



**ESSAY**

## **The American Anti-Vaxxer COVID Dead: A Dynamic Chronicle of Failed Sacrifices**

*Ivan Strenski*

University of California, Riverside, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

Unlike earlier pandemics, where a “politics of blame” was directed against those who spread infection, the COVID pandemic in the United States has created occasions for the deployment of a “politics of commendation” for performing acts of sacrifice. Frontline healthcare workers have been celebrated for sacrificing themselves in service to their patients, even as critics have charged their being hapless victims of “social murder” at the hands of irresponsible medical administrators. Governmental officials, notably in Texas, have also recommended the elderly to refuse COVID care, die and thus sacrifice themselves selflessly for the benefit of the younger generation. Lately, COVID vaccine-refusal has been seen as an act of noble political sacrifice—typically to further individual liberty against the coercive power of the Federal government’s promotion or mandating of vaccination. Anti-vaxxers embracing the role of such political sacrifices, however, generally fail to realize this aspiration, insofar they are often just culpable of their own demise by neglecting public health advisories. Furthermore, the partisan politicization of their deaths militates against the normal recognition of their being sacrifices. Party political calculations have frequently demanded denial of the COVID origins of the anti-vaxxer deaths, and also effectively eliminated any normal attendant rites of reciprocation, memorialization or sacralization of the victims, typical of sacrifices, proper.

### **KEYWORDS**

sacrificial process, politicization, suicide, social murder, gift, Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, COVID, Donald Trump, vaccine-refusal, Texas, freedom

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## Death in a Time of COVID: Scenes of Contestation

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2019, few imagined COVID-victims applauded as “sacrifices.” Past pandemics, such as the Spanish flu of 1918–1919, the Egyptian H1N1 flu, the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and others, typically yielded an ugly “politics of blame” where the afflicted were reviled as “Typhoid Marys,” or some such (Farmer, 1992; Leach & Tadros, 2014). While there have been and still are moments of *blaming* the Peoples’ Republic of China for permitting the virus to emerge and spread beyond its borders, American partisan politics about vaccination soon rankled more Americans than anything the Chinese did. Vaccine resistance became a marker of political affiliation for the right, symbolizing resistance to “big government” public health efforts to get the population vaccinated. The will to risk COVID death by refusing vaccination was hailed by Republicans as a commendable act of “sacrifice” on behalf of individual freedom. Such sentiments did not go unnoticed by the likes Democratic congressman, Jamie Raskin, who attacked GOP<sup>1</sup> campaigns of “anti-testing, anti-lockdown, anti-mask, nothing-to-worry-about orthodoxy” as “like a policy of mass human sacrifice” (Andersen, 2022).

I challenge the use of sacrificial rhetoric to characterize anti-vaxxer refusal to be vaccinated in several ways. First, why, on the face of it, aren’t anti-vaxxers better described as simply foolhardy and misguided, ignorantly courting their own deaths, in virtual suicides? Second, by what standard meaning of sacrifice, do their claims to be “sacrifices”—for the sake of greater personal liberty—make sense of the idea of sacrifice? Surely, everything is not a “sacrifice”?! What, then, makes anti-vaxxer refusal to vaccinate, and possibly die in the process, a “sacrifice”—and not something else, better named foolhardy, a simple death, a misfortune, a bad wager, an “act-of-God,” and so on? I argue that, because of the context in which anti-vaxxers have the sincerest of intentions of being “sacrifices,” these anti-vaxxer attempts at sacrifice tend to *fail*. Simple misconceptions about what distinguishes sacrifices from other acts, together with their generally unfinished or just botched performance, together account for the failure of anti-vaxxer sacrifices.

When the notion of sacrifice is raised together with the COVID pandemic, the anti-vaxxer politics of sacrifice does not probably come first to mind. Very early in the pandemic reference was more often to healthcare and other frontline workers who *sacrificed* for the sake of the public good (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021, p. 730). Notably, while President, Trump excitedly praised medical supply factory workers in sacrificial terms for staying on the job: “They’re running into death just like soldiers run into bullets, in a true sense ... I really call them ‘warriors’” (White House Office, 2020). Trump here reflected admiration for the frontline workers who died from exposure to COVID while fighting the virus or tending its victims. What Trump did not voice in the process was concern of the possible exploitation of frontline workers by bosses eager to enhance their own situations. But awareness of such administrative misconduct let medical leaders like Dr. Joseph Freer, Professor of Medical Leadership and Management at the University of London to indict the bosses of institutional healthcare

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<sup>1</sup> GOP—Grand Old Party, commonly used to indicate Republicans.

for *mischaracterizing* the COVID deaths of front-line workers as “sacrifices.” “For those in power,” accused Freer, appealing to “‘sacrifice’ conveniently retells the stories of premature death [of frontline workers] in a way that sublimates anger, grief and powerlessness into pride, bravery, and individual choice” (Freer, 2021). Confirming Freer’s worst suspicions, Ian R. Carrillo and Annabel Ipsen, reported that “workers are coerced to stay in a sacrifice zone,” and consequently believe that they are “deemed an essential yet expendable asset” and, unceremoniously dumped (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021, p. 730). Talk of the “sacrifices” of these healthcare workers was thus fraudulent. The “nurses ... would [not] have seen their own deaths ... as *sacrifice* [emphasis added].” Instead, adds Freer, “they felt unsafe and afraid at work,” because they lacked means “to protect themselves” (Freer, 2021). Under such circumstances, the failures by public health administrators better to protect frontline workers ought to have been classified as something more akin to criminal negligence or murder.

Other leading medical professionals made just such accusations. Rankin School of Nursing’s Professor Elizabeth McGibbon (2021) argued that the surge of frontline worker COVID deaths recalled Friedrich Engels’ analysis of the “social murder” of similarly exploited 19<sup>th</sup>-century industrial workers. Engels wrote, “When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another, or when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call this deed murder” (Engels, 1845/2009). However, Engels concludes, when an industrialist “places hundreds ... in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural death ... [by forcing them] ... to remain in such conditions until that death ensues ... its deed is murder ... social murder.” (Engels, 1845/2009). Professor Kamran Abbasi, Imperial College (London), concurred, arguing that the moral responsibility of employers of front-line workers “cannot be ignored or spun away,” by disingenuous appeals to “sacrifices” (Abbasi, 2021; Mercola, 2022).

