

# On the Origins of the Anthropological Machine: Sacrificial Dispositif and Equality

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**Abstract:** This article takes a genealogical approach to the material origin of what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called the ‘anthropological machine’, analyzing the *dispositif* by which the ontological and axiological dualism between the ‘human’ and the ‘animal’ first took place in archaic societies. Using some key concepts of René Girard’s anthropology, it is possible to argue that this dualism is rooted in the violent practice of victimage sacrifice. In other words, I claim that the anthropological machine is originally performed by a sacrificial *dispositif*. Though in modern society the human/animal dichotomy is performed by other *dispositifs*, the trace of this origin remains in the form of what Gianfranco Mormino calls *sacrificial survivals*. An analysis of the survival of the violent parameter of equality demonstrates that making a conceptual shift to equality as equal vulnerability is the key to creating a break with the long-lasting effects of the sacrificial *dispositif*. Continental and feminist approaches to animal studies reflect deeply on vulnerability since it appears to be a promising dimension with which to ground human-animal relations in non-violent ways. If we link these attempts with the Girardian context, it is possible to understand their radical potential for creating socio-political change.

**Keywords:** Critical animal studies – Anthropological machine – René Girard – Sacrifice - *Dispositif*

If we consider from a non-speciesist point of view the intensity and the scale of contemporary non-human animal exploitation, what we primarily face is the category of violence, that institutionalized violence which, seemingly, has been directed against other animals ‘since forever’. The aim of this article is to enhance the genealogical and materialistically oriented understanding of that ‘since forever’, a temporal marker that makes explicit the idea that violence is the inalienable foundation of what Giorgio Agamben calls the ‘anthropological machine’ and, consequently, of the ontological and axiological separation between the so called ‘Human’ and the so-called ‘Animal’.

## Anthropological Machine

The concept of ‘anthropological machine’ (or ‘anthropogenic machine’) was introduced by Agamben in the essay *The Open. Man and Animal*, while being revised, and has influenced many antispeciesist thinkers, especially in the field of critical animal studies.<sup>1</sup> This concept is originally defined by Agamben as ‘a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human’ (26) ‘through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman’ (37). According to Agamben, ‘*Homo sapiens* is neither a clearly defined species nor a substance’ (26), rather it is always ‘the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae’ (16). Thus, this place, the centre of the machine, is ‘perfectly empty and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew’ (38). This is because there is not an exclusive trait (such as having language or a soul) that would definitively sanction the demarcation between the *humanitas* and *animalitas* of the human which is only waiting to be discovered ‘out there’, whether by theological or philosophical inquiry or empirical and scientific ones. The ‘Human’ needs to be produced and the machine serves this scope through simultaneous processes of inclusion and exclusion. It works by separating and articulating, within humanity itself, the animal and the human, and together with this binarization of ‘body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element’ (16), of *zoé* and *bíos*, to use the terms which already appear in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*. Depending on the caesura movement and the subsequent arrangement of the two elements that it makes, two variants of

the machine are distinguished, ascribed by Agamben to two different phases: the ancient and the modern. The first, ancient variant, working from Aristotle to Linnaeus, finds the lack of an essence proper to *Homo*, the absence of a place assigned and defined in the creation which therefore leaves him suspended between the divine and the animal, forcing him to shape himself 'at his own discretion in either bestial or divine form' (29). If the human being is characterized by this fragility, by this uncertain identity, the anthropogenic movement seeks to establish those aspects exclusively proper to the human, humanizing certain (held) characteristics of animal life, such as walking on all fours, being without language or being covered with hair. Therefore, those human beings with a (supposed) animal-like appearance: the infant savage, the werewolf, the barbarian, the slave, the foreigner, all these 'figures of an animal in human form' (37), as Agamben puts it, are used to trace the outside of humanity proper.

The modern variant of the anthropogenic machine, by contrast, claims to verify but actually presupposes the specific nature of the human in its emergence from the animal order, identifying the mark that differentiates the human once and for all. What is proper to the human is produced by identifying and isolating animal traits within human life and excluding them from the inside, expelling them as non-human, precisely because of their being animalized. For example, the palaeontologists of the nineteenth century once fixed the essence of the human in language and following Charles Darwin, directed their studies to the search for the missing link between the ape without language and the speaking human, imagining a non-speaking human, *Homo alalus*, a human-ape. In this case, the border between the inside and the outside of the human is occupied by those believed to be bearers of biological animal residues within the human, like *Homo alalus*, but also, Agamben suggests, 'the Jew [...] and the overcomatose person' (37). In both versions, to be situated at the border of humanity means suffering the 'lethal and bloody' (38) effects of the machine, as is clear from the historical treatment reserved to all the figures mentioned as examples by Agamben.

Having seen how the logic of the anthropological machine functions in Agambenian terms, we must try to understand 'what' this machine is. Agamben's analysis, while containing various scientific and theological references, moves openly within the sphere of Western philosophy and in particular within the sphere of metaphysics. In fact, if it is true that the

machine can be read in a broader sense as inherent to Western culture in general, it is in any case ‘Western philosophy’s anthropological machine’ (79). Therefore, anthropogenesis and, by necessity, the mechanism from which it results, occur in the realm of metaphysical discourse, within first philosophy. As Agamben states: ‘From the beginning, metaphysics is taken up in this strategy: it concerns precisely that *meta* that completes and preserves the overcoming of animal *physis* in the direction of human history’ (79). The anthropological machine is thus the *metaphysical dispositif* (*apparatus*)<sup>2</sup> par excellence.

