

Revitalization as Ritual: Sacrifice, Cities, and Schooling

Nicholas Eastman

Ripon College

When the Stranger says: ‘What is the meaning of this city? Do you huddle close together because you love each other?’ What will you answer? ‘We all dwell together

To make money from each other?’ or ‘This is a community?’

- T.S. Eliot, “Choruses from ‘The Rock’”¹

A growing body of scholarship challenges the sharp divide between the secular and the religious on matters of political economy in Western societies. For some, the challenge issues from Christian commitments and seeks to expose the falseness of secular liberalism’s neutral public sphere or its rejection of metaphysics in favor of positivism or both.² Others have exposed secularism’s religiosity without foregrounding a specifically Christian worldview.³ This latter set of critiques moves beyond Weberian mode of analysis that positions capitalism and Protestant Christianity as co-emergent and mutually reinforcing structures of belief and social control.⁴ Instead, in various ways, they examine capitalism as a religion unto itself, a faith complete with a narrative construction of the human person and his duties toward the higher power in which he lives and moves and has his being. Under capitalism, the human person is reconstituted as a unit of capital formed in the image and likeness of the creator. As Walter Benjamin puts it, “Therein lies the historical enormity of capitalism: religion is no longer the reform of being, but rather its obliteration.”⁵ Capitalism’s reconstitution of being reaches beyond the human person and into the political and geographic

landscape. In what follows, I argue for understanding urban revitalization as a form of ritualistic sacrifice. I illustrate the religious dimensions of revitalization by focusing on St. Louis, Missouri, and highlight public schooling as one of several sacrificial victims offered up to capital.⁶

Sacrifice

Understanding sacrifice as practiced within the religion of capitalism requires some attention to the concept of sacrifice more generally. The word comes from the Latin for “to make” (*facere*) and “holy” (*sacer*). To sacrifice is, therefore, a process for transforming the profane into the sacred. In this proper sense, the phrase “religious sacrifice” is redundant since by definition a sacrifice is oriented toward the divine. Yet a modern and thoroughly secular understanding of the term has emerged to describe acts of giving up something for a greater good or cause. Moshe Halbertal describes these dual meanings as “sacrifice to” and “sacrifice for.” Sacrificing *to* pertains largely to religion and typically involves gifts or offerings directed to the divine for purposes of securing atonement through ritual practice.⁷ Sacrificing *for* involves the political and moral spheres, which can be and often are entirely secular. Sacrificing *to* can be the conduct of individuals, but the ritual action is usually for the sake of the whole, as, for example, when a substitutionary victim is ritualistically offered on behalf of the community. Sacrificing *for* deals primarily with self-transcendence, as when the individual gives of himself or gives himself entirely for the good of the other, wherein the other could be anything from an individual to a cause to a country.⁸

Wendy Brown draws on Halbertal’s distinction in her analysis of neoliberal austerity, but she complicates his dichotomy by describing the ways the neoliberal subject is called to sacrifice *to and for* capitalism. “Shared sacrifice,” Brown argues, “is on the lips of every politician and manager engaged in cuts, lay-offs, belt-tightening, revocation of entitlements, and every state imposing austerity measures.”⁹ Such talk seems at first firmly in the realm of morals and politics and is, therefore, a sacrifice *for*. Responsibilization requires that the individual either accept a degraded quality of life and diminishing economic prospects into the future or hustle for higher ground in an economy in which most are underwater. In either case, the individual sacrifices herself for the

system because she is called to self-transcendence either through resignation or entrepreneurial discipline. Yet the rhetoric of shared sacrifice and responsabilization refuses to remain in the domain of the secular. Brown recognizes that, through attempts at economic restoration through shared sacrifice, we “make an offering to a supreme power on which we are radically dependent, but that owes us nothing. We are called to offer life to propitiate and regenerate its life-giving capacities ... but without any guarantee that the benefits of this sacrifice will redound to us.”¹⁰ Halbertal’s concept of sacrifice for requires a higher good or cause. His primary interest in this domain is war as an arena of such spectacular and brutal violence that it demands acts of self-transcendence instead of self-interest. As such, the benefits redound to the individual no matter the outcome. One remains a fallen hero regardless of the war’s outcome.¹¹ This is not the case with sacrificing for the economy, wherein one is made into an offering without attendant dignity or memorializing.

