**The Scapegoat**

The "mimetic" theory of Rene Girard, I suggest, offers us our best way to understand the extraordinary events of recent American politics, especially the extremes of love and hatred different Americans feel for Trump, and the background passions leading to the Capitol Hill riot. To explain why this is so, I will offer an introduction to Girard's thought, interleaved, where appropriate, with comments on how it relates to those events.

# Mimetic Desire and Mimetic Rivalry

Girard demonstrated that most human desire is not innate or self-chosen, but results from imitating what others desire. Anyone who has raised children or supervised day care can understand this: a toy sits in the corner, ignored, until some child picks it up by chance. Almost immediately, the toy is desired by other children. We can see the same process at work in the infamous truth that when one is not dating regularly, it is hard to get dates. But once one had a steady, immediately more potential dating partners show interest.

Girard called this copying of desires from others "mimetic desire." (Of course, mimetic desires had to arise from more basic desires, such as for food and sex, that were not mimetic.) Mimetic desire places human beings in fundamental conflict with each other: if my desire for that house on the hill is an emulation of your desire for that same house... well, we both can't own it, can we? Girard notes that this is why the Ten Commandments place such an emphasis on "not coveting your neighbor's X": that coveting is the basis of social conflict. Adam and Eve covet God's knowledge of good and evil, and we have the Fall. Cain covets God's approval of Abel, or Romulus covets the favor of the divine augury which went to Remus, and we get fratricide. The reader can easily come up with many more examples.

# The Scapegoat as the "Solution" to Mimetic Rivalry

Traditional constraints on behavior, such as the Ten Commandments, systems of taboo, caste structures, the Confucian invocation of Tian, the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, and so on, can serve to control mimetic rivalry. But these may lose their efficacy in chaotic social times, so that mimetic rivalry becomes rampant. When this process threatens to tear a society apart, there is a solution, short of abandoning rivalrous mimetic desire: the society can identify a *scapegoat*, a figure upon whom all the chaos swirling through the social order can be blamed, and society can sacrifice that scapegoat, restoring order (for a time). The sacrifice can be a literal killing (as with Socrates, or Jesus), or it can be merely the destruction of the scapegoat's life, as in contemporary "cancel culture." The rest of the society, having united in the destruction of the scapegoat, experiences a great catharsis, and social peace is temporarily restored. Girard offers the "miracle of Apollonius," in the first century A.D., as a paradigmatic example of this process: a plague (both physical and social) had descended upon the city of Ephesus, and they asked the Neopythagorean philosopher Apollonius for aid. Apollonius points out a beggar, dressed in rags, to the people of the city, and directs them to stone him, as he is actually a demon in disguise. The people are at first reluctant, but once one of them "casts the first stone," they are overcome with "mimetic contagion" and enthusiastically stone the beggar, after which the city recovers from its plague.

Again, this is not an esoteric doctrine: we can witness the scapegoating process in everyday life, for instance, the way of group of children can unite in bullying someone different and weaker, or how a polity riven by factional disputes can be united when some politician identifies an external enemy that all the factions can unite in condemning. And modern history offers plenty of examples of such scapegoating on a grand scale: Hitler scapegoating the Jews, Pol Pot the intellectuals, Lenin the kulaks, or Mao the traditionalists.

Identifying some figure or group as having been scapegoated does not imply that the scapegoat was a blameless innocent. For instance, some foreign enemy made a scapegoat to unite a fractious society may very well have been guilty of working against that society:

indeed, two nations may be engaged in mutual scapegoating. In fact, given the fallen nature of the world, there was only ever a single scapegoat who was innocent of all wrongdoing. It is not innocence that characterizes the scapegoat, but the fact that he is held to be guilty of causing *all* the problems of the community exorcising him.

This last point is vital: to identify someone as a scapegoat in no way implies that there is nothing to validly criticize about that person. In particular, while I contend that the frenzy of the opposition to Trump is an instance of this scapegoating process, that does *not* mean that Trump himself is without blame in what has transpired during and after his presidency. For one thing, Trump was clearly not above doing some scapegoating of his own. For instance, while illegal immigration is certainly a problem America should address, Trump sometimes seemed to imply that illegal immigrants were about the *only* problem America should address, as, for example, in his infamous "they are rapists" speech. Certainly, while some illegal immigrants have turned out to be violent criminals, and it would certainly be a good idea if we could filter out such violent criminals at the border, Trump's (apparent) suggestion that those illegal immigrants are the *main* problem facing American society was absurd: we Americans commit far more violence against each other than illegal immigrants commit against legal residents.

What characterizes Trump as a scapegoat is not any purity in Trump himself, but the irrational heaping of blame on him for all of America's current ills, the over-the-top characterization of him as a "dictator" or "despot," and the extreme catharsis felt by many opponents of Trump when he was defeated.

Let's consider the charge that Trump's rule was despotic. A typical feature of despotic regimes is that they do not allow free elections, or protests against their rule. But the very people who chortled, after the 2020 presidential election, that ["we have toppled a dictator"](https://www.rt.com/usa/513007-trump-dictator-toppled-feminist-mocked/) simply ignored the facts that they had done so in an *election* that the "dictator" had allowed to occur, and that he had allowed protests against his "despotism" and very public denunciations of him as an illegitimate office-holder to proceed throughout his "despotic" reign.

