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Erroneous Paths of the Human Subject in René Girard's Thought

ABSTRACT: In his anthropology René Girard focuses on human collectivities. His main concern are – as the French thinker declares – human relations, which are subject to a deep crisis related to the cultural changes of late modernity. In his last major work, *Battling to the End*, Girard foretells an apocalyptic conclusion of the (failed) process of hominization. Meanwhile, the status of human individuality and autonomy in his thought is, to say the least, problematic. The essay puts under scrutiny Girard's radical skepticism in this respect, as well as his sweeping critique of individualism, without losing sight of his insistence on Christian Revelation – as an anti-myth, disclosing the truth about victimary mechanisms – being the only possible source of the conversion of humans.

KEYWORDS: subject • scapegoat • identity • autonomy • apocalypse • René Girard • modernity

An encounter with Girard's work leaves an impression of a confrontation with a genuine and unceasing effort to understand the essence of human culture, the meaning of human history, and – particularly in the case of the late Girard – the future prospects of humanity, with the support of a constantly refined generative (and evolutionary) theory. Interdisciplinary as Girard's sources and approach are, the main subject of his studies are human collectivities. Girard himself declares that he is interested primarily in human relations. At a certain stage of his intellectual evolution, the author of *Violence and the Sacred* reinterprets the meaning of the Christian Revelation in the context of his anthropology, and more precisely – of what he calls the process of hominization. In *Battling to the End*, his last major work, Girard draws a horizon of a probable apocalyptic conclusion of the history of humanity. When tackling the theme of human relations (and their possible “conversion” inspired by the Revelation), one can hardly escape the issue of human individuality, and when one tries to disavow or diminish its significance, it may recur in an obtrusive way by itself. This, as I suggest in this

paper, may be the case with Girard's theory. I consider the possibilities that, first, a vision like Girard's might benefit from a more definite and perhaps more affirmative idea of human individuality, and, second, that his theory, which involves assumptions that work to the opposite end, contains a self-contradictory aspect or a paradox. In the course of my reflections yet another view emerges as viable – namely that the tension in question is a result of the incongruity between the intellectual traditions Girard represents and engages in.

Violence, desire, symbolicity

The axis of Girard's reflection on the current condition of humanity is the relation between increasing violence and what he calls the "disintegration of sacrifice's effectiveness". To remind the reader of Girard's theoretical premises, an initial, founding murder is said to be the bedrock of all religions and hence, of human culture¹. Human action is, to a large extent, determined by *mimetic desire* – we want an object, a good, not because of its intrinsic value, but because others want it, too. It becomes attractive for us because of someone else's desire, which we imitate by wanting the same thing. Our desire, then, is mediated and the other becomes an obstacle in the competition. Ultimately, we lose sight of the primary object, and it is the desire or even the very being of our rival that we want (thus, we exhibit "metaphysical desire"), because what is hidden beneath the rivalry is our craving for identity. Humans "try to base their being, their profound nature and essence, on the desire of their peers"². This principle defines the prevailing pattern of our relations with other people. The late Girard calls it *bad reciprocity* and contrasts it with an alternative model called, simply, *relationship*. Let me refer this polarity to religious categories and note that "relationship sanctifies while reciprocity sacralizes"³. The former is rare and requires a conversion of desire; the latter is typical of mimetic contagion and tends to culminate in victimary mechanisms.

In a situation of rivalry, while more and more people in a group, imitating one another's desire, compete for the same good, they become similar to the point of turning into "twins". At this stage, called *negative*

¹ According to Girard, in the generative order, religion – as the source of all symbolization – precedes culture.

² R. Girard, *When These Things Begin. Conversations with Michel Treguer*, trans. T.C. Merrill, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014, p. 11.

³ *Idem, Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. M. Baker, E. Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2010, p. 123.

undifferentiation⁴, acquisitive mimesis turns into conflictual one. While escalating rivalry is threatening the integrity of the group, an accidental and innocent victim is found, someone who is recognized as guilty of causing conflicts. The chaos of all fighting against all is resolved once they become united in an act of deadly violence against the scapegoat. The death of a single individual, who is often marked by a certain feature which makes him/her stand out of the many, restores harmony in the community. As soon as the group experiences the good, so to say, bestowed on them by the victim, it starts to sacralize the victim gradually and repeat the event symbolically by reenacting it as a ritual and retelling as a myth. Thus, religion is born.