### **Kurt Andersen’s “Politics of Blame”: The Aztec Elites and the GOP**

In a heated, controversial article, *The Atlantic*’s Kurt Andersen made it his personal mission to indict the irresponsibility of the Trump administration elites for the COVID deaths occurring under their careless watch (Andersen, 2022). For Andersen, sacrifice of all kind and its invocations, scarcely conceal how direct and straightforward *murder* was. Andersen even thinks that COVID pandemic deaths represent *active and deliberate* killings by social elites, not the merely “negligent” social murders of Engels’ sort. Massive COVID deaths, “the real thing, comparable to the innumerable ghastly historical versions”— are just a “new and improved modern version of [Aztec] mass human sacrifice.” To his mind, *both* are the same because both are deliberately exploitative and massive “*ritual human* [emphasis added] sacrifices.” (Andersen, 2022). Both represent the efforts of elites “to keep the *hoi polloi* subservient” (Andersen, 2022). Their hidden purpose, says Andersen, was to terrorize Aztec commoners into political submission, “to fortify [their] ... political and economic power,” typically by employing nefarious “*forms of ‘sacrificial trickery’*” (Andersen, 2022). As radical as Andersen’s indictment is, he finds company with social critics like Kitanya Harrison. Wall Street elite for rushed to resume “business as usual” as soon as COVID cases seemed to slacken,

Harrison noted. And why, just “in order to keep the stock market from crashing.” But this very act, says Harrison, was to make “human sacrifices to Moloch” (Andersen, 2022).

### Sacrificial Populism and Georges Bataille

Commendable as Andersen’s moral outrage at elite victimizations is, he falls prey to a romantic populism. This is important to grasp as we try to assess the motives and aims of the “sacrificing” anti-vaxxers we will meet later. Aztec commoners also apparently eagerly volunteered for their sacrificial deaths. It is the same with those anti-vaxxers knowing courting COVID. Leonhardt’s study of disproportionately high COVID deaths in Ocean County, New Jersey, confirms how ordinary party rank-and-file promote sacrificial vaccine-refusal without elite prompting (Leonhardt, 2022). If Leonhardt is right, populism might then be as salient among anti-vaxxer COVID “sacrifices” as among Andersen’s Aztec sacrifices. Indeed, the more we learn about the voluntary, populist nature of MAGA<sup>2</sup> vaccine-resistance, the less GOP political “trickery” of MAGA folk leads to their own demise. Cases of anti-vaxxer COVID deaths might then be as easily marked by populist *willingness to be* sacrificed, or personally-motivated *self-sacrifices*, as the distinguished by cynical elite political manipulation.

Confirming this thesis of populist origins of MAGA vaccine resistance, Sungkyunkwan University economists, Yeonha Jung and Seungduck Lee contend that “COVID-19 vaccine-hesitancy ... is a phenomenon that arose from Trumpism”—from a mass movement, *not* from Trump himself (Jung & Lee, 2021). Recently even Trump’s latter-day promotion of vaccination was met with anger from the attendees of his 2022 Florence, Arizona rally. Trump seems then to have contributed to the creation of a Frankenstein monster of Trumpist vaccine-refusal, only to have it turn on him. Like the “fiend” of Mary Shelley’s novel, Trumpist vaccine-refusal has slipped its creator’s bonds and marauds the countryside on its own power. Its salience lies in its populist dynamics, not in elite direction, even though elites played a role.

A classic in the literature on sacrifice confirms the unsettling popular appeal of what seems like a populist death-wish. In the 1930s, Georges Bataille, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century French social revolutionary, erotico-theorist, Surrealist, and head librarian of Paris’ Bibliothèque Nationale, was obsessed with transgressive behaviors such as incest, capital punishment, necrophilia, sadism, violence, war, and what he called “sacrifice.” Bataille lamented the bland *bourgeois* mediocrity of conventional utilitarian life and sought to reanimate the creative energies of his world. Durkheim, Hubert, and Mauss had argued that small-scale traditional societies had technologies to recharge their collective batteries. Some of these involved performing violent, transgressive rites or launching wars to shatter the bland mentality dominating bourgeois society.

Bataille then set about experimenting with translating violent, “primitive” rites onto the contemporary urban French scene. If they had revived traditional societies, perhaps reinstating them in the modern day would do likewise for modern society? Bataille even formed a secret society, *Acéphale*, symbolized by a decapitated head of a sacrificial

<sup>2</sup> MAGA—Make America Great Again, Trump campaign slogan from 2016, now refers to Trump supporters.

victim, to realize his ambitions. *Acéphale* advertised in Paris' widely in newspapers for volunteers for ritual immolation, with the explicit understanding of Bataille plans for staging their extravagant deaths. Nothing, however, materialized of Bataille's scheme—but “the main obstacle ... was not finding willing victims.” Bataille later related that the difficulty lay in “finding an elite agent to perform the act” (Pearce, 2003, p. 5). I conclude from Bataille's experience that a certain proportion of the population are ready to die, even in bizarre circumstances like Bataille's. Andersen is wrong that elite prodding, manipulation or trickery are needed. How many more so, if we are to believe anti-vaxxer intentions to die for a lofty purpose like individual freedom?

### How the Vaccines Caused Vaccine-Refusal

MAGA sacrificial populism aside, the exploitation of frontline workers by appeals to “sacrifice” continues. But thankfully, much of the immediate danger to frontline healthcare workers has diminished with the arrival of the mRNA vaccines. Ironically, far from stopping anti-vaxxer “sacrifice,” it made it conceivable! With the arrival of first mRNA vaccine, Pfizer-BioNTech, came online in the USA in August 2020, US healthcare professionals believed they understood the conditions of transmission and morbidity of the virus. Hence, a US program of vaccination could begin. But with these policy decisions, *agency* also came into play. Individuals could *choose* whether or not to vaccinate. In doing so, classic measures of agency, such as personal responsibility, credit or blame, and so on became part of the COVID pandemic's discourse. The arrival of the vaccines made contracting and/or dying from COVID in large measure no longer an “act-of-God,” but a *civic act*, resulting in the transformation of the politics of blame and commendation.

Now, someone could be *blamed* for *sacrificing* their life by contracting COVID—and likewise *commended* for minimizing the possibility of their contracting COVID. Or, perversely, some party might *commend* someone for refusing vaccination to assert personal liberty, and thus become a *sacrifice* for individual freedom. Some anti-vaxxers were reported as having felt “[t]raitorous to cave and get the jab” (Marcotte, 2021). Among GOP loyalists, it “became a badge of honor to remain unvaccinated,” since they were prepared to *sacrifice* their health, and possibly, their lives in support of a “politics of insurrection” (Marcotte, 2021).

