

RENÉ GIRARD'S THEORY OF SACRIFICE, OR: WHAT IS THE GIFT OF DEATH?¹

War is both father and king of all, some he has shown forth as gods and others as men, some he has made slaves and others free.²

This fragment by Heraclitus, one of the oldest sentences in the Western philosophical tradition, explicitly addresses the “dark side” of human being in the world. It offers a glimpse into the supremacy of an impersonal agency characterized by force and violence instead of reasoning and justification. Yet, it is not only a sentence *about* the dark side, it is also dark and obscure in itself, opening space for interpretation and imagination – a general characteristic of Heraclitus’ sayings, in one sense because of their fragmentariness, but also to some extent as a trait of the philosopher himself whose best-known epithet is “the dark one.”³

The following remarks will not try to delve into the abysmal depth of this saying, nor try to fathom the variety of possible interpretations and implications. However, all that is to come will develop somewhat around this sentence as a crucial reference for the philosophical idea of the gift and its dark, “sacrificial” aspects. In any case, what makes the dictum by Heraclitus stand out is not only the fact that it is a famous and dignified saying from the oldest philosophical tradition but that it is a statement which “gives to think”. It is a philosophical gift that can hardly be exhausted and somehow will always exceed our attempts at implementation and control. What it gives is a keynote, a fundamental tone for what Jan Patočka has called the “preponderance of the Night”,⁴ an intrusion of being’s dark side into philosophical clarity, an intrusion of force into the realm of freedom. Heraclitus’ word for all of this is *polemos*. Formulated at the dawn history, this saying still transmits its polemical message: a vision of being engendered by *polemos*.

For Patočka it was one of the core phrases and often referenced sources of his philosophical undertaking. At first glance, *polemos* here stands especially for the concept of intellectual divergence; it is a way of opening up the space of respon-

¹ This article has been elaborated in the framework of the research project *Religion beyond Myth and Enlightenment*, underwritten by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF P 23255-G19).

² DK B53 (Diels-Kranz collection of Presocratic sources); English quotation after the translation by William Harris, accessed 23 September 2015, available from <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf>

³ Already in ancient times he was referred to as *ho skoteinos*: the dark one, the obscure one.

⁴ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 136.

sibility which, as an utterly personal and individual stance, can be gained in only heresy and deviation, namely to the extent that the responsible decision always and necessarily presumes an element of difference and of maintaining distance to the established moral commandment. No responsibility, no politics, no philosophy, no history proper without heresy – that might be an overly abridged, yet by no means misleading résumé of his *Heretical Essays*. Jacques Derrida made this the central axis around which his interpretation of Patočka's essays revolved when dedicating his Patočka-Memorial Lecture in 1992 to the triad of *heresy, mystery, responsibility*, an interpretation that later on, and in an extended version, became his *Gift of Death*.⁵

Polemos, thus, is here to be found in deviation and difference, in antagonism and intellectual conflict (the Différend, as Lyotard put it⁶). But this is not the only aspect where Heraclitus' dictum comes to mind: the final essay of Patočka's volume is entitled "Wars of the 20th Century and the 20th Century as War",⁷ and here Patočka explicitly refers to Heraclitus again, linking his vision of war as the father of all things to the experience of the First World War that for him was not only, so to speak, "the father of the 20th Century" and all its catastrophes, but in a deeper sense the timeless vision of being as *polemos*. It is a vision that makes the front-line experience stand out as the paradigmatic existential discovery of true life. For Patočka, therefore, Heraclitus' notion of *polemos* has a double meaning: it is war in the literal sense but also (and more so) division, difference and the taking of a distance that is the necessary precondition of responsibility. These two readings of *polemos* reflect fairly widespread tendencies in philosophy's linking up with one of its oldest and darkest sayings. Patočka's interpretation thus is one of the most explicit and fundamental references to this kind of thought in 20th century philosophy, yet it is also a well-tried and classical one in the sense of how one is to philosophically come to terms with the meaning of the Heraclitean saying. In the English translations of the word *polemos* these tendencies are reflected in rendering it as WAR or as STRIFE, both of which are widespread and established translations, since the Greek *polemos* literally means battle and warfare but also conflict, discord, or, in a broader sense, competition.

Violence or Polemos?