What does it tell us about the constitution of human culture? In the aftermath of the initial, significant act of violence, the mechanism of repetition (retaining, remembering) is given a form of symbolical replacement (taking a position of distance, forgetting the fact without losing its power and influence). Thus, not only all the rituals refer metaphorically to sacrifice (a symbolic nucleus⁵), but all the cultures are founded upon the symbolical repercussions of this act. Furthermore, culture precedes humanity and *essentia specifica* of mankind is “symbolicity”⁶. It is noteworthy that symbol – a fruit of a collective experiential upheaval – is born from the womb of violence, as if it was pushed through and out of turmoil. The birth of a symbol, then, is a dramatic event, and symbol itself is blood-soaked. Hominization requires that desire (on which violence thrives) and symbolicity form an alliance. In this vision, then, symbolization as such is sacrificial. The presence of a symbol means that something must have been sacrificed – perhaps a life, perhaps some truth, certainly immediacy.

The traumatic event that has taken place has not been understood by the perpetrators of the crime. Its gravity was recognized only through its beneficial effects, namely establishing the first protective mechanism against violence. It is important that the story narrated later in a myth distorts

⁴ Positive undifferentiation, by means of assuming an attitude of withdrawal before the other, is also possible. See for example: R. Girard, *Battling to the End...*, p. 133.

⁵ See among others: R. Girard, *Job. The Victim of His People*, trans. Y. Freccero, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 106.

⁶ To quote Girard: “What makes humankind specific is ‘symbolicity,’ that is to say the ability to have a system of thought which makes it possible to hand a culture down from generation to generation. And that can only begin with the victim and sacrifice. Or more exactly, beyond the victim, with taboos on the one hand and ritual imitation on the other”. See: R. Girard, *When These Things...*, p. 24.

the truth⁷. It must do so for two reasons. First, because it represents the perspective of the “victors” (the perpetrators). Second, because as long as the mechanism of scapegoat is unrecognized, it remains effective and violence, in Girard’s language, is meaningful.

While violence is “[t]he law that mankind lives by on a daily basis”⁸, the current condition of human relations, according to Girard’s thesis, is critical because it is permeated with escalating, uncontrollable and futile violence. When the sacred performs its role effectively, violence is constrained and channeled in such a way that institutions, including war, may function rationally enough. But sacrifice has been losing its effectiveness since myth was deconstructed and the scapegoat mechanism was revealed through Christ’s Passion in the New Testament. Using Girard’s categories metaphorically, one may say that the irrational condition of undifferentiation, which nowadays prevails, is a revenge of the withdrawing religious element. Contemporary humanity is engaged in a multifaceted, absolute war, defined by Carl von Clausewitz (for whom it was but a fascinating yet formidable abstraction) as an unstoppable escalation of violence, a situation when war is approaching the fulfillment of its own, conceptual essence being trend to extremes⁹. Accompanied by the accelerating development of technology, the process of globalization, which theoretically might lead to universal peace, is heading in the direction of the Hobbesian war of all against all¹⁰. An apocalyptic horizon unfolds before the globalized world of undifferentiated humanity.

Now, in Girard’s anthropology, identity formation – as drawing on differences – requires victims. In traditional societies, based on the continuity of fixed, often hierarchical structures, one’s identity was predefined to a lesser or greater extent. In other words, society was drawing on the power of the primary act of violence. In modern societies, which do not impose such restrictions, individuals are, on the one hand, given much greater autonomy in shaping their identities and, on the other, are constantly threatened by the possibility of negative undifferentiation with all its repercussions. The more realistic is the threat, the more indispensable are the victims. Furthermore, no narration is possible without identities, and modern propaganda

⁷ “This relationship between falsehood and peace is fundamental”. R. Girard, *Battling to The End...*, p. 198.

⁸ *Idem*, *When These Things...*, p. 9.

⁹ Clausewitz defines war as such as “nothing but a duel on a larger scale”. See: C. von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. M. Howard and P. Paret, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984, p. 75.

¹⁰ R. Girard, *When These Things...*, p. 83.

– a means of ideological wars – thrives on false, constructed, often short-lived identities. Contemporary victimary mechanisms tend to manifest themselves as “phenomena of non-ritualized collective transference”¹¹. Scapegoats multiply, but they either no longer play their initial role or they do, but this role is short-lived. Finally, an individual struggling for identity (recognition), is exposed to a particularly traumatizing rivalry in the vicious circle of infinite desire, illusory objects, and insurmountable obstacles. This seems to be the essence of what Girard says in his cultural critique.

