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"The system truly comes first". Culture and biology in Girard's analysis of kinship

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§ 1. Lévi-Strauss's critique of Radcliffe-Brown

In the ninth chapter of *Violence and the Sacred*, entitled "Lévi-Strauss, Structuralism, and Marriage Laws", Girard addresses the issue of the natural vs. cultural origin of the nuclear family and, subsequently, of kinship laws. The starting point is a page of *Structural Analysis in Linguistics and Anthropology*, published in 1945, where Lévi-Strauss claims that in social anthropology there is no more dangerous idea than thinking "that the biological family constitutes the point of departure from which all societies elaborate their kinship systems"[1]; the socio-cultural character of kinship "is not what it retains from nature, but, rather, the essential way in which it diverges from nature"[2]. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the relationships "between parent and child, […] between children of the same parents (siblings), and […] between husband and wife"[3] represent the natural fact which is at the basis of any kinship relationship. On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss observes, "a kinship system does not consist in the objective ties of descent or consanguinity between individuals" but it is given only "in human consciousness; it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation"[4]. In other words, the French anthropologist denies that the elementary family, as biological bond originated from the only possible way of human

[1] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson – Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Basic Books, New York 1963, p. 50.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] G. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Study of Kinship Systems*, in "The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland", LXXI (1941-2), pp. 1-18 (p. 2). By "elementary family", Radcliffe-Brown means a man, a woman and their children, "whether they are living together or not"; a childless couple, in this sense, *is not* a family. It should be remarked that, for Radcliffe-Brown, children can be acquired "by adoption as well as by birth" (*ibidem*); this seems to be purposedly neglected by Lévi-Strauss, who equates the elementary and the biological family.
[4] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, cit., p. 50.

reproduction, can be distinguished from any broader kinship relationships: as well as the latter, which anthropologists know to be culturally constructed and, for this reason, subject to wide differences from group to group, it depends on culture. For Lévi-Strauss even the closest blood relations can exist only within a system, just like those that give rise to more complex ones: all social institutions are symbolic, i.e., they all belong to the structure.

According to Radcliffe-Brown, the natural family – consisting of a father, a mother and their children – is universal because sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is the only way for humans to procreate. The three primary relationships derive from it: the one between parents, the one between parents and children, and lastly the one between siblings. Starting from this objective fact, every cultural system elaborates structures of extended kinship, a process in which each group can take different paths. Lévi-Strauss states that, in order for there to be a husband and a wife, first there must be rules of exchange of males and females between already formed groups. The nuclear family can exist only through certain forms of marriage, which are defined by positive rules of exchange of individuals among groups (exogamic rules). Before the establishment of the mother-father-child relationship, each group must *already* have defined who can marry whom and who cannot; the cultural rules that allow the existence of marriage, therefore, precede the elementary family, rather than being founded on it. One could certainly think of a state of total promiscuity, in which exogamic rules are absent; but in such situation there would not even be the stable and objective bonds that Radcliffe-Brown claims to be primary, that is, there would be no family at all. Therefore, Lévi-Strauss concludes, the elementary family can exist only within the system and obeys its grammar.

§ 2. The problem of origin

For Lévi-Strauss the laws that impose exogamy are therefore the founding aspect of any social institution; but what is their origin? In his opinion, there can be no answer to this question; its very formulation is actually not even epistemologically admissible. Girard's critique dwells precisely on this *epoché*: the ninth chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* aims to pose with renewed energy the question of the origin of symbolic thought and, consequently, of human society. Girard reproaches structural anthropologists for having stifled such an investigation, arbitrarily and hastily describing it as meaningless: there is no possible scientific answer to the question of the origin of the "system", they say, because no one can place themselves outside of society and explain how it came into existence. In

Le totémisme aujourd'hui Lévi-Strauss had stated: "we do not know, and never shall know, anything about the first origin of beliefs and customs the roots of which plunge into a distant past"[5]; the main reason of this assessment lies in his refusal to give psychology a role in the explanation of social structures and of human behaviour: "men do not act, as members of a group, in accordance with what each feels as an individual; each man feels as a function of the way in which he is permitted or obliged to act"[6]. For this reason he also rejects Durkheim's theory of the origin of sacred from collective effervescence: "Durkheim's theory of the collective origin of the sacred […] rests on a *petitio principii*: it is not present emotions, felt at gatherings or ceremonies, which engender or perpetuate the rites, but ritual activity which arouses the emotions"[7]. Even though Durkheim thought that it makes no sense to think of a "state of nature" prior to society[8] and had restricted the scope of his research to the *relative* beginning of religion[9], his theory was for Lévi-Strauss too naive.

