Sacrifice was one of the main features of agro-pastoral societies. In this kind of society, sacrifice acts as a ‘total social fact’, like a primordial dimension of social life that, as such, shows up some of the main properties of this way for articulating reality and existence. In this context, the religious system was responsible for social order and sacrificial acts as the method of communication between profane and sacred realms. These realms, which originally were integrated into what we know as ‘animistic religion’ or ‘primitive religion’, were differentiated from each other around the time that human beings started to develop the ‘second order thinking’ or rational thinking. Here, we can clearly establish a link between what Karl Jaspers called the ‘axial age’ and ‘the age of sacrifice’, in the terms developed by Marcel Henriaff. This kind of role played by sacrifice has been studied by distinguished authors such as William Robertson Smith, Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, or, more recently, René Girard, Marcel Hénaff and Guy Stroumsa, among others.

It would be a great mistake to assume that sacrifice performs the same function in current societies that it fulfilled in the past; as we know, societies change with time. This implies that a social fact will present several faces depending on the context that we analyze and depending on the influence of the different and hegemonic social forces in dispute. Through their evolution, sacrifice has necessarily been affected by these dynamics of change. These have caused the transition from one imaginary focus on the religious sphere to another, which is modern and secular. In this transition, it is really important to consider the role played by several “social engines”, such as functional differentiation, individualization, secularization, the disenchantment of the world, acceleration, re-entchantment and re-fusion.

It would be another great mistake to assume that sacrifice can only perform the role of a ‘total social fact’. That is to say, either it performs this role, or no one else will do it. According to Merlin Donald, social facts (evolution in his own terms) do not appear and disappear as if by magic. We witness an endless reshaping of the role that they actually represent or can represent, and this paper is very much connected with the social mainstreams, as well as with the values around hegemonic institutions and social movements which are constructed in each society. In the same way, in modernity (and in post-modernity too), it is very difficult to find ‘total social facts’, due to (among other things) the fragmentation of individual and collective experiences, to the multiple belongings, to functional differentiation processes.

In Merlin Donald’s terms of “evolutive evolution” (1991) and with the strength that exerts the dynamics of change around the whole society, we understand that sacrifice performs a role in current societies, but a role in which its meaning as well as its function have already changed. We wanted to explain what this role is and to study some of the different social faces that it presents.

In achieving this purpose, this special issue includes seven papers that we are briefly going to introduce the following:

In their work, entitled “The Endless Metamorphoses of Sacrifice and its Clashing Narratives”, Josetxo Beriain (I-Communitas, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Public
University of Navarra) develops a fourfold task, which: 1. Provides an affirmative genealogy that shed light on the different forms taken by sacrifice, the origins of its various conceptual layers and the various social practices from which they come: 2. Analyzes the initial conceptual layer proposed by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert and followed by Marcel Hénaff based on farming societies; 3. Analyzes the rise of the anti-sacrificial narrative and its main landmarks, the problems of victims and the responses given by René Girard and Talcott Parsons; and 4. Analyzes the dynamic tension between the tragic-apocalyptic narrative and the defensive-progressive narrative in modern times, and the main landmarks of each one.

In “A Maximal Understanding of Sacrifice: Bataille, Richard Wagner, Pilgrimage and the Bayreuth Festival”, Philip Smith (Yale University) and Florian Stoll (Leipzig University; Bayreuth University) call for a broad conception of sacrifice to be developed as a resource for cultural sociology. They argue the term was framed too narrowly in the classical work of Hubert and Mauss. The later approach of Bataille permits a maximal understanding of sacrifice as non-utilitarian expenditures of money, energy, passion and effort directed towards the experience of transcendence. From this perspective, pilgrimage can be understood as a specific modality of sacrificial activity. This paper applies this understanding to the annual Bayreuth “Wagner” Festival in Germany, while the article traces sacrificial expenditures at the level of individual festival attendees. These include financial costs, arduous travel, dedicated research of the artworks, and disciplines of the body. Some are lucky enough to experience transcendence in the form of deep emotional experience, and a sense of contact with sacred spaces and forces.

In “Metamorphosis of the Sacrificial Victimization Imaginary Profile within the Framework of Late Modern Societies”, Ángel Enrique Carretero Pasín (University of Santiago de Compostela) aims to analyze the imaginary profile of the emerging sacrificial victim in late modern societies. For doing this, Carretero develops a work based on three steps: 1. He analyzes the nature and the functionality of an anthropological structure linked to a rituality of sacrificial victimization surviving in the historical course of western societies; 2. He studies the characterization of the imaginary paradigm of sacrificial victimization crystallized in modernity in contrast to the dominant one in the Old Regime. 3. The generalization of a climate of violence that transforms any individual into a potential victim of sacrifice is analyzed as the unique morphology of the imaginary of sacrificial victimization that emerged in late modern societies.

