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► **To cite this version:**

Hugo Reinert. The Pertinence of Sacrifice: Some notes on Larry the Luckiest Lamb. *Borderlands e-Journal: New Spaces in the Humanities*, 2007, 6 (3), no pagination. halshs-01097626

**HAL Id: halshs-01097626**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01097626>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2014

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# The Pertinence of Sacrifice—Some notes on Larry the Luckiest Lamb

Hugo Reinert

*Borderlands* Vol 6 No 3, 2007 (no pagination)<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Taking the possible relevance of animal sacrifice in the context of modern industrial food production as a starting point, the article examines the ethical and analytical status of industrially slaughtered animals, the transformation of violence within the slaughterhouse, the biopolitical articulation between literal and figurative logics of sacrifice and the question of whether non-human animals can meaningfully be described as “bare life.” The discussion links these issues to questions of human violence, arguing that an adequate understanding of biopower must today perforce incorporate non-human life within the analytical horizon. In closing, the article proposes the term “necroavailability” as a neologism that formally captures the bare life’s variable quality of being or not being available for destruction.

## Introduction

1. In mid-March 2006, slaughterhouse workers in West Yorkshire, England discovered that an ewe in a holding pen had unexpectedly given birth to a lamb, only hours prior to her scheduled slaughter. The charismatic little creature was promptly named Larry, the “Luckiest Lamb”—a name that stuck even when “he” turned out to be a she. Faced with the unexpected situation, the skilled lads of the disassembly line were paralysed. According to the abattoir director, “none of the lads would kill it—10 lads all said no.” As he said, “everything has a right to live.” When it became clear that hygiene regulations would force the slaughter—having entered the premises of a slaughterhouse and been designated for death, hygiene regulations forbid any animal from leaving again alive—the slaughterhouse workers hired a barrister and took their case to DEFRA, the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Remarkably, their case won through: exceptional dispensation was granted and, provided they were not diseased, mother and child could be moved to a local farm and live happily ever after (“The Luckiest Lamb”, *Daily Mail* 17.03.2006). I shall return to Larry and his mother in more detail subsequently; in the meantime, they provide the ethnographic bracket for my concern in the present article, which lies with the social, ethical and analytical status of industrially slaughtered animals, and of the violence that is directed against them. I approach this issue via the question of animal sacrifice—a detour which by the end of the article I will, hopefully, have justified.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol6no3\\_2007/reinert\\_larry.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol6no3_2007/reinert_larry.htm)

## A Question of Sacrifice

2. As a matter of routine, certainly in Western Europe, most commercially slaughtered animals today pass through a series of complex and strictly regulated operations before their meat enters the market. The aim of these operations is to ensure that the resultant meat is well-formed *qua* commodity, suitable for circulation within regional, national and transnational networks of market exchange: that is, certifiably safe, hygienic, traceable, ethically acceptable and of standardized cut. Animals selected for commercial slaughter are carefully inspected, through ante-mortem examinations of the living animal and post-mortem analyses of the carcass, at the tail end of the production line. Detailed regulations and precise instructions govern their treatment before the slaughter, the technologies and techniques of the killing itself and the subsequent treatment of the resultant carcass: from the order and timing of operations to the colour of work-clothing, the distribution of hot-water sinks and storage temperatures. Both the act of killing and the operations that transform the carcass into meat are undertaken by designated technicians, within sealed, sterile, controlled environments. Regulations are strictly enforced by officiating veterinarians and food hygiene inspectors. In their elaborate and pervasive concern with purity and correct action, it might be tempting to see in these practices and regulations “a whole series of preliminary operations, lustrations, unctions, prayers etc. [that] transform the animal to be immolated into a sacred thing” (Durkheim, cited in Lynch 1988: 265). There is a resemblance, of external form at least, to the ritualized and purifying preparations that would precede an animal sacrifice: might there be more to this than a superficial isomorphism?

3. At first sight, the proposition seems counter-intuitive—perhaps first and foremost because the industrial slaughter of animals is almost the paradigm of a secular modern practice: rational, efficient, impersonal, profit-oriented, subject not to the caprice of a deity but to the vicissitudes of the market. The notion of sacrifice in a literal, Abrahamic sense has become profoundly alien to our conceptions of the modern, of modernity and of our modern selves. On the one hand, symbolic registers of sacrifice proliferate all around: men and women are sacrificed in war or “peacekeeping missions”; extremists sacrifice themselves against civilian targets, while civil liberties are sacrificed to combat terrorism; for ourselves, we may even “sacrifice” a chocolate-bar habit to lose a few pounds before the bikini season. In the middle of all this, the literal practice of blood-sacrifice has become something ritual, archaic, brutal, even diabolic: something that belongs not with us but with them, conducted by strange and alien mentalities in foreign times and places—particularly if these “foreign” times and places are located right next door, Muslims celebrating Eid down the hall. The tidy and sublimated secular-Christian West will have no truck with the atavistic messiness of blood-sacrifice (Nancy 1991): instead, the practice has become a marker of distance, expressed variously in spatial, temporal, social, cultural, psychological and racial terms. In the light of this, to speak of the disappearance of sacrifice is not merely a neutral observation, but a speech act that invokes and endorses powerful meta-narratives—of secularization, progress, rationalization, dis-enchantment—while confirming the

position of a modern, EuroAmerican Self relative to an imagined Other that serves as its negative mirror.