Let me finish this section with a digression and a clarification. Mimetism is functional and is not always “evil”. A distinction should be made between phenomena related to violent, “adversarial” rivalry and creative imitation, which is based on identification, aims at perfection, often openly acknowledges the accomplishment of its model and performs a tradition- and culture-forming function. Another distinction concerns the type of mediation – it can be either internal or external (transcendent). In the latter case the model does not belong to the realm of common experience (shared field of action); it is beyond the actual reach¹². By way of creative imitation and with the support of transcendent mediation individuals are given an opportunity of forming identities less prone to falling a victim to the hell of mimetic rivalry, and are more likely to enter into a genuine relationship.

Human autonomy as a “formidable lie”

At this point it is legitimate to ask the following question: what is the status of an individual human subject in relation to the above-described, collective mechanisms and phenomena? A distinctive feature of Girard’s anthropology, one which merits rethinking, is his radical skepticism as to human autonomy. Not only does Girard reject individualism in all its varieties and manifestations – from Darwinian egoism, through Promethean heroism, to the modern individualism of authenticity, which he

¹¹ J.-P. Dupuy, *René Girard. Desire, Violence, and Religion*, “Inference”, Vol. 2, issue 2, May 2016, p. 11.

¹² Still, external mediation may be associated also with “false transcendence”, as it was the case, for example, in religions based on violent sacrifice, and – we should add – whenever Christianity was instrumental in legitimizing earthly power structures. False transcendence, although always imperfect from the viewpoint of Girard’s anthropology, is extremely useful by securing to these structures temporary order and peace so that cultures may thrive. For more on this issue see Chapter 8 “Powers and Principalities”, [in:] R. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. J. G. Williams, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001, pp. 95–101.

calls a romantic delusion and a “formidable lie”¹³ – but he also questions the very ideas of individual freedom and agency. While this is rather common in contemporary philosophy, and in French thought in particular, as part of Girard’s theory, with its critique of collective behavior and the postulate of conversion, it is problematic.

Girard looks at man, first and foremost, from the perspective of socio-cultural phenomena. But that is not all. Given the Durkheimian understanding of religion held by him, already his claim that “[r]eality is not rational, but religious”¹⁴ prepares us for a quasi-ontological primacy of the social and the collective over the individual. Individualism, this powerful myth of Western modernity, along with the cult of authenticity, expressive of craving for identity, is but a mask covering the fact that “we are more mimetic than ever”¹⁵. Advocates of individualism, who, by the way, are not very numerous among contemporary intellectuals, refuse to accept this truth. In a manner which I am tempted to call one-sided and overtly generalizing, Girard classifies the ideas of individualism and authenticity as a lie and a sort of modern vagary.

By way of digression, reprehending individualistic attitudes was not only a strategy of totalitarian regimes, against which Girard himself issues a warning, but it heralded various attempts to suppress autonomy in thinking and freedom of expression whenever they were found dangerous for privileged groups, the dominant visions of the world, or the actual social praxis. George Orwell notes that “[t]he familiar tirades against ‘escapism’ and ‘individualism’, ‘romanticism’, and so forth”, often put forth by the “enemies of intellectual liberty” sometimes convey a dangerous insinuation that “intellectual honesty is a form of anti-social selfishness”¹⁶. Orwell, by the way, shares Girard’s preoccupation with the struggle of domination (violence) against the truth. By putting into doubt the idea of human autonomy and discrediting individualism indiscriminately, one risks – sometimes paradoxically and unintentionally – appearing to be siding with those who promote the belief that one actually wholeheartedly opposes, namely, to quote Orwell again, that “[d]aring to stand alone’ is ideologically criminal as well as practically dangerous”¹⁷.

¹³ R. Girard, *Battling to the End...*, p. 18.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

¹⁵ *Idem*, *When These Things...*, p. 45.

¹⁶ All quotations in this paragraph: G. Orwell, “The Prevention of Literature” (1946), [in:] *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters Volume IV: In Front of Your Nose 1945–1950*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, pp. 61–62.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 61.

This being said, an insightful reader of Girard may argue that the true target of his critique is neither autonomy nor individualism as certain ideals, but rather their degeneration – i.e., their unfortunate alliance with the cult of power, consumerism and the culture of rivalry, where even victimhood is not exempt from competition. This blend of ideas and attitudes, occurring on the vague boundary between the collective and the individual, and reinforced by the lack of external mediation, is responsible, in his view, for an ominous kind of nihilism which permeates human relations and constitutes a major threat for humanity. Nevertheless, the status of human autonomy in Girard's theory requires rethinking, perhaps in the direction of reinstating its significance. Interestingly, a number of passages in his works (which I will refer to later) suggest that Girard is not unaware of that, yet some tenets of his anthropology and ontology of culture create an unpropitious environment for human individuality. Let us see why.