Brown’s treatment of neoliberal sacrifice includes some attention to policy and structural trends, but she keeps the focus primarily on the formation of the neoliberal subject. The immense and impersonal economy reaches down to the individual and forms him as a subject and sacrificial object. He becomes an oblate, one who empties himself so that he may become a vessel for the higher power. Brown claims, “The performance of sacrifice rather than satisfaction, of oblation rather than interest—these suggest traces of theological-political sovereignty in the subject, not only in the state.”¹² Given Foucault’s influence on Brown and her political commitments to forming democratic citizens, her focus on the individual as neoliberalism’s sacrificial citizen is both expected and insightful. However, her analysis is too myopic. Her close examination of the sacrificed individual causes the broader neoliberal political body to remain a blurred outline on the periphery. Ironically, she criticizes Foucault for this very problem:

When Foucault speaks of the governing of the modern subject, he speaks in an oddly confining liberal idiom. Governing emanates from the state and always works on the population and the subject—sometimes on the population through the subject,

sometimes on the subject through managing the population. Whether Foucault is discussing biopower or discipline, law or sovereign edict, subjects are governed or resist being governed *as* individual subjects or as disciplinary bodies. There is no *political* body, no demos acting in concert (even episodically) or expressing aspirational sovereignty.¹³

Like Foucault, Brown is stuck in a “confining liberal idiom” when discussing neoliberal sacrifice. Her attention is only on neoliberalism as a theologically inflected abstract force that works through, with, and in the state to form entrepreneurial subjects and sacrificial offerings. Her analysis of neoliberal sacrifice also lacks a political body acting in concert and expressing sovereignty. The cause for this lacuna is that, for Brown, the *political* describes the struggle of the demos to secure power in such a way as to allow the individual to live as a free citizen. She laments neoliberalism’s economization of the political. While it is true that neoliberalism colonizes everyday life through market logic and recasts political matters in supposedly value neutral market terms, it does both through political bodies acting in concert and exercising sovereignty. Put more simply, the economization of the political does not make it less political. Brown surely knows this, but it escapes her analysis of neoliberal sacrifice.

The reason why the political bodies behind neoliberal sacrifice are so important is that those bodies are what make neoliberalism a hierarchical, organized, and ritualistic religion. In this sense, Brown’s analysis remains in a distinctly Protestant register. The theological dimensions of neoliberalism are the unmediated relationship between the creator capital and its created subjects. She points to the politicians and managers who sermonize on shared sacrifice, but these are capitalism’s bureaucratic pastors, not its sacrificing priests. To make sense of this distinction, I return to Halbertal and the importance of ritualistic sacrifice.

Revitalization as Ritual

A sacrifice is seemingly an *aneconomical* gift. That is, the sacrificed gift is a good, but the sacrificial act is not an economic action among parties in an

economic relationship. What is sacrificed is given freely and is typically used up through the sacrificial act. A worthy sacrifice involves something of value, but it is not a bribe since bribes only work when the parties are equals or near equals. I cannot, for example, bribe a billionaire with money because the billionaire has a superabundance of what I would offer and, therefore, has little interest in my bribe. I could, however, bribe someone who is slightly wealthier, as wealthy, or less wealthy than I since the amount of money might be of interest to those parties. With God as the source of all creation, a material sacrifice would not be of material interest. A sacrifice is, thus, rendered to the divine not as a bribe but as the return of the good to its source for the purpose of establishing a gift cycle.¹⁴ The gift is given, even recycled in a sense, in recognition that the good's existence is possible only through the beneficence of the creator. It is, thus, "a token of submission and gratitude" given in the hope that acknowledging the divine source will permit further abundance and use of such gifts.¹⁵ The desire to enjoy the fruits of God's favor could smuggle the economic back into the relationship. The Judeo-Christian tradition maintains, however, that the fruits of divine favor are not necessarily economic—they could for instance be growth in virtue—nor are they necessarily for enjoyment in this life. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that those who sacrifice to God have interest of some sort in obtaining God's blessing.

