THE SACRED AND THE POLITICAL

Explorations on Mimesis, Violence and Religion

Edited by
Elisabetta Brighi and Antonio Cerella

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Acknowledgments

Little did we know in May 2013, when the idea of the book first took form, that just over two years later the volume would become a way of celebrating the life of René Girard, who died on November 4, 2015, while this manuscript was in production. Girard leaves an enormous intellectual legacy, which the present volume seeks to honour, interrogate, and keep alive. The editors would like to thank all the authors for their contributions and interest in the project, without which this volume would have never seen the light of day. We also owe thanks and gratitude, for their intellectual engagement and friendly presence, to Bianca Baggiarini, Katrin Becker, Hüseyin I. Cicek, Michael Desarno, Rosemary Durward, Viola Giuliano, Peter Lucas, Stéphane Marcireau, Jacques Emmanuel McCaughran, Martin O'Brien, Brian Rosebury, Laura Schuurmans, Anja Teichert, Scott M. Thomas, Jodok Troy, William C. Wolf, Harald Wydra and all the participants to the Conference "Politics, Violence and the Sacred: Exploring René Girard's Thought in Security and International Studies" (UCLan, May 23–24, 2013). Along with these acknowledgments, Antonio Cerella also wishes to express his gratitude, for their constant intellectual support and friendship, to Arthur Bradley, Marco Cesa, Jonathan Colman, Fred Dallmayr, Mick Dillon, Roberto Farneti, Charlie Gere, Laurence P. Hemming, Gavin Hyman, Luca Mavelli, Fabio Petito, Rocco Ronchi, Justin Rosenberg, Richard Sakwa, Ben Selwyn, Ferdinando Tupone and Kees van der Pijl. *Igitur et monere et moneri proprium est verae amicitiae.*

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Spinoza, Girard and the Possibility of a Purely Immanent Democracy

Stéphane Vinolo

We are not asserting that everything that is done by right is also done in the best way; it is one thing to till a field by right, another thing to till it in the best way. [. . .] Consequently, it is one thing to rule and to take charge of public affairs by right, another thing to rule in the best way and direct public affairs in the best way.

—Baruch Spinoza[1]

Since the very beginning of philosophy, democracy as a political system has suffered severe criticisms. From Plato to Badiou, the belief that human beings are politically guided not only by truth but also by majority opinion has been seen as a complete misunderstanding of politics. Likewise, as the current global economic crisis illustrates, attacks against democracy have come from both left- and right-wing groups. The idea that society must be ruled by opinions, whose only legitimacy rests on the majority principle, is somehow seen as disenchanting. Indeed, the vast majority of us would expect to be ruled by ideas or beliefs that are justified either by rational arguments or transcendent values. Within this philosophical framework, a purely immanent democracy that is only based on the legitimacy of majority opinion might not be as satisfying as a political system based on transcendent symbols. Majority opinion is nothing more than a mere reflection of what citizens want or desire in a specific historical moment. From an absolutist viewpoint, democracy is a fragile system, which serves as a mechanism to elaborate values that are not necessarily based on an inherent concept of transcendence, but rather of self-transcendence.

Within the notion of self-transcendence lies a clear opposition between theological systems and democracies. No one has better described this opposition than Jacques Derrida. Citizens are, he argues, both the voice and the ear of the

law. When we analyze *democracy* in light of its *interconnectedness*, we can see that it functions cyclically: "[...] I don't imagine it was ever possible to think and say, even if only in Greek, 'democracy,' before the rotation of some *wheel*."[2] Democratic values are thus inherently self-transcendent. Their principles are not drawn from a fixed external point of reference, but are rather placed in a transcendental position by an immanent and quantitative process.

The crucial issue that I want to discuss in this chapter is the (re)articulation of transcendence and self-transcendence in relation to democratic regimes. This antagonism, as I will show, lies at the heart of Girard's Mimetic Theory. From a Girardian point of view, the whole of human history is signed and divided by the act of Revelation. Although the ancient world was ruled by a sacred self-transcendence, the post-Revelation era has deconstructed this mechanism through the "real" transcendence of Christ, and nothing can be further apart than these two forms of sacred.[3] From a structural point of view, however, the Revelation is nothing more than the revelation of what we thought to be a transcendent structure within a self-transcendent framework. Democracy could thus be seen as the shadow of an archaic belief projected in the contemporary world. It could be perceived as the contemporary embodiment of a lynching mob that used to stabilize human societies in the ancient world. In this sense, there is a strong similarity between the ancient crowd and contemporary majorities. From archaic societies to democracies, the common thread is often seen as being strictly numerical; that is, the greater number will determine human values and decisions. In fact, many modern-day democracies are faced with the Girardian problem of scapegoating, and some authors have analyzed the ritual roots of democratic systems.[4]

However, even though the mechanism undergirding the *self-transcendence* of democracies is very similar to the one that Girard unveiled in his analysis, they should not be considered as identical. We should bear in mind that there is a significant difference between what we refer to as crowds and what is considered to be majority opinion. These differences, which are mainly epistemological, have a significant impact on politics and political action. Since we know that victims are innocent, we cannot afford to merely relying on self-transcendent mechanisms. We should likewise consider the protection of victims and guarantee the rights of minorities. Despite these differences, there is still a very disturbing similarity between contemporary victimary thinking and the archaic scapegoating mechanism. Therefore, it is worth exploring whether democracy might be considered as a "mimetic double" of this archaic mechanism.

