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# Sacrifice as Social Capital among Israeli Conscientious Objectors

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**ABSTRACT** *This article considers counterhegemonic sacrifices as a means of social intervention, and in doing so explores the social efficacy of non-ritual sacrifice in the modern era. Ethnographically, this article examines the way Israeli conscientious objectors succeed in having their refusal of military service and the social costs they incur understood as sacrifices by the Israeli public. Ex-soldiers accumulate social capital in light of public perception that they have 'paid the price' for their beliefs. Other ethnographic contexts that further elucidate the ability of socially object to use sacrifice to counterhegemonic effect are presented. I claim that the recognition of sacrifice depends on an intersubjective combination of sacrificial intention and community recognition. This article suggests that the meaning of sacrifice is determined by how sacrifice is used and understood in social context, and as such breaks ranks with literatures on sacrifice concerned with the intrinsic coherence of ritual sacrifice.*

**KEYWORDS** *Sacrifice, hegemony, sovereignty, intentionality, social recognition*

**A**vi was 33 years old when he refused military service. At age 18, he had enthusiastically volunteered for an elite combat unit and served for four years, as well as a month of reserve duty every year since he was released from basic service. As he grew older, his experiences with violence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories began to give him doubts regarding the ethical contribution he was making through his service, which eventually lead to his public refusal to continue to serve. One day over tea, he spoke of a recent experience that caused him to reflect on previous understanding of being a soldier and his current life as an activist. He said:

I recently went to an event at the military base for the families of newly enlisted soldiers. It was this massive spectacle for everyone to give honor to the new combat soldiers for their sacrifice and volunteerism. It was really weird for me because the last time I was there I was on the other side of that equation as a combat soldier really deep into what I was doing and the . . . significance of it. I don't remember what happened at mine, but at this one there were many speeches praising the soldiers volunteering for such a difficult task, and saying that it reflected the quality of their character. And I actually think that is true, even though I now object to the military, they really are showing how much they are invested in society. There were all these demonstrations. They put a tank out there, and the children. . . I mean the soldiers. . . did an exercise where they approached and conquered this empty tank, and all the parents clapped and cheered for their sons conquering the empty tank. And I thought that this performance is their only chance because if it was a real enemy tank they wouldn't be there to applaud for them. I found it funny but I didn't dare say a word; that atmosphere was very serious and emotional and nationalistic. Even though I feel at this point that being a conscientious objector is a more relevant sacrifice for society, I still remember the feeling then.

Avi was a soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces, and one of a large group of soldiers who refused military service between the years 2002 and 2003, during the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising. Armed self-defense has been a central part of the ethos of Jewish nationalism since its origins in nineteenth-century Europe. In the Israeli state, this ethos has contributed to military service being thought of as not only a necessity, but also an ethical good promoting the values of volunteerism, equality, and masculinity. Jewish Israelis are required to serve in the military for two to three years, and many men are required to serve reserve duty for up to a month a year until the age of 45. In Israel, soldiering is considered to be the central national sacrifice, and soldiers are lauded by society and awarded a very high status for their service, especially elite combat soldiers like pilots. Refusing to serve in the military is enormously controversial in Israeli society, and conscientious objectors paid a heavy social price for their actions. Nearly all the members of this group served time in jail for their refusal. However, what is interesting in this case is the way conscientious objectors were able to cast the price they paid for military refusal, their jail time, and social abjection, as a socially recognized sacrifice in and of itself. It was widely recognized as sacrifice though it was counterhegemonic in nature. This article seeks to forefront the social potency of sacrifice that is evident in Ari's commentary on the status of military service in Israel. I further argue that counterhegemonic sacrifice through

abjection can function as social capital for individuals to gain leverage and influence change in their society.

