Toward a Girardian Politics

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I.

René Girard's ambitious and highly innovative theory of violence, sacrifice, and mimetic desire began, humbly enough, with a study of the modern novel. Published in 1965, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (hereafter '*DDN*') analyses the works of Cervantes, Proust, and Dostoyevsky *vis-à-vis* a theory of appropriative mimesis. In later works Girard expanded this theory into a general anthropological account of the origins of violence, ritual sacrifice, mythology, and primitive religion.[1] Central to this account is the notion that mechanisms of violence and sacrifice were initially hidden within human culture, but were subsequently revealed through the Judeo-Christian scriptures (Girard, 1987). Although Girard's work has proven enormously influential across a range of disciplines (Bottum, 1996)[2] comparatively little attention has been paid to its *political* dimensions. This is not to suggest that Girardian theory has not been applied to real-world political events,[3] merely that it has seldom been analyzed as a political theory and in relation to other political theories. Instead, its political implications have largely been assumed and, on the basis of that assumption, villainized by many on the Left. Hayden White, for example, has called Girard an "apologist of reaction" (1978: 2-9) and various Feminists have repeatedly accused Girardian theory of being chauvinistic and sexually repressed (see, for example, Kofman, 1980; Moi, 1983). Ironically, one of Girard's earliest champions was none other than the prestigious Marxist critic Lucien Goldmann, who compares Girard favorably to Lukàcs in the introduction to his *Pour une Sociologie du Roman* (1973); this support suggests that there is a politically radical potential within Giradian theory, which has been systematically overlooked by its left-wing critics. The purpose of the present essay is to explore the nature of that potential and, more impor-

tantly, what it can contribute to contemporary political philosophy. After briefly summarizing Girard's mimeo-sacrificial theory, I proceed to analyze both the form and content of its political ramifications. On the basis of this analysis I then argue for a Girardian politics, one that is founded on tactical intervention and an ethical concern for personhood.

II.

The foundation of Girard's theory is 'acquisitive mimesis' or 'appropriative mimicry', by this he means mimicry or imitation whose purpose is the appropriation of a desired object (1977: 9). A helpful example is provided by Bailie (1996: 116-118): Imagine that two children are playing by themselves. At a certain point one of the children sees a toy and desires to play with it. When she attempts to acquire it, however, the other child notices and is compelled to imitate her behavior. In this way the second child comes to desire the toy as well. This is what Girard means by 'acquisitive mimesis'. As this example makes clear, the second child's desire for the toy is not the result of her independently recognizing the desirability of the toy, as it would be in most conventional accounts of desire, but rather of a precedent 'compulsion' to imitate the first child. Girard describes this compulsion variously as a 'drive,' an 'instinct,' and - somewhat confusingly - a 'desire' (or rather, to imitate the other's desiring/ appropriating behavior) (1977: 9, 11).[4] In desiring the toy, therefore, the first child serves as a 'model' to the second child insofar as her desiring/ appropriating behavior is the object of the second's mimetic desire. Put another way, her desire for the toy 'mediates' the relationship between the second child's mimetic desire to acquire the toy and the toy itself. The resulting relationship between object, model and imitator is what Girard calls the 'triangular relation of mimetic desire' (1965: 2-3).

When two people desire the same object, as in the above example, a basic conflict emerges over who gets to acquire it. This conflict is one of 'acquisitive mimesis' or 'external mediation' wherein the parties to the conflict simply imitate each others' desire to appropriate the same external object (Girard, 1965: 9). As their desires intensify, however, they begin to focus less on the disputed object and more on each other:

> The impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator; in internal mediation this impulse is checked by the mediator himself since he desires, or perhaps possesses, the object. Fascinated by his model, the disciple inevitably sees, in the mechanical obstacle which he puts in his way, proof of the ill will borne him. Far from declaring himself a faithful vassal, he thinks only of repudiating the bonds of mediation. But these bonds arc stronger than ever, for the mediator's apparent hostility does not diminish his prestige but instead augments it (Girard, 1965: 10-11).

The model's recognition of the imitator's desire simultaneously validates her own desire and augments her pursuit (or protection) of the desired object. Once the imitator recognizes in turn, she no longer desires the object *per se* but rather the *defeat* of the model. To reveal this, however, would be to admit weakness in the face of the model who is now her rival. She must therefore intensify her imitation of the model in order to conceal the true nature of her desire. As this process unfolds, the parties become increasingly hostile to each other and, by extension, increasingly more alike, ultimately transforming into 'monstrous doubles' (1979: 12-13; 1977: 161). This is what Girard calls 'conflictual mimesis' or 'internal mediation'. At this point both model and imitator are 'torn between two opposite feelings toward [each other] - the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred' (1965: 11). If left unchecked, this hatred will eventually compel the two 'to prevent one another from appropriating the object they desire through physical or other means' (1979: 9), in other words, to perpetrate violence against each other. In order to escape violence, moreover, they must re-externalize their desires and, in so doing, reassert the difference between them. This requires a third party, the 'scapegoat', which replaces the desired object. In jointly directing their violent impulses against the scapegoat, model and imitator are reunited even as they cease to be 'monstrous doubles' of one another.