In order to tackle this issue, we must first distinguish between two conceptions of democracy: the contemporary democracy and the Spinozian one. If the aim of democracy were to promote transcendent and absolute values, it would be very close to archaic societies and, therefore, would face the same prospect of violence. To protect democracies from such a danger, a Spinozian democracy would then be required. Through a rereading of Spinoza's conception of democracy, I argue that the sole efficient response to the crisis of undifferentiation triggered by post-Revelation is a purely immanent democracy that has definitely renounced any kind of transcendent value. Furthermore, in order to defend an immanent democracy, a clear distinction between transcendent and self-transcendent political regimes is discussed. Regardless of the values defended within a transcendental framework, a political regime that is based on such values is likely to be perceived as violent because of its inherently absolutist structure. Even though it is crucial to distinguish between victims and victimizer, they are both—in this writer's opinion—a potential source of violence because they portray their actions as being justifiable by some sort of transcendent framework. In this regard, therefore, a Spinozian democracy appears to be the only solution to human violence.

Transcendence, self-transcendence and violence

There is a very disturbing paradox that every reader of René Girard's Mimetic Theory has to face, and which is fully developed in *Battling to the End*.[5] In this work, Girard posits that by unveiling the mechanism of scapegoating and the innocence of the victims, Christ has limited the possibility of lynching, and therefore, has reduced the level of violence in human societies. Christ would have brought about a positive truth and indirectly acted as a vector of peace.

In a post-Revelation era, we should refrain from using the same scapegoating mechanisms. It should be assumed that societies would be saved by the creation of a barrier between internal and external mediations. Nonetheless, the Revelation of victims' innocence has had dramatic consequences. Even if we agree that the murder of innocent victims is absolutely unacceptable, we should still pay close attention to the fact that this scapegoat mechanism has stabilized human communities for centuries. Once the sacrificial chain has been broken, political systems become inefficient, and this inefficiency means that violence

can no longer be restrained. Hence, according to Girard, Revelation should be considered as a *pharmakon* to violence. It is, by its very nature, both a cure against any collective action of violence, and a "poison" that has fully unleashed mimetic violence with no further obstacle that could reasonably stop it: "A scapegoat remains effective as long as we believe in its guilt. Having a scapegoat means not knowing that we have one. Learning that we have a scapegoat is to lose it forever and to expose ourselves to mimetic conflicts with no possible resolution."[6]

While, for Girard, the archaic Gods represent the paradigmatic figures of self-transcendence (in which a victim, emerging from the immanence of the community, is divined by means of a misunderstanding of the process of her eviction), Christ is the model of the "real transcendence" (who reveals the truth of the mechanism from a position radically external to the community). Following Girard's insight, we may say that the truth is spread by "real transcendence," which could thus save us from violence. Ironically, though, this event leads to even more violence. The "real transcendence" that is revealed is even more violent than the one represented by the self-transcendent archaic Gods: "The fetters put in place by the founding murder but unshackled by the Passion, are now liberating planet-wide violence and we cannot refasten the bindings because we know now that scapegoats are innocent."[7] How, then, can we stop violence, especially when the consequences of miscognition are neither acceptable nor efficient, and when the consequences of truth-revelation lead us toward apocalyptic scenarios? A possible answer to this dilemma has been partially provided by Girard himself.

According to him, there is no political resolution to this situation because political obstacles to mimetic violence are nothing but supplementary actions of violence. Today, societies are suffering from a complete and structural inability to contain reciprocal violence. The only way to escape these extremes is through a complete conversion[8] to the message of Christ: "To make the Revelation wholly good, and not threatening at all, humans have only to adopt the behaviour recommended by Christ: abstain completely from retaliation, and renounce the escalation to extremes."[9] We can only admire Girard's ethical stance here; however, we cannot be but sceptical about its probability of success. Girard himself is well aware of the implausibility of this ethical approach, and the deeply dark and pessimistic atmosphere that shines through the pages of *Battling to the End* could be read as a reflection of this "double bind" situation: "We can all participate in the divinity of Christ so long as we renounce our own violence. However, we now know, in part thanks to Clausewitz, that humans will not renounce it."[10]

Girard's Mimetic Theory clearly highlights the scope and limits of both transcendence and self-transcendence mechanisms through which order is established in human societies. According to it, therefore, there are only two historical paths left open to humankind: either global conversion or global apocalypse. Unless we can prove that Girard has overlooked a third option: the possibility of a purely and immanently-founded community, that is to say, a Spinozian democracy.

Spinoza and democracy as *omnino absolutum imperium*

Spinoza is among the very few philosophers who explicitly explored the relationships among mimetism, violence and politics.[11] More important, he has provided us with an in-depth and powerful insight into the nature of *mimetism*. As we can read in his *Ethics*: "From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves, toward which we have felt no emotion, to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion."[12] A second point of comparison between Girard and Spinoza can be found in the importance they both attribute to the figure of Christ. This could sound quite odd because Spinoza is usually considered a pantheist-cum-atheist. This reading, however, tends to overlook the crucial position that the figure of Christ and faith occupy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. On this point, it is worth recalling Levinas's analysis.