This article examines counterhegemonic sacrifices as a means of social intervention, and in doing so explores one instance of the social efficacy of non-ritual sacrifice in the modern era. In the first part of the article, I will contextualize this case within the recent theoretical developments on sacrifice. Moving to ethnography, I will explore sacrifice as a symbolic language that bridges both ritual and social understandings in Israel. The symbolic language of sacrifice is used as a cultural resource, a shared moral code, for those who wish to make an intervention in society. In the Israeli case, the language of ritual sacrifice, the altar, the shedding of blood, and the Biblical myth of the binding of Isaac are used to articulate the meaning of modern day sacrifices, especially the self-sacrifice of military service. We will see that conscientious objectors also redeploy this symbolic language to describe the sacrifice of military refusal. I claim that the recognition of sacrifice depends on an intersubjective combination of sacrificial intention and community acknowledgement. As such, I will examine the sacrificial intentions of Israeli conscientious objectors. The article will explore the ways they try to have their refusal of military service and the social costs they incur understood as sacrifices by the Israeli public. I will then turn to the social capital they accumulate from the recognition of their military refusal as sacrifice in light of the public perception that they have 'paid the price' for their beliefs. I offer other ethnographic contexts that further elucidate the ability of socially abject to use sacrifice to counterhegemonic effect. Finally, I will explore what implications this account of sacrifice suggests for other theories of sacrifice. Specifically, counterhegemonic sacrifice is a prime demonstration that the meaning of sacrifice is determined by how sacrifice is used and understood in social context and should not be thought of as a manifestation of its symbolic architecture.

This article challenges the withering of the role of sacrifice suggested in continental European accounts that look to the coherence of the symbolic architecture to explain the manifestation of sacrificial practice. In contrast, I will emphasize the social potency of sacrificial acts as a means for people to impact their social worlds, an argument supported by the ubiquity of sacrificial acts and language in modern life. Sacrifice here is defined as an intentional abnegation that is understood as an intervention for the ethical good of society. At the same time, in an *economy* of sacrifice, there is an expectation of return, and what is returned is the transformation of moral and social status. Sacrifice is a symbolic language, with metaphors and shibboleths for different cultural

contexts, yet it remains employable to create social capital. As Halbertal notes sacrifice has the effect of making convictions seem genuine (2012: 70). In order to understand how sacrifice can bestow social capital, certain theoretical commitments are necessary. One is that sacrifice must be ethical; abnegation is not enough (Lambek 2007). Another is that sacrifice is fundamentally social (Ham-moudi 1993), thus my analysis is driven by social practice. And the last is that, following Halbertal, I resist sharp distinction between its ritual and non-ritual manifestations (2012: 5).

### **Sacrifice as a Symbolic Language**

In order for sacrifice to be used to accumulate social capital, it must first and foremost be recognized as a sacrifice by the society. The idea of social capital is central to this analysis. To a great extent, I follow Bourdieu's framing of the social capital as one of the three forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) that enable individuals to pursue their interests in a social field (1986), and augment their social being (1993: 274). Social capital is legitimized and recognized in the social order through the mediation of symbolic capital. Like Bourdieu I also focus on the instrumental advantages to possession of social capital as a resource in social struggle, rather than on the robustness of social capital in civil society (1986). More specifically, the social capital addressed in the case of Israeli soldiers and ex-soldiers is closely related to ethical negotiations over recognition as social acknowledgment as discussed at length by Elizabeth Povinelli and Webb Keane. For them also, recognition offered to individuals by the social order is essential for social inclusion and functioning (Keane 1997, 2007; Povinelli 2002). Not all abnegation is sacrifice. If an action is seen to be destructive but not oriented towards an ethical good, it will not be understood as sacrifice, and will in fact likely have negative moral connotations. Keane has demonstrated that we do not define our actions alone, nor are they defined by their formal conformity to a set of objective standards of behaviour. Rather, we depend on others to recognize that our actions are of a certain type and not another (Keane 1997: 15). In ritual sacrifice, the context, such as time of year, place, order of actions, often serve to authorize acts as sacrifice. In order to frame a non-ritual abnegation as sacrifice, symbolic language is often invoked. It is through symbolic language that military service came to be understood as the central sacrifice of the Israeli nation. Military service in Israel has always been described through the language of ritual sacrifice. Early poets described the nation's youth being heroically laid at the altar, and referred to the redeeming power of spilled blood (Feldman 2010). More-

over, the Biblical myth of the Binding of Isaac is the dominant metaphor to discuss military service in Israel, where the soldier is imagined as Isaac. This metaphor is found extensively in public discourse as well as the arts. In the Biblical story, God orders Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but after Abraham demonstrates his willingness to obey and thereby his faith, he is prevented from killing his son. Most of the Biblical exegesis before Zionism considered the sacrifice to be Abraham's, and portrayed Isaac as a young child. The early Zionists identified with Isaac, and wanted to imagine Isaac's sacrifice as active and intentional, so they looked to the Biblical interpretations which saw Isaac as an adult, casting the sacrifice performed as the self-sacrifice of Isaac, thus suggesting an intergenerational consensus on the performance of military sacrifice. Avi Sagi points out 'The Zionist Isaac tells the story of an entire generation: rather than being passive victims, the Isaacs assume responsibility for their destiny and sacrifice themselves on the altar of national renaissance' (Sagi 1998: 46).