The scapegoat is chosen, according to Girard 'only because it is vulnerable and close at hand' (1977: 2). It is an arbitrary victim to the extent that it bears no causal relation to the violence its murderers seek to dispel, at the same time, however, it must possess certain traits which identify it as marginal within (but not entirely alien to) the community. Typical scapegoats as such include children, the elderly, the physically or mentally infirm, women, members of ethnic, religious, or racial minorities, the poor, etc (1986: 21). Such

individuals are conspicuous in their otherness, especially in violent or chaotic circumstances. They are likewise more vulnerable and, to this extent more easily persecuted. More importantly, however, they are chosen because they are believed to be in some sense *worthy* of being scapegoated, as Girard says 'because they bear the signs of victims' (1986: 21). Finally, both the scapegoat and her accusers must believe in the accusations that are intended to justify the scapegoat's sacrifice. To put it another way, the 'scapegoaters' cannot realize they are scapegoating, and the scapegoat cannot realize she is being scapegoated (1986: 9-10; 1977: 15). The sacrifice of the scapegoat is immediately followed by the disappearance of the violence which occasioned that sacrifice. This, in turn, leads to the 'mythologization' of the scapegoat and her sacrifice: though initially reviled as the source of the violence which threatened to destroy the community, the scapegoat is subsequently revered, either as a saint (for having eliminated the violence through self-sacrifice) or as a god (for having had the *power* to eliminate the violence through self-sacrifice). The mythology of her sacrifice is perpetuated, moreover, through the practice of ritualized re-enactments. For Girard, such practices constitute the origins of primitive religion.

To summarize our discussion thus far: Girard moves from a mimetic theory of violence in literature to a more general account of the mechanisms of sacrifice and scapegoating and how these function as curatives for violence in human society. According to this account, it is precisely at the apex of the mimetic conflict between model and imitator that a scapegoat is initially identified. From there, the process leading up to the sacrifice of the scapegoat is itself governed by the mechanism of mimetic desire. In primitive societies, the *j'accuse* of the original mimetic doubles is imitated by other members of community in a gradual and more or less organic fashion until a consensus is reached.[5] The sacrifice is carried out and subsequently mythologized, leading to the birth of primitive religion and of culture more generally.[6] In more advanced societies, the sacrificial mechanism generates an additional acquisitive desire - the desire for power - and this ultimately leads to the monopolization of sacrificial and (later) juridical power by a ruling elite (we return to this process below).

According to Girard, the Judeo-Christian scriptures radically undermined the primacy of sacrificial mechanisms within human culture. Prior to their appearance, he claims, the true nature of such mechanisms was 'concealed' by mythological narratives. The scriptures, however, are very clearly *anti-*

mythological and *anti*-sacrificial both in their valorization of the victim and their identification of sacrifice with idolatry. To this extent Christ's death on the cross constitutes the ultimate anti-mythological and anti-sacrificial gesture: far from being a sacrificial atonement, the crucifixion is rather a divine revelation of the fruitlessness of sacrificial violence. The paramount question of the post-mythological/ sacrifical era therefore becomes: how do we combat violence in society without resorting to sacrificial and mythological practices? For Girard, all of the various world religions, philosophical systems, and political ideologies that developed in the aftermath of this 'sacrificial crisis' may be understood as attempts to answer this question. One need not look far, however, to realize the extent to which ostensibly anti-sacrificial systems have ended up devolving time and again into sacrificial violence. As Bottum notes:

> What the Girardian analysis can help us see is the way in which Christianity itself contributes to our current cultural crises. Hitler sacrificed millions of Jews to found what turned out to be a twelve-year reich, Stalin made scapegoats of millions of "counterrevolutionaries" to preserve a regime with only fifty more years of life, and every little dictator since has slaughtered his own victims to create or maintain an ephemeral authority. Thousand-year cultures are not founded by sacrifice anymore, for the process of scapegoating no longer seems to work very well. Everyone in the world has learned the Christian demythologizing of sacred violence too well, and no one trusts sacrifice to do what it once did. Of course, the Serbs still undertake ethnic cleansing, the Iraqis still speak of the Kurds as a disease, the Chinese still hunt down counterrevolutionaries - for there is no other way they know to try to maintain themselves. The culture-founding violence of the sacred is the only method we know for ending the culture-destroying violence of mimetic desire (Bottum, 1996: 45).

