The Deepening Impasse of Modernity

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Review Essay

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Reviewed by Stephen L. Gardner

Millennial or apocalyptic, the "end of history" has been a live wire of modern thought ever since G. W. F. Hegel finished up the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), watching on admiringly as Napoleon humiliated Prussia (and the military created by Frederick the Great) in the Battle of Jena (1806). The same event galvanized Carl von Clausewitz's lifelong adversity to the Emperor and led him to produce his great treatise *On War*, published posthumously by his wife in 1832. In Bonaparte, the idealist philosopher of history thought he saw the fullness of time on a horse, as if "world spirit" put in a personal appearance to announce the triumph of the "rational," post-revolutionary bourgeois-Christian state. The terms are grand, but the sentiment is common. In the nineteenth century, it was not so implausible. Between the fall of Napoleon in 1814 and August 1914, Europe enjoyed more peace and prosperity than in its entire history. The era announced by Hegel would last one hundred years, and, despite a few ominous bumps such as 1830, 1848, and 1870, would enjoy the manna of laissez faire capitalism until it all came to grief in WWI. True, there were many critics of "bourgeois society" as it came into its own across the century. Along with peace and prosperity, it inspired a lot of intellectual discontent. Today those critics are the ones best (if deceptively) known as "the nineteenth century philosophers"—Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, foremost—and

they were all bent on refuting Hegel. But by themselves, they give a false picture of the century. Hegel was by no means alone in believing that the times had essentially realized the goal of history, the establishment of a self-sustaining social order based on "rational will." Some such belief is a natural myth of modern society, which cannot but assume the permanent expansion of prosperity and the immortality of modern law. The myth of "History" is stamped into the genome of the modern state, if not Hegel's, then some other.

His contemporary Clausewitz, on the other hand, drew a contrary conclusion, if one from which the Prussian general himself shrank back. The achievement of the modern democratic state opened up an epoch of "total war," the mechanism of an "escalation to extremes," as if war were a pure struggle between nations as between dueling egos bent on destroying each other. Napoleon, he perceived, ushered in a species of war based up "total mobilization," not just of prince against prince but of nation against nation, people against people. Logically though not practically, war in the epoch of democracy implied extermination, annihilation of the enemy, as nations threatened to be carried away by mutual hatred. Far from embracing this logical teleology, though, Clausewitz rebelled against it. Since war is a political enterprise, all the obstructions and difficulties thrown up by reality should bring its passions back to earth, if not always, at least normally. Bringing to bear the weight of reality, its political dimension would depress violence back within tolerable limits. And this expectation was borne out, like Hegel's, for a hundred years—only to fail, though, at the moment of truth. It would take a century, but his intuition of the age introduced by Napoleon would be confirmed. In his time, he could only dimly sense the immense forces that would be unleashed by century's end, a social and cultural revolution that would simply overwhelm political systems appointed to keep them in check. But the coming of industry, technology, nationalism, propaganda, political anti-Semitism, mass movements, mass parties, political civil war, economic and imperialist competition, catastrophic economic crises, produced, once again, total war, on a scale even Clausewitz could scarcely imagine. A drama acted out over three decades, it climaxed in the suicide of Europe by 1945.

The funeral was celebrated with the Soviet absorption of the Nazi empire, the collapse of colonialism, rise of the third world, resurgence of Islam, competition for finite resources, expanding populations, ex-colonial immigrations, and ecological crises. In the second half of the last century, the syndrome that might produce total war metastasized to the globe. Yet the potential of total war was kept in check throughout the Cold War. Unlike the Thirties or the summer of 1914, politics prevailed, though at a new level of intensity, the threat of "mutually assured destruction." Under conditions of pure "reciprocity" (the "duel" described by Clausewitz as the "ideal" structure of war), the only way to prevent an "escalation to extremes" that would do away with the planet, was a condition of relative and massive destructive parity between the two superpowers. Nuclear deterrence was a high-stakes instance of what Clausewitz called "armed observation," a tinderbox peace, but preferable to a war. What Clausewitz had conceived as a methodological device, the "ideal" notion of "absolute war," had become a real possibility. With the end of the Cold War, though, the potential of total war or some contemporary mutant has hardly disappeared. Collapse of the Soviet Bloc may well have amplified it since it no longer has the stabilizing parity of a single "duel." It has also assumed new aspects, beyond the inter-state system of Europe. We now live in a global Balkans. Politics in the salutary sense—the antidote to total war in the age of total war—is as precarious as it has ever been, now that nuclear weapons and other advanced technologies have proliferated to the most "archaic" parts of the planet and brought them into the orbit of modernity and the eternally wounded pride of democratic man. It is not inevitable, because nothing in history is inevitable, but it is entirely possible that social, cultural, and political passions will outstrip the capacity of contemporary societies, governments, parties, and leaders to contain collective violence within political limits, or, for that matter, to protect collective entities from the anarchic violence of terrorist individuals, groups, and movements. Politics must play catch-up with modern conditions, which always outstrip our expectations.