In “The Dark God: The Sacrifice of Sacrifice”, Joseba Zulaika (Center for Basque Studies, Reno University) draws from the Frazerian question of murder turned into ritual sacrifice for implementing it to the Basque case. The work addresses such a “sacrificial crisis” in the experience of their own Basque generation. He argues that the crisis regarding sacrifice is pivotal for understanding it. In achieving this, Zulaika expands the notion of “sacrifice” from my initial approach of ethnographic parallels towards a more subjective and psychoanalytical perspective. For him, the motivation behind the Basque violence (focused in ETA terrorist group) was originally and fundamentally sacrificial; when it finally stopped in 2011, many of those invested in the violence, actors as well as supporters, felt destitute and had to remodel their political identity. The argument of the paper is that the dismantling of sacrifice as its nuclear premise—the sacrifice of sacrifice—was a major obstacle, stopping the violence from coming to an end.

In, “Trauma and Sacrifice in Divided Communities: The Sacralisation of the Victims of Terrorism in Spain”, Eliana Alemán (Public University of Navarra) and José M. Pérez-Agote (I-Communitas, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Public University of Navarra) aim to show that the sacrificial status of the victims of acts of terrorism, such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings (“11-M”) and ETA (Basque Homeland and Liberty) attacks in Spain, is determined by how it is interpreted by the communities affected and the manner in which it is ritually elaborated a posteriori by society and institutionalised by the state. The paper also explores the way in which the sacralisation of the victim is used in socially and politically divided societies to establish the limits of the pure and the impure in defining the
“Us”, which is a subject of dispute. To demonstrate this, they first describe two traumatic events of particular social and political significance (the case of Miguel Ángel Blanco and the 2004 Madrid train bombings). Secondly, they analyze different manifestations of the institutional discourse regarding victims in Spain, examining their representation in legislation, in public demonstrations by associations of victims of terrorism and in commemorative “performances” staged in Spain. The conclusion is that in societies such as Spain’s, where there exists a polarisation of the definition of the “Us”, the success of cultural and institutional performances oriented towards reparation of the terrorist trauma is precarious. Consequently, the validity of the post-sacrificial narrative centring on the sacred value of human life is ephemeral and thus fails to displace sacrificial narratives in which particularist definitions of the sacred “Us” predominate.

In “Debt and Sacrifice: The Role of Scapegoats in the Economic Crises”, Luis Enrique Alonso (Autonomous University of Madrid) and Carlos J. Fernández Rodríguez (Autonomous University of Madrid) assert that one of the spaces where sacrifice actually performs a critical role is the realm of modern economy, particularly in the event of a financial crisis. They analyze how the hegemonic narrative has clear sacrificial aspects. Such crises represent situations defined by an outrageous symbolic violence in which social and economic relations experience drastic transformations, and their victims end up suffering personal bankruptcy, indebtedness, lower standards of living or poverty. Crises show the flagrant domination present in social relationships: this is proven in the way crises evolve, when more and more social groups marred by a growing vulnerability are sacrificed to appease financial markets.

In “The Persistence of Sacrifice as Self-Sacrifice and Its Contemporary Embodiment in the 9/11 Rescuers and COVID-19 Healthcare Professionals”, Javier Gil-Gimeno (I-Communitas, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Public University of Navarra) and Celso Sánchez Capdequi (I-Communitas, Institute for Advanced Social Research, Public University of Navarra) analyze the persistence of sacrifice as self-sacrifice in contemporary societies. In order to reach this goal they develop a work in four steps: 1. They discuss how in the Axial Age (800–200 B.C.E.) an understanding of sacrifice as ritual worship or a ritual practice that involves the immolation of a victim became less prevalent and a new understanding of sacrifice emerges. This new notion of sacrifice focuses on individual relinquishment and gift exchange, that is, on a person relinquishing him/herself as a gift that is given in an exchange relationship for protecting a greater good. 2. They analyze how this new sacrifice formula led people to conceptualize sacrifice as a project or as something that persons could intentionally embrace. 3. They attend to the secularization of sacrifice, not in the sense of a de-sacralization of this phenomenon but in the way of sacralization of the mundane realm and mundane things, such as intentional self-sacrificial acts, in social contexts where there is religious pluralism. 4. They study the sacredness of the person as a clear type of secular religiosity that develops self-sacrificial forms. Two of these self-sacrificial forms are the actions of 9/11 rescuers and COVID-19 healthcare professionals. A short analysis of both serves to illustrate how self-sacrifice is embodied in contemporary societies.

In essence, sacrifice persists in modern and secular societies in an ‘evolutive evolutionary’ way. As point by authors like Merlin Donald or Robert N. Bellah, nothing is lost in social evolution. Previous sacrificial forms remains and live together with the new form that this phenomena acquires. This scenario provokes dynamic tensions but also a great pluralism or diversity of forms that sacrifice can develop: sacrificial and antisacrificial narratives, individual or comunal, religious or secular, and so on. The papers conform this Special Issue are a clear example of this sacrificial pluralism.

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