Thus conceived, metaphysics, as mentioned above, is an intrinsically humanist metaphysics because its fundamental *dispositif* is incessantly engaged in the production of the ‘Human’ and of a certain conceptualization of human subjectivity, namely the tradition of the human being as an *animal rationale* and the modern Enlightenment tradition which seeks the site of subjectivity ‘in a quasi-solipsistic, presocial, prelinguistic sites uncontaminated by and discontinuous with historical and social forces’ (Calarco, *Zoographies* 82). In so doing, Agamben is drawing on Heideggerian critique of humanism and metaphysics. As Heidegger clearly states in his *Letter on Humanism*:

Every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one. Every determination of the essence of the human being that already presupposes an interpretation of beings without asking about the truth of being, whether knowingly or not, is metaphysical. The result is that what is peculiar to all metaphysics, specifically with respect to the way the essence of the human being is determined, is that it is ‘humanistic’. (245)

Therefore, jamming the anthropological machine is a posthumanist and antihumanist task, coherent with Agamben’s broader theoretical perspective. The machine needs to be stopped because producing the ‘Human’ is not a neutral or purely academic operation; rather, according to Agamben, it is simultaneously a ‘metaphysical-political operation’ (21).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, ‘ontology, or first philosophy, is not an innocuous academic discipline, but in every sense the fundamental

operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the living being, is realized' (79). It is not an innocuous operation because its consequences are to be found in the political sphere: the including-excluding movement is a matter of life and death (being killed with impunity).

Let us now examine the use and meaning of the concept of the anthropological machine in the framework of antispeciesist reflection. The first obvious effect that this appropriation involves is the widening of the range of interest beyond the human being, eliminating the clarification, constantly reiterated by Agamben, that the human-animal distinction works only *within 'man' himself*. The analysis of the machine undertaken in the field of critical animal studies, therefore, also takes into account the lethal and bloody consequences of that *dispositif* on animals in flesh and blood, in the various forms of animal life. 'The animal' no longer coincides with the concept, proper to the metaphysical discourse, of the *animalitas* of the human, in perpetual contrast with *humanitas*. The 'empty center' of the machine no longer revolves around a certain form of the human; rather around the singular collective 'Human' *tout court*. Following the criticism of Matthew Calarco, if we seriously evaluate the political and philosophical question of the animal, we can see how the antihumanism of Agamben's vision falls completely within the boundaries of a 'performative anthropocentrism' (*Zoographies* 98), blind to animals as living beings in their own right. Thus, critical animal studies scholars make a shift from antihumanism to anti-anthropocentrism, both on an ontological and ethico-political level. As Calarco argues, the failure to implement this shift in Agamben's own thought prevents the definitive halt of the anthropological machine, making its logic reassert 'in places where we least expect it' (98). This omission also considerably limits the political proposal of the 'coming community' in its opposition to the humanist democratic politics of human rights. The radicality inherent in the need for new human-animal relations is, unlike the claim of new relations between humans alone, almost irreconcilable with the human rights approach and therefore more subversive. Indeed, the politics of human rights is centered on the humanist model of subjectivity which, as briefly sketched above, is based on the concepts of logos, mind, rationality, self-presence and so on. While these concepts can be adapted from time to time to include in the scope of what counts as human some marginalized human groups, this does not seem compatible with a

transpecies enlargement. As Calarco states: ‘Thus, when we consider the ethicopolitical status of animal life, the necessity for working toward a form of politics beyond the present humanist, democratic and juridical order becomes clear’ (97-98).

Another consequence of the antispeciesist reconceptualization of the anthropological machine concerns the idea of ‘what’ it is. Focusing more on animals, in a material sense, and on the violent effects of their (inclusive) exclusion – that is, on actual relationships of oppression – its interpretation in exclusively metaphysical terms is no longer sustainable and would be reductive. For this reason, the machine is conceived as a ‘complex *dispositif*’ (Filippi and Trasatti 66) a ‘series of institutions and apparatuses’, ‘a wide set of systems and structures’ (Calarco, *Thinking through Animals* 64) of various kinds (economic, social, cultural, juridical, etc.); in a word, a ‘*performative* apparatus’ that ‘calls into being (which is to say, *performs*) a certain reality’ (55): the ‘Human/Animal’ distinction. Thus, the machine is no longer a privileged *dispositif* of Western metaphysics, but rather a network or ensemble constituted by the multiform interweaving of heterogeneous elements. The analytical gaze, then, widens to include and bring out the *material* mechanisms of animal oppression, the practices that the machine underlies, in a historical and socio-economic perspective.

Such reconceptualization in a materialist sense, broadly intended, allows the framing of the metaphysical/cultural discourse as a ‘justificationist ideology’ (Filippi, *Questioni di Specie* 72; see also Nibert) of oppression which occurs – at the same time and with some sort of feedback loop – through historical determined material practices (rituals, institutions and structures). Following and radicalizing this perspective it is possible to show the historico-genealogical depth of the ‘Human’/Animal’ dichotomy. The anthropological machine, according to this view, would not coincide with, let us say, an (ahistorical) *ur-dispositif* one, but it is performed or actualized in different networks diachronically as well as synchronically speaking. The *dispositif* performing human-animal relations in modern society is formed by different elements from that of archaic societies, with a consequent and peculiar change of the relations themselves. This does not mean that there is a complete replacement of the previous *dispositifs* with the *dispositifs* following them. It could be the case that relations of coexistence and/or survival occur, as we shall see below.