I myself have numerous complaints about Trump's performance in office, such as his awful support for the Saudi war in Yemen, his *scapegoating* of Iran as a particularly terrible international actor, his failure to really do anything to "drain the swamp," and more. But I found myself perfectly free, all through his administration, to voice such criticisms, something I would not have been able to do under a

"dictator" or "despot."

Many sensible leftist critics of Trump, such as Glenn Greenwald, have noted that Trump is a *symptom* of America's political crisis, and not its cause. But adopting such a mature attitude towards our dilemma requires acknowledging that one's own mimetic desires might themselves be a part of our crisis. That would demand perhaps painful self-examination. No, for many people, it is much easier to suppose that Trump is a particular locus of evil, and that by sacrificing him we can again achieve social unity. For instance, it is worthwhile noting that a Trump critic like Jeff Bezos saw his net worth increase by $13 billion in a single day last year: how useful to be able to deflect attention from that fact by scapegoating Trump.

A further indication that Trump has served as a scapegoat is the absurd reactions to Biden's victory. Whatever one thinks of the relative merits of the Trump and Biden candidacies, it ought to be obvious that Biden is no populist hero. Yet Andrew Sullivan reported that he was in tears (of happiness) after the inauguration, while a woman posted on Twitter that she felt she had had an orgasm because of it.

But perhaps "toppling" Trump isn't quite enough? The desire for a cathartic healing through the sacrifice of all "Trumpist" scapegoats is [made](https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-11-27/defeating-trumpism-autocrat-political-movement) [obvious](https://news.yahoo.com/bolton-urges-republicans-purge-taint-221611002.html) [in](https://www.dw.com/en/rick-wilson-there-is-no-moderate-republican-party/av-56182751) [the](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/08/05/if-biden-wins-post-trump-corruption-purge-will-have-be-epic/) multiple articles, published in mainstream journals, that employ the idea of a "purge."

# External Mediation vs. Internal Mediation

Another important Girardian concept we ought to understand is the difference between "external mediation" and "internal mediation." The figure whom we imitate to mold our desires (the *mediator* of our desires) can appear more or less remote from us. If, for instance, we live in an aristocratic society, and are members of the bourgeoisie, we might adopt our modes of dress, our ideas of "fine cuisine," of "high art," and of desirable domiciles from the nobility: but, in general, we can't hope to *become* a noble: in that case, Girard calls the nobility "external mediators" for the bourgeoisie. A similar case might be the attitude of the average American male in the 1950s towards John

Wayne or Cary Grant: he might choose one of these figures as his model, but he never thought that he was *in competition* with Wayne or Grant: he could try to dress or act like one of them, but he didn't imagine that he could seduce their wives or own one of their homes.

Mediation becomes "internal" when the "mediator," the source of one's desires, is not seen as separated from oneself by any unbridgeable gulf. So, as in the many mythical and historical examples of rival brothers, what one brother has the other brother can easily conceive of himself as having: and so Jacob tricks his father into granting him Esau's birthright, or, in the multitude of royal murders throughout history, someone close to a throne murders a closer to that throne in order to grab it for him-or-her-self.

What tends to keep mediation external in any society is the idea of "degree," a hierarchy of statuses where those with a lower status look to those of higher status as models for their own desires, but do not entertain the idea that they can actually *displace* their model. But because in any society these differentiations are always somewhat arbitrary and never completely fair, people can cease to believe in them, creating "the crisis of degree": an onslaught of violent mimetic rivalry.

# The Crisis of Degree

Girard presents the condition of the Greek army besieging Troy, at least as it is portrayed by Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, as a paradigm of the crisis of degree. An army, when functioning as intended, uses differences of degree to keep order: each rank looks up to the next higher rank as its model of behavior, but does not attempt to grab the privileges granted to the rank above it: enlisted men do not try to break into the officer's dining room and have their dinner there. But if that respect for difference of degree breaks down at the top, then the very mimetic process that usually leads the lower ranks to defer to the upper ones instead leads them to mimetically follow their "betters" in rebelling against degree. And so, in the Greek army, Achilles's rebellion against Agamemnon's command cascades "backward," as Ulysses tells Agamemnon:

O, when degree is shaked,

Which is the ladder to all high designs,

Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,

Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,

Peaceful commerce from dividable shores, The primogenitive and due of birth,

Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,

But by degree, stand in authentic place?

Take but degree away, untune that string,

And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets

In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores

And make a sop of all this solid globe:

Strength should be lord of imbecility,

And the rude son should strike his father dead...

And this neglection of degree it is

That by a pace goes backward, with a purpose

It hath to climb. The general's disdain'd

By him one step below, he by the next,

That next by him beneath; so every step,

Exampled by the first pace that is sick Of his superior, grows to an envious fever Of pale and bloodless emulation:

Understanding the "crisis of degree," and Trump's role in bringing one about, clarifies what was really going on at the Capitol riot.

