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0521626099 - Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag

Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it. Peter Berger<sup>1</sup>

What binds the nation together? How vulnerable to ethnic and religious antagonisms is our sense of nationhood? What is the source of the malaise we have felt for so much of the post-World War II period? Above all, what moves citizens to put group interests ahead of their own, even to surrendering their lives? No strictly economic explanation, no great-man theory of history, no imminent group threat fully accounts for why members of enduring groups such as nations consent to sacrifice their immediate well-being and that of their children to the group. Whatever does, tells us a great deal about what makes nation-states enduring and viable. This book argues that violent blood sacrifice makes enduring groups cohere, even though such a claim challenges our most deeply held notions of civilized behavior.

The sacrificial system that binds American citizens has a sacred flag at its center. Patriotic rituals revere it as the embodiment of a bloodthirsty totem god who organizes killing energy. This totem god is the foundation of a mythic, religiously constructed American identity. Our notion of the totem comes from Durkheim, for whom it was the emblem of the group's agreement to be a group. Durkheim was less clear about how this agreement is forged. Though he regarded totemism as a form of social organization suited to traditional societies, he hinted broadly about its traces in post-traditional ones. We intend to show totem dynamics vigorously at work in the contemporary United States. We lay out the practices and beliefs that furnish the system without which the nation is in danger of dissolution. Their focus is the magical and primitive use of the flag, the totem object of American civil religion.

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If there were any doubt about the importance of the flag in American life, the deeply emotional debate about whether flagburning should be legal is a useful reminder.<sup>2</sup> Such controversy constitutes a kind of renewable resource for the imaginative life of the nation. Disagreement about what the flag means among those for whom it is the supreme symbol of political legitimacy is part and parcel of jostling for place among groups in a pluralistic society. More important than the fact that the flag is an object of struggle and veneration is what makes it worth struggling over, and how it enacts transformation and authority. That process is the subject of this book.

How does the flag operate in American life? Religiously, in a word. Durkheim's model is foundational but incomplete, for it fails to explain how the totem binds collective sentiment. In American civil religion, the flag is the ritual instrument of group cohesion. It transforms the bodies of insiders and outsiders who meet at a border of violence. This is the kernel of the totem myth, endlessly re-enacted in patriotic life and ritual, and always most powerfully in the presence of the flag. Though the structure of totem myth is as familiar to Americans as anything can be, it remains largely unacknowledged. Though it governs our political culture, we do not recognize it. When it threatens to surface, it is vigorously denied. What it conceals is that blood sacrifice preserves the nation. Nor is the sacrifice that counts that of our enemy. The totem secret, the collective group taboo, is the knowledge that society depends on the death of its own members *at the hands of the group*.

The totem myth is concealed by the conviction that individualism is the defining myth of America, a way of thinking that seems far removed from any group idea. Individualism is better understood as a highly visible piece of the more encompassing myth it disguises. Laid bare, it is an episode of the totem narrative that tells how a sacrificial hero is selected to die for the group. Not only individualism conceals the totem myth. So does our inability to recognize the religiosity of our political culture. Observers from Joseph Campbell to René Girard see little spirituality in Western life. Campbell has gone so far as to say that contemporary culture has no myth, though he more often claims that our myths are simply debased. From this perspective, violence and disorder are thought to characterize societies without good integrating myths.

For Anthony Giddens, George Mosse, or Ernst Cassirer, on the other hand, myths emerge primarily at moments of great disorder. Whether myths are the cause or consequence of social order and disorder, good myths are often regarded as a property of virtuous nations, and immoral nations are thought to have bad myths. In fact, myth is a constitutive

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element of every enduring group's self-representation. Assigning virtue or vice depends more on the observer's position than on any feature of the myth itself. Mythic American nationalism has been used at different moments for purposes of vastly different moral weight and consequence. We explore how American national identity is created and maintained, not whether it is good to do it or whether we should do it differently.

Nationalism and sectarianism are alternative systems for organizing enduring groups. Both are religions of blood sacrifice. The resemblances between them have been ignored by theorists of sectarianism unwilling to see in it the worldly violence that energizes nationalism, and by theorists of nationalism who see sectarian violence as a threat to stable states. In the wake of events following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has become more difficult to deny the religious character of nationalism and its essential connection to violence. Nevertheless, Western commentators continue to assert that nationalisms seething in Russia, Central Europe, and Asia reflect ancient *ethnic* hatreds, a contemporary term with primitive overtones. In fact, deadly, sacrifice-based challenge to totem authority is a feature of our own society as much as any society now in turmoil. The difference is that our totem rituals have so far mostly worked to keep internal and external totem challengers under control. We examine why.