Even though not every single case of human desire may be explained in terms of mimetic theory, desire *is* essentially mimetic. Human consciousness and action are shaped, in the first place, by desire and not by reason. This does not mean that Girard thinks reason is a by-product or an illusion – in which case he would share Nietzsche's view – he acknowledges its reality, just as he acknowledges the existence of objective truth, but he thinks of it as increasingly powerless. What he calls the rational model has manifested itself in the history of culture and has played some role in the process of hominization, but it is being displaced by the mimetic model. That is why the author of *Battling to the End* is skeptical about the possibility of a spontaneous conversion (i.e., liberation from the shackles of mimetism) by way of deliberation and self-reflection. He nevertheless has a high estimate of the art of understanding and presents *hermeneia*, a certain kind of progressive, spiral movement of thought, which gives birth to meaning, as an alternative to an empty, "bad" oscillation, a to-and-fro movement, usually marked by strong emotional engagement, which represents the bipolarity of mimetism in its "evil" form. And yet, even if autonomous thinking is not altogether excluded from the array of human capacities, man – as a social being – is predominantly responsive, reactive – "[w]e never start anything; we always respond"¹⁸. Girard emerges here as an unorthodox heir to Augustine's voluntarism¹⁹, but he replaces Augustine's individual will with desire, which happens to be mimetic and supra-subjective. Given the fundamental status

¹⁸ R. Girard, *Battling to the End...*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Girard once declared: "Three quarters of what I say is in Saint Augustine". See: R. Girard, *When These Things...*, p. 133.

of desire in human life, the only antidote for the captivity of “bad” mimesis is “good” mimesis. One does not liberate oneself fully consciously and by one’s own powers, but rather in the process of imitating a proper model – a kind of total education, involving transformation of desire and the self in relation to other people and the goods of this world in general.

Christianity, a potential holder of the key (in the person of Jesus) to such a conversion, historically, according to Girard, has failed. It managed to reveal and discredit the “sinful” mechanism of emissary victim, but it has not managed to convert people and transform the way they interact. It collapsed into the sacred mode of a religion. We live as if in the aftermath of this unfinished liberation. In other words, the disabling of the power of the religious sacred was not followed by the universal transformation of desire, even if there are many examples of progress in ethical consciousness. Suppose that we intuitively agree with this thesis of Girard, the question that arises here, in connection with the one asked at the beginning of this section, is: who (or what?) is the subject of the desired but missed conversion? Individuals? Societies? Humanity? The desire itself?

Human subject as a victim

To believe that one is unique and free is not only to err but to be guilty of *hubris*. In opposition to Hannah Arendt’s idea of human capacity to initiate, to give birth to the new, Girard says we hardly ever really begin anything, in political and social realm in particular. We have always already imitated, we have always already been engaged in rivalry and we have always already sinned. This overwhelming condition of our involuntary and imitative indebtedness to the past echoes the fact that humans are fatally leashed to the founding murder, the primordial sin. There is something nearly metaphysical that – despite (or above) our historicity – seems to determine our condition.

One of the most lucid depictions of the situation of an individual in a mimetic environment is presented in Girard’s persuasive interpretation of the adulterous woman episode of the New Testament. Jesus, asked by the crowd to judge whether the woman deserves the punishment of stoning, avoids eye-contact and hence an immediate confrontation with the crowd. “Jesus doesn’t bend down because he wants to write, he writes because he’s bending down. He’s bending down so as not to look his challengers in the eye”²⁰. By doing this and by addressing each person in the crowd individually, he evokes

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

a different kind of temporality – the temporality of the self. The one who is guiltless is challenged to throw the first stone. What is at stake, then, is making the first step and taking responsibility. The scene illuminates the exceptionality and rarity of the act of starting something, of triggering a course of events. By awakening individual self-examination, Jesus avoids the unleashing of violence. By appealing directly to everyone's individual conscience, he evokes individual human selves. It is as if individuals were "born" in response to a calling. Does a group of self-reflective individuals form a crowd? Do they behave like one? People never cease to be mimetic, claims Girard, but the presence of a good model (Christ's guidance) makes a real difference. This kind of appeal is missing in Greek tragedy, which represents an outlook where a (unanimous) community always prevails over an individual. In his interpretation of Job, Girard reaches the duality between the god of society, in the name of whom sacrifices are made, who is referred to as the god of persecutors and compared by the author to the Dionysus of tragic poets, and the God of an individual, who is the only true advocate of the innocent victims of collective vengeance. What should strike us in these two interpretations is the gravity of the issue of an individual human self – first, as representing the victim's unique perspective, second, as representing the awakening conscience of potential persecutors. Much as it is fragile and threatened, it is, in a sense, decisive.