4. But what if the modalities of killing that underpin our carnivorous modernity were not so distinct, after all, from the alien practices we condemn, censor and reject? In *The Nervous System*, Taussig argues for “re juxtaposing the terms of the colonial enquiry” (1992: 117), by deploying notions such as *fetish* or *maleficium*, traditionally associated with the exotic Other, to the analysis of Western social constructs such as the State. Along these lines it seems worthwhile to try re-examining or re-articulating the notion of animal sacrifice, to make it address not only archaic, vanishing or exotic phenomena, but also practices and institutions that are current, even emergent. Relocated and reinterpreted, the notion might shed new light not only on the practice of animal killing, but also on the wider systems, processes and conditions which constitute the complex modernities that define us, shaping our life-worlds: the invisible economies that regulate the conduct—and value—of our lives.

### The Industrial Choreography of Death

Ritual has the effect of separating and isolating a series of actions from the ordinary processes of life. What is otherwise forbidden becomes legitimate in, and only in, the sacred ritual context (Bourdillon & Fortes 1980: 14).

5. By definition, an animal sacrifice is an act of killing: an exercise of lethal violence directed at an animal victim by a human agent. The availability of an appropriate animal victim is one precondition for the sacrificial operation; where it is not immediately available, the victim needs to be produced, through a range of preparatory practices, unctions, manipulations, seclusions, purifications and namings that render it suitable for the sacrifice. The ritually produced character of the victim is important, for example, to theories that emphasize the substitutive character of the sacrificial operation. Where the victim is made to stand in for something else, such as a human life (Girard 2005), it must possess—or be made to possess—certain qualities or properties in order to effectively enact the substitution. The killer or *sacrificant*, similarly, may need to be prepared and purified, and is often assigned obligations, responsibilities, actions to perform, formulas to recite, even psychological motivations or states of mind to attain or maintain. These two roles are elementary: without a killer and a victim, there can be no blood-sacrifice. A host of other more or less supplementary roles could also be adduced from the literature (e.g. Hubert & Mauss 1964): key among these is the *transcendent recipient*, who presides over the sacrifice and may need to be appeased, propitiated or fed, and who may in turn in some way respond to or repay the sacrifice. Taken together, the elementary trinity of victim, sacrificant and transcendent recipient-observer compose the basic template of the Abrahamic sacrifice (Derrida 1995).

6. Other roles in the drama of sacrifice might include the *mundane recipients*, the actors who may receive the material spoils from the sacrifice, consuming it in the ritual meal; the *donors*, who provide and pay for sacrificial victim; the various *beneficiaries*, often including the donor, who

benefit in direct and indirect ways from the sacrifice; the observers or *officiants*—priests, adjudicators, judges—who preside over the sacrifice, ensuring that ritual procedure is followed and that the sacrifice is conducted appropriately; as well as the *audience*—spectators, onlookers, witnesses or testimonies who may assist, comment on or otherwise participate in the performance of the sacrifice: sometimes most importantly by their very absence from the rite, their ritual exclusion as an “absent audience” (Sered 2002: 20). The key point of this enumeration is that considered in this light, the act of sacrifice comes to appear as a fundamentally social event: a central act of violence, framed in a network of linked relationships that constitute a kind of *sacrificial nexus*. Importantly, this social event has a dramatic or spectacular quality, closely associated with the conspicuous, *socially visible* exercise of violence.

7. Animal sacrifices are conducted for a variety of reasons: to strengthen or exalt, atone or purify; to attack, appease or propitiate; to petition deities or commune with intangible forces. From Mauss to Girard, the common ground linking most theoretical accounts of sacrifice is that in some respect or other, they all depend on the central violence of the sacrificial act being *socially visible*. The meaning, functions and effects of the sacrifice require that its performance be socially recognized *as an exercise of violence*. Explicitly or not, sacrificial violence consistently appears as a ritually marked, foregrounded, socially significant form of violence. Even where the act itself is concealed or hidden from view, it remains a marked and extraordinary event. Contrary to this conspicuous violence of the sacrifice, the violence of modern industrial slaughter is a form of violence that seeks to be “as if it were not” (Vialles 1994), that constantly wrestles itself, attempting to disappear and transform—unsuccessfully, as attested to by the ongoing circulation of “shocking” revelations of slaughterhouse interiors—into something else, something that is not violence. The historical transformation of slaughterhouse into modern death factory has created a situation where a veritable arsenal of discursive, symbolic and material arrangements is deployed to make the individual act of industrial violence invisible—physically and socially—and strip it of significance *qua* violence: through concealments and seclusions, euphemisms and the language of “beef” and “mutton”, “production” and “harvesting”; scientific interventions aimed at easing the flow of animals through the “production facilities”, the “humanization” of killing practices and the elimination of animal consciousness. In short, the modernization of slaughter and the modern, industrial organization of killing seem to involve the production of death—and of its accompanying violence—as a kind of non-event: conducted safely out of sight, behind closed doors, by paid labour with no relationship to the killed animals. Suffering, pain and death are eliminated from view, minimized through the application of humane scientific principles and, finally, almost completely effaced in the commercial circulation of meat-as-commodity. From the humane, socially invisible moment of the kill to the anodyne, carefully pre-packaged terminal *substance* picked up at the local supermarket, marketing and carefully controlled representation erase all traces of violence in the finished meat-commodity. Insofar as these arrangements succeed, the humane act of modern slaughter represents a kind of paradoxically *non-violent violence* that slips past almost unnoticed—a highly naturalized, *socially invisible* form of everyday violence. In its quotidian routine and repetitive banality, it is almost the exact antithesis—a reverse, or negative correlate—to the extraordinary and socially marked violence of the sacrifice.