This volatile *tension* between the exploding passions and ambitions of modernity and the limitations demanded by actuality is the basic dilemma within

which Clausewitz's thought moves, without pretending to resolve it. The post-Napoleonic world in which the masses have entered onto the stage of history (as the Marxists say) is stretched between the "logical" teleology of "absolute war" and the "real" teleology of politics or "real war," possibly to the breaking point. The "escalation to extremes" is only an "ideal" moment, according to Clausewitz—not the proper teleology of war, which is political, but an abstract structure, the *pure* intentionality of war. It describes the nuclear moment in which a decision for war has been made—to destroy the enemy—a moment Clausewitz associates especially with the defender rather than the attacker. For wars, unlike duels, are not pre-arranged rituals. They come into being essentially as reactions, expressions of "reciprocity." War as Clausewitz studies it is a total phenomenon, transcending the points of view of each of the sides. It is a system of exchanges, different from trade only in degree not kind, in which both sides get caught up. But within that structure of "reciprocity" an asymmetry emerges which cuts short the "escalation to extremes." To the "ideal" moment correspond "hostile feelings," as opposed to "hostile intentions" of belligerence. The former are passionate, the latter are political, the former hot, the latter cold. So the "logical" tendency is evidently a determinism of the passions, a mechanism of reaction to perceived aggression. The "real" tendency, to the contrary, obeys a calculus of reason (well or poorly) under the pressure of circumstance. But under modern conditions, the rising tide of democracy, nationalism, propaganda, etc., the "ideal" impulse in the logic of war threatens to overflow the boundaries of reason; it is the function of politics to bring it back within them. The aims of war can only be achieved if war is limited and its pure intentionality given up. But while this is typically the case there is no *a priori* guarantee of success. The question is, are there historical and cultural trends that tend to weaken or cripple the political means to contain and use war? Are there social forces that tend to reduce or eliminate the power of obstacles and the calculations of reason to slow down the passionate acceleration to extremes? We have seen that in the past, there have been such forces and trends.

In his new book *Battling to the End*, this is what René Girard insists is the flip side of Clausewitz's view of the political nature of war, the ominously real undercurrent unleashed by democracy of the "theoretical" escalation to extremes. According to Clausewitz, the "ideal" structure of the duel evincing an escalation to extremes assumes that war occurs as a single, dramatic event, in which all forces are expended at once, immediately, as if in a fantasy of instantaneous triumph over the enemy. In reality, wars are always drawn out over space and time and subject to all sorts of intervening obstacles, natural and social, slowing it down and robbing it of any easily decisive character. This is the leverage that politics gains in reality over the tendency to extremes. But in WWI, the impact of modern industry, nationalism, etc., inspired a diplomatic crisis to mutate into total war, and then again from total war into what Raymond Aron called "hyperbolic war." And in the Cold War, nuclear technology removed the obstacles to instantaneousness, making war-as-a-single-explosion of violence entirely feasible. It was the *reality* of this prospect that served the political strategy of deterrence and prevented it from happening. Still, Girard's point stands: developments since Napoleon have "accelerated" history, bringing the "pure concept" of war closer to reality, reducing the latter's controlling power, its political leverage. Clausewitz could not have seen in his own time how history would play an ironic trick on Hegel and "realize the concept" not as the "rational state" but in war as a pure duel. What was merely a logical possibility in his time is now at least a technological possibility, though still perhaps not a very likely political one. A nuclear-armed Muslim nation could wipe out Israel in a single attack, and not a very large one at that. An unfriendly nation could bring down the entire electrical system of the United States and return the country to the Stone Age, merely through software. Advances in technology, as every user of the Internet or follower of the media knows, do not allay violent passions but amplify and intensify them. They reduce them to their basest forms. Clausewitz walks a tightrope pulled disturbingly taut between political passions unleashed by democracy and political reason as the counterweight to their nihilistic escalation.

