

Girard's Optimism

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ABSTRACT This article contains a discussion on René Girard's understanding of the positive sides of imitation—despite the ambivalent nature of desire. Historically speaking, the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism made a great contribution towards limiting violence. The decomposition of the scapegoat mechanism, and its power to find non-violent alternatives, has paved the way for a culture with numerous opportunities. Even if humans constantly rival one another, one must understand and define the close relationship between competition, cooperation, and rivalry. To be able to see the positive sides of mimesis, one needs to have a robust understanding of human nature as competitive and, thereby, see friendship and competition as closely related. Learning and creativity can actually become optimal when there is a high degree of competition. Fierce competition today is allowed because of the taboo against violence.

The decomposition of myth has destroyed archaic societies but, at the same time, created problems of an apocalyptic kind. Increasingly, cultures are now developing without the shelter that sacrificial society previously provided. Positive human development, as is evident in the demystifying of violent myths and the increased concern for victims, cannot stem the power of global terror. Despite greater pessimism in his later works, Girard's hope is that, through the model of Christ, people will finally learn to love their neighbours as themselves. A change of heart is to a certain degree capable to lead people towards the same kind of non-differentiated love as God.

KEYWORDS apocalypse; creativity; desire; Girard, René; good mimesis; innovation; imitation; peace; scapegoating; violence

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René Girard's mimetic theory is often seen as deeply pessimistic: Imitation leads to rivalry and violence, and there is no way to escape the contagion caused by imitation. Because imitation is such an all-encompassing force, not only our actions but also our ideas and ideologies are born out of imitative desire. In other words, there is no place to hide from the negative effects of imitation. At the end of *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, Girard says that mimeticism is pride, anger, envy, jealousy and lust, the cardinal sins, and recommends people to renounce mimetic theory if one is not the least mimetic (Girard 2014, 129).

From Girard's darkest perspectives, imitation leads to rivalry and scapegoating, and, even if the modern world thrives in the wake of having revealed the illusion of the scapegoat mechanism, the constant free flow of imitative desire will, in the end, lead to apocalyptic disasters. Starting with mimesis, one can see the following negative development: imitation-identification-competition-rivalry-violence. The other, more positive outcome of imitation is, admittedly, rarer in Girard's writings as he wishes people to have second thoughts about what he calls ... "enlightenment optimism and the romantic view of human freedom and desire" (Garrels and Girard 2011).

This destructive spiral instigated by desire is, however, only one way of interpreting mimetic theory. Such a somber picture of mimetic theory can be valid when viewing desire solely as choosing either the wrong models or models that easily lead to rivalry. If desire is seen from such a one-sided perspective, mimetic theory clearly has an apocalyptic component, both individually and collectively.

MIMESIS IS INTRINSICALLY GOOD

In Girard's thought everything depends on desire, and one must have in mind that his focus is on evil, the negative. In one interview he claims "I agree with Gide that literature is about evil" (Girard 1996, 64). Thus, there is no doubt that he sees his own work in the same vein. Nevertheless, when asked whether mimetic desire is something inherently bad, Girard says that even if the effects can be bad, mimetic desire is intrinsically good as it means opening up of oneself (Girard 1996, 64). Thus, mimetic desire is what motivates us to take an interest in others. From a phenomenological point of view, imitation is the force which culturally makes the world go round and, as such, is life-giving. So, from such a perspective, the most precise interpretation would be that mimetic desire is inherently good but leads both to good and bad. This ambivalence constitutes the core understanding of how Girard understands both desire and the effects of sacrifice.

ORIGINALITY AND ORIGINS

Girard's optimism is, however, a basic feature in his understanding of both the nature of mimesis and historical development. If one leaves aside the question about any ethical dimension surrounding the term mimetic desire—which is a question Girard seems to avoid—it is clear that he sees mimesis as something rooted deeply in our biology (Girard 1996, 268–9). Research in neuroscience show that even newly born children, minutes after they are born, begin to imitate gestures from their surroundings (Oughourlian 2010, 88–95), indicating that imitation, initially, has little to do with any conscious choice. Rather it indicates that imitation of the other is the basis for all personal development and learning. From such a perspective, mimesis just is, and nobody can have the privilege to opt out, and avoid being influenced by others.

