

Frank Pearce 'Obligatory Sacrifice and Imperial Projects'

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the role played by sacrificial discourses and sacrificial practices in [the organization of states and in the pursuit of their goals. In it, as an aid in the understanding of the contemporary American Imperium, I examine the role played by such discourses and practices in the social organization of the Aztec empire, which dominated Meso-America in the sixteenth century. This is not to deny that there are important and significant differences between the Aztec and American systems. And yet, it is instructive that both systems show evidence of instabilities and contradictions; in both the military controlled an extraordinary amount of social resources; both were born from conquest; both developed a combination of territorial and hegemonic empires; and, surprisingly, in both there has been an occlusion of human sacrificial processes.

Successful imperialistic societies always impose great sacrifices, including death and physical injury, on the members of the societies that they dominate, but in the process they also sacrifice the lives and well-being of many of their own members. In this dual sense, then, human sacrifice is routine in imperialistic societies although it is only sometimes ritualized.

I begin by theorizing sacrifice. Next, I turn to the United States of America and briefly consider some of the discourses on sacrifice to be found in the speeches of recent American presidents. I then explore the role of human sacrifice in Aztec societies, and finally I revisit American society in light of the discussion of the Aztecs.

Theorizing sacrifice

A major resource for this article is the work of Emile Durkheim, which [in] emphasizing its radical possibilities, I take in somewhat unexpected directions. Durkheim argues, both explicitly and implicitly, that sacrifice is integral to all human societies. In his earliest work he notes that children are 'forced to take into consideration interests other than their own, to make sacrifices and dedicate

themselves to the good of the family’; through the appropriate conditioning and development of children’s personalities they are equipped to enter the adult world as free and responsible grown-ups where ‘society demands an enormous amount of disinterestedness and reciprocal sacrifice’ (Durkheim 1883–84/2004: 255). The normal personality is developed through targeted behavioral conditioning. Such personality formation is appropriate for societies manifesting mechanical solidarity, here all make similar sacrifices, because in order for social order to be possible all must equally submit to the uniform conscience collective. What matters is more that values are learned than that they have specific content (Durkheim 1893/1984: 34–9). To refuse the demands of the collective is to risk severe sanctions, which might include death or expulsion.

Organic solidarity is more complex. While all social members still need to learn rules, the social world is more differentiated, thereby increasing individuation and rendering the consciousness of actors more complex and diverse. It also involves reciprocal interdependence, providing a possible basis for a different kind of solidarity. The rules are less unified and more flexible, designed to regulate often changing social interactions. Indeed, many rules are meta-rules, determining how rules should be established, how the harm occasioned by transgressions should be ameliorated, and how criteria should be established to judge whether rules and social arrangements are compatible with equity and justice. These developments in collective social organization and social thought have produced a new social morality found in the ethical and political movements inspired by the thought of Kant and Rousseau. While here, one finds a ‘religion of which man is, at the same time, both believer and god’, what is valorized is not egoism, but the capacity of all humans to develop ‘that wise and pure reason which, dissociated from all personal motives, would make laws in the abstract concerning its own conduct’ (Durkheim 1898/1994: 62–3, 72–3).

Nevertheless, social organization and values are moving beyond an abstract and ontologically individualistic Kantianism. The modern family gives will and effort ‘an end going beyond egoistic and momentary enjoyment’ but it also nourishes and strengthens the child insofar as it is ‘a refuge where the wounds of life may find their consolation and errors their pardon’; ‘the family is a source (foyer) of morality, energy and kindness’ (Davy 1925 cited in Lukes 1975: 185–6). True, the child needs to develop a taste for discipline and order in his or her conduct, and to learn to value reason as well as feelings (Durkheim 1925: 149). But now a major goal is to produce autonomous reflective individuals who can think beyond their immediate circumstances and their particular interests, and who can be morally aware, but who are also sensitive to the Sacrifice, the state and social order

value of humanity per se and aware of their society's specific rules. They should be able to recognize their obligation to 'alleviate the functioning of the social machine' so that all individuals in fact have 'the means to develop their faculties', which means finding 'new means of organizing social life and introducing more justice in contractual relations' (Durkheim 1898/1994: 71).

Durkheim identifies one such means – redistributing wealth that is not earned but merely inherited. If this were to occur, there would no longer be extremely wealthy parents who can install their offspring as managers of industries, and purchase exclusive private schooling and access to the professions, including the military (Durkheim 1893/1984: 319–22). In the United States such practices as using the privileges of wealth to join the National Guard, rather than combat units, would also no longer occur.

In his discussion of altruistic suicide, Durkheim argues that because war increases nationalism and hence altruism it tends to reduce the suicide rate. He also argued that militarism per se tends to increase the suicide rate; soldiers' excessive identification with their army units often leads them to prioritize its interests, attenuating their cognizance and pursuit of their own. For the purposes of his research, Durkheim used a restrictive and legalistic definition of suicide – the term 'applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result' ([Durkheim] 1897/1951: 44). Soldiers do not know, even in the most fraught battle situation, that they rather than others will die. By definition, then, they do not commit suicide. But Durkheim also notes that 'a man exposing himself knowingly for another's sake, but without the certainty of a fatal result' is acting in a way that 'is not radically distinct from true suicide', an action that results from a 'similar state of mind' since it also entails 'mortal risks not unknown to the agent . . . and the prospect of these is no deterrent; the sole difference is a lesser chance of death' ([Durkheim:] 1897/1951: 45). This implies that the willingness of soldiers to risk their lives in typical battle situations is both suicidal and self-sacrificial. This raises the question, can the state legitimately ask for such sacrifices? A democratic state operating in a truly egalitarian democratic society might have a right to so. One that is autocratic, separated from the rest of society, not expressing a 'General Will' but captured by sectional interests, would have no such right. Under these circumstances soldiers are more sacrificed than self-sacrificing. Durkheim focuses on Germany during World War One (Durkheim 1915), but, as Elwin Powell (1988) has shown, there is no reason to restrict Durkheim's theorizing to that war, and nor shall we. Overall, in an unequal and undemocratic society, the interests of the mass of the population will often be sacrificed to those of the privileged, intent on holding on to their wealth and power. Further, in any unjust order the privileged are over-compensated for any sacrifices they make and those with little or no resources are under-compensated for their (often large) sacrifices. While all social

life requires some sacrifice (Durkheim 1914/1960: 328), not all sacrifices are necessary and just.