Now, this is a rather different sense of the end of history than Hegel's. The military thinker discovered the germ of a new kind of political rationality. Taking Girard's suggestion though perhaps in a somewhat different sense than he had in mind, one might call this an "apocalyptic" reason, in contrast to the millennialist sense (my term) of the Kingdom on earth of nineteenth century liberal progressivists. Suppose modernity is a garden of delights on top of a volcano. The optimistic rationalism of political philosophy (exemplified by Hegel) reflexively refuses to contemplate the possibility of the worst. For Hegel, tragedy (like art) is a ghost of spirit past. The optimism of the philosopher romantically assumes that reason will always prevail in the end. Like the financier, it must always assume that there is a future to invest in. It can only operate today on the assumption of profit tomorrow. This optimism is not necessarily justified; in fact, it may well produce the very effect it seeks to deny, as in the recently burst economic bubble, only one in a series. All the same, it is structurally embedded in the conventional rationality of the modern world. It has an instinctive aversion to contemplating the prospect of catastrophe; all the tricks of philosophy are deployed to ward off even the thought of it. This kind of "idealism" typically lends itself to the aims of ideology, though, which are the more dangerous, the more optimistic it is. If there is any lesson of modern politics, it is that optimism lends itself to calamity.

Clausewitz's distinctively new and modern *political* rationality begins from the predicate of the worst and seeks to find a way out of it, a way to stall it, to postpone and temporize it. It postulates the "ideal" of war as an "escalation to extreme," an eliminationist duel, but then seeks in "real war" the means to interrupt and suspend this ballistic. It is out of the question that it can ever be simply done away with, dialectically "superseded," as Hegelian fantasts would have it. Instead of a politics based on rationalist illusions, Clausewitz points not to non-politics, but to a rational politics without illusions. If the modern epoch ushers in a new kind of war, it also ushers in a new kind of politics—in fact several. One of these is politics based upon totalizing ideology, that is, politics as war, of class, race, or nation. This is the supreme expression of political optimism. But another is politics as the

antidote and alternative to total war, politics as postponement, temporization, *keeping things going* in the democratic age of apocalypse. It admits of limited hope, only as an effect of caution. This intuition of a new rationality in Clausewitz is just that, to be sure, not a fully elaborated insight. It is elicited not just from the tension of his thought but from his *thinking of tension*. Nonetheless, he logically postulates the possibility of an apocalyptic end, and, as we now indisputably know, this concept has in some sense and degree become a reality.

This, I submit, is a reasonable construction of Raymond Aron's response (before it was asked) to the question posed by Girard. (Consider, for example, *The Century of Total War* [1954].) In *Battling to the End*, the Stanford anthropologist of religion seeks to settle his conscience on the most important political thinker of the Cold War. Also the most important interpreter of Clausewitz in the twentieth century, in *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War* (1976), Aron stresses the political direction of the general's mature understanding of war. Of the many dramatis personae Girard brings forward in his narrative, it is clear that Aron is the thorn in his side. Girard has great admiration for him and is by no means unsympathetic to his sensibilities, especially on the subject of totalitarianism and the compulsive anti-Americanism of the Left. But at least since *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978) if not earlier, Girard shows evident distaste for his politics, especially as a defender of nuclear deterrence, and for his philosophical defense of "political reason."

In this new book, Girard revisits Aron in the aftermath of 9/11. Girard makes a strong case for the apocalyptic dimensions of modernity and of Clausewitz's thinking, though he does not achieve a decisive victory with respect to Aron—if that is what he is aiming at. For in the end, Girard is as ambivalent as ever with respect to "politics." Certainly he wants to move Aron's reading of Clausewitz as a *political* thinker of war to one side in order to make room for the *apocalyptic* dimension. The question, though, is whether in fact these are antithetical, as Girard seems to assume. Girard does not confront Aron's deep, careful, and textually rigorous reading of the military theorist very directly. His "attack" on Aron is oblique and

