For the Greater Good:
Sacrificial Violence and the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has ushered in an unprecedented epoch of myriad *sacrifice*. Unseen since World War Two, restrictions have been placed upon our movement at various degrees of intensity since March 2020. Across the world, citizenries have been informed by states to transiently sacrifice their cultural freedoms to protect the *sacred* – namely, healthcare systems and thereby help to preserve life, particularly the elderly. However, so far, little scholarly attention has been awarded to the presence of sacrifice throughout the pandemic. Therefore, this article is structured into four core themes. Whilst the first section outlines the moral and ethical quandaries generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the second section explores the theoretical work on violence, since contemporary sacrifice is intimately connected to the systemic violence inherent in neoliberal capitalist economies. Next, the paper explicates the role of sacrifice during the pandemic, particularly through the sacrifices made by 'key workers' like care workers and nurses, outlining how neoliberalism's systemic violence meant they were met with tokenistic gestures including clapping rather than a fundamental improvement in their working conditions. As sacrifice has historically served to reinforce the social fabric, the article closes with a discussion on whether sacrifice during the pandemic is likely to achieve this, given neoliberalism's primacy to post-social arrangements including radical individualism, emotivism, and competition.

Introduction

The arrival of Covid-19 has heralded a prolonged period of great and profound sacrifice. At the time of writing, around 4 million deaths worldwide have been linked to the contraction of the virus. Initially, with no known effective treatments, management of the virus across many states has relied upon non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), such as the full closure or curtailing of economic sectors, social distancing, and confinement to domestic dwellings. Reliance upon these interventions has endured to varying degrees, despite the initiation of vaccination programmes in several countries. Non-pharmaceutical interventions demand sacrifices, and, through their implementation, many people have endured prolonged separation from family members and friends, as well as institutions and cultural activities that offer structure, routine, connections to others, meaning, purpose and identity. As Saad-Filho (2020) speculated, the economic shock caused by the pandemic could be 'catastrophic' and has already led to redundancies and therefore a swell in the numbers of those without work. The sacrifices cannot be overstated, neither can they be ignored as we seek to understand the pandemic's impact.

Sacrifice is inherently painful, yet, often regarded as necessary in the service of a perceived social or communal 'good'. Keenan (2005) suggests sacrifice denotes a process of suffering or loss in pursuit of a noble or 'higher' cause. Girard (2013:1) associates sacrifice with violence and the restoration of social bonds during crises, suggesting there is 'hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice'. Sacrifice may be regarded as a source of 'good' violence for its role in the prevention of greater suffering (Dupuy, 2013). Halbertal (2012: 59) claims it 'covers immensely diverse experiences', but can be captured within two fundamentally distinguished forms: sacrifice as an offer *to* another, or sacrifice that is *for* another. Sacrifice is readily associated with religion, particularly in the former sense of an offer made *to* gods or a deity. Yet, sacrifice *for* another, or in the name of a 'higher' cause, is fundamental to political and collective moral life. Sacrifices are frequently made to establish, alter or defend socio-political systems. Conflict arises when state's demand sacrifices from citizens given their requirement to protect life, while a great burden of loyalty weighs upon those for whom sacrifices are made (Halbertal, 2012).

Crucially, it is significant, as Halbertal (2012) reminds us, to recognise the diversity of sacrifices during the pandemic and those made in pursuit of notions of social or communal 'good'. Importantly, though, sacrifice must be understood contextually, as it is entangled with social inequalities. For instance, there is an abundance of evidence that protection from the virus has been limited for some by virtue of race, gender, socio-economic status, employment, and job security (Adams-Prassl, 2020; Liao and De Maio, 2021; Saad-Filho, 2020; Schwab and Malleret, 2020). Exhortations that 'we are in this together', or that lay claim to a mutually shared experience of loss and sacrifice across social groups, are therefore deeply misleading and belie the myriad ways in which the impact of the pandemic and the response to it 'has laid bare...the vast numbers of people in the world who are economically and socially vulnerable' (Schwab and Malleret, 2020: 79). Importantly, sacrificial acts often involving the killing of humans documented in previous epochs were inflicted in a manner reflective of hierarchical social relations and carried out with the purpose of reinforcing those distinctions (Watts et al, 2016). Indeed, Girard (2013: 13) identified a 'wide spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies' across history, including, children, prisoners of war, slaves and those with disabilities. Those more readily identified as 'sacrificeable', he suggested, are usually those 'exterior or marginal individuals' whose status prevents them from 'fully integrating themselves into the community'.

Considering the tentative, yet evident, connections that we have begun to establish, this article draws inspiration primarily from the concept of *sacrifice* and utilises this as a framework through which to consider and critically analyse the impact of Covid-19. As Covid-19 has further exposed and exacerbated neoliberalism's inequalities like the gap between the rich and the poor (Saad-Filho, 2020; Schwab and Malleret, 2020), the article seeks to delineate some of the ways in which sacrifice became a prevalent feature of the pandemic era. Furthermore, in the spirit of Girard (2013), who asked why the relationship between sacrifice and violence has not been explored in more requisite depth, the article situates the analysis offered within social scientific debates concerned with violence. In particular, the paper seeks to position sacrifice not as an exclusively rare and exceptional act of force that breaches states of non-violence, but rather an 'integral feature of social life' (Jackman, 2002: 389) during the pandemic and inherent to the *new* ''normal' state of things' (Žižek, 2008: 2).

The article is structured into four substantive sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the pandemic with a particular focus on the harms that have emanated from it, as well as the various moral dilemmas that have emerged concerning appropriate mitigation of these respective harms. We suggest that sacrifice has become a means through which such moral dilemmas may be to some extent deemed resolved. However, we suggest that in the attempt to reinforce the social fabric, these sacrifices leave legacies (Halbertal, 2012) liable to produce further harm, which we address in the final section of the article. In an attempt to more clearly conceptualise sacrifice in relation to the pandemic, we next consider theoretical work on violence, providing the basis for an incipient framework that envelops the following penultimate section. This penultimate section offers a tentative and brief discussion, through different examples, of how sacrifice is both simultaneously evident during the pandemic and relevant as a framework for interpreting its impact and management. Furthermore, we discuss here how sacrifice has historically served to reinforce social bonds and expectations of loyalty from those who the sacrifice protects, but question whether this is possible under neoliberalism's post-social arrangements of emotivism, competitive individualism and self-enhancement. The article closes with a discussion, and a brief conclusion, addressing the key issues raised and suggests how the tentative associations developed in the article may be taken forward in further research.