Given this reading of *polemos*, the paraphrase of Heraclitus' dictum that is to follow now is in stark contrast: it is a reference found in René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, a study that aspires to come to terms with human evil, to detect the central role of sacrifice for the functioning of human societal being, and to show evil's intimate relation to the sacred.⁸ At one point, Girard plainly declares: "Violence is the father and king of everything!"⁹ This sentence is highlighted in italics and ends with an exclamation mark – it carves attention, and readers can't

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by D. Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); cf. the German publication of the initial lecture: „Ketzertum, Geheimnis und Verantwortung. Jan Patočkas Europa“, in: *Transit* 4/ 1992, transl. by H.-D. Gondek, Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik 1992, 141–166.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁷ See Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, 119–138.

⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Bloomsbury Revelations (New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2013), originally published as *La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris 1972.

⁹ Ibid., 166 (similar formulation already on 162).

do otherwise but notice the obviously groundbreaking meaning of this statement. In contrast, very little or nothing is done to explain and contextualize it: there is no comment, no further explanation, no explicit referencing of either Heraclitus or the philosophical tradition in relation to it. The highlighted sentence pops up like a pied balloon with the only aim of demanding attention, and it seems obvious that it is not only a statement about *polemos*, but *polemos* (warfare) in itself. More than anything else, it serves as the widely visible and deliberately displayed bone of contention – an impression that is reinforced by Girard's reluctance to give an account.

Certainly, Girard is aware of the divergence of his translation and its turning against traditional interpretations. Three chapters prior to this passage, he quotes the same sentence – in full length and with proper quotation marks. Here the sentence still reads: "strife is the father and king of all".¹⁰ It is therefore clear that the intrusion of *violence* is Girard's deliberate deviation and his philosophical war-fare. This might still be considered a rhetorical question of minor importance, yet it seems that precisely this shift is one of the crucial switch-points of the whole study on violence and the sacred.

Taking the deviant translation seriously as an indicator for a more substantial change – what does it tell about the book's basic assumption? Or: How can violence be understood as the father of all, i.e. as the engendering of and giving rise to possibilities, if violence seems to indicate more than anything else the destruction and suffocation of possibilities? How are we to make sense of the use of the English (and French) word 'violence' which can by no stretch of imagination be understood as a translation of the ancient Greek *polemos*? For what is connoted by 'violence', in ancient Greek one would have used the word *bia*, which is a noun with a double meaning: it first indicates 'strength' or 'power', also and especially bodily power,¹¹ secondly, and probably derived from the first meaning by way of confinement, 'mere force', i.e. brutality, violence and outrage, also sacrilege.¹² The English and French 'violence' is obviously in line with the second connotation – violence, related to Latin *violare*, characterizes an act of the infliction of pain, injury, or damage, it has to do with the attempt to hurt and to injure. In this sense, the word has little leeway for an ambiguous reading. The Greek *bia* however maintains precisely the indicated ambiguity: it is comparable to the German "Gewalt", which is both, mere force in the sense of violence but also power and sovereignty.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 99.

¹¹ In this sense, *bia Herakleos* speaks of the bodily power of Heracles.

¹² In Greek mythology, *bia* is the sister of *kratos*. The siblings represent the duality of power as force and raw energy (*bia*) resp. as strength (*kratos*). However, both Greek words preserve the ambiguous meaning of power, so that *kratos* is not only majestic power but also allows connotations of violence and raw force.

¹³ The second connotation becomes nicely displayed in the adjective "gewaltig", which indicates grandiosity and magnitude: "gewaltige Musik" is hopefully not violent music. (I would like to thank the Swedish composer and cellist Peter Schuback for his grandiose Cello-Concert entitled *Gewaltige Musik*. It was given at the end of the workshop at IWM in Vienna where my contribution and others in this same issue of JCRT were presented for the first time). Also, if an impression of nature is called "gewaltig", this still bears witness to its possibly destructive and violent force but more than anything else highlights nature's monumental, sublime character.