The claim that Americans are devotees of a powerful civil religion is deeply suspect. Americans generally see their nation as a secular culture possessed of few myths, or with weak myths everywhere, but none central and organizing. We see American nationalism as a ritual system organized around a core myth of violently sacrificed divinity manifest in the highest patriotic ceremony and the most accessible popular culture. Though it uses a Christian vocabulary, its themes are common to many belief systems. Our failure to acknowledge the religiosity of this system obeys the ancient command never to speak the true name of God. It is said that so-called primitive societies fail to recognize distinctions between their religion and their culture. This is the first of many resemblances between ourselves and cultures we consider to be different from us by virtue of a special condition of savagery or villainy or both. A feature of our modernity is projecting on other cultures impulses we believe we do not possess and deeds for which we claim no capacity. By remaining displaced observers of our most important acts, we define ourselves as a nation.

Following Weber, analysts traditionally define the nation-state as the legitimized exercise of force over territorial boundaries within which a population has been pacified. The nation-state protects the nation, more vaguely defined as the commonality of sentiment shared by members of a language group, ethnicity, or living space. All observers acknowledge the

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imprecision of such a definition. Nor does it explain why these properties constitute a “nation.” We say the nation is the shared memory of blood sacrifice, periodically renewed. Those who share such memories often, but not always, share language, living space, or ethnicity. What they always share and cultivate is the memory of blood sacrifice. In totem myth, the felt or sentimental nation is the memory of the last sacrifice that counts for living believers. Though the sovereign nation, or nation-state, is an agreement about killing rules that compels citizens to sacrifice themselves for the group, the felt nation makes them want to. Neither the nation or the nation-state can exist without such memory myths, or not for long. Their maintenance is an ongoing sacred labor shared by rulers and those who grant them authority.

#### How does violence cause the group to cohere?

Blood sacrifice is a primitive notion. We define as primitive those processes that construct the social from the body. Since every society constructs itself from the bodies of its members, every society is primitive. The term nevertheless has a pejorative meaning from which so-called civilized societies strive to distance themselves. What is the distinction between our society and those that seem different enough to be labeled primitive? The crucial comparison may be the relative prevalence of practices in which the body is immediately present and its relation to social action directly observed, and those of disembodied, or textual practices in which the body is not only removed, but denied by active effacement. Relative to the textualized, body-denying social organization of industrialized nation-states, small-scale, face-to-face societies are less textual and more bodily in their social organization.

Textually organized societies can never eliminate the body from the social order despite their efforts to move it beyond the range of awareness. Propriety in textualized societies is associated with bodily invisibility. The more textually organized a society, the greater its failure to recognize its own ritual capacity, the more secular its self-perception, and the shriller its deprecation of its own religious elements. Nevertheless, *bodily* sacrifice is the totem core of American nationalism, as it may be of all religion. At the behest of the group, the lifeblood of community members must be shed. Group solidarity, or sentiment, flows from the value of this sacrifice. The totem god of society, which turns out to be society itself, cannot do without its worshippers any more than its worshippers can do without the god of society. It must possess and consume, it must *eat* its worshippers to live. This is the totem secret and its greatest taboo.

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Tribal members are forbidden to kill one another in the presence of the totem. There is an important exception to this rule. Public discourse treats it as a last resort, something the community dreads doing. In fact, it is no exception, but the sacrificial heart of the totem system. The creation of sentiments strong enough to hold the group together periodically requires the willing deaths of a significant portion of its members. The lifeblood of these members is shed by means of a ritual in which designated victims become outsiders and cross the boundary of the living group into death. The most powerful enactment of this ritual is war. This totem sacrifice is the hidden foundation of the system that leads us to define the nation as the memory of the last sacrifice.

#### How do we know?

A hologram contains the information to reproduce a whole image in every one of its pieces. Flag practice and nationalism are like that, each piece a holographic element of a group myth. To start from any point quickly leads to the entire structure. American culture is holographically saturated with the flag. It is a pervasive presence in mass media, in advertising, in manufactured and home-made artifacts of every description, on the street, and in the institutions of daily life. Since flag practice and imagery are everywhere, the difficulty is not sampling it, but constructing the complete myth to which every instance of patriotic practice is a contribution. The whole history of the nation offers evidence. The most persuasive comes from living memory, which demonstrates the power of the totem in our own present rather than some ideal or benighted American past. The cult of the flag is no quaint historical residue, but a living source of American myth.

