKI 1983, 126; HAVEL 1985, 23-96.

– sacrifice loses its regulative, ordering characteristics, and rather acquires that shattering aspect that Patočka described as the essence of a proper sacrifice. In a political system that is grounded on a principle of monolithic authority, anything that can reignite the heterogeneous aspects of the social structure becomes a disturbing element; it is no longer a fundamental component of a community life, but something that must be silenced and suppressed – whatever the cost.

### 3. Conclusion: A Sacrificial Community?

The attempts of Patočka and Caillois to reconnect the discourse on sacrifice and the sacred with the nature of modern political power inevitably run up against a series of setbacks. For the members of the Collège de sociologie, reenacting a positive idea of the sacred means creating a new «moral community, different in part from that ordinarily uniting scholars and bound, precisely, to the virulent character of the realm studied and of the laws that little by little are revealed to govern it».<sup>50</sup> This soon translated into a re-evaluation of the role that irrational forces, passions, and instincts play in forming the social structure, and also into a critique of the idea that rational calculation should be considered the only valid political instrument. In the delicate political situation of interwar France, this intellectual project aimed at warning the public against the emerging totalitarian ideologies that were spreading throughout Europe. Nonetheless, the activities of the Collège have been often interpreted in the opposite sense, i.e., as if its members were complicit in the same phenomenon that, theoretically, they wanted to denounce.<sup>51</sup> This profound ambiguity is particularly evident in Bataille's 1933 essay "The Psychological Structure of Fascism", and it also re-emerged during the

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50 «Note sur la foundation d'un Collège de sociologie». In *Acéphale*, Vol. 3-4, 1937, 26. Quoted in HOLLIER 1988, 5.

51 About the connection between the Collège de sociologie and twentieth-century political ideologies, see in particular FALASCA-ZAMPONI 2011; GEROULANOS 2006.

meetings of the Collège, as well as in the pages of *Acéphale*.<sup>52</sup> Bataille, Caillois and their collaborators were not, however, the only targets of this critique: their main forerunner – Émile Durkheim – was repeatedly accused by various detractors of fostering an authoritarian conception of society in his writing.<sup>53</sup> The recent revival of interest in the activities of the Collège, and also in the idea of a “moral community” that might possibly emerge from the recurring crises of contemporary democratic institutions, shows how the “sacred sociology” that these thinkers wanted to outline is still worthy of careful consideration.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the ambiguous possibility of a political use (or misuse) of the notion of the sacred remains. It is echoed, for example, by the same Caillois who, in the preface to the third edition of *L'homme et le sacré* (1963), recollects the experience of the Collège as a moment of intense activity, but also of great confusion. «When I wrote this essay I was influenced by an almost exclusive preoccupation for the obscure and urgent emotions that disturb, enthrall and sometimes dominate the human heart». <sup>55</sup> This urgency – which translated into the attempt to restore an “active” idea of the sacred, in order to counter the tendency to neglect the abyssal forces that (as the emergence of fascism showed) still impinged themselves upon the world – ended up in failure. «It was like hoping for a miracle; and, in fact, these vacuous ambitions remained a dead letter». <sup>56</sup>

If we look at Patočka's philosophy of history, and especially at the crucial passage between the fifth and the sixth of his *Heretical Essays*, we can easily detect similarities with Caillois. Is it still imaginable –

52 Concerning the meaning and problems of Bataille's thought today, a series of excellent contributions can be found in STRONGE 2017. See in particular chapter 3: PAWLETT 2017.

53 See, in particular, RANULF 1939; MCGOVERN 1941; MITCHELL 1931. For an accurate account of this debate, see FALASCA-ZAMPONI 2006.

54 Among the numerous investigations about the Collège de sociologie that appeared over the last few years, see in particular the essays collected in the special issue of *Economy and Society*, edited by Frank Pearce in 2003. In their linked analyses of the community concept, Michel Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy have both referred back to the idea of “moral community” that the members of the Collège first sketched. See BLANCHOT 1988; NANCY 1991.