One of Halbertal's key insights into "sacrifice to" is his distinction between a gift and an offering. God's infinite superiority means He is not bound by the obligation to receive a material gift of which He has no need. Halbertal argues that *to give* means the transfer of goods takes place immediately, whereas *to offer* leaves open the possibility of divine refusal.¹⁶ Sacrifices are, therefore, offered to God in the hope that He will accept and in fear of His rejection. Great care is taken to avoid such rejection and its traumatic and fatal consequences. For Halbertal, ritual arises as a means of protecting the circumstances of the offering so as to be reasonably sure of its outcome. Ritual is a protocol "analogous to legal systems as a whole insofar as they impose order while confronting the unreliability and capriciousness of emotional responses. It makes cooperation and division of labor independent of the chaos of personal encounter; it is

therefore an attempt to project a stable future.”¹⁷ This presents a significant problem for Brown’s analysis of neoliberal sacrifice, heavily focused as it is on the individual. Absent is a clear discussion of the rituals that develop within and are carried out by political bodies serving as neoliberalism’s priestly caste attempting to secure the favor and blessings of the capricious, jealous, and vengeful god of neoliberalism.

The subjectivity of the neoliberal citizen is not the only or even primary site of neoliberal colonization, nor is the individual the only or primary sacrificial offering. Space itself is offered up as sacrifice. This is best illustrated by neoliberal urban revitalization. *Revitalization* literally means a process for bringing something back to life. Material space is bundled with an array of gifts such as tax abatements, tax increment financing (TIF), historic preservation credits, and many others and laid before the god of capital as an offering with the hope that the global capitalist economy, the very well-spring of life, will look kindly on it. Urban neoliberalization has dramatically increased spatial competition as municipalities and metropolitan areas market themselves as attractive sites for businesses to invest. The interests of homegrown business and local communities are subordinated to state, national, and global interests in much the same way Brown describes the subordination of individual political and economic interests to the deity of global capital. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell describe the tragic futility of this process this way:

In selling themselves, cities are therefore actively facilitating and subsidizing the very geographic mobility that first rendered them vulnerable ... Thus, elite partnerships, mega-events, and corporate seduction become, in effect, both the only games in town *and* the basis of urban subjugation. The public subsidy of zero-sum competition at the interurban scale rests on the economic fallacy that every city can win, shored up by the political reality that no city can afford principled noninvolvement in the game.¹⁸

The neoliberal city is, like the individual, both an entrepreneur and a sacrificial oblate. More precisely, entrepreneurial public officials function as

a priestly caste that offers local capital in the form of public goods and land to the god of global capital to earn its favor and so establish a gift cycle that maintains or augments existing levels of local prosperity. The increasing mobility of capital results in an increasingly unstable economy. Complex revitalization rituals arise in order to secure stability and safeguard global capital's favor into the foreseeable future.

Tax abatements and TIF are two offerings made in the present but extending into the future. An abatement is a reduction or elimination of a tax obligation for a specified amount of time. TIF occurs when a city issues debt in the form of bonds (long-term) and notes (short-term) for redevelopment projects within a designated area. The bond money is used to subsidize upfront infrastructure, land acquisition, and construction costs. The property tax rate is frozen for a given period of time (usually around 20 years), and a portion of the increased tax revenues resulting from the revitalization is used to pay off the long-term debt. In essence, the city borrows from the future tax revenues to pay for the upfront costs of redevelopment. TIF is more advantageous to the developer than abatements because the benefits of the subsidy are realized immediately, whereas the developer must wait the length of the abatement to realize the full value of that incentive. Finance capital also prefers TIF to tax abatement because TIF bonds can be bundled and sold on financial markets.

TIF became a popular way of addressing urban "blight," an ill-defined and often abused term that could be applied to any other parcel or structure presenting "a menace to public health, safety, morals, or welfare."¹⁹ In theory, TIF could spur economic revitalization in struggling neighborhoods by incentivizing developers who would otherwise find the initial costs too high and the likely return on investment too low. City officials are free to authorize TIF only when proposals satisfy a "but for" clause. That is, the revitalization would not occur but for the use of TIF. The political issues of public entities assuming the risk of revitalization by covering upfront costs paid for by as yet unrealized future incremental growth or of institutions like public schools shouldering the burden through decades of frozen property tax rates would be prominent enough even if TIF functioned in the best-case scenario. The actual effects of

TIF use and abuse are far worse.

