

Vengeance and Sacrifice: Whiteness as Scapegoat in Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies

by Michael Rectenwald



The usual criticisms of [critical race theory \(CRT\)](#) have become patent and cliché by now. CRT essentializes race and those within races, figuring all white people as racist and all black people oppressed. It treats people not as individuals with individual motives and goals but strictly as members of their racial group. It denies individual agency to the very people it aims to liberate. It implies that racial group membership determines the beliefs and behaviors of those within said groups, curtailing an appreciation of their full humanity. It ascribes all outcomes to racial group membership, thereby denying merit to those in the “dominant” category (whites), while denying responsibility to those in the “subordinated” categories (blacks, indigenous, and people of

color, or BIPOC). It makes contemporary white people guilty for the sins of long-dead white people who benefited from slavery. By incessantly harping on race, it exacerbates if it doesn't create racial strife. CRT is divisive and threatens the social order by provoking perpetual enmity between the races. So, the story goes.

The same kinds of criticisms may be leveled at [critical whiteness studies \(CWS\)](#).

Such analyses are by now legion. Rather than engaging in this kind of critical commentary, in this article, I aim to understand how CRT and its offshoot, CWS, function in the social field. Just how does the “abolition of whiteness”¹—arguably the ultimate goal of CRT and CWS—operate? How might we understand CRT's and CWS's treatment of whiteness and the intention to abolish it?

Ritual Sacrifice of the Scapegoat

Sacrifice, as René Girard argued, is a ritual mechanism of violence that in primitive societies served to substitute a victim in place of the real culprit in an effort to mitigate violence otherwise directed at the community, violence that might otherwise have no end:

Why does the spirit of revenge, wherever it breaks out, constitute such an intolerable menace? Perhaps because the only satisfactory revenge for spilt blood is spilling the blood of the killer; and in the blood feud there is no clear distinction between the act for which the killer is being punished and the punishment itself. Vengeance professes to be an act of reprisal, and every reprisal calls for another reprisal. The crime to which the act of vengeance addresses itself is almost never an unprecedented offense; in almost every case it has been committed in revenge for some prior crime. Vengeance, then, is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of

the community, it threatens to involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. The multiplication of reprisals instantaneously puts the very existence of a society in jeopardy, and that is why it is universally proscribed.[2](#)

Sacrifice, Girard argues, is an act of violence meant to forestall greater violence, the reciprocal violence of vengeance that if left unchecked threatens the extinction of the community. Sacrifice is thus a means of limiting and circumscribing violence. Ritual sacrifice, Girard argues, serves as a violent means by which such endless violence may be avoided. Violence is deflected onto a sacrificial scapegoat, which takes the place of a prototype on which it would otherwise be enacted, which would instigate further vengeance. The victim serves as a surrogate for its prototype. Ultimately, the prototype is not a single individual but rather the community at large, because unmitigated vengeance threatens everyone. The sacrifice is offered in lieu of such unfettered vengeance:

The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament [a god]. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from its own violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself. The elements of dissension scattered throughout the community are drawn to the person of the sacrificial victim and eliminated, at least temporarily, by its sacrifice.[3](#)

Whiteness as Scapegoat

The abolition of whiteness, I argue, may be understood in

terms of the ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat. I am not referring here to the scapegoating of poor, mostly rural people by a white urban elite, as many have before me.⁴ Under that formulation, poor whites take on the sins of those whites who benefit most from existing conditions. Rather, I am arguing that in CRT and CWS, *whiteness* is the scapegoat; whiteness stands in for white people themselves. Whiteness becomes the scapegoat on whom symbolic vengeance is to be enacted. Whiteness is a scapegoat because it is not whiteness *per se* that has done violence to BIPOC. After all, whiteness is an abstraction. Rather, whiteness stands in for the perpetrators in a *mostly* unconscious act of substitution. The abolition of whiteness forestalls unending vengeance, while at the same time enacting it. Since the abolition of whiteness is never complete, the sacrifice must be ongoing. CRT and CWS thus establish themselves as perpetually necessary theoretical dispositions and movements, ensuring their longevity and the need for their theorists.

