René Girard: The End of the City of Man

In spite of the inspiring sweep of the Straussian project, there remains a nagging suspicion that perhaps it is missing something fundamental altogether. And if the French literary theorist René Girard is even partially correct in his extraordinary account of the history of the world, then the Straussian moment of triumph may prove to be brief indeed.

In important ways, the Girardian analysis of the modern West echoes some of the themes already discussed. As with Schmitt and Strauss, Girard also believes that there exists a disturbing truth about the city and humanity, and that the whole issue of human violence has been whitewashed away by the Enlightenment. Moreover, there will come an hour when this truth is completely known: "No single question has more of a future today than the question of man."[84] The possibility of moving beyond the unknowable human "X" of John Locke and the eighteenth-century rationalists had already been implicit in the entire project of evolutionary science during the nineteenth century.[85] Just as Darwin's *The Origin of Species* transformed the natural sciences, some other writer's *The Origin of Religions* will provide the logical and chronological sequel and one day transform the sciences of humanity.[86]

For Girard, this post-Darwinian account must somehow combine the gradualism of Darwinian evolution with the essentialism of the pre-Darwinians, stressing both the continuity and discontinuity of humanity with the rest of the natural order. This more comprehensive account of human nature will be centered on an insight already contained in Aristotelian biology: "Man differs from the other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation."[87] Here one has both a difference of kind and one of degree, which can provide the basis for a synthesis between Aristotle and Darwin. Such a synthesis and relationship was already hinted at in the time of Shakespeare, when the word "ape" already meant both "primate" and "to imitate."

However, the new science of humanity must drive the idea of imitation, or mimesis, much further than it has in the past. According to Girard, all cultural institutions, beginning with the acquisition of language by children from their parents, require this sort of mimetic activity, and so it is not overly reductionist to describe human brains as gigantic imitation machines. Because humanity would not exist without imitation, one cannot say that there is something wrong with imitation per se or that those humans who imitate others are somehow inferior to those humans who do not. The latter group, according to Girard, simply does not exist—even though it remains the most

cherished myth of a diverse array of modern ideologies to celebrate an utterly fictional human self that exists independent of everyone else.

Nevertheless, the necessity of mimesis does not render it unproblematic. Conventionally, one tends to think of imitation as primarily representational, as in the learning of language and the transmission of various cultural institutions, but nothing prevents mimesis from extending into the acquisitive realm, or stops people from emulating the desires of others. In the process of "keeping up with the Joneses," mimesis pushes people into escalating rivalry. This disturbing truth of mimesis may explain why the knowledge about mimesis remains rather suppressed, in an almost unconscious way. Of all the mortal sins of medieval Catholicism, envy is the one closest to mimetic rivalry, and it is the one mortal sin that still remains a cultural taboo even in the most *avant garde* postmodern circles.

And finally: because the mimetic ability is more advanced in humans than in other animals, there exist in us no instinctual brakes that are strong enough to limit the scope of such rivalry. Thus, at the core of the mimetic account, there exists a mystery: What exactly happened in the distant past, when all the apes were reaching for the same object, when the rivalry between mimetic doubles threatened to escalate into unlimited violence?

* * *

For the philosophers of the Enlightenment, the war of all against all would culminate in a recognition by the warring parties of the irrationality of such a war. In the midst of the crisis, the warring parties would sit down, have a sober conversation, and draw up a social contract that would provide the basis for a peaceful society. Because Girard rightly views this account as preposterous, he considers the social contract to be the fundamental lie of the Enlightenment—a lie so brazen that none of the advocates of the social contract theory, from Hobbes to Rousseau, themselves believed it to be the case that an actual contract had ever been signed.