In his writings on religious phenomena Durkheim discusses sacrifice in the context of more ritualized forms. In all societies, he argues, an absolute distinction is made between those beliefs, rituals and activities that are seen as sacred and those seen as profane. The sacred realm is produced through the collective activity of society, which is 'infinitely superior to each individual, since it is a synthesis of individuals' and since we are always in a state of 'perpetual dependence' upon society it 'inspires in us a feeling of religious awe' (Durkheim 1899/1994: 93). The profane realm is more the everyday world, of routine activities and contingent beliefs, as experienced individually. Society needs both realms but it is essential that they are kept separate (Durkheim 1912/1995: 313). Yet at the same time there must be mechanisms by which the realms are connected; one such mechanism is ritual sacrifice. Durkheim's colleagues Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss define this as a procedure 'establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed' (Hubert and Mauss 1898/1964: 97, original italics). 'The purpose of the cult', Durkheim remarks, 'is not only to bring the profane into communion with sacred beings but also to keep the sacred beings alive, to remake and regenerate them perpetually' ([Durkheim]1912/1995: 350). Sacrificial consecrations generate a religious power that passes both to the sacred sphere, to the gods, who then 'have received their share', and to the profane sphere where the sacrificer is 'raised above . . . his ordinary and normal nature' (Hubert and Mauss 1898/1964: 44).

In most religious systems, a deity or deities create the cosmos, and deities play some role in its continuity and development. In 'Brahmanic' systems, a major focus is on continuity and development, usually seen as dependent upon the desires and activities of one or more divine beings. However, these in turn often require nourishment from 'effective sacrifices' made by humanity, who thereby also control and maintain the order of the universe. In other religions the focus is on the deity who has created the universe and who is willing to sustain it for the benefit of a chosen people and for the rest of humanity providing that this people honor a contract made between them and the deity. In such systems sacrificial acts and ceremonies seem to have no effectivity; they merely demonstrate respect for the deity and memorialize and reassert the contract (Herrenschmidt 1982). This argument will be revisited.

Religious and ritual sacrifice articulate different forms and levels of the cosmic and human world. But as Durkheim makes clear, the sacred and profane and, by implication, sacrificial systems are not only associated define as the secular realm.

For example, insofar as humanity is worshipped for the intrinsic human capacity to develop a sophisticated reflective consciousness, this requires that we treat humanity as a whole, and the particular societies in which we live as equally sacred. Thus national and international collective assemblies and patriotic rituals are sacralizing mechanisms (Durkheim 1950/1957: 74–5).

At this point it is useful to clarify and elaborate somewhat on the way the term sacrifice has been used thus far. A sacrificer is a person or collectivity whose desire motivates a sacrifice. A sacrificer (who may also be the sacrificer) is a person or collectivity who arranges and possibly presides at a sacrifice (it could be a parent, an army officer, or priest). Some sacrifices, but by no means all, involve ceremonial rituals. A sacrifice will honor a superior other; this can be human or divine, and an individual, collectivity or ideal. In that all of these are connected with collective values and aspirations, which are foundational of the sacred, the superior other is always sacred. The beneficiary of a sacrifice may be the sacrificer and/or some designated individual or collective other. While sacrifice is always altruistic it does not preclude self-interest, but if there is self-interest it usually involves self-transformation.

The term sacrifice refers to an act or acts by which a sacrificer gives up something it values to a superior sacred other, sometimes through a ritual officiated by a sacrificer, in the hope of creating for itself and sometimes for designated others a right relation with the superior other and possibly to receive other benefits that the latter can bestow. Sacrifice implies both the hope of some positive outcome and a lack of certainty that this will occur. In summary, from these analyses, an analysis of sacrifice requires the deployment of the following terms and categories: sacred/profane; sacrificer(s); sacrificer(s); victim(s); community; recipient(s), beneficiary(ies); hierarchy; effective; covenantal; cosmic order; divinities.

While this schema applies to all sacrifices made by humans, the concern in this chapter is to apply it primarily to situations where humans sacrifice other humans, i.e. human sacrifice. For the United States, when one of its military personnel dies in battle, this has long been described as the ultimate self-sacrifice, undertaken in the interests of the nation and American values. Many other instances of sacrifice, while not so final, also refer to physical harms and other deprivations that Americans suffer. For the Aztecs, the major form of sacrifice was the ritual slaughter of captive warriors in honor of their gods and to keep the sun moving in the sky.

Sacrifice in the United States

There is a long tradition in America of presidents making explicit reference to sacrifice in their public addresses. Here I look at some sacrificial themes in such speeches by a number of presidents. For example, in his second inaugural address President Eisenhower portrays the world of 1957 as caught in a struggle between the 'Free World' and 'International Communism'.

Schema for human sacrifice – all moments ritualizable

Sacrifier: Individual/collectivity seeks 'right relation' to superior being and other benefits. Sacrifier's worth relates to frequency/quality of their sacrifices.

Societally superior sacrificer: Elite individual or institution that can in part appropriate the sacrifice.

Victim: Person of value donated by sacrificer(s) and destroyed: high-status persons often most desirable.

Sacrificer: Agent of the sacrifice: if ceremonial usually already sacralized.

Ceremony: A set of rituals sacralizing participants, and spatio-temporally separating them from and returning them to mundane life.

Beneficiary(ies): Designated individual(s) or collectivity(es).

Recipient: Superior other – sacred/mundane individual, collective, being or ideal.

Cosmic order: Articulated, hierarchical.

Community: Inclusionary and exclusionary.

Other societal effects: Complex effects that may differ for different groups.