8. This point finds purchase in the literature. While some observers and critics argue that modern meat production does represent an ongoing form of sacrifice—in the broad sense of being based on the destruction or surrender of living animals for the benefit of humans—other commentators, closer perhaps to the bone (and flesh) of the traditional anthropology of sacrifice, tend to treat industrial slaughter as having *nothing at all* to do with sacrifice or with sacrificial operations—as, in fact, the very opposite of sacrifice. Expressing something like a general consensus, the French anthropologist Mondher Kilani, for example, argues that with industrial slaughter consumers, producers and regulators conspire in “the construction of a fictive ‘hygienic’ death, without spilled blood, or victim, or sacrificer: the modern putting to death of animals *no longer possesses a sacrificial dimension*” (2000: 79; my translation; emphasis added). What this loosely defined consensus fails to capture is that there is at least one vitally important correlation between sacrificial practices and industrial killing—namely, as I suggested at the outset, that both represent *highly scripted*, ritualized forms of killing.

9. The industrial organization of killing represents an inordinately complex technical script, involving a large number of participants—a script that calls for a large-scale mobilization of resources, manpower and specialists. In this sense, the modernization of killing might be said to involve a kind of secular ritualization of the act of slaughter—a formal specification of actors, procedures, spaces and instruments that stipulates strictly their relationship and succession in time. Through this specification, the slaughterhouse kill acquires a very distinctive choreography: as a spectacle, it becomes organized and intended primarily for the gaze of *officiants*—the officials, veterinarians and inspectors that represent State or federal interests, ensuring protocol and the disciplined ordering of practice and bodies. “Everyone else” is redefined as *outsiders* and relocated to the outside of the act: whether literally, in a physical sense, or socially, symbolically and emotionally. The industrial script is anything but politically neutral. The powerful exclusions and involutions that it performs have far-ranging social, cultural and material effects—from the point of view of consumers, livestock owners, activists, researchers and everyone else that participates, in some capacity or other, in the agroindustrial production complex that defines and enables our carnivorous modernity of leather shoes, gelatin and pork pies.

10. Within a psychoanalytic of culture, it would be precisely these proliferating operations—the myriad expulsions, fissions, concealments, effacements, segmentations and involutions; the effacements and segregations, the concealments and surveillance, the standardization of practice and the “humanization” of anonymous mass death on industrial scales—that *confirmed* animal killing as the “public secret” of carnivorous modernity (Taussig 1999), operating as ideological bricks in a wall that offered “social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (Žižek 1989: 45). Importantly however, these operations not only confirm and respond to the trauma of the kernel: *they produce it*. As anyone can confirm that has been party to the casual, untroubled fascination of the very young with the act, there is nothing necessarily intrinsic about the post-domestic shock of witnessing a slaughter: the shock is enabled by a prior disjunction that has made slaughter and death shocking precisely to the degree that they were previously concealed from view (Bulliet 2005). That is to say, concurrently with dramatic shifts in spatial,

social, material and economic organization, the disciplinary ritualization of slaughter has also operated a moral transformation of the act of killing itself, centred on the moment of observation: a transformation of observer into *witness*—or intruder—and of routine everyday practice into concealed, traumatic, morally troubling action. A secret spectacle, choreographed for the eyes of unseen experts. Effectively, with the modernization of slaughter, the vast majority of us have been turned, unwittingly, into the members of an absent audience—participants defined by our avoidance, by our combined inability and marked insistence on *not witnessing* the desacralized rites of modern slaughter; rites that take place constantly, on almost unimaginable scales, across the entire world.

### The Possibility of a Victim

In the eyes of a butcher a horse is already dead (meat, an object) (Bataille, cited in Nancy 1991: 30).

11. The material, disciplinary and moral transformation of modern slaughter leads me back to a matter that lies close to the heart of sacrifice: what is a sacrificial victim? What is the specific role of a *living* victim in the script of a sacrificial operation, what is it that distinguishes a living animal or human from, say, a cucumber among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956)? No single answer to this exists: one answer that I suggest here centres on a quality of relative or limited affinity, shared between executioner and living victim in a way that excludes the cucumber. To Girard, the sacrificial substitution of an animal for a human being requires that the victim be socially close enough, both to its killer and the community, to operate as an effective scapegoat. At the same time, it must not be so close as to trigger the latent violence that the sacrifice aims to neutralize in the first place. In order to take upon itself and diffuse the violence that circulates through the community, the victim must thus be simultaneously *of* the community and *outside* it. If it is too distant, it can not meaningfully fulfil its function as a surrogate; if it is too close, the sacrifice risks triggering the very violence that it aims to disperse in the first place. In short, the role of the animal victim hinges on its *partial affinity* with the killer: an affinity that finds expression in the treatment of the victim, in forms of address, expressions of affection, clothing and apparel. Such affinities frequently play a central role in the operation of the sacrifice, enabling it as a meaningful practice—whether its meaning be substitution, absolution or communicating with the gods. The animal victim may not be a human person, but it is nevertheless commensurable, in some way or the other, with its human killer.