REPRESENTATIONAL MIMESIS

Derrida deliberately criticized Girard for making mimesis an essence, arguing that Girard betrays mimesis by making it a property (Derrida 1989, 25). This also goes for the act of defining mimesis: to render mimesis as imitation, reproduction, simulation, similarity, identification, analogy, will only amputate the indefinite nature of mimesis (Agacinski et al. 1975). According to Derrida, every (affirmative) discourse on origins will reveal a Theology (McKenna 1992, 58). In “The Double Session,” Derrida claims that mimesis is located as something unique in itself; mimesis with no before or after, no repetition, no imitation, no reality, no right or wrong similarity, no truth outside the mimetic. Mimesis is something in itself with no reference outside itself and should not be reduced to anything else (Gebauer and Wulf 1995, 301–2).

The deliberate vagueness in Derrida's concept of mimesis is dismissed by Girard, because it would blur the representational aspect of mimesis. Girard's concept of mimesis is not based on any clear-cut definition of mimesis; it is more an instrument with which to uncover reality. The repetitive element in mimesis is, in Girardian theory, self-evident, but the distinction between direct copying and (innovative) imitation is seldom considered. The emphasis, from a normative context, is on what one is imitating. Thus, the emphasis lies on the model.

DISCOVERING SOMETHING RADICALLY NEW

Even if Derrida is, according to Caputo, conservative as a venerator of the classics (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 8), he is clearly more optimistic than Girard about the potential to discover the radically new, focusing on

science as being able to work on themes that are not even interdisciplinary. Derrida's involvement in the International College of Philosophy, whose aim is to "discover new themes, new problems, which have no legitimacy, and are not recognized as such in existing universities" (Derrida and Caputo 1997, 7), illustrates his belief in innovation. Such an *a priori* belief in the possibility to uncover something radically new does not exist in Girard's writings. However, at the same time, the revelation of the scapegoat's innocence has paved the way for a culture obsessed by caring for victims. When everything depends upon mimesis there can be no innovation outside imitation. The totally new indicates discovering something without imitating, which for Girard is "to expect a plant to grow with its roots up in the air" (Girard 1990, 19).

EVOLUTION: FROM ANIMAL TO MAN

Derrida is preoccupied with originality while Girard is preoccupied with origins. From the perspective of origins, it is clear that Girard views the stages, from animal to man, aided by the scapegoat mechanism, as a ground-breaking progress in man's evolution, gradually becoming universal, and, a source behind both rituals and symbols. Despite its bleak picture of man's violence, especially prior to the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism, Girard initially viewed scapegoating as having made great progress in man's evolution.

According to Girard, archaic man could not have cared less about the mysteries of the world (Garrels and Girard 2011, 224) as he was too preoccupied with staying alive. But with victimizing came virtual reality. The act of scapegoating enhanced rationality and made us less violent. The crisis of violence became, because of antagonism, steadily reduced to one victim. Thus, through the scapegoat mechanism man got a tool to enhance its cultural evolution, as the victim, because of its power to establish peace, was deified, and became the initial expression of religion. In this way the scapegoat mechanism is both a step towards peace (by a violent killing) and, at the same time, introduces a first attempt to establish religious life.

Girard's scapegoat scene is crude and basic, with no underlying values or philosophy in the making. At the same time, despite its violence, historically speaking scapegoating made a great contribution towards the reduction of violence. Instead of letting violence be a random and an everyday phenomenon, it began to take the shape of ritual. This ritual does not stem from any instinctual guilt. Therefore, it is not a new version of Freud's *Totem und Taboo* (2012). It does not, as in the case of Freud, refer back to a killing committed by the sons of a primitive horde. The killing is for Girard

"a random and anonymous phenomenon that occurs between undifferentiated doubles, a phenomenon that produces mythological significance without presupposing its existence beforehand" (Girard 2014, 110). Even if scapegoating, initially, has a certain correspondence to the survival of the fittest in the animal world, the divinisation of the victim works in the opposite way by giving more and more value to the victim. By the sheer fact that scapegoating does not totally correspond to a biological urge, the freedom to moderate and reduce violence, becomes greater.

DEFERRAL OF VIOLENCE OR JUST VIOLENCE?

For Girard, the originary victimage scene marks the transition from the pre-human to human. He seems to see no basic belief or ethics attached to the procedure. How to interpret this originary scene has, however, been a discussion among Girardians. Eric Gans, by considering Girard's theory of hominization, sees a slight ethical aspect in the originary event. Gans claims that language and culture began with some kind of deferral of violence, (Gans 1996, 52), thus softening Girard's claim that culture has its origin in the actual violence of spontaneous scapegoating. If Gans is right, there seems to be an inherent humanism in the transformation from animal to human, which Girard does not consider.

