A synopsis of the mimetic theory of René Girard

(Words in **bold** are the key technical terms employed by Girard.)

Imitation is an innate aspect of human psychology that plays a fundamental role in learning and socialisation. We learn how to act by watching and copying parents, peers and even those remote from us via books and other media. We learn language, along with how to behave, how to think and what to believe from others who model those things for us.

René Girard notes that we also learn what to **desire** by imitation. We observe what our models desire and we ingest those same desires. This process of desiring what we understand others to find desirable is, for instance, the basis of advertising and if it were not such an effective method the advertising industry would collapse.

Girard uses the Greek term "**mimesis**", or equivalently "**mimetic desire**", to denote the process by which our desires are formed by imitating the desires of a model. While not unique to Girard, the use of "mimesis" is foundational to Girard's project. He avoids the term "imitation" because others have used that term in too narrow a sense (Girard 1987, 16–18) and avoids "desire" in order to separate his analysis from Freud's (Girard 1996, 268). Although mimesis plays an essential and positive role, Girard often adds adjectives such as acquisitive, conflictual, contagious and antagonistic to emphasise the negative side of this imitation. Even the apparently positive "reconciliatory mimesis" takes on a negative meaning because Girard links it to the resolution of crises through scapegoating (Girard 1987, 35).

People who share the same desire will often find themselves in **conflict** over the object of their desire. But a more psychologically interesting situation arises when one person imitates the desire of their model, for in such cases, the model becomes a rival – a blockage to the attainment of the desire. The model may also find their desire enhanced by this competition, and a reciprocal pattern of modelling and desire develops in which the two people become undifferentiated "mimetic doubles" and the object of mutual desire fades into the background behind the dominance of the **rivalry** itself (Girard 1987, 26). As an example, I would like my girlfriend to be desirable to others because that validates my own desire, and yet that increases the likelihood of others seeking to gain my girlfriend's affection, sometimes to the point where the inherent personal value of the girlfriend is forgotten in a battle over who can satisfy their mutually imitated desire.

This mimetic process is one of the primary causes of inter-personal violence as people attempt to overcome whatever obstacle they perceive prevents them from attaining what they desire. The same process works on larger scales, as groups of people define tribal identities around internally shared desires that are both copied from and compete with the desires of other groups.

Any sustainable form of communal life must somehow enable imitation while also containing the conflict and violence that arises from imitation. If unconstrained, collective violence escalates to a point of **mimetic crisis** that could destroy the community. One way to avoid that destruction is for the community to band together against a single victim who can be blamed for the crisis. If the violence can be channelled against that victim, the pressure is released and the crisis resolved. From Girard's research, this "mimetic unanimity" (Girard 2001, 44) of a crowd against a victim has been the *only* effective means by which human communities have resolved such crises, and is the **founding mechanism** of all human culture.

This “**single victim mechanism**” may also be called “**scapegoating**”, a term originating in the ritual described in Leviticus 16. Our modern usage of “scapegoat” encompasses both the original ritual as well as the social and psychological mechanism of finding someone to blame. The term’s expanded connotations can be somewhat misleading in that we typically recognise that the scapegoat is innocent whereas in the founding mechanism described by Girard, the view from within the culture is always that the victim is blameworthy. Linguistically, the psycho-social use of the term is a figurative allusion to the Leviticus ritual. But since the psycho-social mechanism is phenomenologically antecedent, there is an important sense in which it is the Leviticus ritual that is figurative (Girard 1987, 131–133).

The mimetic theory starts with an observation about individual psychology, but given the importance of other people in the process of imitation, Girard coins the term “**interdividual**” and, as we have seen above, navigates from psychology to anthropology. His next step is to theology.

The two fundamental pillars of **religion** are **prohibitions** and **rituals**, and both arise from a community’s attempt to curb mimetic violence. Religious prohibitions seek to prevent unhealthy imitation and conflict. For instance, the intent of a law against adultery is to prevent conflict that might arise when one person’s desire for their partner is imitated by a third person. This intention is often masked, especially in more primitive cultures, by justifying the prohibition in sacred terms – such as touching blood causing one to be unholy (Girard 1987, 10–19). Four of the Ten Commandments are of this type, while a fifth – “You shall not covet …” – specifically limits the conflict over common desires of any type (Girard 2001, 7).

