

# Imitation, Violence, and Exchange

Girard and Mauss

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## RECIPROCAL VIOLENCE AND THE DESIRE FOR WHAT THE OTHER DESIRES

In this article, I would like to draw attention to the potentially violent outcome of exchange interactions between individuals and groups. Both Girard and Mauss examine violence in a wider social and political process.<sup>1</sup> According to Mauss, the smallest difference, such as a lack of reciprocity, may evoke a desire for retribution. Understanding reactions when there is a lack of symmetry, real or illusory, can give us an important insight into the generative mechanisms behind violence. This is why traditional societies tried, often very successfully, to protect individuals through prohibitions and taboos. These prohibitions and taboos were directed against any kind of activity that could possibly result in violent rivalries among the population. The killing of adulterers, thieves, and foreigners can be seen as a way of ridding society of people perceived as having undesirable traits and ridding it of the potential imitation of their bad desires. In this way, a society's violence may function in a protective

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and anti-mimetic way. The violence against transgressors is a kind of mimetic anti-mimesis, a way of telling people to follow the rules of society so that they will become mimetically immune to the forces that threaten society.

Violent victimizing appears to fulfill a generative function by preventing transgressions, moral cleansing, and restoration of peace. At the same time, however, it bears (unconsciously for the participants) a similarity to what one wishes to expel, namely, the feared violence and negative influence of the person or persons who are victimized. Despite attempts to expel violent transgressions, the attempts themselves are quite similar to the violence they are trying to exorcise. Both Freud and Girard argue that those who conduct a rite of sacrifice are projecting onto the sacrificial victim qualities that reflect some of their own innermost concerns.<sup>2</sup> Sacrificial violence, seen from a modern, nonsacrificial standpoint, is a kind of suicide. By killing the other, one also kills something in oneself.

*In demolishing the victim they are symbolically annihilating aspects of themselves. What is destroyed is destructiveness itself: the feelings of violence and hostility that lie behind attempts to carry out violent activities. Such feelings are antithetical to the ties of friendship that bond a community together, and feelings of violence towards one's peers and associates must be banished if a closely knit community—such as a tribal brotherhood, a spiritual fellowship, or a modern nation—is to survive.<sup>3</sup>*

Modern societies are full of these projections of one's own desires onto the other, which expose the modern variant of what is sacrifice, and which are often less physically but instead psychologically violent, yet still victimizing in their attitude of projecting. Terms such as "imitation," "identification," and "comparison" do not have to turn out to be violent—even when a great deal of competition is involved. In this respect, I disagree with some Girardians who claim that imitative desire must be violent and who look back to an insight going back to Heraclitus that violence is the source of all.<sup>4</sup> The all-decisive factor is the gradual shift from competition to rivalry, from being allies to becoming enemies. The transition from being competitive friends to rivals comes as a result of imitation. Seen in this way, imitative desire is the generative force behind violence, the snake that turns friends and lovers into rivals.

This Freudian act of projection resembles an act of doubling, an intense mimesis of the other that creates doubles. From a Girardian perspective, it is the clash of desire that leads to doubling, and later to violence.<sup>5</sup> The imitation of each other's desires will sooner or later cause some kind of violence.<sup>6</sup> This doubling does not only have to involve two people; it can be groups, even countries.

But the effect is always negative. Raymund Schwager explains it in the following terms:

*Whoever is desirous has to expect that the others will too. Whoever succumbs to rivalry arouses the same passion in others. Whoever resorts to violence is imitated in his or her actions until, sooner or later, the deed falls back upon his or her own head.<sup>7</sup>*

This excellent description of reciprocal violence shows just how inevitable the escalation of violence is. There is something organic in mimetic rivalry; its force is so strong that the way out of violent conflicts seems nearly impossible other than if there is a shift: a change of heart, or an act of forgiveness in order to stop the ongoing cycle. I therefore would disagree with Bernard Perret when he emphasizes the gift in itself as a peacemaker,<sup>8</sup> as it only really functions in times when conflict is low and exchange is fair. Mark Anspach may be right in that to refuse to give is risking becoming a victim of violence oneself.<sup>9</sup> However, the problem is that the gift in itself becomes too symbolic and weak and cannot, in the long run, hinder mimetic violence. If, however, mimetic desire were not as destructive and strong as it is, the gift would be able to balance, possibly eradicate, the conflicts. In my view, this seems to be the reason why Girard does not consider sacrifice in peace ceremonies.<sup>10</sup>

