

SACRIFICING THE POOR ON BEHALF OF THE RICH: AN EXAMINATION OF THE RITES OF SOCIAL WELFARE

PROFESSOR JONATHAN PARKER, PHD, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, BOURNEMOUTH UNIVERSITY, UK; UNIVERSITY OF STAVANGER, NORWAY



AIMS:WHAT WE WILL COVER...

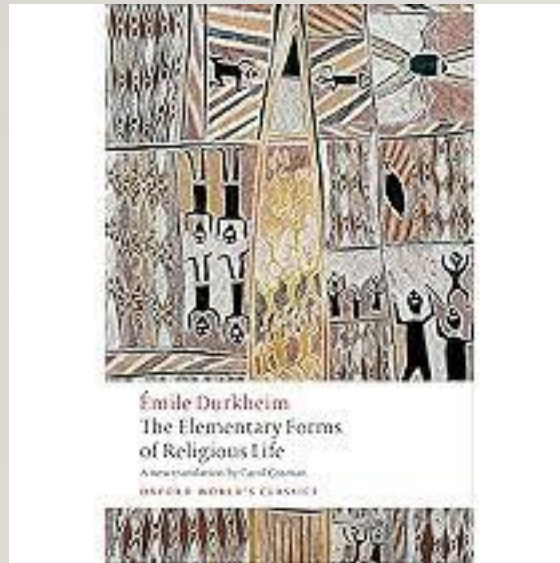
- This talk will consider the social and political rationale for austerity measures
- These will be analysed in terms of power relations and considered akin to a social ritual sacrifice of the poor
- We will introduce 20th Century sociologist Emile Durkheim's concept of piacularism and anthropologist/philosopher René Girard's concept of mimetic violence and the Scapegoat as ways of understanding



PIACULAR RITES

Emile Durkheim 1858-1917 was an early French sociologist. He was a 'functionalist' looking at the ways societies organised and behaved in order to maintain and support themselves.

- Political theology of binary distinctions that stigmatise, set apart and blame
- Requires blame, scapegoating and sacrificing of the blameworthy



PIACULAR RITES

His work on early religious life drew on anthropological studies of Australian first peoples.

- Durkheim *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*
 - Coping ceremonies
 - Piacular – *piaculum*, expiation or transformatory sacrifice
 - Piacular rite – expression of community solidarity (*Volksgemeinschaft? Us & Them?*)
 - Deep sadness – anger – ritualised violence against self OR other prescribed members of group
 - Duty rather than affective expression
- Collective expression intensifies grief and allows transformation through mourning the feared other
- This can also be applied to the ‘demonised other’ in poverty/on benefits

FROM DURKHEIM'S SOCIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY...

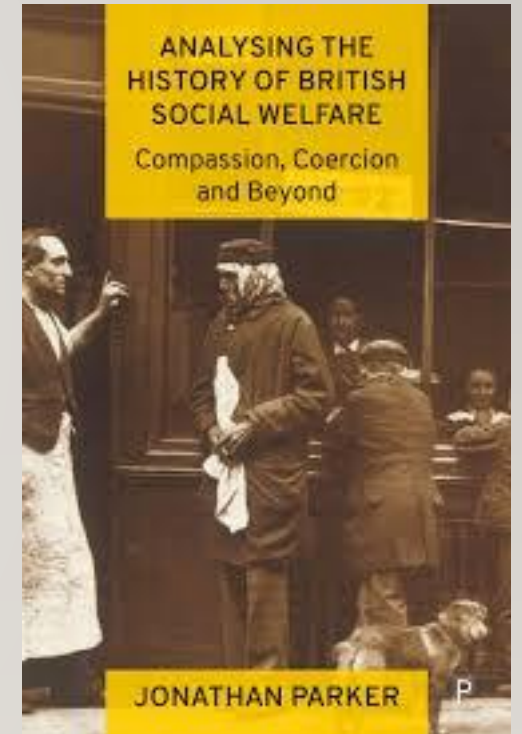
'The victim immolated in expiatory sacrifices is laden with impurity, since it has been heaped with sins that must be redeemed. Yet once it has been slaughtered, its flesh and blood are put to the most pious uses.'