indirect, a shift of emphasis or accent, a change of perspectives (though a radical one), rather than a textual refutation. And this, I suggest, is because Aron was fully sensible of the apocalyptic dimensions of modernity, that he sought to address them precisely in politics, as the only deliberative human institution by which one could, and that his defense of political reason is in everything but name a mode of the "new rationality" that Girard calls "apocalyptic." For it is clear that Aron's political thought is *not* that of modern philosophy, despite his esteem for that tradition. His is not a political philosophy (like that of Locke or Hegel) so much as a thinking of *politics* in the spiritual economy of the human condition. Far from embracing a philosophy of history such as Hegel's (let alone that of the Hegel-descended ideologues, from Marxists to neo-conservatives), he was free of the self-deceptions of the modern state and of political rationalism. He defended political reason and liberal democracy as its proper condition in the century in which it had already been defeated once in the first half and remained under the existential threat of totalitarianism in the second. Aron gives modern meaning—in the age of real and potential catastrophe—to classical *phronesis*. The question is, why Girard does not appreciate this about Aron—especially since classical politics in the 'phronetic' sense is part and parcel of Christian tradition? Why does he fail to perceive in Aron his apocalyptic confrère?

This is by no means to say there are not deep differences between Girard and Aron. One might get the impression from the above that for Aron there isn't anything more noble to politics than just a means of survival in the age of global calamity, survival at any cost. This issue, though, touches on a critical difference between Aron and Girard. Politics, for Aron, is not just about survival but also about protecting politics as a condition of the human good. Politics is not just necessary to prevent catastrophe; it is also one of the conditions under which humans can attain their humanity in the highest degree. It is not just a means; it is an end in itself. Human beings are by nature political; the human good is shared life. By contrast, Girard seems to want to expunge politics from his notion of apocalyptic rationality, so that little more than survival is involved, for which sake virtually everything can

be surrendered. In the face of the end of modernity, he, like Heidegger, is proposing a kind of will not to will, an abandonment of willing itself as the culprit. This suggests a deeply reductive element in Girard, one that pervades his whole theory. There is scant place for nobility, excellence, classical heroism—qualities that confer worth on human existence—or "human nature" in Girard's anthropology (though that is by no means to say he did not personally recognized and appreciate them). We shall return to these issues later.

In sum, Clausewitz's most famous sentence, "war is the continuation of politics by other means," lends itself to at least three meanings: (1) War is political in the sense that it serves political ends and so is limited by the realism of circumstances. The "battle to the end" is merely a momentary flare of national passion that must give way to more practical calculations; it is checked by reality. The enormous difficulties of actual war bring those who wage it back down to the banal objectives it was originally conceived to achieve. (2) Politics itself is war, an uncompromising duel between parties, nations, classes, or peoples that aims for a final solution in the total destruction of one by the other. This is the trend of totalitarian ideology, a perpetual danger rooted in the basic structure of modernity. We glimpse an anticipation of the ideological wars of the twentieth century in the wars of Napoleon. The first is compatible with but not necessarily confined to the optimistic horizons of "political philosophy" in a Hegelian sense. The second, without ceasing to be optimistic, carries politics and war in the opposite direction, to extremes. The ultimate form of political optimism is the belief in total victory. But (3) there is another possibility, one that sees politics as the only means by which the drift of modern war and ideology may be deflected or tempered, if not eliminated. This is the salutary sense of Clausewitz's notion of politics. It is philosophical but not Hegelian, rational but not rationalist. It does not appeal to a grand philosophy of history in a revolutionary or progressive sense but to one that is apocalyptic in a perfectly banal sense, the potential self-destruction of civilization thanks to its inability to contain its propensity for violence, as the means of violence are vastly amplified by the progress of democracy, industry, media, and technology.

Needless to say, for obvious historical reasons, this is an implication in Clausewitz rather than a fully developed insight. But by that very fact, it is a measure of his historical intuition. So there are three meanings—call them the philosophical, the totalitarian, and the apocalyptic. The first may be compatible with either the second or the third, but the latter two cannot be compatible with each other. Girard in effect opposes the second to the first, and Aron opposes the third to the second. But to understand the real issues dividing Aron and Girard one must appreciate that the dilemma between Aronian politics and apocalyptic reason as drawn by Girard is largely a false one.

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Girard turns to the theoretical general to press his lifelong ambition to reconcile Christianity and the human sciences. It will undoubtedly be his most controversial to date, since it aims to bring to accomplishment Girard's project of a "fundamental anthropology" of the radical origins of man, paradoxically in an apocalyptic theory of his end. For him, the Franco-German rivalry crystallized by the Napoleonic wars (and in Clausewitz's personal attitude towards Napoleon) and culminating in the destruction of Europe by 1945 prefigures things to come.

