

Politics as Sacralization

Política como sacralización

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Received: August 26th, 2021

Accepted: May 19th, 2023

ABSTRACT

This article aims to demonstrate that the dimension of the sacred is constitutive of politics. First, abandoning any substantive view of the sacred that confines it to the exclusive jurisdiction of religions is necessary, reaching a broad and non-essentialist conception based on developments from Durkheim to Bataille. In this way, the sacred can be considered the center and common foundation of all society, present both in its glorious manifestations and its excremental ones, which will be referred to as pure and impure heterogeneous elements, respectively. Furthermore, contrary to those who speak of the “sacralization of politics” —a formula that implies an external relationship between politics and sacredness and a rejection of their contamination— this article proposes to understand politics as the practice of sacralization —of people and processes, of events, objects, and places— which aims to construct objectivity, that is, to stabilize the principal meanings within a social set.

Keywords: politics; sacred; sacralization practices; heterogeneity; Bataille.

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo mostrar que la dimensión de lo sagrado es constitutiva de la política. En primer lugar, es preciso abandonar toda mirada sustantiva de lo sagrado que lo sitúe como jurisdicción exclusiva de las religiones, para así llegar a una concepción amplia y no esencialista a partir de los desarrollos desde Durkheim hasta Bataille. De este modo, lo sagrado puede pensarse simultáneamente como centro y fondo común de toda sociedad, presente tanto en sus manifestaciones gloriosas como en aquellas excrementales, que serán nombradas como heterogéneas puras e impuras respectivamente. A continuación, en contra de quienes hablan de la “sacralización de la política”, fórmula que supone una relación de exterioridad entre política y sacralidad y un rechazo de su contaminación, en este artículo se propone entender por política la práctica de sacralización —de personas y de procesos, de acontecimientos, objetos y lugares— que apunta a construir una objetividad, es decir, a estabilizar de los principales sentidos al interior de un conjunto social.

Palabras clave: política; sagrado; prácticas de sacralización; heterogeneidad; Bataille.

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Introduction

This article aims to conceptualize politics as a *discursive practice*¹ that operates through the sacralization of people, processes, events, objects, and places, thereby constructing objectivity within a given social set. To achieve this objective, we will start with the theories of Durkheim and Bataille, from which we will recover a broad and non-essentialist conceptualization of the sacred. Thus, this article adopts an understanding of the sacred that does not confine it to religions, the institutions that strive for its monopoly, but can identify it in ordinarily non-religious places, such as political activism, large corporations, show business, or rulings issued by the judicial power. To this end, we will discuss the theoretical perspective of the “sacralization of politics” in the writings of authors like Emilio Gentile, showing that it constructs its object based on the assumption that there is an external relationship between politics and sacredness. On the contrary, this article proposes to understand politics as the practice of sacralization aimed at constructing objectivity, that is, a stabilization of the meanings that prevail within a society, understanding sacralization as the operation intrinsic to every social set to make its central meanings dominant and its peripheral or accursed meanings, which constitute its reverse, marginalized. Along the way, perspectives that reduce politics to the administration or the struggle for state power are set aside, and the formula “sacralization of politics” is proposed to be replaced with *politics as sacralization*, showing that the terms “politics” and “sacralization” mutually refer to each other.

This article falls among those works that consider the category of the sacred as fundamental for the analysis of the social. Initially, it is worth mentioning the developments of Jeffrey Alexander, who argues for the validity of the binary sacred/profane in modern societies (Alexander, 2020). According to this author, this can be glimpsed in civil narratives about good and evil (Alexander, 2006), the discourses of political figures in the face of terrorist attacks (Alexander, 2011), but also in the fascination with *celebrities* (Alexander, 2010). Another relevant author in the context of this article is Michael Taussig (2015), who argues that every state has a spiritual foundation and an ontological magical work, that is, the creator of reality, not only through its legal institutions —as we usually point out from social sciences— but also and especially insofar as it appeals to the cult of spirits (something typical of popular religiosity) to legitimize its existence.

On the other hand, the debates around the presence of the sacred in modernity within anthropology and sociology of religion in recent decades indicate a reconfiguration of the

¹ The concept of *discourse* will be used in a broad sense, such that it encompasses not only utterances and texts, speech and writing, but all processes of meaning production (which contribute to the constitution of the social). This, of course, implies that practices are considered as producers of meaning because they are part of a significant field; hence, they are always discursive practices. Laclau (1990, 2004) argued that it is within this framework, which involves both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, that thoughts, utterances, and actions should be inscribed.

sacred rather than its progressive disappearance, as the secularization thesis claimed.² In this line, among others, the works of Cristián Parker Gumucio (1993, 2019), Mallimaci and Giménez (2007), and especially those of Eloísa Martín, which account for sacralization practices around popular music singers (Martín, 2007) and soccer idols (Martín, 2017), can be mentioned. Finally, the research of Tonkonoff is central to the overall argument of this paper, as it asserts that the institution and reproduction of dominant meanings and fundamental prohibitions is a political activity and that this “can well be designated as a practice of sacralization” (Tonkonoff, 2019: 142). This conception of politics as sacralization —dispersed in Tonkonoff and focused on prohibitions, transgressions, and punishments— is what this article seeks to develop, in complement with other approaches and debates that may prove valuable in expanding and strengthening its fundamental premises.