Covid-19 and an emerging moral quandary on its various harms
The Coronavirus pandemic represents the most significant and disruptive global event so far of the 21st Century (Briggs, et al, 2021). In the relatively short period of time that has elapsed since the first cases of the virus were reported in December 2019, social life has been profoundly altered in many states across the world. Initially, in the absence of any known effective treatment or vaccine, nations responded with strict social distancing measures to reduce transmission and have relied upon these intermittently since. In the UK, restrictions on basic civil liberties, unknown since the final days of World War Two in 1945, have been applied at varying levels of intensity since the pandemic began.

The physical harms of the virus are evident. At the time of writing, the UK alone has recorded more than 6 million confirmed positive cases and in excess of 130,000 Covid-19 related deaths[1]. Globally, according to John Hopkins University, there have been over 200 million reported cases of the virus. In addition, there are potential, and thus far relatively unknown,

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[1] It is important to note that in several countries like the UK, how the government has recorded Covid-19 related deaths has generated some controversy (Briggs, et al 2021). This is because Covid deaths are recorded as dying within 28 days of testing positive for Covid-19, failing to distinguish between those that died of Covid-19 or died with it.

consequences for those who contract the virus and suffer what has been termed 'long Covid': an array of debilitating symptoms that may persist for a considerable time afterwards. Health outcomes are likely to be severely affected by the pandemic and not just because of contracting the virus. Recent research assessing the impact of the first UK lockdown upon diagnoses for a variety of cancer types, for example, estimates substantial increases in avoidable deaths are to be expected in the future because of diagnostic delays (Maringe et al, 2020).

The social and economic consequences of both the virus and the core governmental response are considerable too. The various measures taken to shield populations from it are unintended generators, or catalysts, of further and future harm. Labour market indicators in the UK demonstrate that since the pandemic began the number of individuals classed as unemployed has been increasing, with 318,000 more people registered unemployed in September 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier (ONS, 2020). While a record number of redundancies (314,000) were registered in the period from July – September 2020 (ONS, 2020). Petterson et al (2020: 3) point to an increase in deaths of despair in the US as a result of drugs, alcohol and suicides, which they believe 'should be seen as the epidemic within the pandemic'. Confinement to domestic dwellings during the first lockdown in the UK was followed by increased reports of violence between intimates (Condry et al, 2020), a trend that available evidence indicates has been mirrored in many other states across the world where lockdowns were imposed (Ellis, et al, 2021).

Placed in this context, it is perhaps not surprising that many peoples' mental health has been detrimentally impacted by the pandemic/lockdowns in the UK, especially those from more deprived localities who already experienced anxiety or depression (O'Connor, et al 2020). Statistical research indicates that, throughout the first lockdown, around one in seven adults had suicidal thoughts, while many more reported feelings of loneliness and entrapment (O'Connor, et al 2020). As feelings of social isolation have intensified, many people have increased their food consumption to help them cope with social uncertainty and distress. Others, including those that have eating disorders, have reported an increased concern with both regulating their food intake and their body image throughout the pandemic (Robertson, et al 2021). Other studies indicate an intensification of mental ill health in the UK, particularly for those that are unemployed or on low incomes (Pierce, et al 2020).

The direct and in-direct harms arising from social distancing measures to address the virus are becoming increasingly evident too. The virus itself has caused without question considerable harm to public health, but the measures taken in response have indirectly contributed to the generation of an array of harms distributed unevenly across the population and that manifest both physically and psychologically (Briggs, et al 2020). It is for this reason that lockdowns and related social distancing can be considered paradoxical: initiated with the intention to protect and preserve life, yet inherent stimulants of harm and threats to life. It is from this paradox that great moral discord has emerged and the presence of sacrifice during the pandemic becomes clearer.

Certainly, demands 'for' sacrifices, as well as their moral justification in the name of preventing the spread of the virus, have been prevalent throughout the pandemic. On the 10th May 2020 at a national address, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson thanked the public for their 'effort and sacrifice in stopping the spread of this disease'. In October 2020, at a World Health Organisation (WHO) press conference in Geneva, Dr Mike Ryan spoke of the possible need for "many, many people" to make sacrifices in their personal lives (Lovelace, 2020). While in November 2020 the President of the United States of America, Joe Biden, delivered

a Thanksgiving address to the nation to highlight the 'shared sacrifices' made by many Americans throughout the Covid-19 pandemic (Woodward, 2020).

Alongside various pleas and demands 'for' the sacrifice of personal freedom and liberty, as well as the lauding of those sacrificing themselves for the 'greater good', such as frontline workers (see Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2020), Utilitarian questions concerning who, what, and how much, should be sacrificed, and relatedly whether these sacrifices could be justified, began to emerge. In a letter published in the British Medical Journal, a Consultant Medical Microbiologist at St George's Hospital London questioned the moral basis of forcing young people in the UK to sacrifice their freedoms 'so that the older generation can live a bit longer' (Breathnach, 2020). Such sentiments were echoed by Texas lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, who, in appealing for the application of Utilitarian principles, pleaded with the US senate not to 'sacrifice the country' in order to protect older, more vulnerable citizens from the virus who will, he claimed, 'take care of themselves' (Beckett, 2020). In an interview with Channel 4 News, outspoken critic of lockdowns in Britain and member of the Conservative Party, Sir Charles Walker, raised concerns about the sustainability of ongoing restrictions and argued that the country could not continue to 'cancel', or in essence sacrifice, 'life' to preserve every life.