Girard proposes to confirm independently, in an anthropological theory of modernity, the intuitions of Christian revelation about man and history summed up in the dream sequences of the Book of Revelation. Turning prophesy into hypothesis, and hypothesis into prophecy, Girard argues that the Christian understanding of man points inevitably to apocalypse, but without having to resort to a dogmatic take on Armageddon. The end of humanity is already presaged in its beginnings. That is why Girard describes his anthropology (in *Things Hidden*) as "fundamental"—in obvious challenge to and emulation of Martin Heidegger's "fundamental ontology." It is a theory of the radical origin of man, a transition from nature to culture, from hominid to human being. The origin is radical, because it can only be conceived of as a leap beyond biology into symbolic order, a sudden event, yet one that must have happened in evolutionary time. Girard identifies this with

the appearance of religion, and with it, of language and institutions. It is not language and culture that lead to religion, but religion that signifies the emergence of language and culture. This occurs through the reflexive social channeling of violence in primitive sacrifice, an act by which individual violence is separated off from collective violence, bad violence from good, constituting the group properly as such.

The origin of humanity in sacrificial violence—a core Girardian claim—contains the key to its inevitable self-destruction. What generates the sacrificial reflex that is the definingly human character, for Girard, is what he calls "mimetism," the propensity of human beings to imitate each other beyond all instinctual limits. According to Girard, imitation between individuals sparks violence because it generates "desire," the need to possess what the other has or seems to have. Human desire is "mimetic desire," acquired in and through imitation of others. Desire is always borrowed from another; it is reflexive, reactive, reciprocal by nature. Humans imitate each other by desiring. By the same token, "mimesis" tends to mortal conflict, as individuals reciprocally desire things they cannot have in common. In primeval time and periodically since then, this produces cataclysmic social crisis, an anarchy of envy and resentment that threatens to destroy the group. Sacrifice channels and controls mimetic desire by cathartically discharging its violent proclivities onto a substitute victim. The group saves itself at the expense of one of its members—and thus humanity is born. But sacrificial institutions, out of which civilization develops, are ultimately unsustainable; they break down, and then are actively destroyed by the Passion of Christ. The end of history returns into the chaos of the beginnings, as humanity in the modern age can no longer sustain order on the basis of collective or religious violence. And we have now entered into that final phase. The violence of the individual returns to neuter collective violence—as in the religious pathology of the suicide bomber, the weapon of choice of archaic Islam in its war with modernity. That, in a nutshell, is the significance of modernity—it is the last chapter in the history of violence. And that is where

Clausewitz comes in—the original thinker of "absolute" war as the war unique to modernity, a theorist before the letter of "mimetic" reciprocity of violence.

In opposition to Aron, Girard wants to read Clausewitz as an apocalyptic in the sense that he is announcing the *end* of war and the *end* of politics as the rationale and the limiting power of war. Total war is a consequence of the dissolution of war as a *religious* institution clothed in rituals and myths that limited it but also made it politically efficacious. Ostensibly, the democratic enlightenment rationalizes war, strips off the religious garments, the aristocratic conventions, the traditional limits, in order to reveal its real mechanisms and motives, its logic and structure, its "pure concept." It reduces war to politics, and so seems to bring war under the governance of reason. In reality, the reverse happens; it reduces politics to war, a duel to the end. The revelation of its nature does not bring it under prudential control, but effectively frees it from such control, or at least tends to do so. It abolishes war as an *institution*, by demolishing its religious nature, its myths and rituals. All that remains is the "pure concept"—the essence of war as a duel—and that now tends to become the reality. That is why the political wars of the twentieth century, so rationally executed, unleashed such unprecedented violence. The apocalyptic Girard sees in Clausewitz is not just the end of war as an institution but the *end of politics* as a means of containing violence.

Whereas Aron sees in Clausewitz an instance of politics without illusions, Girard sees him pointing towards a "new kind of rationality" *beyond politics altogether*. This is the Catholic Church of Benedict XVI, which embodies the "idea of humanity," "human identity." For Girard, though, this new rationality was to elude most of the century between Jena and the Western Front except for a marginal but prophetic string of writers (such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Madame de Staël) belonging mostly to the romantic strains of French and European literature, who also sensed where the world augured by Napoleon was headed. They were the secret curators of an "idea of Europe" that might offer an alternative to the total wars towards which France and Germany were drifting. With his customary flair for paradox, Girard claims that a Catholic Church chastened by the wars and the

Holocaust is the true heir of this romantic tradition. But Girard does not see that Benedict's defense of the *rationality* of Christianity (against Protestantism and Islam, but for obvious reasons, especially against the latter) in his controversial speech at Regensburg is partly on account of its inherently political nature and its absorption of classical prudence, both for churchly *and* secular institutions. Benedict criticizes Islam's reliance on violence, to which he counterposes the *reason* of Christianity. But what is "Christian reason" if not politics instead of spilling blood? No religion is as political as Christianity; it both absorbs and readjusts classical senses of politics. And it can and must do that because of its distinction between City of Man and City of God.