Through this symbolic language military service was made recognizable and identifiable as sacrifice. When conscientious objectors move to cast their refusals as sacrificial, they make use of the same language. They explicitly describe their acts as sacrifice, referring to their desire to pay the price to help society. They also use the sacrificial myth of the binding of Isaac to try and reconfigure the sacrificial relationship to cast their dissent as the sacrificial act. One conscientious objector activist wrote an opinion to the newspaper *Haaretz* in September of 2007, transposing the Akedah story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac to Israel of modern times:

Why did Abraham not offer himself in place of his son, even before the hand holding the knife was raised?... Fathers do not rise up against those who send their sons into war... In our day, this translates as preference for the given social situation and not rebelling against it for my son. (Zonshein 2007)

The conscientious objector represents the 'good' sacrifice as rebelling against the institution of military service. He turns Isaac back into a child, negating the element of voluntary sacrifice, and thus casting the Isaac/soldier as victim as opposed to an ethical member of society.

### **Sacrificial Intentionality**

The political significance of representing of Isaac as victim rather than sacrificer demonstrates the importance of ethical intentionality in sacrifice. It is



important to the understanding of military service as sacrifice that soldiers are willing sacrificers and not pawns or victims of the state. Thus, conscientious objectors emphasize the intentionality of their sacrifice at every opportunity. My interlocutors would always say that they 'decided' to go to jail for their beliefs; they never said that the military put them in jail. For example, while interviewing Ofer about his decision to refuse he told me

I thought about it a long time, and I decided I would go to jail, I will take this blow, in order to show Israelis that this is something I really believe in, to get their attention and make them think about their own actions.

Sacrifice is an intentional act. 'Sacrifice combines the ethical consequentiality of judgment with the decisiveness of choice' (Lambek 2007: 33). Ethical value does not attach without intention. Conscientious objectors are able to substantiate these claims to the voluntariness of their abnegation because it is well known that one can evade military service quite easily through medical and other exemptions. Public conscientious refusal is understood to be a deliberate invitation of disciplinary action. In fact, far more people leave military service in this manner, referred to as grey refusal, than those who publicly declare their refusal. Thus, even though the military technically jails the refusers, and the social price they pay is exacted by others, they are able to convincingly claim that they could have avoided paying this price entirely.

Conscientious objectors testify to their sacrifice in various formats including oral testimonies at activist events. One of the refusers published his refusal statement saying

We (as well as some other groups who are even more despised and harassed) are putting our bodies on the line, in the attempt to prevent the next war... We are the young Chinese man standing in front of the tank.

Others spoke of their willingness to sacrifice their social status, while extolling the value of self-sacrifice for higher principles. One refuser's letter from prison stated: 'The true path to happiness passes through acts like going to prison and absorbing suffering and humiliation for the ideal...'. Sitting in jail, and then testifying about sitting in jail, became their public spectacle of renunciation for their new beliefs, which were also articulated as being for the good of society. Repeated over and over throughout their public statements is a singular focus on 'paying the price'. At least one conscientious objector engaged in a hunger strike while he was incarcerated. Other social sanctions such as com-

plete rejection by friends and family, the loss of employment, public ridicule, and the accusations of responsibility for many of the ills of society were brought into the refusers' own narratives to prove to their physical and virtual audiences the depth of their renunciation, and thus earn social respect. When the soldiers describe their own actions as war crimes, they disgrace their own names, but the virtue of military service as national sacrifice is damaged as well in the process.

When an account gets published in writing, it has an even broader impact. The organization Breaking the Silence publishes accounts of soldiers like this one, parts of which have been repeated in Israeli blogs, editorials, and art pieces critical of military service:

I was ashamed of myself the day I realized that I simply enjoy the feeling of power. I don't believe in it: I think this is not the way to do anything to anyone, surely not to someone who has done nothing to you, but you can't help but enjoy it. People do what you tell them. You know it's because you carry a weapon. Knowing that if you didn't have it, and your fellow soldiers weren't beside you, they would jump on you, beat the shit out of you, and stab you to death- you begin to enjoy it. Not merely enjoy it, you need it. And then, when someone suddenly says "No" to you, what do you mean no? Where do you get the chutzpah from, to say no to me? Forget for a moment that I actually think that all those Jews [settlers] are mad, and I actually want peace and believe we should leave the territories, how dare you say no to me? I am the Law! I am the Law here! And then you sort of begin to understand that it makes you feel good. (Breaking the Silence 2004: 10)