If one were to translate Girard's sentence back into Greek (*bia pantón men patér esti*), the indicated ambiguity would help to make sense of it, at least more sense than the English or French equivalents seem to offer at first glance: in the realm of political philosophy, e.g., one could understand the sentence as an argument in the sense of Carl Schmitt's insistence on the primal injustice and violence entailed in any juridical and societal order.¹⁴ Exactly by referencing the double meaning of the word, it would be possible to hold that sovereignty, power, and order are always based on an original act of violence.¹⁵ But even this result, brought about by the attempted re-translation of violence by *bia*, is probably too generous. It tries to give meaning to a sentence by transforming Heraclitus' cosmological principle into a relatively narrow political principle of order. But not only that: something about the whole idea is quite counter-intuitive. This becomes obvious when examining the typical context of the word *bia*: its most colloquial form in ancient Greek is the dative βιᾳ (spelled with a *iota subscriptum*) which always is used to indicate that something is done forcefully, i.e. by means of force or violence. The dative form also proves that what is happening, is done against somebody's will or against somebody's resistance, violently.

Different from *polemos*, the act related to violence or carried out by force (βιᾳ) becomes topical mainly from its end and its mere result: resistance had to be overcome to achieve the necessary result - resistance was overcome, things have been solved, violently. *Polemos* however speaks a different language: it means especially the open process, the fact that things are moving and being fought out. *Polemos* opens the battle or the debate instead of settling it and bringing it to an end. More generally, one could hold that what *polemos* ontologically stands for in the context of Greek thought is the creation of tension as a basic tonus of life. Even for a generous reading, Girard's reformulation can therefore only be considered misleading – it goes against Heraclitus' fragment (dark as it may be) and against a basic understanding of the idea of *polemos* in Greek language itself.

Violate the Taboo of Violence

Once again and more clearly than before, the discussion is driven back to the conclusion that the substitution of 'war/strife' by 'violence' is in itself an act of warfare and violation. As depicted, Girard at no point makes this really explicit or goes for an open argumentation about and against Heraclitus' dictum. The treatment takes place subterraneously. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence for how crucial the importance of this transformation is for the main axis of his argumentation. The very last sentence of *Violence and the Sacred* is highly characteristic in that sense. Summing up his results, Girard insists that it is his theoretical approach which, for the first time, invites us to "violate the taboo that neither Heraclitus nor Euripides could ever quite manage to violate, and to expose to the light of reason the role played by violence in human society."¹⁶

¹⁴ Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Nehmen / Teilen / Weiden* (1953), in: *Verfassungsrechtliche Aufsätze* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1958), 489-504, where Schmitt by way of an etymological argumentation based on the Greek word *nomos* (law) hints at the initial violent act of "taking/ taking into possession" in order to set up lawful regulations.

¹⁵ Every order for Schmitt is said to presuppose an act that is not covered by this order: the Greek verb *nemein* (related to the noun *nomos*) accordingly means the triad of taking something into possession forcefully, which can only then, subsequently, be divided and subjugated to the formulation of a law.

¹⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 363.

The claim that *violence itself* is foundational and essential for human society is the core issue of Girard's study on religion, and it is the "taboo" that according to his self-conception has not been laid bare before. This essential claim is placed prominently at the end of the whole book. It sums up the polemical message like saying: This study on violence might be violent in itself but rightfully so, because what it violates is the so far unviolated (= intact and uncontested) taboo concerning the productive role of violence for human society. Interestingly, however, this core issue is directly linked to the mentioning of *Heraclitus* and *Euripides* – those who, according to Girard, still did not dare to violate the taboo, although seemingly the two of them came closest to what he claims to be his new insight, namely the violation of the taboo of violence.

Once again, the mentioning of *Heraclitus* remains somewhat mysterious: there is no contextualization or any preceding discussion that would motivate the reference. Once again, however, one could argue that it proves how much of the discussion is a tacit dispute with Heraclitus. Quite different for the setup of the argument is the role of *Euripides*: his plays are referenced by Girard throughout the whole book and they serve as the main source of examples for the theory of violent sacrifice and its functioning as a trigger for social cohesion. The most convincing reference in this context is Euripides' *Bacchae* – indeed an enactment of violence through and through, culminating in the *sparagmos*, i.e. the tearing apart or the dismembering of Pentheus by a group of Dionysian revelers, including his own mother. This violent culmination is initiated by an intrigue of the god Dionysos himself, of whom Girard in the context of this tragedy consequently holds: "The god has no proper being outside the realm of violence."¹⁷

Intriguing is the parallel to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. While Nietzsche holds that Greek tragedy is always concerned with the smashing of the individual hero and the concomitant triumph of life's joyful (Dionysian) impulses,¹⁸ Girard links his theory to the very same factor of the "sacrifice" of the individual hero but wants to give it a quite divergent interpretation. Nietzsche, according to his reading, rightly hinted at the "sacrificial character" of tragedy, but only in terms of its "maleficent aspect".¹⁹ Allegedly, he overlooked the "beneficent, regulatory ... role" of the sacrificial happening.