Of course, all of this can be traced back, at least, to the beginning of the last century when Émile Durkheim shifted the focus from religion to the category of the sacred. It should be remembered that, for this author, the distinctive feature of religion is the division into two spheres —one profane and one sacred— that are most sharply separated and whose difference is not of degree but of nature. Every religion, he notes, centers on a set of sacred elements protected by prohibitions and simultaneously regulates contact with these forces through rituals. Between these two spheres, there exists an absolute heterogeneity to the point that, for Durkheim, “in the history of human thought, there is no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated, so radically opposed to each other” (Durkheim, 2007: 34). Thus, no matter how important the role recognized to religions as social institutions is, one must not forget that their primary element is the sacred and that it is necessary not to confuse them (Pickering, 2009).

This leads to an issue that has been pointed out as a problem.³ Still, here, it appears as a heuristic possibility: if one adheres to Durkheim’s understanding of the sacred, it is not entirely clear what distinguishes a religious group from other collectives. In his 1899 essay, Durkheim had already established the possibility of thinking about lines of communication between religious beliefs and others:

² The thesis of secularization was dominant in the social sciences for much of the 20th century. However, towards the end of that past century, various studies showed that secularization had become more of an unquestioned dogma than a verified theory. Some key figures in this debate are Berger (2000, 2006), Ferrarotti (1993), Martín (1991), and Stark (1999).

* All textual citations and titles of works of this article come from bibliographic references in Spanish and were translated and thoroughly verified into English by the translation committee of the *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales* [Editor’s note].

³ Pickering points out as problematic that for Durkheim “anything can take the place of the sacred, and therefore anything can be ‘religion’ or ‘religious.’ In this sense, the sacred and religion have no boundaries” (Pickering, 2009: 153).

Between science and religious faith, there are mediators: they are the common beliefs of all kinds related to apparently secular objects, such as the flag, the homeland, a particular form of political organization, a certain hero, or a historical event, etc. (Durkheim and Mauss, 1996: 127)

In *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*, Durkheim asserts that “there is something eternal in religion” (Durkheim, 2007: 397), which does not mean religions themselves are eternal, but rather that there is something destined to persist in every society, even those moving towards increasing individualism and rationalism. This is “the need to preserve and reaffirm, at regular intervals, the collective feelings and ideas that provide its unity” (Durkheim, 2007: 397) because “a society cannot create or recreate itself without creating, at the same time, the ideal” (Durkheim, 2007: 394). In other words, there is no society without collective beliefs and rituals associated with them. Thus, he maintains that:

The day will come when our societies will once again experience new moments of creative effervescence during which new ideals will arise, new formulations will appear that will serve, for some time, as a guide to humanity, and once such moments have been lived, people will spontaneously feel the need to mentally relive them from time to time, that is, to preserve their memory through festivals that periodically revitalize their fruits. (Durkheim, 2007: 398)

Note that Durkheim speaks of new ideals and collective festivals —beliefs and rituals— and argues that the question of the concrete forms in which they are expressed is not only impossible to know from the present but is practically irrelevant. In the same vein, Hubert and Mauss (2010) identify a displacement of the sacred:

If the gods, each in turn, leave the temple and become profane, on the other hand, human but social things like the homeland, property, work, and the human person enter one after another into that category [of the sacred]. (Hubert and Mauss, 2010: 49)

It can be noted that much of the group from *L'Année Sociologique* already pointed out that the secularization of certain divine figures did not lead to the dissolution of the sacred but to its relocation into new elements characteristic of the modern world.

Durkheim cites the French Revolution as an example. Still, without forcing the argument, this reasoning could be extended to the American Revolution, the Russian Revolution, Nazism, or Peronism. Regardless of one's position on these processes, it is difficult to deny that they emerged during times of creative effervescence, produced ideals, and celebrated them in public and periodic rituals. This is merely intended to highlight that, for Durkheim, no society can endure without the existence of common beliefs among all its members and their participation in rituals that periodically revive them.

Now, if we take as a starting point Durkheim's sociology of religion and his school, it is because it enables the departure from an exclusively religion-centered focus —like that of Weber (1998, 1964)— towards one centered on the category of *the sacred*. This allows us to conceive of religions as one mode of accessing the sacred, but not the only one, thus expanding its field of analysis. By flexibilizing conceptual boundaries and not restricting itself to the “management of the sacred” performed by religious institutions, Durkheim makes the sacred a master key for social analysis.

This conceptualization of the sacred as a collective entity composed of representations and practices, a force that awakens deep and contradictory emotions and is defined relationally (that is, not anchored to any particular object or being and variable in time and space), will be central to the developments of Georges Bataille.

The sacred in Georges Bataille

In 1937, Georges Bataille spearheaded the creation of the *Collège de Sociologie*⁴ as a study group focused on the sacred, paying particular attention to that which is as difficult to assimilate as it is to extinguish, lying at the foundation of every social ensemble. To explore the possibility of a “sacred sociology” (Bataille, 2006: 151), they adopted the basic premises of Durkheimian sociology of religion but did not focus on the *Warramunga* or the *Dayaks*, rather on phenomena of modern European societies such as fascism, revolution, and forms of marginal existence.

By the mid-1930s, it was already clear that the sacred was far from disappearing in the contemporary world; it was also evident that it was not necessarily an agent of peace, order, and cohesion. In all its ambiguity —a marginal theme in *Les Formes*— the sacred would erupt more forcefully than ever in Enlightened Europe. Hertz's (2020) proposal to delve into the “fearsome waters of the impure” was particularly appropriated by Bataille, who took it to the extreme to contemplate the most abject crimes, forbidden manifestations of sexuality, and war. His major themes were eroticism, luck, expenditure, and transgression, all related to religion and the sacred. His perspective is particularly unsettling for those who adopted the premises of secularization and rationalization with the optimism characteristic of rationalist intellectualism (Riley, 2005).