55 CAILLOIS 2013, 13.

56 CAILLOIS 2013, 14.

Patočka asks – that we can overcome the “self-bondage of life” and relearn how to live «through the whole opposition of the sacred and the profane»<sup>57</sup>? The way in which he answers this question, namely by looking at «the night, [...] struggle and death»<sup>58</sup> as experiences which are necessary to form what he eventually called a “solidarity of the shaken”, presents just as many ambiguities as Caillois’ arguments in *L’homme et le sacré*. Is the “solidarity of the shaken”, that is, the solidarity of those who are «shaken in their faith in the day, in ‘life’ and ‘peace’»,<sup>59</sup> something similar to the moral community to which the members of the Collège de sociologie referred? And is “sacrifice” – the contact with and the making of the “sacred” – that which allows humans to shape this renewed solidarity, in the same way that the ritual sacrifice allowed indigenous peoples to recreate their social structures upon new bases? We cannot conclusively answer this question. What we know for sure is that both Patočka and Caillois identify the loss of the capacity of humanity to handle the radical distinction between what is sacred and what is profane as one the deepest causes of the modern social and political crises.<sup>60</sup> They also share the idea that in the twentieth century war became humanity’s extreme attempt to find a surrogate of the sacred festival, with war being interpreted as a cathartic and creative experience. For Patočka, the First World War represented the orgiastic explosion that allowed humanity to discharge the burdens that the German empire – built on the “ossified bureaucracy” of conservative Prussia and on the incredibly narrow-minded Lutheran orthodoxy – had accumulated: «Long before the war, this Germany had already transformed Europe into an energetic complex».<sup>61</sup> Caillois shared a similar position: in 1949

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57 Patočka 2002c, 103.

58 Patočka 2002c, 131.

59 Patočka 2002c, 135.

60 In this regard, I don’t think that Patočka’s idea of responsibility can be interpreted as an overcoming of this distinction, insofar as being responsible does not mean for Patočka dismissing, but rather becoming fully aware of the radicality of this distinction. See on this Patočka 2002c, 99-100. I need to thank an anonymous reviewer for allowing me to re-think this complex aspect of Patočka’s thought.

61 Patočka 2002c, 120.

he added to the second edition of *L'homme et le sacré* an appendix entitled "War and the Sacred". «War must not serve as a foundation for peace, but peace must serve as preparation for war since peace is only a simple and transitory armistice between two conflicts. All valuable effort is oriented toward war and finds its conservation in it».<sup>62</sup>

In light of these ambiguities, one might well wonder if it is possible to rediscover «the whole opposition of the sacred and the profane» whilst simultaneously avoiding the ideological conclusions that this stance seems to entail. This question is as relevant today as ever, in light of the continuous re-emergence of irrational forces and passions within public debate, and of the misuse that political factions make of them. In this regard, what should be underlined is that while Patočka is not immune from the same ambiguities that are present in Caillois and the other members of the Collège de sociologie – he also indicates a possible path that leads beyond them. This path is linked to his distinction between "proper" and "improper" sacrifice. A proper sacrifice means for him preserving the shattering and destabilizing character with which sacrificing is necessarily endowed. This also means avoiding the instrumentalisation of sacrifice for political gain. For example, we can imagine ideological and violent outcomes of sacrifice that aim not at the destabilization of crystallized social structures, but instead at the imposition of reinforced, reactionary regimes. Maintaining the authenticity of sacrifice means rejecting any misuse or violent appropriation of it. It is therefore the example of non-violent political dissent, which characterized the final days of Patočka's life as a spokesperson for Charter 77, and which mirrors his understanding of politics as a realm of freedom and truth, that represents in this sense the true idea of sacrifice that he most likely had in mind.

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62 CAILLOIS 2003, 172. It is not surprising that, for both Patočka and Caillois, Ernst Jünger became in this phase an important reference point.

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