(Durkheim, p. 306)

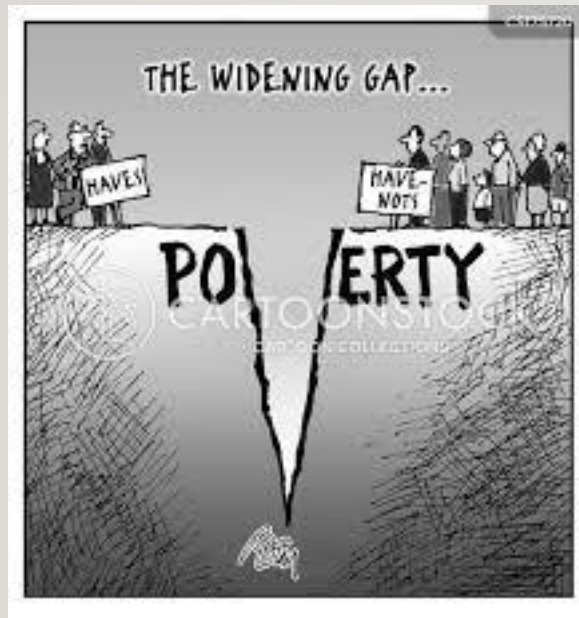


APPLIED TO THOSE IN POVERTY...

‘the expression of shame, unworthiness and gratefulness for being in receipt of welfare benefits is not simply an individual act signalling a perceived failing, but it is required by those in society not in receipt of benefits so that the causes and results of poverty are assuaged and not visited upon the non-recipient other. This provides a powerful socio-political justification for the introduction of austerity measures which generally have a greater impact on minority groups, women, people in poverty, on low incomes, or in receipt of benefits than on those who impose the measures. In this way, the ‘poor’ are sacrificed for the benefit of the ‘rich’, or at least those who align themselves with vested interests and the status quo.’ (Parker, 2023, p. 120)



THINK...



- Scroungers
- Benefit cheats
- Skivers
- Chavs
- Undeserving
- Workshy, and so on

SOME EXAMPLES



CIVIL LIBERTIES AND BENEFITS CLAIMS – SACRIFICES!



FROM DURKHEIM'S SOCIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY...

When society encounters circumstances that sadden, anguish, or irritate it, it exerts pressures on its members to bear witness to their sadness, their anguish, or their anger through expressive acts. It imposes in them something like a duty to weep, wail, and inflict wounds on themselves or others, for these collective demonstrations and the moral communion they express restore to the group the energy that events were threatening to take away, and this enables the group to recover itself. (Durkheim, p. 307)

APPLIED TO THOSE IN POVERTY...

‘The outrage against ‘benefit cheats’ and ‘scroungers’ was supplemented, during the COVID- 19 pandemic, by a concern to admonish those who break the rules on social distancing or staying at home, considering the individual to be the problem and not considering the inequality gulf and structural problems such policies expose... However, the process of anger and outrage can also be understood to address the situation in which the sacrifice of the welfare recipient allows wider society to assume a position of moral uprightness, to be part of the nonstigmatised, those ‘hard- working families’ as opposed to the undefined others in government pronouncements ... and to maintain a sense of collectivity.’ (Parker, 2023, p. 121).

GIRARD – MIMETIC VIOLENCE AND THE SCAPEGOAT


Girard believed that human actions result from mimesis (copying), and we copy the desires of others which leads us into conflict and violence.