This articulation of Girard's criticism, however, can hardly be considered adequate when taking into account that Nietzsche stresses precisely tragedy's life-affirming and joyful (beneficent) character. Consequently, the difference between both approaches can scarcely be expressed with the terminology of "beneficent" vs. "maleficent" (which Girard blatantly and, it should be said, wrongly parallels with the Nietzschean duality of Apollonian and Dionysian).²⁰ If at all, one would

¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). For the discussion of tragedy's depiction of individuality, see esp. §§ 9, 10.

¹⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 333.

²⁰ "If tragedy has a sacrificial character, then it must possess a maleficent aspect – a Dionysiac aspect, as Nietzsche would put it – as well as a beneficent, regulatory, Apollonian cultural role." (ibid., 333) Such characterization is more than misleading: it not only misses the interpretative force of Nietzsche's duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian, it also goes against the grain of the core issue of his *Birth of Tragedy*, which is precisely the interpretation of tragedy as a joyful overcoming of the spell of individuation and the premonition of a re-established unity. To hold that Nietzsche ("although his classifications are manifestly superior to the ap-

have to say that Girard exclusively speaks about the sacrifice's beneficiary consequences *for the community*, whereas for Nietzsche the sacrifice has a beneficiary effect in the much broader sense of an *aesthetic and metaphysical re-affirmation for the will to life*.

When drawing the parallel to Nietzsche, also another crucial aspect should not go unnoticed: while Girard's most often referenced tragedian is Euripides, it is the same author that for Nietzsche represents nothing but the decadence and downfall of tragedy. And precisely the *Bacchae*, written towards the end of Euripides's life, serve as the paradigmatic case for Nietzsche's critique. The play was conceived, as Nietzsche holds, when Euripides started to regret his contempt for Dionysos and wanted to make up for this by dedicating this late drama to him. Nietzsche parallels this dedication to Socrates' famous decision to "make music" shortly before his death (thereby, seemingly, wanting to overcome his one-sided adherence to "reason" throughout the rest of his life). In both cases however, as Nietzsche insists, this regret came too late and only testifies to the failing of their artistic and philosophical projects. Consequently, the *Bacchae*, dedicated to Dionysos, are for Nietzsche the most articulate expression of Euripides' un-Dionysian approach to tragedy. Obviously, there is no need for Girard to walk along the same path, but if at all referencing the Nietzschean concept of tragedy such obvious and fundamental divergences should be addressed.

Violence as Father and King

In what sense for Girard might violence be father and king of everything? A good starting point for a closer examination is Freud's "death drive", the principle of *destrudo* or *thanatos*, as it is also called. It is a latecomer in Freud's theory, first established in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, later on rephrased especially in *Civilization and its Discontents*.²¹ The death drive is introduced as the destructive twin of libido (the siblings of "love and death"), an inherent and irreducible drive to come to an end, aggressive and destructive, entailing also self-destructive impulses. The death drive thereby clearly resembles some features of violence. As in other instances, Girard takes up this concept of a "death wish", but gives it a quite different setting. To assume an instinctive drive towards death or violence is, for Girard, still the remnant of mythological thinking, i.e. the delegation of human violence to some outside influence that man can hardly be expected to control – be it the gods, fate or some other source (as the "instinct"). The assumption of such "death drive" would merely be an act of evasion in confronting human violence.

Girard's own approach tries to set up another model of explanation. It is introduced with the following sentences:

In all the varieties of desire examined by us, we have encountered not only a subject and an object but a third presence as well: the rival. It is the rival who should be accorded the dominant role. (...) The rival desires the same object as the subject,

proaches of most critics", *ibid.*) fails to understand the "beneficent" aspects of sacrifice is therefore in itself a misguided critique.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI (1927-1931) (London: Vintage 2001); *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in: *ibid.*, vol. XVIII (1920-1922), London: Vintage 2001.

and to assert the primacy of the rival can lead to only one conclusion. Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it.* (...) The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.²²

This provides a short glimpse of Girard's theory of mimetic desire, a theory that he developed early on in his career and that remained crucial for all his writings. Desire is not object-related (as in Freud) but mimetic, directed towards any object that is desired by the rival (the rival is not primarily the "father" or "brother" as in Freud's theory but can be anybody). Ultimately, what the desire desires is *Being* as such, i.e. something which the subject "lacks and which some other person seems to possess".²³ Therefore, "all desire is a desire to be", i.e. an aspiration or the dream of a fullness that is attributed to the model. Yet, this is also where problems arise: in human relationships the idea of similarity normally evokes the image of harmony, but what if people share the same desires? This is Girard's field of observation, especially in reference to literature where he detects such rivalries.