Despite such reconceptualization, it is possible to see a certain ambiguity in critical animal studies regarding the place to be assigned to the Western metaphysical discourse on one side and the material processes, the social practices, on the other. The ambiguity does not consist in considering and evaluating the metaphysical elements of the *dispositifs* in order to propose alternative, non-essentialist and non-hierarchical ontologies; rather, this is a fundamental operation to be performed. The ambiguity consists in accepting, in fact, that the meaning of the critical analysis is exhausted in ‘proceeding from and in view of the rupture in the human/animal distinction that *has grounded thought thus far*’ (Calarco, *Zoographies* 64, emphasis added). In order to eliminate this ambiguity, it is necessary to try to deconstruct this ‘cognitivist’ absolutism, and to look for the material roots of the ontological categories of ‘Human’ and ‘Animal’. In other words, we must ask, which *dispositif* firstly grounded the ‘Human/Animal’ distinction in Western thought, and how?

### **Sacrificial Dispositif**

Before proceeding further, it is important to briefly define the notion of *dispositif*. This concept was introduced to the philosophical lexicon by Michel Foucault, starting from the 1970s when he began to employ it in his writings. It then became the central element of the disciplinary systems’ analysis in *Discipline and Punish* and of the genealogy of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*. In these works, however, Foucault does not provide a general definition of the notion of *dispositif*; a more specific determination was given by the philosopher in an interview published in 1977 entitled *The Confession of the Flesh*. Referring to this, it is possible to summarize Foucault’s definition as follows: a *dispositif* is a *network (réseau)* of heterogeneous elements that is formed, at a given historical moment, as a strategic response to an *urgency* and that produces certain *effects* (194-195). Such elements can be either discursive, such as laws, regulatory decisions, philosophical propositions, or non-discursive, material and physical, such as architectural forms or less complex objects, those called by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* ‘petty’ *dispositifs*, such as elevated platforms in the dining rooms or the stones of the prison wall (173). The urgency, which is very often configured as a practical and technical problem, can have

various historical causes: it can be a vital, biological, social, and/or anthropological pressure (Bianchi 225). Finally, as far as the effects of the *dispositif* are concerned, that is, their being performatively constitutive of a certain reality, they concern subjects, knowledge and power, and can even arrange a ‘whole type of society’, as Foucault claims about disciplinary *dispositifs* (*Discipline and Punish* 216).

The thesis of the present paper, first proposed by Italian scholar Gianfranco Mormino (*René Girard* 221, *L'Animale come Essere Sacrificabile*), is that the ‘Human/ Animal’ ontological and axiological dichotomy is originally rooted in the violent ritual of victimage sacrifice within the context of archaic societies, in the sense of René Girard’s theory (*Violence and the Sacred, Things Hidden*). It is important to underline that following Durkheim’s functionalist and sociological approach, in *Violence and the Sacred* Girard investigates the actual function of the sacrifice and the ‘ambivalence’ of the sacred, with a radical materialist and atheist approach to the religious realm, which is completely meaningful and even more coherent without referring to Girard’s later conceptions on Judeo-Christian scriptures (Mormino, *René Girard*) – which I totally dismiss. Moreover, it is true that Girard’s first intuition on the function of sacrifice came from the biblical episode of Abraham and Isaac; however – as Mormino underlines (*René Girard* 145) – Girard first analyzes it in light of the myth of Oedipus, reading the figure of Abraham as ‘another Laius’ (*Oedipus Analyzed*). Indeed, in *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard draws to a great extent on Greek materials (tragedy, myths, epic). In addition, in order to support his thesis, he takes into consideration sacrificial practices, myths and rituals from all over the world, including Canelos (Ecuador), Cape people (Ghana), Andaman Islanders, Ceram Islanders, Chukchi (Siberia), Dinka (Sudan), Ifugao (Philippines), Incwala ceremony (Swaziland), Iroquois (North America), Jukun (Nigeria), Kaingang (Brazil) and many others. Given this, Girard’s findings can likely be extended in order to claim that in ancient societies, the hierarchical classification of beings is determined by concrete and materials urgencies (i.e. by sacrificial needs) earlier than by economical or exploratory interests.

Thus, my claim is that the first actualization of the anthropological machine is a sacrificial *dispositif*. To support this claim, it is necessary to answer the question of whether the sacrificial practice conforms to the definition of *dispositif* we have sketched above. Therefore, it is



necessary to see whether it presents a network structure, what is the urgency to which it responds, how it responds – that is, its functioning – and finally, its effects, with particular attention for our purposes to the ontological and axiological ones. Girard's unified theory of sacrifice allows us to answer this question affirmatively, justifying the expression 'sacrificial *dispositif*'. First, victim sacrifice is well presented as a network of heterogeneous elements, with variable complexity. They range from the most elementary sacrifices, like stoning, whose elements are only stones, to highly formalized collective ceremonies that – to resume Foucault's definition – involve 'discourses', such as theological discourses; 'architectural forms', such as the altar, the route of the procession, temples; 'regulatory decisions' such as the introduction of professional figures like the executioner, priests, and so on.

