For over half a century, René Girard has put forward new concepts for a fundamental anthropology referred to as mimetic theory. Michel Serres has suggested that in the field of human and social sciences this was a revolution comparable to the one caused in biology by Darwin’s theory of evolution.¹ For his part, psychiatrist Jean-Michel Oughourlian saw it as the equivalent to the effect of Newtonian mechanics on the field of psychology.² As it is being gradually appropriated by the epigones, it tends to merge into the whole range of human and social sciences, even bringing them together as a science of human interaction capable of explaining the mechanisms by which social structures organize themselves. While links have become apparent with psychology and psychotherapy—and even neurophysiology, economics, ethnology, sociology, pedagogy, literary criticism and theology, associations are also forming with the theory of international relations and in particular, polemology.

Girard maintains that desire is always an imitation of the desire of others, and believes that conflict is inevitable as soon as these desires focus on something that cannot be shared. From their very beginnings, human groups have been confronted with the inevitability of violence

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¹. For example, in his response to Girard’s speech on being admitted to the Académie française on December 15, 2005.
and the threat of their own destruction, and may only owe their survival and development to the early emergence of institutions that, apart from any deliberate structure, managed to contain violence and control the crises that threatened their organization. Thus Girard lays the foundations for an anthropology that Lucien Scubla describes as morphogenetic.³

Since Girard’s theory arose out of literary criticism and the analysis of myths and sacrifices, it is not immediately political. Pierre Manent even suggested that it could never be political.⁴ The aim here, therefore, is to explain how it has flourished in an area that, in some respects, even today, may still appear to be beyond its reach.⁵ As far as the politics are concerned, the mimetic theory should therefore be seen in the same way as an economic policy that would distrust work or utility as the basis of market value and the fetishism of merchandise, replacing it with a value based on the relationship of exchange and the monetary institution; it is an idea put forward by André Orléan, according to whom the economy should henceforth be thought of in terms of relations or interactions rather than size.⁶ As with the economy, if rivalry was accepted as the basis for deliberation, and imitation as the social relationship on which institutions are founded, a political anthropology could be formed based on relationships rather than on social position.

By observing that people have the same desires, as well as the rivalry that necessarily ensues between mutually opposing models, Girard is keen to return to the origin of human culture, all the way back to the hominization phase. He is the author of a new “epic tale”, but it

⁴. “It is hard for [mimetic theory] to shed any light on politics because at every turn it reveals the hidden truth behind the same. Enemies are rivals and rivals are ultimately the same. […] It inevitably tends to fail politics because politics is organized according to the diversity of regimes and political histories.” In La relation franco-allemande depuis 1945, from the symposium at the Collège des Bernardins, Antoine Guggenheim, Paris: Lethielleux Parole et Silence, 2010.
⁵. However, it is worth noting the work of Paul Dumouchel, Jean-Pierre Dupuy or Wolfgang Palaver.
⁷. The term political anthropology is generally used to describe, after Georges Balandier, a discipline that “tends to establish a science of the politician, regarding man as a form of a homo politicus, and seeking out properties common to all political organizations with their range of geographical and historical diversity,” in Sens et puissance, Paris: PUF, 1971.
is a tale intentionally based on scientific and historical facts; a real story, not a myth. For Girard, humanity has been marked out from the beginning by the inevitable nature of violent rivalry between equals; within traditional societies it would have been contained through the sacrificial rites that reproduced the original acts of violence in order to ensure stability and taboos established in relation to the supposed causes of violence that might destroy the community. In historical times, the innocence of the victim deified by myths, and of the ordinary victims of lynchings, would have been gradually revealed by Judaism and Christianity, setting in motion the true dynamic of Western modernity.

Girard’s position is thus entrenched both in the metahistoric—if not the ahistoric—and in the plan for a mimetic history of humanity which he calls for. After half a century of research, in *Achever Clausewitz* (2007)—(Finishing Clausewitz), Girard finally tackles the great questions of political history head on, as seen through the prism of the European wars of the 19th and 20th century. He states: “We have entered a period in which anthropology is going to become more relevant as a tool than political sciences. We are going to have to radically change the way we interpret events, stop thinking like men of the Enlightenment, and finally consider the radical nature of violence and with that build up a whole new form of rationalism. Events demand that we do so.”

One particular criticism leveled at Girard is that he has translated a Christian theology of original sin into anthropological terms: indeed he seems to have deliberately exposed himself to criticism by integrating his hypothesis, for which he claims scientific status, with the Biblical revelation of the innocence of victims. So why not give him the benefit of the doubt, when he considers it is possible and desirable to combine heuristic hypothesis with Christian dogma? Indeed, Girard might well turn the criticism on its head by questioning the scientific nature of those opinions that rule out on principle the inevitability of rival violence in interpersonal relationships and social groups. Another response might be to make the distinction between a dogma that maintains that man is born concupiscent, and the anthropological fact that emulation and

covetousness, in the meaning that Baruch Spinoza lends to the term,⁹ occur automatically when humans coexist in a society.