If anti-sacrificial paradigms seem to culminate inevitably in sacrificial violence, it may very well be because we do not know (or, worse, cannot know) how to curtail the violence of mimetic desire without it. This would seem to negate the possibility of escaping violence, a point which has led some to conclude that Girardian theory is essentially apocalyptic in nature (see, for example, Wallace, 1994: 287-304). In fact, Girard himself and many of his followers have articulated a solution to this problem; a personalistic ethics grounded in the Christian notion of *imitatio Dei* (Girard, 1987: 22-23; Watson, 1998: 31-321). I do not propose to discuss this solution in any real detail

here, though I shall return to it briefly toward the end of this paper. Instead, I want to note the extent to which Girard's project may already be seen as political in nature. Broadly speaking, political philosophy is the study of the fundamental questions of law and authority, for example, what is the nature and origin of the state; what makes political authority legitimate; what form ought governments take, etc. Girardian theory, as we have seen, is deeply concerned not only with the origins of violence but also with the regulatory mechanisms which develop in response to violence. Even in their most primitive manifestations, however, these mechanisms are *necessarily* forms of *authority* and *political power*. For this reason we are *prima facie* justified in thinking of Girardian theory as a *political* theory.

As Todd May has argued, political philosophy is a 'project perpetually haunted by crisis' (1994: 1). It is an intermediary, situated in the shadowy and shifting interstices between metaphysics (the study of what is) and ethics (the study of what ought to be) and constituted by the tension that exists between the two. Consequently, May continues, 'political philosophy has only discussed the ought *given what is'* (1994: 2): a successful political theory navigates between what is and what ought to be by accounting for each in terms of the other. This is precisely what Girardian theory accomplishes, I would argue, when it describes the historical phenomenon of violence in terms of the prescriptive and political mechanisms which have been utilized to eradicate violence. Where this theory seems to fall short, however, is in its failure to provide a normative justification for concrete political intervention (in other words, to explain what *ought* to be done and why).[7] The same is equally true of the theories of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and various other post-stucturalists even though they touch upon political issues in a far more explicit fashion than Girard does. This explains, I think, why post-structuralism has been so frequently accused of being apolitical, even *anti*-political. For centuries strategic political philosophy has attempted to reduce analysis to a foundational and universalizable normativity, and it is precisely this sort of reduction which post-structuralism seeks to disavow. Girard's rejection of reductionism does not follow from epistemic, metaphysical, or linguistic analyses as it does for Jacques Derrida, Deleuze, and Jean-Françios Lyotard. Rather, it is based on his two-fold recognition that reductionism produces *metanarratives* (e.g., the myth of the scapegoat) and that metanarratives in turn produce *violence* (e.g., in the form of ritual sacrifice). This reveals something important about Girardian theory: even though it does not provide a full-blown political normativity, it nonetheless contains an implicit political *axiol-*

ogy or *ethics* founded on its analysis of violence.[8] The same is true of Foucauldian theory, which bases its axiology on the care of the self, to which I return below as I demonstrate that Girdard's disavowal of reductionism and, by extension, normativity is not necessarily a disavowal of politics. On the contrary, the implicitly ethical/ axiological content of Girardian theory augurs the possibility of a *new* kind of political philosophy, one which rejects unitary, global analyses in favor of a localized politics of difference and multiplicity. In the next two sections my goal is to describe both the form and content of Girardian theory in greater detail.

III.

In order to understand the political dimensions of Girardian theory, it is helpful to begin with a brief discussion of Foucault. For Foucault, all statements, whether written or spoken, belong to a particular *discourse*, where a discourse is the set of all possible statements that can be articulated about a particular topic within a particular historical period. Discourse defines the boundaries surrounding what can and cannot be *said* and to this extent shapes or constructs what can be *known* (i.e., the object of knowledge itself). Foucault's early works are principally concerned with the conditions of possibility ('historical *a prioris*') that must be in place in order for certain statements to actually emerge within a given discourse.[9] They are also concerned with demarcating and analyzing *discursive formations,* or the historical ruptures and discontinuities whereby new forms of discourse come to replace older forms. Foucault refers to this mode of analysis as 'archeology.' In his early works, Foucault seeks to *describe* particular discursive formations *vis-à-vis* the archeological method but not to *explain* how and why they came about. Beginning with *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault turns his attention to an analysis of how power relations produce knowledge within particular discursive formations (a method that he calls 'genealogy'). To this end, he moves beyond discursive formations to a consideration of other forms of knowledge that are formed and constituted by power; non-discursive formations and the production of subjects. Non-discursive formations are practices through which power is manifested in particular forms (for example, the prison, the asylum, the hospital, etc). Subjects (prisoners, madmen, patients, etc), in turn are created through the process of being acted upon by non-discursive practices.