While states have demanded considerable sacrifices from their citizens, there have been demands made of states to offer protection from the virus as well as the unintended harms arising from the measures implemented to address it. Along with some vocal politicians, protest and lobby groups like the Save Our Rights UK movement and the Great Barrington Declaration, comprised of scientists and medical professionals from across the world, have formed a consensus that responses to the virus unintendedly represent greater social evil because of the harm they cause in both the immediate and the longer term. As we will see, as the pandemic has evolved, societies have become increasingly confronted with ethical and moral quandaries concerning the need for the preservation of both life and the quality of life.

In the pandemic response, moral arguments take clear sides: a utilitarian response that essentially accepts the sacrifice of some to protect the many clashes with a deontological response that argues moral judgements about who to sacrifice cannot be universalised and are therefore ethically unsound. The fundamental incommensurability of these starting positions is irresolvable despite both essentially advocating the protection of life. A third position, a teleological virtue ethics, situates goods external to subjective emotion but internal to social roles and practice (MacIntyre, 2016; Raymen, 2019). This calls for an understanding of what a 'good life' means and how we individually and collectively strive towards its realisation. The pandemic response, in this context, raises questions about individual and collective flourishing yet, increasingly, Western societies are unable to resolve moral quandaries as thorny ethical questions that require collective agreement are met with emotivism (MacIntyre, 2011; 2016; Raymen, 2019). That is, the locus of morality now sits within the individual and the concept of 'good' reflects how something makes us feel; this rejects the existence of a fundamental telos or external adjudicating authority (MacIntyre, 2011). Both sides talk past each other in an interminable debate that cannot be resolved. Questions about the quality of life are secondary to the administration of non-death, mere preservation, or endurance of life.

This descent into emotivism represents both the absent telos at the heart of Western society (MacIntyre, 2011) and post-political biopolitics *par excellence* (Žižek, 2008). MacIntyre (2011) situates this historic shift within the context of declining virtue ethics and the eradication of a telos; there is neither collective agreement nor fundamental discussion about the constitution of a 'good life'. Human purpose is largely absent from the kinds of utilitarian and

deontological positions outlined above but their absence is reflective of contemporary politics. While MacIntryre (2016) notes that politics and ethics are inherently intertwined, contemporary politics abandons key ethical questions. The hegemonic power of liberal ideology and its current neoliberal variant have reduced politics to the administration of bare life (Agamben, 1995; Žižek, 2008); politics was the mechanism by which we keep people alive, a platform upon which each individual can then pursue their own freedoms and self-interest. This is more accurately a *post-political* position as it accepts the horizons of liberalism, reduces politics to the cold administrative functions necessary to maintain life and little more. The efficient functioning of neoliberal parliamentary politics and the technical administration of everyday life came to dominate the political horizon. Experts were required to administer this technocracy in a 'value free' manner (Hochuli et al, 2021). Liberal post-politics abandons the telos in favour of freedom in a negative sense; it provides the negative liberty of *freedom from* without any ethical, moral or political understanding of the *freedom to* pursue an external good or end (Raymen, 2019). This represents the political and ethical vacuum into which the pandemic struck; the public were asked to 'follow the science' and put faith in our technocratic, administration of bare life without any public discussion about the values or principles that underpinned decisions. The pandemic's administration of non-death and mere preservation of life, regardless of the consequences, reflects the absent telos at the heart of liberal democracy and is indicative of our current political juncture. It is within this moral vacuum that numerous sacrifices were required that remain ethically irresolvable.

This became particularly pronounced as underfunded and under resourced health services like the NHS and care homes struggled to cope with the weight of additional demand for their services. Faced with being overburdened with patients, many care homes in 2020 utilised 'do not resuscitate' (DNR) orders on some of their residents (Booth, 2000), the majority of whom are aged over 70 and often have various health issues like dementia and frailty. Whilst DNRs were utilised to perhaps try and preserve the lives of those younger individuals that possessed a better chance of survival and to free up some capacity within the health service, an inquiry in the UK is currently underway into their usage (Booth, 2020), since many were potentially administered without obtaining the consent of the bereaved family. This has been criticised by some commentators, claiming that healthcare workers should not be compelled to make judgements on the quality of life, not least because it could potentially lead to discrimination and undermine the sanctity of human life (Bledsoe, et al 2020).

Other moral and ethical dilemmas include how the lockdown forced schools to close, impacting detrimentally on children's' education and thereby exacerbating educational inequalities. Children from socially and economically marginalised communities spent at least 1.5 hours per day less doing schoolwork than children from more affluent backgrounds, with the latter receiving more support and guidance from their parents (Andrew, et al 2020). Whilst the former often struggled to access a computer or device connected to the internet at their home, they also received fewer online classes from teachers, impacting upon their ability to do schoolwork. Given those children from more deprived areas were already often struggling to meet the educational attainment requirements, it is likely that lockdowns intensified educational inequalities between poorer and more affluent school children (Andrew, et al 2020), indicating that some working-class children's education was temporarily sacrificed during the pandemic.

The sacrifices made in the name of averting the greater harm of allowing the virus to circulate unimpeded are in themselves evidently damaging and potentially generative of further harms. Importantly, Halbertal (2012: 48) suggests that sacrifices 'for' others can constitute socially

binding constraints upon those in the future that serve as bonds between those who are sacrificed and those who are saved. In particular, Halbertal suggests:

> '...Future generations are assumed to be burdened with the onus of that early sacrifice, which demands loyalty, since betraying it means retroactively stripping the sacrifice of meaning.'

The longer-term ramifications of exacting great sacrifice in the name of responding to the virus are as yet unknown, but certainly contingent upon the extent to which they are acknowledged and honoured as societies shift into a post-pandemic period. We consider this issue in more depth subsequently, but at this juncture provide an overview of scholarship on violence, to lay the groundwork for a discussion of neoliberalism's systemic violence and its relation to sacrifice during the pandemic.