Peace could only be maintained if an equal or superior force confronts the latter; but he cautions: ‘Splendid as can be the blessings of such a peace, high will be its cost: in toil patiently sustained, in help honorably given, in sacrifice calmly borne. We are called to meet the price of this peace’ (Eisenhower, 21 January 1957).

In his first inaugural address, George H. W. Bush broadened the discourse of sacrifice by reminding Americans of the danger of being too

‘enthralled with material things, less appreciative of the nobility of work and sacrifice’. There is a need to help:

[T]he homeless . . . children who have nothing . . . those who cannot free themselves of enslavement to whatever addiction – drugs, welfare, the demoralization that rules the slums. . . crime to be conquered, the rough crime of the streets . . . young women . . . about to become mothers of children they can’t care for and might not love . . . The old solution, the old way, was to think that public money alone could end these problems. But we have learned that is not so . . . We will turn to the only resource we have that in time of need always grows – the goodness and the courage of the American people . . . (George H. W. Bush, 20 January 1989)

While the explicit focus is on those who give up their leisure time for unpaid volunteer work in the community, implicit is reference to other kinds of sacrifice. For example, there are the good parents who give up their time and comfort in the interests of their children. Many of these will have worked hard to build businesses or to gain qualifications that means they receive a good income that helps them provide well for their families. He is also suggesting that welfare is an ‘addiction’, crime is the province of the poor, children ‘born to single mothers’ are unloved. As a wealthy patrician, Bush sees the American political, economic and social system as a valid and moral order and that its distribution of wealth and advantage, poverty and disadvantage, are merited (Phillips 2004). While charity might be a moral imperative, there would be no legal requirement for the wealthy to help the poor through the redistributive effects of taxation. Indeed, in his election campaign, Bush had promised not only to impose ‘no new taxes’, but to cut corporate taxes.

Even though the Soviet Union was clearly unraveling and the Berlin Wall had fallen, in this speech Bush retained the same belligerent emphasis on combat readiness. He promised the world that ‘We will stay strong to protect the peace . . . The “offered hand” is a reluctant fist; but once made, strong, and can be used with great effect’ (George H. W. Bush, 20 January 1989). Within the year, the US had invaded Panama, toppling its former ally Manuel Noriega, allegedly in order to

protect American service personnel, defend democracy and human rights, safeguard the neutrality of the Canal and because he was a major drug trafficker. In his State of the Union Address on 31 January 1990, Bush quoted a letter written by Private 1st Class James Markwell, a 20-year-old Army medic to his mother, prior to his death during the invasion:

I've been trained to kill and to save, and so has everyone else. I am frightened of what lays beyond the fog, and yet . . . do not mourn for me. Revel in the life that I have died to give you . . . But most of all, don't forget that the Army was my choice. Something that I wanted to do. Remember I joined the Army to serve my country and ensure that you are free to do what you want and to live your lives freely. (George H. W. Bush, 31 January 1990)

Among Bush's justifications for the invasion of Iraq in January 1991 was that, Saddam Hussein,[a leader, in fact, supported by the US as an ally while, as they knew,] he was using poisonous gas against Iranians and Kurdish dissidents, now became represented as a cruel and murderous dictator:

'Saddam Hussein systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own. He subjected the people of Kuwait to unspeakable atrocities – and among those maimed and murdered, innocent children' (George H. W. Bush, 16 January 1991).

If we turn to the (post-9/11) speeches of George W. Bush we find he links different sacrifices with a besieged community unified in its warlike resistance:

We see our national character in rescuers working past exhaustion, in long lines of blood donors, in thousands of citizens who have asked to work and serve in any way possible. And we have seen our national character in eloquent acts of sacrifice. Inside the World Trade Center, one man who could have saved himself stayed until the end and at the side of his quadriplegic friend. A beloved priest died giving the last rites to a firefighter. Two office workers, finding a disabled stranger, carried her down 68 floors to safety . . . Today, we feel what Franklin Roosevelt called, 'the warm courage of prevail against our enemies. And this unity against terror is national unity.' . . . Our unity is a kinship of grief and a steadfast resolve to now extending across the world . . . God bless America. (George W. Bush, 13 September 2001)

The imagery in these examples, and others, present a Manichean vision. This produces the conditions for an 'othering' that permits ruthless treatment of the

enemy. The use of the term evil is also significant here because it often means not only that human beings do evil things, but that doing evil things means that they are doing the work of the devil. God is not only on the side of the United States, but the devil is with its opponents. In this schema I am also drawing upon some of my previous work (Pearce 1976, 2007; Pearce and Tombs 1998).

Dominant Discourses on Sacrifice in the United States

A: Sacrifice and evil

Sacrifiers and sacrificers: (a) Undemocratic, statist, fanatical, atheistic or Islamic fundamentalist nations or terrorists; (b) Disloyal Americans favoring foreign interests and ideologies over America's; (c) The venal, envious, lazy, cowardly and self-indulgent welfare/criminal classes.

Societally superior sacrificer: At different times, Moscow and Beijing. Victims: (a1) American youth in the military; (a2) Entrepreneurs throughout the world but particularly American companies denied essential materials and markets; (a/b/c) The loyal, hard-working American people as a whole bearing the cost of keeping world peace and the cost of the justice and welfare systems.

Human recipients: (a/b) Dictatorial rulers of unfree nations; (c) Different 'mafias'.

Cosmic order: God has created human beings who have been able to build social orders, such as the US, based on the worship of the one true God, freedom, property rights and democracy. Others have built inefficient and oppressive systems, often through ignorance but at times malevolently. In practice, they align themselves with the devil, the evil power that plots against God.

Community: The lives of the devout, productive and deserving are constricted and disrupted.

Societal effects: Great harm throughout the world, but as a God-fearing nation America is basically unassailable

B: Noble self-sacrifice in contemporary United States

Sacrifiers/sacrificers: (a) The military and other useful public servants; (b)

Capitalist wealth creators; (c) Wage earners; (d) Parents; (e) The charitable. Societally superior sacrificers: Monotheistic American nation including (a) The President and Congress; (b/c) Free market economy; (d) Network of families; (e) Charities.