At this point we may say that our analysis reveals a tension between the satanic aspect of the social and the divine aspect of the individual. Despite all his skepticism as to human autonomy, Girard admits that "[t]aken individually, human beings are not necessarily given over to mimetic rivalries, but by virtue of the great number of individuals they contain, human communities cannot escape them"²¹. We may infer, then, that individuals, at least potentially, are the only sanctuaries of freedom in the sea of mimetism. The problem is that in Girard's vision the status of an integral and autonomous individual is, to say the least, uncertain. Self-deception and the logic of vengeance which humans are involuntarily subject to, may evoke associations with Schopenhauer's ideas about humans deluding themselves about free will while they are determined by the omnipotent power of universal Will. The assumptions of Girard's anthropology work to the effect of creating a quasi-metaphysical ambience of fatality²², where

²¹ *Idem, I See Satan...*, p. 17.

²² The notion "metaphysical" is justified also for another reason. Girard uses it in reference to the fact that rivalry determines the reality of the object, it has the power of "transfiguring" the reality of the parties engaged. See: R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of*

mimetic desire and violence take over the function of the main subject, the agent proper in human history, and receive the name of Satan. "If desire is the same for all of us, and if it is the key to the system of relationships, there is no reason not to make it the real 'subject' of the structure", we read²³. Now, this status quo, when understood, may provoke in a thoughtful human being – as we know from Schopenhauer – different responses, from heroism to self-denial. Each of these attitudes, though, involves something decisively subjective. There is no escape from the subjective and the individual – as I believe – if human beings are to confront, somehow, the evils of common life. This kind of awareness, so intensely exposed in the New Testament, is not altogether absent in Girard's writings, but – as a postulate – it clashes both with the tenets of his theory and his cultural critique, from the perspective of which the romantic belief in the power of an individual is a dangerous illusion, leading to the expulsion of transcendent mediation. The French thinker, in my view, narrows down individualism to the idea of will to power and the Faustian desire to occupy the place of God, both of which threaten moral integrity and may be conducive to nihilism. One may speculate that individuality in Girard's theory might and should be a carrier of positive meaning (which is visible in both the above mentioned interpretations), if it wasn't for the fact that external mediation is no longer possible, is no longer an important part of our culture. We read that

[r]ather than an authentic exit from mimetic desire there is mimetic submission to a culture that advocates that exit. In any social venture, whatever its nature, the proportion of authentic individualism is necessarily minimal, but not nonexistent²⁴.

My reading is reinforced by Girard declaring that his theory rather than denying the existence of individual freedom places it in its natural, extremely challenging context, namely that of "omnipresent mimetic contagion"²⁵. The cult of obstacle (we desire what is beyond our reach, all else becomes worthless), typical of bad mimetism, carries in it a sense of bad infinity, a drive towards the non-human, towards nothingness, whereby it tends to hollow humans out. I would venture to say that sustaining an individual integrity – a kind of

the World, trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer, London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 284.

²³ R. Girard, *Things Hidden...*, p. 291.

²⁴ *Idem*, *When These Things...*, p. 125. My emphasis.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 124–125.

self-integrity able to resist or even disrupt the mimetic mechanism (and it is not necessary to evoke “individualism” here) – should be an unuttered wager in Girard’s thought insofar he is engaged in an intellectual crusade against nihilism. Much as his use of the notion “identical” is ambiguous, his idea of “the insistently identical” may be read as an expression of it²⁶. We read that the most emphatic symbol of retaining the integrity of the self, in flesh and spirit alike, is Christ’s resurrection and the very idea of the resurrection of bodies²⁷. Moreover, in the era we inhabit, considered by the author to be eschatological time, “it is more than ever up to each one of us to hold back the worst”²⁸. In other words, the apocalyptic horizon which is predicted by Girard requires a heightened individual (moral) integrity. The French author is outspoken enough when he declares that “[t]he chief enemy is nihilism [...] It’s nihilism that we have to fight against if we want to fight for mankind”²⁹. Meanwhile, coming back to the idea of unfinished liberation, not only does the process of hominization remain incomplete, but the time left for its completion may be too scarce. Reading Girard between the lines may bring us to a somewhat surprising, but still illuminating conclusion that collectivity has, time after time, defeated the humanity of humans (!).