Girard sees Aron's politics as trapped in the same kind of philosophical optimism as Hegel. Were Aron alive today, though, we might easily imagine how he might see the anti-political Girard as a relative of the kind of apocalyptic writers we find in Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, or to that of the avant garde of Paris in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's, their later twentieth century heirs. Not that Girard belongs to the company of the "thought of 68." But clearly he sees his apocalyptic more as a Christian appropriation of the secular apocalypticism of radical historicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thinkers of the terminal end of bourgeois modernity, than, say, of their critics such as Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, or Raymond Aron. In particular, Girard adopts Heidegger implicitly as a model, rejecting his anti-Christian animus, to be sure, but aspiring to be a Christian Heidegger of sorts all the same. This is ironic and perplexing, given that his politics are in the end much closer to those of Aron, the sacrificial victim of the French Left during the Cold War. But whereas the Parisian avant garde was a philosophical caricature of democratic politics and a political caricature of philosophical thought, Girard seems to want to pull the rug out from under politics and philosophy altogether. While Aron sought to rescue politics from philosophy and philosophy from politics—to reestablish the proper boundaries that the intellectualist politics of the radical Parisians sought to efface—Girard writes as if their totalitarian perversion of politics were the truth of both philosophy and politics.

The upshot of the modern apocalypse, for Girard, is the "renunciation of violence," the right of retaliation, a power of the "sacred" that previously upheld order. Girard makes it clear, though, that he is not a pacifist. How is it possible to renounce violence without embracing pacifism? This and similar dilemmas will perplex readers of this book. Politics is over, seems to say, but not just yet. War is over, but we may still have to fight them (though not as promiscuously as "Trotskyite rascals" would have it). Is there any way to square this circle of Girard's thought? Not all violence is simply retaliation, nor is all retaliation unmeasured. Ironically, though, it is political reason that "renounces" violence—retaliation for its own sake—without exactly giving violence up. This may not finally prevent the self-destruction of civilization. But practically, aside from preparing oneself for martyrdom, politics is the only thing we can do.

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At the risk of oversimplifying, let us say there are really two Girards, both inextricably on display here. One Girard is the "anthropologist" of religion, literature, society, and culture. In the dispassionate spirit of Emile Durkheim, he is realistic and reasonable, holds no brief especially, and is sensible when it comes to relating his theories to politics, history, and the demands of life. And in the moderate spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville, this Girard is spontaneously conservative (in a non-partisan and also distinctively European sense) and, despite his affirmation of modernity, sympathetic to the "archaic" or "primitive" institutions, that is, "sacred" myths and traditions he studies in terms of "sacrifice." If as a Christian he rejects human sacrifice, he nevertheless appreciates the real order or sacred law—or sense of the grounding office of *prohibition* or "differences"—to which genuine sacrificial religion has given rise. Sacrifice generates an order that has a value beyond sacrifice itself, above all, its sense of the forbidden and its intimation of holiness. He does not reject order or law, like post-modern antinomians, only its origins in arbitrary violence and ritual sacrifice. The conflict between the origin and the truth of human institution is, to a great extent, the dilemma of history his thought attempts to address. If he does have a brief here, it is

an apology for the intuitive wisdom of the "savage mind," which has a deeper sense of the danger of violence, mimesis, and the contagion of envy, than does the modern, which blithely sets all these forces free. And so it is a rejoinder to Claude Levi-Strauss's supposed celebration of *La pensée sauvage*, which is rather a disguise, a primitive mask so to say, for the victimary resentments of modern equality. The true "thought" of the "savage" is his intuitive appreciation of the absolute importance of prohibition, of the difference of the sacred and the profane. Girard demonstrates in effect that Leftist orthodoxy on the complex relation of the modern and the archaic is hopelessly superficial and ideologically tainted.