Regarding the urgency, in the Girardian theory, victimage sacrifice is seen as an effective solution to an urgent problem, to a pressure that could be defined as vital. Such urgency is represented by the problem of containing violence within human groups; a particularly pressing problem for the survival of these groups because of the hypermimetism of our species. The intensity and destructiveness of violent conflicts are directly proportional to the mimetic ability of the involved subjects. In fact, mimesis is the fundamental engine of violence. Or rather, it is the mimesis of those behaviours aimed at the appropriation of a good – called by Girard 'acquisitive mimesis' (*Things Hidden*, 7) – that triggers rivalry. However, when imitation is directed towards representative and non-acquisitive behaviours, it constitutes a fundamental and powerful learning tool and therefore, given the consequent adaptive advantage, it represents a positive variation that favours the life of individuals and, as such, constitutes a pattern of behaviour present in many animals. Consequently, to limit the disadvantages that acquisitive mimesis creates at a social level – a threat to the peaceful cohesion of the group and to its survival – the emergence of another positive variation is necessary to solve the problem of the control of violence. Like many other species that have found such positive variation in the assumption of dominance pattern, humans must also find, or rather, must run into a mechanism that solves the problem of violence. This solution, suggested by the logic of mimesis itself but in no way a necessary outcome of it, is the mechanism of victimization of the scapegoat whose sacrifice is its ritualized and codified expression.

Approaching the third element of the definition of *dispositif*, that is, how it responds to the urgency, we ask, how does this mechanism and, *ergo*, sacrificial practice work? What makes a killing – an act of violence, as sacrifice actually is – a good solution precisely for the urgent problem of internal violence?

I think that Girard's analysis of the myth of Ajax's madness in the first pages of *Violence and the Sacred* allows us to understand the core functioning of the sacrificial *dispositif*. The myth tells of the Greek warrior Ajax Telamon, furious with the leaders of the Greek army – who refused to award him the late Achilles' weapons, assigning them to Odysseus instead – coming out of the camp at night and killing the cattle intended as supply for the troops. Ajax, blinded by anger – here again rage is caused by acquisitive mimesis: Ajax imitates Odysseus' appropriative gesture, thus coming into conflict with him and with the other soldiers – *mistakes* the tamed animals for the warriors on whom he means to vent his rage. The violence of the hero is unleashed on subjects who have nothing to do with his conflict and with the object of his hatred. The cattle, external subjects to the clash and to the Greek army community, *substitute* for the warriors. This substitutive function not only calms down the fury of Ajax (in the night the oxen *resemble* the warriors so much that the hero does not notice his own mistake), but also – which is an essential aspect – it does not raise any kind of violent retaliation. In this way it is possible to avoid the spiral of revenge that would have been generated if other warriors had been killed. Girard notes here that 'the institution of sacrifice is based on effects analogous to those produced by Ajax's anger – but structured, channeled and held in check by fixed law' (*Violence and the Sacred* 9). Even the fact that Ajax kills oxen and rams is not accidental: they are species from which Greeks traditionally drew their sacrificial victims, and this gives evidence of the increasingly massive and widespread consolidation of animal sacrifices.

According to Girard, sacrifice works as a way to 'deceive' violence by directing the internal aggressiveness of the group in the 'right' direction (*Violence and the Sacred* 1-22). The right direction is the one which avoids reprisals, does not re-launch violence and thus avoids triggering a potentially self-destructive spiral. In other words, the right direction restores peace to the community that unanimously performs the ritual because it precludes the shedding of that 'dirty', 'bad' blood spilled in conflicts between individuals. In short, the victimage sacrifice

allows one to vent violence on a surrogate victim in place of its proper recipient, the one who actually caused the violence itself. Violence vents again on someone or something that is – as Girard says – ‘chosen only because it is *vulnerable* and close at hand’ (*Violence and the Sacred* 2, emphasis added). Sacrificial ritual only serves to bring to a successful conclusion the substitutions that violence would spontaneously carry out, taking care to channel it in the ‘right’ direction.

The fundamental aim of sacrifice, in this reading, is the substitution of the real victim with an expiatory one. However, to really succeed in deceive violence, we must pay close attention to the choice of scapegoats. To appease violence the chosen victim must somehow resemble the individual to be replaced without being that same individual who is, after all, a member of the community. If this were the case, the sacrifice would not be successful as it would not meet the main requirement of the victim’s neutrality in terms of revenge. Otherwise, there would have been someone, usually within the family group, with the possibility – which in archaic societies means duty – to avenge the murder of the kin. The fundamental characteristic of a good sacrificial victim is, therefore, *vulnerability*. Being vulnerable implies the victim to be both weak – unable to threaten his/her aggressors – and with no one willing to take his/her side. The chosen victim is to be considered ‘sacrificeable’ by everyone: someone whose murder is seen as a lesser evil in the light of the greater good of social stability. This agreement activates the most authentic sacrificial logic, that is, *the all against one*. ‘Violent unanimity will ... reveal itself as the fundamental phenomenon of primitive religion’ (Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* 85). Unanimity alone, in fact, fully realizes the situation of indefensibility of the victim, ensuring the salvation and harmony of the group. For this reason, the choice will tend to fall on ‘second-rate subjects’, whose death has little or no importance, not in itself – because of some intrinsic ‘*essential qualities*’ of the subjects that would make their death worthless – but, precisely, because of their being defenceless. In short, defining someone as sacrificeable is equal to declare that is someone not to be afraid of. Thus, the categories designated as sacrificeable are, first, animals, scapegoat victims *par excellence* (even if their sacrifices historically followed those of humans) as they are similar enough to humans to make the replacement effective and unable to defend themselves; and second, marginalized humans, such as war prisoners, slaves, children, women, celibate

young men, foreigners, individuals with physical and mental disabilities, or with non-ordinary characteristics, like individuals of very poor social status or, on the contrary, of high social status, like kings. Both animal and human surrogate victims cannot be complete outsiders, otherwise they would not resemble enough the potential victim and the mechanism could fail. The surrogate victim has to pass for one of the community. For this reason, in many rituals, for example the bear ceremony among the Ainu and in Tupinamba cannibalism, a considerable period of time preceding the immolation is declared during which the victim destined for sacrifice lives within the community to be integrated and assimilated with the other members of the group (Girard, *Things Hidden* 70-71).