He described Spinoza as a betrayer of the Jewish community because of the significant role that Christ plays in the Spinozian reading of the sacred texts. Levinas suspects him to have submitted Judaism to the Revelation of the New Testament.[13] Even if we disagree with such an allegation, Levinas is definitely right in arguing that Christ is at the heart of Spinoza's hermeneutics in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Furthermore, both the allegations of pantheism and of atheism should not lead us to believe that the whole existential experience of the *Ethics* should be read, as Pierre Macherey has suggested, as a profound ethical conversion.[14] Even more left-wing interpretations of Spinoza have argued that there is something like a quivering feeling of conversion that runs throughout the *Ethics*.

However, despite these similarities, there remains one major difference between Girard's and Spinoza's theoretical apparatus, which I use to spell out the

possibility and the necessity of a purely immanent democracy. As Girard has pointed out, if all human beings behaved according to the ethical principles of the Gospel, humanity would be saved by a complete renouncement to desire. For him, there is no third option between total and all-embracing ethical conversion and equally total and all-encompassing violent escalation to extremes. A similar idea can be found in Spinoza's philosophy, but with one important difference: Between conversion and apocalypse, there is still a way for politics. Spinoza posits, just like Girard, that politics is nothing more than a prosthesis for the masses. Their need for politics stems from their lack of knowledge and education. Politics, therefore, is thought of as a simple and makeshift means to rationalize things. Nevertheless, if we could imagine a society in which all individuals reached the highest level of knowledge, a society in which all humans had read and interiorized the message of the *Ethics*, politics would be totally unnecessary. This is not because politics would not have any impact on violence, but rather because individuals, guided by reason, would naturally desire to live in peace and have nothing to expect from politics. This dichotomy between politics and knowledge appears clearly in the *Theological-Political Treatise*: "Now if men were so constituted by nature as to desire nothing but what is prescribed by true reason, society would stand in no need of any laws. Nothing would be required but to teach men true moral doctrine, and they would then act to their true advantage of their own accord, whole-heartedly and freely."[15] There exists friction between political systems that can be created through ignorance, and what might be described as the anarchy of wise men; that is, a purely self-organized social system that is based on the conjoining of all human desires, and yet still guided by reason. At a conceptual level, then, Girard and Spinoza seem to share very similar views of politics—understood as a kind of relief from ignorance.

Spinoza does, however, also resemble Girard in that he has no illusion about the actual achievement of a solid and self-organized social system. Humankind, as a whole, cannot achieve this kind of knowledge. The logical conclusion of the *Ethics* is that the ignorant cannot be saved.[16] Yet, even though the ignorant cannot be saved by knowledge, they can still be saved by obedience.[17] At this point, we can almost predict an unbridgeable gap between Girardian and Spinozian thought. *Obedience*, in Spinoza's work, is defined as the opposite of knowledge because it tends to be interpreted as an adaptation to an external law (whereas *consent* can be defined as obedience to an internal law; e.g., the law of rationality). We cannot but notice that although Spinoza is usually described as a philosopher of freedom and liberation, his major political texts

can be read as two treatises on obedience: obedience to divine laws in order to live according to the *vera vivendi ratio*—true conception of living[18] (in the *Theological-Political Treatise*), and obedience to the political laws (in the *Political Treatise*). Accordingly, there is still something that can be done in order to protect us from violence and injustice: obedience to law. In Spinoza's work, there is thus a clear depreciation of knowledge in the political life in favor of a purely externalist and behavioral obedience to the law. Whether citizens agree to the law or not, the important point is that obedience *per se*, as a concept, exists in society: "It is not the reason for being obedient that makes a subject, but obedience as such."[19]

The divergence between Spinoza and Girard cannot be more irreconcilable. Girard not only has no hope in politics, but also describes democracy as the utmost mimetic regime. Democracy is a regime that leads us toward the fastest road to apocalypse by eliminating most of the cultural, religious and societal differences among individuals: "The increasing equality—the approach of the mediator in our terms—does not give rise to harmony but to an even keener rivalry."[20] Since 1961, Girard has described democracy as a "mimetic machine." When, for instance, Girard analyzes Tocqueville's discussion of the destruction of the *Ancien Régime*, he precisely explores the links between the new forms of political and social equality spread by the Revolution and the massification of rivalry. In the ancient monarchical systems, the fight for power was limited by the boundaries established by a king's family. Conversely, in democratic regimes today, the desire for power is extended to all citizens and all peoples. The extension of rights and liberties to all citizens theoretically implies that everyone can aspire to the same positions and desire to possess the same things. What was a limited rivalry is now a potential *bellum omnium contra omnes*: "They have destroyed the annoying privileges of some of their fellow-men; they encounter the competition of everyone."[21] After having dismantled the transcendence of the divine rights of sovereigns that used to rule the old regimes, democracy is now facing the problem of an even more violent self-transcendence of power.

It is not surprising, then, that Girard in 2007—establishing a link between democracy, mimetism and global rivalry—still believed that democracy, even more than other political regimes, was a futile and useless shelter to violence: "Only democratic hope can claim to put an end to the tragedy, but we now know that this is a modern platitude."[22] Moreover, democracy was considered a political regime that was somehow spreading more and more violence: "Democracy is the author of that little invention, the power to draft people."[23] The critique of

self-transcendence put forward by Girard is, therefore, a critique of the archaic Gods and the scapegoat mechanism as well as a strong conceptual offensive against the futility and the political impotence of democracy.