Victims: (a) Youth in military; (b) Capitalists deferring gratification; (c) Wage workers accepting discomfort to earn money for their family; (d) Housewife depriving herself of luxuries for family; (e) Those giving up time and pleasure for the unfortunate.

Ceremonies: Memorializations marking individual and collective self-sacrifices under the aegis of the state.

Human recipients: (a/b) Democratic nation/free world; (c/d) Family; (e) Deserving poor.

Cosmic order: God created and sustains human ability to build a social order based on worship, freedom, property rights and democracy. Through skill, effort and thrift individuals determine the kind of life they live. They have a manifest destiny to spread this way of life to others and to oppose the fanatical, irreligious, envious, cowardly, self-indulgent, collectivists.

Community: The devout, productive and deserving.

Societal effects: As a god-fearing nation America is basically unassailable

The Tenochca and the Aztecs

I now turn to the Aztecs. This may seem a surprising choice; after all, the Aztecs are notorious for their practice of ritual human sacrifice and aggressive warfare. Further, their religion was a mixture of shamanism, animism and polytheism, and it was all-embracing; their political leader was also their military and spiritual leader; their technology was minimal and their economy was based on peasant farming and on wealth redistributed to hereditary classes by tributes raised both from their own peasants and from the societies they conquered. Americans may often talk about sacrifice but by this is meant self-sacrifice, which is not ritualized; their government is formally democratic; there is a separation of church and state; the main religions are monotheistic and claim to be based upon compassion; science and technology are both well developed; America claims to be a meritocracy and its economy is capitalist; and, finally, America has no colonies. But while the role of sacrifice in Aztec societies superficially is very different from that in the US, I hope to show that on a deeper level there are significant similarities between them.

The term Aztec is used to refer to the twenty or so northern Nahuatl-speaking peoples who in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries (••) arrived in the Valley of Mexico and the surrounding valleys (Gibson 1964). The Aztecs included the Culhua, Alcolhua, Tepaneca, Tlaxcala, Huexotzinca and the Mexica peoples. They shared the legend that they had left a northern homeland called Aztlan in order to journey south. They subscribed to similar cosmologies, and pantheons of gods, and practiced similar rituals including human sacrifice. Their forms of political, economic and social organization were similar. When settled, they did so in autonomous tribal units called altepetls, each of which controlled a territory, consisted of a number of clans or calpolli, and had an overall leader, called their tlatoani. If they became more populous and urbanized they evolved into one of many hierarchical city-states.

The Mexica founded a settlement in a swampy part of Lake Texcoco, which became the city-state of Tenochtitlan. At first, the Tenochca Mexica were in a subordinate relationship to the powerful Tepanec city-state of Atzacapotzalco, but along with the Alcolhua of Texcoco and the with the tacit support of the Tepanecs of Tlacopan they were able to defeat their former rulers. The three victorious city-states formed a 'triple alliance' and created a huge empire. In 1519 this empire controlled an area of some 77,000 square miles (Fagan and Beck 1996: 81) and consisted of three provinces in the Valley of Mexico and another 36 or so provinces from which the triple alliance demanded tributes, plus another 23 provincial regions with which it had an asymmetrical client-like relation. The empire as a whole was sustained by a combination of alliances, including the intermarriage of women of the Mexica nobility with ruling-class men of the city-

states[the appropriation of land and serfs; the offer of protection and relative prosperity; and the threat of force. Economically it was tied together through a series of circuits of tribute and trade involving goods, labor and, indeed, lives (Berdan 2004: 264).

The Valley of Mexico was home to between one and two million Aztecs living in 50 or so city-states in three provinces with a relatively high degree of social, political and economic integration. Up to another two million Aztecs lived in the surrounding valleys. Ideologically, this heartland was unified, at least to some extent, by appeals to the superior Toltec/Culhua heritage, by the shared Meso-American pantheon of gods, and by the Tenochca's claim to a unique role in world-making, world-centering, and world-renewing (Carrasco 1999: 36–40). However, the Aztec city-states of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco and Cholula were neither conquered by, nor allied with, the triple alliance. Tenochtitlan was the largest city-state in the Americas, organized in 20 *calpolli*, each numbering about 8,000 residents, and each mustering about 400 warriors for the Tenoch army (Hassig 1988: 65–7). It was the political, economic and ritual centre of the empire, clearly dominating the other members of the triple alliance.

Human sacrifice

While all the Aztec peoples made many different kinds of offerings to their gods it was human beings and human blood that were deemed the most important offerings. People of all ranks used maguey spines on their own bodies, drawing blood from these lacerations, but they also sacrificed male and female children, criminals and other wrongdoers, slaves and captives, and particularly male warriors. The victims were put to death in a variety of rituals involving drowning, burial while alive, bludgeoning, stoning, impaling, being thrown into fires, having their throats cut, being shot with arrows, flaying, being decapitated and through excision of the heart, with the last often combined with one or more of the former (Graulich 2005: 19). They were sacrificed on feasts to celebrate the gods and on calendar dates relating to the seasons and the passing of years and to memorialize important events in history. Of all the Aztec peoples the Tenochca Mexica engaged in human sacrifice with particular frequency and with the largest number of victims. While some estimates of the number sacrificed annually are implausible – 250,000 (Harner 1977) – human sacrifice was certainly widespread. Throughout the empire 5,000 people were probably sacrificed each year (Davies 1981: 239). Many slaves and captive warriors were provided as tributes by the provinces both creating a general fear of the Tenoch and providing grounds for revolt – what more could be taken from a subaltern people than their lives (Conrad and Demarest 1984: 44–71)? Nevertheless, captives were of particular significance during most major festivals and celebrations of great victories. Below I focus on the great

warrior festival, of Tlacaxipeualitzli, the feast of the flaying of men, celebrated at the time of the spring equinox and dedicated to Xipe Totec, Our Lord the Flayed One, god of spring, fertility and success in war.