According to Girard, the actual mechanism of the sacrifice, the scapegoat mechanism, and the secret of its effectiveness are obscure to the actors and need to be so. Not only the mechanism needs to be obscure, but it needs to be misapprehended in the religious discourse on the basis of a theology of sacrifice (*Violence and the Sacred* 327), that is, reading sacrifice as an offer wanted by a violent god, thus concealing human group's own violence. Thus, when speaking in terms of 'choice of the victim' this is always to be understood as an unaware choice dictated by the dynamics of the mechanism itself. 'Rites efficacy is a consequence of the religious attitude in general, which precludes all those forms of conscious social engineering that modern man likes to think he can detect in the socially efficient traditional organizations' (301). In line with his materialist and functionalist methodology, Girard rejects any reference to theologies of sacrifice as a meaningful resource to explain it. Outside of any theology of sacrifice, which also includes presenting the immolated victim as beneficial, honoured, sacred, and valorized, the sacrifice remains a mere and simple act of killing. This view allows us not to believe in some sort of golden age for animals that would have coincided with the sacrificial era, as for instance maintained by Elisabeth de Fontanay (207, 215).

Finally, to complete the interpretation of sacrifice as a *dispositif*, and therefore of the anthropological machine as firstly actualized in a sacrificial *dispositif*, we have to take into account its effects. Generally speaking, in the Girardian theory it can be said that the sacrifice engendered the most crucial effects for human groups. For Girard, in fact, it generates the entire socio-religious order. Universally widespread phenomena such as animal domestication,<sup>4</sup> collective

hunting, war, games, agriculture, kingship, theater, marriage rules and kinship structures, ritual medicine, philosophy are originated from the sacrificial practice.<sup>5</sup> Recalling Foucault's words about the disciplinary *dispositifs*, it can well be said with regard to the sacrifice that it structures a whole type of society: the archaic sacrificial society.

According to this perspective, therefore, the hierarchical classification of beings – metaphysical categories – also depends, as its effect, on the sacrificial practice. Indeed, sacrificial functioning does not distinguish between human and animal victims *per se*, that is, it does not choose animal victims because *they are* animals, rather it distinguishes between strong and weak, between beings to be afraid of and harmless ones. In this regard it is straightforward what Girard remarks about archaic sacrifice:

Strictly speaking, there is no essential difference between animal sacrifice and human sacrifice, and in many cases one is substituted for the other. Our tendency to insist on differences that have little reality when discussing the institution of sacrifice—our reluctance, for example, to equate animal with human sacrifice—is undoubtedly a factor in the extraordinary misunderstandings that still persist in that area of human culture. . . . This dividing of sacrifice into two categories, human and animal, has itself a sacrificial character, in a strictly ritualistic sense. The division is based in effect on a value judgement, on the preconception that one category of victim – the human being – is quite unsuitable for sacrificial purposes, while another category – the animal – is eminently sacrificeable. We encounter here a survival of the sacrificial mode of thinking that perpetuates a misunderstanding about the institution as a whole.

(*Violence and the Sacred* 10-11)

This aspect is extremely important because it is an explanation that allows us not to presuppose what actually should be explained: the 'Human/Animal' distinction. Those living beings who were sacrificed were chosen (according to the inner dynamic of scapegoat mechanism) not *because* they were marked by differences of species, (or gender, or origin) – the idea of some sort of 'essential qualities' mentioned above. Rather, they were marked as 'animals', precisely because they were sacrificed. In other words, it is on the basis of a criterion of dangerousness that the

sacrificial *dispositif* distinguished between bodies that do not matter, easy to kill in complete impunity, and bodies that matter, which are instead to be safeguarded. The former were classified under the ontological and axiological category of ‘Animal’, the latter under that of ‘Human’, with all the consequences for human-animal relations that derived from this gesture. This is exactly how the anthropological machine works: it does not consider species boundaries, but from time to time it designates the ‘Human’ on the basis of who it excludes.

In the course of human history, the sacrificial *dispositif* in itself and the socio-religious order it arranges have progressively disappeared. In line with a coherent functionalist and materialist perspective, the reason for this lies in its becoming *useless*, in the fact that it stopped working as an effective solution to the problem of vengeance (Mormino). Thanks to new experiences, the acquisition of new knowledge and changing social conditions, sacrifice is replaced by other practices that better and more efficiently respond to the problem. Though Girard, betraying his own immanentist methodology, credits the revelation of the victimage mechanism (supposedly) contained in Judeo-Christian scriptures as the exceptional potential cognitive source of the erosion of the sacrificial sphere and scapegoat mechanism, at the beginning of *Violence and the Sacred* he seems to maintain that a determining factor in the disappearance or weakening of the sacrificial institution is the presence of a judicial system (18ff). He identifies a historical evolution, at least in the West, of the means of containment of revenge that coincides with the transition from preventive to curative:

- (1) preventive measures in which sacrificial rites divert the spirit of revenge into other channels;
- (2) the harnessing or hobbling of vengeance by means of compensatory measures, trials by combat, etc., whose curative effects remain precarious;
- (3) the establishment of a judicial system—the most efficient of all curative procedures. (21)