Sacrificing St. Louis Public Schools

St. Louis, Missouri, provides a compelling illustration of the abuse of TIF and its relation to neoliberal urban revitalization. Marred by decades of population and economic decline, extraordinarily intense zero-sum economic competition between urban and suburban governments, and severe racial segregation, St. Louis is a place where the common problems of urban neoliberalization manifest in uniquely destructive ways. Deindustrialization, racialized suburbanization, high crime rates, and regional depopulation have taken a city of 850,000 people in 1960 to just over 300,000 today. From the 1970s onward, the city aggressively used neoliberalism's various tax incentives to spur revitalization efforts. Officials blanketed the city with enough abatements that, by the late 1990s, over half of the city was either abated property or tax-exempt public and charitable property. As a result, only 7 percent of the city's budget came from property taxes.²⁰

By the close of the twentieth century, St. Louis's public school system was broke and in the process of dismantling its desegregation busing program—the largest and longest running in the nation's history—and replacing it with a charter-driven school choice program that would further erode St. Louis Public Schools' financial viability. The grave financial position of the public schools was no surprise. A consultant's report informed the school board in the early 1980s that 90 percent of new residential construction and all new commercial and industrial construction projects would receive tax abatements.²¹ In 1982, Missouri passed its first TIF legislation.²² The fifteen to twenty-five year duration of abatements and TIFs meant that city officials had pummeled the schools with wave after wave of "revitalization." Abatements in the early 1970s were converted to TIF projects in the 1980s and then reconverted to one or the other at the close of the century.

Colin Gordon aptly describes the process this way: "As the City sacrificed more and more of its tax base at the altar of economic development, it could not sustain the advantage granted by the first generation of incentive programs."²³

The tragedy of this ritualistic sacrifice is heightened when “the blighted property was an old shopping mall and the abated property a newer mall.”²⁴

While city officials are supposed to reserve TIF for spaces that present a clear threat to public well-being and projects that would not occur “but for” the tax incentive, Missouri structured its TIF legislation as a naked upward wealth redistribution mechanism. It is one of only ten states that allow TIF to capture sales tax in addition to property tax revenues. TIF is, therefore, most advantageous for corporate commercial interests rather than residential projects. Without enforcement of the “but for” clause, TIFs have clustered in already heavily gentrified and commercialized areas instead of spurring development in the parts of the city that need it most. Commercial projects that are already projecting profits are made more lucrative as the city subsidizes their upfront costs. From 2000 to 2014, the city offered over \$700 million in tax incentives, one-fifth of the local contribution to public schools. Such gifts were not evenly distributed. Residential tax abatements flowed to neighborhoods with already strong housing markets, and TIF, which accounted for over \$400 million of the total amount, remained concentrated in St. Louis’s heavily gentrified and commercialized central corridor. The result is that some already wealthy neighborhoods captured around two-thirds of all incentives.²⁵ It is not just the local wealthy 1 percent who is on public assistance. Corporate recipients of TIF in St. Louis include Mercedes-Benz, Whole Foods, IKEA, and a number of luxury condo developers. A 2016 report found “there is little evidence of significance [*sic*] spillover effects around incentivized parcels after the use of incentives. Across most project types, there is no significant change in the trajectory of assessed value, permit investments or jobs.”²⁶ In sum, St. Louis’s neoliberal tax incentives do not spur development, and whatever economic benefits they contain are enjoyed almost exclusively by those who do not need them. The idea that any of the above corporations would build amidst blight or would not have been able to risk investment “but for” the tax subsidy is absurd. Like the God Halbertal describes, they have no need of the gift of capital because they already have it in superabundance. They are the source of tax revenue, so neoliberalism’s priests humbly and ritualistically offer public goods to them in

the hopes that they look kindly on the offering.

Recall that sacrificing to is primarily a communal act, while acts of sacrifice for are the purview of the individual. An individual priest may make an offering to God, but he does so as a member of a priestly caste and on behalf of the people. In St. Louis, that priestly caste is made up of an array of public officials including the mayor, the Board of Aldermen, tax lawyers, and various bodies facilitating public-private partnerships. I wish to focus on the aldermen since they are instrumental in securing TIF and abatements in their respective wards and because their long-established culture of “aldermanic courtesy” has guaranteed that “blight” and “but for” would present no obstacles.