The other is a religious Girard whose inspiration, intellectually speaking, owes a great deal to Blaise Pascal. The great Jansenist anti-philosopher is, paradoxically, his patron philosopher. In Pascal we first witness the beginnings of a modern critique of "desire" based on a revisionist appropriation of Augustine, and a critique of institutions that achieve justice indirectly, as it were, only by systematizing violence and its author, 'vanity' or desire. Conventional justice, on these terms, is the net result of a system of individual violence, injustices, and vanities, not unlike Hegel's "cunning of reason" or Adam Smith's "invisible hand," or Bernard Mandeville's "private vices, public virtues." Girard's theories of mimetic desire and the sacrificial origins of culture and institutions are a contemporary reformulation of this Pascalian view of man and society. Human institutions originate in violence; there is no natural order; all objects of desire are figments of the imagination; justice is the justification of violence; social morality is arbitrary convention. There may be a kind of justice in the whole, but it is generated by the economy of vices and injustices in every part. And all it serves is the utilitarian needs of the majority at the price of sacrifice of the individual. Pascal exuded a profound intellectual contempt for two things: *philosophy* and its kin, *politics* and political *institutions*. Girard shares this dual distrust—though his students have not often linked them—and it fundamentally shapes his work. The rejection of philosophy and the indifference (if not animosity) to politics are deeply linked in his thought—as if he rejected politics because of its historical link in Western history to

philosophy and philosophy because of its historic links to politics. The history of Western institutions is predicated on the relation of philosophy and politics, without which a proper political life cannot evolve. What Girard ignores, though, is that this spirit is also ingredient to Christianity, not just because it absorbed classical philosophy and politics, but because that is the reason it was led to do so.

Girard the anthropologist of religion affords us an original glimpse into the bi-polarity within the modern world, between democracy, equality, and related phenomena such as law, markets, technology, and science, and the "archaic" or the "sacred," in the sense of inviolable differences and ranks that ground the social bond. Girard's notion of democracy or equality is Tocquevillean; his notion of the "sacred" is Durkheimian. The modern regenerates within itself a sacred order that it endlessly seeks to expel, flatten out, or supersede. Sacred order does not just "uncannily" haunt the modern, as Freud has it, the "repressed" that "returns" to upset the weak-minded. Rather, the sacred is intensified and aggravated by the modern, as if the social bond reflexively reacted to the democratic attempts to dismantle and desecrate it. The modern generates an intensifying cultural crisis because it can never incorporate or subdue a sacred order that, nonetheless, always belongs to it, since it is the only thing that holds it together. The modern is both itself and its sacred antithesis, but in the manner of volatility or escalation of tension; it reproduces the archaic as the surplus it can never absorb and digest.

Girard bridges the gap between Durkheim's view of modernity as a crisis of "indifferentiation" and "anomie," and the critique of democracy and equality in Alexis de Tocqueville as "leveling" through the "social power" of envy. Tocqueville stresses the "soft despotism" of the modern public and its law of envy (vulgate for "mimetic desire"). Durkheim, on the other hand, stresses the destruction of cultural differences and of "solidarity" (group identity) that attends the modern division of labor with its extreme individualism. This creates the problem of "anomie," the restless instability of a "passion of infinity" that feeds social pathologies such as suicide, divorce, and murder. Tocqueville looks with melancholy at the flattening of rank and the diminution of the sense of greatness by democracy, the decay of the

moral value of vertical distinction; Durkheim looks with anxiety at the collapsing of social differences and the loss of clear sense of purpose and its social consequences with a division of labor that no longer reflects rank or function. Still, Durkheim and Tocqueville affirm individualism and equality (unlike utopian critics of modernity such as Marx or Joseph de Maistre). Their thought is characterized by reflective ambivalence. Similarly, Girard's work is in effect an extended and profound mediation on these themes and their implications for the future of our world.

The second Girard, though, is a Pascalian who condemns "violence" abstractly (without ever defining it) as humanity's original sin, and who looks askance at politics and its soul mate, philosophy, as hopelessly implicated in the Fall. Girard has never made a secret of his Pascalian suspicion of philosophy (and in twentieth-century French context, that makes a certain sense). In Girard's view, the philosopher is compromised by his deference to politics, to the needs of the city if not of the mob, and so he is implicated in violence. This is a view that has underwritten his project from its early formulations in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972). The original sin of philosophy, exemplified by Plato, is its equivocation with respect to the guilt of Socrates. Philosophy arises from the death by sacrificial scapegoating of Socrates by Athens. It is secretly in at least partial agreement with Aristophanes, the traditionalist comic poet who mocked the philosopher of the agora merciless in *The Clouds*, but whose plays by tradition Plato kept by his bed. The New Testament has a cleaner relation to politics, on Girard's reading: "Better one man die than the nation suffer." The words of Caiaphas distill the essence of politics, according to Girard in *Things Hidden*. Like the apocalypses of Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, Girard's is profoundly anti-political; his vision of social life is closer to the socialism of the Apostles, a community based on the total renunciation of desire. He sees the political only as an adaptation to human fallenness (which it certainly is in part), but he acknowledges no intrinsic good, no natural teleology, in communal life. In reality, Girard thinks that humanly escaping politics (or violence, or mimesis, or even desire and war) is not so simple. But it is a concession wrested from him like a pulled tooth. And it opens him to the unjust