In Girard's alternative account of these matters, the war of all against all culminates not in a social contract but in a war of all against one, as the same mimetic forces gradually drive the combatants to gang up on one particular person. The war continues to escalate and there is no rational stopping point, at least not until this person becomes the scapegoat whose death helps to unite the community and bring about a limited peace for the survivors.[88]

That murder is the secret origin of all religious and political institutions, and is remembered and transfigured in the form of myth.[89] The scapegoat,

perceived as the primal source of conflict and disorder, had to die for there to be peace. By violence, violence was brought to an end and society was born. But because society rests on the belief in its own order and justice, the founding act of violence must be concealed—by the myth that the slain victim was really guilty. Thus, violence is lodged at the heart of society; myth is merely discourse ephemeral to violence. Myth sacralizes the violence of the founding murder: myth tells us that the violence was justified because the victim really was guilty and, at least in the context of archaic cultures, truly was powerful.[90] Myth transfigures the murdered scapegoats into gods, and religious rituals reenact the founding murder through the sacrifice of human or animal substitutes, thereby creating a kind of peace that is always mixed with a certain amount of violence.[91] The centrality of sacrifice was so great that those who managed to defer or avoid execution became the objects of veneration. Every king is a sort of living god, and therein lies the true origin of monarchy:

> There is no culture without a tomb and no tomb without a culture; in the end the tomb is the first and only cultural symbol. The above-ground tomb does not have to be invented. It is the pile of stones in which the victim of unanimous stoning is buried. It is the first pyramid.[92]

That is how things used to work. But we now live in a world where the cat is out of the bag, at least to the extent that we know that the scapegoat really is not as guilty as the persecuting community claims. Because the smooth functioning of human culture depended on a lack of understanding of this truth of human culture, the archaic rituals will no longer work for the modern world.

As in Hegel, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at dusk. The unveiling of the mythical past opens toward a future in which we no longer believe in any of the myths; in a dramatic rupture with the past, they will have been deconstructed and thereby discredited.[93] But unlike Hegel, our knowledge of our hidden history—of the "things hidden since the foundation of the world"—does not automatically bring about a glorious final synthesis.[94] Because these founding myths also served the critical role of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate violence, their unraveling may deprive humanity of the efficacious functioning of the limited and sacred violence it needed to protect itself from unlimited and desacralized violence.

For Girard, this combination of mimesis and the unraveling of archaic culture implies that the modern world contains a powerfully apocalyptic

dimension. From a Girardian perspective, the current political debates remain inadequate for the contemporary world situation to the extent that, across the spectrum, there remains a denial of the founding role of the violence caused by human mimesis and, therefore, a systematic underestimation of the scope of apocalyptic violence. Nuclear weapons pose a horrific dilemma, but one could (just barely) imagine a nuclear standoff in which a handful of states remain locked in a cold war. But what if mimesis drives others to try and acquire these same weapons for the mimetic prestige they confer, so that the technological situation is never static, but instead contains a powerful escalatory dynamic?

One may define a "liberal" as someone who knows nothing of the past and of this history of violence, and still holds to the Enlightenment view of the natural goodness of humanity. And one may define a "conservative" as someone who knows nothing of the future and of the global world that is destined to be, and therefore still believes that the nation-state or other institutions rooted in sacred violence can contain unlimited human violence. The present risks a terrible synthesis of the blind spots in that doctrinaire thinking, a synthesis of violence and globalization in which all boundaries on violence are abolished, be they geographic, professional (for example, civilian noncombatants), or demographic (for example, children). At the extremes, even the distinction between violence inflicted on oneself and violence inflicted on other people is in the process of evaporating, in the disturbing new phenomenon of suicide-murderers. The word that best describes this unbounded, apocalyptic violence is "terrorism."

Indeed, one may wonder whether any sort of politics will remain possible for the exceptional generation that has learned the truth of human history for the first time. It is in this context that one must remember that the word apocalypse originally meant unveiling. For Girard, the unveiling of this terrible knowledge opens a catastrophic fault line below the city of man: "[I]t is truly the end of the world, the Christian apocalypse, the bottomless abyss of the unforgettable victim."[95]

History and Knowledge

In the debate between Strauss and Girard, perhaps the key issue of contention can be reduced to a question of *time*. When will this highly disturbing knowledge burst upon general awareness, render all politics impossible, and finally bring the city of man to an end?