Let us return to our key question about individual human subject and its autonomy. The primary form of individuality in a social milieu – a reader of Girard finds himself inclined to conclude – is that of a victim, a scapegoat, someone who is excluded from the group, and later deified³⁰. Thus, individuality is, at first, as though enforced onto the victim of exclusion and separation from the whole which is community. There is something shameful about identity thus acquired. One’s singleness is violently exposed and laid bare shortly before one’s sacrificial death. Interestingly, there is yet another distinctive feature of the victim – innocence. It is only afterwards that this truth receives a specific sort of objective realization, namely – in the process of deification, which moulds the separated, “sinful” part into an object of cult. There surely is something “satanic”, to use the phrase of Girard, about this way of individualization. In this victimary paradigm, where no other language of human relations is spoken, although its existence may be intuited, yet another kind of individuality is revealed. The exemplary

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 102. This idea contradicts both undifferentiation and disintegration.

²⁸ *Idem*, *Battling to the End...*, p. 131.

²⁹ *Idem*, *When These Things...*, p. 65.

³⁰ Meanwhile, Dupuy notes that the “difference between victim and mob is the beginning of all differentiation”. See: J.-P. Dupuy, *René Girard. Desire, Violence, and Religion*, p. 8.

individuality is that of Christ – a self-conscious and consenting victim, a true agent whose identification is simultaneously divine and human. To identify with Christ, who presented the attitude of withdrawal and did not want to be imitated, is to assume a non-violent, unforced and persistent identity and, thereby, to resist the evil of mimetic desire effectively. There is a significant point to be made – identity is related to the revelation of the truth and both reside outside community, “outside of the system”, beyond any totality³¹. A scapegoat, just like Christ, is situated beyond the game of powers.

Desire as a subject

In response to his interlocutor’s suggestion that there may be yet another way of gaining identity and escaping mimetic contagion, one which is more natural, based on self-reflection and possible without direct references to Christianity, Girard says,

[t]his process is possible, but it is not under our control. [...] Some are lucky enough to have had good models and to have been educated in the possibility of taking distance. Others have had the bad luck to have had poor models. We do not have the power to decide; the models make decisions for us. One can be destroyed by one’s model: imitation is always what makes us fail in identification. It is as if there was fatalism in our violent proximity to the other³².

Regaining the proper distance in relation to others, then, is neither impossible nor nonexistent; however, much as it is desirable, it is uncommon: “[i]mmunity to mimesis is a very rare and precious quality”, we read³³.

One of the sources of Girard’s pessimism is – I believe – his reductive formula of mimetic desire being the essence of humans. While desire relates a human being in an essential way to other humans, the dynamics of human reality is defined in terms of conflict or struggle, which – again and again – seeks a sacrificial discharge. Unless it becomes subject to enlightenment and undergoes a total conversion, desire belongs to the realm of competing powers, and an individual is naturally subjugated to overwhelmingly powerful, supra-individual sacrificial mechanisms. We read that

³¹ See: R. Girard, *Battling to the End...*, p. 50.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 99. My emphasis.

³³ This kind of immunity, by the way, is mentioned by the author as a necessary condition of forming a true friendship. R. Girard, *Job...*, p. 61.

human subjects as individuals are not aware of the circular process in which they are trapped; the real manipulator of the process is mimetic contagion itself. There is no real subject within this mimetic contagion, and that is finally the meaning of the title 'prince of this world', if it is recognized that Satan is the absence of being³⁴.

These words tell volumes about the vicious circle at the heart of which Girard places a human being. There is something "satanic" in any human society and it finds its manifestation in the phenomenon of the crowd. It involves the lack of real subject, "the absence of being", a kind of barren, fatal impersonality. Even though humans are said to be historical through and through, and history is not determined, they are, anyway, subject to genetic laws hidden behind human culture and defining the way humans interact. An impersonal desire itself (the nothing) emerges as the subject of history. Given the relation between desire and violence, history may be easily narrated from the perspective of violence. "Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure"³⁵. Being thus entangled, the more individualistic humans strive to be, the more dependent on the powers at work they become. While Girard's idea of a human subject is anti-essentialist, his idea of human society crosses the threshold of metaphysics, granting to the latter – by the same token – an unshakable preponderance over the former.

