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A Theory of Everything (That Just Might Work)

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Beginning in April of this year quiet celebrations will be held on three continents to mark the 50th anniversary of a book most people have never heard of, but whose ideas affect everything from buying designer tote bags to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Far from being a household name, Rene Girard, 87, is professor emeritus at Stanford University, and also a member of the prestigious *L'Académie française*. Born in Avignon in 1923, he started his academic life as a scholar of medieval history. Girard moved into French literature and built a reputation there through critiques of modern French writers. Through his work he began to notice commonalities of characters and relationships found in great works of fiction; he named these themes *mimetic desire*. This is detailed in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, (1961 French; translated into English 1966) – the source of the 50th anniversary celebrations. Here he first develops his ideas on mimetic desire – the triangular relationship between a subject, model, and object. Sometimes called the *geometry of desire*, this relationship is often graphed as a triangle with the subject and object at base angles and the model at the apex. The sides of the triangle become arrows pointing from subject to both model and object, and from the model to the object as well.

Girard says that once in society, we imitate others – from the learning of language to social customs, even to our desires. Girard proposes that individuals like to think that their desires are authentic and unique to themselves but, he argues, human desire is actually mimetic.

We *learn* what to desire by *watching* what others desire. Fundamentally, the subject desires “being” (a deep longing due to our separation from God, says Girard) and in the subject’s eyes the model seems to have this “being”. The model has (or desires to have) an “object” – this object can be material, such as a particular car or a house in a certain neighborhood, or it can be immaterial such as social status or political power. The subject, in imitation of the model, focuses his or her desire and efforts on acquiring what the model has (or desires).

We see this occur every day at all levels of society. Imitating their models, my lower income neighbors have five TVs and regularly order from Pizza Hut. My modest income longs for a Coach brand “colette” tote bag. I imagine it would be fun to swing into Starbucks with my hip sunglasses, skinny jeans and big branded tote, at least appearing to be someone with money – someone who has that oh-so-elusive “being”. “The rich” may seem to have everything, but even for them there is always one next thing *au courant*. Fashion Week in New York is, literally, mimesis. Even the profoundly poor can be mimicked -- in their spirituality and “simple lifestyle”. Advertisers take gross advantage of our desire to imitate, using powers from “being like the group” to product placement and celebrity endorsements.

Because both the model and the subject desire the object, and come into relationship with each other over its acquisition, they can actually become violent rivals for the object. As long as social separation between subject and model is kept acceptable via social mechanisms (distinctions such as economic class, ethnic group, religion), mimetic desire remains peaceful.

According to Girard, as acceptable social mechanisms degrade, mimetic *rivalry* can occur because the object cannot be possessed by more than one person at a time, or because the subject, who is moved to imitate, values individuality; the only way to maintain individuality is

to obtain the object and then eliminate the model. In that situation the model becomes a barrier to the subject's acquisition of the object and the possibility of violence increases.

Often this escalation costs human lives, as seen in riots, from 1965's Watts to 2011's Egypt, as those who wish for the objects of their models trip the wires of violence. Eventually, actual possession of the object can lose importance as both the model and subject battle for the prestige associated with the object's possession. Most NFL football players could, for instance, afford to pay a jeweler to *make* a Super Bowl winner's ring, but, the ring itself is meaningless without the prestige of actually winning.

Once the outbreak of violence between subject and model is imminent, this violence can be redirected away from the community (preserving both subject and model) and projected onto a *scapegoat*. The scapegoat is a group or individual easily identified as "different" – a foreigner, a handicapped person, a "different" ethnic group. One example: my daughter was in the backyard playing with two neighbor brothers, who, out of sight of their peace-loving Mom, were "wrestling" with each other – a fight for primacy of parental love thinly disguised as the sweet spot on the trampoline. The older was hitting and teasing the younger, but then a third boy from another neighborhood showed up and became the immediate recipient of joint teasing by both brothers. Suddenly, the brothers were "in community" with each other against the "stranger", who had committed no wrong. "Mom", says my eleven year old, "it was mimesis (sic) rivalry".

The community gives to the scapegoat *both* the cause of the community violence (through false accusations of heinous behaviors, usually ones breaking social taboos) and the solution to the community violence (through the elimination of the scapegoat). This double-attribution, as Girard names it, is understood by the community: violence against the scapegoat brings peace. What it actually does is masquerade the true source of conflict -- the imitative

rivalry within the community -- by viewing the scapegoat as the both source and the solution. What began in mimesis, that is, rivalry between subject and model for the object, ends in mimesis with the subject once again imitating the model in blaming and ultimately eliminating the scapegoat. The persecutors are forever bound to each other by their treatment of the scapegoat.