Like Foucauldian archeology/ genealogy, Girard's generative anthropology draws upon a daunting array of literary and historical texts in order to justify its general claims about the operation of culture. For Girard, however, the principle vehicle of that operation is not power *simpliciter,* but rather mimetic desire. This places Girardian theory at a definite advantage over Foucaldian theory, as it is capable of demonstrating not only *that* power is manifested in specific formations but also *how* and *why* it is manifested in these formations (via the mechanism of mimetic desire). Classical political philosophers and jurists (Hobbes, Locke, Machiavelli, etc) understood power in a purely juridical sense; that is, as a function of law and the coercive authority of the state apparatus. Juridical or sovereign power is force exerted upon bodies (through incarceration, torture, and execution) and to this extent may be regarded as a species of violence. It is repressive in nature; it prevents rather than allows; disables rather than enables; limits rather than expands; constrains rather than mobilizes; closes possibilities rather than opens them. For Foucault, power is not and cannot be centralized in the body of the sovereign or any form of coercive state apparatus; it exists not only at the macro-level of society (e.g., in ideologies and coercive state apparatuses) but also at the micro-level of subjects (as in disciplinary power). As the invisible surveillance of the Panopticon reveals, power is in reality dynamic, ubiquitous, and diffuse. It operates only in the relations of those to whom it applies, and can be exerted on individual bodies (anatomo-power) or entire populations (bio-power). It is not an absolute force but rather a relationship that exists *between* forces - a set of actions or forces exerted upon other actions or forces, or upon subjects (Foucault, 2003: 401). It is the capacity to act upon *and* to be acted upon, thus is not only repressive but productive as well. For both Foucault and Girard, repressive power *is* violence, and violence in turn is a product of the suppression of difference. Furthermore, micropolitical violence is coextensive with macropolitical violence to the extent that the former both shapes and is shaped by the latter. The only real difference, again, is that concrete manifestations of repressive power are ultimately governed, for Girard, by mimetic desire; micropolitical violence is a product of acquisitive mimesis, whereas macropolitical violence is a product of sacrificial mechanisms.

It may be argued that Girardian theory, no less than Foucauldian theory, *is* reductionistic in a descriptive sense because it claims to provide a general account of the way violence functions in *all* human societies at *all* times. I would respond by noting that a *description* is not the same thing as an *explanation* and at no point does Girard attempt to explain *why* mimetic desire exists.

He never argues, for example, that human beings are *necessarily* imitative or that any particular form violence is *inevitable*, as such arguments would rely on several problematic assumptions about "human nature". On the contrary, Girard's only aim is to demonstrate *that* mimetic desire exists and is capable of producing violence. This immediately distinguishes Girardian theory from what Todd May has called 'formal political philosophy': this approach attaches itself to one or the other of the two poles of political philosophy (is versus ought) mentioned above and builds its analysis upon this attachment (May, 1994: 4). Much of contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy can be seen as operating in this fashion. For example, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is founded on a variety of descriptive assumptions including the notion that human beings are rationally self-interested: 'by utilizing the maximin principle of decision theory in a situation (the original position) of ignorance about one's eventual place in society, Rawls tries to provide the principles which all rational beings would choose as the cornerstone of [a just] society' (Ibid.). Although Girardian theory is indeed founded upon descriptive claims, these are contingent and empirical rather than necessary and transcendental. Not so with Rawls, for whom rationality is an essential characteristic of human nature that must be assumed for any kind of political analysis to get off the ground. None of Girard's descriptive claims depend upon these sorts of totalized metaphysical assumptions; though he refers to mimetic desire as a 'drive' and even an 'instinct', he does not attach it to any kind of transcendental subjectivity, nor does he claim that its appearance is in any sense inevitable. He merely argues that it is widespread and contagious.

There is a second type of political philosophy, which May calls 'strategic political philosophy' (1994: 7). Whereas the formal philosophy of Rawls employs normative analyses to determine what a just society would be like, strategic philosophy employs analyses of context, including historical and social conditions, in order to articulate possible forms of political intervention. Girard's analysis of the failure of sacrificial mechanisms may be read as an articulation of the possibility of anti-sacrificial mechanisms. Unlike formal political theories, however, Girardian theory does not couch this articulation in a normative context; in other words, it does not attempt in the first instance to argue that anti-sacrificial forms *ought* to be pursued, but only that such forms *can* be pursued, *ceteris paribus*). As May notes, however, there is another important characteristic 'that binds various strategic political philosophies together [namely] that a strategic political philosophy involves a unitary