Totem myth suits the military conscript systems of industrialized nations that sacrifice large numbers of citizens in wars of attrition. For any leadership to survive such a brutal strategy, soldiers and their families must be committed to the cause. The rise of the religiously regarded flag coincides with the introduction of this ritual of mass sacrifice in the United States. The triumph of nationalism achieved by the bloodletting of the Civil War helped restructure the American economy from a local to a national base. It also helped assimilate waves of immigrants in the late nineteenth century. In a reorganized continental community struggling to forge a national identity, the bloody flag emerged as a talisman with transforming properties. Its sacralization required, and requires still, the enthusiastic assistance of mass media.

Though new modes of production and dissemination have shifted the reproductive scale of American media, media have never altered their basic

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religious function with respect to the flag. This is to re-present it in multiple arenas along with the totem system it governs. By furnishing the stock of images and metaphors that filter and remodel totem myths, media play a key role in structuring our sense of ourselves as a nation. They convey assent to patriotic symbols for a national audience. No American living a reasonably conventional life can avoid the flag, either in person or as a member of the audience for its endless media multiplications. Since rituals of blood sacrifice alone establish the flag's magical potency, media neither create nor dilute its sacred character. Their task is to re-present and disseminate what blood sacrifice creates. They keep totem symbols vibrant, effective, and ever present.

### Domains of flag practice

Totem myth and ritual are played out in fields of activity we call *domains*. Each inhabits distinctive physical and social spaces, addresses characteristic groups and deploys unique communicative strategies. First is the *totem* domain, from which all others are derived and to which they ultimately refer. This is the ritual space occupied by the totem class. The President and members of the armed forces are its principal members. They live in communities segregated from the rest of society and organized around disciplinary ordeals. They are charged with the holy task of guarding the flag and offering the sacrifice that keeps it alive. Powerful prohibitions govern totem class members, who are ritually transformed by touching death.

The steadfast loyalty of citizens in the *popular* domain sustains and re-creates the totem through fertility and connection rather than sacrifice and death. In this domain citizens not only touch the flag but remake it endlessly. In the strict sense they defile it, but dismembering and rearrangement in this context symbolically enact the revitalization of the community. The vernacular flag is not distanced from ordinary life. It acts as an immanent rather than transcendent divinity. It is a popular instrument of magical action, regenerating totem leaders in seasonal rituals of popular election. Popular flags also ritually separate warriors from society as they go into battle and re-attach them when they return.

Groups in the *affiliative* domain believe they represent the community as it ought to be. They envy the totem even when they oppose it. They practice exclusive membership, relations of passionate alliance or rebellion toward the totem, and shared ordeals. Varying in their embattledness with the totem, they include groups such as the Boy Scouts, the Ku Klux Klan, religious denominations, militia groups, Hell's Angels, and labor unions. Affiliative groups celebrate team sacrifice and deeds of valor. Cultivating

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quasi-totem pomp, they seek to bend the totem to their will. They are regularly disappointed by the administered state, which always falls short of their ideals. Denied the privileges of totem power, they doubt their status and must endlessly prove themselves. Affiliative struggle is fundamental to the totem system and the most dangerous threat to its unity.

Relations among the totem class, affiliative groups, and citizens who constitute the popular domain structure the nation. Each domain may join or mate with any other. The combination of any two domains implies the subordination of the third. The continuing quest of each domain to join another at the expense of the third is the engine that drives political life. To consolidate its legitimacy, the totem domain seeks to unite with the popular. Popular and totem groups have historically joined forces against Communist cells, the Ku Klux Klan, sectarian groups and street gangs, affiliative groups all. Affiliative groups compete with the totem for a popular following with which to mate. Affiliative and popular groups together may try to topple the totem. This was the dashed dream of the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. Affiliative groups may also ally with the totem against a popular insurgence or against other affiliative challengers. Even in their suspect state, affiliative groups are central to the totem system, for the achievement of totem legitimacy requires a consensual tilt in a shifting affiliative hierarchy whose cooperation is both necessary and unstable. We will examine these patterns in American political culture.

The choice of a subject as emotionally freighted as nationalism requires a discussion of our own relationship to it. Although we admire the richness and complexity of nationalism and the energies that fuel its transforming power, the moral evaluation of patriotic practice remains the responsibility of the citizens whose creation it is. Our task is not to say what patriotism ought to be, but to understand nationalism as a system for generating feelings of profound sociability and belonging through the primitive construction of the social out of the flesh and blood of group members. The participants in that system are free to embrace, modify, or reject it, for nations and citizens always have options. Though we undertake to illustrate the pervasiveness of nationalism in American life, we regard even its most fervent devotees as persons possessed of whole lives with multiple interests. Still, we see the totem god hovering close by, ready to be called forth in group crises and in the periodic rituals that keep its memory alive. But totem gods are not indestructible. Nor is national unity a foregone conclusion. The nation could die, as many have. If it does, others will spring up. What is indestructible is a pattern of enduring group behavior rather than any particular expression of it. By showing how violence is an essential

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social resource, just as denying it constitutes an important group-making tool, we aim to illuminate the dynamics of patriotic nationalism.