Moreover, as suggested by Mormino, we can think of other determinants that make it more and more difficult to achieve the unanimity of violent contagion (the ‘all against all’) and the unanimity of the persecution (the ‘all against one’): the increase in population and geographical extension, social heterogeneity, multicultural complexity, social openness, mobility. These are all elements of the erosion of conformism; indeed, coming into contact with difference introduces

new possible models of mimesis carrying different values (*René Girard* 243-247). These characteristics reach their maximum in modern society. Therefore, the victimage mechanism and its effectiveness seem suitable only for small, isolated groups; or elsewhere there could be only partial persecutory phenomena, capable of founding 'regional' mythologies but not of reuniting a totality. Thus, it seems an ahistorical projection to analyze contemporary animal oppression (which is performed by a peculiar *dispositif* relatable to the notion of Animal Industrial Complex as redefined by Twine) with the lens of sacrificial *dispositif* and its function. Animals in modern societies do not serve as scapegoats in that their mass killing does not have the function of preventing social crises within a community.

In claiming this, I disagree with Dinesh Wadiwel's thesis.<sup>6</sup> He connects Girard's theory on sacrifice – interpreted in the light of Roberto Esposito's concept of immunization – with the Agambenian figure of *homo sacer* re-read as 'the life that may be taken without constituting a sacrifice' (145), to conclude that:

Under conditions of industrialised slaughter and large scale experimentation, the human is thus founded upon a perpetual animal sacrifice, which constitutes, immunises and securitises the human, without formal celebration of the fact of sacrifice. (. . .) a sacrifice that is never really considered a sacrifice. (145-146)

The point is not that there is no formal celebration of the fact of sacrifice, but that there is no sacrifice at all, in the sense of sacrificial *dispositif*. Strictly speaking, we cannot adapt the Girardian definition of sacrifice to modern animal oppression. Who would be the 'human' or 'the human community' who unanimously commits this perpetual sacrifice? Capitalism? What would be the threats that 'human community' tries to get rid of by the mass killing of animals? Are there not other tools and practices that securitize society, as said before? It seems that in Wadiwel's thesis there is a flattening of the analysis of historically determined *dispositifs* on a metaphysical reading.

## Which Equality?

However, affirming that the sacrificial *dispositif* and the sacrificial social order have disappeared does not mean that they have just vanished without leaving a trace after the process of secularization. The inheritance of the very long era in which bloody sacrifices were practiced still remains in our society in the form of *sacrificial survivals*, to use Mormino's expression (*Dalla Predazione al Dominio* 71). Such survival involves the *effects* of a *dispositif* which can persist even when the *dispositif* as network of heterogeneous elements does no longer exist. Two effects that are given as enduring survivals are important for our discourse: the first is the permanence of the ontological 'Human/Animal' distinction in Western thought and culture, as already discussed, and the other is about the relation of modernity to violence and equality (82).

As mentioned, the sacrificial *dispositif* identifies the ability to harm as a relevant parameter to establish equality. Thomas Hobbes was the first to detect and claim this notion of equality; the true foundation of human equality is not, for instance, freedom or reason, but rather the identical ability to harm: 'They are equals, who can do equal things one against the other; but they who can do the greatest things, namely, kill, can do equal things. All men therefore among themselves are by nature equal' (133).

When anybody can inflict the 'greatest things' on anybody else, power relations lie in perfect balance. Everyone stands on the same rung of the ladder of violence, which, in this perspective, corresponds to the ladder of equality. A shift in the balance of power means, on one hand, the withdrawal of equal status to weaker subjects and, on the other hand, the success of those individuals who have maintained their position. It is clear that this kind of equality is founded on a violent and potentially destructive parameter. It could be said that, ideally, such a system admits only two possible states of affairs: first, a real 'balance of terror' in which individuals use their equal capacity to harm as a mutual deterrent; second, a sort of perpetual state of war. In fact, if a conflict starts, it will be long and serious. Hobbes concludes: '[war] is perpetual in its own nature; because in regard of the equality of those that strive, it cannot be ended by victory' (138-139).



That being said, in the sacrificial *dispositif* – given its ‘all against one’ functioning – the crossing of the sacrificial threshold occurs when, in a mimetic-rivalry way, potential victims increase their ability to ‘resist the persecution of the majority, necessarily sustained by *force*’ (Mormino, *René Girard* 208, emphasis added) making their unanimous oppression less simple. The potential victims have to become dangerous in order to gain positions in the ladder of power relations. A change in the sacrificeable categories means nothing more than an advancement along the violence ladder, becoming equal in the ability to harm.

Even if the modern discourse of rights (forgetting the Hobbesian lesson) has given the concept of equality a completely different guise – pacified, rational, abstract, put pen to paper in the charts of the various Declarations of Rights and Constitutions, something almost taken for granted – we must not forget, as the history of liberation movements shows us and as Mormino well emphasizes, that:

The end or the reduction of the forms of oppression and exclusion has always been caused by the increased dangerousness of the weaker categories, which have not *received* rights, rather have always conquered them. (*Dalla Predazione al Dominio*, 85)

This holds true in the case of animal oppression also. Indeed, the sacrificial survival in relation to the violent parameter of equality makes it necessary that the oppressed acquire, at least potentially, the ability to ‘strike back’. It is this ability that, ultimately, animal liberation activists and scholars try to increase. They have opened a space for dissent and resistance, for negotiation: this is exactly what we are talking about when we speak of the ‘question of the animal’ in a political sense.<sup>7</sup> Unlike other liberation struggles, animal liberation needs the active participation – not necessarily in a paternalistic sense, as we shall see below – of those humans that take up the cause, both at the theoretical level and at the practical one. Antispeciesism expressly tries to find a new basis for human-animal relations that is able to revolutionize, with a different extent of radicality, the current situation.