If there is something prophetic about Girard's announcement of the founding murder, then Strauss might note that his situation also resembles the plight faced by Nietzsche's madman announcing the death of God to an unbelieving world:

> I come too early . . . my time has not come yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet it is they who have done it![96]

For Strauss as for Nietzsche, the truth of mimesis and of the founding murder is so shocking that most people, in all times and places, simply will not believe it. The world of the Enlightenment may have been based on certain misconceptions about the nature of humanity, but the full knowledge of these misconceptions can remain the province of a philosophical elite. The successful popularization of such knowledge would be the only thing to fear, and it was in this context that the Straussian, Pierre Manent, launched a ferocious attack on Girard's theory: "If human 'culture' is essentially founded on violence, then [Girard] can bring nothing other than the destruction of humanity in the fallacious guise of non-violence."[97] Girard, in turn, would counter that salvation is no longer to be found in philosophical reticence, because there will come a day when there is no esoteric knowledge left:

> I do think it is necessary for us to engage in the discourse we have been pursuing here. But if we had chosen otherwise, others would have taken up this discourse. And there will be others, in any case, who will repeat what we are in the process of saying and who will advance matters beyond what we have been able to do. Yet books themselves will have no more than minor importance; the events within which such books emerge will be infinitely more eloquent than whatever we write and will establish truths we have difficulty describing and describe poorly, even in simple and banal instances. They are already very simple, indeed too simple to interest our current Byzantium, but these truths will become simpler still; they will soon be accessible to anyone.[98]

For Girard, the knowledge of the founding murder is driven by the historical working of the Judeo-Western revelation. The revelation may be slow

(because it contains a message that humans do not wish to hear), but it is not reversible. For this reason, the decisive difference between Girard and Strauss (or Nietzsche) centers on the question of historicism.

On the level of the individual, even at the end there will still remain a choice of sorts between Jerusalem and Athens. We have Sir Thomas More, a Christian saint, as a helper in making that choice. In his *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation,* More declares:

> [T]o prove that this life is no laughing time, but rather the time of weeping, we find that our savior himself wept twice or thrice, but never find we that he laughed so much as once. I will not swear that he never did, but at the least wise he left us no example of it. But, on the other side, he left us example of weeping.[99]

The saint knew that the opposite had been true of Socrates, who left us no example of weeping, but left us example of laughter.[100]

* * *

But the world has not yet come to an end, and there is no easy telling how long the twilight of the modern age will endure. What then must be done, by the Christian statesman or stateswoman aspiring to be a wise steward for our time?

The negative answers are straightforward. There can be no return to the archaic world or even to the robust conception of the political envisioned by Carl Schmitt. There can be no real accommodation with the Enlightenment, since so many of its easy bromides have become deadly falsehoods in our time. But also there cannot be a decision to avoid all decisions and to retreat into studying the Bible in anticipation of the Second Coming, for then one will have ceased to be a statesman or stateswoman.

The Christian statesman or stateswoman must diverge from the teachings of Strauss in one decisive respect. Unlike Strauss, the Christian statesman or stateswoman knows that the modern age will not be permanent, and ultimately will give way to something very different. One must never forget that one day all will be revealed, that all injustices will be exposed, and that those who perpetrated them will be held to account.

And so, in determining the correct mixture of violence and peace, the Christian statesman or stateswoman would be wise, in every close case, to side with peace. There is no formula to answer the critical question of what

constitutes a "close case"; that must be decided in every specific instance. It may well be that the cumulative decisions made in all those close instances will determine the destiny of the postmodern world. For that world could differ from the modern world in a way that is much worse or much better—the limitless violence of runaway mimesis or the peace of the kingdom of God.

NOTES

1. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 9–10.
2. Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Mark A. LePain (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 27.
3. Manent, *The City*, 27.
4. Manent, *The City*, 35.
5. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 197.
6. John Locke, *Atheism*, in *John Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 245–46.
7. John Locke, *First Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214.
8. Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government*, 321.
9. Locke, *First Treatise*, 216.
10. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 294 and 352.
11. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 297.
12. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 300.
13. Locke, *Second Treatise*, 362.
14. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity, with A Discourse of Miracles, and part of A Third Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. abridged, and with an introduction by I. T. Ramsey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 38.
15. Egon Mayer, Barry A. Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, *The City University of New York American Religious Identification Survey, http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_findings.htm* (noting that 76.5 percent of Americans identify themselves as "Christian").
16. Manent, *The City*, 113 (citation and quotation omitted).
17. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 313–21.
18. Manent, *The City*, 123–24.
19. Manent, *The City*, 169–71.
20. Locke, *Essay*, 391–95.