⁴ Some of those who joined Bataille in the creation of the *Collège* (1937-1939) —a hybrid between an intellectual community and a space for political action— were Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, and Pierre Klossowski. For a more extensive development of this group, see Hollier (1982), Marmande (2009), and Surya (2014). For an analysis of the relationships between the ideas of Durkheim and those of the *Collège*, see the articles by Giobellina (2014), Lorio (2013), and Riley (2005).

Bataille's approach has strong connections with the Durkheimian school, particularly in its adoption of the sacred-profane dichotomy as a starting point (Bataille, 2003: 146; Bataille, 2005: 72). However, Bataille makes a wild use of the concepts of Durkheim, Hertz, and Mauss, leaving behind a theoretical legacy that is especially valuable for thinking about the relations between politics and the sacred. Bataille's understanding enriches the Durkheimian school with a conceptual universe for approaching the sacred—including discussions on expenditure, utility, labor, sovereignty, and heterogeneity—that stimulates new debates, particularly relevant to the purposes of this article.

A first definition of the sacred is entirely based on Durkheimian foundations: “Fundamentally, what is *sacred* is what is the object of a prohibition” (Bataille, 2005: 72). However, while maintaining the sacred-profane division, Bataille emphasizes their connection that which both unites and separates:

The sacred world is, in this sense, a negation of the profane world, but it is also determined by what it negates. The sacred world is also, in part, the result of work, as its origin and *raison d'être* lie not in the immediate existence of things as nature created them but in the birth of a new order of things, one that consequently arose from the opposition presented to the nature of the world of useful activity. The sacred world is separated from nature by work; it would be unintelligible to us if we did not account for the extent to which work determined it. (Bataille, 2005: 121)

Just as work makes life possible—while simultaneously negating it—the sacred requires profane time and accumulation without forgetting that it drives the glorious destruction of the accumulated surplus. Thus, for Bataille, the sacred is both that which is protected by a prohibition and the transgression of a prohibition. This transgression can be ritual,⁵ as in the case of religions, which, for Bataille, aim to regulate transgressions of prohibitions (Bataille, 2005: 73). However, it can also be non-ritual, such as that exercised by lovers, where the sacred is directly linked to eroticism as a means of accessing the violent dissolution of individual identity in the ecstasy of amorous fusion.

In either case, to assert that transgression suspends the prohibition without abolishing it implies that the law and the transgression are interdependent. Transgression is not, therefore, an antisocial act but, on the contrary, a constitutive and necessary mechanism for the preservation of society, as it serves to communicate with that which threatens it but is also a source of life: “Organized transgression forms a whole with the forbidden that defines social life” (Bataille, 2005: 69). This is why rituals exist—institutions created to decompress

⁵ Here, ritual should be understood as a collective, prescribed, and codified behavior in which beliefs and values considered central by a particular group are enacted. These beliefs and values are expressed through symbols and narratives, evoking both representations and feelings (Turner, 1980).

and purge the social machinery of the energy contained by law and laborious order (the profane world) through a suspension of prohibitions limited in both time and space. Hence, margins, festivities, and intimacy exist— spaces of transgression, gray zones where the law is simultaneously active and inactive.

What constitutes the tonal center in Bataille's thought is the approach to the sacred based on its opposition to the useful. However, this does not mean that the sacred is useless—in the sense that an investigator could not find “utility” in a religious ritual, for example— but that its existence is not represented as necessary by virtue of its entanglement in the world of useful things.⁶ The sacred is qualitatively superior to the profane: it is a center, having escaped the circuit of utility; it is not just another difference but belongs to the realm of ends in themselves.

Although implicated by the world of work, its decisive moment is *expenditure*, or perhaps better, loss or consummation (Bataille, 2005: 119). Here, Bataille draws on Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (2009), which studies the gift as a form of exchange not centered on acquisition and saving but on expenditure and the destruction of wealth, subordinating the latter to the generation and strengthening of societies.⁷ For Bataille, the sacred is an escape from the servitude of the useful—which characterizes the profane time of calculation and projects— through the expenditure of the surplus; it is the consecration of the energies accumulated in daily labor to a transcendent object. However, the sacred not only requires a sovereign destruction of production but also prescribes it. This loss must be, by nature, excessive, as only in this way is it possible to violate boundaries and destabilize an identity (individual or collective) that seeks to be closed and self-sufficient. Excess, for Bataille, has a sacred significance:

The desire we must consume and ruin, to make a bonfire of our resources and, in general, the happiness that consummation, the bonfire, and ruin give us—this is what seems divine, sacred, and what determines in us *sovereign* attitudes, that is, gratuitous, useless ones, serving only for what they are, never subordinating to ulterior results. (Bataille, 2005: 191)

⁶ This is a common unfounded criticism of Bataille—for example, in Wolin (2004: 168-171)—, as it confuses the *purpose* of rituals with their *utility*. To label a ritual as useful in the same way one would apply the term to an action in a productive process is to completely overlook the theoretical context in which Bataille presents the problem of expenditure and utility.

⁷ Mauss reminds us that the *homo oeconomicus* is a recent invention and considers it necessary to retrace the path of the gift and reinforce noble forms of expenditure because “the brutal pursuit of individual ends is detrimental to the ends and peace of the whole” (Mauss, 2009: 248). He was one of the most important members of the *L'Année Sociologique* team, and his ideas appear throughout Bataille's work, albeit with an original appropriation that emphasizes agonistic gifts. For a development of Mauss's ideas, one can consult Godelier's book (1998); for an analysis of the gift in contemporary capitalist societies, see Godbout and Caillé (1997).