12. Another key element of affinity between human agent and living victim within many sacrificial scripts is the *volition* of the victim, the exercise of which can form a central part of the sacrifice. By assenting to or willing its own death, the victim may confirm the efficacy of the sacrifice—by refusing it, conversely, it may neutralize this efficacy, or signal ill tidings. Somewhat sceptically, Walter Burkert (1983: 16) referred to practices such as positing the volition of the sacrificial victim by inviting its assent as the “comedy of innocence”—a logical move for someone who posited collective guilt as the prime force of sacrifice. In the present

context, his expression draws attention to the mechanisms that displace and defer guilt, not only in traditional sacrifice but also in industrial meat production—as witnessed in the ceaseless efforts to humanize the slaughter, disperse responsibility and conceal the animal origins of the meat. Compared to the enrolment of consenting animals in sacrificial operations, the very staging and structure of this industrial comedy of innocence expresses, first and foremost, a profound ontological disenfranchisement of animals: there is no room here for agency, volition, participation, or assent on their part. Except in children’s literature and perhaps occasionally in advertising (Adams 1990, 2004), modern animals do not and *can not* meaningfully participate in or consent to their own slaughter. They are not volitional agents, and they can not meaningfully be held responsible. Instead, in two steps, the moral responsibility for killing is first confined to the human side of the ontological divide, then effaced, fractured or diffused across a network of agents, devices, procedures and spaces: to technicians, veterinarians, legislators, producers, marketers and consumers, who contrive to disguise the animal origins of the meat and transform it into a substance. Through this bureaucratization of responsibility, “the intentionality of the kill, which is at the heart of the sacrificial act ... is completely eluded in favour of a dispersion of responsibility, made possible by a succession of technical acts” (Kilani 2000: 79).

13. To the extent that the practice of animal sacrifice does depend on a precariously balanced logic of partial affinity between animal victim and human agent, one might say it is the advent of radical human-animal dualism in modernity that makes the practice meaningless, even impossible—by replacing affinity with a logic of complete exteriority or radical otherness. Perhaps it is precisely to the degree that animals come to appear insentient, machine-like, objects, non-persons, substance—in short, insofar as they are turned entirely into *the opposite of a human*, into “meat on legs” or a “walking larder” (e.g. Clutton-Brock 1989)—that they also cease to operate as meaningful sacrificial victims. Borrowing a phrase from Heidegger, the decline and disappearance of animal sacrifice could thus be taken as a measure of the growing “abyss of essence” that separates the human from the non-human, and across which the act of killing now takes place: an ontological gulf that reconstitutes the sacrificant, not as a killer but as a *technician* conducting routine manual labour, and transforms the victim into mere meat, stripped of agency, personhood and other qualities that it might have shared with a human sacrificant. In short, what I am suggesting is that it is the objectification of the industrial livestock animal—born, raised and killed entirely within the industrial coordinates of total human control—that disqualifies it as a sacrificial victim, by excluding it *a priori* from forms of violence and killing that recognize and depend on some form of shared personhood between killer and victim. As perceptive readers will no doubt have predicted already, at this point I find it useful to turn to the works of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

### **The Bare Life of Animals**

14. For a few years now, in his *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben has been tracing the political predicament of the present using the enigmatic figure of the *bare life* [*nuda vita*] (1998). Throughout his work, this bare life appears in many guises: from werewolves, outlaws and



Roman priestesses to overcomatose patients and concentration camp victims. Perhaps its principal exemplar however—the figure that Agamben uses to illustrate its basic dynamic most succinctly—is the *homo sacer* or “sacred man”: “an obscure figure from archaic Roman Law” who, for his crimes, has been expelled from both the *ius humanum* and the *ius divinum*, from both secular and sacred law. As a consequence of this, it is declared that he “may be killed but not sacrificed” (Agamben 1998: 8). Killing this sacred man therefore invokes no sanction, but his life is also “unsacrificeable” (82). His existence is constituted through a “double exclusion” that expresses the basic operation of sovereign power itself—the process by which “the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule” (18). This is the “relation of exception”: “the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion” (18). Through this extreme relation, sovereign power maintains itself in a permanent relationship to the excluded: the outlaw for example, as another figure of the bare life, “is in a continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death” (183).