Approaches to Violence

As we have begun to outline in the previous sections of this article, sacrifice is a particularly significant feature of the Covid-19 landscape especially in light of the panic, discord, and deep moral quandaries it has generated concerning protection from the virus and the wider human consequences of responding. Therefore, it offers a potentially useful conceptual lens through which to explain the social effects of the pandemic. Given the harm that is inherent to the making or infliction of a sacrifice and its relationship to violence (Girard, 2013; Halbertal, 2012), this section of the article offers, by way of a brief but necessary detour, a discussion of theoretical approaches to violence to provide a tentative framework within which to consider more carefully the meaning and significance of sacrifice during the pandemic.

Social scientific disciplines, like sociology and criminology, have often assumed a widely held view, readily found beyond the confines of the academy, that violence involves physical harm, is inflicted wilfully by motivated individuals, and arises from a breakdown or a malfunction within institutions that perform an integrative and control function. Such an approach effectively situates the phenomenon of violence as 'without'; an external threat that must be addressed, minimised, and contained. Violence is therefore often presumed to be an alien and threatening presence that is comprised of 'eruptions of hostility that have bubbled over the normal boundaries of social intercourse' (Jackman, 2002: 308). A partial result of conceiving of violence in this way for Larry Ray (2011: 2) is that 'sociology seems to have assumed the existence of a pacified society in which violence appears in specific places and events'.

Those 'specific places and events' are neatly delineated spatialised territories or seemingly isolated incidents to which scholarly attention has often been directed: the less salubrious neighbourhoods of cities occupied by dangerous gangs of marginalised young men (Andell, 2019); violent domestic dwellings (Westmarland, 2015); or violent conflicts that erupt in the territories of failed or failing states (Ray, 2011). There exists, then, a discrete range of sub-fields within sociology, criminology, and the social sciences more generally that focus upon forms of violence or settings in which violence takes place and the individuals present in those spaces (Ellis, 2016). The issue of violence is of course multi-faceted in its manifestations and addressing specific forms of violence in this way has led to important contributions to the extant literature. Reflecting on this tendency within academic disciplines, Ray (2011: 2) has described research addressing violence contemporarily as 'fragmentary' in nature. An issue with this, Ray suggests, is that such fragmentation potentially 'risks losing sight of the intimate connection between violence and the human condition'. Similar sentiments have been echoed by Winlow (2012) who, in consideration of criminology's attempts to theorise human violence,

suggests there is a tendency amongst criminologists to view violence as tangential to another issue rather than violence becoming the focal point of theoretical endeavours.

Violence, as intimated already, is also often regarded as the antithesis of 'civilisation'; a view reflected in some notable academic contributions. Steven Pinker (2012) has recently contrasted what he considers are the less violent societies of modernity, with more frequently violent societies that existed historically. Crucial to Pinker's claims about this decline of violence are insights from the work of Norbert Elias (2000) and the 'civilising process', which suggested successful state monopolies of violence and the development of an attendant capacity for self-control have, over time, resulted in considerable reductions. There are various and important critical accounts of this relationship, particularly of those that suggest a declining presence of violence as modernity has progressed. Fromm (1973) posited an opposing relationship, arguing that a greater degree of human violence and destruction is evident with the development of civilisation and hierarchical social relations. In a similar and equally critical vein, Wieviorka (2009: 2) alludes to the problem of assuming that as the capacity for human 'reason' proceeds the resort to violence recedes. Wieviorka suggests violence may be encouraged by reason and continues to possess functional potential for various groups, including states, as a 'resource or a means to an end'. Criminologist Steve Hall (2012; 2014) points to the fragile and precarious process that underlies declines in violence in certain territories, describing this as the result of an economically functional and paradoxical process of 'pseudo-pacification'. The temptation to assume then that 'advanced societies are no longer seriously troubled by violence and that theories of violence are perforce losing their raison d'etre' (Keane, 1996: 9) should be resisted.

Although the failure to resist such an assertion may perhaps be the product of how violence is conceptualised or regarded. Importantly, the arguably limited scope within which violence has sometimes been viewed and understood can result in conceptual obscurity. Through reviewing attempts made to define violence, Jackman (2002: 388) has argued that scholars 'commonly refer to a phenomenon called violence that implies a clearly understood, generic class of behaviours' and yet, Jackman suggests, 'no such concept exists'. While labouring under this misconception, a decidedly narrow set of assumptions about violence in human social life have emerged. Importantly, Jackman argues for the benefits of expanding the dominant view of violence to enable recognition of the fact that 'violent actions are a normal part of the human repertoire' rather than always necessarily 'deviant' from it, and that violence 'incorporates a diverse array of actions that are an integral feature of social life' (p.389).

Jackman's insights take us some distance from those approaches to violence concerned with identifiable physical harm carried out by motivated individuals and groups, and which, as a result, becomes routinely positioned as deviant and in contrast to order and civility. On the contrary, violence and harm frequently result from forms of inaction and through attempts to maintain political systems, which may not require the direct application of force and may be sacrificial in nature. Ruggiero (2020), for example, describes 'strategies of omission' where addressing conditions of suffering or injustice are designated an economic impossibility by political authorities. Relatedly, there are the frequent failures of powerful state actors to address conditions of danger, despite possessing knowledge that if left unaddressed these will likely cause injury or death (Cooper and Whyte, 2018; Pemberton, 2016). These are representative of mere parts of the much greater 'hidden complexities of violence in contemporary societies' (Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2020: 2). However, such complexity is often not acknowledged due to what Evans and Giroux (2015: 3) describe as neoliberalism's 'most monstrous of illusions', through which its own capacity for destruction is concealed and scripted in ways that suggest violence is becoming less of a problem. What is of further importance from Jackman's (2002)

discussion mentioned previously, particularly for the analysis offered in this article, is the violence that arises from seemingly positive intentions, or that is an incidental by-product of other actions; even those that may be undertaken in the service of life or to avert other harm. What may be termed 'good' violence (Dupuy, 2013). This often remains elusive and unacknowledged, resulting in frequent neglect of the myriad ways in which many are harmed 'unintentionally' and sometimes because of what may also be well-meaning state interventions (Mason, 2020); indeed, the road to hell may be paved with good intentions.