There is a choice to be made regarding the status of the mechanisms of violence in human societies within any political and moral philosophy, or any fundamental anthropology: are they inevitable or contingent? As far as Girard is concerned, evil does not in fact have to be present within man for it to spontaneously insinuate itself into the relationships he forms with his fellow humans. For Girard, the interpersonal mechanism of mimetic desire is represented by the devil of Christian theology.

The first move towards creating a Girardian political anthropology would be to inscribe the political foundations of mimetic theory within the philosophical traditions to which Girard refers more easily in terms of setting himself apart from them than in terms of pointing out any similarity, let alone recognizing any form of indebtedness.

Some not insignificant writers on political realism recognize that if conditions were to be equal, rivalry between men would not be reduced, but paradoxically, such equality would actually provide an environment which would encourage rivalry to flourish. Both Thomas Hobbes and his war of all against all¹⁰ and Alexis de Tocqueville and his equality of conditions¹¹ seem likely subjects for an interpretation in Girardian terms. On the particular point of the rivalry of equals, it would be tempting to speculate if and how reading Hobbes, and then de Tocqueville, would help us to understand Girard’s relevance for political thought.

⁹. In *The Ethics* (part III, note on proposition 27): “This imitation of emotions, […] when it is referred to desire, it is called emulation, which is nothing else but the desire of anything, engendered in us by the fact that we conceive that others have the like desire,” (quoted from the Project Gutenberg e-text version of Benedict de Spinoza’s *The Ethics* translated by R.H.M Elwes.) Spinoza calls “emulation” what Girard three centuries later will call mimetic desire or mimesis of appropriation.

¹⁰. In 1651, at the head of Chapter XII of the Leviathan, Hobbes states: “Nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body, and mind […] yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.”

¹¹. In 1835, Tocqueville, introduced his first volume of *De la démocratie en Amérique*, based on empirical observation, in which he theorized on the swing that took place, after both the French and American revolutions, towards societies in which conditions tend to become more equal: “Thus, the more I studied American society the more I perceived that the equality of conditions was the fundamental fact from which all others seem to derive…” For Tocqueville “what the human heart most prizes is not the quiet possession of a precious object, it is the as yet to be satisfied desire to possess the object and the constant fear of losing it.”
The equalization of conditions in the democratic age, far from making rivalry disappear, has, on the contrary, encouraged it for the purpose of obtaining coveted objects and keeping hold of what we already possess. Since rivalry is, in Hobbes' view, a natural phenomenon, for Tocqueville the tendency towards equality is a matter of inevitability, even if he dresses it in the guise of Providence.

On the other hand, Girard always purposely distanced himself from theories about the social contract; from those constructed around the autonomy of the individual; from the abstraction of Hegelianism by confronting it with the realism of Clausewitz, from Nietzsche's accusation of resentment towards Christianity's slave morality. His arguments against these ideas also merit further analysis. A Girardian theory of political relations might, also, be based on the interpolation between those already formulated about human relations and the history of international relations.

Following Girard's analyses, it is possible to envisage four main situations in the relationships between people that could be identified as interpersonal: model, disciple, rival, and victim. The interactions between them are multiple and these situations are never constant nor definitive. There is no marked discontinuity between them; each one slips from one situation to another depending on the way the relationships with others develop. For that matter, Girard tries to get away from the alternative between the continuous and the discrete; he tries to think of the two simultaneously, observing as the cracks appear in these continuous processes. Recently, he reflected that the relationship model also applies to a greater or lesser extent to relations between states; for example, in his interpretation of Franco-German relations since 1806, in his opinion, the Napoleonic victory at Jena marked the beginnings of rivalry between the two continental powers which ended up structuring the history of Europe. The table below shows the type of parallels suggested by mimetic theory by means of interpolations or analogies between different fields of human science.

12. Neologism put forward in mimetic theory to suggest that individuals do not exist without the divisions that set them against each other.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Type</th>
<th>Position of Players</th>
<th>Main player</th>
<th>Rival player</th>
<th>Certain Players after the conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interindividual12</td>
<td>model</td>
<td>disciple</td>
<td>rival</td>
<td>victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>international</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>enemy</td>
<td>conquered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>market</td>
<td>agent</td>
<td>competitor</td>
<td>poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>sovereign</td>
<td>governed</td>
<td>opponent</td>
<td>oppressed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By applying mimetic theory to both extremes of the scale, individuals on the one hand and national conglomerates on the other, Girard implies that there is in fact a limited spectrum of relationships that can form between different entities, whatever their size and nature and the way in which they develop. These relationships include: imitating a model in order to draw inspiration from it and letting one’s actions be dictated; entering into conflict with others in order to obtain something of value or mutually coveted prestige; competing in a duel of doubles to the point where the initial issue at stake has been forgotten; seeing these rivalries escalate to extremes, resulting in a situation where the totality is in opposition to one of the protagonists; and reconciliation around the death or the exclusion of victims of such conflicts, and the random selection of the victims and owners of sovereignty. It is a dialectic of allegiance and opposition, of exclusion and integration connecting sovereign, governed, opponents and oppressed. Equally, in the political economy, agents may be encouraged by the market to enter into what they hope will be clear and perfect competition, but which runs the risk of distancing certain players from the original aims and becoming poorer in the process.