#### MAUSS: EXCHANGE AND RIVALRY

If we downgrade violence to the relational nature of exchanging gifts, as Mauss describes it, this may help us more clearly see the acquisitive dimension of violence. Conflict can therefore be seen as an initial stage. In anthropology, mimesis is understood, more than in philosophy and religion, as acquisitive mimesis, an acquisition that is also based upon the other. Mauss's work, *The Gift*, illustrates the acquisitive basis of human societies in a most intriguing way. The strength of Mauss's work lies in the emphasis he puts on rivalry in the act of exchange. Mauss shows that all kinds of gifts within the societies he has researched (mainly Polynesian) are based on a system of *reciprocity*. This reciprocity, which governs different kinds of exchange, clearly contains acquisitive elements. The balancing of accounts can contain virtually anything. In other words, the exchange of goods indicates a system of imitative reciprocity. The imitation involved in receiving a gift in an attitude of reciprocity establishes a connection with each other. This double nature is, as Mauss writes, already inherent in the word *gift*,

which in Germanic languages can mean both a gift (present) and a poison.<sup>11</sup> The act of receiving a gift entails a whole number of social obligations, and in this respect, reciprocal imitation means surrendering to the laws of society.

Furthermore, religious sacrifices are built upon a principle of reciprocity. When there is reciprocity, the system, according to its own laws, is governed by good mimesis, and when there is some kind of breach, bad imitation is always near at hand. Among the Polynesian clans, refusing to give a gift, failing to give invitations to others, or refusing to accept a gift is tantamount to declaring war, indicating that violence is near at hand whenever there is a breach in reciprocity.<sup>12</sup> Mauss writes in his conclusion that over a considerable period of time, in a considerable number of societies (up until modern times) there was no middle way: Either one trusts completely or distrusts completely, either one gives everything or one goes to war.<sup>13</sup> The rivalry is not only limited to necessities; there is rivalry in all spheres, not least in the act of generosity. For example, the will to outdo the other with presents and feasts is also imbued with the same mimetic rivalry.<sup>14</sup>

Mauss talks about the ability to attract and dazzle other people.<sup>15</sup> At certain potlatches, there were rivalries over who was the richest and the most wildly extravagant. Mauss clearly perceives rivalry in generosity, and cunningly concludes that “everything is based upon the principles of antagonism and rivalry.”<sup>16</sup> In some instances there is a violent transcendence of the reciprocal system of giving and returning gifts. Instead of a controlled reciprocal imitation, there is a shift toward a chaotic imitation where one destroys in order to not give the slightest hint of desiring one’s gift to be reciprocated. This has, however, led to a misunderstanding that the act of giving is free and symbolic, and does not need to be reciprocal.<sup>17</sup>

Mauss provides an example from the American Northwest where houses and thousands of blankets are burned, and the most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown into the water “in order to ‘flatten’ one’s rival.”<sup>18</sup> This indicates a development from a rational and upholding imitation based on reciprocity, to a violent, almost apocalyptic frenzy. The more destructive examples given by Mauss indicate the metaphysical and nonmaterialistic forces in human societies. If there is reciprocity, everything is fine. However, a breach in etiquette, a lack of honor (which is probably more important in traditional societies than in modern ones),<sup>19</sup> transforms the rationality of a mimetically based exchange system into destructive actions, indicating that acquisitive mimesis can mean something more and something worse than mere imitation based upon exchange. The system of gifts, of exchange, has a balancing function, but its reasons and its dialectical nature are far from rational.

Mauss's research is limited to particular societies, but, as he indicates, many of these phenomena or mechanisms have something universal about them.<sup>20</sup> He claims that it is possible to extend his observations to our own modern societies.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it is difficult to find anything more universal than rivalry and violence, even if the forms vary greatly. While Girard sees the genesis of violence in mimetic rivalry, Mauss sees the rivalistic tendency in all forms of exchange, and therefore regards rivalry as something inevitable.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Mauss's work on exchange clearly corresponds to the acquisitive nature of imitation and human coexistence.