All hoarding must be directed towards expenditure; wealth should exist only for the society that produces it, and labor should serve merely as the means for sacrifice, which aims to return to the sacred world what has been degraded and profaned by servile use (Bataille, 2007: 64). Sacrality and expenditure are intimately linked; there is no sacrality without excessive expenditure, without consummation dedicated to sustaining the ultimate goals of any social group. Bataille's theoretical-political proposal is to imbue moments of intensity as a way of breaking free from the empty chain of useful works (Esposito, 2006: 299). This is not a consideration of the futility or insignificance of all works, nor a resignation or immobile nihilism, but rather a search for redemption outside of laborious activity and the endless accumulation of its product. In this way, Bataille presents the sacred as a means of directing surplus expenditure to revitalize collective existence.

Bataille's effort is aimed at rescuing all elements negated by Protestantism, at least as portrayed in *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Weber, 2011). Bataille takes up Weber's developments regarding religious ethics, particularly Protestantism, representing the pinnacle of religious rationalization and the transition to establishing a de-theologized capitalist ethic. Thus, according to Bataille, Protestantism "destroyed the sacred world, the world of unproductive consumption, and delivered the earth to men of production, to the bourgeoisie" (Bataille, 2007: 129), who constructed a universe of self-centered prosperity that enthrones utility as the highest value.⁸

On the contrary, the politics that interests Bataille are linked to the openness to the sacred as a collective experience of sovereign expenditure in which the differences in the world of production are destabilized. Politics necessarily appears connected to the recreation of the sacred as a collective and de-individualizing event that, through the prodigious destruction of wealth, makes the recreation of the whole possible. At this point, Durkheim's division between the profane and the sacred reenters, though reformulated by Bataille into the categories of the homogeneous and the heterogeneous.

*The homogeneous and the heterogeneous*⁹

The dichotomy between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous can be read as an update of the division between the sacred and the profane, but with an emphasis on the ambiguity of the sacred. Bataille retrieves this ambiguity from the ideas of Durkheim—and particularly those of Hertz (2020)—and develops them in a way that seeks to avoid using the sacred in a manner that, to appear more digestible to a rationalist reader, becomes overly simplistic.¹⁰

⁸ For further exposition regarding Bataille's Weberian roots, particularly in relation to the problem of disenchantment, see Attias Basso (2015).

⁹ The three texts by Bataille that are used to explain these concepts are *La structure psychologique du fascisme* (Bataille, 2003), *Le sens moral de la sociologie* (Bataille, 2005b) and *La valeur d'usage de D.A.F. de Sade* (Bataille, 1974).

¹⁰ Hertz's inclination, later revisited by Bataille, towards the dark forces of death and sin, as well as the social mech-

The *homogeneous* category groups the elements of the profane world, that is, the world of productive activity that elevates utility above any other value, where nothing has intrinsic value, but all elements are commensurable and interchangeable. The homogeneous is the realm of chained means: commerce and enterprise, bureaucracy, science, and law. Here, each individual relies on themselves to sustain and reproduce their life, and only utilitarian technical reason is recognized.

The *heterogeneous* encompasses everything incommensurable, whether by excess or lack of meaning, that which is unassimilable by homogeneous reason, problematic for bureaucracy and law, but also production and medicine. Suppose the figures embodying the homogeneous world are the accountant, the laboratory technician, or the bureaucrat. In that case, heterogeneous figures include the violent criminal, the madman, and the vagabond. However, these latter examples illustrate only one side of heterogeneity, the lower, impure, or inferior kind, which Bataille complements with its opposite, the higher, pure, or superior heterogeneity, represented by the king, the high bourgeoisie, and the icons of spectacle.

Suppose this category includes unproductive expenditure and violence, madness and force, horror and nobility, admiration and idolatry, rejection and excrescence. In that case, the pressing question is how to group such dissimilar elements and distant figures, some from the underworld and the so-called “dangerous classes”, others from the centers of power and nobility; Pablo Escobar and Miley Cyrus are as heterogeneous as Muammar Gaddafi and Elon Musk. What allows us to think of them within the same category is that all of them are subject to a prohibition of contact, they provoke affective reactions of attraction/repulsion among the groups that compose the homogeneous world, and they engage in unproductive expenditure (whether to effectuate the transcendent, the infamous, or due to the misery of their existence). All are sacred, but they represent its two variants (pure and impure) within the social whole. All are energy sources, but some display their instituting and glorious face, while others reveal their destructive and putrefactive or excremental facet. Now, both the higher and the lower heterogeneous radically oppose the homogeneous, against which they constitute overwhelming excesses; this is why prohibitions must contain the spillover of their energy, and their contacts must be regulated and ritualized.