While it seems to be a widespread conviction that one's own desires are individual and authentic, Girard refers to novels to demonstrate the pervasive effect of envy and jealousy that is hidden behind a diversity of lies and dissimulations. Mimetic desire follows a certain logic of projecting upon the model all the desired qualities and virtues, while at the same time one's own being is felt as empty and deprived of real being. Leaning on the dictum by Heraclitus again, one could characterize mimetic desire as the setting free of a process that shows forth some as gods (the model) and others as slaves (the ones bound by mimetic desire), yet what is missing is precisely Heraclitus' final reference to freedom ("some he has made free"), because the inner logic of mimetic desire does not leave any freedom. In the end even the models and so-called gods become enslaved by being absorbed in the rivalry. The desire is never a desire for the object as such, but always aroused by the model. This imitation of the other's desire for an object, however, will soon transform into an imitation of the rivalry as such. The conflict turns into general antagonism and the will to destroy each other. Violence takes over:

Whenever the disciple borrows from his model what he believes to be the 'true' object, he tries to possess that truth by desiring precisely what his model desires. Whenever he sees himself closest to the supreme goal, he comes into violent conflict with a rival. By a mental shortcut that is both eminently logical and self-defeating, he convinces himself that violence itself is the most distinctive attribute of this supreme goal! Ever afterward, violence and desire will be linked in his mind. (...) *Violence is the father and king of everything!*²⁴

This is how the author himself explains the short way from mimetic desire to utter violence, culminating in the above quoted statement that 'violence is the

²² Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 163f.

²³ Ibid., 164.

²⁴ Ibid., 166.

father and king of everything'. Many questions could be asked about the inner logic of this process: what about the reproduction of desire? A good part of what desire desires is desire itself, i.e. to reproduce itself *as desire*. Precisely by detaching desire from the object, Girard himself acknowledges the fact that desire is not so much about the satisfaction of desire but about the desire for desire as such. Nevertheless, why then does his overall theory so blindly run into the dead end of all-encompassing destruction and violence? Why is the model so overly deterministic that the ultimate desire is always that for destruction and annihilation? It is also helpful to understand desire as a social construct (as in Girard's approach), but this means even more that desires become flexible and shapeable – where is the place for new or unknown desires? Finally, what about the desire for the rival as a rival? Zarathustra's "ye must be proud of your enemies; then, the successes of your enemies are also your successes",²⁵ might serve as an outstanding reference for how to understand rivalry productively, instead of reducing it to the one and only process of attempted annihilation. Generally, the Nietzschean idea that longing has to do with distance ("longing"), giving and finding space, has no resonance in Girard's theory, where everything implodes into the standstill of an overall motion that does not know any flexibility or inner development.

Ritual Violence as a Way to Overcome Violence

Following the suggested path by Girard, however, the situation can be summed up as follows: All desire is mimetic desire, and because all desire is mimetic it always ends up in rivalry and competition, ultimately in violence. But even then violence cannot be said to be 'father and king of everything'; it would be more adequate to hold that in fact everything *is* violence, everything leads to violence and ends in violence, respectively violence is what ends everything, brings it to an end. This, according to Girard, would be the overall pattern of human coexistence that as a matter of fact could never work as coexistence but only as annihilation – if there was not a way out. Instead of what Girard calls "reciprocal violence, wholly destructive in nature", there can also be "ritual violence", one "creative and protective in nature".²⁶ It is only with the notion of this ritual violence that the attributed role of violence as 'father and king' of everything might obtain a better meaning. Since it is the crucial point of the whole undertaking, a longer quote by Girard seems apt to outline the overall idea:

Along with any known historical context, we can infer behind a myth like that of *The Bacchae* a sudden outbreak of violence so extreme as to threaten the very existence of the community. This threat will eventually be withdrawn, as rapidly as it appeared, thanks to a type of mob violence that reconciles all members of the community because it involves the participation of all. The metamorphosis from peaceable citizens into raging beasts is too terrifying and too transitory for the community to accept it as issuing from within itself. As soon as calm has been miraculously restored, the past tumult will be looked upon as a supreme example of divine intervention. Angered at discovering himself ignored or misrepresented, a god has made known his wishes in a

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I/10: "War and Warriors", accessed 23 September 2015, available on: <http://4umi.com/nietzsche/zarathustra/10>

²⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 163.

thoroughly godlike manner. Having accepted a final victim, a victim of his own choice in which he may also be incarnated, he silently withdraws from the scene (...) Religion, then, is far from ‘useless’. It humanizes violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check by the appropriate rites appropriately observed...²⁷

The process described here exactly mirrors the dramatic situation of *The Bacchae*: Dionysos is angry that he is not worshipped adequately by the community, so he shows up on the scene in disguise and seduces everybody to violence that finally culminates in the unrestrained tearing apart of Pentheus. The whole development shows a paroxysm of violence. However, before the community becomes drowned in utter violence and mutual slaughtering, there is an outlet that is found instinctively: violence focuses on an arbitrary victim (Pentheus) who is sacrificed, and by his dying, reinstalls the peaceful order. The violent outburst is over and retrospectively seems to be conducted by an outside (god-like) interference, not by human mimetic desire. Girard calls this “ritual violence” or “unanimous violence”, both of which refer to the same thing, namely the sacrificing of an arbitrary victim in order to renew peace. And he indeed insists that the choice of the victim is accidental: it could be *anybody* – Tiresias or Kreon as well as Antigone. This indifference in the choice of the victim is consequential if one considers the relations brought about by mimetic desire as symmetrical. After the deed, however, the victim becomes sanctified: he/she is the one who miraculously reinstalled power and showed prodigious power. Girard holds that this is the origin of archaic religion and its sacrificial rites.

It is easy to recognize essential traits of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* here. According to Freud, it is the killing of the father that later on becomes reenacted in the sanctity of the totem animal and its ritual killing in memory of the initial murder. Yet, it is not only the change of object (the “father” can be replaced by anybody) that makes Girard’s approach look quite divergent. Similarly as in the case of Nietzsche, Girard thinks that Freud came close to discovering the “main issue” but missed it in the end:

Clearly the truth we are seeking is close at hand, and although Freud failed to grasp it, he was surely on the right track when he concentrated his attention on totemism. His intuition did not play him false in suggesting a connection between the enigmas of religion and an actual act of murder. But for want of a mechanism that would make this connection, Freud was unable to translate his discovery into any kind of plausible formulation.²⁸

Following this interpretation, one would have to say that Freud clearly discovered the intimate nexus between sanctity and an actual murder, but he always projected it back into prehistoric times and delegated all its powers to one single act of murder (the killing of the primordial father) which, as Girard holds, “lends a note of fantasy to his theory”. Freud missed the truly vertiginous scope of his

²⁷ Ibid., 152.

²⁸ Ibid., 224.

discovery, namely the close interconnection of ritual murder and sanctity that might lead up to a “general theory of sacrifice”.²⁹

A “general theory of sacrifice”

This general theory of sacrifice, the core issue of Girard’s understanding of religion, has by now become abundantly clear: any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe “hurls itself blindly into the search for a *scapegoat*. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of.”³⁰ This scapegoat-mechanism is what Girard sees at work throughout the history of humanity, it is what brings peace to a community – at least temporary peace – and is therefore essential for its functioning and for the mere survival of a community that would otherwise be drowned by sheer violence. Scapegoating is the origin of archaic religion and it becomes institutionalized in religions by practicing ritual sacrifices.

It should be noted however that this concept of religion has little or no transcendence: its aims and goals are exclusively mundane. It protects humans and society by, as Girard says, “humanizing violence”. Religion, thereby, *at the same time* obtains a pivotal role as it is also turned into something that is only and merely useful in the service of human life. One might therefore call Girard’s approach “atheistic”, despite the fact that his theory constantly speaks about gods and their deeds. These gods are, however, mere projections in accordance with the needs of human life – their true existence is of no importance whatsoever. Dionysos (a whole chapter of *Violence and the Sacred* is dedicated to him) is the “god of mob hysteria, of sudden onslaughts of collective fear” or “the god of decisive mob action.”³¹ The upswing of its cult in Greece is for Girard just an indicator for a sacrificial crisis at that time, as if people instinctively felt the need for human sacrifices and therefore invented Dionysos as the one who demands sacrifices (on a deeper level, one would also have to hold that this is what basically all gods do: they all have the same function of demanding sacrifices, although there might be temporary shifts in their characters or attributes related to them).