The process toward violence therefore seems to stem from different variations on the structure and strength of desire. However, the gift may postpone violent sacrifices, but it cannot eradicate it. Violence is born from the interaction between the subject and the desired person in different configurations. What could have been the initial motivation, such as erotic rivalry or money, seems to get lost in the turmoil. Girard explains this escalation of violence as an increase in resistance: "*The more desire is attached to resistance the more it is oriented towards violence.*"<sup>23</sup>

According to mimetic theory, there is little rationality in violence because, in exactly the same way as in rivalistic love, violence seems to be motivated less and less by any object, and more and more by reciprocal violence. There is, of course, a rationality attached to the balance, based on some kind of reciprocity, but the objects, which are usually seen as introducing and motivating violence, gradually become less motivational.

*Any object at stake in conflict will ultimately be annulled and surpassed, and acquisitive mimesis, which sets members of the community against one another, will give way to antagonistic mimesis, which eventually unites and reconciles all members of a community at the expense of a victim.*<sup>24</sup>

This rivalry toward nothingness is well illustrated in the film *American Psycho*, based on Bret Easton Ellis's novel of the same name, showing how a young New York yuppie can become a serial killer. In one scene, the young and successful New York businessmen begin comparing which of their business cards is the most slick, refined, and subtle. The protagonist, Patrick Bateman, gets sick with envy and reacts by committing his first murder. This is an example of *desire according to the other's desire*, as there is absolutely nothing real at stake, only desire.

Seen in this way, imitation is the force that both begins and ends violence, and in this respect, imitation is key to violence. As violence is always caused

by imitative desire, it therefore is not originary. It is a by-product of imitative desire.<sup>25</sup>

*Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more. Violence is supremely mimetic.*<sup>26</sup>

If there were a violent inclination in human beings, violence would have been instinctual. Calling it violence, however, means that the killing is not primarily instinctual but is related to moral problems. The specificity concerning humans and killing is this lack of ability to kill without further consequences, without the accompanying moral and religious implications. This is the result of an expanded imitation. Human violence has no braking mechanisms against intraspecific aggression. This means, according to Burton L. Mack, that rivalries and conflicts, once unleashed, cannot stop short of manslaughter.<sup>27</sup> According to Girard, the growth of symbolic violence among human beings is a result of imitative activity linked to the increase in brain size.<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that human nature has become more violent, quite on the contrary, but it does mean that increased intelligence makes violence more effective and far-reaching. Also, the fact that human beings have no instinctual stoppage mechanism makes violence complex and seemingly irrational because of the vast range of violent expressions caused by the variations in conflictual mimesis.

When discussing imitation in relation to violence, almost all variations of violent imitation can be labeled as acquisitive. However, there is a tendency to interpret imitation as re-presentation (to present again), especially when the level of conflict is low. If the level of conflict rises, everything revolves around acquisition. This should perhaps indicate that imitation should be related to a desire to acquire goods, not least to obtain objects that are difficult to obtain, but Girard only follows up to a certain point the tendency to attribute violence to the scarcity of essential objects, as the connection between scarcity and violence is relative.<sup>29</sup> In some cases, there is only a minor degree of scarcity before there is violence, and in other cases there is no scarcity whatsoever. This means that the relationship between violence and scarcity must be understood in the context of desire rather than in relation to the scarcity itself.

Girard, however, has never related his understanding of imitation to a real discussion about the scarcity of goods. Scarcity is arguably given too little consideration in mimetic theory, especially in a global perspective. This might potentially be because Girard thought it may weaken his mimetic theory. External desires caused by scarcity of food and other goods are, in certain areas of the

world, clearly motivated by the desire to survive and not by desire according to others' desires. One could argue that mimetic desire, when not confined to the ways desire is played out in the Western world, would become less related to internal mediation, as the individual expression in most parts of the world is more regulated by sacrificial institutions.