Once the government inaugurated public health policies, the politics of “blame” and “commendation” predictably hardened along American party lines. GOP anti-vaxxers claimed that COVID was either a “hoax” or that “sinister ingredients” in vaccines counseled vaccine refusal (Leonhardt, 2022). Other GOP elites discouraged vaccination by slandering the motives of the healthcare professionals “to prevent the disease—even among children—as an attack on red-state America” (Leonhardt, 2022). *The New York Times's* Paul Krugman said that “America's bad pandemic reflects a wager by rightist notables,” who believed “that they can reap benefits by making basic public health precautions part of the culture war” (Krugman, 2022).

Given the tendencies of American political culture, once freedom of choice, and its limitation became policy issues, an American COVID politics was irresistible. Whether

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to get vaccinated or not *signified* something elemental in one's personal identity—as political party identification had lately become. Getting COVID and potentially dying—statistically-speaking—also became contingent upon one's *political preferences*. *The New Yorker* writer, Benjamin Wallace-Wells notes how “the politics of COVID are no longer about death and disease, but about public-health restrictions” (Wallace-Wells, 2022). David Leonhardt's study of COVID deaths in “heavily Republican” Ocean County, New Jersey showed that the “large number of unvaccinated residents in Ocean County” corresponds to the “horrific amount of Covid illness and death” there. Ocean County's toll was “worse than ... in Mississippi,” the state “with the largest amount of Covid death per capita,” and “worse than in any country, except for Peru” (Leonhardt, 2022). Leonhardt's data clearly pointed to political affiliation. In Ocean County, “Donald Trump won ... by almost 30 percentage points in 2020, and many Republicans—including those who are older than 65 and vulnerable to severe Covid illness—are skeptical of the vaccines” (Leonhardt, 2022).

Trump's entry into the controversy on the side of the resisters only deepened the pandemic's politicization primarily by a program of disinformation. A “recent study has identified [former President Trump] as likely ... the largest driver of the COVID-19 misinformation infodemic ... [and] the main influencer in the anti-vaccination web” (Evanega et al., 2020; Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021, p. 9). Leader of “a virtual community” of “anti-vaccination supporters” (Evanega et al., 2020; Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021, p. 7), Trump has been accused of “willfully neglecting scientific advice, international and historical experience, and their alarming statistics”—all for the purpose of aiding his “political strategy or ideology” (Abbasi, 2021). Recognizing the politicization of the pandemic, Leonhardt coined a term *Red-COVID* to refer to anti-vaxxer Republicans who had risked contracting COVID deliberately to affirm their GOP political identity (Leonhardt, 2022). With the culture wars on in earnest, the anti-vaxxers saw the Red-COVID dead as having made the ultimate *sacrifice* by their heroic defiance—“insurrection by other means”—more “resistance against Democratic ‘tyranny’” (Marcotte, 2021).

Progressives angered by presidential disinformation or encouragement of anti-vaxxer *gullibility*, predictably fought back (Greenspan, 2021). A celebrated opinion piece, “The Quiet Rage of the Responsible,” Krugman captured this mood of resentment against anti-vaxxers for effectively breathing new life into the pandemic (Krugman, 2021). “Anti-vaxxers need to face penalties for their selfish choices, which threaten the lives of others” (Green, 2022). Although he never spelled out the consequences, President Biden ominously said that “patience with the anti-vaxxers was ‘wearing thin’” (Spiering, 2021). In a mood of bitter sarcasm, some progressives urged anti-vaxxers to even greater vaccine refusal—all the better to increase their morbidity, and lessen their electoral strength. Progressive digital sites like *The Stephanie Miller Show* and *Redbubble* hawked “Just Hurry Up and Die” tee shirts and other similarly themed merchandise (Just Hurry Up, 2022).

Giving as good as they got, rightwing organ, *Breitbart*, charged that progressives had created a phony “partisan gap in vaccination rates ... [as] part of a liberal plot” (Leonhardt, 2021). In distracting from the truth about the pandemic, *Breitbart* merely imitated the example Trump sent his supporters and administration:

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A content analysis of just over a month of White House briefing transcripts found that self-congratulations, often based on exaggerations or falsehoods, were the most common utterances of the president (about 600 times). He also blamed others more than 110 times. By comparison, he expressed empathy or appealed to national unity only about 160 times. (Kapucu & Moynihan, 2021, p. 603)

Reflecting Trump's policy of public denial, *Infowars'* Alex Jones piled on, accusing the left of lying that COVID deaths had been "overcounted." In fact, they had occurred primarily among the "co-morbid," or because of "ventilator malpractice" (Spiering, 2021). Added to these charges, mercenary "hospital incentives" of their healthcare allies had deliberately driven up the toll of "covid deaths" to create the appearance of a pandemic (Mercola, 2022).

### **But Just What Is a Sacrifice, Anyway?**

Skeptics of such a "politics of commendation" might be forgiven for thinking it paradoxical. If a Red-COVID death were a "sacrifice," what gain was to be had from refusing vaccination, and consequently dying of COVID? Personal liberty? But for whom? The dead are not reported to care about personal liberty. We are left with only other alternative—the examples set by the Red-COVID dead as sacrificing for freedom are expected to inspire the whole community of anti-vaxxers.

Before submitting that proposition to testing, a host of legitimate questions need first to be raised about what qualifies Red-COVID deaths as "sacrifices"? Were personal declarations enough? Some critics might argue that failing to follow public health advisories only qualifies one as "self-destructive" or a "suicide." Or, even if the intention to sacrifice were genuine, maybe that intention was frustrated or unfulfilled in the process? Perhaps anti-vaxxer deaths diminished society's devotion to individual freedom? These questions do not even consider the Red-COVID dead who expressed no sacrificial *intentions*. Could a third party declare them so to be *ex post facto*—say, in the way the deaths of soldiers are often officially declared "heroic," even though nothing is known about their intentions?

It is no simple matter, then, to decide whether Red-COVID deaths are "sacrifices." As the proverb says, the road to hell is paved *with good intentions*. So, too, the road to sacrifice may be similarly paved with "good intentions," but little more. Sacrificial intentions, like proverbial "good intentions," do not a sacrifice make. Just because someone *says* they "*sacrificed*" does not make that claim meaningful or true. "Sacrifice" is word tossed around in everyday discourse covering everything from the Catholic eucharistic theology to the Pillow Guy's announcing an annual sale where "everything must be *sacrificed!*" Perhaps the anti-vaxxer actor claiming "sacrifice" just blundered negligently into death? Perhaps, the anti-vaxxer simply had known enough of the science of COVID infection—even while uttering "sacrifice" on their dying lips? Needless to say, not every death constitutes a "sacrifice." But which ones do? Consider only one facet of the semantics of "sacrifice"—the relation of killing to sacrifice.