analysis that aims towards a single goal' (1994: 10). Marxist philosophy, for example, involves analyses of the substructure of economic relations with a mind to the eventual abolition of capitalism. Likewise, certain forms of radical Feminism focus their attention exclusively on the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Both Marxism and radical Feminism agree that 'political and social change, if it is to be significant, must rest upon a transformation at the base [...]. All problems can be reduced to the basic one' (Ibid.). The goal of strategic political philosophies, such as Marxism, has typically been the total eradication of repressive power. This goal is ultimately brought about, moreover, by eliminating the *source* of that power (e.g., patriarchy, the state, the church, capitalist economic relations, etc). Violence, as we have seen, is clearly a form - indeed, the most egregious form - of repressive power. Girard denies, however, that violence emanates from a single, concentrated formation; this is, after all, the essence of scapegoating. On the contrary, he argues that such formations are *produced* by violence, which is *produced* in turn by mimetic desire. Perhaps this just means that mimetic desire itself should be eradicated, for Girard, however, this is not possible. After all, how can we eradicate mimetic desire when we do not even know *how* or *why* it comes into being in the first place? The best we can say, perhaps, is that mimetic desire is not an essential feature of 'human nature' and to this extent it is at least *prima facie* resistible whenever it does surface. But absent of any further knowledge, we cannot altogether *prevent* it from surfacing.

Girardian theory, then, does not seem especially amenable to strategic thinking. What of the third and final type of political philosophy, which May calls 'tactical'? Like strategic philosophy, tactical philosophy subsists in the tension between the is-pole and the ought-pole, but it does not attempt to reduce political analysis to a central and foundational problematic. Such a reduction implies that repressive power emanates from a unitary source, and this, in turn, radically circumscribes the locus of possible intervention. Instead of locating power in a single center, tactical political philosophy acknowledges the 'many different sites from which [power] arises and [...] the interplay among these various sites in the creation of the social world' (May, 1994: 11). Power does not originate in or flow from these sites but rather builds up around them in varying degrees. For May, formal philosophy is wanting because it fails to specify the concrete strategies by which to achieve political change. As we have seen, this is not true of strategic philosophy. However, insofar as strategic thinking involves the reduction of power to a unitary site, 'it is possible that there are those who are peculiarly well placed to analyze

and to lead the resistance against the power relationships of that site' (May, 1994: 11). Thus strategic philosophy requires a vanguard or other elite class to oversee and carry out programs of resistance (e.g., sacrifice). The strength of tactical philosophy, May thinks, is its ability to provide relevant political strategies without relying on such elite classes. After all, 'if power is decentralized, if the sites of violence and oppression are numerous and intersecting, it is hardly likely that any one set of individuals will find itself particularly suited to a vanguardist role in political change' (Ibid.).

As we have seen, Girard very much agrees with the idea that repressive power arises in multiple sites. After all, the opposite contention, which is the essence of strategic thinking, is also the essence of *sacrificial thinking*. Likewise, just as strategic philosophy ends up replicating the repressive power it seeks to abolish through the adoption of vanguardism, so too does sacrificial thinking reproduce violence through the adoption of the scapegoat mechanism (the overseeing and execution of this mechanism generally ends up falling into the hands of a vanguard as well). To this extent, Girard's approach to politics, like that of Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard, may rightfully be viewed as *tactical* in nature (see May, 1994: chapters 4-6).

IV.

We now have a general sense of the *orientation* or *form* which a Girardian political theory might take on. Our analysis cannot stop there, however, as we have yet to explain how this theory would go about *justifying* its political recommendations, let alone what those recommendations *are*. Before attempting to do so, let us return briefly to Foucault for some direction. Upon concluding his investigation of power relations in *Discipline and Punish* and the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault seeks to address the following problem: given that power is pervasive, and given that power shapes, molds, and constitutes both knowledge and subjects, how is it possible to resist power? More importantly, when and why is it appropriate to resist power? Though recast in Foucaldian parlance, these are the traditional problems with which all radical political philosophies are concerned. For Foucault, as we have seen, power is pervasive; it is neither concentrated in a single juridical entity (e.g., the state) nor exerted upon subjects from somewhere outside themselves:

> If it is true that the juridical system was useful for representing, albeit in a nonexhaustive way, a power that was centered primarily around deduction and death, it is utterly incongruous with the new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed at all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus (1978: 89).