#### VIOLENCE AND DESIRE IN MYTH

Mimesis and violence play such an important role in understanding myths that without the presence of violence and imitation, a myth would not be a myth, but either a straightforward true story or a fairy tale. Instead of seeing the homogeneity of myth in common textual structures, like Lévi-Strauss,<sup>30</sup> Girard sees the homogeneity of myth in the violence from which it stems and tries to hide. Myths try to cover up the violence that has been inflicted by divinizing the violence and transcribing the events in such a way that the violence of the society is not revealed as such.<sup>31</sup> According to Maurice Bloch, the act of hiding violence in myth is an attempt to create the transcendental in religion and politics.<sup>32</sup> Myths therefore function in a society both as legitimation and as preservation.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Girard's understanding of myth corresponds with that of Durkheim, as the latter claims myths hide more than they reveal.<sup>34</sup> According to Girard, one cannot trust the myth's message; one has to uncover layers of mythology in the myths to discover the real accounts hidden within them.<sup>35</sup> Golsan, in his book on Girard and myth, writes that while Girard "shares the view that myths are not precise accounts of historical occurrences, he does argue that they originate in real or historical events."<sup>36</sup> Thus, one of the most important features in Girard's understanding of myths is that there are real events behind sacrifices.<sup>37</sup> Despite his suspicion about the messages of myth, Girard believes they refer to violent historical events: "*All myths . . . have their roots in real acts of violence against real victims.*"<sup>38</sup> Myths are linked to great conflicts in society and thus to violence. The most important function of myth is to establish a sacred reality.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, Mauss differs from Girard, as, for him, exchange does not establish a sacred reality and therefore fails to restore peace in the community.

The mythmakers are imitators of the norms of society; they are a kind of spiritual storyteller who produces narratives within which a society can function. Both myths and rituals are rationalizations of the sacrificial crises that threaten to cause their society to collapse into violence. "*Myths are the retrospective transfiguration of sacrificial crisis, the reinterpretation of these crises in the light of the cultural order that has arisen from them.*"<sup>40</sup>

Both myth and rituals must, in mimetic theory, be seen in the context of desire. The urge to hide desires means disregarding imitation. Myth in particular can be seen as being desirous, both in transforming the victim and in covering up violence. Because myth partially reveals violence and humans cannot function well when there is chaos and serious violence around them, this indicates that acts of mythologizing stem from the same sources as exchange, from the desire of the other.

#### THE ECONOMY OF RIVALRY

Girard does not limit rivalry to any specific object. However, he does emphasize rivalry in erotic love, which indicates this special area as being potentially rivalistic. He lays surprisingly little emphasis on money. According to both Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida, imitative desire has always been particularly problematic in relation to money and economic circumstances. Lacoue-Labarthe claims that when economic circumstances are a part of the picture, there is always the possibility for both rivalry and hatred.<sup>41</sup> Economic circumstances, alongside love, are in my view the most common grounds for rivalry. Economic rivalry in its initial stages is a kind of rationale for survival stemming from a scarcity of goods and a scarcity of jobs and so on. However, as both Girard and Mauss emphasize, sooner or later, when desire gets stronger, rationality seems to fade into the background, and conflicts will arise.

When, however, rivalry is not based on survival, but on prestige, objective value—if one can use such a term—plays an entirely secondary role, as the aim is to outdo one's rival in an ongoing competition where material objects play a symbolic and highly decisive role. The scarcity of jobs, food, or other goods will often spark violence, though using economic circumstances to enhance one's prestige, is, in a modern society at least, not directly violent, even if this kind of rivalry creates scapegoats among rivals who do not make it, and even if it exploits the suffering of people in the Third World to an even greater degree.<sup>42</sup>

#### RIVALRY AND CAPITALISM

From a historical point of view, desire has become more acute. The loss of societal taboos and social restrictions and the openness toward imitation make the modern world highly mimetic. Even if, for example, firms manage to redirect rivalry in their own working environment by creating a rivalrous atmosphere



toward other firms, all kinds of internal rivalries may arise within a group. This tendency is clearly not new, but the individuality stemming from a kind of sacrificial breakdown has made these rivalries more internal, less clear-cut, and less based on collective desires. The sacrificial breakdown that clearly moderates violence, however, produces more subdued, individual versions of expulsion. When the illusive balance between "us" and "them" crumbles, rivalry creeps into all private areas such as families and friendships, where rivalries with relatives and colleagues and so on can arise, and that could touch all spheres of life unless there are prohibitions and ethical norms to stop the rivalry creeping in and disintegrating even the smallest of social entities.