This kind of account exploits the ambiguous condition of the soldier that I have described as both the embodiment of the state and an individual who is ostensibly involved in the national sacrifice. He announces 'I am the Law!' which is a scandalous statement precisely because it is true, he did have power over life and death in that situation. But his clearly abusive disposition contaminates the sacrifice, specifically the principle of purity of arms (*tohar ha'neshek*), and the regulatory code by which the military claims military sacrifice to be 'kosher'. This soldier's contamination does not only stain himself, but also the law, the state, and the authority he was enacting as a soldier of the state. He knows he is sacrificing his good name through such a confession, but it is done in the hope of capitalizing on this abnegation in the form of social change.

Here, one sacrifice is contested with another: the performance of sacrificing their hard-earned honor is used to contest the state supported sacrifice. They remind their audiences that they sacrificed for years in military service,



demonstrating their connection to the original sacrifice and cementing their membership in the community. When they testify, they tell their personal life stories, to demonstrate how familiar their lives are and how much they conform to the Israeli ideal of virtue. Recognition of this membership is essential for the recognition of their sacrifice, but it is not guaranteed; they are vulnerable to being cast as traitors and enemies. Thus, a delicate balance is struck between confirming loyalty and membership, and the dissent intended to bring about social change. They do this in part through their *declaration* of refusal. Though they could evade service quietly, their declaration calls the state into being, demanding its recognition, even if this is punitive recognition.

### Recognition of Counterhegemonic Sacrifice

Ari's experience at a family event at a military base reaffirms the academic literature showing that military service is honored in Israel as the central national sacrifice (Sagi 1998; Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari 1999). It is also central to full citizenship (Sasson-Levy 2002; Barak-Erez 2006). For some Israeli soldiers, the hegemonic framing of military service as a worthy sacrifice can break down in the face of their experiences with their own violence, causing them to refuse military service and become conscientious objectors. Though these soldiers initially undertook their military service with vigor and strong self-sacrificial intentions, their experiences with military policy and their interactions with Palestinians disrupted and ultimately undermined their ethical convictions (Weiss 2011). A soldier who refuses touches the heart of the state's vulnerability, which has no other force than through the individuals that volunteer to enforce its idea. And the Israeli state responded to these individuals with befitting alarm, jailing the refusers (using other volunteers to carry this out) and mobilizing as much social sanction against them as possible. Ultimately, this strategy backfired as refusers were able to mobilize this sanction to earn social capital for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

It was not obvious that military refusal would be granted recognition as sacrifice. Halbertal uses the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, in which Cain's offering to God was rejected without reason while his brother Abel's was accepted, to caution that sacrifice is always vulnerable to rejection (2012: 20). Our abnegations may fail to accumulate the social benefits we anticipate for a number of reasons. It may be, following Keane's explication on recognition as acknowledgement, that our abnegations fail to be recognized by others as sacrifices. Military refusal violates many Israeli values and challenges the national ethos of self-defense. Recognition is never complete consensus, yet there is evidence

that conscientious objectors received wide mainstream recognition (which is not the same as approval). This interpretation of localized and site specific negotiations over whether or not this public military refusal would count as sacrifice. Notably, the process to define refusal as sacrifice began with refusers' self-definition as sacrificers. With their refusal, conscientious objectors immediately released press statements framing their abjection as voluntary sacrifice. They claimed that they were willing to accept the punishment of imprisonment and more painfully the scorn of their own society, and that they were willing to do so for the good of society. This was clearly a controversial argument, but their insistent plea for recognition that they were engaging in sacrifice did in fact frame mainstream interpretation. During my fieldwork, I attended many events in which conscientious objectors would make their case as to why their sacrifice of sitting in military jail was more authentic and just than military service, which they said had forced them to commit war crimes. Before and after the events I would interview the audience members, and it became clear that conscientious objectors were speaking to a tough crowd. The audience was from Israel's political mainstream and was very sceptical about the legitimacy of military refusal. When I asked them why they had come to hear the refusers speak, many cited a sense of respect they had for the refusers willingness to 'pay the price' for their beliefs. One man told me 'Maybe I don't agree with what they did, but they paid the price when many others did not. So they have my respect, and that respect brought me here today, to hear what they have to say.' Each time they spoke to groups of 50–100 people, but over the years they spoke to thousands of Israelis throughout the country.