- Unification in punishing an agreed scapegoat – communal participation and society feeling better about itself by shunning/sacrificing the ‘other’
- For Girard the coming together against the scapegoat is unconscious
 - Scapegoat is evil and monstrous not innocent as in Leviticus; scapegoat must be punished to ensure community survival
 1. Codification of central prohibitions
 2. Creation of rituals that enact redemptive violence/patterns of conformity
 3. Killing of scapegoat – not murder but salvation

THE CURRENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HUE

- Economic deregulation
 - Atomisation
 - Political and democratic futility
- +
- Growth in state apparatus
 - Regulation of the person
 - Surveillance technologies



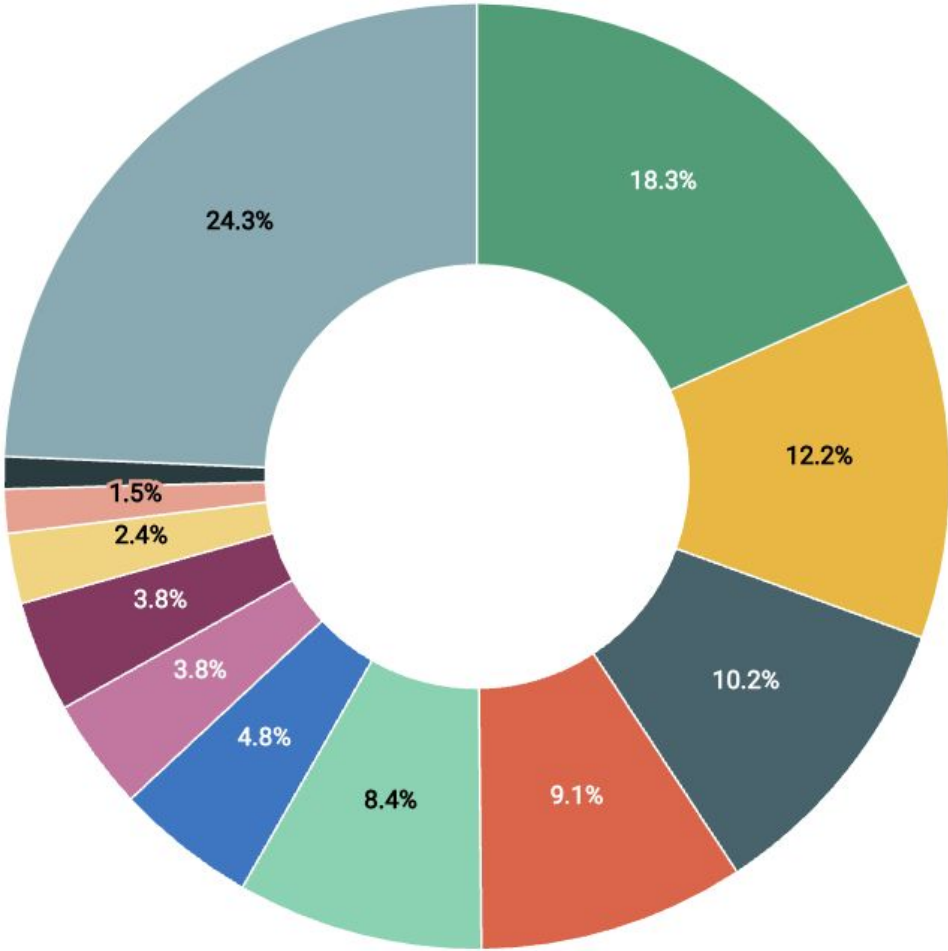
Brexit
Trumpism/Johnsonism
COVID-19 pandemic
Fuel poverty/food poverty
Trussonomics
'Get Britain Working Again' group

Reporting illegalities and benefit
fraud; demonising the poor

Components of UK government spending in 2022–23

Total managed expenditure in 2022–23: £1,155 billion

- Health
- Social security (pensioners)
- Social security (working-age & children)
- Education
- Net debt interest
- Defence
- Transport
- Public order & safety
- Long-term care
- Housing & community amenities
- Overseas aid
- Other



[Download the data](#)



Spending by function, as a percentage of total managed expenditure and in £ billion (2022–23 prices)