A killing might be an execution, a stylized murder, or sadistic slaying done for this sheer pleasure of inflicting pain. But, for all that, the killing might not entail sacrifice.

Second, sacrifice may not entail any killing, either. In Confucian China, even though sacrifices nourish the gods, “the victim’s slaughter does not mark a culminating moment of the rite” (Wilson, 2002, p. 253). Tracking the origins of *ahimsā*, Herman W. Tull (1996) tells us how ritual slaughter gradually became repulsive entirely. The *Mānavadharmasāstra* 5:53 teaches, moreover, that “the abjuration of sacrificial violence ... leads to the same reward as that gained by performing the horse sacrifice every year for a 100 years” (Tull, 1996, pp. 224–225). In the Bible, many sacrifices involve no killing at all (Levenson, 1993). In *Leviticus*: 1–7, for instance, only one of the five basic sacrifices—burnt offering—requires killing. The other sacrifices, namely guilt, sin, and well-being, as well as the four kinds of grain sacrifices, involve none (Dozeman, 2017, p. 376). Even in the classic biblical example of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, the “sacrifice” was not merely Abraham’s proposed *killing* of Isaac. Cain didn’t *sacrifice* Abel by murdering him anymore than Abraham would have obeyed God’s command to “sacrifice” Isaac just by killing him. Much else was involved. Abraham had to build an altar and, specifically, on Mt. Moriah (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 22:6–9). He needed to *prepare* for the sacrifice by gathering fuel for the “burnt offering” Isaac was to have become. Abraham had, then, to *bind* Isaac (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 22:9). Only then, would Abraham have taken knife to Isaac and killed him in preparation for making of him a “burnt offering.” Presumably, after Isaac’s body had been consumed in flames, Abraham and his retinue would have eaten the burnt flesh—in a sacrificial meal shared with God. And, God, in return would have been somehow obligated to Abraham, and so on.

Beyond rejecting the identity between killing and sacrifice, the Abraham–Isaac story helps us make a critical point about the semantics of sacrifice. Unlike simple killing, sacrifice is not clearly a *discrete* act—“one and done,” although it may be spoken of in this way. Instead, “sacrifice” names a *process*—as a *sequence* of acts as the Abraham–Isaac story reveals, constituting the complex process of making a successful “offering” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 22:2). In order to do the sacrifice properly, the person making the offering needs to be prepared, typically made “pure” and worthy to make the offering. Once the offering is made, a whole sequence of responses is set in motion—sharing the offering in a communion meal, thanksgiving, reciprocation and so on.

Critically, as series of acts, the sacrificial process needs to adhere to certain rules in order to succeed. Where the rules are neglected, the sacrifice can simply fail. Sacrifice is fraught with *contingencies*. In *Leviticus*, for instance, much is made of “accentuating the need for precise and correct performance” (Dozeman, 2017, p. 376). All this means that sacrifice that can be done well or badly, perfectly or imperfectly, completely or incompletely, successfully or botched to the point of being something else altogether. In the case of putative anti-vaxxer COVID sacrifices, they may, thus, better be regarded as suicides or “social murders.” About the *process* of sacrifice in the *Puranas*, Christopher Z. Minkowski, for instance, itemizes various ways that a “sacrifice can be interrupted ... (destroyed, say, or disrupted, or intervened in) by various kinds



of interrupters ... with various effects on the sacrificial victims (they might be released, or stolen, or sacrificed all the same)" (Minkowski, 2001, p. 170). Minkowski even notes how one recommended ancient Indian way of getting a story started was, for instance, to *interrupt* a sacrifice! The possibilities for sacrificial failure are limitless.

Summing up thus far: saying that COVID deaths are *sacrifices* must consider that they may be processes. As sacrificial processes, they differ from the *discrete fact* of just being dead, or in the *discrete act* of killing that may have led to a death. Sacrificial offerings, purifications, preparations, killings, deaths, communion meals, reciprocations, and such are all parts of the whole *sacrificial process*. In a given sacrifice, omitting one of these parts, or not performing the same properly can render the sacrifice invalid, incomplete, aborted, or simply, *failed*. Thus, as far as Red-COVID deaths as sacrifices goes, how well or not do they meet the requirements of performing the sacrifice *well*?

### COVID Deaths, "Sacrifice", and Texas Freedom

We now know quite a lot about sacrifice. Sacrifice is potentially as much a matter of elite imposition—even to the extent of looking like "social murder" (Andersen, 2022; Engels, 1845/2009)—as it is populist, grassroots phenomenon. Next, we also know that Red-COVID "sacrifices" may *look* like "suicides" or "social murders," but that their being "sacrifices" requires further specification. What do these preliminary conclusions then entail about evaluating whether critical cases of Red-COVID deaths, designated as "sacrifices," succeed in being sacrifices?

One prominent case of sacrificial language lately applied to the COVID dead in public discourse has drawn considerable attention. It exhibits many, if not all, the salient features of Red-COVID claims about being sacrifices. I refer to public remarks linking COVID deaths to sacrifice made in a 23 March 2020 nationally-televised interview with Fox's Tucker Carlson by GOP Texas Lieutenant Governor, Dan Patrick. Patrick specifically urged "those of us who are 70 plus" to make a regular practice of "*giving up*" their desire to prolong their lives in face of the COVID pandemic. Patrick was thus *recommending* and "commending" the elderly to sacrifice their lives by ceasing to resist COVID infection, so that they would vacate public space for youth. In more technical language, Patrick encouraged "generational self-sacrifice" by declaring a policy known as "calculated ageism" (Barrett et al., 2021, p. e201).

Explaining why he was recommending something essentially commendable, the Texas lieutenant governor noted that "he and other [presumably Red, GOP] grandparents would be willing to risk their health and even lives"—"sacrifice" or give-up—"for the United States to 'get back to work' amid the coronavirus pandemic ... But don't sacrifice the country" (Knodel, 2020). A month later on Fox, Patrick defended the high-mindedness of his original view: "There are more important things than living," said Patrick adding a note of nobility to his proposal, "and that's saving this country for my children and my grandchildren and saving this country for all of us" (Samuels, 2020). Bottom line: to promote the greater good of Texas's civic and economic health, the over-70s' should "give-up" ("sacrifice") their own attempts to avoid COVID death.