Girard blames Lévi-Strauss, and especially his disciples, of having issued a ban on the origin, cutting thus off the most relevant question in the research on human beings. The fearfulness of the contemporary thought consists in being content to provide a description, albeit elegant, of the state of things that represents the extreme horizon of knowledge; such self-censorship, he writes, cannot be found in Freud though, who dares to think about the origin and whose *Totem and Taboo* is therefore looked at as an embarrassing reverie (a "Just-So Story", as Freud himself ironically wrote[10]). In reality, according to Girard, the silence of the anthropologists does not stem from methodological rigor but, rather, from the fear of looking into the abyss of mimesis and violence, which shows us a very unrewarding image of humanity.

[5] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Totemism* (1962), tr. Rodney Needham, Merlin Press, London 1962, p. 70.
[6] *Ibid*.
[7] Ivi, p. 71. No wonder Lévi-Strauss never talks about Girard's work, which follows a strict logical thread going from psychology to anthropology.
[8] See É. Durkheim, *Le "contrat social" de Rousseau* (1918), ed. Jean-Marie Tremblay, Electronic Resource.
[9] "The study which we are undertaking is therefore a way of taking up again, *but under new conditions*, the old problem of the origin of religion. To be sure, if by origin we are to understand the very first beginning, the question has nothing scientific about it, and should be resolutely discarded. There was no given moment when religion began to exist, and there is consequently no need of finding a means of transporting ourselves thither in thought. Like every human institution, religion did not commence anywhere" (É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), tr. Joseph Ward Swain, George Allen & Unwin, London 1915, p. 8).
[10] See S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII, reprint Vintage Books, New York 1999, p. 122.

The blow struck by Girard to the social sciences of his century is, in my opinion, harder than he actually meant it to be: in *Violence and the Sacred* he denies that the elementary family is a natural formation, revealing instead its reliance on a *real* historical event that happened in the distant past in different ways from group to group. Taking Lévi-Strauss's thesis about the social character of kinship to its logical consequences, Girard radicalizes it, just as he did with other thinkers, whom he considered insufficiently courageous: think for example of the theories of primary identification in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* or of the original murder in *Totem and Taboo*, pushed far beyond Freud's intentions. Going beyond and against Lévi-Strauss, Girard displays a particularly polemical vein, both because in 1972 Lévi-Strauss is at the peak of his activity, and because, as is well known, the personal relations between the two scholars were not at all friendly: far more famous than Girard, Lévi-Strauss never mentions his youngest colleague, who does not belong to the community of anthropologists operating "in the field". To Lévi-Strauss's disregard, Girard mimetically strives to show that his own theory is able to grasp reality more effectively than any investigation carried on in distant lands, rejecting the criticism according to which, in his works, "blood is only in the library"[11].

Girard starts his critique by examining a sentence that, in Lévi-Strauss's work, may seem of little importance: even the most elaborate system of relationships, we read, "must take biological parenthood carefully into account"[12]. Cultural systems may be formed in many ways but none of them can ignore the biological *fact* that, to have children, it takes a man and a woman. Lévi-Strauss thus grants Radcliffe-Brown a non-marginal point: even though the biological family is not the primary element, no system can ignore the natural laws of reproduction. To Girard the attempt to keep a deeply-rooted basis in nature appears to be in contrast with the structuralist approach, as it presupposes an absolute given (the biological laws), which would affect the system without being part of it. It is, substantially, an approach still vitiated by the "naturalist myth", that is, in Girard's words, by "the belief that a particular affinity exists between the "state of nature" and biological truth or even scientific truth in general"[13].