According to Gil Bailie "civilization made-possible-by-violence" becomes, through history "civilization-made impossible by violence (apocalypse)" (Bailie 1999, 115), indicating the fundamental change with the introduction of Christianity. Bailie claims that violence is the force which makes culture both possible and impossible. Possible in the first stages of human violence by using the scapegoat mechanism, and impossible by revealing its violence. Bailie is here presenting Girard's main understanding of the fundamental shift in man's historical development. The fundamental change happened in the wake of Christianity and its concern for victims. According to Girard, from the early post-Christian period onwards, there has been a slow evolution where the scapegoat structure is eliminated (Girard 2001, 168). From the change of mentality instigated by Christianity and its greater concern for victims, human institutions first evolved slowly, and then increasingly rapidly (Girard 2001, 166).

MODERN CONCERN FOR VICTIMS

From this slow decomposition of the victimage mechanism arises modernity, and, despite its many faults, humanity attained a culture of great refinement. According to Girard, no culture has by far been preoccupied with

victims as we have today. People criticize from every corner the indifference of the West towards the poor, but the truth, says Girard, is that we have never been so preoccupied with helping the poor, and, at the same time, we have never criticized ourselves in such a manner (Girard 2001, 161–2). Even if Girard, In *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, seems afraid to advocate Western superiority, as, if by doing that, one will hamper the process; he is clear about the advantages living in a modern, democratic world. This optimism stems from the fact that the decomposition of the scapegoat mechanism, and its power to find non-violent alternatives, paves the way for a culture with numerous opportunities.

Girard claims that people today, especially the West, do everything they can to conceal the overwhelming superiority of our world, a world which saves more victims than has ever been done. He also claims that modern democracies can defend themselves by pointing to a mass of accomplishments so unique in human history that they are the envy of the rest of the world (Girard 2001, 165).

Its superiority is so overwhelming, so evident that it is forbidden to acknowledge the fact, especially in Europe. (Girard 2001, 169)

However, Girard claims that the Western world did not invent compassion but rather universalized it. Thus, his optimism is quite remarkable, especially when he claims that the process is becoming universal. Societies that are slow to transform, he claims, are, in a global world, changing towards a non-sacrificial direction. When the foundation of culture has changed, there is seldom any way back (Girard 2001, 168). Globalization marks the last of this slow decomposition of the closed worlds rooted in the victim mechanism. This decomposition has destroyed archaic societies (Girard 2001, 166), but at the same time created problems of an apocalyptic kind.

A LOSS OF OPTIMISM

However, the ambivalence from which revealing the scapegoat's innocence becomes more and more to the fore in his writings. From the new millennium onwards, Girard seems to have become less optimistic on behalf of human evolution. The perspective is clearly darker and more pessimistic. The emphasis is on the danger of absolute violence and of a real meltdown of civilisation. In *Achever Clausewitz*—in English: *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (2010)—which is based on an analysis of the Prussian General Clausewitz's thoughts on war, there is a marked negative change in Girard's view on modernity. From the initial view of

apocalypse as conversion, bridging the false divisions between self and other (in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* [1965]) to belief in a non-sacrificial attitude to violence (in *Things Hidden*), Girard begins to question the global scenario in which the sacred has lost its grip on man. Progress is replaced by a vision in which the sacred boundaries fall apart, paving the way for extreme violence. In other words, the slow decomposition of the sacred was once a great benefit, but by liberating desire in all its expressions it has created a world on the brink of global disaster.

In Girard's latest writings, there is only a slim hope for any kind of "Hegelian" reconciliation, rather the contrary (Girard 2010, 34–5). Girard seems, somewhere along the way, to have given up a certain pacifistic idealism, notable in his earlier writing. The positive attitude of concern for victims seems overshadowed by a scenario in which the loss of order in society, combined with heightened technological skills, may trigger a mass catastrophe at any moment (Girard 2010, 67). Apocalypse is not, however, a scenario involving "forces of light" versus "forces of darkness," it is rather a complete collapse of the bittersweet "good" yet violent mechanism that previously kept our world under control.