		1978–79	1996–97	2007–08	2022–23
Health	% of TME	9.4	13	16	18.3
	£ billion	44.4	74.7	141.6	211.6
Education	% of TME	11.9	11.5	12.5	9.1
	£ billion	55.9	66	110.2	105.5
Defence	% of TME	9.6	6.7	5.3	4.8
	£ billion	45.4	38.6	47.2	55.5
Social security (pensioners)	% of TME	12	14.7	14.9	12.2
	£ billion	56.7	84.5	131.8	141.2
Social security (working-age and children)	% of TME	8.5	14.2	13.1	10.2
	£ billion	40.3	81.6	115.5	117.5
Public order and safety	% of TME	3.3	5	5	3.8
	£ billion	15.4	28.6	44.4	43.9
Transport	% of TME	3.6	2.9	3.3	3.8
	£ billion	16.9	16.6	28.9	43.6
Housing and community amenities	% of TME	6.3	1.7	2.1	1.5
	£ billion	29.9	10	18.2	17.8
Overseas aid	% of TME	1	0.6	0.8	1.1
	£ billion	4.9	3.6	7.4	12.6
Long-term care	% of TME		2.3	2.9	2.4
	£ billion		13.2	25.7	28.1
Net debt interest	% of TME	8.4	7.4	4.5	8.4
	£ billion	39.4	42.3	40.1	97.2

HISTORICAL SACRIFICING OF THE POOR

- Demonisation, ritualised sacrifice of poor has happened throughout history
 - Humiliation, whipping and branding under the Poor Law
 - Community expiation through ostracizing the sinful poor
 - Binary distinctions
 - deserving/undeserving, or
 - in William Temple's words 'the haves and the have nots'
 - Enactments of power, privilege and righteousness



AUSTERITY AND WELFARE REFORM POST-2008

- Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance, 0.5% cap on deficits in Eurozone; followed closely in UK
- Strict conditions on borrowing; draconian public spending cuts, restructuring of public sector, increased privatisation and tax reform
- Failure of capitalism (Jordan and Drakeford)
- Political strategy of austerity as a hegemonic project (Bhattacharyya)
 - Thatcher's cuts and reforms were retrenchment
 - Austerity needed no consent



THE RESULTS OF SACRIFICE

- Commonsense or logical strategy?
- Differential effects and experiences
- Sacrificing the poor for the sake of business continuity and economic productivity
- Some more valuable than others
- Impact of cuts AND impact on policy shifts
 - ‘dismantling by arena shifting’
- Erosion of public welfare through uncritical use of social income bonds

HILL AND IRVING (2020)

- Reduction of citizen entitlements
- Growth in material inequalities
- Changes narratives on collective responsibility
- The poor and the needy are costly
- Social divisions represent a problem
- Welfare chauvinism
- Payments to business during COVID-19 belies the claim of unaffordability
- The sinful poor must be punished some more!

SOME MORE EXAMPLES



DEATHS WAITING FOR PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENTS (PIPS)

In the context of getting people back to work and cutting the welfare bill

- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) indicated that between April 2013 and April 2018 there were over 3.6 million applications made; of these:
 - 4,760 claimants died between their case being referred to, and returned from, an assessment provider;
 - 73,800 claimants died within 6 months of their claim being registered; and
 - 17,070 claimants died after registering but prior to the DWP making a decision on their claim.
-
- <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2018-12-19/203812/>

DWP

Department for
Work and Pensions

COVID-19, LOCKDOWN AND SACRIFICING THE POOR AND 'WORTHLESS'



-
- Lockdown restrictions
 - Policing the public; differential and sometimes heavy-handed
 - ‘All in it together’???
 - Domestic abuse and violence
 - Space and place
 - Education and resources
 - Food banks and school meals

SUPPORTING UKRAINE ...

- ...But at the expense of international aid
- Although releasing oligarch frozen assets may be restoring balance





Sacrificing the poor for the rich: 'Piacular' austerity and the need for welfare reform

Social security costs for Great Britain in 2024–25 are forecast to be around **£303.3 billion**. This represents about 10.8 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), or nearly one quarter of the total government spend. It is not surprising, therefore, that the **government** is intent on reducing the bill.

by Jonathan Parker
31st March 2025

CONCLUSIONS

- Legitimated ritual sacrifice of those in need (underserving) for the collective good of the deserving
- Collective responsibility as a functionalist construct in society



*We need:
To think critically,
To understand our tendency to 'us
and them' thinking,
To stand with and alongside the
sacrificial victims.*

**ANY QUESTIONS?
& THANK YOU**