As we know, in *Violence and the Sacred* Girard states that the foundational moment of the system is "the mechanism of the surrogate victim"[14],

[11] See R. Girard, *Letter to Pierre Pachet*, in M. R. Anspach (éd.), *René Girard*, Cahier de l'Herne, Éditions de l'Herne, Paris 2008, p. 61.
[12] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*. cit., p. 50.
[13] R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore – London 1977, p. 225.
[14] Ivi, p. 235.

which is triggered by an event – the collective murder – that determines hominization and with which humans move on to culture; to support this hypothesis, he criticizes the idea that the structure "must take biological parenthood carefully into account". After taking the institution of family outside nature, Lévi-Strauss then takes a step back, arguing that every system must have its foundation in the universal laws of reproduction; in doing so, he makes it impossible to understand why we cannot "photograph" the origin, that is, the moment in which the symbolic system asserts itself on a natural basis. If biology precedes culture, it is theoretically possible to investigate how the transition takes place from one to the other, but the only basis on which structural anthropology supports this possibility is the recourse to "the permanent traits of human nature", thus recurring to an essence which cannot be known and which is misleadingly identified with the real laws of biology.

If there is a gap between nature and culture, as Lévi-Strauss himself had claimed, then *every* social structure, including the one which originates from the reproductive process, is already internal to the system. The human "essence" does not univocally determine the social institutions, which originate from very distant events but that can be, nevertheless, obtained via hypotheses. The beginning of culture cannot be based on the laws of biology, which men initially ignored and which they only gradually and painfully learned over history, nor on a supposedly immutable essence; instead, it must derive from needs and behaviors that depend on the historical conditions of human groups. These conditions, of course, almost infinitely vary from place to place and from time to time, conferring upon the structure of family a high degree of arbitrariness; the understanding and conveyance of the social outcomes of the original event is therefore not the distancing and diversification from a unique and universal model belonging to human nature, but rather the continuation of the effects of an act of violence that happened in different ways and whose development is subject to almost infinite variations. But since the system born from this origin does not cease to change, it is possible that different forms of family appear, never experienced before. As we will see in the final paragraph, this point is of the utmost importance in shaping a few consequences of Girard's position which, very likely, he himself had not foreseen.

§ 3. Scientific truth and cultural system

One might think that, sticking to Girard's theory, we would end up devaluing scientific truths, which would become nothing but arbitrary attributions of meaning, marked by the same relativism that applies

to the manifold forms of social life; as we will see, however, this does not happen. Undoubtedly, Girard rejects the idea that past knowledge needs to be "demystified" by the superior knowledge of the modern scientist: "in severing the cord that attached us to the matrix of all mythic thought, this liberator of humanity will have delivered us from dark ancestral falsehood and led us into the luminous world of truth. Our hard and pure science is to be the result of a *coupure épistémologique*"[15]. Such "scientific angelism springs from a deep-rooted reluctance, philosophical and even religious in origin, to admit that *truth can coexist with the arbitrary*"[16]. Yet, a sharp distinction between our knowledge and ancient beliefs exists: "there is such a thing as *false* symbolic thought (for example, the assumption that childbirth is the result of a woman's possession by spirits) as well as *true* symbolic thought (for example, the assumption that childbirth is the result of the sexual union of man and woman)"[17]. Some cultural products work better than others. It is true that modern biology arises within a very specific context, but the idea that women are impregnated by the spirit of a place, not during sexual intercourse, can be defined false insofar we try to find means to control the social aspects of reproduction (e.g. the attribution of paternity). We can certainly admit that our biology belongs to a cultural system, much like the knowledge of reproduction of any other group depends on the circumstances that prompted its elaboration; however, it allows us to control the reproductive process more effectively than different theoretical constructions. Considering truth in a pragmatic way, as a problem-solving tool, we can state that the symbolic knowledge, including our science, is true as it allows the achievement of socially significant goals for the group that elaborates it; as in Durkheim, social ineffectiveness is the only true mistake[18]. Modern biology makes it possible, for

[15] Ivi, p. 233.

[16] *Ibid.*; my italics. Girard emphasizes for example Lévi-Strauss's weak attempt to tone this dualism down by distinguishing the ancient "savage thought" or "bricolage" from the modern "thought of the engineers"; this would also explain why he hesitates on affirming not that kinship systems "depend" on biological facts, but only that they take them "carefully into account".