Spinoza, to the contrary, has given democracy a fundamental position by means of his philosophical system. Spinoza's approach to democracy is purely positive and affirmative. In his view, democracy is not to be seen as the best possible political regime, but, rather, as the best regime from an *absolutist position*. Democracy, in other words, is the "ultimate" political regime, or at least, the best of the political regimes that humanity will ever experience: "I pass on at length to the third kind of state, the completely absolute state which we call democracy."[24] In what way might democracy be considered an "absolute and ultimate" regime in Spinoza's thought, and how does it face the problem of violence? How can Spinoza still believe in democracy when the self-transcendence of values and power resembles the murderous mechanism of scapegoating? How can we believe in democracy where there is a constant effort to promote the will of the majority, that is, that form of grouping that resembles the most to the unanimity of a lynching crowd?

A plea for an immanent democracy

In order to understand why we should side with Spinoza—that is, in favor of a purely immanent democracy—we must first identify the essential problems that contemporary democracies are facing regarding the linkage between mimetism and violence. According to Mimetic Theory, rivalry and violence would emerge not from *real* equality, but from *structural* equality, that is, equality understood as a fundamental governing principle of society. Due to the loss of the transcendental dimension, which was capable of justifying the differences among citizens, any social diversity among them might nowadays be perceived not only as divergence but also as injustice. For the equality principle posits that we can all reach the same status or goal. Therefore, if a person has something that I do not possess, this difference might not only be perceived as a neutral difference, but also as a social injustice. From this egalitarian perspective, the status of the victims has been radically changed because of the deconstruction of the scapegoat mechanism. More specifically, most of us want to be seen as a victim because the victim status is now considered the ideal position to justify and legitimize violence. Today, the violence of the victimizer is

unanimously considered unjust, while the violence perpetrated by the victimized is perceived as morally just. This process, however, according to Mimetic Theory, has little to do with psychology or sociology: It is the result of the deconstruction of the scapegoat mechanism that is advancing relentlessly since the event of the Revelation.

Because of the legacy of the two World Wars and the Holocaust, Europe has entered a post-modern era that is mainly based on "victimary thinking." Eric Gans, for example, has shown the impact of this victimary thinking on the political realm and, at the microlevel, on academic socialization in university departments.[25] Wherever we look, victims are at the center of the media's and the public's attention. On the one hand, this process surely represents a kind of moral progress. Yet, on the other hand, a novel form of "victimhood" has been forged; a radical phenomenon directly linked with deconstruction: victimary competition. An example of this dynamic could be the way in which, at the time of this writing, minority groups that have been persecuted in France for centuries are raising serious claims against the current French government. These claims, although legitimate in themselves, are mimetic too. The persecuted group members wish to be *recognized* as victims. But being recognized as victims *per se* also implies that they are recognized as victims like other minority groups. By the same token, each minority demands its own commemorative day, and elaborates its own version of national history (which has to be taught in schools) as well as its own museums that are funded and inaugurated by the same political bodies. Indeed, when there is no equanimity among minority groups, there emerges a tendency to feel less recognized and less legitimate than others. The point here is not to criticize this desire for recognition, but simply to stress the mimetism that is pervading "victimary thinking" and its consequences.

Indeed, in our contemporary world, there is a spiral of claims of a mimetic nature that resemble those used by victimizers. This phenomenon echoes Pascal's philosophical views, according to which there is nothing the truth can do in order to stop violence:

> It is a strange and tedious war when violence attempts to vanquish truth. All the efforts of violence cannot weaken truth, and only serve to give it fresh vigour. All the lights of truth cannot arrest violence, and only serve to exasperate it. When force meets force, the weaker must succumb to the stronger; when argument is opposed to argument, the solid and the convincing triumphs over the empty and the false; but violence and verity can make no impression on each other. Let none suppose, however, that the two are, therefore, equal to each other; for there

> is this vast difference between them, that violence has only a certain course to run, limited by the appointment of Heaven, which overrules its effects to the glory of the truth which it assails; whereas verity endures forever and eventually triumphs over its enemies, being eternal and almighty as God himself.[26]

Mimetic violence is thus not only based on the misunderstanding of the persecutors, but also on the unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism. From an epistemological and moral standpoint, the victim/victimized and the victimizer have little in common. They are opposite forces, like positive and negative charges. However, from the point of view of mimetic violence and the escalation to extremes, victims and victimizers are, very dangerously, becoming similar to mimetic doubles. In the ancient world, for example, violence was expulsed by means of violence. As Girard metaphorically put it: "In order to prevent the destruction of his kingdom, Satan makes out of his disorder itself, at his highest heat, a means of expelling himself."[27] Our contemporary world already knows its double—the satanistic violence based on the equally mimetic violence of the victims based on the truth and the deconstruction of the scapegoat mechanism: "The sacred, which has been returning for 2,000 years, is thus not an archaic form of the sacred, but a sacred that has been 'satanized' by the awareness we have of it, and that indicates, through its very excesses, the imminence of the Second Coming."[28] From the archaic world to our present day, victims are equally sacred (even though in a very different way). Although victims, in the archaic world, used to be made sacred because of their false guilt, they are now sacralized because of their true innocence. Any objection, any obstacle, any doubt that opposed these claims is thus perceived as a supplementary violence on the victims that justifies even more their claims, consolidating their status.