Girard mentions at one point "the most excessive individualism, one that presupposes the total autonomy of individuals, that is, the autonomy of their desires"³⁶. Should he – by reducing an individual to desire – assume a sort of Nietzschean definition of human being? Or, perhaps, he merely evokes the modern understanding of an individual and – consequently – of the kind of individualism that he is otherwise so critical of? It is probable that Girard, so critical of Nietzsche, shares some elements of his anthropology, to mention only the rejection of a rational, conscious human agent. This, by the way, explains his insistence on the need for a transcendent solution to the problem of mimetic contagion – otherwise humans are merely a part of the field of powers they are entrapped in. If the future of humans is open-ended, it is due to the appearance of God-man. The problem is that the desired completion of hominization may turn out to be beyond human capacities, or, in other words, humans may prove unable to withstand

³⁴ *Idem*, *I See Satan...*, p. 70.

³⁵ *Idem*, *Things Hidden...*, p. 210.

³⁶ *Idem*, *I See Satan...*, p. 8. My emphasis.

the test of history. Girard's pessimism, then, is coherent with the quasi-metaphysical make-up of culture and society as according to mimetic theory. In an explicit expression of it, the author says that

there is neither non-sacrificial space, nor 'true history'. Solomon's judgment explains everything on this score; there is the sacrifice of the other, and self-sacrifice; archaic sacrifice and Christian sacrifice. However, it is all sacrifice³⁷.

A quarter of a century earlier Girard wrote: "There are only those who dominate and those who are dominated"³⁸. Ontologically speaking then, our actions and relations with others are but forms of conforming to the rule of sacrifice; we are moving in-between different dimensions of it. If the substance of our being is desire, its form is sacrifice. There is neither costless satisfaction of desire nor costless identity. The already mentioned idea of symbolicity being the "formal" essence of human culture fits into this pattern too – we have noted that symbolization may be viewed as a mode of sacrifice. By way of digression, we might also speculate that, ontologically, it is sacrifice that is primary, not violence, violence being the way in which the law of sacrifice manifests itself through history.

Violence thrives on desire, and to reproduce itself it needs an unceasing repetition, which is provided in the form of rivalry. Violence transcends and modifies itself; through mechanisms active in human societies it regulates and contains itself. From the perspective of the ideal of humanity (after conversion), rivalry is an erratic way of striving for identity. This sheds some light on why Girard is suspicious of what he calls the illusion of human autonomy and different forms of alliance between individuality and power.

If we assume that desire is the main individualizing factor for a human being, individuation is negative and threatened by the trap of mimetic contagion³⁹. The negativity is deepened by the "bad infinite" mentioned earlier. Desire tends to be impersonal and drives one right into

³⁷ *Idem*, *Battling to the End...*, p. 35.

³⁸ *Idem*, *Things Hidden...*, p. 293.

³⁹ Andrzej Gielarowski notes that Girard indeed assumes that desire is the main individualizing factor and, at the same time, is critical of the romantic idea of an autonomous desire. It seems, then, that Girard's conception of desire makes individuation *de iure* "unsuccessful". See: A. Gielarowski, „Człowiek i pragnienie. Podmiot kultury w refleksji René Girarda”, [in:] *Naród. Społeczeństwo. Kultura*, ed. T. Homa, Ł. Bandola, K. Daraż-Duda, Kraków: Episteme, 2011, p. 13.

the collective fatality. We surely lack positive identity; the question is – are we capable of acquiring one? Another question follows immediately – what, if any, faculties do people have at their disposal, particularly in a secular age, to become subjects of the conversion in question? It is required that desire defines itself by self-restraint, and ideally – by (at least partial) self-denial. The readiness for self-limitation, however, must be first embodied by good models, exceptional individuals, as Girard himself admits. It is a challenge for a culture “increasingly unable to comprehend the positive nature of renunciation”⁴⁰. Perhaps a great historical trauma, a shocking and transforming experience might trigger a sort of collective *metanoia* followed by a major cultural change. Otherwise, in a relatively self-reflective culture, which finds itself in a state of a prolonged political and legal crisis (and contemporary world has certain features of such a culture), individuals cannot control violence, but may gain a critical insight into the nature of the crisis. This kind of recognition, at least theoretically, might be a harbinger of change. The paradox is that, at the time when institutions are increasingly helpless and after individualism has been exorcised from public discourse, the burden of constraining violence is shifted onto individuals.