Christianity's global concern for victims and its ability to dispel mythological violence is unable to stop the massive rivalries and tensions, with their devastating consequences. Increasingly, cultures are now developing without the shelter that sacrificial society previously provided (Girard 2010, XI–XVII), despite the use of moderate violence. Positive human development, as is evident in the demystifying of violent myths and the increased concern for victims, cannot stem the power of global terror. Girard seems to indicate that nothing, not even Christianity, has been able to stop the cycle of violence:

Normal religion, which creates gods, is the one with scapegoats. As soon as the Passion teaches people that the victims are innocent, they fight. This is precisely what scapegoat victims used to prevent them from doing. When sacrifice disappears, all that remains is mimetic rivalry, and it escalates to extremes. (Girard 2010, 198)

Historic Christianity has failed to put societies on the right track again (Girard 2010, 105). Christianity made humans more human, but at the same time, the freedom that resulted from a less violent and retributive society, has also created a society in which the freedom to act on one's desires has created mass violence. According to Girard, this means that societies are developing towards a crisis, due to a continual breakdown of institutions.

Violence is no longer a part of a “gentleman’s warfare” (Girard 2010, 14), but appears at random, depriving people of any safe haven and giving them the feeling that there is nowhere left to hide (Girard 2010, 68). One can say that the horror described in *Violence and the Sacred* (Girard 1986), which was initially seen as something remote from the modern world, has, in his last works, become closer to the everyday life in the modern world.

In *Battling to the End* Girard still seems to uphold the ideals of non-violence (Girard 2010, XVI). However, he became increasingly inclined to view the notion of the sacred down through the centuries more as being effective, even useful, in order to reduce violence. Nevertheless, the notion that violence can serve as a means to put an end to violence is ultimately dismissed, since Girard claims that sin consists in thinking that something good could come from violence (Girard 2010, 106). Today’s massacres of civilians, he claims, are thus simply sacrificial failures, proof that it is impossible to eliminate violence through violence, to expel reciprocity violently (Girard 2010, 20).

Girard’s attitude towards the possibilities of creating peace in society has clearly changed, perhaps because his last major work was more on specific historical conflicts. A certain shift from interindividual desires in human relationships to war between nations, by extending the “enemy twin” scenario, seems to have made his outlook more sombre. Viewing the way societies deal with war and increasing polarization, where everyone is caught up in mimetic rivalry, clearly enhanced Girard’s apocalyptic tendencies. One may wonder if Girard, in his later phase, actually thought it necessary to sustain the ritualization of the sacred in order to maintain social order, to the extent that this is possible in our current world?

According to Girard, humankind cannot handle its own darkness without collapsing into social chaos. Although he maintained that Christianity revealed the scapegoat mechanism and, thereafter, created a climate of compassion towards victims, his non-sacrificial attitude became one-sided, and only related to theology. The sacrificial mechanism is, according to Girard, in the process of being revealed and broken down, giving humankind a glimpse of itself. However, the process seems inevitably to create an apocalyptic scene. Man, confronted with his own darkness and satanic enslavement, will attempt to demolish the mechanism that has worked thus far to sustain the peace. Without the scapegoat mechanism in place, and without an alternative mechanism to replace it, chaos and uncontrolled violence will reign. The world, according to Girard, seems as if it is inevitably moving towards this kind of breakdown.

OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM?

Thus, Girard seemed, as the years went by, to be pessimistic about the ability of humankind to ever learn how to stop the violent mimetic cycle. His hope was that, through the model of Christ, people would finally learn to love their neighbours as themselves. However, the realisation of this hope became more distant in his later work, and the possibility of avoiding the apocalypse, meaning extreme rivalry and mass violence, seemed small—although this is still an open question.

It seems that Girard went from a rather linear view on history where scapegoating marked the fundamental change, towards a cyclical understanding of history where violence, in the end, has the upper hand. Initially violence, which, especially in the West, has become more and more eradicated, will, because of the sheer scale of desire, return on a mass scale and create problems of a global dimension, such as severe climate change. Christians, despite having the key to peace, have been unable to make non-sacrificial societies function. Instead, the social inspiration taken from Christianity has created liberal and human societies of advanced technological refinement. We see that the ambivalence comes through the paradoxical ways desire works.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF DESIRE

Girard is skeptical of any pretense of innate goodness (Redekop and Ryba 2013, 8). He maintains that there is no such thing as original desire, only mediated desire. Thus, desire “is always reaching past its ostensible objects and finds little or no real satisfaction in them” (Webb 1988, 184). Desire in mimetic theory is not static and therefore cannot be fixed except in stages. The stages of desire are stages of decline, developing from a fascination with the rival to the final stage of being possessed by the same rival; and they can be explained in terms of the increasing intensity of the imitation of the other, which gradually becomes more and more conflictual. There is a development from fascination to rivalry, to conflict, to hate, and eventually to madness/murder/suicide (Girard 1987, 414–5). If there is a stage where desire is most poignant, it is clearly in the later stages, characterized by serious conflict, violence and illness. Thus, desire must be linked to and defined in relation to these negative phenomena.