[17] Ivi, p. 229.

[18] "It is undeniably true that errors have been able to perpetuate themselves in history; but, except under a union of very exceptional circumstances, they can never perpetuate themselves thus unless they were true practically, that is to say, unless, without giving us a theoretically exact idea of the things with which they deal, they express well enough the manner in which they affect us, either for good or for bad. Under these circumstances, the actions which they determine have every chance of being, at least in a general way, the very ones which are proper, so it is easily explained how they have been able to survive the proofs of experience. But an error and especially a system of errors which leads to, and can lead to nothing but mistaken and useless practices, has no chance of living" (É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, cit., p. 80).

example, to develop methods of increasing or reducing the number of births; in societies with different social structures, such aim would be of much lesser interest.

Many factors made modern biology possible; one of which, certainly quite important to Girard, is the affirmation of the elementary family as the primary social unit; the narrowing of incest prohibitions (for Girard, unlike Lévi-Strauss, prohibitions come before positive rules[19]) to the mother-father-children relationships, has channelled all our attention and knowledge on the problem of paternity. Our world "reduces the principle of exogamy to its simplest forms and requires in consequence only the minimum number of prohibitions necessary to bring out the basic facts of generation"[20]. On the contrary, a more complex kinship system, like the ones of previous cultures, is unable to bring out the basic biological laws, which are "somewhat lost in a maze of other distinctions"[21].

Biological laws are obviously inescapable for Girard, but the formal recognition that a human group has of them is the decisive factor for the systemization of social norms; even for Lévi-Strauss of course, it is only what is known that determines the social production of a norm. But what Girard adds is decisive; he states that what you want to know depends on what interests you. Scientific discoveries on human reproduction are the result of an investigation that is not neutral, conducted only out of intellectual curiosity, but "commanded" by needs of crucial interest to the social order. It is the decisive importance of the identification of the father, for example, that has led many "patriarchal" societies to identify the exact biological contribution of the male, overcoming the difficulty of a long interval (a few weeks) between the sexual intercourse and the woman's realization of being pregnant. The explanation according to which pregnancy depends on the spirit of a place (and more precisely of the place where the woman first becomes aware of the changes in her body) is good enough for a society that does not entirely revolve around a male-controlled family. On the other hand, if paternity represents a decisive element of stability of male domination, the reproductive process *must* be investigated more carefully, in order to establish a safer causal link between the child and the father. It is therefore the social imperative of binding a woman to a man, with whom there is a legal contract (marriage) and who then has complete authority

[19] "I have […] adopted a point of view diametrically opposed to that of Lévi-Strauss: for me, prohibitions come first […]. Positive exchanges are merely the reverse of prohibitions, the result of a series of maneuvers or avoidance taboos designed to ward off outbreaks of rivalry among the males. Terrified by the fearful consequences of endogamous reciprocity, men have created the beneficial reciprocity of exogamic exchange" (R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 239).
[20] Ivi, p. 229.
[21] *Ibid*.

over her and over the children, to provide an extraordinary impulse to the elaboration of a different biological knowledge. Girard's previously quoted statement that "truth can coexist with the arbitrary" can be displayed by the following example: "as far as the facts of reproduction are concerned, it is true that our system is as arbitrary as any other. For as far as real biological functioning is concerned, it scarcely matters whether a system forbids a man to marry either (1) his mother, his sisters, his daughters, and any of the women of tribe X; or (2) his mother, his sisters and his daughters only. The biological machinery works neither better nor worse in the first case than in the second"[22]. But the simplicity of our family gave us the opportunity to focus our interest for the reproductive process on issues which are equally simple, much easier to solve than the ones implied by a more complex kinship system; from this radical simplification, Girard says, comes the greater success of our understanding efforts, which led to modern biology.