Interestingly, Patrick's comments attracted nearly 32,000 retweets, expressing various points of view (Barrett et al., 2021, p. e203). Clearly, the linked subjects of the voluntary aspects of COVID deaths and their relation to civic sacrifice struck a tender public note. Although only 5% supported Patrick's views, and although his remark referred to the aged only, "opposition centered on moral critiques, political-economic critiques, assertions of older adults' worth, and public health arguments. Support centered on individual responsibility and patriotism" (Barrett et al., 2021, p. e201).

The question to be asked, however, is how well the sacrificial practice of COVID death as imagined by Patrick conforms to the sacrificial ideals Patrick and others of his ideological persuasion enunciate? How can Patrick assure us that the sacrifices ordered will be done *well*? Or, will they instead look more like pathetic suicides, or cruel social murders than the grand sacrifices Patrick seems to envision? What rules of "sacrifice" is Patrick proposing, as well? Patrick seems to misconceive sacrifice as "one-and-done"—a discrete act whose consequences don't much matter. Once dead, the old timers will be forgotten, plowed into the earth like so much compost, enriching the tilth of the Texas soil so that the young generation can move on with the good life. What if sacrifice proceeds in steps, all or many of which needed to be completed—a process beginning perhaps with an individual act that, however, requires completion, follow-up and response? If sacrifice is such a social process, like all *ritual processes*, sacrifices can fail. They can *fail* to be completed, or botched, along the way. I suggest that one way to weigh the quality of Red-COVID sacrifices is by measuring the quality of performance. That, in part, means seeing how well or not Red-COVID sacrifices square with theories of sacrifice.

### What Theory of Sacrifice Covers Red-COVID "Sacrifices" Best?

Theories of sacrifice are many. Which would fit Dan Patrick's data? Would, for instance, they fit René Girard's theory of sacrifice as scapegoating? On the face of it, no, since the deaths of Patrick's Texas elderly do not incriminate anyone. "Scapegoating" is just not an issue in Dan Patrick's Texas—not even the innocent elderly that Patrick wishes to let die. Nor, like Andersen and Girard, does Patrick focus on how sacrifice becomes a vehicle for promoting the injustice of social victimization (Girard, 1977). As theorized by Andersen, Girard and others, the sacrificial process entails *blaming* an innocent party for certain wrongs, then heaping the burden of guilt for those wrongs onto the victim—"scapegoating" them. But Patrick's elderly are blameless. That makes them an awkward fit for Girard.

Similarly, Jon D. Levenson, Martin Bergmann, William Beers and others fix on the Hebrew Bible's mention of the violent practices of ritual killings of cherished, but helpless, first-born infants—"child-sacrifice" (Beers, 1992; Bergmann, 1992; Levenson, 1993). But, again, to the extent that Patrick imagines the elderly dying, it is not as the cherished, who are given-up in an act of self-abnegation. Patrick's elderly are the *uncherished*, the expendable. Disposal of the elderly seems particularly *unfitting* then to the Hebrew Bible cases spelt out by Levenson, Bergmann, and Beers. Even less is Patrick's scenario conceivable within the theory of Marcel

Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's focus on sacrificial "cuisine" (Detienne & Vernant, 1989). Detienne and Vernant conceive sacrifice from the viewpoint of the processes of arranging a sacrificial meal of the slaughtered victim to be shared with the gods. But it is immediately absurd to imagine Patrick proposing Texas retelling of "Soylent Green." Texans are not about to feast on the sacrificed elderly—or indeed even *with* them. Indeed, what distinguishes Patrick's conception of the elderly in sacrifice is their *exclusion* from any Texas common table. As disposable, the Texas elderly are the *garbage* to be jettisoned to make way for new Texans, not the stuff of some macabre barbecue.

Therefore, although Dan Patrick presents a recognizable—if monstrous—example of sacrifice involving COVID, it fits no theories of sacrifice thus far canvassed. Nor, as well, do they accommodate what matters to Red-COVID sacrificial deaths—acts done to promote individual freedom. In Patrick's case, as with the other Red-COVID sacrifices reviewed thus far, the salient acts are "offerings", "contributions", "pledges", and so on—in short, *gifts* and *social exchanges*. Patrick wants to *exchange* the deaths of COVID-compromised Texas elderly for economic benefit, for a future Texas. He wants them to *give-up* their struggle to stay alive during the pandemic; resources that might be diverted to them would go elsewhere. Given Patrick's conception of sacrifice, featuring gift, offering, and social exchange, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss's theory of sacrifice offers a natural fit with Patrick's intended sacrifices (Hubert & Mauss, 1964). The Red-COVID dead *constitute* sacrifices because they are special, "sacred," kinds of gifts, recalling the often-used soldier/warrior imagery frequently associated with death in the pandemic.

What I then propose is *pragmatic test* of the extent to which Red-COVID "sacrifices" like Patrick's live up to their claims to be sacrifices—at least insofar as the elements of gift, offering, and social exchange are focal to what sacrifices are. Crucially, in what ways do Red-COVID sacrifices *succeed* and, in what ways, do they *fail* at being sacrifices, as far as Hubert and Mauss have laid it out? To claim a Red-COVID death was indeed a *commendable* sacrifice, a given death would need *successfully* to complete the process of sacrifice being a gift, offering, social exchange, and so on. Failure to complete the process would mean that such an act—whatever the intentions—would have to be judged a "failed" sacrifice, an "aborted" sacrifice, or some other term indicating its lack of success at completing the particulars of a sacrificial process defined by giving, offering, and social exchange.

Grading Red-COVID deaths presents us with some of the weighty scenarios. Some people want to *commend* the deaths of anti-vaxxers as noble sacrifices made as *gifts* or *offerings* for advancing individual political freedom. In speaking of Red-COVID deaths as sacrifices, one suggests something more than a commonplace "giving-of." One holds out the sometimes-chilling prospect of a total "giving-up," an unconditional surrender, even to the extent of complete elimination, or erasure. I, thus, want to join those who argue that many "sacrifices" show that people like giving gifts, cooking and eating communally, or raising things from the profane to the sacred. Others frown on the COVID deaths of anti-vaxxers—as *condemnable*, claiming instead that what may seem like gifts or offerings are really suicides, social murders because

they are heedless squandering—a *giving away* of precious life. Even worse, refusing vaccinations *steals* from the larger community, rather than *giving* to it, by providing hosts for COVID to mutate further. With these and other examples in mind, let me begin testing claims that some Red-COVID deaths ought to be commended for being sacrifices as Hubert and Mauss see it.

