Belonging

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Source: *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 1-12

Published by: Michigan State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/contagion.23.1.0001

Belonging

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Translated by Rob Grayson

"Belonging" means the fact of belonging to something or someone. A serf belongs to an estate. A slave belongs to his master. In our democratic universe, no one belongs to a lord and master anymore, at least in principle. Nowadays, people only belong to communities of free individuals who are equal under the law—again, in principle.

We all belong to the human race. Nearly all of you here belong to the nation of Italy, to Sicily, to the city of Messina, to such and such a milieu, to such and such a family. Most of you now even have a new level of supranational belonging: your passports are no longer merely Italian but European.

While some relationships of belonging are mainly spatial in nature, they necessarily have a temporal dimension, and vice versa. We all belong to a particular generation. If relationships of belonging are located in space and time, this is because the same is true of people. Some relationships of belonging are purely cultural, such as belonging to a religion, a social or professional group, an ideology, or a political party. Others are predominantly natural relationships of belonging, but which have been "culturalized": for example, each of us belongs to a particular blood group.

Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, Vol. 23, 2016, pp. 1–12. ISSN 1075-7201.

In times past, relationships of belonging were organized hierarchically. In the modern world, they are increasingly variable and unstable. We are now conglomerates of such relationships, though with vestiges of hierarchy.

There are strong and weak relationships of belonging, and their distribution varies from individual to individual, from country to country, and from one era to the next. I'm told that in Italy, the sense of national belonging is weaker than in the United States or France, but regional and family relationships of belonging are more meaningful.

There are voluntary and involuntary relationships of belonging. There are honorary ones, such as belonging to an academy, and dishonorable ones such as belonging to a group of habitual offenders.

There are relationships of belonging that are purely administrative and bureaucratic, and others that, on the contrary, are private and even concealed—for example, secret passions to which an individual belongs body and soul without anyone else knowing. There are also relationships of belonging that no one has any problem recognizing apart from the one who belongs: if I belong to the category of conceited people, I am the only one not to notice.

Our social identity is an intertwining and intermingling of relationships of belonging so numerous and diverse that together they constitute something unique: an individual being that we are the only one to possess. Although our relationships of belonging are never individual in the strict sense, they are so many and varied that, for each individual, they make up a combination distinct from all comparable combinations, a singular identity, a bit like our genetic makeup.

It seems to me that it is in this individualizing multiplicity of relationships of belonging that we need to look for the two meanings—not only different but diametrically opposed—of the word *identity*. To have an identity is to be unique; and yet, outside of that use, the term means the opposite of unique, denoting rather that which is identical—in other words, the complete absence of any uniquely identifying difference.

In short, by dint of belonging to everyone, we end up belonging to no one but ourselves. Our own identity is merely the intersection of all that makes us identical to countless others. This explains the paradox of identity, but in such a way that it is no surprise that so many nowadays are afflicted with what they call "identity issues." The very expression highlights and explains their confusion. Such people feel the same as anyone and everyone. What the modern world offers us by way of difference cannot satisfy our desire for uniqueness.

In the highly socialized traditional world, we already define ourselves—exclusively, even—by our relationships of belonging. But since we don't

distinguish ourselves from those relationships—since we're joined to them—we're not aware that they're nothing more than a string of "identities"; or, if we are aware, it doesn't bother us because we feel different from everyone else. We're not yet likely to mistake ourselves for someone else any more than we're likely to lose an identity card that we don't yet have.

In our world, relationships of belonging are becoming looser and looser. As they pull away from us they become visible, and we have the impression that it is we who are pulling away from them. So we frequently judge them burdensome or, conversely, we dread losing them altogether. This is why there has arisen nowadays a problem that was unknown in times past, the problem that concerns us here: the problem of belonging. It cuts across the problems of identity and difference.