Two contemporary French philosophers have shown how this dynamic works and how violence is spread today in the name of victims. Alain Finkielkraut has analyzed, for instance, the new wave of anti-Semitism that, according to him, is very different from the anti-Semitism of the past. While German anti-Semitism was based on the annihilation of otherness, Jews are now persecuted in the name of the victims; that is, in the name of the innocence of the Other. Hitler, as is well known, gave anti-Semitism an evil connotation, but this has also somehow protected the Jews from the resurgence of Nazi thinking and violence. Finkielkraut, however, argues that the new form of anti-Semitism, which is affecting modern democratic societies, is justified, in the mind of the victim, by their "alleged innocence." The new challenge that Jews, therefore, have to face is violence in the name of the Other, that is, in defense of the victim:

> The Other is wholly innocent, and even if his intentions are revolting, even if he comports himself as a *declared enemy*, it is never anything other than a legitimate defense. If the Other commits reprehensible acts, it is only in reaction to the spirit of reaction—in response, for example, to the apartheid practices and the harsh security measures to which he has been unfairly subjected. If he is angry, it is because exploitation and exclusion have made him dream of opening fire on the crowd; it is because his rights have been violated in France and his brothers murdered in Palestine. If he is a fanatic, it is because of the degradation to which the Gaudins and the Zionists have condemned him.[29]

From a different perspective and through a deep analysis of the roots of 9/11, Jean-Pierre Dupuy reaches similar conclusions. To make his point, Dupuy refers to an interview delivered by Osama bin Laden on February 5, 2002, in which he declared that violence is not only theologically defendable, but also logically justified by the rules of reciprocity, and most important, that the violence of the victims is no less reciprocal than that of the victimizer: "If killing those who kill our sons is terrorism, then let history be witness that we are terrorists. [...] We kill the kings of the infidels, kings of the crusaders, and civilian infidels in exchange for those of our children they kill. This is *permissible* in *Islamic law* and *logically*."[30]

In both Dupuy's and Finkielkraut's analyses, we can clearly see an application of Girardian thought: the unveiling of the scapegoating mechanism and the innocence of the victims brings about even more violence. This new form of mimetic violence, however, is based on the new status of innocence of the victims. Furthermore, it knows no limits because values that are perceived as "just" and "legitimate" are potentially as violent and as illegitimate as the ones of the persecutors. Thus, on the one hand, we should denounce the persecutors and accept the innocence of the victims, but on the other hand, we should find a way by which the mimetic violence of the victims can be contained because, due their perceived legitimacy, "good values" could be even more dangerous than the "bad ones." Therefore, when transcendence and self-transcendence are solely understood as justificatory principles, and when both of these concepts might be equally subjected to violence, where can we find a middle ground on which to establish neutral relations? It is at this conceptual level that Spinoza, by means to his concept of purely immanent politics, can help us shed some light on this issue.

As previously mentioned, if a democracy is based on "good" or "positive" human values, it might be no less violent than a democracy based on "bad

values." The only real way to fully escape violence, and mechanisms of victimization is to abandon the entrenched view that political systems should be solely founded on values. As a matter of fact, any political system that continues to refer to transcendent or self-transcendent values can in itself be subject to scrutiny. In other words, we should renounce the belief that the political common denominator is a matter of "right" and "wrong." Instead of perpetually seeking a well-founded political system anchored on absolute values, we should rely on its emerging antithesis: a nonfounded politics. Accepting this view does not mean, however, that there are no legitimate reasons behind established political systems, but rather that their basic foundation should rely on a Spinozian perspective, which we could define as the unbearable lightness of mathematics and numbers. Let me try to spell out this point in a little more detail.

In principle, the sole legitimacy of law lies in the fact that it has been voted or selected by a majority of the citizens. Consequently, members of a society will try to follow the majority views and behave accordingly, even if some of these views are considered to be unfair. In other words, as Spinoza points out, society as a whole will act in accordance with the dictates of the collective group, despite moral discrepancies:

> We see, then, that the individual citizen is not in control of his own right, but is subject to the right of the commonwealth, whose every command he is bound to carry out, and he does not have any right to decide what is fair or unfair, what is righteous or unrighteous. On the contrary, since the body of the state must be guided as if by a single mind (and consequently the will of the commonwealth must be regarded as the will of all), what the commonwealth decides to be just and good must be held to be so decided by every citizen. Thus, although a subject may consider the decrees of the commonwealth to be unfair, he is nevertheless bound to carry them out.[31]

Such an immanent form of democracy without resting on any value other than the majority principle could be interpreted as a very authoritarian regime. In some cases, though, the laws of a country might be balanced more by individual values than group or collective behavior. How, then, can we determine which moral values we should follow? Moreover, if we are capable of rejecting law in the name of our own moral value, how can we stop others from emulating this behavior, creating a dangerous "snowball effect"? As a matter of fact, nowadays even the most passionate follower of civil disobedience would not state that just any law could be disobeyed. Murder and rape, for instance, are seen as blatant transgressions of law and should, therefore, be punished accordingly. Conversely,

it is argued that there are "bad laws" that we can disobey, in the name of higher moral values, and "good laws" that we must always follow. Who decides, then, whether one action is morally justifiable, especially when it involves abiding by the law? If we accept that it may be possible to disobey a law that has been approved, this clearly implies that the vote of the majority can also be contradicted by other more ambivalent and conflicting values. For example, when France voted "no" to the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005, Daniel Cohn-Bendit[32] asked Europe to repeat the vote because, in his view, many people did not really understand the full meaning of the referendum. In the same vain, Eva Joly[33] denounced the arrogance of the Irish who had voted against the EU Treaty. In both cases, the citizens were told they were "wrong" and their votes were "misinterpreted."

