

Marco Stucchi*, Tania Checchi**

Introduction

Half a century ago, in May 1972, *La Violence et le Sacré* was printed for the first time by the French publisher *Éditions Bernard Grasset*. Although that year lies approximately halfway through Girard's long and productive life (1923-2015), the work probably represents the finest theoretical contribution born of his brilliant mind. The pillars of what would be known later as "mimetic theory" find here their most convincing illustration, which was never abjured or changed, in its fundamental guidelines, by his creator. Therefore, the present volume is not simply bound to an editorial occurrence but to the rich evolution of the theory Girard bequeathed to us.

Indeed, in the following pages, the reader can get a concrete idea of how mimetic theory has evolved up to the present day – but also of how it may evolve in the next decades – and assess its state of health fifty years after Girard formulated it¹. In order to provide this panoramic view to Girardian scholars, and to anyone else who desires to become familiar with mimetic theory, we have selected thirteen works from professors and researchers who have dedicated, in different ways, a significant amount of their studies to mimetic theory. Among them are authors who have cooperated firsthand with Girard in his intellectual enterprise, some who have pursued mimetic theory in their field of research (taking some new steps and proposing adjustments), and some who have made mimetic theory their primary object of interest.

But what is mimetic theory, at least in regard to its most general elements? Here we would like to sketch a rough outline of the theory as it was formulated fifty years ago, hoping that this will aid the reader to better appreciate the following contributions. We also hope to help the

* Ph.D. Candidate, University of "Roma Tre"

** Ph.D., Professor of Phenomenology and Ethics at Colegio de Saberes, Graduate School, Mexico city

¹ Inquiring to which extent *Violence and the Sacred* could be theoretically "deduced" from *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*, could be interesting but highly controversial and would rule out a non-Girardian audience.

reader appraise the far-reaching nature and the utmost importance of the *Violence and the Sacred*, and thus realize why we have decided to pay tribute to it. Unfortunately, to sum up this theory, and even to indicate the object or the domain of this “one long argument”, is far from simple. Each plain answer – “it is about religion”, “it explains the origin of human beings”, “it concerns the origins of culture” – incurs possible objections; in fact, in the last chapter, Girard finds no better way to describe this elusive “object” than to call it “the unity of unities”.

So let us proceed in order, despite the difficulties. At the base of the theory is a complex system of influences linking three general factual phenomena²: violence, desire and mimesis (or imitation). These relevant “behaviours” are common to all human beings – though not just to them –, and they are all intertwined in an essential fashion. Without the presumption of being exhaustive – not even Girard proceeded in a systematic way – let us point out just some of these relations, beginning with violence and desire. Girard states in Chapter VI that “in one way or another violence is always mingled with desire” and that, under certain conditions, “violence becomes simultaneously the instrument, object, and all-inclusive subject of desire”. This seems to suggest there is a violent component in desire: since it looks for a state of affairs that must be achieved, it requires a force able to change things (more or less abruptly); furthermore, as the change may turn out to be particularly challenging, it could be hard to concretely distinguish between violence as a means for desire and violence as the very object of desire³. Moreover, there is also desire in violence, since violence can desire – in the simple sense that it can strive for something – and it will not stop until it finds its fulfillment.

Relations that take place between violence and mimesis are not less intricate or multiform. If we define mimesis as the tendency to be similar or to act similarly to something else, we should note, as Girard does in the very first pages, that “nothing resembles an angry [and then violent] cat or man so much as another angry cat or man”. We could then say that violence, at least, produces the same effect as imitation. Throughout his oeuvre, Girard also points out that imitation is a good survival strategy in risky and violent situations. To imitate others, in fact, should make it more difficult to be *distinguished* from others; besides, being able to not get noticed means to divert possible aggression from ourselves. Moreover – and, at this point, we should begin to bear in mind the paradoxical relations of these three large domains of psychosocial life – imitation leads to violence, as mimesis brings individuals to perform the same acts, and some actions, in order to be fulfilled, seem to require a kind of exclusiv-

² Whether they should be labelled as phenomena or categories can be a matter of debate.

³ Girard has already dealt with this point in *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*.

ity, and, if so, they necessarily produce rivalry and violence. Finally, precisely because of imitation, it will be more difficult to stop violence, since two violent individuals will mutually copy their own violence, despite the risk this escalation brings about.

The deep entanglement of desire and imitation comes into play here. Mimesis profoundly affects desires, since a great number, if not all, of our most ingrained aspirations are in reality *mimetic desires*, that is, at least in a first sense, desires copied from others. Then again, desire and mimesis share two-way relations: for example, certain desires and certain forms of desiring can trigger imitation. A desire presented as particularly satisfying, intense, and “self-confident” might inspire other desires to take the first desire as a model, that is, to copy it. On the other hand, imitation can be seen as a marker of good desire: if so many desires aim at the same goal, it stands to reason that such a desire is a relevant one, and that it must be attained *by all means*. This is why mimetic desire increases, qualitatively and quantitatively, violent behaviors.