Christians used to believe—and still do—in the existence of the individual *person*, inseparable from her relationships of belonging but neither lost in the mass of those relationships nor, even more so, melded with any single one of them such as, for example, her race. During the Romantic period and in the modern era, many thinkers responded to the weakening of relationships of belonging by inventing a pure and empty subject, both impersonal and supremely individual, and which, far from making us into a simple intersection of relationships of belonging, would deify us with the help of neither God nor anyone else. All of this collapsed in very short order.

We live in a world in which the weakening and widening of relationships of belonging goes hand-in-hand with the globalization of all aspects of life—economic, financial, political, and even cultural. However, as such relationships become more and more all-encompassing and less and less restrictive, they also become less and less protective and less able to provide a sense of security.

This weakening is not always easy to spot, since it's often due to a shift in relationships of belonging. For a long time, for example, local relationships of belonging weakened in favor of regional ones, then regional ones declined in favor of national ones, until finally, today, we've moved on to the supranational level.

Many are those who believe the opposite of what I've just been saying: namely that, far from weakening, ancient, ethnic, and, in particular, religious relationships of belonging live on and are getting stronger, as demonstrated by the virulence of conflicts that define themselves as clashes of ethnic, religious, and cultural belonging. I am of the opinion that they are mistaken, and I'm going to try to demonstrate why.

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Our earliest relationships of belonging are fundamental for everything we call learning or education. The family provides the individual with his first models: it's by imitating his mother and father that a child learns the basic actions of life. Then come schools, which also provide models without which children would never become adults capable of "functioning" effectively in society. The professional world is another source of learning. Our earliest relationships of belonging secure our social integration.

Although positive and essential, most relationships of belonging—even the most humble—involve some form of exclusion, rejection, and, consequently, violence. To exist, they have to exclude some people, and even if this exclusion is not achieved through physical violence, it employs means that are inevitably perceived as violent by those who are its victims. The more desirable the relationship of belonging is or appears to be, the more bitterly the violence of exclusion is experienced by the excluded. Also, as a rule, the harder such a relationship is to acquire, the more desirable it appears to be.

The further back in history we go, the more closely certain relationships of belonging are bound up with violence: there was a time when belonging to the most desirable class, the nobility, essentially relied on force of arms. As time passed, the role of physical violence diminished, but wherever relationships of belonging were or appeared to be advantageous, they were subject to competition that led to all kinds of fighting, maneuvering, and scheming—in other words, less brutal but more insidious forms of violence.

One only has to look, for example, at education systems. Even the most democratic of such systems have to include an element of selection if they are to be at all effective. In a world that has become hypersensitive to rivalries, entrance exams, end-of-year exams, anything that is intended to select the most able students is experienced by those who are rejected as an act of unbearable violence. One cannot but acknowledge that even and especially those methods that are clearly the most merit-based are objectively cruel.

Sociologists rarely pay as much attention to the dual nature of relationships of belonging as the subject deserves—or if they do, they treat it simplistically as a political, social, or racial injustice that could easily be rectified by establishing a more egalitarian regime. In doing so, they fail to see that, for reasons of general interest, our societies cannot give up selecting the most competent.

While the violence of exclusion is nowadays very visible and hotly debated, contrary to what we tend to think, it is not the only violence associated with relationships of belonging. Neither is it the most widespread or the worst. There is another form of violence of which we are largely unaware and that can be said to exist inside relationships of belonging.

By bringing individuals closer to each other, and by encouraging them to pursue the same goals, all manner of associations—professional, educational, recreational, sporting, and so on—give rise to agreement between those they unite by inspiring in them the same desires. In so doing, they also give rise to a certain type of conflict.

If we desire the same things, we feel close to one another, and this closeness, which constitutes agreement on the spiritual level, can become disagreement on the concrete level. Indeed, there are two possibilities: either the object that two or more of us desire can be shared and we agree to share it, in which case there is no conflict; or the object is one that we cannot or will not share, in which case conflict is inevitable.