Alderman Joe Roddy is a particularly important example of the priesthood of neoliberal revitalization. Roddy chairs the Housing, Urban Development and Zoning Committee. His ward covers much of the heavily gentrified Central West End and is the site of the TIF offerings to corporate capital previously described. One of Roddy’s public presentations perfectly captures the politics of neoliberal urban revitalization. While arguing in favor of a luxury condo development that would receive 95 percent abatement for ten years with 50 percent abatement for another five, Roddy outlined a hierarchical taxonomy of revitalization’s priorities on a slide titled “How the City Makes & Spends Money.” At the top of the hierarchy are “Businesses” because of sales, real estate, and earnings taxes, all of which are included in TIF. Second among those listed under “Makes Money” are “Residents” with the explanation that they “Pay high earnings tax with no children in the Public School.”²⁷ Of the undesirable categories Roddy’s slide classifies under “Spends Money,” the best of the worst is “Retired Fixed Income Residents with no children in the Public School,” and the worst of the worst is “Criminals & Residents with children in Public School.” Roddy has elsewhere conveyed his disdain for the parents of public school children in saying of his ward, “Residents in the central corridor often don’t have kids, and if they do, their kids go to private schools ... Basically, all the rest of society works to support families who have children in the school system. Children are very expensive.”²⁸ This lowest class of people are ideal sacrificial offerings to the gods of capital. Through their participation as

a sacrificial offering, their unworthiness is made worthy.

I have attempted to show how Brown's analysis fails to capture the complex ways neoliberalism as a religion depends on sacrificing to an omnipotent god that has no need of the offering. Moreover, she misses the necessity of a priestly caste acting as intermediaries between the city and its god. Urban neoliberalization is not a chaotic process of dissociated individuals offering themselves as sacrifices for the economy. Nor are its rituals and power structures reducible to Foucauldian governmentality in which the state is the source and summit of ideology. Rather, neoliberalism is a theo-political faith that forms individuals *and* a people through ritualistic sacrifice. Such sacrificial rituals require a priestly caste with specialized knowledge and the authority to act on behalf of the city when encountering the deity. The deity of capitalism does not need the offerings placed before it, but it does need a worshipping people organized and disciplined through institutions and political bodies. It is those political bodies that constitute actually existing neoliberalism, not merely individuals existing at various economic strata presenting themselves before the abstract force of capitalism as either its beneficiary or victim.

1 T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 160.

2 See, for example, William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2002); Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

3 See William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings*

by *the Major Thinkers*, ed. Ernesto Mendieta (New York: Routledge, 2005), 259–61.

4 See Benjamin, “Capitalism as Religion,” 261.

5 Benjamin, 260.

6 Schools’ active participation in neoliberal sacrifice as the formators of human capital is an important topic but one that lies outside the scope of this paper. Instead, I wish to focus on the ways in which schools are taken up into the larger theological, economic, and political forces of capitalism. My subtitle is, thus, both a description of the movements of the argument and a hierarchy of concepts.

7 Halbertal situates his analysis within the Judeo-Christian tradition. I follow his lead not because other traditions of sacrifice are entirely irrelevant but because the analysis of capitalism as a Western religion that spread across the globe is strengthened by remaining within the register of Judeo-Christian conceptions of sacrifice and God.

8 Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 2–4.

9 Wendy Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics,” *Constellations* 23, no. 1 (2016): 11.

10 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015), 216.

11 Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 68–69.

12 Brown, “Sacrificial Citizenship,” 11.

13 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 73.

14 Halbertal, *On Sacrifice*, 11–12.

15 Halbertal, 13.

16 Halbertal, 10.

17 Halbertal, 15.

18 Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, "Neoliberalizing Space," in *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North America and Western Europe*, ed. Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 46.

19 Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 181.

20 Gordon, 216.

21 Gordon, 216.

22 Gordon, 181.

23 Gordon, 216.

24 Gordon, 219.

25 "City of St. Louis, Missouri: City Economic Development Incentives" (Philadelphia: The PFM Group, May 5, 2016), 2–4, https://nextstl.com/wp-content/uploads/St.-Louis-City-Economic-Incentives-Report_FINAL-May-2016-1.pdf.

26 "City of St. Louis, Missouri," 5.

27 Danny Wicentowski, "St. Louis Alderman Links Criminals and Public School Families in Slideshow Touting CWE Apartment Project," *Riverfront Times*, December 14, 2016, <http://www.riverfronttimes.com/news-blog/2016/12/14/st-louis-alderman-links-criminals-and-public-school-families-in-slideshow-touting-cwe-apartment-project>.

28 Jeannette Cooperman, "How Owners of a \$600,000 House Get Away

with Paying \$400 in Property Taxes,” *St. Louis Magazine*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.stlmag.com/news/spotblight/>.