This brief, but necessary, detour along the broad contours of the social scientific investigation of violence leads us towards a means of conceiving of violence as potentially unintended and yet inherent in the maintenance of contemporary political and economic systems, especially in the face of threats to their continuation. This is vital to capture more fully the complexity of violence that has often remained unacknowledged. Importantly, as Lohmeyer and Taylor (2020) have argued recently, the pandemic itself provides a moment in which the complexity of contemporary violence, particularly what they identify as the structural and cultural violence of neoliberalism, may be viewed more clearly. Furthermore, we are pushed towards a recognition of what might be termed or considered 'good' violence that emanates from well-meaning intentions or the very attempts to avert other perceived, possibly greater, violence and harm; something that appears to be in evidence during the pandemic and manifest in the demand for various sacrifices as briefly discussed already. Following the important insights afforded by this consideration of violence, the following section seeks to develop a clearer theoretical exposition on the relationship between sacrifice and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sacrifice and Covid-19
In the previous sections of this article, we have begun to assemble the foundations of a potential relationship between sacrifice and the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the various moral quandaries that responding to it has presented to societies. A brief but demonstrable case has been made for these evident connections and in this penultimate part of the paper we seek to flesh this out in more detail in order to assemble upon those foundations a tentative set of assertions that speak to the utility of sacrifice as a conceptual lens through which to view the pandemic.

The previous section's brief consideration of various attempts to conceptualise violence revealed both evident complexities and paradoxes. Girard's (2013) work on violence and the sacred is particularly instructive in this respect for addressing somewhat the evident paradoxes that emerge from the study of human violence. For Girard, put straightforwardly, there is violence in society's attempts to prevent violence. As Buffachi (2005: 193) cogently observed: 'if violence is the problem, violence is also the solution'. In explicating the nature of this irony further, Girard (2013) focuses upon the sacrificial act that inflicts suffering. In doing so, Girard suggests that through sacrifices:

> '...society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a "sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect' (2013: 4).

For Girard (2013), sacrifice serves to avert more destructive harm and reinforces social bonds, yet, simultaneously, this is often reflective of social hierarchies particularly with regards to who becomes designated as the victims and that are deemed 'sacrificeable'. The violence that takes place during the sacrificial act may become regarded then, as Dupuy (2013: 15) has suggested, as 'a "good" form of institutionalised violence that holds in check "bad" anarchic

violence' that threatens stability. There is of course great irony here that Dupuy is acutely aware of. Dupuy goes on to suggest that as a result, evil works to contain evil, citing by way of example the proliferation of nuclear armament during the Cold War which, ironically, it is suggested contributed to the prevention of an outbreak of violence on a larger scale amidst escalating tensions within and between states. As a form of 'good violence' or 'necessary evil' then, sacrifice inflicted upon specific victims becomes particularly crucial during times of societal crisis. Indeed, as Ray (2011: 195) has argued, there is evidence for the fundamental process outlined by Girard 'at the level of ...whole societies' and 'especially...at points of crisis'.

The crises engendered by historic epidemics of infectious diseases have previously led to the initiation of the kinds of sacrificial mechanisms that Girard outlined, particularly the systematic targeting of groups with 'outsider' status who became the focal point of wider society's panic and discord. In Medieval Europe, for example, Jews were routinely identified as spreaders of diseases or were seen as responsible for transmission, and subject to violence and persecution (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, similar incidents of wilful hostility and violent racism have been directed towards individuals of Asian origin, targeted in the belief that they are responsible for the origins of the virus as the first known cases were reported in China (Cabral, 2021; Gover et al, 2020).

Other sacrificial mechanisms during the pandemic have been subtler and structurally embedded, but nevertheless predicated on the same mechanisms and generally targeted at groups united by their lower socio-economic and minority status. Consistent then with a systemic violence that produces what Žižek (2008) terms the 'zero level' against which subjective, agent-led violence is rendered visible, 'good' violence or 'necessary evil', are more effectively concealed through their embeddedness within sacred and, more so contemporarily, profane institutions (Dupuy, 2013; 2014). Dupuy (2014: 11) importantly reminds us of this fundamental contemporary paradox in his critical discussion of neoliberal political economy and the functions it performs following the de-sacralisation of many particularly Western nations:

> 'Economy has violence in it; it is, if you like, inherently violent. But it also acts as a barrier against violence. It is as if violence finds in commerce and industry the means of limiting itself, and therefore protecting the social order against collapse'.

On this basis, Dupuy asks whether the economy should be considered remedy or poison and seems to conclude that it is both. Its remedial qualities lie in its ability to contain and limit internecine violence that would otherwise result in self-annihilation. Steve Hall (2014) contends, along similar lines, that capitalist political economy puts to service potentially and otherwise destructive libidinal drives, harnessing them to serve processes of accumulation and growth through non-violent interpersonal competition. The paradox exists though in economy's Janus-face, specifically the poison it simultaneously distils through exploitation, subjugation and structural violence inflicted upon sections of the human population (see Cooper and Whyte, 2018; Galtung, 1969; Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2020).

While Dupuy points towards the troubling realisation of the function of necessary evil within systemic and institutional structures that inflict an unavoidable, yet limited, amount of damage on sections of human populations to hold at bay more destructive forces, Ruggiero (2020: 28) highlights the way that power through such structures 'inflicts a form of sacrificial violence...whereby vulnerable victims suffer...so that those protected by power can thrive'.

Indeed, Schwab and Malleret (2020) describe the dichotomy that emerged during the pandemic between social classes and that mirrors this violent sacrificial process. As the pandemic unfolded, the ability of different social groups to erect barriers against it and the moral quandaries and harms it has generated became increasingly evident: 'the uber-rich moved into their yachts, the merely rich fled to their second homes, the middle class struggled to work from home' (Saad-Filho, 2020: 480). Crucially, wealth softened the blow of social distancing and the restrictions placed upon movement and daily life. Members of the working class, however, were more likely to be employed in occupations that placed them on 'the front line to help save lives and the economy – cleaning hospitals, manning the checkouts, transporting essentials and ensuring our security' (Schwab and Malleret, 2020: 80).