The discovery of simpler and better biological laws has brought our culture to the belief that the elementary family is "natural", thus reversing the historical process by which it is the social structure that determines *what one knows* (or tries to know) about nature, and not the other way round. One of the consequences of this logical and historical *hysteron proteron* is the possibility of standardizing social institutions in order to sanction anomalous relationships, which are considered unnatural when they actually just do not comply with the grammar of the system. As Girard's well known interpretation of Sophocles's *Oedipus rex*, the victimization of the protagonist is the cause of the accusation of incest that is made against him, not its consequence; and the implacable investigation about whose son Oedipus is, prompted by himself under the menacing pressure of the citizens of Thebes, displays at best the conditions under which the quest for paternity has become a major aim of our culture. By retrieving Freud's notion of the incest prohibition as a norm that brothers give themselves in order to avoid rivalry, Girard can explain why some human groups began to investigate biological laws with a tenacity that was probably not necessary in different societies.

§ 4. Nature and normativity

The consequences of this paradigm shift are huge: in opposition to the Greek-Medieval model of the natural family, still in 1972 the foundational notion of social institutions, Girard proposes a system that is solely cultural. It is the system itself that defines fundamental human re-

[22] Ivi, pp. 229-230.

lationships, not nature: "the system truly comes first"[23] is a sentence that destroys the traditional idea of family, whether Girard realizes it or not.

The family institution is separated from its supposed biological basis, on which it was founded by a line of thought that began much earlier than Aristotle and that has been taken up without exception by thinkers of all times. This nature-based conception of the family is also obviously the foundation of the Christian social theory, according to which what is "natural" corresponds to the divine Law and is therefore perpetually normative. Nature does not change, therefore the notion of family cannot change, since it derives from the immutable laws of biology. In contrast to this position, Girard paves the way to the idea that family is the product of an original event, therefore dependent on accidental circumstances. The inalterability of biological laws does not in any way imply the existence of a single way to define the family, which can be constituted in different ways and which is subject to change as a result of the group's changed needs.

The laws of biology, first investigated to provide solid elements to support a cultural system through the recognition of stable relationships, now allow procedures that are just as "natural" as mating, like assisted reproduction; in the same way, the inclusion of non-heterosexual couples in the concept of family, for example through adoption or surrogacy, allows just as much stability to the parental nucleus as to any heterosexual family. Even though they are defined as "monstruous" by traditionalists, they are based on the exact knowledge of reproductive mechanisms and on sustainable social models which cause no particular harm, just like other practices we have long been recurring to, such as the adoption of the partner's child or the recognition of children born out of wedlock. Like any other cultural foundation, the powerful mythogenesis that narrates about a heavenly Father, and the two primordial parents He gave us, is not based on Nature, but on a long series of social institutions that have undergone profound changes throughout history. The elementary family, according to Girard, is the result of an event that took place long ago and that has more or less efficiently satisfied, for a very long time, the main needs of almost all human groups. Like all institutions born out of the founding violence, however, it has generated contradictions and produced an incalculable amount of suffering: the utmost harshness of sanctions against non-standard bonds; the disparagement of children born out of wedlock; the suppression of all forms of unconventional sexuality; the refusal to grant the aid of reproductive medicine to childless couples (even to heterosexual ones, legitimately united in marriage); the impos-

[23] Ivi, p. 227.

sibility of accessing forms of practical mutual support for unmarried couples; the contempt for cultures in which family norms were, albeit slightly, different from ours. The list goes on.

If we focus our attention on the consequences of Girard's critique of the naturalist myth, it is evident that the hard-core defenders of the natural family, by not recognizing its cultural and contingent aspect, cannot see how different forms of interhuman relationship are actually as natural as the traditional one. It is ironic how, by criticizing Lévi-Strauss, Girard actually gets to a point that can only be described as the beginning of an ethico-anthropological revolution, still unacceptable to many fifty years later. But this is true of many ideas expressed in his 1972 book, characterized by such an open-mindedness, both ethical and philosophical, which is way more powerful than what Girard himself has later on written. Any argument aimed at establishing norms on the basis of natural laws is without foundation: all prohibitions are systemic, that is, cultural, and therefore relative to a context. Staying true to Girard, we must renounce any argument of a natural character that presumes to prove the immutability of a social institution, including the biological family. The bioethical doctrine of the Church finds in the catholic Girard the worst possible opponent of its most sacred, and most violent, assumptions.

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