This is the crucial point I wish to make: Can a vote or a legal decision be wrong even though it has been approved by a majority? It could be argued that it would be wrong only if we accepted the view that politics is merely about moral norms. But if we accepted such an idea, we would face the paradox of always having a minority for which the law voted by the majority is wrong. How to decide, then, which minority has the right to disobey the majority's decision? In a purely immanent democracy, we could embrace the idea that the results of an election should not be evaluated according to the "right" or "wrong" hypothesis, but only as far as the will of the people is concerned. In this sense, no one can simply be considered wrong in the realm of politics, just like no one can be evil in mathematics. During the 2005 European electoral campaign, most of the French media acted exactly as their counterparts. They presented polls showing people's preferences, which were portrayed as influenced by their level of education. The "no" was not even considered as a free expression or an option, but merely as the result of a lack of knowledge. Media could not even imagine that some of us really wanted to vote against the EU Constitution. To them, to vote "no" was not an option, but a mistake. In this case, the lack of respect for the vote in the referendum was not only permitted, but also promoted because it was perceived as a conflict between "right" and "wrong."

Another good example of this phenomenon is the *problématique* of the same-sex marriage. After France legalized same-sex marriage in 2013, some city mayors declared that they would disobey the new law, opposing same-sex marriage. Surprisingly, both politicians and the media took part in this heated debate, advocating obedience. In the case of the 2005 treaty, both the media and politicians find disobedience to the vote not only acceptable but also necessary

whereas the disobedience of the city mayors in the case of same-sex marriage was denounced as unacceptable and as a violation of the deepest principles of French democracy. This shows once again that when we support disobedience in the name of our own personal values, we are immediately faced with the problem of determining, and discriminating between, "good" and "bad" values.

Perhaps, the following example can better illustrate this issue. If we ask ourselves: Does it make any sense to say that direct taxation is fairer than indirect? In one sense, it does, but the opposite opinion is also totally plausible. In any case, this has nothing to do with being right or wrong. By the same token, we could debate whether proportional representation is fairer than majority representation. Once again, however, both arguments could be equally defended. It would be, therefore, an arduous task to try to demonstrate which option is fairer. Whereas, it is much easier to ask people to vote for the option they prefer or feel comfortable with. By voting, however, people are not demonstrating who is right and who is wrong; they are just advocating a preferred way of living by defining society's rules according to their own interpretations and moral standpoints.

In a purely immanent democracy, defense against a violent majority is reduced by the "law" of the lynching mob—as Girard has correctly pointed out. When this phenomenon occurs, it literally undermines Spinoza's vision and his idea of promoting an immanent politics of the crowd. Accordingly, there is some confusion on what the crowd represents and what the democratic majority signifies. In light of this argument, it is important to remember that, despite his defense of democracy, no other philosopher has been as sensitive to collective violence as Spinoza. This is not only for biographical reasons, but for theoretical ones too.[34] Conversely, if we accept the view that a majority is nothing more than a crowd, then we would not be doing proper justice to Spinoza's thought. Once again, there is an epistemological conflict. In effect, although the members of a crowd might believe they are morally right, the majority is aware that its legitimacy is solely determined numerically.

Thanks to Girard's anthropology, we can now better understand the difference between a democratic majority and a crowd as well as the reasons why a democratic majority is protected from mimetic violence. In a sense, Girard advocates Spinoza's ideas. A crowd, whether it is a crowd of victimizers or one of victims, is always driven by the view that their actions are justified by values (self-perceived as "good" or "right"). The persecutors or victimizers, however, believe in the justified actions taken against the victim in the same way that we

believe in the innocence of the victimized. On the contrary, a democratic majority knows that it has not clearly established, once and for good, what is "right" or "wrong." The only legitimacy of a true majority lies in what we could refer to as the lightness and grace of numbers. I refer to this form of legitimation as "the lightness of numbers" because, unlike transcendent values, a majority can easily move from one choice or position to another. Let us discuss a final example to reinforce this point.

In 2013, France decided to legalize same-sex marriages. In so doing, France did not demonstrate that same-sex marriage was good, fair or moral. It was not a matter of demonstration, truth or validity; it was a matter of will and choice, of a way of living. Thus, the idea that nonadherence to the law will not be persecuted became a conventional fact. Citizens who disagree with this law will be respected anyway. They probably would have a variety of interesting arguments to defend their beliefs against this "unjust law," but because politics is not about being right, they would be asked to respect the law, and all the mayors will be expected to celebrate same-sex marriages as long as this decision reflects the overall will of the majority: "Therefore, if a man who is guided by reason has sometimes to do, by order of the commonwealth, what he knows to be contrary to reason, this penalty is far outweighed by the good he derives from the civil order itself; for it is also a law of reason that of two evils the lesser should be chosen."[35] In fact, every citizen would have the chance to fight for his or her own beliefs, putting forward a public, political campaign, running for election, supporting a party or simply voting against a particular law. Because there are no democratic transcendent values, the opponents of the law will likewise be able to undo what the previous majority had done, but only when they come to power by creating a new majority. Until then, they will be asked to obey the laws.