Such a many-sided system of phenomena was not exhausted by René Girard’s investigations, neither in his masterpiece nor in his whole academic trajectory. Looking for new relations and yet undisclosed laws that govern the link between mimesis, violence and desire represents nowadays a vital intellectual task, and the reader will discover some possible paths regarding this labor in the following pages. However, Girard’s intuition of this “productive triad” of violence-desire-imitation in *Violence and the Sacred* is just the first step of mimetic theory. Putting this set of relations at the centre of his inquiry was the first major theoretical innovation from which mimetic theory was born. The second major step Girard took led him to ascertain that this triad shows a cyclical tendency that inexorably brings about a general situation that can be effectively named with one simple word: crisis.

The violence-desire-imitation mechanism, exacerbated in human beings, seems to be unable to settle into an equilibrium compatible with life. What Girard names “mimetic crisis” is an all-out conflict that sends different spheres into disarray: the “psychic”, since the normal mental life of individuals gets jeopardized; the “social”, as all forms of social organization tend to vanish; and even the “natural” sphere is impacted. Every order is questioned. Violence and mimetic desire both reach their paroxysm here. And since imitation may be seen as the tendency to be the same as somebody else, the highest degree of a “universal” mimesis is undifferentiation. In fact, according to Girard, a crisis is always a crisis of differentiation.

How to escape from such a terrible plague, which is much worse than any sickness, war, or any other imaginable situation? The third theoretical step of mimetic theory attempts to answer this critical question.

The solution, according to Girard, is to be found in the same context that generated the problem: the triad of violence-desire-imitation. As it happens, the same complex system that produces chaos – that is, undifferentiated (and undifferentiating) violence – also produces order, harmony, and peace. The imitation of others' violence and desire that pervades the community during a crisis also engenders a stochastic chance that this all-against-all violence will converge on a single individual⁴, whose removal “miraculously” effects the restoration of order, that is, *difference*. Violence has found what appears to be an ultimate release because the result was arrived at unanimously, and no reactive violence will come after the expulsion to upset the new state of affairs. Because such an ejection establishes a difference – impossible to overcome – between the victim and the others, as well as a difference between “good” and legitimate violence and “bad” violence”, “difference”, as such, is restored, and with it, primeval cultural institutions emerge. The first “good” violence is to be re-enacted in rituals that therapeutically contain and prevent the rivalrous and disastrous “violence” that hereafter will be proscribed, as it led to the crisis in the first place. This never fully conscious process, which Girard calls the “scapegoat mechanism”, will thus set an implicit rule regarding imitation, reducing its dangerous effect: no-one can (or should *desire to*) imitate the victim, the *different one* whose transgressive and transcendent quality is never questioned. The triad attains at this point a new equilibrium – provisory, of course, if seen from a historical perspective – and produces “the sacred”, a complex and ambivalent system of socio-religious regulations that offer a chance of survival to human societies. Rites and prohibitions – the pillars of archaic religion – are then born, concludes Girard, from what was originally a spontaneous sacrifice, the re-enactment of which will deploy human culture as a whole.

If we take heed of Girard's hypothesis, we realize that all human societies that have survived a significant amount of historical time had to pass through a high number of repetitions of this dynamic. Crucial to the rise of culture as such, this mechanism has left its mark most, if not all, human endeavours: religion, political institutions, law systems, the arts, philosophy, and technology. This is precisely why it is difficult to circumscribe mimetic theory's field of application, as the reader will note when engaging the essays in the present volume.

Understood as above-described, we firmly believe that mimetic theory represents a crucial turning point in the history of thought. In fact, it opens up unexplored paths, from which there will likely be no coming

⁴ Or even a small group of individuals.

back, inasmuch as it sheds new light on significant portions of the most glorious tradition of Western thought. It carefully develops Hobbesian-like theories on sovereignty, providing them with a firmer foundation. It actually improves Durkheim's theory on religion and society. It offers to Freudian psychoanalysis a range of compelling solutions to some of its key problems. As deployed in *Violence and the sacred*, it also offers a persuasive Darwinian solution to the problem of how the human species originated. And since Girard's theory provides us with conceptual tools to reinterpret any and all cultural phenomena, the finest productions of human history appear under a fresh and challenging guise: ancient myths, the Bible, Greek tragedy, Dante, Shakespeare, up to Dostoevsky and more are ready to yield unsuspected truths.

