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**Jesse Goldhammer**, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. x + 205 pp. Notes and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 0-8014-4150-1.

Review by Julian Wright, University of Durham.

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What is political sacrifice, and how can it generate new regimes in modern politics? This is the problem at the heart of Jesse Goldhammer's thoughtful essay on some of the more mysterious of modern French thinkers. The four chapters of this book investigate the theory of political sacrifice as developed by revolutionaries of the period 1792-94; by the conservative Joseph de Maistre; by Georges Sorel, who interestingly emerges as one of the least violent of Goldhammer's subjects; and by the surrealist Georges Bataille, the most confusing and problematic of these theorists.

Underpinning Goldhammer's investigation is the constant presence in modern French politics of the regicide of Louis XVI, but his deeper reading on sacrifice has provided him with a wider frame of reference as well. He shows from the outset that French theorists of sacrifice have drawn on an eclectic range of ancient sources, from ancient Greece or imperial Rome, as well as from the Bible and Christian—especially Roman Catholic—tradition. This double reference helps to explain the richness of the theory of sacrifice in modern French politics. Sacrifice is not just about the shift in power between regimes, or about the use of scapegoats in order to purge a regime of its perceived sickness. It has a more fertile side. The spilling of sacrificial blood takes on a ritual dimension which makes it an integral part of the foundation of modern societies.

Thus the revolutionaries conceptualized the death of Louis XVI in a multitude of ways. The monarch was both a ritual scapegoat, and, to some (including himself), a martyr. The most significant aspect of his death was drawn out by republican theorists, however, whose theory of regicide was—in an important respect—new. Louis XVI's blood, having left his evil body, in fact became the anointing oil of the new republic. Regicide thus became an initiation rite. Although it had many sides to it, therefore, it was this peculiar combination of the moment of political foundation or rebirth with the killing of the physical representation of the old regime that gave the regicide its full meaning: more than a martyrdom, January 21, 1793 was a baptism.

The texts Goldhammer analyses in this section are rich with contradictions, almost as if authors like Camille Desmoulins, Louis-Marie Prudhomme, and Robespierre were drunk with the blood of the monarch whose death they attempted to theorize, and the author could have done more to draw out the inconsistencies that litter their theorizing. It was in the end Robespierre himself, though, who developed the theory of regicide most convincingly. As Goldhammer correctly points out, the logic of political sacrifice became an obsession for Robespierre: eventually he drew down its conclusions on his own head. The irony was that—unlike Louis XVI—Robespierre could not re-found the republic through his own blood, and thus did nothing to save, purge, or renew the body politic on the 9th of Thermidor. The poignant poem Robespierre wrote earlier in 1794 makes the irony of his position clear: “to die for the people and yet be abhorred for it” (p. 70). We are left to decide whether Robespierre, in drawing to himself the memory of Christ's rejection by the people, was actually worse off than Louis XVI, whose death was necessary and fruitful for the new Republic.

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This problem leads immediately and naturally to a conservative reflection on violence as presented by Joseph de Maistre. After all, the crime of the regicide had already had its martyrological dimension drawn out by the revolutionaries; so, to a monarchist, the ground work for the theory was already there. Of course the martyrdom of Louis XVI became, for Maistre, a feature of the Revolution's satanic side rather than a sacred rite. Nevertheless, Maistre argued, the regicide led to the Terror; and that was the crucible in which the French had to be purified for their corruption. Because of his strong connection with French Catholic thought, Maistre was determined to distinguish good and bad sacrifice.

While he rejected the notion that sacrificial violence could play a positive, foundational role, he promoted an idea that was not far removed from this: that bloodshed had a didactic power for a citizenry that had gone astray. In the final assessment, however, Goldhammer is right to show that Maistre contributed a new and important theory to modern political argument: "Maistre is the first to explain the social, cultural, and political effects of sacrifice" (p. 111). Because of this distinctive contribution, Maistre becomes an unlikely intellectual godfather for later authors of a different political affiliation, such as Sorel and Bataille. This is indeed one of Goldhammer's most important and surprising discoveries.

One of this book's greatest merits is the precision it brings to discussions about the infamous *Reflections on Violence* of Georges Sorel.<sup>[1]</sup> Goldhammer stresses that Sorel's concept of bloodshed is based around the death of a few martyrs from among the working class. This bloodshed is minimal and yet provides a mythic dimension to the working-class struggle without which the latter would fail to have any relevance. In effect, he takes up a Maistrian eschatology, looking for final human redemption not from the death of the Christ-figure, but from the proletariat in Christ-like garb. But Sorel has no theory of institutional foundation or regime change. The death of proletarian martyrs, envisaged as a small but significant loss in times of social unrest, will provide the proletariat with moral rebirth, not a state-based reordering of institutions and social arrangements.