### The Ambiguity of the Sacred and Gift in Sacrifice: “Making Sacred”

Hubert and Mauss (1964) proposed that the salience of sacrifices lay in their “making (something) sacred,” as its Latin roots in “*sacri-ficium*” attest: “It is indeed certain that sacrifice always implies a consecration; in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain; it is consecrated” (p. 9). Therefore, as a process of “making sacred,” Hubert and Mauss tell us that sacrifice is an action that makes something experienced as *qualitatively* “holy”, “hallowed”, “heroic”, “treasured”, “sacred”—distinct from something that had been experienced as *qualitatively* mundane. Thus, Hubert and Mauss observe that “the victim does not necessarily come to the sacrifice with a religious nature already perfected and clearly defined: it is the sacrifice itself that confers this upon it” (Hubert & Mauss, 1964, p. 97). The war dead ascend to the lofty status of “heroes,” or loftier still—transcendently—to being akin to “martyrs” or “saints”—“giving up” their lives as soldiers *sanctifies* them. In the COVID pandemic, for example, everyday frontline care-givers *sacrificed* of themselves for the infected, and thus earned exalted, heroic, “warrior” or “sacred” designations.

Can the anti-vaxxer Red-COVID dead, however, be said to be “sacrifices” by this logic? According to Hubert and Mauss’s way of thinking, the Red-COVID dead might be seen as sacred because they had sacrificed their lives for GOP goals by resisting governmental public health measures. But seeing the Red-COVID dead as sacred in this way also entails *recognition* by those promoting these “sacrificial” deaths. Hubert and Mauss note that “the sacrificed victim”—here the Red-COVID dead “were treated with a religious respect; honours were paid to them” (Hubert & Mauss, 1964, p. 35). The reason for recognition is, as Hubert and Mauss say, because sacrifice “has so frequently been conceived of as a form of contract” (Hubert & Mauss, 1964, p. 100). Doing sacrifice *well* means, for instance, that those who “sacrificed” to support Trump’s anti-vaccine policies and died as a result, *oblige* Trumpers, at least, to revere, honor, recognize, remember, or memorialize them by whatever means seem appropriate. Doing sacrifice *well* indeed requires that the sacrificing Red-COVID dead are so recognized as *sacred*.

This does not, however, seem the case among the anti-vaxxer population and its elite sponsors. First, an air of profanity seems to have settled over attitudes toward the anti-vaxxer dead. Dan Patrick, in effect, confesses his entirely profane attitude to the matter in his 21 April 2020 *FOX News* interview, saying “I don’t want to die, nobody wants to die, but man we’ve got to take some risks and get back in the game and get this country back up and running” (Samuels, 2020). Risks aplenty, but from Patrick not a word about a sacred *obligation* to those taking the risks or *solidarity* with those who sacrifice in one’s behalf. “Those of us who are 70 plus, we’ll take care of

ourselves,” said Patrick to *Fox News*, perhaps unaware of the bleak scenario of the lone elderly dying off in isolation, he broadcasts. Patrick does not even need to add that the over-70s’ are expendable—and therefore their deaths do not register *morally*, nor could they trigger a moral reaction, such as obligation, much less spur sacred feelings of *solidarity*. As social “garbage,” the elderly have outlived their utility, and can be “dumped” along with all the other “garbage” that makes up profane reality (Knodel, 2020). Let me suggest along with Carrillo and Ipsen’s report on the neglect of workers in “meatpacking facilities ... critical [to the national] infrastructure in the COVID-19 pandemic.” They too were treated as “expendable” and unceremoniously “dumped”—in effect, “garbage,” profanity at its most profound (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021, p. 730). What aborts interpretations of Patrick’s Red-COVID deaths as sacrifices is the same *profanity* with which frontline workers in the early stages of the pandemic were treated.

Second, even when the dead are calculated for economic reasons, a deep wave of denial smothered recognition of the would-be moral gravity of Red-COVID sacrifices. For instance, in GOP South Dakota, dying GOP loyalists even deny having COVID! Emergency Room nurse, Jodi Doering, recently stated to *The Washington Post* that the “last dying words [of many Red-COVID anti-vaxxers] are, ‘This can’t be happening. It’s not real’”. Doering added that “some patients prefer to believe that they have pneumonia or other diseases rather than covid-19 [*sic*], despite seeing their positive test results” (Villegas, 2020). But statistics show how mistaken these feelings were. In a *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR) report, by the end of December 2021, *unvaccinated persons were six times*—more likely to contract COVID than fully boosted vaccinated persons, and *10 times* more likely to die from COVID, as measured from early April through much of December 2021 (Johnson et al., 2022).

*Vanity Fair*’s Caleb Ecarma also reports how Fox News effectively pursues the policy of Red-COVID denial:

Ever since the start of the coronavirus outbreak in the U.S., Fox News has largely focused its coverage on downplaying its severity and the health risks ... The network’s top talent found new ways to misinform their audience about the outbreak’s dangers around each new development and every updated death toll. (Ecarma, 2020)

A further wrinkle on *denial* about COVID, has been how Fox headliners, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, and Sean Hannity routinely played down the lethality of COVID (Davidson, 2021). The effect of this is, of course, to put populations at increased risk of infection (Davidson, 2021; Ecarma, 2020). Treated in this way, GOP media leaders regards Red-COVID deaths less as gifts or sacrifices than *thefts*. Disguised forms of *taking*, Red-COVID deaths become opportunities to *reduce* the approval and power of GOP political opponents. Red-COVID deaths are, thus, *fake* gifts and phony sacrifices in that they primarily seek to *take* political approval from GOP opponents, rather than offering them to someone.

To Fox, since so few have died, in theory, even fewer have “sacrificed” anything for anyone. One, thus, seldom hears rightist media or personalities calling attention

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to the COVID death-toll, since that would remind audiences of what the loyalists have *given up*. *The Guardian* thus reported that “as Donald Trump agitates for the US to reopen, the American right appears to have found a novel way to deal with the rising coronavirus death toll: deny it altogether” (Gabbatt, 2020). Even conservative organs, like *Forbes* have concluded that no one has given up anything for anyone:

A growing number of conservatives (especially fringe sites like Alex Jones’ *Infowars*) are embracing a conspiracy that government-approved death tolls are inflated for various political reasons—and some reports suggest President Trump will soon endorse the murky theory as well. (Perez, 2020)

GOP elites thus never really wanted to *acknowledge* the full extent of COVID deaths, much less memorialize or celebrate their nobility as they would were Red-COVID dead felt to be the *sacred gifts* that real sacrifices are. Red-COVID deaths are not then acknowledged or remembered as they should were they real sacrifices. “At worst,” whether they die or not makes no difference, Krugman argues. Anti-vaxxers are “engaged in deliberate aggression to make a point,” which tragically may never get acknowledged (Krugman, 2022).