15. The sacred man and the outlaw are only two figures in a gallery of priests, bandits, kings, werewolves and concentration camp victims, all connected by the thread of the bare life and its shifting parameters. King or camp victim, this bare life is always a figure of the extreme margin: life stripped of its everyday humanity, reduced and excluded to the blurred threshold that surrounds the “city of men” and defines its limits. In a sense, it is the human *zoon politikon* stripped of the very quality that makes it human: its social being, its character of sociality. Seen this way, the bare life is defined by the fact that it is not—or that it is no longer—a *social person*. This is the sense in which the term has come of age recently: particularly to describe Muslims held at Guantanamo, but also—with variable relevance—to describe social phenomena ranging from premature infant births (Wynn 2002) and homeless people (Feldman 2006), to the geopolitics of post-colonial violence (Sylvester 2006) and, somewhat bizarrely, European tourists in Ibiza (Diken & Laustsen 2004). In the present context, the more relevant of these applications focus on the question of violence—on the intersection between the sovereign exercise and justification of violence, on the one hand, and the bare life’s quality of constant, permanent exposure to the threat of violence on the other.

16. As Agamben argues, the exercise of lethal violence against the bare life is twice circumscribed by the structure of the sovereign ban. Suspended in the grasp of sovereign power, the bare life becomes simultaneously vulnerable to certain kinds of violence and ineligible for others. On the one hand, it can be freely killed—the exercise of violence against the bare life is routine, insignificant and unmarked. It requires no expiation or atonement and invites no sanctions: it is banal, without consequence to the law and anything but “intrinsically mysterious, mystifying, convoluting, plain scary, mythical and arcane” (Taussig 1992: 116). Simultaneously, with this subjection to unregulated and freely exercised forms of violence, the bare life also becomes *ineligible for sacrifice*—which is to say, in the general sense in which Agamben interprets the term, that the bare life is excluded from all forms of ritually marked, institutionalized, exalted or sacralizing violence, such as are “prescribed by the rite of the law” (1998: 102): it can not, for example, be “submitted to sanctioned forms of execution” (103). Between them, these two

exclusions operate to *desacralize* the death of the bare life, stripping it of any significance. Its killing and death become trivial, casual, mundane and devoid of higher meaning: to Agamben the observer, the horror of the concentration camp is that as embodiments of the bare life, the men and women there died, to their executors, “like lice” (114). In one sense, the bare life stands as cypher for a de-personalization, or dis-individuation, that transforms subjects into objects: subjecting them to the free exercise of unregulated violence while simultaneously, through the trope of denied sacrifice, disqualifying them from subjection to ritual or sacralizing forms of violence—insofar as they are “not worthy of this gesture of honour” (Hansen & Stepputat 2005: 17).

17. So far, so superficially similar to industrially processed animals—a cornerstone horror of the bare life in the concentration camps was the “bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques” (Foucault, cited in Agamben 1998: 3). Humans were processed like cattle, like pigs in the Chicago stockyards—but if the industrial processing of human beings was a “bestialization”, how do we distinguish what happened to *non-human animals* when they were first shifted into the new industrial mega-abattoirs of the 19th century? How do we talk about the historical emergence of industrial animal processing in the first place? Let me turn briefly to another iteration of the bare life, embodied this time in the figure of the brain-dead patient:

The hospital room in which the neomort, the overcomatose person, and the *faux vivant* waver between life and death delimits a space of exception in which a purely bare life, entirely controlled by man and his technology, appears for the first time. And since it is precisely a question not of a natural life but of an extreme embodiment of *homo sacer* ... what is at stake is ... the definition of a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide (Agamben 1998: 164-165).

In this aspect, the bare life is a life that has been reduced to its minimal threshold of biological activity and beyond, kept alive only by the constant exercise of human power in a technologically created zone of indistinction where the lines between life and death become blurred and flow into each other. The example echoes Peter Singer’s infamous example of the veal calf (Singer 1995: 129-136):

The short life of the veal calf is one which is determined strictly within the coordinates of domination. Calculations made around nutritional and fluid intake, lighting levels, stall size and flooring are directed towards the maximization of market profit from the production of the correctly coloured and textured flesh of the animal. But the priority of the life of the veal calf, no matter how short or painful, is apparent in this process. The life of the calf, maintained in a bare, weak state, is maintained scrupulously to prevent a premature death; a death that threatens the profitability of that life for the livestock complex. Thus a “balance” is struck, where life is held at a point that borders upon death itself (Wadiwel 2002: 3-4).

18. Can animal life be bare? In the case of the calf and the patient, the figure of the bare life seems to aptly capture how both bodies are produced and suspended within dedicated social and technical spaces that effectively constitute two distinct but analogous forms of “death worlds”, or “forms of social existence in which ... populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003: 40). If human beings were “de-humanized” within the industrial coordinates of the camps—a far more precise term than “bestialized”—it seems fair to add that the veal calf and other modern livestock animals whose entire lives are now contained within the industrial coordinates of economic profit and human domination—the narrow, scientifically optimized cycles of battery farming, industrial stock-rearing and slaughterhouse disassembly—have effectively been “deanimalized” (Noske 1997), in ways that reflect and often pre-date the application of analogous techniques and principles to human beings (Patterson 2002).