But this only partially explains why we have chosen to pay tribute to his masterpiece fifty years after its publication. In conclusion, we need to make explicit one last reason. According to Girard, human culture cannot be indifferent to an ethical point of view. Since it descends from real scapegoating, it is called upon to take a stance regarding its own origins. Thus, studying mimetic theory is not a simple intellectual matter; it entails a moral commitment: it means to seriously question our own violence and to strive to give it up. Developing mimetic theory leads us to heed the voices of all the victims: past and present, human and non-human, others' victims and, first and foremost, our own victims; finding out, sometimes, that we can also become victims of ourselves when enmeshed in the mimetic maelstrom. However, Girard has insisted that the desolate and deadly landscape of conflictual mimesis can always be reshaped by the *conversion* of a desire, in a new life beyond the vicious circle of victimisation.

What follows is an overview of the texts in this volume. We hope you enjoy them as much as we did. The first paper is by Sandor Goodhart, one of the foremost Girardians and personal friend of the French thinker, who was there to witness essential milestones of the latter's intellectual trajectory. In these pages, Goodhart traces the critical and dialogic genealogy that enabled Girard to formulate his groundbreaking hypothesis about the emergence of archaic religion, engaging with the likes of Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and the Cambridge ritualists to provide us with a precise overview of mimetic theory. Employing in an insightful "jeux de mots" the Girardian term "méconnaissance", Goodhart proceeds then to expose and explain the reasons for the most recurrent misunderstandings regarding Girard's oeuvre: first, regarding his views on Christianity – which in truth, never changed in essence, though he had to advance a more nuanced account of the sense of sacrifice; and second, concerning the notion that his thought presumably implies a certain ethical or ideological advocacy instead of a new hermeneutical tool.

In the second essay, Paul Dumouchel, another close collaborator of Girard, also offers an account of early misreadings of *Violence and the Sacred* that still influence its reception today. Far from being another formalistic and/or symbolic understanding of sacrifice like the one advanced by Hubert and Mauss, Girard's approach goes directly into the pragmatic, though unrecognized, nucleus of the sacrificial practice without failing to explain, as did former functionalist doctrines, the origin of the institution. For him, violence is not a secondary addition to the offering or oblation to nonexistent deities that exclusively grabs the attention of structuralists and the like: violence is involved throughout a process which contingently gives way to a mechanism that, though successful, is not deterministic, as some of Girard's readers claim. *Violence and the Sacred*, according to Dumouchel, formulates a morphogenetic theory of culture and religion that inaugurates an entirely new paradigm.

The third piece in this volume is a polemical assessment of Girard's undeniable achievements in *Violence and the Sacred*, as well as its possible blind spots. Giuseppe Fornari takes us into the exciting new realm of inquiry opened up by a thinker that could be thought of as a daring "outsider" that never felt the constraint of the accepted "wisdom" of the social sciences of his time. This enabled Girard, Fornari tells us, to forge an innovative conception of the sacred that avoided the trap of taking for granted the phenomenon to be explained as an unfathomable given, like Walter Otto or Mircea Eliade did. Nevertheless, Fornari claims that in his attempt to open up a new theoretical and unifying space, Girard obviated the insights of Euripides – favoring Sophocles instead – and Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, foreclosing thus a more philosophical approach that would give us the "quid" of the matter.

In contrast to Fornari's text, Jeremiah Alberg undertakes a Girardian reading of Kant's rational idea of the self in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, taking mimetic theory into the domain of pure philosophy, in order to show the involvement of violent expulsion in the latter's "Transcendental Dialectic". According to Alberg, Girard left us with a difficult task: that of verifying in our own field of inquiry the validity of his trailblazing hypothesis concerning the productive role of the victimary mechanism in every cultural endeavour. His own attempt allows us to discern the mimetic role of key notions like *Ansehen*, that in its prestige, authority, or reputation functions like the ancient kudos: a cause of order or disorder, depending on its position and aim. The censorship exercised by this notion prevents Kant from recognizing that the searched for unconditioned that "is never itself an object of experience" is the expelled victim that gives rise to the series of substitutions with which thought as such begins. Alberg's is a most notable example of how mimetic theory can traverse the realm of philosophy with astonishing results.

In this same vein, Stéphane Vinolo takes us into an overtly philosophical discussion of the epistemological status of mimetic theory as exposed in *Violence and the Sacred*. From the very beginning, Girard insisted in the realism of his theory. Nevertheless, in the midst of today's constellation of "realisms", the question as to which kind, if any, Girard's thought pertains, remains mostly unanswered. And that is what Vinolo successfully attempts in his text. In stark opposition to aesthetically formal – and deeply mythical – takes on desire that fail to recognize the relational and conflictual nature of desire, Girard tries to reach the non-symbolic kernel that remains exterior to all texts and rites through a hermeneutic that, though not exempt from difficulties, follows the logic of a palimpsest: that of the "pharmakos" whose expulsion is always textually veiled.