At such meetings, the tension over where to lay ethical credit and responsibility was always in play. Here, the ethnographic functioning of counterhegemonic sacrifice often comes to light. An exchange at one event illustrates the divergence from heroic sacrifice. Michael, one of the conscientious objectors described his upbringing for the audience as well as his ethical epiphany through which he became convinced he would have to refuse military service.

I knew that I would have to go to jail, and even worse, I knew that I would lose friends and family, I knew that people would say terrible things about me in public, but once I realized it was the right thing to do, I had to pay that price.

Later in the time for audience questions, a distraught man in his 50s stood up and told Michael 'I have to tell you that, from my perspective, you are a traitor (*boged*). Without the military, there will not be a Jewish state. That is all.' The

man sat down, looked away and crossed his arms. Michael stood silently for a few moments before responding, letting the tension build in the room. 'I knew when I refused that people would call me a traitor, accuse me of treason (*b'gida*), and I accept that completely. That is my affliction, and I am at your mercy.' For a while, the room was silent trying to decide how to respond to Michael's comments and the dramatic elevation of rhetoric. This exchange reflects the approach of conscientious objectors to actively accept rather than deny degrading accusations and claim that such abjection is in service of the greater good. This is in stark contrast to heroic sacrifice where such accusations are highly damaging to the sacrificial interpretation.

Audience members would often preface their comments to the speakers by expressing their belief that refusing to serve in the military is wrong, an error in ethical judgement. However, just as recognition is not entirely in the hands of the sacrificer, it is also not entirely in the hands of the audience. Often once conscientious objectors had explicated all the ways in which they suffered more through refusal than they would have in the military, and convinced the audience of the authenticity of their sacrificial intentions through their testimonies, recognition of sacrifice was often given begrudgingly. Such recognition was not on the basis of agreeing with the necessity of refusal, but rather the acknowledgement that the motivations that informed the refusal were sacrificial and with ethical intention. The individual doing what they believe is right even if they are in the minority and being willing to pay the price for their beliefs is respected by many in Israel,<sup>2</sup> and it is from this perspective that conscientious objectors are recognized as having sacrificed.

The gradual recognition of their abjection as sacrifice endowed conscientious objectors with a great deal of social capital that they tried to mobilize as a political intervention. Specifically, the recognition of their sacrifice gave them a public platform from which to speak to Israeli society. It is because of their emphasis on the sacrificial nature of their acts that they succeeded in transforming the public perception of military refusal from something that was borderline treasonous, to a legitimate, if still widely resented, act of civil disobedience. After they were released from prison, conscientious objectors were interviewed on national news programmes, and even years later, they continued to be invited onto news programmes as commentators on government policy and actions. And there were many Israelis who did support them publicly, including hundreds of university professors, giving them further public legitimacy. A feature length hagiographic film, *I Wanted to Be a Hero*, was made about their experiences and the torment of refusal, and shown many

times on public television for years afterwards. They also received accolades abroad, some of which helped to secure the legitimacy of their movement in Israel. For example, in 2004 they were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The social capital they have gained is also reflected in language. This group is referred to in Hebrew as *sarbanim*, refusers. This category is reserved for those who declare their refusal publicly on conscientious grounds and serve jail time for their disobedience. In contrast, those who evade military service without 'paying the price' with jail time and social notoriety are generally referred to as *mishtamtim*, shirkers in Hebrew. The ethical distinction is immediately apparent. 'Refusers' implies a public stance taking, highlights their public engagement, and invokes the memory of historical acts of conscientious dissent. 'Shirkers' implies an active evasion of social responsibility and a lack of responsibility. During my fieldwork, a public advertising campaign was launched to fight the phenomenon of shirking military service. It appeared on television, radio, on billboards, and the sides of buses. The campaign implied that shirkers were unprincipled freeloaders and its theme 'A real Israeli doesn't shirk', implied that evading military service was at least unpatriotic. While conscientious objectors were given a voice in public, invited to speak and give account of their actions, 'shirkers' remained a faceless shameful phenomenon. Conscientious objectors who served time in jail were seen to have earned different treatment by virtue of their sacrifice. However, it is not only by virtue of abnegation; it is also because they managed to successfully convey their abnegation as sacrifice by demonstrating their membership through Israeli cultural tropes and deploying the language of sacrifice.