Lastly, it is necessary to clarify that the heterogeneous and the sacred concepts are superimposed. Bataille asserts that

the heterogeneous world is largely constituted by the sacred world, and analogous reactions to those provoked by sacred things reveal heterogeneous things that are not strictly considered sa-

anisms that societies have constructed to confront them —funerary rites and beliefs and expiation— is not merely a morbid inclination. It arises from these authors’ marked sensitivity to all manifestations of the sacred, not only the grand human constructions characterized by brilliance and glory, such as the state, monuments, or (con)secrated works of art. To delve into Hertz’s sociology, see Giobellina (2014) and Riley (2005).

cred. These reactions consist of the *heterogeneous* thing being assumed to be charged with an unknown and dangerous force (like the Polynesian mana) and that a certain social prohibition of contact (taboo) separates it from the *homogeneous* or common world. (Bataille, 2003: 146)

This passage has led some researchers to consider the sacred as a specific form of the heterogeneous.¹¹ In the cited text, the heterogeneous appears as a more general category than the sacred, but this is only because there are elements of the heterogeneous that are not generally considered sacred. This does not imply that Bataille did not think of them this way. In this quote, one should read “pure heterogeneous” where it says “sacred”. Therefore, as long as the bipolarity of the sacred is not ignored, it is correct to assert that the heterogeneous and the sacred overlap. As Tonkonoff states:

It must be called heterogeneous that which, in secular societies, occupies a position and fulfills a function analogous to that assumed by the sacred in manifestly or consciously religious groups; but to assert this means that the heterogeneous is an unconscious and repressed sacred, and as such behaves like an immanent exteriority, a foreign body that stirs within the social and subjective identities that reject and disregard it. (Tonkonoff, 2015: 280)

The category of the heterogeneous makes the sacred visible in situations, people, and objects ordinarily thought of as non-sacred (such as political activism or high finance) and even “anti-sacred” or belonging to impure sacrality (such as crime or sin). More than a “part” of the sacred, the heterogeneous functions as a “decoder of the sacred” in contemporary societies.

Bataille thinks of the sacred in opposition to utility, following the Durkheimian line but establishing links with new concepts not previously considered, such as expenditure, transgression, and the heterogeneous, which help to name certain aspects of political phenomena that generally appear obstructed. To conclude this point, we quote one of the best summaries of Bataille’s view, which is not his own but that of his friend Roger Caillois:¹²

The word “sacred” is rightly used outside the strictly religious realm to designate that to which each person *consecrates* the best of their being, what each considers the supreme value, what they revere, and for which they would even *sacrifice* their existence. This is, in fact, the decisive touchstone that, in each case of disbelief, allows the establishment of the division between the sacred and the profane. Then, the being, the thing, or the notion for which man interrupts all his conduct

¹¹ This is the reading, for example, of Taurel (2019: 65) and Lorio (2019: 173).

¹² This is not surprising because, as Caillois clarifies in the prologue, there was such a degree of “intellectual osmosis” between him and Bataille that it was impossible for him to discern the authorship of the ideas he expounded, which is why he suggests that the book be considered a joint work.

is sacred; what he does not consent to discuss nor allows to be the subject of jokes or mockery, which he would not renounce or betray at any price. (Caillois, 2006: 142)

Bataille opens the concept of the sacred and shifts the focus away from the sacred object to the practice of sacralization. What is important now is the transcendence socially assigned to a particular object, regardless of whether it is situated in religious institutions. Thus, his view results in overcoming the rigidity that characterized the sacred-profane dichotomy in Durkheim's formulation, making possible a non-essentialist perspective open to a situational approach that does not render invisible the work of the sacred as a constitutive part. Moreover, Bataille's emphasis on the distinction between pure and impure heterogeneous rescues the ambiguity of the sacred, which in Durkheim appeared little attended to.¹³ As will be seen in the next point, this conception of the sacred is key to reorienting the understanding of the politics proposed here.

The sacralization of politics in Emilio Gentile

In this analysis of the concept of the heterogeneous in Bataille, one of his main political inspirations for developing this concept was deliberately omitted: Italian fascism. In Bataille's reading, fascism is a political movement that, unlike liberalism and communism, does not reject the heterogeneous elements of society but incorporates them into its formation. However, this incorporation is deceptive, as the mobilization of impure heterogeneous elements occurs within a framework that ultimately suppresses them or, at least, assigns them a subordinate place in a structure guided by the values of pure heterogeneity. Some characteristic qualities of the fascist state include superiority, strength, honor, duty, moral nobility, etc., which lead to unity embodied by the leader. Thus, fascism appears as a superior heterogeneous political form, distinguished by the fact that it produces social homogeneity through internal repression of inferior heterogeneous elements, supported by the alliance of all representatives of the homogeneous —capitalists, the military, and the clergy, whose unity is based on anti-communism— led by the heterogeneous leader. Therefore, in the 1930s, Bataille already observed the nexus between political and religious forms. Throughout the 20th century, a group of intellectuals will take up this task,¹⁴ with Bataille understandably absent

¹³ These are some of the main criticisms raised by Lukes (1972) and Pickering (2009) in their studies on Durkheim.

¹⁴ It refers to the debate surrounding political religions, whose origins trace back to Rousseau and Tocqueville, who in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, argued for the necessity of a civil religion in the context of the revolutions in France and the United States. After a period of "hibernation", their ideas were revived in the early 20th century by thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Eric Voegelin, and Raymond Aron. Robert Bellah reignited the debate in 1967 with his famous article *Civil Religion in America*. For further reading on this topic, consult Bellah's article, Gentile's texts (2005, 2006, 2007), the introduction of Casanova's book (1994), and the articles by Roggero (2015) and Soroujon (2019).

from their theoretical references.¹⁵ One of them is Emilio Gentile, a recognized historian of fascism and a theoretical reference in the issue of the sacralization of politics.