Thus resistance necessarily emerges *within* power relations and is primary to them. To resist power as though it were somehow *elsewhere* or *outside* is merely to react against power, and, as radicals of all stripes have witnessed time and again, such reactive resistance is either quickly defeated by extant power structures or else ends up replicating these power structures at the micropolitical level. In the place of reactive resistance, Foucault recommends an active form of resistance in which power is directed against itself rather than another form of power. To actively resist is to enter into a relation with oneself, to reconstitute oneself, to create oneself anew. Through this process, extant power relations are challenged and new forms of knowledge emerge. For Foucault, the relation of the self to itself forms the basis of 'modes of subjectivation' or, more colloquially, *ethics*. In *Technologies of the Self* (2003: 145-169) he formulates a history of the various ways that human beings 'develop knowledge about themselves' *vis-à-vis* a host of 'specific techniques.' These techniques, which Foucault calls 'technologies of the self',

> ...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (2003: 146).

On my reading, Foucault believes that each person has a 'true self' which is both discovered and produced by these technologies. This self is neither an 'immortal soul' nor a transcendental subjectivity, but rather that aspect of one's existence which one affects (or has the capacity to affect) by oneself, independently of all external power relations. As we noted above, this process of self-construction ('care of the self') is an *ethic* or, more specifically, an *axiology* (a study of what is valuable or good). This is because in producing ourselves we also produce the various *goods* which we aim to promote, pursue, and protect. The potential for such 'care of the self' is not necessarily radical in and of itself, since self-construction can and often does mere-

ly replicate extant power relations that lay 'outside' or 'on top of' the self, but it is precisely through the generation of values that radical political critique becomes possible.

Earlier we suggested that Girardian violence is a species of repressive power. However commonsensical this suggestion may be, it is necessarily an assumption on our part because Girard simply does not frame his discussion in terms of power *as such*. At the same time, it is fairly clear that violence for Girard is *not* the pervasive and all-encompassing force that power is for Foucault, despite the extensive role it has played in human history. Girard never claims, for example, that violence is the unitary cause of all discursive and non-discursive formations, nor that it is simultaneously active and reactive. On the contrary, we know from our discussion at the end of section two that there is at least one discursive formation - the Judeo-Christian scriptures - which is not produced by violence. Likewise, we know from our discussion of the sacrificial that violence is reactive *by definition*; this is because it cannot produce anything other than itself. Mimetic desire, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated. Many commentators have suggested that human beings are mimetically inclined *by nature* - in other words, that we simply cannot *help* but imitate others. As evidence to this effect they have cited the example of language, which is very clearly a skill that is acquired through imitation. While I agree that language is mimetic, I do not see this fact as particularly relevant to Girard's analysis of *acquisitive* mimesis. This form of mimesis, after all, typically involves desires for ready-at-hand objects in the world (e.g., food, commodities, luxuries, etc) rather than abstract objects like language. It is easy to see, following Girard, how competitions over the former can lead to violence. I do not understand, however, how the desire to master language skills could possibly lead to competition let alone *violent* rivalry. The point is that mimetic desire is not a metaphysically basic concept in the way that 'human nature' is taken to be. As I noted earlier, Girard makes no attempt to explain *how* or *why* mimetic desire comes into existence. Furthermore, I can find no direct textual evidence to support the idea that human beings are *necessarily* mimetic in the acquisitive sense or that we *necessarily* engage in imitative behavior whenever we find ourselves with mimetic desires. Girard leaves open the logical and empirical possibility that non-mimetic desires exist or that there are individuals who, for whatever reason, simply do not have mimetic desires. His point, as I have stated many times before, is simply that mimetic desire is overwhelmingly pervasive in human history.

This suggests that the problem of resistance is far less serious for Girard than it is for Foucault. After all, while it strictly *impossible* to resist power as such; there is no reason in principle why one cannot resist acting on mimetic desire and, by extension, initiating violence. The universality of violence throughout human history is at best an indication that resisting mimetic desire is very difficult, especially for those who possess political power. But difficulty - even extreme difficulty - is not the same thing as impossibility, and as long as resistance to mimetic desire is possible, so is resistance to violence. The question, however, is not whether it is possible to resist mimetic violence but *when* and *why* we ought to do so. Classical political theories have tended to approach this question through the formulation of normative principles grounded in an account of 'human nature': Kant, for example, claims that human beings are both rational and autonomous by nature and that the rules of practical rationality place normative restrictions on what we can and cannot do. Like Foucault, Girard does not make any such claims about human nature and normative principles. As we suggested above, however, this is because he thinks metaphysical and moral totalizations lead to *violence*. This provides a preliminary indication that Girard does not much care for violence - a similar argument could be made about Foucault: the fact that he discusses resistance to repressive power automatically implies that he *wants* to resist repressive power or even that he thinks repressive power is in some sense 'bad'.