Rituals, on the other hand, provide a safely sanitised enactment of mimetic crisis. Rather than allow the full destructive cycle of imitation, desire, conflict and violence, a religious ritual provides a symbolic alternative ‘relief valve’. Rituals often violate prohibitions (e.g. ritual incest) but over time they tend to become less violent and more symbolic (Girard 1987, 19–21).

Primitive religion thus adds a sacred dimension to the single victim mechanism allowing the psychology of violence to be projected onto the divine, and allowing lynchings to be recast as religious **sacrifices**. Once violence has been enacted against a scapegoat, the collective violent urge is often assuaged, leading to a resolution of the social crisis. A surprising side-effect is that the victim may come to be seen as the cause of the resolution. The sacrificial victim can move from being the problem, who deserves divine retribution, to being the solution, whose magic powers are honoured and sacralised. That second stage, in which the victim becomes sacred, is reflected in the etymological connection between “sacrifice” and “sacred” (Girard 1987, 226), although Girard notes that it has almost disappeared in modern Western history (Girard 1989, 50–51).

Violent responses to violence are at best only partially effective and bring resolution to a crisis for only a short time. Nevertheless, “The miracle of sacrifice is the formidable ‘economy’ of violence that it realizes. It directs against a single victim the violence that, a moment before, menaced the entire community” (Girard 2011, 27).

I have said virtually nothing so far about how Girard discovered the concepts described above. The insights arose for Girard through recurring patterns he saw in a variety of written accounts of historical persecution, fictional literature and ancient **myths**. A comparative reading of those texts revealed four common features: a social crisis; the accusation of crimes by a small group or individual who are seen to be the cause of the crisis (with the crimes being typically violent, sexual or religious in nature); the selection of the accused based on their marginality (e.g. the disabled, the foreigner, or the powerful); and the collective violence against the accused (Girard 1989, chap. 3–4).

This analysis of myth and its relation to both culture and religion is an essential component of Girard's later analysis of Christian scripture, although Girard notes that it is the Christian text that provides the interpretive key to myth rather than the reverse (Girard 2001, 104). Myth, and human culture in general, conceals its violent origins (Girard 1989, 100). The single victim mechanism underpins the whole mythic structure and yet is never explicitly addressed within that structure. Indeed, the effectiveness of the single victim mechanism depends on it being hidden. If people understood the arbitrary and unjust nature of scapegoating, and understood the human rather than divine source of reconciliatory mimesis, then they would no longer be enthralled by the glamour.

In today's world, we can see the results of the partial exposure of the single victim mechanism. The power of the mythical and primitive sacred have been undermined by a growing recognition of the innocence of victims. "No historical period, no society we know, has ever spoken of victims as we do" (Girard 2001, 161). We are still prone as a society to finding a scapegoat, and yet doing so no longer achieves what it once did and, with increasing frequency, victim-blaming is accompanied by voices that assert the innocence of the victim. Whereas civilisation has depended in the past on the resolution of crises via collective violence against marginalised victims, our modern world finds that this mechanism has become less and less effective. As the Girardian scholar Gil Bailie puts it: "The reason culture is now in such disarray, however, is that this ancient recipe for generating social solidarity has ceased to have its once reliable effects" (Bailie 1997, 7). Bailie sees this as such a significant change that he pronounces it to be the end of history (Bailie 1997, 13). Like Girard, Bailie thinks that the cause of this change is that "protecting or rescuing innocent victims has become *the* cultural imperative everywhere the biblical influence has been felt" (Bailie 1997, 20).

We are approaching, or perhaps in the midst of, a larger crisis as we realise that the old approach no longer works and have not yet collectively embraced an alternative. Girard hopes the balance will tip in favour of non-violence and yet fears an **apocalypse**: the escalation of "violence without sacrificial protection" (Kirwan 2009, 101). "Human beings must become reconciled without the aid of sacrificial intermediaries or resign themselves to the imminent extinction of humanity" (Girard 1987, 136).

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