Desire has a tendency to lead to nothing or nothingness and this means that it has no substance. At the same time, however, desire is the force that has the greatest power in shaping individuals—and society as a whole. The deeper one penetrates into the process of desire, the more symbolic, blurred and sterile the desired objects become in the mind of the subject.

Moreover, the references to reality become more and more blurred. The process associated with the ongoing desire for pleasure results in pain, again and again. This is the process by which wounds result from acting on one's attraction. In other words, it is the process of desiring through desirous models, which eventually leads to nothingness (Grande 2020, 10–7). The content of desire is metaphysical, therefore, devoid of substance, despite having the most devastating consequences for individuals.

CREATIVE MIMESIS

All this is the consequence of imitating models which are dominated by a desire to outdo the other. Yet, this is not always the case. If we see mimetic desire in the light of creativity, creativity comes about by emulating a model (Redekop and Ryba 2013, 27). However, when desire vis-à-vis the other becomes too intense, it inverts the learning process and becomes a hindrance to learning and creativity. Learning and creativity can nevertheless become optimal when there is a high degree of competition. Competition and cooperation seem to exist simultaneously—despite a strong skepticism towards competition among scholars, especially in the humanistic field. To find the right balance between imitating a model and the intensity of the desire entailed in imitation seems to be decisive for the degree of innovation. In my view, the distinction many make between the opponent and the competitor makes sense only if one considers the intensity of the desire vis-à-vis the other. This means that we must consider the degree of desire in the other sufficiently in order to understand the heightened intensity, the development from where one simply competes to where one is solely focused on outdoing the other. Even if there is a fine line between competition and rivalry, we must try to understand and define the close relationship between competition, cooperation, and rivalry. To be able to see the positive sides of mimesis one needs to have a rather robust understanding of human nature as competitive and, thereby, see friendship and competition as closely related. However, people seem to function best in an environment where they are not fixated on outdoing the other but see competition as a means, a tool for learning. Even if Girard does not refer much to mundane models, he clearly sees a hope or a liberating possibility in being able to see through the illusion of the other's attraction.

Being rational—functioning properly—is a matter of having objects and being busy with them; being mad is a matter of letting oneself be taken completely by the mimetic models, and so fulfilling the calling of desire. (Girard 1987, 311)

This ability to reveal the futility of desire is also possible when understanding society as a whole. Western societies have paved a way for societies with fragile moral and political borders, enabling desire to flow so freely that everybody is engaged in fighting each other. While many Christian countries are, historically speaking, caring societies, Westerners are currently living in societies in which fulfilment of one's most secret individual desires has become the central concern. At the same time, because everyone seems to be directed towards the same desires, people are constantly being prevented from fulfilling them. This incredible individual freedom in the modern world entails so much rivalry, so much spending and such depletion of the world's resources, that the apocalyptic seemed, in the eyes of Girard, to be inevitable.

RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND OPTIMISM

Optimism in Girard's work must be seen in relation to his Christian belief, which, through the decades, became more and more pronounced. The shift from imitating different human models who, in one way or another turn out to be violent, to imitating God through Jesus, meant a shift towards mimetic models who are devoid of violence. This imitation makes people capable of avoiding the scandalon, the force that deprives our existence by creating false desires. According to Girard:

Jesus invites us to imitate his own desire, the spirit that directs him toward the goal on which his intention is fixed: to resemble God the Father as much as possible. (Girard 2001, 13)

A change of heart, which Girard advocates actually reveals great optimism as it is to a certain degree capable to lead people towards the same kind of non-differentiated love as God. However, a growing emphasis on the dire consequences of desire seems to locate God, more and more, as the Other, a non-violent power which so many neglect to imitate. Even if belief in the resurrection is not a direct part of mimetic theory, Girard clearly believed in an afterlife where violence is eradicated. Also, Girard believed and demonstrated that it is possible to narrow the gap between Christian belief and rationality, thus revealing great optimism, on behalf of science and religion (Girard 2014, see Chapter 11).

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