Many authors have shown that a major rationale proposed for these sacrifices was the need to sustain the movement of the fifth sun. The Tenoch believed that the cosmos was permeated and shaped by teotl, a dynamic, vivifying, sacred and impersonal power, energy or force (Maffie 2002). Its movement was in and through dualities, endless opposition of mutually arising, mutually interdependent and mutually complementary forces, sometimes in equilibrium but more usually with one temporarily dominant. Balance and change in the universe was an effect of perpetual conflict, particularly between the four deities, Tezcatlipoca, Xipe Totec, Quetzalcoatl (the plumed serpent, god of priests, of wisdom), and Huitzilopochtli, (the sun god and god of war). This had led to the creation of 5 eras or suns; each of the 4 previous eras had ended when their suns were destroyed (Soustelle 1955/1970: 95). The current and last sun was created at Teotihuacan where the gods had gathered after the destruction of the fourth sun. They sought a god who by throwing himself into fire would sacrifice himself and become the sun. An arrogant, vain and powerful god, Tecuciztecatl, first presented himself, but lacked the courage to leap into the flames. The gods then chose a lowly god, Nanahuatzin, who bravely cast himself into the fire to be followed by a tardy Tecuciztecatl. Nanahuatzin became the sun and Tecuciztecatl the moon. The sun still did not move until, the god of the day wind, Ehactl (Quetzalcoatl) sacrificed the other gods and then blew on the sun making it move to be later followed by the moon. Quetzalcoatl then went to Mictlan, the realm of the dead, rescued the bones of humans who had died in the previous era. He bled himself and with the other gods did penance, bringing men and women back to life (Sahagun 1953: 4-8; Leon-Portilla 1963: 107-109).

The gods had once again initiated a cycle of exchange by self-sacrifices, which benefitted humanity. In order to keep the sun moving in its course there was a need to replicate the sacrificial actions of the gods by human sacrifice; the human body was a container of divine energy and that the blood, the head, the heart and the liver all contained important regenerative powers. Some of these forces manifested themselves as gods the sacrifice of which played a key role in the workings of the cosmos. In order to keep the sun moving in its course there was a need to replicate the sacrificial actions of the gods by human sacrifice; the human body was a container of divine energy and the blood, the head, the heart and the liver all contained important regenerative powers.

Sacrifice was a sacred duty towards the sun and a necessity for the welfare of the people; without it the very life of the world would stop. Every time a priest on the top of the pyramid held up the bleeding heart of a man and then placed it in the quahxicalli the disaster that perpetually threatened to fall upon the world was postponed once more. Human sacrifice was an alchemy by which life was made out of death; and the gods themselves had given the example on the first day of creation.

As for man, his very first duty was to provide nourishment *intonan intota tlaltecuhtli tonatiuh*, ‘for our mother and our father, the earth and the sun’. To shirk this was to betray the gods and at the same time all humankind, for what was true of the sun was also true of the earth, the rain, growth and the forces of nature. Nothing was born, nothing would endure, except by the blood of sacrifice (Soustelle 1955/1970: 96–7).

Humanity has always relied on the gods for their very existence and for their well-being and in exchange the gods required sacrifices to sustain them in turn (Clendinnen 1993: 74; Sahagun 1981: 199).

This system of exchange with the gods, however, was not necessarily symmetrical and there were no guarantees that appropriate conduct would produce positive outcomes. Events and the trajectory of individual lives were, after all, the outcome of conflictual superhuman forces, but also Tezcatlipoca, in particular, was feared for his quixotic interventions in human affairs (Clendinnen 1993: 80). True, divination and priestly sleight of hand allowed people to circumvent aspects of their fate (Sahagun 1981: 39), but the universe was essentially an unsafe, insecure and largely unknown place. So, despite all these human sacrifices, a day would come when the sun would be no more and earthquakes would destroy the world (Soustelle 1955/1970: 96).

Tlacaxipehualitzli

The festival of Tlacaxipehualitzli was a payment to the gods for the favors they had shown humankind and to beg for more favors. It was particularly addressed to Xipe Totec, who had flayed himself in an act of self-torture just as the sprouting maize seed separates into multiple shoots. Flaying a victim’s skin represented the maize seeds’ own self-sacrifice when they shed their outer covering; wearing the victim’s skin represented the regeneration of the plant. The ceremonies were intimately connected with other annual events; for example the war season that began in the November of the previous year and which lasted for 120 days. Ideally, major military campaigns were started and completed during this period, which ended just before Tlacaxipehualitzli. During these months new territories were

sought and existing provinces secured in bloody and often fatal warfare and ideally a large number of enemy warriors would be captured and be available for sacrifice. Sometimes the numbers of captured warriors would be supplemented with warriors captured in a *xochiyatl*, 'flower war', a ritual combat usually between the triple alliance and the unconquered 'Enemies-of-the-House', the cities of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco and Cholula. In such wars, warriors on both sides sought to capture as many enemy warriors as possible so that they could be ritually sacrificed. 'Sacred war was a cosmic duty' (Soustelle 1955/ 1970: 203).

At the beginning of January, Tenoch warriors would begin to display the warriors they had captured in their *calpolli*. At the beginning of March these captives were transformed into *xipeme*, living images of *Xipe Totec*. The next day, when *Tlacaxipehualitzli* officially began, the priests, in accord with the royal prerogative of controlling ritual human sacrifice, took the captives to the Great Temple. This was believed to be the *axis mundi* and the Tenoch saw it as their responsibility to maintain its essential role in sustaining the universe. The priests told the captive warriors to climb to the shrine of *Huitzilopochtli* (Carrasco 1999: 142). Some captives displayed reluctance while others embraced their fate, but in each case:

[T]hey stretched them out on the sacrificial stone. Then they delivered them into the hands of six offering priests; they stretched them out upon their backs; they cut open their hearts with a wide bladed knife.

And they named the hearts of the captives 'precious eagle-cactus fruit'. They raised them in dedication to the sun, *Xipilli*, *Quauhtleunatil* . . .