As a result of their program of denial, Fox and other rightist media outlets undercut any sense of obligation and social solidarity that might develop were Red-COVID deaths really treated as sacrifices. Mauss well captured the sense of obligation in gift-giving that seems so conspicuously missing in the lack of recognition by Fox and other of Red-COVID sacrificial intentions. For Mauss, gifts are given and repaid under *obligation*, even though they may seem to be voluntary. Gift-giving generates its own social consequences. Gifts elevate the status of the giver and, put the *receiver* in debt—to *reciprocate*.

By analogy, this would mean that Red-COVID deaths should incur *obligation* in being sacrificial gifts. Red-COVID sacrificial victims *should expect* the process to play out, such that, for instance GOP leaders would *feel obliged* to express recognition for their sacrifice. One might have expected acts of recognition, memorialization, or perhaps even celebration, like those for wartime soldiers who *gave-up* their lives in combat. But instead, the very politicians and media leaders who found it politically useful to advocate their Red-COVID constituents—in effect, to *give-up* their lives by refusing vaccination—often systematically discount, ignore or even deny the existence of those deaths entirely (Ecarma, 2020; Motta, 2021). Witness what political scientists, Naim Kapucu and Donald Moynihan, observe about Trump in this connection:

While President Trump sometimes acknowledged the cost of the disease, he did not make expressions of empathy or of loss central to his messaging. Indeed, the White House never undertook an acknowledgements event or commemoration that acknowledged the scale of the loss even as the disease passed milestones such as 100,000 deaths. One of the most memorable statements from President Trump was “I don’t take any responsibility at all”. (Kapucu & Moynihan, 2021, p. 602)

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In consequence, although once hailed as defenders of liberty, the Red-COVID dead now only serve as examples of sacrifices done *badly*. Their potential sacrality goes unheeded. The moral contract at the heart of sacrifice goes unhonored. No one of their cohort remembers, honors, reveres, memorializes, or mythologizes these sacrificed Red-COVID dead as the sacrificial occasion should dictate. Leonhardt shows how MAGA culture warriors systematically suppressed recognizing the many “memorials to the dead ... [that] pop up on a daily basis” on social media. Or they refused to face the inconvenient facts of Ocean County’s hospitals being “overwhelmed with Covid-19 patients” (Leonhardt, 2022). The anti-vaxxer MAGA performance of sacrifice would thus be unrecognizable to the likes of a Confucius, who knew how to do sacrifice *well* because he followed the socio-logic of sacrifice, its rhythm of give and take, its dialectic of act and memory, and so on. “The superior man,” said Confucius, “while his parents are alive, reverently nourishes them; and, when they are dead, reverently sacrifices to them. His thought to the end of his life is how not to disgrace them” (Muller, 1885). And that is what Hubert and Mauss mean when they say that in sacrificing someone

gives up something of himself ... [But] if he gives, it is partly in order to receive. Thus, sacrifice shows, itself in a dual light; it is a useful act, and it is an obligation. Disinterestedness is mingled with self-interest. That is why it has so frequently been conceived of as a form of contract. Fundamentally there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element. (Hubert & Mauss, 1964, p. 100)

From available evidence, we know then how the Red-COVID dead, their *sacrifices* have been done *badly*. Truncated by how the sacrality of the sacrificial victim has been violated, or by the failure to memorialize the acts of the Red-COVID victim, their sacrifice has effectively been aborted. Such “sacrifice done badly”—sacrificial processes begun but left incomplete—might arguably be said to be no sacrifices at all.

This was not always the case with Trump and others in his camp. He, for instance, hinted at appreciation of the contractual nature of sacrifice. He acknowledged the sacrality of those who worked at critical industries, in effect, sacrificing their labor to produce medical equipment for the nation. Of workers at a plant manufacturing healthcare devices—Owens and Minor, Allentown, PA—Trump said that they were *giving of* themselves because “they’re running into death just like soldiers run into bullets, in a true sense ... I really call them ‘warriors’” (White House Office, 2020). Company training coordinator, Ms. Carol Timm likewise echoed Trump’s soldierly sacrificial theme: “I know it well—the workers at this facility have answered the call in America’s hour of need ... We all work. We’re all working hard ... Every incredible worker here today is part of the greatest mobilization of American society since World War Two” (White House Office, 2020). Trump’s tone would have pleased Hubert and Mauss for its appreciation of the sacrality of “sacrificing” frontline workers. Just as Hubert and Mauss would have wanted him so to do, Trump exalted in the paradigmatic sacrificial acts frontline workers, acting like soldiers “giving of” and even “giving up” their labor for the national interest in maintaining medical preparedness.

But compare Trump's early words at the Minor and Owen plant to his later Tweets. Once the growing COVID pandemic threatened him politically, Andersen reminds us how Trump changed his tune. Now, Trump, like Andersen's Aztec elites, pushes "the nation"—not just the "warrior" factory workers at Owen and Minor—to court COVID death, but without acknowledging a contract with the dying! Speaking from his elite position as president, Aztec-Trump said that everyone will "just have to accept the idea that ... there will be more deaths."

What commends our attention to Hubert and Mauss's theory, then, is that according to its logic, Trump qualifies as doing sacrifice—but doing it *badly*! In effectively exploiting the sacrificial dead for his own purposes, he has not honored the essentially contractual socio-logic of sacrifice. The Red-COVID dead and the Aztec commoners, presuming Andersen right, are apparently "dead to" both Trump and the Aztec elites, respectively. Neither Trump nor the Aztec elites have acknowledged the relevant sacrifices of the victims' gift of themselves by acknowledging or honoring the fact, much less reciprocating in kind. As a gift, sacrifice *ought to* entail a return of the gift. But both Trump and the Aztec elites shirk their obligations. They are just "takers." Trump and the Aztec elites *owe* debts to those who have sacrificed or given up, but neither Trump nor the Aztec elites honor their social debts.