In their analysis of media coverage during the first wave of the pandemic in both the UK and Australia, Lohmeyer and Taylor (2020) note the frequent invoking of heroism and the military in reference to the efforts made in response to the virus, particularly those individuals employed in roles where adjustments to working practices to minimise transmission were not possible. Even the use of and emphasis placed upon the term 'frontline' when describing the roles associated with and performed by these workers, denotes militaristic connotations of infantry engaged in direct close proximal combat with opposition forces.

In the UK, the frontline of the pandemic has undoubtedly been the NHS. In practice, a health care system is designed to protect citizens (Jones and Hameiri, 2021) but from the outset of the pandemic, the NHS became a sacred institution that required collective sacrifice to protect it. "Protect the NHS" became the mantra as lockdown and social distancing measures were the collective price required to preserve the sacred (Briggs, et al 2020). This required a determination concerning which parts of the economy were essential and which could be sacrificed. Paradoxically, the workers *within* the NHS became buffers against the virus and were sacrificed to protect the rest of society. The phrase 'key workers' entered popular consciousness to denote those essential workers employed on the frontline to keep our society functioning (Briggs et al, 2020). NHS staff, care home workers, cleaners, retail workers, delivery drivers and other emergency services became sacrificial offerings to protect the rest of society from greater harm. The violence inherent within this offering – their potential exposure to a deadly virus – sacralised frontline key workers and in the first weeks of the pandemic generated ritual praise through the weekly 'clap for carers' doorstep applause, a symbolic gesture of recognition for the sacrifice made on our behalf (Wood and Skeggs, 2020). The ultimate sacrifice is to give one's life in the service of a greater or collective good (Halbertal, 2012) and media reports throughout the pandemic have focused on the deaths of NHS workers and care home staff (Lintern, 2020), with the Office for National Statistics reporting that, between March and December 2020, almost 900 health and social care workers had died with Covid-19 in the UK (ONS, 2021). These workers were, in Dupuy's (2013:117) terms, 'scapegoats' in the true sense of the term when 'society causes its wrongs to fall upon an innocent individual or group' – the failure to adequately prepare and ensure sufficient protections against a viral pandemic. Widespread appreciation and acknowledgement, like children's drawings of rainbows in windows, weekly doorstep clapping, exclusive discounts and offers on consumer goods, arguably acted as an attempt at the expiation of society's collective guilt for the absence of fundamental preparations and protections.

However, the absence of adequate preparation and protection is symptomatic of the contemporary capitalist system. Capitalism's systemic violence imposes upon the sacrifice of key workers in a way that reveals the disavowed 'real' (Hall, 2012) – the exploitation and preparedness to harm others essential to the system's continuation but that remains disavowed

and subject to frequent denial. The absence of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at the outset of the pandemic exposed frontline workers to harm and demonstrated the limits of both neoliberal governance structures and globalised just-in-time supply chains (Jones and Hameiri, 2021). The mad scramble for PPE revealed a system that privileged market forces, competition, outsourced supply chains and networks, global trade routes and a hollowed-out state where government had been replaced with governance (Jones and Hameiri, 2021). Despite warnings about the likely impact of a global pandemic, governments were underprepared and would rue their reliance on highly insecure just-in-time production and delivery models that reflected a neoliberal approach to governance and that suited corporate interests. The normal functioning of the capitalist economy left frontline healthcare workers at risk of harm in the early days of a pandemic where the virus had no known treatment and could be passed easily without the protection afforded by PPE. While frontline workers displayed the hallmarks of Halbertal's (2012) and Keenan's (2005) self-sacrifice in the service of a higher cause, the systemic violence of capitalism also sacrificed low-paid, overworked, and precarious workers (Ruggerio, 2020). Capitalism's sacrificial offering came at a price: a proposed 1% pay rise for frontline nurses who, over 12 months into the pandemic, were now displaying signs of PTSD, stress, anxiety, and depression (Green et al, 2021). Public outrage and the official rejection of the 1% pay increase reflects a social desire for their sacrifice to be recognised and validated in a more meaningful way; yet, the systemic violence of capitalism insists upon the continuation of precarity, low-pay and insecure work (Lloyd, 2018), resulting in a tokenistic gesture rather than a fundamental betterment in their material conditions.

Importantly, Girard (2013) and Halbertal (2012) suggest that sacrifice always takes place within a hierarchical structure. This is true of the Covid-19 pandemic as the greatest sacrifice appears to have been borne by the frontline workers, while many others worked from home or received furlough payments. However, a range of sacrifices are visible across the pandemic and potentially exist on several levels in what might be identified as a *sacrificial hierarchy* depicted visually in Fig 1.

Fig 1: Conceptualising the relationship between the 'sacred' and 'sacrificed'
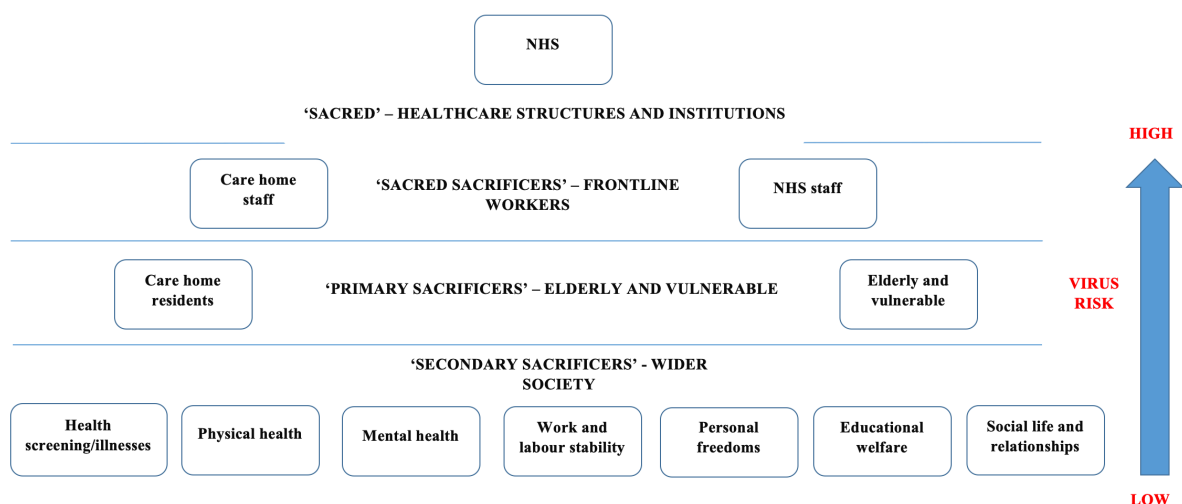
As indicated in Fig 1, whilst the NHS and its supporting healthcare institutions were cast as the *sacred*, frontline workers might be branded as the *sacred* sacrificers since they worked to protect what the government regarded as sacred, something which all individuals should strive to protect and uphold even at the expense of their own physical and mental wellbeing.