I call this conflict *mimetic rivalry*. It presupposes common relationships of belonging that, by the very fact of bringing us together and setting us in opposition to one another, not only foster this type of conflict but also provide it with a battleground in which to rage. Mimetic theory affirms that people's desires are not really rooted in either desired objects or the subjects who desire those objects, but rather in a third party: the model or mediator of our desires. As long as the imitator and his or her model have relatively few relationships of belonging in common, they are not threatened by mimetic rivalry. They are like two stars that, while they may dream about each other, remain light years apart. If, on the other hand, imitator and model have many relationships of belonging in common, they are exposed to the temptations of rivalry. We are always close to our rivals, and the more we compete with them, the more we resemble them, and the more our two identities become one and the same. If models only inspired in their imitators a desire for objects that they then agreed to share with them, violent rivalry would be avoided. What makes such rivalry inevitable is the thirst for exclusive possession, which most often characterizes the imitator's desire precisely because it already characterizes the desire of his or her model.

Voltaire's *Candide* contains a thousand examples of mimetic desire with disastrous consequences. The young hero's private tutor, the philosopher Pangloss, teaches his naïve student the optimistic system of his idol, the great Leibniz. Pangloss will unknowingly also serve as a model for a less philosophical activity: passionate love. Indeed, as the tale opens, the beautiful Cunégonde—like Candide, a student of Pangloss—stumbles across the master making love to a castle servant under a bush. Inspired by this scene, the young lady plucks up the courage to declare her love to Candide, who responds enthusiastically to her ardor. But the two lovers are in turn caught unawares by the baron, who would like to provide his daughter with a more aristocratic husband than the unfortunate Candide, whom he unceremoniously boots out.

When a faithful disciple catches his revered master caressing a pretty girl, it is not hard to see how he desires to do the same. And, in his desire to be even more faithful, he ends up being completely unfaithful: he tries to steal his model's partner. This is when the most dreadful conflicts erupt.

While mimetic rivalry can be sexual, contrary to what Freud and his disciples would have us believe, it can also be professional, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, sporting, philatelic . . . in short, it can exist in all kinds of forms. As Shakespeare tells us in *Hamlet*, men can fight to the death over an eggshell. The playwright takes up the same image again in *Coriolanas* because he is obsessed by the futility of mimetic rivalry. Perhaps it was this Shakespearean eggshell that gave the satirist Jonathan Swift—another great revealer of mimetic rivalry—the original idea for his inexpiable war of the eggs, between those who break them at the larger end and those who prefer to start at the smaller end.

In short, far from guaranteeing peace, even the most insignificant relationships of belonging arouse not only the external violence of exclusion but also the internal violence of rivalry between individuals who, all desiring the same thing, however absurd, become obstacles to one another and can no longer stop quarrelling.

Our capacity for mimetic absorption is not confined to those behaviors that our models wish us to imitate. The violent side of relationships of belonging is the flip side of their positive function. Relationships of belonging thus contain a seed of self-destruction—the basis of their own collapse—which is explained by the mimetic nature of human desire and the resulting rivalry.

It seems to me that a good example of this is the terrible combat between Yvain and Gauvain at the climax of the romance *Yvain* by Chrétien de Troyes. The reasons why these two men are the best friends in the world are the very same reasons that incite them to be secretly jealous of one another, and thus to fight like no two knights have ever fought. Since they both present themselves anonymously and armored from head to toe, in theory they fight without recognizing each other. However, we can assume that in reality, their excellence is such that they cannot but recognize one another by strength of arms. Each of them possesses the utmost qualities of the perfect knight, and each fears being outdone in a field in which he wants to believe he is without peer.

As we read this romance, we sense that the world of knights—and this is perhaps also true of all cultural worlds—is doomed to self-destruct. Similarly, in some democratic regimes, mimetic rivalries can become so acute that they paralyze public life. Both Italy and France are all too familiar with rivalrous blockages that prevent all decision-making.

The genius of our economic liberalism lies in the fact that it gives free reign to mimetic rivalries in the pursuit of wealth, thus allowing such rivalries to channel themselves in productive directions that are beneficial for society. However, one might wonder whether this system is not also threatened by the effects of overly frenetic competition.