The imprisonment of conscientious objectors can be contrasted with thousands of Palestinian prisoners who are held without trial by the Israeli state. Conscientious objectors, by virtue of their performance and rhetoric, were able to cast themselves as members of the community rather than traitors, and their abnegation as sacrifice rather than punishment. Palestinian prisoners demonstrate not only that membership in the community is an essential component for the recognition of sacrifice, but also that there is a fluidity to the basis of membership. As Peteet has demonstrated, the extensive imprisonment of young Palestinian men by Israel is widely recognized to be sacrifice within Palestinian society (1994). It is also widely unrecognized as sacrifice within Jewish Israeli society. Prisoners do not mobilize the language and shibboleths of sacrifice that resonate with Jewish Israeli society, and even if they tried to do so, their identity as the enemy might well prevent their success. Yet, the fluidity of how a community is defined is demonstrated, for example, by

cases of hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners such as Khader Adnan. While he was virtually unknown in Israeli society before his hunger strike, his 66 day protest brought a great deal of attention to his plight through newspapers and social media, and resulted in the Israeli state agreeing to release him so as to prevent his death. Adnan's hunger strike brought renewed attention to Israel's policy of administrative detention and the fact that no evidence had been brought against him, and that he had received no sort of due process. Newspapers reported statistics on numbers of detainees and their lengths of incarceration and in the comment sections readers debated Israel's responsibility to these prisoners. Several Jewish Israeli civil and human rights organizations rallied to his cause, offering legal representation and public relations services. Adnan's abnegation did not gain the same social capital as the conscientious objectors. At the same time, his acts did raise his status to the public eye, securing his own release. His hunger strike also renewed public debate about the rights of Palestinian detainees.

### **The Counterhegemonic Sacrifices of the Marginalized**

Sacrifice through social abjection is a means through which people are able to acquire social capital and influence their societies. In these cases, the individual willingly suffers the externally imposed punishment and humiliation of the social order in the hopes that this voluntary acceptance of degradation will demonstrate commitment and accumulate social capital. It is a leap of faith always with the potential of failure to gain social recognition. My use of abjection does not follow Julia Kristeva's idea of a sweeping universal and primordial force, theorized in abstract and psychoanalytic terms unsuitable to the messiness of the ethnographic context. Rather, I follow Bernstein's use of abjection as a social and dialogic category (Bernstein 1992: 29). Significantly, in this understanding the expression of abjection is dependent on prior cultural models, and offered up for evaluation by the social order. This implies that when abjection is used to acquire social capital elsewhere, in other cultural contexts, it will manifest in different idioms. While the Jewish intellectual genealogy of the binding of Isaac served as the idiom for sacrifice through social abjection for in the Israeli context, in other cultural contexts acts of sacrifice are modelled on other symbolic configurations.

For example, Garces examines what he calls 'crucifixion protests', carried out by inmates in a penitentiary on the outskirts of Guayaquil, Ecuador (Garces 2010). These prisoners, following the Christian example of Jesus' self-sacrifice, nailed themselves to crude wooden crosses inside the jail. The events were



staged in cooperation with the local media, with several prisoners at a time volunteering for crucifixion. Prisoners were protesting imprisonment practices of the state that they perceived as unjust. These legal practices involved policies of preventive imprisonment in urban areas, which led to many of the incarcerated prisoners being imprisoned with long sentences for petty infractions. Prisoners felt their human and civil rights were being withheld. It was not only the police who were responsible for these policies. A sensationalized local media and 'mano dura', law and order policing discourse encouraged local residents and business owners to support extreme detention policies, establishing a moral consensus regarding the handling of crime (Garces 2010: 464). The spectacle of these sacrifices was designed not only to draw attention to their plight, but also to challenge the social forces that contributed to their criminalization (Garces 2010: 475). Through self-victimization inmates sought to represent themselves as unjustly persecuted and unsettle habitual ways of thinking about justice and the incarcerated. (That these gory acts were rapidly normalized in the media speaks to the difficulties counterhegemonic sacrificial acts often have in gaining recognition and thus, political traction.) Though this sacrifice is creative in its unique deployment, it references a familiar sacrificial tradition. Indeed, the symbolism of this sacrifice, being nailed to a cross, is legible to Ecuadorians, the vast majority of whom are Christian. Michael Bernstein observes that when moral critiques are implied in stagings of abjection such critiques are often dependent on the skilled use of mainstream criteria of judgement and values. The actor may ultimately intend to throw the mainstream criteria into doubt, but first he must register them accurately so the audience recognizes that their own culture's values are implicated in the dialogue (Bernstein 1992: 21). Just as Israeli conscientious objectors dialogically interact with culturally resonant idioms and values to make their redefinition of abjection as sacrifice plausible to the social order, so here Ecuadorian prisoners use different idioms to accomplish a similar effect.