19. Deployed only as a metaphoric referent for human experience, non-human animals are displaced from the analytical optic—and with them, so are the complex historical processes that have so dramatically transformed and reorganized conditions for animal practice and human-animal relations since the mid-19th century. If animals can indeed be persons in a real, social, interactive and individuated sense—rather than in the merely figurative, symbolic or metaphoric sense all too frequently deployed by social scientists—then this personhood can also be stripped from them, as it can be from humans. The question is, does an extension of the bare life to the sphere of the non-human undermine the critical, political valence of the term? Does the juxtaposition jeopardize Agamben’s political and theoretical agenda?

20. As it stands, the bare life is a nebulous term, shrouded in contradictions: it practically constitutes itself as a “zone of indistinction”, of the type that Agamben himself is so fond of identifying. The kaleidoscopic, highly abstract character of the argument, and the sketchy, often tenuously connected examples, invite the question of whether it is, in fact, meaningful to consider together the various figures that Agamben presents under the banner of the bare life. To put it bluntly:

[E]ven if all subjects are *homines sacri*, they are so in very different ways ... It remains woefully unclear to what extent and in what manner the comatose in the hospitals share the fate of prisoners in concentration camps; whether asylum seekers in the prisons are bare life to the same degree and in the same sense as the Jews in the Nazi camps (Lemke 2005: 7).

21. As if to compound this indistinction, non-human life seems to occupy an oddly fluid, not very clearly theorized space within Agamben’s argument—sometimes segregated to the mute outside of the city, sometimes casually conflated with the inherent “animality of man.” Following his critique of the human-animal distinction in *The Open*, for example—where he refers to it as the “anthropological machine”—he still falls back on a reified, inflexible and essentialist construction of “the Animal”, derived from Heidegger: humans can see “the Open”, animals can not. As one reviewer pointedly notes, “can we be sure that the animal does not see the Open?” (Wadiwel 2004) The answer depends on our faith in Heidegger. More to the point: if indeed “the

anthropological machine must be stopped”, as Agamben says it must, why on earth does he himself then proceed to deploy an essentialist, all-encompassing notion of “the animal”—counterpart to “the human”—that *reproduces* the very distinction he critiques? It is as though Agamben himself stepped back and refused to look the full posthuman implications of his own argument in the eye. Whatever his reasons for this, the net result is that he fails to engage the “anthropological machine” sufficiently to uproot its metaphysical premises or explore alternatives—producing, instead, yet another tired reiteration of human-animal dualism that situates him squarely within a canon of contemporary Continental thinkers whose engagement with animals and the animal provides the grounds for a more radical critique than they themselves are willing—or able—to undertake: “a tale of missed opportunity, of aborted radicalism” (Wood 1999: 19; Atterton & Calarco 2004).

22. Agamben defines the bare life as the “threshold of articulation between nature and culture”; of course, this separation of “nature” from “culture” as discrete domains already represents, in itself, a biopowerful operation—one that defines the ontological limits of personhood, separating persons from non-persons, sentience from instinct, significant life from insignificant existence. The sovereign power constitutes itself by expelling the exception, but expulsion requires an outside. The question, then, is whether the originary and sovereign expulsion that founds the “city of men” is really the production of the sacred man bare life in the zone of indistinction, or rather the prior separation of nature and culture that expels *the animal*, producing “nature” as the original outside that enables the subsequent expulsion of *homo sacer*. The sacred man is expelled towards an outside that already exists, and is occupied by the brute, speechless beasts of nature. Taking the formation of this non-human outside as granted means ignoring the fundamentally political character of the operation by which it is produced in the first place—*political*, because it disqualifies the life that already inhabits the outside from political life and being—and the political ramifications of defining politics and political being as exclusively human prerogatives.

23. Given this, it would seem that not only is there scope for radicalizing the bare life to include nonhuman animals as more than expressions or metaphors of the human: such a move may even amplify the analytical valence of the term, enriching it. We inhabit a world where parameters of human power, control and agency over the so-called natural world are expanding at vertiginous rates: the increasing prevalence of practices such as transgenic bioengineering, xenografting and animal drug trials is producing new entanglements of human and non-human lives, both encompassed within the shared coordinates of the same systems, networks and technologies of biopower. Increasingly, non-human life is becoming subject to and transformed by the operation of powers that also affect human life, and in similar or analogous ways. Anthropocentric exceptionalism produces artificially truncated accounts of human violence: the human mass exterminations of the 20th century had precedents and correlates in the material and social histories of animal mass extermination in the 19th century—down to Henry Ford’s fatefully inspiring observation of the meat-packing disassembly lines in Chicago (Hounshell 1984; Giedion 1969). More than ever, it is vital to find ways of taking non-human life *seriously*: ways of abandoning the classical line that “animals are good to think with” to engage directly with the radical social and material transformations that are affecting not merely *human* life, but all life

and life itself. Drawing attention as it does to the terrifying symbolic violence of biopower, its grotesque potential for dissimulated violence and naturalized exclusions, this is precisely what an appropriately radicalized notion of the bare life offers.