For Foucault, the question of resistance is not normative but *ethical* or *axiological* - in other words, it is a question of *values*. Values are produced through the process of caring for the self, which is by definition opposed to and in competition with repressive power. Ultimately, however, the very capacity to produce one's own values is regarded as good or valuable in itself, and this entails that repressive power is bad. The 'meta-value' of self-care, moreover, is neither *prior to* nor *independent from* the other values which self-care produces. Rather, it is *immanent* to the very process which produces it, this is important because Foucault wants to avoid making values transcendent. Girard approaches this question from the standpoint of values as well, albeit in a very different way: for Girard, the Judeo-Christian scriptures have revealed the evil not only of sacrificial violence but of mimetic desire more generally. This is most apparent in the example of Christ who, instead of imitating others, imitates God alone (Girard, 1987: 22-23; cf. Swartley, 2000: 218-245; Watson, 1998: 318). Where human beings desire fleeting worldly things, God desires the supernatural values of love, compassion, and peace. In desiring

them, moreover, he *produces* them; God has no model, and there is no mediator standing between Him and the object of His desire. To imitate God as Christ did is therefore to desire the good *because* it is good and not because someone else desires it.

Girard also seems to believe that being a 'self' or a 'person' is coextensive with the ability to desire and pursue the good (1987: 22-23).[10] Because the self is in some sense generated by its own recognition of and active attempts to achieve the good, mimetic desire necessarily involves a kind of *depersonalization* or *disintegreation*. This is captured in part by Girard's insistence that the process of mimetic rivalry leads to a suppression of difference. In desiring the desire of another, the imitator becomes a passive hostage to the model. The model's selfhood, in turn, is threatened not only by the potential loss of the desired object, but of the desire itself. Internal mediation is therefore a product of the parties' fear of disintegration as well as their mutual attempt to reassert selfhood-as-difference. Paradoxically, it is precisely this attempt to salvage the self that leads to violence, the destruction of 'other selves'. This discussion confirms many of my previous claims about the function of mimetic desire within Girardian theory. As Girard makes clear in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, it is possible to have original non-mimetic desires whose objects, simply stated, are *values* or *goods*. It is equally possible, moreover, to resist mimetic desires whenever they appear (this, after all, is precisely what Christ does). This discussion also reveals several of Girard's ethical presuppositions; one such presupposition is that the good is independent of any particular agent's desires; another is that the experience of integral self- or personhood is both a consequence and a condition of moral valuation. This leads to a conclusion that parallels Foucault: that integral self/ personhood is itself valuable.

The first presupposition is controversial because it assumes that there are moral goods (compassion, love, etc) whose value consists in their being desired by God. The controversy vanishes, however, once we consider this presupposition in relation to the second. After all, if integral self/ personhood is good, it follows that (a) whatever is conducive to the maintenance, protection, or advancement of integral self/ personhood is also good; and (b) whatever is conducive to the destruction of integral self/ personhood is bad. Values such as compassion and love are obviously conducive to integral self/personhood whether God happens to desire them or not. To this extent they are good. Whereas the ethics of Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard are

predicated on the values of anti-representationalism and difference, Girard's axiology is predicated first and foremost on the sovereign value of personhood: it is, in short, a *personalism without humanism*, the political implications of which are now easily articulated. The most basic implication is that whatever is antithetical to the good of personhood is to be resisted. At the highest level of generality this includes all forms of repressive power, including mimetic violence, as well as the entire range of sacrificial mechanisms which have unsuccessfully attempted to eradicate that violence. As the last section makes clear, moreover, this resistance is to be *tactical* in nature. In other words, (a) it is not carried out by a vanguard nor any other representational body but directly by those whom repressive power threatens; and (b) it is not directed against a unitary locus of repressive power but rather at the multiple and local sites within which repressive power becomes concentrated.

How do we combat repressive power without resorting to repressive (sacrificial, mythological) practices? As we saw earlier, this is the question which all 'post-sacrificial' political systems have tried, and failed, to answer. The reason for this failure, is made clear by the foregoing analysis. The modern state portrays itself as an *anti-sacrificial* bulwark against violence yet is defined and justified precisely in terms of its monopoly of the 'legitimate' use of force. As Girard points out, illusory distinctions between force and violence, between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' force, are themselves products of sacrificial logic (1987: 266, see also Braulik et al, 1993). This reveals that state violence is simply a secularized version of sacrificial violence (Girard, 1987: 266). The relationship between the state and those it imprisons, exiles, or executes is identical to the relationship between the ancient sacrificial victim and her murderers (Girard, 1987: 173). The only difference comes in their respective myths: the former having to do with justice, the latter with the sacred. Capitalism, too, may be seen as an elaborate mimeo-sacrificial structure insofar as it thrives on - indeed, *requires* - the creation and proliferation of rampant acquisitive mimesis and the competition that results from it. The violence generated by this process - the violence of environmental destruction, sweatshop labor, Imperialist warfare, poverty itself - is deflected by the sacrificial violence of the capitalist police state against poor minorities, immigrants, and other marginalized peoples. Within the complicated myth that follows, these 'criminals' are a necessary evil that must be tolerated for the sake of living in a 'free society'. As these examples clearly demonstrate, the failure of the state and Capitalism to escape sacrificial violence is not a fluke but an inevitability. For this reason, the central goal of Girardian political