And these captives who had died they called eagle men. (Sahagun 1981: 48)

The priests flayed each victim and the old men of the captor's *calpulli* took the body to their temple and then to the captor's house. The corpse was cut into pieces, the thighbone going to the *tlatoni*, the rest to members of the *calpulli*. The captor distributed bowls containing pieces of the victim's flesh to his family; he himself ate none of the flesh. He was decorated with 'bird down', covered with 'chalk' and named the 'sun', because he 'had not died there in war, or else because he would yet go to die, to pay the debt [in war or by sacrifice]' (Sahagun 1981: 48).

On the second day, young Aztec warriors wearing the skins of the sacrificed warriors travelled from door to door collecting food but also harassing other captive warriors in mock battles. Elite aristocratic warriors then led some of these captives to the place of gladiatorial sacrifice. Each captor tied his captive to the hub of the *Temalacatl*, a round flat stone about nine feet in diameter, and then

provided him with defanged weaponry. He was attacked in sequence by elite warriors until overcome and sacrificed. Watching these ceremonies, but hidden from the crowds of the Tenoch, were foreign dignitaries, some from friendly states but others from the very states whose warriors were being sacrificed. Each warrior who had provided a captive walked around the city placing the captive's blood on the images of the gods and the captive's body was taken to his calpolli. There it was flayed, cut up and distributed. Again, this captor ate none of it. He said: 'Shall I perchance eat my very self?' For when he took [the captive], he had said: 'He is my beloved son.' And the captive had said: 'He is my beloved father' (Sahagun 1981: 54). But he did take the flayed skin, at first wearing it himself, and then lending it out to poverty-stricken Tenochca.

On the third day there were more sacrifices but also many ceremonial dances. The tlatoani of each of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan danced together, wearing the skins of the most important flayed victims, and accompanied by many of the greater nobility. The Tenochca tlatoani then distributed presents of cloaks and food to the warriors for their accomplishments (Sahagun 1981: 56). And then variations of the ceremonies went on and on until the end of the month. In the next month maize seeds and other seed were planted.

David Carrasco provides an incisive analysis of the overall significance of the event.

The gorgeous and terrible displays of warriors draped in the skins of sacrificial victims and the cuauhxicalli filled with blood moving throughout the city show that the Tlacaxipehualitzli was a story the Aztecs told to themselves about their triumphant wars, in the way they wanted it known . . .

[For] the observer, deity impersonator, mother carrying child, teenager in the street, or novice in training, the ceremony is a perfect battle, is a middle place, their pivotal place in a process of production and completion. It is both the end point and the starting point. It is a perfect battle after the war and a magic display to the citizens of how things should go in the next war. It is a public victory within the city, and a preparation for a future battle. It is an ideal recollection and an anticipatory ceremonial practice because it provides a clear cognitive and experiential system or map . . . [P]ower in the Aztec world was perceived as much in ceremonies of sacrifice and their charismatic transformations as in the stomping, moving hoards who blazed like a sacred fire in the lands beyond the capital city. (Carrasco 1999: 163).

Rereading the sacrificial discourse and practices of the Tenochca

Such account of the complexus of mythological discourses and ritual practices associated with human sacrifice underlines much that is of significance. However, while useful in describing the practice of human sacrifice and in helping to understand the workings of Tenochca society as a whole, as explanations such accounts are underdeveloped, need clarification, elaboration, retheorizing and articulation with other theoretical positions. Soustelle and Carrasco in particular are culturalist in that they start and remain constrained by the discourses of the Tenoch about both everyday activities and more formal ritualized ones, paying almost exclusive attention to what Tenoch nobles said that they did and also the explanations they provided for their conduct. They do not, however, pay sufficient attention to all that was taking place, that which was underemphasized, and much of that which while neither seen or spoken can be theorized.

The Tenochca ceremonial machine was part of a social formation based upon a tax-rent system whereby ‘the surplus product’ was ‘appropriated in the form of a tax . . . paid in labour . . . or in kind’ (Hindess and Hirst 1975; Knight 2002: 183). This came from various sources; of great significance were tributes from other states, going to the royal treasury, some of which was distributed to the 6 per cent of the population who constituted the nobility. These also owned large estates, farmed by serfs, outside of Tenochtitlan in conquered territories. Within Tenochtitlan itself, produce and communal labor, including military service, were provided by its 20 *calpolli*. Social order was sustained by a complex combination of an economic order, which usually guaranteed an adequate subsistence living, a very ordered and regulated life and a combination of ideology and repression (cf. Padden 1962; Wolf 1999).

While there is no doubt that part of the purpose of Tenochca sacrificial rituals was to show their might to themselves, to their allies and their opponents, it was also to make clear to the citizens that war was necessary and good, that they benefited from war, and that their contribution was essential. Carrasco (1999: 163) is accurate that the whole festival ‘is a perfect battle after the war and a magic display to the citizens of how things should go in the next war . . . and preparation for a future battle’. But inherent in the mythologies, the ceremonies and the discourses of the Tenoch warriors themselves was the inherent reversibility for them of the role of sacrificer and victim. This was why the captor ate none of the flesh of his sacrificed captive, saying: ‘Shall I perchance eat my very self?’ It was also why on another occasion after the sacrifice of his captive, he was decorated and named the ‘sun’, because although he ‘had not died . . . he . . . would yet go to die’.

The root sacrifice of the Tenochca was the sacrifice of their own young warriors. At the same moment that the massive ceremonial machine of Tenochtitlan centripetally pulled in enemy warriors to be ritually sacrificed it centrifugally pushed out its own warriors to be sacrificed – on the battlefield or, if captured, ritually. This was a society dedicated to war. Its resources, social organization, ideologies, socialization practices, schooling, reward structures all promoted militarism (Clendinnen [1993]).