In this sense, Sorel is of course picking up on the strong anti-statist theory of the Proudhonian Left in France, and his moral concern for the future of the proletariat is best understood when placed within this context. After all, as Goldhammer is absolutely right to underscore, Sorel "loathes the Jacobin tradition of political violence" (p. 123). And yet the moral aspect of Sorel's essay gives him a deeper connection to the ideals of enlightened thought. This helps Goldhammer to mark out the distance between Sorel (or at least the Sorel of the period around the publication of *Reflections on Violence*) and proto-fascistic ideas. He was neither a nationalist nor an enthusiast for war. Sorel did not drink from the muddy well of the early twentieth-century's proto-fascist ideas. Rather, his rejection of reason was a common concern of a wide variety of thinkers in the period, and Sorel is just as close to Marx in his belief that eighteenth-century reason can only lead to a false morality—one which ultimately collapses into bourgeois decadence—as he is to thinkers of the new right.

The features of the moral regeneration through (limited) violence that Sorel favours are precisely those which have often been misunderstood. Just because violence, in his theory, is based on qualities of spontaneity and mythic—or, more accurately, "sublime"—stature, one should not conclude that he was an advocate of widespread and unremitting violence. It was the moral dimension to the working class struggle that needed to rediscover the sublime through its very spontaneity—the class struggle must expand in an ever-widening circle.

If Sorel's concept of political violence points to a constantly expanding, generous theory of moral regeneration, that of Georges Bataille, just as dynamic, is introverted and ultimately self-devouring. Here Goldhammer faces his greatest challenge, for, as he is obliged to point out at the beginning of the fourth chapter, Bataille's work is impossibly elusive and contradictory. Ultimately, Bataille's activity

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tied itself round in ever-decreasing circles, and he consciously rejected the associations and political manifestos he had established, sacrificing his own concept of political sacrifice several times over. In Bataille's work, the break from a concept of sacrifice as political foundation is made complete.

Herein lays the problem, however: if sacrifice does not serve to generate new regimes, or moral regeneration, we might well ask what ends his theory of sacrifice does serve. Bataille appears as a classic surrealist, looking to 'erotic and textual self-loss' as the source of an undoing of the bourgeois self--and this leads to a "metapolitical community whose 'foundation' remains permanently destabilized" (p. 153). Goldhammer's perusal of this complex and at times frustrating theoretical oeuvre is laudatory. And yet one is left feeling that the deep effort necessary to provide us with such a clear summary of this fascinating thinker is ultimately misguided. Bataille almost appears as a modern Gnostic: there is certainly a lot about him that reminds one of the introversion and social renunciation of the early eastern desert-intellectuals.

This reflection could to an extent be extended to Maistre and Sorel as well. If the relevance and engagement of their political essays is clearer and more developed than that of Bataille, one might well ask about the collection of authors under survey here: how common, how typical they were of modern French thought. If the arch-priests of political sacrifice are Maistre, Sorel, and Bataille, does this not make political sacrifice itself a rather arcane, mystical religion in a French political context which was fundamentally less violent, less concerned with martyrology or the theological dimension of modern scapegoating? Again, the Gnostics spring to mind: like the arcane thinkers of early eastern Christianity, do these modern proponents of political sacrifice not actually attract a disproportionate amount of attention? As Goldhammer's provocative conclusion suggests, it is only in writing about the terrorists of Al-Qaeda that he can point to an ongoing and relevant connection between the writers he studies here and the twenty-first century. Gnosticism as it is received in today's historical culture plays a far greater role than its minor part in a more humdrum history of Christendom ought to allow; this is perhaps because our culture has a fascination with the elitist and almost arrogant intellectualism of its faith. So, with Goldhammer's study of Bataille, we have a right to ask: why bother? Is it just because the conscious quest for irrelevance and sterility impresses us when it is described with such impressive intellectual style?

The discourse of political sacrifice is clearly present in modern French history, and it absolutely demands a study of the quality and focus of Goldhammer's; but it would be interesting, now, to have a fatter (and perhaps duller) book about the non-sacrificial theories of political foundation that must have played a role in all the other moments of rebirth for which nineteenth-century France is so famous. It would likewise be interesting to see, in the twentieth century, how mainstream socialists, or how philosophers who were less self-indulgent than Bataille, developed theories that adapted the discourse of sacrifice in a more mundane, reformist direction. Did the discourse of sacrifice have such practical and commonplace spin-offs? If it did, then we could be coming closer to an understanding of modern France that is less bound up with the mythology of violent death and transfiguration--that discourse which has such a natural fascination for intellectuals and historians, but which is nevertheless a little removed from the practical reality of politics.

In drawing such diverse theorists together in one essay, Goldhammer avoids the stereotype of French history based on constant violent rupture. The cross-fertilization between revolutionaries, Maistrian conservatives, and Sorelian left-wingers is strong and points to new ways of addressing the problems of French political thought. It may be time to take this sort of approach and apply it to less striking examples--all those French theorists who, ultimately, would never be considered in the same breath as terrorists, and who, for all that they might sing the Marseillaise, have no desire whatsoever to water their fields with the impure blood of their enemies, or indeed their martyrs.

## NOTES

[1] *Réflexions sur la violence* was originally published in 1906 as a series of articles in the journal *Le Mouvement socialiste*.

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