According to Gentile, the axis for analyzing the relations between religion and politics lies in a proper understanding of the *sacralization of politics*, a phenomenon characteristic of modernity, which occurs when a particular political entity —such as the nation, class, party, or state— becomes “sacred”. This implies that politics becomes an object of worship, loyalty, and devotion, constituting the core of a constellation of beliefs, rituals, and symbols (Gentile, 2005: 29). Thus, the sacralization of politics results in the creation of

a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the purpose of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collective to a supreme entity (Gentile, 2006: 14).

Gentile proposes distinguishing between “civil religion” and “political religion”. The former is directly related to the American case —continuing Bellah’s line (1967)— while the latter is primarily based on Italian fascism. Both civil religion and political religion are forms of sacralization of politics, but there are differences between them. Gentile defines *civil religion* as:

a form of sacralization of a collective political entity that is not identified with the ideology of a particular political movement, affirming the separation between Church and State and, by positing the existence of a deified supernatural being, coexists with traditional religious institutions without identifying with any particular confession, presenting itself as a *common civic creed* above parties and confessions. It recognizes wide autonomy for the individual concerning the sanctified collective and generally appeals to spontaneous consensus to observe the commandments of public ethics and collective liturgy. (Gentile, 2005: 30)

In contrast, *political religion* is defined as

a form of sacralization of politics of an exclusive and integralist character. It rejects coexistence with other ideologies and political movements, denies the individual’s autonomy from the collective, prescribes the mandatory observance of its commandments and participation in political worship, and sanctifies violence as a legitimate weapon against enemies and an instrument of re-

¹⁵ Bataille is highly uncomfortable for both an academic and political perspective that seeks to criticize authoritarianism in the name of democratic principles. He believed that the fight against fascism should not lead to discarding it *in toto*, and that democracy was too pedestrian a form of government to face the challenges of his time. Of course, stating that he was not a democrat does not imply at all that he was a fascist, as Wolin (2004) attempts to portray him through a carefully arbitrary selection of fragments from his work.

generation. It adopts a hostile attitude towards institutionalized traditional religions, seeking to eliminate them or establish a symbiotic coexistence. (Gentile, 2005: 30)

The difference between one and the other lies in how the sacralized contents are imposed on the members of a social group. Gentile emphasizes the distinction between democracy and totalitarianism, placing sacralization at the center, but without overlooking that both participate in the same set: the sacralization of politics. The former is a sacralization that (supposedly) guarantees plurality and the absence of restrictions on access to and exercise of power; the latter aims at its monopoly, being “intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, seeking to permeate every aspect of individual and collective life” (Gentile, 2006: 15). Hence, several questions arise: why call fascism political religion and not, for instance, “authoritarian political religion”? Is civil religion political? Why not call it “civil political religion” or “democratic political religion”? Does the distinction between “political” and “civil” rest on the political regime that heads sacralization? Or is the difference in how sacralization is executed by the government?

For Gentile, sacralization —once a certain threshold is surpassed or in the hands of certain agents— becomes harmful to democracy, transforming the dichotomy between totalitarianism and democracy into a fundamental cleavage for political analysis. It is revealing that Gentile has reserved the name *political* religions for authoritarian regimes and the name *civil* religions for democratic ones, as it implicitly links politics with authoritarianism as opposed to civility and democracy. Latently, we find here a rejection of politics (or at least its inclination towards totalitarianism), deduced from his texts that sanctity is not problematic, as long as it is centered on civic life and not on political life, a distinction that, of course, does not stand alone and that the author does not problematize.

However, the fundamental issue we are interested in problematizing is the division between politics and sacredness, a central premise of Gentile’s theory. For it to even be possible to propose something similar to the sacralization of politics, one must first affirm the externality of the two terms; that is, one must consider the possibility of pinpointing something called “politics” that does not have a necessary but contingent relationship with sacredness. Therefore, we pose the most important question that returns to the heart of the issue discussed in this article: is it valid to speak of non-sacralized politics? The next section presents the forms of conceptualizing politics. It also argues that separating terms is detrimental to understanding each one.

Politics as sacralization

There are at least two ways to imagine non-sacralized politics: the first involves reducing it to management, and the second to a game of naked power; these are two paths that, more than a mere reduction of politics, imply its falsification.

The foundation of politics in technical knowledge has been growing in recent decades, present in the statements of political actors and occupying an important space in universities. The word *management* is its distinctive note (Fair, 2012). Implicitly, politics is portrayed as spurious, morally questionable, or simply as an obstacle to development. According to this reasoning, it is preferable to minimize the impact of politicians in administration and attract as many technicians and *outsiders* to the state sphere as possible to restore “rationality” to public administration. This rationalism aims to purge the management of any non-technical component to be governed exclusively by the principles of efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency in using state resources (Vilas, 2011).

Of course, technique and politics, at least in their modern sense, are co-originating (Esposito, 2006). The problem arises when management justifies itself and nullifies politics, reducing it to administration and denying its multiplicity of knowledge, beliefs, values, and emotions. This dual operation —of negating politics and affirming technique— is an attempt at the (political) neutralization of conflict. In this way, the advance of technical rationality should be interpreted as Weber (2011) did, that is, as disenchantment: a form of inhibition of politics through the capture of its evaluative dimension or, from the perspective of this article, its sacralizing dimension. Imagining a fully desacralized world returns us to Weber, with his fears of a world of closure and disenchantment in the face of the primacy of technical rationality, in which the gaps between legality and legitimacy, between authority and power, have been suppressed. This is precisely what should be affirmed to desacralize politics and see it as nothing more than a factional struggle for power or “neutral” administration. Thus, it is possible to paraphrase Geertz and affirm that a completely desacralized world is a completely depoliticized world.¹⁶

To conceive of a non-sacralized politics —a politics that does not dignify its own existence and the actors who protagonize it, as well as its history and the rituals that celebrate it— implies reducing it to a mechanism of technical management of resources based on universally shared goals. However, founding politics on objectivity, in the first place, requires the essentialist belief in objectivity when, in fact, politics is precisely the means through which it is constructed. Objectivity is nothing but the crystallization of a state of forces at a given moment, which has the effect of limiting contingency and fixing meaning in an always partial and transitory manner (Laclau and Mouffe, 2011).