Far from putting an end to rivalries, the weakening of relationships of belonging in our egalitarian world merely exasperates them at all levels of society by arousing ever more symmetrical violence between rivals. The model becomes the imitator of his imitator, and the imitator becomes the model of his model. When this type of relationship mimetically spreads everywhere, it turns into a diabolical machine that ends up blowing up the very framework that makes it possible: the system of relationships of belonging, i.e., culture itself.

Mimetic rivalries give rise to conflictual crises of such intensity that they ought to blow everything up—and there are undoubtedly situations where everything does blow up. But there are also situations, especially in archaic societies, where through their continual exasperation, mimetic crises themselves become their own remedy, so to speak, by triggering the so-called scapegoat mechanism.

In their mimetic escalation, the rivals end up forgetting about the objects they were arguing over and focusing instead on the argument itself; the mimetic to-and-fro tends to polarize no longer around the objects but directly around the antagonists. Since this mimesis is cumulative, there necessarily comes a point when the entire community polarizes around a single individual against whom the lost unity is reformed, thus reconciling the community with itself. This scapegoat mechanism, or single victim mechanism, owes its effectiveness to the unanimous transfer of all the hatred aroused by rivalries onto a victim whose expulsion and/or death necessarily restores peace, since the community believes itself to be rid of all its obsessions, and is thus actually rid of them.

This results in an abrupt end to violence that, not knowing how else to explain it, the community attributes to the victim himself, who, through his own death, will henceforth appear to be an all-powerful force for good while continuing to appear to be an all-powerful force for evil in his capacity as a scapegoat. This dual omnipotence, both good and evil, is the invention of the archaic sacred. When it operates at full capacity, the scapegoat mechanism ensures the genesis of archaic religion. Around the sacralized scapegoat gathers a group that has shared the moving experience of the crisis and its reconciling conclusion. This group endeavors to perpetuate and strengthen its own harmony by evacuating any mimetic discord that continues to arise through new victims who take

the place of the original victim. This is what we know as blood sacrifice, which is always a more or less faithful copy of the liberating mechanism.

Each time mimetic rivalries appear to be reigniting, or even when other kinds of catastrophe threaten, communities endeavor to ward them off by once again triggering, through replacement victims, the mechanism that got them out of trouble the first time: the scapegoat mechanism. This mechanism is thus transformed into a ritual technique through the practice—universal until today—of blood sacrifice. Through sacrifice, religion creates culture. It seeks to prevent or cure unfettered violence by administering sacrificial violence.

In my opinion, all social relationships of belonging originate in ritual and sacrifice. Indeed, that is why, in archaic societies, such relationships depend on what are known as *rites of initiation* or *rites of passage*. Candidates are put through trials that recreate the original mimetic crisis and its victimary resolution. In prevailing over such trials, the candidates demonstrate that they will be able to overcome the crises that await them and are worthy of belonging to the culture that initiates them. Primitive societies are characterized by the multiplicity and rigidity of ritual and religious relationships of belonging (e.g., matrimonial groups). This multiplicity is intended to prevent desires from converging on the same objects, as a safeguard against mimetic rivalry. What I am saying, in short, is that relationships of belonging always reemerge from the crises that threaten to destroy them, through scapegoats against whom and then around whom communities beget or renovate their religious and ritualistic systems. As they weaken, our systems of belonging are moving further and further away from this model of radical crisis and violent regeneration.

All that I have just said is directly valid only for archaic societies. In historical and modern societies, an opposing influence is at work: that of Judaism and Christianity, which explains the constant weakening of relationships of belonging. Christianity condemns sacrificial violence as I have just defined it, since it condemns the death of Christ. The Gospels make manifest cultural violence by presenting the death of Jesus as a mob phenomenon caused by a mimetic frenzy. They tell a truth about human culture that all mythical religion conceals. Christ proposes that humans abandon scapegoating by resisting mimetic reprisals, giving up the spirit of vengeance and replacing sacrifice with the rules of the kingdom of God—i.e., by voluntarily seeking to escape from mimetic rivalry and its consequences. The realistic and mimetic description of the Passion stops the victimary mechanisms working by revealing their absurdity. Christ is divinized not as a guilty and saving scapegoat, like the pagan gods, but for opposite reasons: because he reveals and upsets the violent mechanisms that moderate mimetic crises.