Many of the most recent and promising research attempts in the field of critical animal studies focus on the dimension of vulnerability, especially as analyzed from continental and feminist perspectives. Vulnerability opens important areas of inquiry; firstly, the one revolving

around the dimension of the body. Vulnerability is framed as belonging to every ‘living/lived bodies’ (Acampora xiv), as something in *common* and at the same time different ‘according to the tonality which each living body gives it’ (Filippi, *Il Margine dei Diritti Animalì* 26). The phenomenological-inspired analysis of animal corporeality, understood as the sum of the physical body and the environment reached through the sensorimotor apparatus as well as the marginal body which is continuously reshaped through the interaction with the other, brings to the fore the constitutive relationality of the living beings, their being constantly involved in a field of ‘somatic sociability’ (Acampora 5). Then, acknowledging that, to use Husserl’s words, ‘human animate organism . . . is with regard to essence a particularization of animate organism generally’ (qtd. in Acampora 16) allows us to situate ourselves, both on an experiential and theoretical level, on a shared and common ground which can give rise to an ethic capable of crossing species boundaries. It is the ground of moral sentiments which, once the body dimension is brought to the fore, becomes also the ground of ‘corporeal sentiments’: compassion, in the sense of feeling-together, sympathy and symphysis.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the vulnerability of bodies and the ‘forms of togetherness’ (Acampora 84ff) provide for an *ethos* of care, of participation, neighborhood, partnership; ways of ‘living otherwise’ (Calarco, *Thinking through Animals* 67) which we already find, for example, in animal sanctuaries, in the protection of ecological zones and wildlife corridors which ‘point us toward the kinds of practices that are required for human, animal, and non-animal life to flourish jointly’ (68).

Relating these attempts to those discussed previously, it is possible to argue that they try to make a shift from the violent parameter of equality as equal ability to harm – that sacrificial survival – to equality as shared vulnerability, a nonviolent parameter. This shift enables to erase the sacrificial idea that we owe respect only to those who are able to earn it by force and enter, as we have seen, into the sphere of ethics. In fact, respecting the Other on the basis of his/her force, broadly intended, is not an ethical way of behaving. There is no choice, nor duty in this type of conduct; simply, if you want to be safe from retaliation, you cannot do otherwise. It is therefore an act of necessity. To claim the opposite would be like supporting the validity of that ‘inexplicable nonsense’ (Rousseau 8) which is the expression ‘right of the strongest’. Jean-Jacques Rousseau dismisses the topic with a sarcastic joke that shows the deep contradiction of

that expression: ‘If a brigand should surprise me in the recess of a wood, am I bound not only to give up my purse when forced, but am I also morally bound to do so when I might conceal it? For, in effect, the pistol which he holds is a superior force’ (8). Opening up to the constitutive ‘im-potency’ (Filippi and Trasatti, 160) of life makes it possible to move in the direction of a fairer distribution of this common vulnerability that societies instead distribute unevenly. This redistribution may not offset the existing imbalance of power between humans and other animals but it could contribute alternative ways of dealing with human-animal relations: not oppression and exploitation but practices of emancipatory care and participation, as briefly sketched above. In this perspective, animals’ inability to strike back would no longer be permission to unpunished oppression but an invitation to an ethical response and moral respect. Not only this. If it is true that history and present time show the tragic truth of ‘men’s imprisonment in cultural or philosophical systems that maintain his *modus vivendi* with violence’ (Girard, *Things Hidden* 162) – a point on which Girard is only too convincing –, this openness also means a real ethico-political and social revolution, the search for a new *modus vivendi*. This shows the great subversive potential of antispeciesism and its challenge: a nonviolent, liberated, ‘relational community’. Such a ‘concrete utopia’ (Bloch) of the most aware antispeciesism is not conceivable if it were to be understood as ‘single-issue’. Indeed, equality as equal vulnerability is a promising theoretical and practical base toward the formation of intersectional solidarity with correlated movements for radical social change.<sup>9</sup> All the more so in the context of vulnerability to climate crisis.

## Conclusion

The Girardian framework does not allow those who use it to escape too easily from its inexorable pessimism. Equality is still based on that sacrificial survival which is the ability to harm. And the way in which the oppressed can pursue it is ‘by increasing with violence their “bargaining power”’ (Mormino, *René Girard* 295). After all, the animal liberation struggle also draws on this parameter, both in more institutional forms (parties in defense of animals, lobbying on governments, associations) and in more radical forms (such as direct actions in slaughterhouses, laboratories or farms) and, more explicitly, also in its less paternalistic guise based on the concept of animal resistance and the consequent practices of solidarity with animals

in revolt.<sup>10</sup> The disproportion of forces seems to make it appear unattainable to advance the animal cause on the ladder of violence-equality. Yet, it is precisely the current scale of animal extermination, and its entanglement with the most urgent problems of our time: environmental catastrophes, sixth mass extinction, global pandemics – that obliges our thought and practices to undertake a leap toward the abolition of the present state of things in the direction of that shift to equality as equal vulnerability that antispeciesism, in its intersection with other instances of radical change, foreshadows and opens.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Calarco, *Zoographies. The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*; Wadiwel, *The War against Animals*.