### **The Sacrificial Logic of Mass Killing**

24. The gist of the argument so far is simple: that industrialization and agricultural modernization have transformed the practice of contemporary slaughter into something like the opposite of a sacrifice, in the process reducing the slaughtered animal to something like the bare life. So far, so unexceptionable. Beyond the ritualized physical immolation of animals, however, the term sacrifice also has broader application—in a “figurative” or “metaphoric” capacity (Sykes 1980)—relative to a range of practices and situations where one thing is given up for another. The historian of religion Bruce Lincoln, for example, defines sacrifice as:

a logic, language, and practice of transformative negation, in which one entity—a plant or animal, a bodily part, some portion of a person’s life, energy, property, or even the life itself—is given up for the benefit of some other species, group, god or principle that is understood to be “higher” or more deserving in some fashion or another (Lincoln 1991: 208).

25. Such uses span a range of social domains, from chess-playing strategies and the language of dieting fads, to Christian theology and the moral phraseology of militant nationalism. Most of them lie far from traditional anthropological treatments of sacrificial practice *per se*, but are anything but trivial or redundant to the latter. In the context of tribal India, for example, Padel (1995) demonstrates the powerful, frequently ironic correlations between Christian notions of sacrifice and self-sacrifice among 19th-century British colonial administrators in India, and the “superstitious” and “irrational” *indigenous* practices of sacrifice that these very administrators suppressed in the name of “rational” colonial rule. Effectively, the eradication of *literal* human sacrifice required the *figurative* sacrifice of far more lives than the practice itself had ever demanded.

26. A figurative concept of sacrifice usefully shifts attention away from sacrifice as a narrow and specialized subset of killing, foregrounding instead the vast, intangible and often inchoate economies of *sacrificial commensurability* that regulate forms of exchange, transformation, substitution and controlled destruction, both at individual and aggregated scales, and which may not require individual acts to be marked as sacrifices *per se*. The practice of giving up chocolate to lose weight and become attractive, for example, institutes a simple sacrificial commensurability between chocolate and attractiveness; the surrender of civil liberties in the so-called “war on terror” does something similar. You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. Where an act of killing coincides with a register of figurative sacrifice that commands and justifies it—an American soldier killing a civilian in Iraq, for example—the opaque, complicated relationship that binds the two appears as a theoretical and empirical problem to be investigated. Padel’s

example illustrates one particular point where two meanings of sacrifice—one literal, one figurative—combined awkwardly; the industrial slaughter of animals is another.

27. When Foucault discussed the rise of the modern (fascist) biopolitical State, he described its deployment of a “calculus of war”—the relationship between “my life and the death of the other”—to enable and justify its exercise of the old sovereign power to kill (Foucault 2004). So and so many enemies must die so that I, we, the people or the nation might live. Rather than war-like, the relationship is perhaps better understood as *sacrificial*, part of a sacrificial economy: someone, or something, dies in exchange for the life of another. The precise terms of the equation are insignificant, the key fact is that similar calculations are made constantly, all around us, measuring life and death in a currency of bodies both human and non-human: whether it is Madeleine Albright stating that the price of half a million children dead in Iraq is “worth it”, or the UK government opting to cull more than six million animals during the 2001 Foot and Mouth outbreak, after rejecting vaccination largely on financial grounds.

28. Let me dwell on that last example. The outcry and public horror surrounding the imagery of charnel pyres piled with bodies during the 2001 FMD crisis attests to how the implementation of mass calculations of death at the aggregate and populational level—be they genocides, exterminations, warfare, livestock culls, agro-industrial production—depends in no small part on the invisibility of both violence and victims: be that moral, social, emotive, symbolic or physical. Mass killings require neutralizing the violence involved in the individual act, exempting it from the everyday codes that govern the exercise of violence, making both violence and victim morally insignificant (Bauman 2003). This involves the transformation of the living being targeted by the violence, from victim into “something” that can be killed freely and easily, without protocol, sanction or repercussion—a non-person, *disqualified from sacrifice*. Hence the apparent contradiction: a genocide or mass extermination may well operate through sacrificial calculations at the aggregate level—“they must die so that we can live”—but individual acts of killing that compose it must be routine and inconspicuous; that is, *they must not possess the character of a sacrifice*—exalted, significant, extra-mundane. In the modern slaughterhouse, this is precisely what the act of slaughter has become: impersonal, efficient, routinized, disaggregated into myriad specific operations; in short, an anti-sacrifice. At the same time, mass destructions of nonhuman life—whether regularly for human consumption, or in states of exception precipitated by threats to human health or financial interests—continue to function by their own, often unarticulated logics of sacrificial equivalence.

29. This is where the bare life comes in. Its paradox, as Agamben draws out, is that it can be routinely destroyed within the sacrificial calculations of sovereign power—individually or at an aggregate level—*precisely insofar as the act of killing it has ceased to function as a sacrificial operation*. The figurative sacrificial orders of necropolitics—war, genocide, mass destructions of life—depend, for their smooth operation, on the very conditions that negate the sacrificial potential of the individual killing. Insofar as a necropolitical order such as the complex eugenic apparatus of the Nazi state—or the agro-industrial complex that enables the carnivorous modernity we inhabit—operates as a sacrificial economy, within which living bodies are designated for death and killed in exchange for a variously defined *something else*, the disposable, perfectly available

body of the bare life represents its perfect victim—to the exact degree that the act of killing it has been made casual, transparent, infused no longer with significance: that is to say, as long as no sacrificial dimension inheres in the act. Rephrasing this point, what is ultimately at stake in the historical emergence of industrial killing on a mass scale—not merely as a fact but as possibility—is the relationship between individual, embodied acts of killing and the operation of wider, frequently unmarked sacrificial economies that trade in a currency of living bodies, designated for death. This relationship—the imperfect mesh between the tangible, embodied, individual act of killing and the intangible economies that command it—is easily among the most topical political problems of the day, and the most pertinent question raised by my present discussion.