Our analysis is not intended to take aim from the safety of the text at those who put their bodies on the line for the nation, or at any who subscribe to alternative faiths. We seek to understand nationalism in the United States, an important case that resembles others, since enduring groups model one another in mobilizing and disciplining group members for sacrifice. This means that the sacrificial system of nationalism can be challenged effectively only by those who embrace with still greater commitment alternative sacrificial systems to replace it. The location of killing force is a variable in this scheme. Structure is the constant element. The principles of group connectedness that underlie American nationalism thus have relevance for other countries and causes for which people willingly offer their lives. By giving meaning to violence, a chief energizing component of group life despite the most emphatic denials of its centrality, patriotic practice affects all who identify themselves as citizens of any nation. We dedicate this book, therefore, to sacrificial warriors, whose fate it is to be cast out from every border.



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# That old flag magic

Symbolism is a primitive but effective way of communicating ideas.  
West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette (1943)<sup>1</sup>

This is a book about religion, specifically, the religion of American patriotism. Though nationalism does not qualify as religion in the familiar sense, it shares with sectarian religions the worship of killing authority, which we claim is central to religious practice and belief. Nationalism and sectarian religion share something else related to killing. Wherever religion has been fervently embraced, it follows in the minds of believers that it is entitled to glory in missions of conquest that reflect God's will. Jesus's disciples felt it; a Weberian Protestant ethic suggests it. Islam did this for centuries for its believers before European nation-states accomplished it for Christianity. In an era of Western ascendancy, the triumph of Christianity clearly meant the triumph of the states of Christianity, among them the most powerful of modern states, the United States. Though religions have survived and flourished in persecution and powerlessness, supplicants nevertheless take manifestations of power as blessed evidence of the truth of faith. Still, in the religiously plural society of the United States, sectarian faith is optional for citizens, as everyone knows. Americans have rarely bled, sacrificed or died for Christianity or any other sectarian faith. Americans have often bled, sacrificed and died for their country. This fact is an important clue to its religious power.

Though denominations are permitted to exist in the United States, they are not permitted to kill, for their beliefs are not officially true. What is really true in any society is what is worth killing for, and what citizens may be compelled to sacrifice their lives for. To understand what truth is for the United States as a nation, we must inquire into the national doctrine and practice of sacrifice and death. Questions about sacrifice and death are pro-

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foundly religious. It is their presence that makes nationalism the most powerful religion in American culture. For despite a sturdy American tradition of separating *sectarian* faith from the state, *national* faith is inextricably wedded to governance, which is ultimately the question of who shall live and die. Only nationalism motivates the sacrificial devotion of citizens, without which there can be no effective governance. In relation to *that* faith, sectarian religion is best understood as a jealous competitor.

To argue that nationalism is the most powerful American religion is not new. A long line of American thinkers has argued that civic life has, or ought to have, the structure of a civil religion.<sup>2</sup> Conceiving the nation as an object of civic worship troubles indigenous political and cultural categories nonetheless. Conventional wisdom holds that religion as an ideal order rejects violence. By contrast, nation-states unapologetically reserve to themselves the privilege of killing. Even where observers concede the necessity of ultimate force as a matter of group survival, those who long to live in peace may deny that political beliefs and practices can justly be compared to the beliefs and practices of traditional sectarian groups. They are reluctant to confer the virtuous title religion on a group that kills. This reluctance lies at the heart of what makes nationalism the most powerful American religion. Indeed, the refusal of Americans to acknowledge the indissolubility of religion and nationalism rests on a motivated misunderstanding of the genuinely religious character of American patriotism and the violent character of genuine religion. What the motive for this misunderstanding is will emerge in the course of the discussion.

Sectarian groups in the United States exist officially as denominations, churches that have surrendered all claim to monopoly status.<sup>3</sup> Those who argue that sectarian religion is antithetical to killing obediently comply with the first commandment of religious nationalism. This is that groups subordinate to the nation-group, such as sectarian groups, may not kill. The first principle of every religious system is that only the deity may kill. The state, which does kill, allows whoever accepts these terms to exist, to pursue their own beliefs and call themselves what they like in the process. In the broadest sense, the purpose of religion is to organize killing energy. This is how it accomplishes its social function of defining and maintaining the group. By this standard, nationalism is unquestionably the most powerful religion in the United States.

Taking a leaf from René Girard, we argue that collective victimage constructs American national identity. This mechanism expresses itself through a primitive belief in the transformative power of the *totem*, a term the sociologist Emile Durkheim made famous. The Durkheimian totem is “the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others . . . It is at