Christianity weakens all relationships of belonging by revealing that their origin is in no way authentically sacred. It is thus Christianity that weakens the victimary principle; and, today, it is not Christianity itself that is weakening: it is the sacred violence with which Christianity is confused.

The weakening of relationships of belonging is an essentially positive phenomenon because it lowers barriers between human beings. It works against exclusion, against the making of scapegoats. But it also has adverse and violent effects: by removing ritualistic mechanisms and the barrier of prohibitions, it further reduces resistance to mimetic rivalry. In the contemporary world, these positive and negative aspects combine in such a complex way that, while the weakening of relationships of belonging paves the way for increasing global unification, such unification entails an increase in rivalry. No longer separated from one another by insurmountable barriers, groups and individuals frenetically imitate one another and acute conflicts—whether national, ethnic, economic, social, religious, etc.—are on the rise.

Since such conflicts are always justified on the basis of some traditional, ethnic, religious, or national belonging, people think relationships of belonging are more alive and virulent than ever. In most cases, however, this is not the least bit true. This is also why, in self-justifying rhetoric, relationships of belonging easily replace one another: they are rarely anything more than excuses. While no one knows definitively whether the Bosnian war broke out for reasons of ethnic, national, or religious belonging, everyone believes that *one* of these relationships of belonging was the true reason for the conflict; consequently, traditional relationships of belonging appear stronger than ever. On the contrary, it seems to me that their weakening, and the resulting and ever worsening non-differentiation after forty years of communism, is more important than what remains of their reality.

All conflicts are conflicts between enemy brothers. The only wars are civil wars, between groups whose relationships of belonging are no longer binding enough to truly separate them, and which are henceforth too visible—too ingrained in human thinking—to enable them to unite.

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To understand that the conflict between relationships of belonging can be worsened by the weakening of such relationships, there is no need to turn to either sociologists or political analysts. Our human and social sciences, overly fascinated by the natural sciences, treat human intelligence as though it were primarily oriented toward objects—as though our relationships with others were no more than incidental or secondary. The social sciences see

relationships of belonging as objects just like any other, while in fact they are arrangements of mimetic relationships founded on forms of initiation, exclusion and ostracism that derive from primitive scapegoating and ritual sacrifice.

To understand relationships of belonging and what is happening to them in today's world, then, we need to turn not to the social sciences, which understand nothing of conflictual mimesis, but to the true specialists in human relations, those who stage and portray them: in other words, playwrights and novelists—but only the best ones. The dialectics of weak relationships of belonging that seek to become stronger in and through conflict are marvelously described by Marcel Proust in the social interactions of *Á la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. At first sight, one might think that the village of Combray and the Parisian salons in which the novelist moves provide too limited a terrain to illuminate the conflicts of the contemporary world. Actually, this is not so: Combray is an admirable scale model of the mimetic relationships sketched out by the novelist.

Combray is a "small enclosed world." Its children live in the shadow of their parents and familial divinities, in the same confident intimacy as a traditional village living in the shadow of its church tower. The unit of Combray is spiritual as well as territorial: it represents a vision shared by all the members of the family and even of the village. And, of course, Combray operates by means of scapegoating: by rejecting and eliminating that which it cannot assimilate—everything that might contradict its view of things. There are striking analogies between Combray and the "society salons." The *salon Verdurin* was not just a meeting place: it was a way of seeing, feeling, and judging. The *salon* itself was also a "closed culture." It rejected anything that threatened its spiritual unity. It perpetuated itself through expulsion and scapegoating.