This inventory of problematic social relationships, one which is worthy of further study, naturally raises the question of cooperation and the quest for mutual advantage to which there is initially no response in Girardian theory, even though it is an imperative in any political community. A program of Girardian political studies ought to establish if and how it might arise from an anthropology founded on the primacy of violence and the vital necessity of containing that violence.

Girard’s view is that, if equality is a desirable social and political point of reference, it is still far from being the solution to rivalry, even when it supposedly has removed the object of that rivalry. For that matter, it is hard
to conceive of a form of liberal equality that does not involve competing and freely thought-out life projects, or the inevitable conflicts that would arise from the fact that they exist alongside each other and necessarily therefore converge. Indeed, there is no reason why this situation should result in a harmonious balance between individual ambitions that would be acceptable and bring stability to each and every one.

Of all the elements in Girard’s theory that may be appealing, or more often, exasperating, it would be important to consider, from a political point of view, the impact of his assertions about morphogenesis in human societies and about the initialization of institutions through founding murders. His attempt to draw a continuum from a hypothesis based on events that triggered the process of hominization, which leads to catastrophist prophesies presented as being apocalyptic, manifestly weakens his interpretation of the known history of humanity. It ought to be possible to determine the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating Girard’s speculations on the origins of humanity and its future with his vision of history. Likewise, following the insights of Simone Weil alluded to in *Je vois Satan tomber comme l’éclair* (1999) [I See Satan Falling Like Lightning], it would be impossible to ignore his reading of the Gospel, and more generally, the Biblical texts in terms of an anthropology, in this instance political.

Once these different preconditions have been established, the relevance of a political anthropology based on mimetic theory could be put to the test in four major fields of conflict and resolution: relations to the other, to the group, to the sovereign, to God. It would be worth applying the analyses to the relationship to the other or more precisely between others, to the core of the social, political and moral matters, based on the evidence that the individual cannot exist without others, and that there can be no coexistence without interindividuality, or “interindividuality”, to use the term suggested by mimetic theory.

This trial of the mimetic theory would use four dichotomies essential to the characterization of all political thought, the ones that in contemporary democracies are organized by the declarations of rights, the constitutions and laws that determine the distribution of opportunity and wealth, in a way that reflects the manifestations of rivalry: cooperation and opposition; exclusion and integration; equality and hierarchy; freedom and submission.
During this process, there is likely to be a change of perspective; from the moment we are convinced that equality does not prevent rivalry, the key question for human sciences should center on the disagreements and resulting destructive confrontations between people, a situation which is inherent and inevitable in all human society. The relevance of practical social norms that pedagogy, psychotherapy, law or ethics, amongst others, are intended to devise and disseminate could be judged by their capacity to prevent these disagreements between equals from degenerating into destructive situations, and by their ability to encourage as much as possible, creative activity that would benefit society as a whole. It is these conditions for the possibility of democratic equality freed from rivalry that ought to be explored.

Democracy is partly based on the illusion that equality will put an end to rivalry, as seen, for example in the work of John Rawls. To some extent, liberal democracy is without doubt the approach to organizing public authorities that has best succeeded in “taming” rivalry, by controlling, often in completely new ways, the political, economic, social and cultural competition; in particular, liberal democracy has limited the frequency of—and the importance given to—situations in which an object of desire is unique and cannot be shared. This has been achieved to a large extent by reducing inequality, although admittedly this has been only partly achieved in the form of citizen equality, but nevertheless more so than in any other complex society throughout history. The principle of “one man, one voice” is the clearest possible demonstration of this. The freedom of the individual, in theory, to determine the course of his/her life is another just as significant example of this aspiration towards equality. In this historical context formed by the contemporary ideals of democratic institutions, it remains for this tension between equality and rivalry to be considered in a fresh light.

The challenge of bringing mimetic theory into the political arena is to allow a (re)definition of the complex relationship between equality and rivalry and its impact on our understanding of contemporary democracy: it is a relationship which is particularly demonstrated by the way our societies promote equal opportunities in the competition for merit. These

societies have to bring increasingly elaborate political and ethical means into play in order to reduce the risks represented by the persistence of rivalry in a society of equals such as ours, as much to ensure civil harmony as for the fulfillment of the citizens that make up that society.

According to Girard in *La violence et le sacré*— (*Violence and the Sacred*), “modern society aspires to equality among men and tends instinctively to regard all differences … as obstacles in the path of human happiness.”¹⁴

By expanding on Girard’s theory we might be able to better link the desired equality and the necessary differences. At this stage, we can only speculate on the potential and the significance of an oxymoron in order to overcome the tension between equality and difference. Is it possible to envisage a “differentiatory” equality to ensure that the fellow human we regard as a model does not inevitably turn round and become an obstacle with which we have to contend? Unless, that is, it becomes necessary to invent equalizing differences, an option that the proponents of the politics of recognition seem to encourage.

A mimetic theory of politics might one day help us to make some progress in the direction of such a difficult conciliation.

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