It was also allegedly meritocratic in that the nobles were seen as the best warriors and exceptional commoners could receive special honors. In fact, the nobles were better trained, better armed and better protected. The tlatoani rulers represented their wars as defensive, arising from incipient danger, disobedience or their being treated with contemptuous disrespect. But there were always sanctions against those who resisted military discipline or proved cowardly or inept on the battlefield; warriors were meant to fight to the death to avoid capture, and to return home after being a bona fide captive was dishonorable (Hassig 1988: 115). Even when the Tenochca were successful in their campaigns, nearly 20 per cent of their warriors were probably killed, maimed or missing (Hassig 1988: 117). When they were badly defeated, for example, as in the wars against the Tarascans, the triple alliance lost over 20,000 warriors, 90 per cent of their army. It is necessary to modify Carrasco's words: sacrifice in the Tenochca empire was first, of the Tenoch warriors who died when as 'stomping, moving hoards' they 'blazed like a sacred fire in the lands beyond the capital city' and the peoples thereby ravaged, and only second, of those ceremonially sacrificed in Tenochtitlan.

All societies that routinely engage in warfare have been willing to sacrifice their own people on the battlefield, and they are unlikely to have more compunction about killing other people on the battlefield than in risking the lives of their own warriors. The same holds true for the treatment of prisoners. From the point of view of captors, but not that of the captives, there is little difference between slaughtering enemies on the battlefield, capturing them and then massacring them, torturing them to death, or ritually sacrificing them. There are, of course, other ways of dealing with prisoners: ransom; prisoner exchange; temporary imprisonment; serfdom or slavery; impressment in the victor's army; colonization; and simple release (Patterson 1982: 106). Each and every way of dealing with prisoners has costs and benefits for their captors, and choices made between them are likely to be determined by pragmatic responses to situational exigencies rather than by moral considerations. But these exigencies are also determined in part by the goals of any particular state.

In Meso-America warfare was common, but the enslavement of captives was minimal, in part because production was so organized that they were unlikely to be

a useful addition to the labor force. On the other hand, the sacrifice of some captives was common, although not on a mass level. Yet not all powerful city-states dedicated themselves to war. Teotihuacan, for example, possessed significant military capacity, and a warrior elite was of great significance to the city (Sugiyama 2005; Headrick 2007), but its internal growth and the external expansion of its influence were not primarily dependent upon the use of force; trade, albeit often unequal terms, was much more significant (Pasztory 1997). Cholula, during much of its existence and including during the post-classic period, was the centre of the Quetzalcoatl cult and generally avoided offensive actions (McCafferty 2000). Even the more warlike and equally powerful city-states of Atzacotalco and Chalco, intense and often belligerent rivals, avoided war for a long period of time. Instead, the two city-states engaged in ritual confrontations, the goal of which was not to physically harm their opponents, who were mainly nobles, but to take them captive and then release them unharmed back to their home city. These were one kind of flower wars, *xochiyatls*. However, after eight years or so of this, and in the context of a continuing stalemate, Atzacotalco brought the Tenoch Mexica into the conflict. This coincided with a shift whereby while captured nobles were still released, captured commoners were now killed, presumably as human sacrifices (Hassig 1988: 128–30). Chalco remained unconquered but in about 1420 it precipitated another flower war with the Tenochca; and now both sides captured and sacrificed the other's nobles as well as their commoners. Conflict with Chalco continued, although the latter was finally defeated in 1450. But this victory was followed by four years of famine, and Tenochtitlan then instituted flower wars with the independent Aztec states of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Atlixco and a reluctant Cholula (Duran 1994: 231–6).

Tenochtitlan was above all an imperialist power, claiming a 'manifest destiny' to sustain the cosmos. In most of their campaigns, including those against other Aztec peoples, the Tenochca's main goal was to defeat their opponents, ruthlessly killing them on the battlefield, sometimes massacring prisoners after the battle, but usually saving some for sacrifice. The major sacrifices were on the battlefield, and the ritual sacrifice of prisoners was as impelled as much by pragmatism as religious ideology. The Tenochca were very successful, but their success had within it crucial dangers; it created problems of control and their methods of control created further problems (Conrad and Demarest 1984). Then the Spanish arrived.

Aztec Sacrifice

Sacrifier: Aztec warrior kills on the battlefield or captures enemy Aztec warrior; seeks position in competitive hierarchical society.

Superior sacrificer: Each tlatoani controls all ritual human sacrifice, but also decides whether or not to send warriors to secure and expand imperium and keep the sun moving in the sky. Sacralizes the Aztec hierarchy.

Victims: Aztec warriors embrace death, whether on the battlefield or in ritual sacrifice. Their souls rise with the sun and later become a butterfly or hummingbird.

Sacrificer: On the battlefield another warrior; in the temple the tlatoani's priests .

Ceremony: In battle somewhat ritualized fighting; in the temple rituals including heart excision.

Recipient: Huitzilopochtli, and the other gods.

Cosmic order: Order of the fifth sun is sustained, particularly in Tenochtitlan, the 'city of sacrifice, where the great temple is the cosmogonic axis.

Community: Collective involvement in the many rituals encompassing the sacrifice: nobility and some ordinary community members eat victim's remains.

Social effects: Sustains military hierarchy and warlike spirit; victories required to sustain leader's charisma/sacral credentials otherwise possible instability. Rituals stable but mythology often changes in line with interests: violence usually externalized creating internal solidarity and terror in subaltern people but it may also create resistance in the latter.