Once again, the arbitrariness in the choice of the victim is nicely illustrated in *The Bacchae*. Pentheus is the human scapegoat, he didn’t obey to the god’s command, he is guilty, let him be sacrificed. Yet, Dionysos himself is also guilty: it was he who demanded the sacrifice, and humans could blame him for driving Pentheus’ mother Agave out of her mind and causing an ecstatic frenzy all around the place. However, all guilt is projected onto Pentheus, who didn’t worship Dionysos adequately. It is precisely this notion of guilt that is crucial for the functioning of the whole process. If we were to admit that anybody could take over the role of the victim (that there in fact is *no guilt*, just an asserted guilt), then the foundational and constitutive role of sacrificial violence for the community would collapse. According to Girard, Greek tragedy, as well as the Jewish prophets, bear witness to such a process of “enlightenment” where guilt becomes doubtful. Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah and Micah denounce in vehement terms

²⁹ Ibid., 225.

³⁰ Ibid., 90.

³¹ Ibid., 151.

the impotence of the sacrificial process and ritual in general. Tragedy, on the other hand, shows that the lot of being the victim could fall on anybody. Thus Greek tragedy as well as the prophetic claims of the Old Testament are rooted in what he calls a "sacrificial crisis,"³² which is the time of a transition where sacrificial rites disappear and the difference between impure violence and purifying violence becomes doubtful. The culmination of this is Christianity, where it becomes explicitly stated that the person sacrificed is innocent.

Yet it is unclear what this process really means for Girard's theory. The so-called "enlightenment" could be seen as a desirable and welcome change because it creates awareness and empathy for the victim. However, awareness and empathy concurrently disable the functioning of sacrificial violence. This would therefore mean that the gates are wide open again for a return of reciprocal, unrestricted, and destructive violence. Following Girard, this is probably the situation that we are living in. The constitutive role of sacrificial violence and the innocence of the victim – these are *The Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (as the title of a later book by Girard holds, where he elaborates the extension of his theory into the fields of Jewish and Christian religions).³³

It seems to be the presumption of both books to finally uncover these things and, as the last sentence of *Violence and the Sacred* holds, "expose to the light of reason the role played by violence."³⁴ But what is one to do once this has been achieved? Once things have been exposed to the light of reason, should not reason at least try to deal with the role of violence? Girard's approach to the whole matter in terms of instinctual affairs leaves little-to-no space for reflection, for responsible answers, or for thinking and philosophy in general. Violence for him is the inescapable destiny of humanity, and the discovery of sacrificial violence *comes like a gift*: it is the one way out that saves humanity from being carried away by reciprocal violence and from being extinguished. But this gift is just an instinctive mechanism. It is not outside of economy or transcending economy but it is fully motivated by economy. It is an economy that sacrifices something (or, better, somebody) for obtaining something back. It is a doing in the sense of the Greek dative βίᾳ, sacrificing somebody violently, by force, against his/her own will. How can this violence be the father and king of everything?

To end polemically: The gift of death cannot be the gift of somebody's death but only – and if ever so – my own death. It is this side that gets fully lost in Girard's approach. The aforementioned concepts of sacrifice in authors such as Derrida or Patočka speak a very different language. Not that their ideas of sacrifice would be unproblematic (which is a story of its own), but they indeed approach the topic of sacrifice from the inside, from out of reflection, responsibility, thoughtfulness, ultimately as the idea of self-sacrifice. For Patočka, this sacrifice is the most radical breaking with the idea of an economic exchange, it is a sacrifice that means precisely to draw back "from the realm of what can be managed and ordered, and an explicit relationship to that which, not being anything real itself, serves as the ground of the appearing of all that is real and in this sense rules over all."³⁵ What is here said to "rule over all" is exactly that which cannot be

³² Ibid., 54.

³³ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987) (French original: *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, 1978).

³⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 363.