Silvio Morigi begins his text pointing out how for early Girard the "mensonge" inherent in "mimetic desire" produces a nihilistic uprooting from reality which results in what the French thinker calls an "ontological sickness". That "mensonge" resembles the "méconnaissance" inherent, according to *Violence and the Sacred*, in the "scapegoat mechanism". Born from sacrifice, primitive symbolic thought would share in this uprootedness. Morigi also shows that this estrangement from reality is eerily similar to a contemporary textual nihilism for which there is nothing but an auto-referential language that will always strive in vain to reach the real. If indeed Western logos too bears the imprint of those violent origins, a paradox inhabits the writing of the Gospels. They demystify the violence of the "scapegoat mechanism", but they can do so only by using that logos. For Morigi such a paradox is overcome by Girard's exegesis, in *The Scapegoat*, of the "parabolic" language of Christ and of the Gospels' demonology.

Gianfranco Mormino, for his part, takes us back to one of the most impressive analysis contained in *Violence and the Sacred*, that of Lévi-Strauss's critique of the biological family as the foundation of all kinship relations. In his furthering of this critique, Girard would appear as an über-structuralist, Mormino contends, inasmuch as his theory of the emergence of the symbolic would account for the formidably gradual recognition of biological truths, giving culture the first and last word, a notion that would upend any presumed "natural" and naïve normativity.

Maria Stella Barberi – who partnered with Girard himself on many occasions, especially in exploring his political and religious philosophy –, through a close comparison between Freud's *Totem and Taboo* and Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, reflects upon *méconnaissance* and the recognition of the victim's sainthood as historical and anthropological phenomena.

If Girard's mimetic account of the origin of culture has indeed a morphogenetic character, then no scientific realm should be foreign to its application. As a tribute to its fecundity, Fabio Bachini, Ivan Blečić, Paul

Dumouchel and Emanuel Muroi engage in a Girardian analysis of the emergence and transformation of spatial objects whose evolution is not only influenced by their participation in the mimetic triangle that reigns over desire but can conversely impact the latter's deployment. Thus, their description of different forms of space as arising from distinct mimetic relations – and sometimes producing counterintuitive effects – provides us with fertile ground for further inquiry.

Among the various issues and questions discussed by René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, one that has attracted some attention within both contemporary philosophy and anthropology is the emergence of kingship and the “paradox of sovereignty”, which for Girard stems from the ritualization of human sacrifice. By critically examining two prominent positions in this regard – that of Giorgio Agamben's in *Homo Sacer* (1995), and that of David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins in *On Kings* (2017) –, Pierpaolo Antonello's essay aims to clarify the political dimension of those arguments vis-à-vis Girard's explanation and to unpack some key epistemological elements of Girard's theory of the sacred.

Tania Checchi's text entails a phenomenological approach that explores the affinities between Emmanuel Levinas's and Girard's critique of myth in terms of its temporal effects as deployed in the realm of art. Checchi attempts to show how Levinas' critique of the mythical background of art as such finds a robust confirmation in Girard's description of the temporal distortions that myth brings about. In between the mythical universe that opts out of the true course of time on the one hand and ordinary temporality on the other as a withdrawal from the eternal return of our mimetic rivalries, art would confront us, according to this author, with its ambivalence and open hermeneutical possibilities.

Though no theologian himself, Girard's thought, from its inception, impacted the theological world, and the fecundity of his decades long dialogue with Father Raymund Schwager cannot be overestimated. Chelsea King explores what mimetic theory's engagement with some of the most renowned exponents of feminist theology would look like with fruitful results, properly updating and expanding Girard's original perspective. Because his theory provides us, King affirms, with excellent tools to critically examine the insidious nature of all those institutions that owe their functionality to the exclusion of women and other minorities, this encounter is more than necessary. Furthermore, King shows that in perfect affinity with Girard's overall project, the notions of “sin” and “broken heartedness” advanced by some of these eminent authors – R.M. Radford, D. Williams, and Rita Nakashima Brock, among others – poignantly describe the painful and violent situation of our mimetic entanglements, but not without offering a redeeming exit from them.

Finally, Damiano Bondi closes this volume with a piece that offers first a historical account of how vegetarianism has found, through the ages, its most forceful formulations under the auspice of religion. Then, contrasting the sacrificial origins of archaic religiosity and its use of animals as substitute victims with this refusal to consume meat, Bondi underscores the weak link in arguments in favor of vegetarianism, which ultimately hide a gnostic disgust with the body and a spiritualist aspiration to leave behind all earthly concerns – an aspiration that has led to an equally concerning ecological disaster to that produced by the meat industry.

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