<sup>2</sup> I maintain the French word over the common English translation ‘apparatus’ because of its crucial conceptual and etymological ties, which, instead, are occluded by ‘apparatus’. A preferable English translation, also in accordance with the Italian translation ‘*dispositivo*’, is the term ‘dispositive’. For a detailed analysis of the conceptual differences between *appareil/ apparato/ apparatus* and *dispositif/ dispositivo/ dispositive* see Bussolini.

<sup>3</sup> In Agamben’s thought metaphysics and politics are seamless because, to recall his quotation about the strategy in which metaphysics is taken up, he identified that *meta* as *bíos*, the political form of life and the *physis* as *zoé*, the simple fact of living common to all living beings. Thus, in turn, politics is from the beginning biopolitics. This conception *per se* is problematic because it seems to propose a reading of biopolitics substantially determined by sovereignty (see Wolfe, 24-33). Moreover, according to Agamben, the sphere of the (bio)political – the relation of sovereign ban – precedes the specific distinction of the sacred and the profane, thus ‘politics defines the social space upon which the entire human social grammar hinges, as well the modalities of operational and violent control of the human’ (Antonello, 150-151). This is in sharp contrast with the Girardian theory that sees religion and the sacred as the genealogical source of the socio-cultural order, including political institutions and laws. In addition, adopting the Girardian framework it is possible to account for the enigmatic figure of *homo sacer* and the ‘paradox of sovereignty’. ‘The *homo sacer* would, then, become a juridical figure produced at the moment of exhaustion of the sacrificial rite, but before the instauration of a completely secular judicial system’ (158). See Antonello 146-164 for a convincing analysis of the intersections between Agamben and Girard.

<sup>4</sup> I believe that one starts treating animals like human beings in order to sacrifice them, substituting the animal for the human victim. (. . .) there is no incentive directly related to domestication and its advantages since no one knows about them at the start, and

they will only become evident as time goes by. Moreover, in its first stages domestication was *anti-economical*: the size of domesticated animals decreases; they suffer all sort of stress-related diseases due to captivity; the amount of bacteria and viruses that wild animals introduce to the human community is very high (Girard, *Evolution and Conversion* 116-117; see also *Things Hidden* 69-75).

<sup>5</sup> See Girard, *Things Hidden*; *Violence and the Sacred*; *Evolution and Conversion*.

<sup>6</sup> Wadiwel's account of Girard's theory of sacrifice is problematic because he seems to claim that the source of antagonism is internal differentiation. For example, he states that: 'the differentiations that stratify the social body – along lines of gender difference, class, ability, sexuality and race – land generate continual conflicts and antagonisms between entities that would otherwise be non-differentiated – is resolved through a unified violence that is directed towards animals' (144). Or again: 'Despite vast differences between humans, differences that could be the source of unhealable schisms, community is forged in spite of this difference through a unified superiority over other animals' (144). However, according to Girard, it is the equality, the loss of differences, caused by internal mimesis, that is the source of conflict. 'A single principle is at work in primitive religion and classical tragedy alike, a principle implicit but fundamental. Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another's throats'. (*Violence and the Sacred* 52) The fear to be averted is internal non-differentiation through the establishment and preservation of an internal hierarchical order of differences (a *Degree*, see Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*), not through a homogenizing macrodifference (with an outside).

<sup>7</sup> Here I refer to a notion of politics inspired by radical democrats Jacques Rancière, which stresses the element of dissensus, 'rupture', 'deviation' (*Ten Theses on Politics*) of quarrel over a social order's given assumptions. Rancière states:

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of

distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police* (...) I now propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. (*Disagreement* 28-30)

<sup>8</sup> Compassion and sympathy are two key terms of the feminist tradition in the field of antispeciesism. This tradition, more attentive in the field of ethical reflection to the dimension of encounter, emotions and political implications in opposition to the universalizing, logocentric and apolitical trend of rights-based ethics, has provided important contributions to the investigation of a shared somatic core capable of supporting an ethic of interspecies care (see Donovan and Adams). The concept of bodily symphysis has been introduced in a somewhat similar vein by Acampora with the aim of replacing the notion of empathy which turns out to be too undermined by a dualist and egological perspective on experience. The term symphysis derives from the ancient Greek and literally means 'the state of growing together' (Acampora 159). Acampora defines it as:

the sense of sharing with somebody else a somaesthetic nexus experienced through a direct or systemic (inter)relationship. In this way the concept comes to signify a pattern of more densely physical orientation-i.e., by contrast to the more airy, psychic notion of sympathy frequently utilized by moral sense theorists. (76)

He adds: 'experientially, [symphysis] is as well a whole body phenomenon-also felt subcutaneously 'in the bones', registering viscerally 'in the gut', taking place throughout the thickness of live bodiment's material dimension or aspect' (83).

<sup>9</sup> See Butler's reflections on vulnerability in *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*; *Vulnerability in Resistance*; *The Force of Nonviolence*. For important examples (among others) of theoretical works in the direction of intersectionality, beginning from the ecofeminist tradition

see Plumwood for a ‘classical’ work; Adams and Gruen for a more recent work; from the field of queer studies see Giffney and Hird; Simonsen; from the field of disability studies see Taylor; from the field of black studies see Jackson; Ko and Ko.

<sup>10</sup> On the concept of animal resistance, see Hribal; Colling; Kowalczyk; Wadiwel.

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