This makes ethics and moderate prohibitions particularly acute in the modern world. Without the sacrificial checking and balancing of our desires, they threaten to take control of the construction of the world around us. Religion often questions different forms of desire, helping people get rid of desires that lead to violence toward the self and the other. Christian mimesis, an imitation of Christ in the Western world, does not propagate prohibitions against rivalry in itself. Rather, it warns of its effects. Violence brought about by the freedom to rival anyone, and that sometimes leads to scapegoating, where people fail and fall out of competitive niches, can be seen as a modern form of victimizing. The encouragement of this relatively new global ideology seems to create victims out of a market system where the most brilliant, the luckiest, and, at times, the most brutal possess the greatest value.

Violence must be seen as stemming from the desire to have what others have. In the past, violence was moderated by systems of prohibitions and taboos. Today, prohibitions and taboos are clearly weakened, allowing the individual to act on their desires in ways that were unthinkable in the past. The freedom to imitate seems to create an extremely dynamic society and, at the same time, creates a society where the individual is continually trapped by the effects of desires, making him fall prey to illusion and deceit.

#### NOTES

1. Bruce Kapferer, *The Feast of the Sorcerer: Practices of Consciousness and Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 210.
2. Mark Jurgensmeyer, ed., "Is Symbolic Violence Related to Real Violence?" in *Violence and the Sacred in the Modern World* (London: Franc Cass, 1992), 3.
3. Jurgensmeyer, "Is Symbolic Violence Related to Real Violence?" 3.

4. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 132; Hans J. Lundager, *René Girard* (Fredriksberg: Anis, 1991), 33.
5. René Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 12.
6. "The more a tragic conflict is prolonged, the more likely it is to culminate in a violent mimesis; the resemblance between combatants grow ever stronger until each presents a mirror image of the other." René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 5th ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 47.
7. Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: The Crossroad P.C./Gracewing, 2000), 81.
8. Bernard Perret, "Mauss, Girard et la violence. Une lecture girardienne de Mauss," *Revue de Mauss* 55, in *La Violence et le mal, Mauss, Girard et quelques autres* (2020): 91–103.
9. Mark R. Anspach, "Apprivoiser la violence. Le sacrifice, la vengeance, le don," *Revue de Mauss* 55, in *La Violence et le mal, Mauss, Girard et quelques autres* (2020): 104–116.
10. Mark R. Anspach, *Vengeance in Reverse. The Tangled Loops of Violence, Myth, and Madness* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017), 21.
11. Marcel Mauss. *The Gift* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 81.
12. Mauss. *The Gift*, 17.
13. Mauss. *The Gift*, 104–105.
14. Mauss. *The Gift*, 20.
15. Mauss. *The Gift*, 36.
16. Mauss. *The Gift*, 47.
17. See <https://anthromodeologist.wordpress.com/2012/10/15/marcel-mauss-the-gift-critical-review>.
18. Mauss. *The Gift*, 47.
19. Mauss. *The Gift*, 48.
20. Mauss. *The Gift*, 59.
21. Mauss. *The Gift*, 83.
22. Mauss's attempt to synthesize and show certain universal traits in his research actually corresponds with Girard's approach. There is, however, a tendency in Girard's work not to mention those critics with whom he is in tune. Instead, his texts are written against a background of adversaries.
23. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 334.
24. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 95.
25. Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," 12.
26. Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," 12–13.
27. Burton L. Mack, "The Innocent Transgressor: Jesus in Early Christian Myth and History," *Semeia* 33 (1985): 139.

28. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 94–95.
29. Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," 10.
30. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995). See chap. 4, "When Myth Becomes History." See also Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in T. A. Sebeok, *Myth—A Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 83–84.
31. René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 23–99.
32. Maurice Bloch, *Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.
33. Mariasusai Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1973), 140.
34. Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1987), 138.
35. See Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 23–99.
36. Richard J. Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 61.
37. Girard, "Mimesis and Violence," 12.
38. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 25.
39. Dhavamony, *Phenomenology of Religion*, 150.
40. . Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 64.
41. Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 124.
42. Although suffering people in the Third World are only indirectly a part of the metaphysical rivalry in the Western world, they become, partly when considering the economic systems, the scapegoats of our metaphysically motivated mass consumption.

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