The crisis Girard speaks of is – at bottom – a crisis of desire. Overcoming it would be tantamount to overturning the reign of violence over human relations. Desire directed at the other can take either the form of duel or of love. The latter, understood as a pacifistic anthropological “mode”, involves the rejection of the logic of vengeance, called also “reciprocity of loss”⁴¹, and self-containment in the face of the other. “To imitate Christ is to identify with the other, to efface oneself before him”, we read⁴². One should not mistake a withdrawing subject, able to resist mimetic temptation, with a non-subject or a liquidated, post-modern subject. Girard, inspired by Levinas, also considers the transformation which violence, tending to take control of human relations, may undergo in and through relationship. The Other “is already the living enemy facing him [man]. It is as if we had to go through the ordeal of the real”. Through a dramatic “confrontation with otherness [...] the individual acquires self-consciousness”⁴³.

Returning to the main issue which preoccupies us here, namely the status of human individuality and autonomy, the thinker from Avignon notes that one specific tradition created a particularly powerful image of an

⁴⁰ R. Girard, *When These Things...*, p. 86.

⁴¹ See: J.-P. Dupuy, *René Girard. Desire, Violence, and Religion*, p. 10.

⁴² R. Girard, *Battling to the End...*, p. 133.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

individual and granted it a privileged position. “I think Christianity pushed the discovery of the person as far as it could go”, and this allowed for “the loosening of ritual constraints [...] [and] the desacralization of the social”⁴⁴. Girard admits the discovery of a person to be a “great innovation”, but is critical of its repercussions or rather – the gradual degeneration of the idea. We read:

Like all great Christian innovations, this one is vulnerable to terrifying distortions and perversions. The modern individual is what remains of the person when romantic ideologies have finished with it, it’s an idolatry of self-sufficiency that is necessarily deceptive, an anti-mimetic philosophy of the will that immediately causes a redoubling of imitation, an ever more complete submission to the group, which is itself ever more subject to the futile pull of fashion, and thus always exposed to totalitarian temptations⁴⁵.


The words quoted above form a not untypical criticism of the fate of individualism after the idea of the person was stripped of its moral orientation, including forms of discipline, responsibility, asceticism, self-denial, etc., and transformed by various philosophies of will and political ideologies into an egotistic and egoistic subject, and, ultimately, an atomistic particle susceptible to all kinds of deception and “totalitarian temptations”. What is important, Girard relates his reluctance towards individualism in its contemporary form to the failure of its ideal, manifesting itself in “an ever more complete submission to the group”. However, even though the thinker has no doubts as to the evils of collective life and the consequences of the inability to resist the pull of the crowd in critical moments, he nevertheless does not venture to rethink human autonomy or consider its possible rehabilitation.

To conclude, I have tried to shed some light on what I consider to be the most sensitive “moments” in Girard’s anthropology, ones that place an individual human being in a particularly problematic position. When trying to clarify the constitution and status of human subject and its autonomy, one may stumble upon Girard’s almost imperceptible switching in-between different perspectives, sometimes operating with different understanding of time, like evolutionary (Darwinian), ontological (even if not overtly so), and eschatological. While the dynamics of these intertwining perspectives, in which different intellectual traditions resonate, constitutes an added value for Girard’s hermeneutics of the human world, in some cases it is unclear

⁴⁴ *Idem*, *When These Things...*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

how these perspectives and modalities coexist or overlap. Moreover, while the sort of transformation of modern humanity advocated by Girard is hardly imaginable without individuals of certain moral integrity, autonomous hermeneutic capacity, and at least a degree of freedom to act, an individual human being in his theory is literally overwhelmed by certain fatal mechanisms, in terms of which social and cultural phenomena are explained. The status quo of the actual human being and the desired completion of the process of hominization seem to differ essentially rather than form a continuum and, consequently, the possibility of a passage between them is unclear. On the one hand, the Revelation releases the grip of the original sin, on the other, humans prove incapable of meeting the challenge of conversion.

This being said, one may note in Girard's defense that the tension in question is not at all incongruent with the vision of Christianity held by the French thinker – as an otherworldly, destabilizing element, one that disorganizes any earthly structure, without ever promising any terrestrial paradise. Moreover, the process of hominization and its (apocalyptic) horizon elude rational thinking. Thus, it is legitimate to let paradox in and leave certain questions unresolved, which, rather than undermining the value of ideas like those of Girard, the critical and hermeneutic power of which is an achievement in itself, constitutes a challenge to question, reinterpret or amend them. 

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