philosophy is not the creation of anti-sacrificial (just or humane) mechanisms within existing political and economic systems; this is impossible, after all, inasmuch as all such systems are already sacrificial by definition. Nor is the goal the mere abolition of these systems, as this by itself would do nothing to prevent the re-emergence of sacrificial violence. Girardian theory is neither liberal nor utopian; it advocates neither reform nor revolution, but rather a series of on-going tactical interventions that resist sacrificial violence wherever and whenever it arises. Such interventions, if sufficiently widespread, would inevitably generate new forms of human social organization. What they would and could not do, however, is completely and permanently eliminate the possibility of renewed violence. To this extent, Girardian theory may be viewed as a kind of *anarchism*: unlike the classical anarchist theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Girardian anarchism denies the existence of a uniform political *telos* preceded by spontaneous and cataclysmic revolution. Because it is concerned first and foremost with the protection of *persons* or *selves* rather than abstract moral concepts, it acknowledges as many political ends as there are individuals to pursue them. And because no single revolutionary event can guarantee the continued protection of individuals against violence, it follows that revolution, if it is to occur at all, must be eternal.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I gestured at the radical potential of Girardian theory, a potential which, with few exceptions, has been systematically ignored or overlooked by many of the Left. I then elucidated this potential along two trajectories: first, in terms of the *form* of Giradian theory (which I have identified as tactical rather than formal or strategic) and then in terms of its *content* (which I have identified as ethical/ axiological rather than normative). On the basis of this analysis, I then argued that the political axiology of Giradian theory is founded on the value of integral personhood. Finally, I suggested that the tactical and axiological character of Girardian theory marks it as a kind of anarchism, albeit one that is neither teleological nor revolutionary in the traditional sense. To be sure, much more could be said - indeed, *needs* to be said - about Girardian political theory, especially its relationship to other political theories, its connection to Christianity and theology more generally, and the theoretical and practical ramifications of its

anarchism. This essay has at least managed to unearth the political potential of Girard's thought, a potential which, as we have seen, is anything but reactionary. The goal of future analyses is to move beyond a mere exploration of the potential to applications of Girardian political theory in the actual world.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977); *Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism* (1979); *The Scapegoat* (1986).

2. As Bottum notes, 'A number of writers, banding together as the Colloquium on Violence and Religion, have taken up Girard's notion of the sacrificial scapegoat and devoted themselves to its application. Like Leo Strauss, Ernest Becker, and Eric Voegelin before him, Rene Girard has been transformed into something of a sect in America, with disciples, translators, and proselytizers' (1996: 43).

3. See, on the contrary, Bailie (1995) and Williams (1995).

4. cf. M. Wallace & T. Smith, *Curing Violence* (1994).

5. Girard's account of the phenomena surrounding mob violence is based on historical analysis. As Wallace has pointed out, however, this account is readily corroborated by countless sociological and psychological studies. See, for example, Baron & Byrne (1987: 253); Blumer (1957: 129-131); Forsyth (1990: 438-450); Gilbert et al (1998); Pratt & Cullen (2000: 931-964); Vadum (1998).

6. Non-religious forms of ritualized violence such as war and capital punishment can also be explained in this way. See, for example, Bailie (1995) and McBride (1995).

7. By 'normative justification' I mean a justification in terms of universalizable moral norms or principles.

8. By 'axiology' or 'ethics' I mean a general account of the good or the valuable. Unlike normativity, axiology/ ethics is not concerned with rules or norms of behavior, but with determining which things are 'good' (*prima facie* worthy of being pursued, protected, etc.) and which things are bad (worthy of being avoided, undermined, or even eradicated).

9. For example, statements about airplanes could not be uttered in the Middle Ages because the historical a priori condition necessary for the production, transmission, and intelligibility of such statements within discourse (viz. the actual existence of airplanes) was not yet satisfied.

10. Girard does not offer a systematic analysis of self/ personhood as Foucault does; rather, he delivers his thoughts on the subject in the form of scattered references throughout various texts. That said, Girard's conception self/ personhood does not involve transcendental subjectivity nor any other substantial identity so far as I can tell. Like Foucault, he seems to think that self/ personhood just is the subject's capacity to produce its own moral desires and to be produced by them in turn.

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