³⁵ Jan Patočka, "The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger," in *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, ed. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1989), 332.

calculated, it is the incalculable “dark side” evoked in Heraclitus’ *polemos*, the preponderance of the night, which precisely is *not* an expansion of life. In Derrida’s words:

How does one give *oneself* death [*se donner la mort*]? How does one give it to oneself in the sense that putting oneself to death means dying while assuming responsibility for one’s own death, committing suicide but also sacrificing oneself for another, *dying for the other*, thus perhaps giving one’s life by giving oneself death, accepting the gift of death...³⁶

Although Girard’s theory abundantly speaks about death, what can be found in his book is exactly nothing similar to the acceptance of death. It is an approach that is reflective and thoughtful but remains anti-philosophical in the sense that it does not open space for reflection and thoughtfulness. On the contrary, it buries all possible thinking in factology and in an inescapable fate of violent outbursts. Most intently this one-sided enclosure is reflected in the shift from Heraclitean *polemos* to violence. But how can violence ever be ‘father and king of everything’?

Appendix

More than anything else, Girard’s theory of sacrificial violence is a neat reading and interpretation of Greek tragedy. A number of questions related to his understanding of tragedy remain pending and/or can be applied only to a highly selective pool of examples. Without any intention to exhaust this topic, the following three remarks intend to outline possible basic questions in regard to Girard’s explication of tragedy:

- 1) How can the alleged symmetric setup be applied to concrete tragedies? Girard’s theory holds that *anybody* could possibly be sacrificed: Creon as well as Tiresias as well as Oedipus. If applied to *Antigone* however, the whole setup becomes highly questionable. There is indeed some kind of a symmetric setup in the confrontation of Antigone and Kreon (this symmetry is also what Hegel’s reading put prominently in the foreground), yet the two of them are not just interchangeable characters. They both “represent something” (the “law of the state” vs. “the divine law”, as one could put it), and if this crucial confrontation is not to become utterly meaningless, any reflection on this tragedy has to take into account their divergent positions. In fact, *Antigone* offers the great example of the two rivals Eteocles and Polynices, both of which are swept away by their rivalry. It is almost too perfect a case for Girard’s theory of mimetic desire and reciprocal violence. Strangely enough, Girard refers to it only in reference to their duel as portrayed in Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*. It would be exactly Antigone who, in the play by Sophocles, already reflects about the brothers’ equality and their indifference, whereas Creon is precisely the one taking sides. How can this topic, which seems to be so essentially crucial for Girard’s approach, go unnoticed? References to *Antigone* are mysteriously absent from Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*. Seem-

³⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 10.

ingly, he has little to say about “heavenly Antigone, that noblest of figures that ever appeared on earth.”³⁷ Is this so because in *Antigone* the sacrifice does not at all obtain the meaning and the result that Girard would like to prescribe to it?

- 2) Aischylos’ *Prometheus Unbound* is the example of a tragedy where the hero (Prometheus) is in the end freed from his torments. It delivers reconciliation *without any sacrifice*.

Or, to mention another example, the main topic of *The Persians* is *hybris* – this idea is fully lost if viewed from a Girardian perspective, and the fact that Aischylos writes about the enemy and shows empathy for the enemy also becomes fully lost. Once again, there is no sacrifice, but there is an extended lament about the loss of the battle and, as one could add, about the uselessness of all the violence invested into the battle. There is also the lament of Xerxes, who still does not see the reason for his defeat (*hybris*). What shall we do with this tragic misconception of the human lot in the context of Girard’s theory? All of this would be superfluous and accidental “material” added to the tragedy that “basically” (only) deals with sacrificial violence, although evidently there is no sacrificial violence to be found in the drama. Obviously, not all tragedies must serve as paradigmatic examples, but if too many fail to fit the general pattern, the result becomes unsatisfying if the presumption is that *all* mythology, *all* religion, *all* ancient tragedy is precisely about this one idea.

- 3) Finally, there is a paralleling of expulsion and killing: both are sacrificial violence, i.e. they follow the scapegoat mechanism. Oedipus is the best example for expulsion, he is driven into exile; Pentheus is the paradigmatic case for being killed (literally torn apart by mob hysteria). The paralleling of both cases and the assertion that both of them serve the same function is unproblematic. But if exile instead of death can indeed satisfy the very same need and similarly serve the function of settling violence, is not that a detail worthwhile to be emphasized? If a blood feud can be terminated without blood, this shift should indicate more than a minor aberration in the general setup.

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³⁷ Hegel’s *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. I, ed. E. S. Haldane (London: Routledge, 1955), 441.

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