If what has been said so far is true, any conceptualization of politics must account for the operation of unifying power and the good. As Critchley (2017) asserts, no political collective can maintain its unity or be effective in its practice without a sacred element, without an appeal to the transcendent. This implies understanding the struggle for power as intrinsic to politics (and therefore permanent), but also understanding power to the institution of an

¹⁶ Geertz's exact quote says: “A completely demystified world is a completely depoliticized world” (Geertz, 1994: 167).

idea of good¹⁷ and an idea of evil, insofar as, as mentioned above, the transcendent should not be equated with the good, since this would cancel the constitutive ambiguity of the sacred. Of course, the concrete meaning it assumes is always a disputed object. Precisely for this reason, politics is posed as a struggle between antagonistic forces that compete for the central elements of their discursive formations to have preeminence over those of others, that contest which concrete contents will be sacralized and, at the same time, which will be intensely rejected, labeled as “impure”, as threats to common existence.

All accumulation of political resources would be impossible without value-oriented expenditure. Such accumulation aims for certain meanings to become dominant and to acquire primacy within the social whole. Thus, the power of a collective is both the money and infrastructure it possesses and its capacity to propose meanings and make them legitimate within itself —preferably through persuasion, ultimately through force—; it is always and necessarily both things at once. Precisely, if fascism continues to foster debates and generate attraction a hundred years after its emergence, it is because it was an exemplary movement concerning these two issues. It managed to create a world and propose a desirable future for large numbers of people, accumulated resources for its construction while inhibiting (and repressing most brutally) those who opposed it.

Therefore, politics is both administration and sacralization; without these two elements, true domination cannot be conceived, understanding it as the success of an actor in achieving the widespread acceptance of a contingent order as necessary or, in the terms previously outlined, in the construction of social objectivity through the sacralization of certain meanings. Power will then be the set of means that make this acceptance possible and the “forgetting” of its contingency effective. One of the ways in which the belief in this naturalized order is achieved is through the sacralization of certain objects considered superior for the existence of a social order.

These sacralized objects should be understood in line with what Laclau and Mouffe (2011) call nodal points.¹⁸ Sacralization is, in this sense, the set of practices aimed at fixing certain elements through which a discourse achieves stability, slowing down the flow of differences and thus enabling a partial fixation of meaning. Sacralization is the operation

¹⁷ With this notion, I aim to name ideals, values, narratives, and even utopias —conceived as proposals for a desirable future— with a variable level of abstraction and connected to sedimented practices of meaning. It should not be confused with ideology in the rationalist programmatic sense of the term, nor with concepts like necessity or objective interest, but rather in dialogue with Weber’s category of *ethos* and Geertz’s characterization of *Weltanschauung* (2006). For Weber (2011), *ethos* is an ideal of life and conduct, a way of being characteristic of those who compose a social group, in which “doctrinal” elements appear as a subtext of practice. Geertz defines the category of *Weltanschauung* as the significations constructed to account for reality. However, although *ethos* emphasizes the evaluative and worldview the descriptive, both concepts are intertwined in the construction of objectivity.

¹⁸ *Nodal points* are defined as privileged points within a discourse in which a partial fixation of the flow of differences is achieved (Laclau and Mouffe, 2011: 152).

through which agents strive to make the meanings that constitute their identity dominant and peripheral (or cursed) those of the identities with which they antagonize; this is why it is a central practice in the structuring process of any social whole.

From this perspective, doing politics means making certain elements sacred and giving them primacy within a social whole. This ensures that the groups composing it direct themselves toward these objects considering their sacrality. By this, I mean that they respect the prescribed considerations for approaching them, direct themselves towards them with respect and care, participate in the rituals that recreate and celebrate them, etc. Similarly, this implies a negative side when certain objects are made infamous or insignificant and relegated to the margins of a given social whole. Therefore, if politics is the struggle for the definition —instituting or destituting— of the signifiers that have primacy in a particular structuring of the social, it is now possible to add that this is a sacralizing practice. Thus, what Martin defines as sacralization practices, namely, “the multiple ways of constructing the sacred, of inscribing people, places, and moments in a differential texture of the inhabited world” (Martin, 2020: 290), is here revealed as an always political practice. In short, there is no politics without sacralization; all sacralization is political. Now, considering that this approach implies a reformulation of theories that regard the political as the struggle for the establishment and maintenance of a system of differences and that politics is the operation through which the institution, protection, and updating of a system of differences open to contingency is fought over, always in dispute between antagonistic collectives, the following questions are expected to arise: what is the point of talking about sacralization? What does the dimension of the sacred add to the already established theoretical bases? Why talk about the sacred and not, for instance, the valuable? To answer these questions, we must return to Bataille.

The (political) dispute over the sacred

Up to this point, we have focused on politics as a valuation mechanism. Now, it is necessary to indicate what distinguishes it from others, such as the market, which can be minimally defined as a mechanism for the differential allocation of value given the production and exchange of goods. There is a central qualitative difference between political action and market action, which requires revisiting the homogeneous and heterogeneous categories to be understood.