Moreover, care home residents, the elderly and the vulnerable, could be deemed the *primary sacrificers*; as mentioned, this is clear particularly during the initial stages of the pandemic whereby the systemic violence of neoliberalism and its recent economic logic of austerity meant many healthcare services were privatised and underfunded (Baines and Cunningham, 2015), and often unable to adequately mitigate the risks of Covid-19. Lastly, at the bottom of the sacrificial hierarchy lie the *secondary sacrificers* which includes the various sacrificial losses of members of wider society, not least peoples' mental health, cultural freedoms and other illnesses and health appointments that were transiently sacrificed to focus on the threats and harms posed by Covid-19.

Discussion

Returning to the violence of economy, we can situate the sacrifice outlined previously within the systemic violence of neoliberal capitalism (Žižek, 2008). As noted already, violence is a normalised element of both human nature and capitalist political economy and throughout each successive 'spirit of capitalism' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), a variety of groups have been sacrificed in order for others to flourish. This process has historically reflected existing inequalities and hierarchies within the system; from 19th century industrial workers in the UK and USA to 21st century miners and sweatshop labour in the Far East, from migrant workers to modern slaves. The unequal sacrifice of the poor, working-class, minorities, marginalised and, ultimately, disposable workers, is a persistent feature of the perpetuation of a violent system. The result of the Covid-19 pandemic's interaction with capitalist political economy bears these historic features. To keep society functioning and some semblance of economic activity in place, the lowest paid, most insecure, precarious, and exploited forms of labour were sacrificed to protect the rest and maintain some productivity.

Dupuy's (2014) contention that the 'good' violence inherent within the economy is deployed to remedy more serious forms of 'bad' violence is well-judged in relation to the pandemic. Harm and violence have been visited upon certain sections of the population such as those that are vulnerable through their employment to prevent greater harms throughout the social order. Many have survived and even flourished throughout the pandemic, and we can situate this within the context of sacrificial violence inflicted upon others. Violence as the answer to violence appears in other examples too. Domestic violence calls to the charity Refuge rose by 25% in the first month of the UK's first lockdown (Nicola, 2020). Paradoxically, the violence inherent within the normal functioning of labour markets acted as 'good' violence that was only visible by its absence. The release valves of work, socialising, and leisure disappeared with 'stay at home' orders, unemployment, furlough, and online working; families were forced into close proximity for prolonged periods without respite and domestic violence spiralled (Ellis, et al 2021). In some senses, the 'good' violence routinely meted out by the economic system averted to some extent a wave of 'bad' violence in domestic spheres. In the sense of sacrificial violence, those victims of domestic and child abuse were sacrificed for the greater good.

In conceiving of this violence in terms of harm, we see the unintentional consequences of the normal functioning of a system built on violence, but also what ultra-realist criminologists have identified as the positive motivation to harm (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Lloyd, 2018; Telford & Lloyd, 2020). Inequality emerges from a willingness to inflict harm on others (Lloyd, 2018). On a subjective level, individuals emboldened by 'special liberty' pursue their expressive and instrumental ends unencumbered by adherence to law and societal norms (Hall, 2012; Tudor, 2018). If we shift our focus to the macro-level, Dupuy (2014) suggests that sacrifice is embedded within the economy. As we have stated, violence and sacrifice are intimately

connected and therefore we could argue that a measure of sacrifice is always required to avert a greater anarchy. The sacrificial process of the more disposable members of human populations represents:

> 'the purest and most extreme embodiment of the abusive, negligent and exploitative relationships between the capitalist socio-economic system and the individual' (Hall and Wilson, 2014: 650)

This represents a willingness to inflict harm and violence upon disposable populations. Sacrifice, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, is an essential and integral feature of a society and economic system that must forestall consequences potentially more harmful than the violence it enacts. In returning to Girard's (2013) analysis, we were never 'all in it together'; those sacrificed on the front line of the pandemic deflected violence from those that the power structures and ideology of neoliberal capitalism most sought to protect. The prevailing ideology of a post-political neoliberalism has emphasised individual competition, status, display, emotivism and accumulation for decades (Winlow and Hall, 2013); therefore, many of those sacrificed on the frontline have been those that are marginalised, socio-economically precarious and disposable, or what we might brand as the losers upon the field of neoliberal capitalism.

Girard (2013) suggests that those sacrificed throughout history have usually been an 'other', an outsider on the margins of the social fabric. Perhaps the most extreme form of 'Othering' occurred under Nazi Germany and manifested in the Holocaust, whereby Jews were cast as the cause of society's problems and were murdered in their millions (Whitehead, 2018). However, those that are cast as 'others' under neoliberalism have principally been socially and economically marginalised groups, particularly problematic drug users, the unemployed, prisoners, as well as immigrants and asylum seekers (Whitehead, 2018). Those that have been sacrificed during the Covid-19 pandemic, though, particularly frontline workers, are therefore not a traditional 'other', though they were sacrificed to protect society and those further up the social structure like neoliberalism's socio-economic winners, many of whom witnessed their wealth increase during the pandemic (Briggs, et al 2021).