Turkish prisoners offer a likewise exemplary case of counterhegemonic sacrifice. In the year 2000, more than 800 leftist Turkish political prisoners undertook self-starvation, called a Fast Until Death, as an explicitly sacrificial practice to protest their imprisonment and the conditions of their imprisonment, specifically the transition into American-style maximum-security detention. While the Turkish government considers their treatment prevention against terrorism and radicalism, the Turkish prisoners considered their treatment to be torture and themselves to be martyrs. Consuming only sugar, salt, and water, more than 30 prisoners starved to death, and many more suffered



permanent physical damage. Bargu writes that Turkish prisoners understood their self-starvation as acts of sacrifice meant to challenge the Turkish legal system they believed to be unjust. For the prisoners, the sacrificial act of self-starvation was a silent indictment of the moral legitimacy of the neoliberal state (Bargu 2010: 253). The images of the 'deformed' and 'famished' bodies that would be released by the media were expected to prompt the public into action and shame the state. In their ideological articulation of their acts, prisoners participating in the Death Fast explicitly rejected the idea of framing their acts in heroic terms, preferring an anti-heroic self-representation similar to other cases of counterhegemonic sacrifice we have examined.

The Death Fasts were a significant moral threat to the Turkish government, which raided prisons in attempts to end this practice. Bargu has pointed out that this sacrifice, like other cases of counterhegemonic sacrifice we examine, involves the assumption of sovereign powers without sovereign permission. Here, Turkish prisoners challenge state control over matters of life and death, the very stuff of sovereignty, killing the only life they are able to access, their own, against the will of the state (Bargu 2010: 254). Bargu quotes a Death Fast participant, 'We did not have any other means of resistance than our bodies at hand. Either our bodies would be transformed into weapons against us, through torture, or we would use those bodies as means of resistance against the state' (Bargu 2010: 249). The state had already victimized the bodies of the prisoners by subjecting them to violence; in self-starvation the prisoners exaggerated this corporeal mortification. In doing so, they gain social capital in public through their renunciation of comfort and life, which demonstrates their investment.

These examples demonstrate that the counterhegemonic sacrifice that conscientious objectors mobilize in the Israeli context is performed through other symbolic languages elsewhere. The self-crucifixions of Ecuadorian prisoners served to claim their membership in the community, as well as to make their acts recognizable as sacrifice by enacting a symbolic connection to the foundational sacrifice. At stake here is the religious community, which is not equivalent to the national community, but, like in Israel, deeply entwined in national self-understanding. Alternatively, the Turkish prisoners' death fasts illustrate the double movement involved in counterhegemonic sacrifice. Just as Israeli conscientious objectors disgrace their own reputations by confessing to what they describe as war crimes, Turkish prisoners likewise highlight their personal abjection through starvation. Both do so in order to gain social capital through self-debasement. This process is effective only because of the intersubjective

recognition of the self-debasement as a sacrifice. These examples serve to demonstrate that while non-ritual sacrifice is communicated and recognized differently across cultures, it remains a way to reaffirm membership in the community and to gain social capital, even from the margins.