### Sacrificing for Individual Freedom

But despite shortcomings in grasping the moral gravity of appeals to sacrifice, what of the possible claims of anti-vaxxers that in resisting what they take to be oppressive federal health measures, consequent Red-COVID deaths would be "sacrifices" intentionally made for the preservation and increase of personal liberty? Kurt Andersen cites rightist Christian, Joy Pullmann's grotesque view that "the Christian faith makes it very clear that death, is now good for all who believe in Christ" (Andersen, 2022). Is that what informs anti-vaxxer refusal of life-preserving vaccines? Andersen suggests as much. Lamenting the tragic consequences of the right's politicizing of COVID to the point of tolerating the COVID deaths of its own constituents, Andersen says

whatever their reasons, millions of Americans have been persuaded by the right to promote death, and potentially to sacrifice themselves and others, ostensibly for the sake of personal liberty but definitely as a means of increasing their tribal solidarity and inclination to vote Republican. (Andersen, 2022)

The question, however, neither answered nor even addressed, remains: Whether vaccine resistance leading to Red-COVID deaths does, in fact, enhance personal liberty for Americans (Cohen, 2021)? Fear of "big government" motivated many "people on the right" to refuse vaccination. Does that also mean personal freedom would be enhanced by the resistance entailed in Red-COVID deaths? If so, where is the empirical evidence supporting vaccine-refusal? Where is the empirical evidence that the many anti-vaxxer Red-COVID deaths have increased or sustained personal freedom in the nation? Surely some indication of increased liberty should have been



evident by this time? One can only conclude that since partisan media are seldom shy about broadcasting their successes, the silence on this question is rather deafening.

Lacking empirical evidence that Red-COVID deaths enhance individual liberty, perhaps empirical tests can be made of other claims of the efficacy of Red-COVID deaths? A classic sacrificial religious text, the *Hindu Manusmriti* 5:39 hints at just such an area of testing. It reads, “Animals have been created by the Self-born God himself for the purpose of sacrifice: sacrifice is conducive to the well-being of all this world; hence killing at a sacrifice is no *killing* [emphasis added] at all” (Jha, 1920). Is it, then, empirically true that society at-large has benefitted from Red-COVID sacrificial deaths? In places plagued by overpopulation, Red-COVID sacrificial deaths might, for instance, produce Manusmriti-like social benefit. Texas’s Dan Patrick sees just such potential social betterment from the sacrificial COVID deaths of the elderly. “Those of us who are 70 plus, we’ll take care of ourselves. But don’t sacrifice the country.” Let the elderly hurry up and die as Red-COVID sacrifices, Patrick implies—for the sake of Manusmriti-like benefit of society at-large. While Twitter<sup>3</sup> reactions to Patrick’s calculations of social good would hardly seem to constitute rigorous empirical proof, a study of Patrick’s proposal at least tested whether it was widely persuasive. The Methods statement outlined an impressive procedure that began by “using Twitter’s advance search feature,” and concluded that 90% opposed Patrick’s view (Barrett et al., 2021, p. e202). Any doubts about the rigor of using Twitter material should be dismissed given the statement of the methods employed in reaching this result. The researchers “addressed Patrick’s statement ... posted the day he made it (March 23, 2020), included the name “Dan Patrick,” and were written in English.” Further, the “dataset includes 188 deidentified tweets ... each post’s retweet count between initial posting and data collection ... 1 month later (April 24, 2020).” Then a “thematic analysis, a qualitative method” identified “topics and ideas ... revealing overarching patterns ... using Nvivo.” This “involved three steps. First, we read the tweets to develop initial coding categories ... Second, we coded each tweet using these codes, along with others emerging ... Third, we examined the tweets associated with each code to identify justifications for positions of support versus opposition. Justifications were not mutually exclusive” (Barrett et al., 2021, p. e202).

## Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, there are many reasons to be skeptical about claims that Red-COVID deaths are sacrifices, given the different conditions under which people have died of the virus. Some deaths, better classified as “social murders,” have resulted from culpable neglect or even deliberate exploitation of victims by powerful elites. Other Red-COVID deaths look increasingly more like “suicides,” to the extent that individuals have been culpably negligent. Indeed, examining Red-COVID deaths carefully reveals that many Red-COVID anti-vaxxers seem to have acted by omission

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<sup>3</sup> Twitter® is a trademark of Twitter Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. По решению Роскомнадзора, социальная сеть Twitter полностью заблокирована в России как организация, занимающаяся распространением запрещенного контента.

and chosen—negatively, by their negligence—to hasten their own deaths. If true, responsibility for Red-COVID deaths shifts, correspondingly, from influencers like Trump to the vaccine-hesitant cohort itself—the “Red-COVID” dead (Leonhardt, 2022). This shift of responsibility contrasts to how early in the pandemic, elites may have been chiefly responsible for the “social murders,” described by Abbasi, McGibbon, and the others.

But, once the new mRNA vaccines came onto the scene in abundance, without cost to the citizens of the major industrial nations, responsibility for COVID deaths (plus transmissions and further mutations of novel strains of COVID) shifted to the popular level of vaccine resistance (Leonhardt, 2022). If Leonhardt is accurate about this self-inflicted aspect of Red-COVID deaths, these deaths look best to be classified as something—at least—approaching “suicides”? A measure of the intentional nature of these deaths would depend, say, upon how sincerely Red-COVID victims believed in the efficacy of their many so-called therapeutics—Ivermectin, Hydroxychloroquine Sulphate, household bleach, various botanicals, or lately, chug-a-lugging one’s own urine. And to the extent, recourse to these “remedies” signals vincible ignorance or culpable negligence, the resultant deaths tend to favor classification as suicide. Deep down inside, while Red-COVID anti-vaxxers know that drinking their own urine has symbolic value, equally well, they surely know it isn’t a therapeutic for anything. Yet, some did so anyway.

In other cases, both elites and commoners may share responsibility for Red-COVID deaths insofar as both elites and commoners conspire to further a common political strategy. But upon closer inspection, although superficially like sacrificial gifts, Red-COVID deaths fail as “sacrifices.” They both fail as gifts and for sanctifying public life. They are, thus, neither reciprocated, nor do they create obligations and social solidarity. Second, they also fail as sacrifices because they fail to “make anything sacred.” Red-COVID deaths are routinely denied or suppressed by those who should be doing just the opposite. Red-COVID deaths thus do not stimulate recognition, inspire memorialization, or contribute to any form of sanctification. The Red-COVID dead are “dumped” and forgotten like so much garbage. They are drowned in denial and purged from mindful recognition. Red-COVID deaths are then the antitheses of gifts and sacralizing processes. They are quintessentially profane.

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