Girard notes three requirements that victims of ritual sacrifice must satisfy in order to serve as adequate surrogates: 1) surrogates must bear a resemblance, but not too close a resemblance, to the prototype excluded from violence; 2) victims must be outcasts of some sort; they must be expendable; thus, they must not be fully integrated within the social body; 3) victims must be sufficiently removed from social bonds such that “they can be exposed to violence without fear of reprisal. Their death does not automatically entail an act of vengeance.”⁵ That is, victims must be sufficiently disconnected from the social body that retaliation is avoided.

Whiteness meets each of these requirements. First, although it is an abstracted quality, whiteness bears a resemblance to its prototype—white people. Second, due to CRT’s incessant indoctrination and propaganda, whiteness has become an abject quality that can be sacrificed without compunction; whiteness

is not a respectable quality such that it must be protected. Third, because it is an abstraction, whiteness has no social bonds; whiteness can be sacrificed without instigating further acts of vengeance.

Is Sacrifice Still Operative?

However, in adopting Girard's theory of ritual sacrifice for the contemporary moment and in particular in the context of CRT and CWS, a few problems immediately present themselves. For one, the "violence" in the sacrifice of whiteness, at least where critical race *theory* and critical white *studies* are concerned, is strictly symbolic. The abolition of whiteness does not involve literal sacrifice as in archaic societies. Clearly, CRT and CWS do not involve the physical slaying of whiteness. As an abstraction, whiteness is more like a conceptual voodoo doll than the sacrificial scapegoat of ritual sacrifice. As leftists are prone to say about Antifa, whiteness is merely "an idea." You can't physically kill an idea (which, in fact, may be the problem).

Yet, it can be argued that all ritual sacrifice is symbolic. The violence taken against the surrogate symbolizes vengeance not enacted against the prototype. The sacrifice of whiteness merely excludes all but the symbolic aspect of ritual sacrifice. It is no less sacrificial for that.

The more difficult problem for this formulation is Girard's apparent exclusion of societies like our own from the practice of ritual sacrifice. Girard suggests that we no longer live in a society where sacrifice is necessary:

Yet societies like our own, which do not, strictly speaking, practice sacrificial rites, seem to get along without them. Violence undoubtedly exists within our society, but not to such an extent that the society itself is threatened with extinction.[6](#)

In arguing this, Girard is by no means making a moral comparison between modern (or postmodern) and archaic societies. He merely refers to a functional difference. Sacrifice is not practiced in societies like ours not because we are morally superior or because we have internalized a notion of abstract justice, but because sacrifice is no longer necessary:

It is not a question of codifying good and evil or of inspiring respect for some abstract concept of justice; rather, it is a question of securing the safety of the group by checking the impulse for revenge.[7](#)

Girard is not positing a moral progress narrative, although he does suggest that something has changed that has made sacrifice unnecessary. How, then, is the impulse for revenge checked? According to Girard, the factor that obviates sacrifice for societies such as our own is the development of the judicial system:

Vengeance is a vicious circle whose effect on primitive societies can only be surmised. For us the circle has been broken. We owe our good fortune to one of our social institutions above all: our judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance.[8](#)

The judicial system makes sacrifice unnecessary because it serves to stem the spiral of vengeance, a role that sacrifice played heretofore but not as well as the judicial system does for us. By delegating and limiting the role of vengeance to the judicial system, modern societies have given the judicial system the last word on vengeance. Vengeance stops with the “guilty” verdict:

The break comes at the moment when the intervention of an independent legal authority becomes constraining. Only then are men freed from the terrible obligations of vengeance.