Conclusion: back to the USA

Let us turn again the United States. Probably nothing has exposed the dubious claims of the US to be an ethical power and one always forced to go to war by malevolent opponents than its relation with Iraq. George H. W. Bush's address on the eve of the first Gulf War [was] effective both because it is not a complete misrepresentation of the world – it includes reference to uncontestable facts – and because it subjects these to rhetorical strategies which decontextualize them and then recontextualize them within a motivated ideological and self-interested discourse, which in this case uses a sacrificial trope (Pearce and Fadely 1992). But the manipulations engaged in by George W. Bush are too well known to need detailing here, as is much of the mayhem and unnecessary deaths for which he is responsible. Yet one issue is of particular relevance here, namely torture. It is not coincidental that at the same time that many of the American elite were boasting that the United States was the only superpower, and, in fact, imperial power, the Bush administration publicly redefined who they might hold as prisoners, and how, in violation of Geneva Conventions. Further, the interrogation of prisoners would now take place in a way that was illegal, violating well-established legal judgments as to what constituted torture. It is becoming increasingly clear that for many US administrations, signing treaties and publicly subscribing to the ethical treatment of prisoners has been motivated primarily by a fear that otherwise US soldiers in the hands of the enemy would also be tortured, with consequences that would include the discouraging of military recruitment. In fact, some of those in the US military raised exactly these concerns in their critique of Bush's torture policy. But the problem lies not merely with such excesses but with the routine activities of this state. It is here that I disagree with the argument of Marvin and Ingle (1999: 199) that all societies are based upon obligatory blood sacrifice, not because they have a rosy-eyed view of the US, but because they overgeneralize from the American experience. Members of many societies try to avoid rivalry and war by trying to nurse their own resources and engage in co-operative relations with other societies. Only some societies are expansionist. The US was born from British colonialism and the rationale for its foreign policy is well captured by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, notable for its theocratic underpinnings, worship of private property, its preference for an egoistic freedom over collective endeavors, its disdain for substantive equality and its impoverished view of democracy (Pearce 2007).

There is a more critical discourse of sacrifice that links it with justice and injustice. First, the activities of the US have led to the sacrifice of many brave young American men and women who have risked and often sacrificed their lives and health in conflicts in other lands, not, as they have been led to believe, in the pursuit of peace, self-determination, justice and democracy but rather through

olitical strategies oriented to securing US political and economic hegemony. Particular Americans have disproportionately borne the burden of these sacrifices – for example, it was clear during the Vietnam war that while most elite white men kept their sons, including a future vice-president and president, safe in America, many badly schooled sons of poor southern whites and of poor African-Americans were destined for combat in Vietnam and other parts of south-east Asia. But there is an important point to note about this critical discourse of sacrifice. It understands these wartime deaths in a new way, as being a cynical misuse of noble impulse and courageous commitment, a consequence of a system in which state power is at the behest of self-serving limited special interests. This reinterpretation makes possible new ethical judgments and to imagine alternative forms of social arrangements that could produce different outcomes, ones that offer all human beings equal respect and equal protection. In other words, the occurrence of these deaths become what Alain Badiou calls an ‘event’ (Badiou 2001: 70). Thus, Remembrance Day can be used to argue for new ways of dealing with international and global relations rather than to legitimate new militaristic venture.

In this context, like in the Aztec case, there are readily available statements and documents that can facilitate a shift in perspective on the relation between sacrifice and the US military. A useful starting point is the six articles of the current Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States.

I

I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

II

I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

III

If I am captured, I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

IV

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information nor take part in any action, which might be harmful to my

comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

V

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

VI

I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America. (US Department of Defense, n.d.)

The code assumes monotheism and an unquestioning nationalism. Military personnel must be willing to sacrifice their lives for the defense of their country and to never surrender willingly. The Code of Conduct is seen as a positive mission statement regarding expected behavior in combat or captivity and in a relation of mutual support with the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The UCMJ is a system of punitive laws, a part of which can be used to address serious violations of the Code. Articles 77–134 of this are known as the Punitive Articles. While some of these refer to the same offenses to be found in state and federal civilian criminal codes, a large number deal with offenses against military organization and military projects. Desertion, disobedience, mutiny, sedition, rioting and cowardice are all addressed and liable to severe punishment. This means effectively that once personnel are in the military they are obliged to effect their superior's definition of 'defensive action' and how they should conduct themselves. True, there are conditions in which formally they can refuse unlawful orders, but in practical terms authority and discipline generally rule their responses. It indicates how personnel, in effectively surrendering their autonomy, may carry out orders, whatever their content. This has been made all too clear in such incidents as the 'My Lai massacre' and the disgraceful events in Abu Ghraib prison, but it is also just as clear when the military accept such unethical commands as to firebomb cities, drop atomic bombs and invade other sovereign states because they might constitute a threat.

US society, sacrifice and repression.

Sacrifiers: American state functionaries, organized capitalism, ideological apparatuses, gendered and radicalized institutional structure.

Societally superior sacrificer: The corporate capitalist system and its state.

Victims: (a) Military personnel; (b) Working class used up in production processes; (c) Consumers reproducing themselves and some valuing themselves through accumulation of commodities; (d) Those denied an adequate income and meaningful life for selves and children in US and abroad.

Sacrificers: An autocratic military, repressive state apparatus, authoritarian corporations.

Ceremonies: Memorializations of some victims but effacement of others.

Recipient: Global capitalist system articulated and ordered through transnational and national relations.

Cosmic order: Unequal/unjust/class/race/gender systems sustained by unjust wealth distribution, repression and sustained by meritocratic ideology.

Community: Supports 'communities' of the 'respectable' disorders 'communities' of the 'oppressed'.

Social effects: Tensions about middle-class self-identification; class, racial and gender injustices and systemic contradictions and struggles to organize positive change potentially challenge this.

CODA

Sacrifice has also been a significant theme in President Barack Obama's communications with Americans. For example, in his Inaugural Address on 20 January 2009 he mentioned the human cost of the American War of Independence, the Civil War, World War Two and the Vietnam War. He refers to the back-breaking contribution of pioneers and immigrants and, unusually, slaves ('the lash') and exploited workers ('sweatshops'), to the development of the United States. In another part of the speech, he called for 'a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world'. These words may seem hackneyed, crying out for the cynical response only too appropriate to similar words from the Presidents Bush. However, they elicited positive responses from many, both because President Obama appears to express genuine concern for the disadvantaged and oppressed, but also because intuitively people realize that no society is possible without sacrifice. And yet, there are serious limitations to Obama's vision: in his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention in August 2008 he claimed that 'each of us has the freedom to make of our own lives what we will', thus seeming to efface structural advantage and disadvantage; his challenges to corporate capitalism have been weak; his policy in Afghanistan is foolhardy. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that he is wise, compassionate and courageous, and these qualities may help him move beyond the limits of his current political vision. It is possible that the more he becomes aware that the ruthless egoism he confronts is a natural concomitant of an inherently unjust corporate capitalism, the more he may recognize that a just world requires its demise.

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