The ideas of Girard have disseminated throughout the academic disciplines of literature, theology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, but uptake in the field of political science has been slower, despite the obvious fertile ground for application to politics. This is changing, as a number of political scientists work to bring Girard's ideas into the discipline. Some have applied Girard's ideas to studies of 1994's genocide in the African country of Rwanda, which was sparked by the shooting down of Hutu President Habyarimana's plane on April 6th of that year.

This particularly brutal and efficient mass murder – an estimated one million Tutsi killed by Hutu gun or machete in just 100 days – was remarkable as well for the lack of international involvement. Many countries, led by the United States, worked to characterize the “conflict” as a “civil war” rather than as genocide, thus absolving them from taking action under the 1948 U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Thus “Never Again” happened once more as the world stood by and watched. Afterwards many writers in trying to answer the question “Why?” pointed fingers at Tutsi-Hutu ethnic rivalries, exacerbated by that favorite post-modern whipping boy, colonialism. Taking a Girardian approach, however, reveals that a cauldron of tensions among the Hutu power holders bubbled up just prior to the genocide. What astounds is their intimate level. Yes, there was a geographical North versus South Hutu rivalry, but there was also a North vs. North sector, divided along family lines according to who was married/related to the assassinated President and who was not.

In 1959 the Tutsi monarchy were “relieved” of their political power by the Hutu, with the new President Grégoire Kayibanda stacking the political deck with colleagues from his home prefects in the south and legalizing various discriminations against Tutsi. In 1973, Juvenal Habyarimana, Kayibanda’s Defense Minister, took power in a fairly bloodless coup and installed his own people from northern prefects. He immediately outlawed all but his own political party, and some say he was so anti-southern Hutu, it was easier to be Tutsi under his rule. Throughout this time most peasant Hutu and Tutsi lived peacefully side by side and often intermarried.

Under Habyarimana, his buddies and relatives, especially a tight-knit group of his wife’s relatives known as the *akazu* (“little house”) became very wealthy, as they had preferred access to lucrative coffee and lumbering contracts. Then global politics changed with 1989’s fall of the Berlin Wall, and pressures to democratize rose. Fearful that power sharing meant losing their wealth, the *akazu* began pointing fingers of blame at the Tutsi (who traditionally held close ties with European countries due to Belgian racial favoritism), trying to unite all Hutu against Tutsi once again.

Stealthy plans for the “final solution to the Tutsi problem” were hatched. Anti-Tutsi hate radio and newspapers worked to incite fear and loathing by accusing all Tutsi of great social trespasses. Hundreds of thousands of machetes were imported from China. Plans were drawn up with lists of named Tutsi marked for death. The *akazu*’s worst fears were realized when Habyarimana caved to foreign pressures (much-needed aid money being tied to democratic governments, post Cold War) and signed the Arusha Accords, which were sweeping power sharing/multiparty agreements that would have given opposition Hutu and Tutsi parties much power. On his way home from signing those agreements, his jet was shot down – by whom, no one knows – and the well planned genocide began. Innocent Tutsi, moderate Hutu, and

aboriginal pygmy Twa were all victims – the scapegoats – of a few master planners and their influenced followers, the result of rivalry not just between Hutu and Tutsi, or Northern Hutu and Southern Hutu, but between a man in power and his wife’s family.

What does this mean to present politics? Are we doomed to witness the repetition of mass killings as communities seek to quell their inner unrest by scapegoating innocent populations? With recent tensions flaring in Islamic-ruled nations in the Middle East, will new leaders call for war against Israel as a way to revive pan-Arabism? Are West-East ideologies doomed to forever be the tinder for ever-escalating violence?

Perhaps, says Girard, who puts forth in his most recent book *Achever Clausewitz* (English title, *Battling to the End*, 2010) that we may be in the apocalypse now, hurtling towards the final Armageddon. But there is an out: name scapegoating for what it is, and it loses its power.

The Tutsi were not to blame for the *akazu*’s potential loss of wealth. Israel is not the source of all the woes of the Middle East – there are differences of opinion within Arab societies which need acceptance or resolution. And this is what political scientists – and policymakers – need to look for: what is the *true* source of conflict in the community at question?

Closer to home, my daughter is in the midst of that *Lord of the Flies* experience called middle school. Recently the victim of the mean scheming of two female classmates, I comforted her by saying: “They pick on you to make their friendship stronger, which means it’s already troubled.” Perhaps we can say the same to millions of victims worldwide. But it’s small comfort. Next time, let’s name it beforehand, and have “Never Again” *really* mean it.

Author **Teresa Pitts** has worked as a professional cartographer and is currently completing a Master’s Degree in Political Science at Virginia Tech, as well as teaching as an adjunct at Radford University. She is interested in bring Girard’s ideas into Political Science, both in theoretical work as well as at the policy making level.