Arguably, the prospect of a purely immanent democracy is somewhat disappointing, and perhaps, even disenchanting as it does not tell us how we should live. And this is probably what we all expect to obtain from philosophy and politics. But if we agree with Girard that violence is the biggest challenge that the world is facing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we could then accept that avoiding the escalation to extremes is probably the main goal we should aim to achieve. Accordingly, the first end of politics would be peace and security, although reformulated in Spinozian terms: "[...] the best state is one where men live together in harmony and where the laws are preserved unbroken. For it is certain that rebellions, wars, and contempt for a violation of the laws are to be attributed not so much to the wickedness of subjects as to the faulty

organization of the state."[36] Neither transcendent nor self-transcendent values would, therefore, be of much help to prevent us from global violence. As I have tried to demonstrate, the only way forward is to abandon our "warrior democracies," based on quasi-transcendental values, in favor of a purely immanent democracy.

Conclusion

Today, in the light of Girard's insights, it is becoming clearer that what is threatening our democracies is a global mimetic crisis leading to an apocalyptic escalation to extremes. Economic crises, environmental crises, social crises are just some of the major issues we are facing in our post-modern world. Indeed, these phenomena can be precisely conceived and defined by frameworks elaborate by thinkers such as Spinoza and Girard.

Mimetic Theory, which is a philosophical and anthropological approach built on the concept of crisis, is helpful to show us a way out of this apocalyptic moment. Yet, according to Girard, time is getting short: "[...] if the escalation to extremes continues a little longer, it will lead straight to the extinction of all life on the planet."[37] Nevertheless, Christianity has unveiled the scapegoat mechanism and limited its efficiency. The apocalypse is no longer a simple metaphor to define the end times. The differences on which societies were once based are now showing their fragility: "Today, violence has been unleashed across the whole world, creating what the apocalyptic texts predicted: confusion between disasters caused by nature and those caused by humans, between the natural and the man-made: global warming and rising waters are no longer metaphors today. Violence, which produced the sacred, no longer produces anything but itself."[38] This paradox consists of a new devastating violence, which is not only perpetrated by mimetic victimizers, as it used to be, but by mimetic victims as well. Most of the violence that occurs today has a direct correlation with the actions, behaviors and beliefs of both victimizers and victims. It is a purely reciprocal phenomenon: "Reciprocal action can thus be a source of both undifferentiation and of differences, as path to war and a road to peace."[39] The old heroism, based on the conquest and the submission of peoples, has been substituted by the new heroism of the defence of the victims: "The primacy of a defensive position is consistent with the appearance in a conflict of the principle of reciprocity as a suspended polarity in the sense that victory will not be immediate, but will be total *later*."[40]

However, transcendent truth justifies violence even more than a self-transcendent lie. The violence of the victim is based on a single truth, and therefore, any obstacle tends to distort its meaning. And this new violence knows no logical remedy: "We now know that differing violence, failing to renounce it straight away, always makes it grow."[41]

Accordingly, if neither transcendence nor self-transcendence can save us now, only immanence can. This is exactly what Spinoza has tried to establish in his very unique, in the whole history of philosophy, conception of democracy. Nowhere else has democracy been described in more absolutist terms. Even though Girard argues that democracy is the most mimetic regime and the closest one to the structure of a lynching mob, the fact that a crowd is always determined by self-justifying (transcendent) values allows us to clearly distinguish between *mimetic crowds* and *democratic majorities*. A crowd is founded on common values. Self-righteousness is the key feature of crowds and represents the *pharmakon* of violence. Consequently, crowds are spontaneous and mimetic, whereas a democratic majority is rational and organized. More important, Spinozan democracy is also paradoxically the regime that provides us with the strongest, and at the same time, lightest conception of power. On the one hand, it offers a very strong notion of politics because it conceives majority as its only form of real legitimacy. On the other hand, it is also the lightest because no idea is treated negatively *a priori*, and therefore, freedom of thought and speech are more likely guaranteed. The idea that politics should not be about being "right" or "wrong," but about knowing what citizens want and desire from society is probably a little disenchanting, as citizens would like to defend[42] their ideas and way of life even against majority opinion. Nonetheless, it is the best way to guarantee peace without abandoning rationality.

Notes

1 Baruch Spinoza, "Political Treatise," in Id., *Complete Works*, trans. S. Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 698–699.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10.

3 "Jesus is not divinized by the false unanimity that puts only a temporary end to collective violence. He is an unsuccessful scapegoat whose heroic willingness to die for the truth will ultimately make the entire cycle of satanic violence visible to all people, and therefore, inoperative. The 'kingdom of Satan' will give way to the

'kingdom of God.'" Cf. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lighting*, trans. J. G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 2.

4 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. S. Corcoran (London: Verso, 2007); Michel Serres, *Rome: The Book of Foundations*, trans. F. McCarren (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

5 René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, trans. M. Baker (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

6 Ibid., xiv.

7 Ibid., xi.

8 Girard discusses, back in 1961, his major intuition in terms of conversion: "Since the beginning of the 'novelistic conversion' in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, all my books have been more or less explicit apologies of Christianity." Cf. Girard, *Battling to the End*, xv. Moreover, he also describes the relationship between conversion and Mimetic Theory in terms of reciprocity: "My conversion is what put me on the mimetic path and the discovery of the mimetic principle is what converted me." Ibid., 196.