### Necroavailability

30. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille conceived of sacrifice as a supreme act of superfluous destruction: a “wasteful” expenditure that restored the victim to the “originary intimacy” of a sacred world, by negating its “use value” and destroying the “utilitarian relation” that had “made a thing (an object) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the subject, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject” (55). Sacrifice, a sacrificial operation destroyed the instrumental “thingness” of the victim, removing it from the utilitarian circuits of the economy. Importantly, to Bataille, this did not require the physical destruction or slaying of the victim: it was sufficient that the sacrificial offerings be destroyed “insofar as they have become things”—that is, “that the consumption of the offerings, or the communion, has a meaning that is not reducible to the shared ingestion of food” (56). This opens for an understanding of sacrifice without killing: or rather, for the possibility that an act of sacrifice might be constituted precisely in the intentional act of *not* destroying an animal. Here is precisely where we find Larry the lamb, the luckiest exception: a double negation, sacrifice consummated in the negation of the negated sacrifice. Suspending the desacralized moment of the kill not only transformed Larry into front-page fodder, but made him a sacred fetish for a nation of fetishists: “the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth” (Zizek 2001). The lie? In the words of the slaughterhouse director, that “everything has a right to live.” The “unbearable truth”? Provisional data from DEFRA indicate that in the month of March 2006 alone, while little Larry and his mother were transported to the safety of the farm, 1 210 800 of “his” UK species peers—rams, ewes and “other sheep”—were slaughtered without much notice or ado; in the whole year, more than 16 million (DEFRA 2007). Not many of them exercised their “right to live.”

31. More is at stake here than fetishism or sacred exceptions, however. In the zone of conceptual indistinction that is the bare life, Agamben risks conflating the outlaw with the camp victim. *This is a serious problem*: Sherwood Forest is a long way from Auschwitz, and any attempt to realistically grasp the material operation and practice of necropolitical sovereignty over the outlaw and the camp victim demands, at the very least, that the two be differentiated with regard to the simple feasibility of killing them—that is, to their quality of being or not being *available for destruction*. To coin a non-trivial neologism—in conversation with Cohen’s work on the

“bioavailability” of organ transplant donors, their availability for “selective disaggregation” and “reincorporation into another body (or machine)” (2005: 83)—I would refer to this quality as *necroavailability*. Theoretically, outlaw and camp victim may both well have been expelled beyond the law into the murder-free zone of the bare life, subject to the constant and permanent threat of death; in practice, their exposure to this threat is anything but identical. One is out there, beyond the city, and must be found; the other is always already there, confined and “ready to hand”, as Heidegger might put it—available for destruction. The latter is distinguished by his or her constant, radical, near-complete *availability for killing*—a manufactured availability that is physical as well as social, symbolic and emotional. In neither case, however, does the sovereign designation coincide automatically with death—or with the impossibility of resistance. Camp inmates may survive to tell the tale, death row prisoners may escape and become outlaws—exercising forms of agency that demonstrate a crucial theoretical gap in the structure of sovereign power: namely, the space that separates designation for death from the actual exercise of the power to kill.

32. This is the space that lucky little Larry the lamb unexpectedly surfaced into: born on the slaughterline, designated from birth explicitly for death within the necropolitical coordinates of the agroindustrial complex. Despite his apparently complete *necroavailability*, however, something happened to make ten experienced slaughterhouse workers refuse to kill “him.” For whatever reason, he suddenly acquired name, persona, history and moral value, along with unexpected emotional investments—in short, he *ceased to be available for killing*: “his” *necroavailability* was not a function of mere physical subjection and control. On a small scale, the incident highlights the urgent ethical and empirical task posed by the bare life as a diagnosis of the present—namely, to identify the powers that resist it. Where sovereign power operates to designate life for death and produce it as freely *necroavailable*, other factors—cultural, social, symbolic, legal, financial, material, emotional—are also mobilized to resist the effects of this and prevent, however marginally or sporadically, the production of life as *necroavailable*. Such factors operate and are deployed within the space that separates designation from execution, bodies from the law, theory from practice—the space of reluctant executioners and victims that “get away”, guilt and quandaries, accidental survivors and serendipitous accidents, the last-minute reprieve and the sudden change of mind; a space within which the microphysical vicissitudes of embodied existence may, occasionally and often unpredictably, be underdetermined by sovereignty or necropower. Foregrounding empirically what takes place within this space might serve to counterpoint Agamben’s pointedly “bleak and quasi-apocalyptic” (Cohen 2005: 79) *Homo Sacer* diagnosis—that “we are all homines sacri”, permanently exposed to the constant threat of death—with an account of the life politics of the present that was more nuanced, less dystopian and, perhaps, more hopeful.



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