Despite playing a central and important role in society both before and throughout the pandemic, many of the pandemic's sacrificial others like care workers continue to endure degrading working conditions including low-pay, non-unionization, zero-hour contracts and long working hours (Briggs, et al 2021). This is because the systemic violence of neoliberal capitalism insists upon the importance of the maximisation of profitability, market expansion and capital accumulation, severing the historic Hegelian master-slave relation (Hall, 2012; Telford & Lloyd, 2020). While capital historically required the recognition of employees to secure its hegemony, it no longer needed the acknowledgement of workers under neoliberalism, since the emergence of a reserve army of labour meant they could be easily disposed of when they were no longer required. Whilst many of those sacrificed were not history's traditional 'others', they were often in socio-economically precarious positions and thus deemed more disposable than other social groups.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that society does require the nurses, care home workers and couriers, among others, to keep society and the economy functioning. As mentioned, they were rebranded as frontline workers, often denied access to PPE and did not have the option to work within the safe and comfortable surroundings of their home. If a partial meaning of sacrifice is loyalty to a higher and more noble cause (Girard, 2013; Halbertal,

2012), then key workers - many of whom often laboured in difficult conditions to protect the most vulnerable elderly people in care homes; provided care to those that suffered with ill health in hospitals; and often travelled many miles per day and thus came into contact with countless people and thereby increased their risk of contracting Covid-19 to deliver important items – evidently exemplify this commitment to a virtuous ideal. Therefore, it might be argued that 'it is the mark of the good that it deserves sacrifice' (Halbertal, 2012: 68), not least because sacrifice has historically been a means to reinforce the fabric and bonds of the social order (Girard, 2013).

However, how well does the sacrificial offerings documented above reinforce the fabric of neoliberalism's social order; or, indeed, is there a cogent social order to be reinforced? Throughout the neoliberal era, individualism and the profit motive have seeped further into society and reached areas of life previously untouched, restructuring social institutions and relations along the cold lines of the business logic (Whitehead, 2018). Perhaps we witnessed a transient burst of communal spirit during the initial stages of the pandemic, with some relatives often dropping food off for their elderly family members who were self-isolating, as well as our shared sacrifices which meant 'me first' individualism was somewhat subordinated to the collective. Over time, though, it became clear that this sense of social cohesiveness and community was temporary, with many people longing for the return of individual freedoms and gratification, while clear divisions and tensions have emerged around one's level of commitment to the imposed restrictions (Briggs, et al 2021). As fatalism, resignation and scepticism have become doxic, many peoples' belief in the possibility of a better world has collapsed (Winlow & Hall, 2013). The solipsistic and hollow pleasures of consumer culture are embraced to mitigate a structural sense that something has gone wrong, or is missing (Lloyd, 2018). Absent is a universal and convincing political narrative to explain peoples' place in the world; the traditional tools for identity formation like social class and community have evaporated.

This is what some have referred to as a post-social world (Raymen, 2019; Telford & Lloyd, 2020; Winlow & Hall, 2013), whereby commitments to the collective Good are absent and all that matters is self-enhancement (Raymen, 2019). The longer the pandemic lasted, this absence of a telos, purpose or collective Good made the demands for sacrifice much harder to accept. The continued existence of as many people as possible – the administration of non-death – became a moral end in itself, while questions about purpose, flourishing and the virtues inherent in living a 'good life' were ignored. Whilst Halbertal's (2012) point that sacrifice and recognition of it has the potential to move us beyond individual desires, drives and goals towards the Good, was clear in the short-term during the pandemic, the sacrifice of those on the frontline and our collective sacrifices more generally potentially mean that the systemic violence of neoliberalism has merely been maintained in the longer term.

Conclusion
This article has highlighted the evident presence of sacrifice throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. We have begun to develop here some tentative but evidently important connections between the pandemic and the concept of sacrifice, which do require further consideration. We have also provided a demonstrable case for the utility of this concept for understanding the impact and societal response to the threat the virus poses to the social fabric, which is also in need of greater attention particularly as society shifts into a post-pandemic period.

The arrival of Covid-19 has without doubt required personal sacrifices to be made of varying kinds in an attempt to resolve the various moral dilemmas that its management presents for

human society. The various sacrifices made have frequently been lauded by politicians and others as evidence of a collective commitment to a common higher cause by individuals across the social strata. A focus purely upon personal sacrifices made by individuals though without appreciation of context, obscures the broader social and historical backdrop in which sacrificial processes are both undertaken by individuals and also enacted upon them. It also ignores the greater complexity of human violence and its centrality within social relations, which many authors discussed in this article alert us to. Contemporary sacrifices made in the Covid-19 era bare many of the hallmarks of historic sacrificial acts and processes, particularly in terms of their hierarchical nature. The sacrifices discussed here, while undertaken and enacted in pursuit of a perceived notion of common social good, must also be understood as emblematic of systemic violence that works to maintain the functioning of current neoliberal economic and political systems by routinely harming sections of human populations that are considered disposable and therefore 'sacrificeable'. While historically, as significant theorists also discussed here have suggested, sacrifice served the function of restoring the social fabric in the face of threats and crises, the potential for this in the contemporary neoliberal period requires further critical consideration.

There is the potential to recognise Covid-19, and the sacrifices entailed in the response to it, as an 'event' (Winlow and Hall, 2013) that may transform society and social life for the better by awakening populations to the importance of mutual care, support and regard for others, over individual desires, and thus hollow consumer pleasures (Briggs et al, 2020). Indeed, the myriad sacrifices made during the pandemic bequeath a great burden of responsibility upon those who were protected to ensure those sacrifices are honoured (Halbertal, 2012), and act as a catalyst for reassessing and possibly altering the various harmful aspects of our socio-economic arrangements. With many contemporary critical theorists highlighting the specifically post-social character of contemporary relations and the repeated obstruction of an agreed upon notion of the 'good', the noble sacrifices made in response to the pandemic do risk being rapidly forgotten, and therefore undertaken and enacted purely for the protection and furtherance of a fundamentally unequal and violent system.

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