9 Ibid., xiv.

10 Ibid., xvi.

11 I have already discussed the numerous links between his work and that of Girard in Stéphane Vinolo, "Critique de la Raison Mimétique: René Girard lecteur de Jean-Paul Sartre," in Charles Ramond (ed.), *René Girard. La théorie mimétique, de l'apprentissage à l'apocalypse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 59–104.

12 Baruch Spinoza, "Ethics," in Id., *Complete Works*, 292.

13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. S. Hand (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 106–110.

14 Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Ethique de Spinoza, La cinquième partie, les voies de la libération* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994).

15 Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," in Id., *Complete Works*, 438.

16 Alexandre Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1971).

17 "Everyone without exception can obey, not merely the very few—very few, that is, in comparison with the whole human race—who acquire the habit of virtue by the guidance of reason alone." Cf. Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. M. Silverthorne and J. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194.

18 "Isaiah teaches nothing more clearly than that the divine law in an absolute sense signifies, not ceremonies, but that universal law that consists in the true conception of living." Ibid., 68.

19 Ibid., 209.

20 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Y. Freccero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 136–137.

21 Ibid., 120.

22 Girard, *Battling to the End*, 47.

23 Ibid., 139.

24 Spinoza, "Political Treatise," 774. "*Transeo tandem ad tertium et omnio absolutum imperium, quod democraticum appelamus.*" We cannot but regret that Samuel Shirley has decided to translate the most equivocal and important concept of Spinoza's politics—*imperium*—with the word *state*.

25 See Eric Gans, "Victimocracy," *The Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 442, May 25, 2013.

26 Blaise Pascal, *The Provincial Letters*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Classics, 1982), 168. This quote of Pascal is the *exergue* of the French version of *Battling to the End* but, sadly, it has not been reproduced in the English version.

27 Girard, *I See Satan*, 35.

28 Girard, *Battling to the End*, 2010, xi.

29 Alain Finkielkraut, "In the Name of the Other: Reflections on the Coming Anti-Semitism," *Azure* 18 (2004): 21—33, 31.

30 Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Anatomy of 9/11: Evil, Rationalism, and the Sacred," *Substance* 115, no. 37 (2008): 33—51, 43.

31 Spinoza, "Political Treatise," 691.

32 Daniel Cohn-Bendit is copresident of the *European Greens—European Free Alliance* in the European Parliament.

33 Eva Joly is a French magistrate and politician for *Europe Écologie—The Greens*. She has represented this party as a candidate for the presidency of France in the 2012 elections.

34 Spinoza, "Political Treatise," 741–742. Spinoza witnessed the lynching of Johan and Cornelis de Witt on August 20, 1672. Thanks to Leibniz, we know that on this occasion Spinoza wanted to go out at night and post a placard near the site of the massacres on which he had written: "*Ultimi barbarorum*"—the worst of the barbarians.

35 Ibid., 713–714.

36 Ibid., 699.

37 Girard, *Battling to the End*, xiv.

38 Ibid., x. See also: "Christ took away humanity's sacrificial crutches and left us before a terrible choice: either believe in violence, or not; Christianity is nonbelief." Cf. ibid., 21.

39 Ibid., 13.

40 Ibid., 17. The violence of the victims is the evil mimetic double of the persecutors: "Our passions and desires come from others; we never draw them from the depths of ourselves. It is because the adversary is hostile that I become so too, and vice versa." Ibid., 34.

41 Ibid., 44–45. We have modified the translation of Mary Baker, who has translated the French expression "*différer la violence*" as "suspending violence." The Derridian vocabulary of *différance* is absolutely essential to Mimetic Theory. For this reason, we prefer to use the expression "differing violence."

42 It is worth noting that most of the Romance languages express the idea that, in an argumentation, a position is to be "defended," which immediately implies that the participant in the discussion is feeling "attacked."

6

René Girard's Mimetic Theory: An "Anti-political Theology"?

Michael Kirwan

Introduction

I understand this exploration of "Mimesis, Violence and Religion" as an opportunity to test the following syllogism. The first premise: that the social and political sciences have been compelled, over recent decades, to incorporate into their analyses a global "return" or recrudescence of religion in the public sphere—the alleged "return of the theo-political"—thus drawing back from premature and largely discredited theories of secularization. The second proposition: that the Mimetic Theory (MT) of René Girard, as an exploration of the role of sacralized desire and violence in human societies, is a broadly credible paradigm for understanding processes of social formation. The conclusion: that MT has a distinctive contribution to make to contemporary political thought.

To some extent, this is to read René Girard against the grain. On the whole, Girard has shied away from political explanation; for example, he engages directly and polemically with Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, but shows little interest in Karl Marx. Literature—specifically, certain great European novels and the drama of William Shakespeare—is his initial chosen medium for articulating his key insights, with mythology and the Bible coming later as areas of concern. The latest phase of his work, above all in *Achever Clausewitz*, is oriented toward an apocalyptical historical thesis, prompted by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz and by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin.[1] At no point in Girard's long career does political theory command the attention of this polymath and interdisciplinary scholar. This reticence seems at times to border on the allergic, for which there may well be good biographical reasons. As a youth in wartime occupied Paris, Girard witnessed the mimetic contagion that engulfed his fellow citizens into eddies of hatred on either side of the political