Retribution in its judicial guise loses its terrible urgency. Its meaning remains the same, but this meaning becomes increasingly indistinct or even fades from view. In fact, the system functions best when everyone concerned is least aware that it involves retribution. The system can—and as soon as it can it will—reorganize itself around the accused and the concept of guilt. In fact, retribution still holds sway, but forged into a principle of abstract justice that all men are obliged to uphold and respect.[9](#)

Thus, it would appear that Girard is suggesting that sacrifice is no longer functional today. Likewise, whiteness cannot be a sacrificial scapegoat offered to forestall violence.

However, a closer look at the homologous relationship between sacrifice and the judicial system may point to the persistence of sacrifice, only moved into another register. The judicial system, as Girard notes, carries out the same function as sacrifice, only it does it better. Vengeance, although obscured, is nevertheless undertaken:

Primitive religion [especially ritual sacrifice] tames, trains, arms, and directs violent impulses as a defensive force against those forms of violence that society regards as inadmissible. It postulates a strange mixture of violence and nonviolence. The same can perhaps be said of our own judicial system of control.[10](#)

Both ritual sacrifice and the judicial system enact vengeance. In fact, Girard sees in the judicial system a more effective and directed form of vengeance. “If our own system seems more rational, it is because it conforms more strictly to the principle of vengeance.”[11](#)

Yet, the judicial system differs from ritual sacrifice by locating the “guilty” party and enacting vengeance particularly on them, thus precluding ongoing acts of

vengeance. A substitute is not taken in lieu of the transgressor. The judicial system locates the transgressor and limits vengeance to him, thereby ending the spiral of vengeance.

Still, an imperfect judicial system can and has been used as a rationale for continuing the chain of vengeance, and in some cases, the belief that justice will never be rendered by it has incited the relatives and advocates of victims to “take the law into their own hands,” sometimes in advance of any action on the judicial system’s part. The Black Lives Matter movement, inspired by CRT, is just one such example. This phenomenon speaks of a leaky system that has never and can never be perfected, likewise leaving the door open to “private” acts of vengeance. And from private acts of vengeance, on Girard’s logic, follows an ongoing role for sacrifice in societies like our own.

Concluding Remarks

Who can read about the judicial system, sacrifice, and scapegoat theory today (April 2021), without thinking of the case of Derek Chauvin, the police officer recently convicted on two counts of murder and one count of manslaughter in the death of George Floyd? Whatever one thinks about the verdict, cannot one nevertheless see in the convictions a case of sacrifice wherein the violence done to the defendant has the direct effect of precluding additional violence in the broader social body? In fact, given the calls for violence by state officials in the case of any acquittal, and given the widespread violence in response to Floyd’s death, could any other verdict have been expected or accepted? Even if Chauvin were innocent of murder and manslaughter, anything short of his conviction on all counts likely would have sparked widespread violence. In fact, even with Chauvin’s conviction, BLM activists continue to agitate and threaten violence. Such violence could clearly be likened to the very chain of vengeance that sacrifice is meant to forestall. Whatever

Chauvin's crime (and his very surname, "Chauvin," is suggestive of a "chauvinism" the likes of which "whiteness" is an extreme example), his sacrificial role can hardly be denied.

But let us recur to the original scapegoat treated here: whiteness. If whiteness is a scapegoat, what precisely does it stand in for? What is its prototype? Is the prototype all white people, or is whiteness rather a metonym for a select group of (mostly) white people who, by virtue of the impossibility of exacting direct vengeance on them, and by virtue of their power to deflect vengeance onto another, have managed to escape vengeance? In other words, is whiteness the surrogate for a ruling elite that has attempted to make the mass of white people, who have had little if anything to do with historical oppression, the scapegoat for their own crimes? If so, then CRT and CWS actually serve to deflect vengeance away from this prototype. CRT and CWS would thereby serve this ruling elite. After all, although whiteness is a substitute, as Girard points out, the prototype that it replaces is never entirely forgotten. Whiteness continues to be associated with the majority of white people, while those who benefit from historical oppression escape notice.

First published in the