### **Theoretical Implications of Counterhegemonic Sacrifice**

There are several implications suggested by the ethnography of counterhegemonic sacrifice offered above. For example, the demonstration of the possibility of sacrifice by the socially abject and marginalized offers a challenge to Agamben's idea of bare life. For Agamben, sovereignty is constituted by the ability to expel a person from the context in which their death would have social consequence, a condition he calls 'bare life' (Agamben 1998). Thus, it becomes impossible to sacrifice such a person, and presumably for that person to conduct any sacrifice, of herself or otherwise. I am not the first to doubt the usefulness of this conceptual extremum in the social world, even from those not engaged in empirical research such as Antonio Negri (2003). Nevertheless, I believe this article makes an additional theoretical contribution by showing that social exclusion or inclusion does not directly correlate with the social efficacy of sacrifice. Rather, often the most marginalized and 'forsaken' in society are able to mobilize sacrificial acts with the most efficacy, while those who are at little risk for being considered bare life, are not necessarily able to leverage the same social effects. I demonstrate this through an examination of the competing sacrifices of military service and the refusal of military service in Israel, as well as by highlighting other cases of the socially marginalized mobilizing sacrificial acts against the state. While sacrifice depends on membership in a community for recognition, the understanding of the community is flexible and constantly up for renegotiation between the religious, the national, the human, and many other parameters of inclusion and exclusion, as we saw in the case of Khader Adnan. Agamben's representation of the sovereign suggests an all-powerful entity that can place an individual outside the realm of the social. But the relationship of the state to sacrifice is far more entwined than any purely conceptual idea of 'bare life'. Moreover, this relationship reveals the state to be vulnerable to challenges of its citizen-subjects, who are literally the flesh and bones of sovereign state itself. In other words, so long as sovereign enforcement is carried out by people, it is social, and sacrifice can be used as a social intervention.

Many theorists have focused on the internal coherence of sacrificial practice, while I have in this article been emphasizing the social potency of sacrificial acts

as a means for people to impact their social worlds. But, I would like to go farther than to shift the focus to the social effects, because much of the emphasis on the internal structure is not only overemphasized, but also misleading. Derrida (1996), Girard (1995), and Blanchot's focus on the symbolic architecture of sacrifice rather than sacrificial practice downplays social intention. Sacrifice in modern Israeli society, through military service and also the refusal of military service, illustrate that sacrifice is not a manifestation of inherent structures. Rather, it is clear that these sacrifices are made as a way to address urgent and contemporary social concerns and ethical demands. Those who critique sacrificial logic in its entirety must in doing so ignore the way sacrifice is a way that people can make ethical interventions and impact their own moral status. The focus of Girard, and Bataille (1990) on sacrifice as a means to regulate and release visceral violence no longer acceptable in society does not account for the ethical effects understood to result from sacrifice. The cases of abject prisoners staging self-sacrificial acts to appeal to society demonstrate that even the most socially repudiated have access to the language and performance of sacrifice to create social effects.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I have been concerned to show the enduring significance of sacrifice. I argue that its significance is an outcome of the ability of sacrifice to create social capital, and to allow people to make an intervention in their social world. I emphasize that sacrificial language and acts can be deployed to reaffirm the community and social order, or, on the other side of sacrifice, to argue against its values or practices. I examine the case of Israeli conscientious objectors, who after participating in the hegemonic national sacrifice of military service, mobilize the price they pay in military refusal as a counter sacrifice. Though Israeli society is highly sceptical of the ethical good of military refusal, refusers are granted social capital for paying the price for their beliefs through imprisonment and ridicule nevertheless. Thus, they are given a public platform and a public voice in society from which to tell their stories and offer their opinions. Likewise, we see in other ethnographic cases around the world that the socially marginalized are able to influence society not by denying their abjection, but by highlighting it as a sacrifice.

I try to show that sacrifice is a kind of language and resource available for individuals interested in social intervention of different sorts and objectives. The creative intervention of conscientious objectors and prisoners in counter-hegemonic sacrifice shows that sacrificial effects are not merely the manifes-

tation of internal logics, but the highly intentional deployment of acts and rhetoric for social intervention. Theoretically, I rely on a model of sacrifice that focuses on the ways sacrifice is ethical and a response to the social. This is a challenge to the idea that sacrifice is fading from our modern existence, as well as theories of 'bare life'. This ethnography offers optimism in moderation. While it demonstrates that people can impact their societies even from the far margins, it is clear that doing so requires very high levels of abnegation, often much higher than mainstream hegemonic forms of sacrifice. For Israeli conscientious objectors, it is only because of their exceptional disillusionment with the ethics of military service that they would seek to undertake such a mission in lieu of remaining in the military and accumulating social capital in the more conventional way. Thus counterhegemonic sacrifice is rare, but not impossible. It is a certainly sacrifice of last resort. At the same time, it allows for opportunities for the disenfranchised to gain social capital that are only visible when we attend to the details of social practice.

### Notes

1. A military lawyer involved in the prosecution of conscientious objectors told me that the military has stopped jailing refusers, preferring instead to release them so as not to create 'martyrs'.
2. Conscience is partially enshrined in the Israeli Defense Laws as conscientious dissent was a major human rights concern for the first members of parliament who constructed these laws. They do not, however, allow for military refusal.

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