As Bataille states, the market is the principal agent of social homogeneity; its actions produce, sustain, and expand the measurability and quantification of existence, establishing the tradability of the elements within it. The key here is that these elements cannot be presented as transcendent, as their importance is directly tied to their utility and value expressed by their price. The evaluative practice of politics is very different, especially —but by

no means exclusively— when it acts from the state. Politics produces transcendental objects, which, after being politicized, are no longer “things among things” but more-than-objects, superior entities qualitatively distinct from ordinary things and become luminous (or terrifying) centers for the social whole.

Exemplary past and present figures, places considered special due to their connection to foundational events for a society, mythical narratives, and the objects that materialize them are all part of this (political) production of the sacred, of pure heterogeneity. But also, the identification of figures considered threatening to the social whole, places where disastrous events occurred, and objects linked to terrible actions or carried by cursed individuals materialize the lower limits of a given symbolic order. Thus, politics is always tied to the heterogeneous (both superior and inferior), as it supports and demolishes to institute and maintain the boundaries that stabilize a social whole. Hence, a politics that denies the sacralizing dimension, limiting itself to management or the use of force, will be self-mutilating and doomed to failure.

From this perspective, not only social organizations, parties, or governments carry out this sacralizing action. The statements and decisions of business entities, judicial rulings, bishops’ homilies or papal encyclicals, museum artistic exhibitions, and especially the production of mass media and show business in general must be considered as practices of sacralization, and of profanation or the production of the abject or impure heterogeneous. All these are political practices as they are inscribed in the struggle for the guiding meanings of the social, without it being necessary for their agents to inhabit parliaments or ministries.

Therefore, it is not that politics requires an external (or emergent but distinct) element to effect its sacralization. Politics is in itself a mechanism of sacralization, a discursive practice through which certain objects of the homogeneous world are set apart to elevate, dignify, and protect them, thus constituting them as luminous centers, fundamental guiding principles for the survival of a social whole, as they are essential for the reproduction of a certain arrangement of its elements. Anyone participating in the struggle over which elements deserve to be dignified (or rejected) and how this should be done will intervene in the system of differences. Thus, their practice will undoubtedly be political. This outlines an analytical perspective that brings back to the center usually relegated aspects to understand political dynamics, attending to their pure sacralization mechanisms (of central signifiers) and impure ones (related to the construction of fundamental otherness).

Conclusions

Throughout this journey, an attempt has been made to provide some elements for understanding the sacred useful for thinking about political phenomena. The cornerstone of the reflections presented is the abandonment of any substantive view of the sacred that has a

reifying effect and, therefore, is situated as the exclusive jurisdiction of religions. These constitute one way of accessing the sacred. Still, it is not the only one since, as mentioned, the sacred always overflows the religious. The sacred appears as both the center and the common background of every social whole, present in its glorious manifestations, in those excremental and violent, and even “present as absence” in the “normal” functioning of a society when a particular objectivity is firm. In constructing this perspective, emphasis was placed on the transcendental nature granted to sacred objects and beings, but with the openness to manifest in unexpected places and through practices to which there is a commonly attributed secular character. The theoretical path outlined, from Durkheim to Bataille, points to a relational approach to the sacred, where visibility is given not only to what is the object of sacralization but also to the diversity of actions through which this sacralization takes place, which involves being aware of the distinctions and evaluations made by believers regarding what they sacralize.

To work on the relationship between the concepts of politics and the sacred, we started with Gentile’s developments, then showed that the political phenomena this author presents as cases of sacralization of politics account for a fundamental and inseparable characteristic of all politics: sacralization. A reading of “politics as sacralization” was proposed throughout this article, separating this approach from that of the “sacralization of politics”, where an exterior relationship between the elements is assumed. Such exteriority would imply that, in some cases, politics would be colonized —and, therefore, perverted— by sacrality. On the contrary, it does not seem accurate to think of politics as “sacralizable” (invested with sacred attributes from the outside) or “desacralizable”. Still, it is preferable to understand politics as the action of sacralization that aims to construct objectivity, that is, a stabilization of meanings that have primacy within a social whole. The minimal formulation of all this reads as follows: all sacralization is political; there is no politics without sacralization.

From the above, it follows that if one cannot speak of the sacred as if it were a substance, it is because what we consider sacred is always the result of a set of sacralization practices, but also because every social whole is inhabited by competing sacralizations. This perspective enables a reading of the social as a game between agents who activate discursive practices to support or demolish meanings from diverse positions and spaces: from a church to a television set, from a union to an artistic stage. These are all sacralization practices that construct modes of valuation that compete, where each constitutes certain objects as qualitatively superior and tries to make them operational as pillars of a particular objectivity while designating others as insignificant or cursed.

As Steven Lukes argues, in our time, “the evidence suggests that, for the most part, people facing political choices tend to treat their political views, especially at the national or federal level, as sacred” (Lukes, 2017: 113). In line with this assertion, the proposed approach can be particularly productive in addressing events and processes where utilitarian

rationality does not prevail among the actors but a struggle between ultimate values. Thus, this type of approach seems necessary to think about the anti-denial laws in Germany, the debate around the right to abortion in Argentina (2018-2020), the tenor of the slogans of Trump supporters during the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC (2021), Bolsonaro supporters in the Brazilian Congress in 2023, or the protests of opponents to scientifically-based care measures during the global Covid-19 pandemic, to cite just a few of the most prominent examples of contemporary politics.

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