In many ways the previous impeached president, Bill Clinton, was the direct ancestor of the more recent impeached president. With Clinton we saw "the dignity of the office" of president undergo serious erosion, with media discussions of the president's underwear and his receiving oral sex from an intern in the Oval Office. Although the sides were reversed, the reactions were similar to those produced by Trump: those on the President's side felt he was a "regular guy" like them (if male), or someone they might hook up with (if female -reporter Nina Burleigh went so far as to publicly declare she would be happy to fellate him for keeping abortion legal). Those on the opposite side held him in contempt, as he lacked the presidential aura that usually exempted the president from such disdain.

Trump, of course, abolished degree more deliberately and more radically than had Clinton. His constant tweeting made him just another voice on Twitter. His street-talking belligerence in oral performances led people to see him as similar to that loud-mouthed guy in their local bar, whom they either found hilarious or wanted to get banned. Whatever one thinks about whether Trump *incited* the Capitol Hill riot, he most certainly *inspired* it in this sense: there is little evidence that the invaders of the Capitol seriously thought they were going to "seize power," but they most certainly wanted to demonstrate that they had no *respect* for it, lounging around on the floor of the Senate, taking selfies in representatives' chairs, stealing the House speaker's podium, and running around shirtless wearing buffalo horns. Much as the lower ranks of the Greek army mirrored Achilles' "neglection of degree" to his superior, so these Trump supporters mirrored Trump's disdain for the customary rules of American political life.

Those who condemned them at least sensed what was at stake, decrying the violation of the "sacred space" of the Senate chambers. And the new Capitol fencing is clearly an attempt to re-establish a difference of degree between the plebs and those inhabiting the "sacred space" of the capitol buildings.

The kicker is that both sides are partially right. As St. Augustine taught us, this is the way things are in the City of Man: it is true that degree is artificial, without any substantive basis... and yet we can't do without it. (And here is where Strauss was accurate about the importance of the "noble lie.") Without degree, mimetic emulation of "one's betters" turns into mimetic rivalry among equals, and the social order turns violent and chaotic. Without belief in a myth that lets those with less know why those with more deserve it... because of their position in the Great Chain of Being, or due to the Divine Right of Kings, or because of an unbroken chain of Lockean just acquisition, or as an expression of the survival of the fittest, or perhaps the fortunate are the vanguard of the proletariat... those with less will, with increasing violence, demand their share of the pie. Their demands have an element of justice in them, but they are hopeless in terms of fixing the problem: in the world of mimetic rivalry, no one is ever satisfied with just evening the playing field: no, the oppressed will never stop demanding more until they become the oppressors in turn.

In the City of Man, purportedly egalitarian schemes, in fact, only result in replacement of one elite buy another. The destruction of the

Russian elite of nobility and church hierarchy by the Bolsheviks did not, in fact, create an egalitarian society: it only created a new,

Bolshevik elite. The French Revolution did not replace the (arbitrary) rule of the king and nobility with the equality of Man, but with rule by Napoleon. And, in our current crisis, the woke elite do not actually suggest eliminating differences of degree: they only propose new criteria by which to base such differences.

# Conclusion

It is important to recognize that Trump served as a scapegoat because, as Girard noted, scapegoating is only a *temporary* fix for social disorder. It does not eliminate its true cause, mimetic rivalry: instead, it makes the crowd *forget* about that rivalry, for a time, in the euphoric rush that comes from unleashing violence against the scapegoat. But the euphoria passes, and new victims are needed.

Already we can see [Ted Cruz](https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/535664-beto-orourke-ted-cruz-guilty-of-sedition-in-capitol-insurrection), being tried out for the role of scapegoat, or perhap[s](https://nypost.com/2021/03/01/ex-new-york-times-reporter-donald-mcneil-says-hes-not-racist/) [Donald McNei](https://nypost.com/2021/03/01/ex-new-york-times-reporter-donald-mcneil-says-hes-not-racist/)lwould fit the role better, or maybe even

[Marjorie Taylor Greene](https://thefederalist.com/2021/02/09/marjorie-taylor-greene-has-become-a-scapegoat-for-ruling-class-failures/). (For example, the Wikipedia page on Greene, supposedly written from a "neutral point of view," describes her as "a far-right conspiracy theorist," as though this were a simple statement of fact, like "water is H2O, rather than a thrust in a partisan 2

fencing match.) If we acquiesce to scapegoating, perhaps thinking "Well, Trump was a loudmouth: maybe with him out of the way things will calm down," we fundamentally misunderstand the process. So long as scapegoating is not clearly identified for what it is, "the crowd" will demand a new scapegoat soon.

Political maturity consists in recognizing that, in the City of Man, we will always be "stuck" with a hierarchy, a social order of different "degrees," that is somewhat arbitrary and somewhat unfair. The wokest of the woke cannot evade this fact: instead, what they covertly work towards is a social order in which they will be at the top of the hierarchy. So long as we live in the City of Man, and not the City of God, the best polity we "ordinary folk" can hope for is one in which the ruling class at least tries to acknowledge our issues and concerns.

And no heaping up of the carcasses of sacrificed scapegoats will forward that aim.