The spiritual unity of the *salon* had something strained and strict that Combray did not have. From Combray to the *salon Verdurin*, it seems that the structure of the "small enclosed world" remained: the most apparent traits merely intensified and hardened. The *salon* caricatures Combray's organic unity in the same way that a mummified face caricatures and accentuates the features of a living face. The components of the overall package are the same, but differently ordered. In Combray, the negation and refusal of the outside world is always subordinate to the affirmation of one's own genuinely lived values. Conversely, Parisian snobbery produces the opposite phenomenon. Rites of union between close friends are camouflaged rites of separation. Ceremonies are no longer observed for the purpose of fostering unity or being oneself, but rather to distinguish oneself from those who do not observe them—the other *salons*. Rival salons, in theory hated, are the real gods.

Almost identical relationships of belonging encompass two completely different realities. The more real a group's organic unity, the less that group needs to resort to violence to oppose other groups of the same type, and the more authentically foreign to it violence is.

Combray is always described to us as a patriarchal regime that we cannot pin down as either authoritarian or liberal, since it operates autonomously. Conversely, the *salon Verdurin* is an obsessive dictatorship that tries to pass itself off as a democracy. Its boss is a totalitarian head of state in the modern sense, who governs by dispensing a judicious combination of demagoguery and ferocity in expelling her scapegoats. When Proust speaks of the feelings of loyalty inspired by Combray, he speaks of *patriotism*; when he turns to the *salon Verdurin*, he speaks of *chauvinism*. The difference between the two terms corresponds to the two different types of relationships of belonging. The second appears stronger, since it is bellicose, arrogant, and conflictual; in reality, however, it is weaker. Patriotism is a collective egoism that is still authentic. It is a sincere worship of heroes and saints—i.e., of models too distant to become rivals. The fervor of this worship is not dependent on rivalries with other parties. Chauvinism, on the other hand, is the fruit of such rivalry. It is a negative feeling rooted in resentment—i.e., in the secret worship of an *Other* that is simultaneously venerated and detested.

The interplay between Combray and the *salons* represents a microcosmic reproduction of the weakening of relationships of belonging in today's world and the resulting paradoxical strengthening of rivalries. Violence is fueled not by the strength of relationships of belonging but by their weakness. It is precisely because they are collapsing that relationships of belonging try to dress themselves up in a strength they no longer have.

It seems to me that history bears out Proust's analysis. The decline of feudalism exacerbated feudal conflicts. After the Reformation, when religious fervor waned, religious wars increased. At the end of the eighteenth century in France, the "noble reaction," aroused by the weakening of the nobility, helped trigger the Revolution. The First World War, that paroxysm of national conflicts, announced the decline of nationalism.

Right-wing and left-wing ideologies both make the same mistake: they conceive of relationships of belonging univocally and unilaterally. Formerly, men were traditionally compared with a plant rooted in the soil. Back then, the supreme good—that which must be protected at all costs—was "rootedness." Conversely, revolutionary ideology sees relationships of belonging as an entirely bad thing that must be thrown off at all costs—nothing more than an expression of class prejudice and "superstition."

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I have tried to sketch out a perspective on relationships of belonging that is a little less univocal and unilateral than ideological oversimplifications would have us believe—less swamped in the naïveté of for and against, which makes next to no sense in such an area. However, what I have had to say on this extremely complex issue remains schematic and simplified. Our discussion will be an opportunity to clarify, refine and critique these various ideas.

NOTE

This essay, originally delivered as a speech in Italy, was first published in *Politiques de Caïn: En Dialogue avec René Girard* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2004), 19–34. I am indebted to Michael Hardin for bringing it to my attention.

The French title is "Les appartenances." If you look up "appartenance" in a French-English dictionary, you will likely find something like "membership" or "adherence." However, Girard essentially uses the word as the nominal form of the verb "appartenir," to belong. Since "belongings" in English has a different meaning ("possessions"), I have opted in most places to translate "les appartenances" as "relationships of belonging."