suspicion of being a quietist—as if the inward withdrawal described by Tocqueville (the remoteness of democratic individualism, the lukewarm and distant relation to common life or polity) were a solution to the problem of modernity, not one of its essential expressions.

These two Girards are not completely separable, nor should they be. But neither are they completely harmonious with each other. His work is evangelical in the sense that Pascal's is, an attempt to show the reason of religion, and the irrationality of "pure reason." Like Pascal, his anti-philosophical view of politics affords him a certain anthropological insight denied to more optimistic and salutary minds, especially in terms of the relation of politics and institutions to society, culture, and religion as deeper historical forces to which political philosophy cannot finally do justice. But the price he pays for this insight, like Pascal, is the loss of an intellectual relation to the classical notion of *phronesis* (though Girard himself is personally 'phronetic,' in his 'private' political judgments too), and by the same token, to the notion of a 'natural order' in the classical sense—that is, the sense discovered by the classical philosophers.

The central issue of Girard's anthropology is that of "desire," though his version of Augustine's "concupiscence" seems closer to that of the early Protestants (hopelessly depraved) than to that of Catholics (intrinsically geared towards the good, however distorted or perverted by the Fall). Like Pascal, Girard denies any natural order of desire. This enables him to see through the artificialities of desire, like Pascal, but it also imprisons him in that artificiality, to which there is no humanly natural alternative. Consequently, there is no real contrast term to "mimetic desire" in Girard, so that while he often talks of a "good mimesis," he does not apparently acknowledge any good "mimetic desire," nor any "desire" besides the "mimetic." "Good mimesis" demands the renunciation of desire as such. Is this humanly possible? Or humanly desirable? In the last analysis, all desire is for Girard constituted by envy, jealousy, and resentment. There is no positive form of Eros, as in Augustine and Plato. Or, to put it differently, envy is always something negative for Girard; there is not much room for positive emulation.

Classically, the proper contrast to desire in the negative sense of reactive or reflexive passions is the notion of the intrinsic end, the end-in-itself, desirable "by nature." Without this notion of *what is intrinsically desirable or desired for its own sake as a final end*, there can be *no* acknowledgement that man is a *political* animal—meaning social, communal, and deliberative. Humanity is realized with others and in community, as voluntary and deliberative as it is natural. Only this allows for the possibility of positive emulation. For ancient thought, the question is not whether one should imitate, but only who, what, and how. The nature and possibility of positive imitation and of positive forms of desire has always dogged "mimetic theory," however. Girard has never entirely divested himself of the romantic notion of spontaneity he so brilliantly criticized in his first book. This notion cannot be shed unless one acknowledges positive desire. "Mimetic theory" cannot properly appreciate Aristotle's simple but critical distinction between the *natural* order of *ends* and the fact that all specific desires are acquired and learned (or social). For Aristotle and Plato, desires are both natural *and* learned or acquired. Because human desire is by nature social, the human potential to desire is by nature indeterminate, to be shaped by education and training—by imitation, by any other name. This is not merely because it is free libidinal energy, as in Freud, that must find some object to "cathect" itself in or to "bind" itself to or by, so that it has an object at all. Rather it is because objects that are intrinsically desirable *cannot* or *should not* be desired (merely) "spontaneously" but must be desired with some acquired intuition of why they are intrinsically desirable, what makes them good. Proper desires must be acquired and learned, because only so can they be understood, a part of their being proper. Imitation proper is not "copying," the sense in which Plato attacked *mimesis* in *The Republic*; it is far too difficult and demanding for that. Genuine imitation culminates in wisdom, partly a knowledge of imitation itself. Knowing *how* to imitate is as important as what or who, and even more than the what or the who, democratic culture has lost the *how*. That by nature certain things are desirable means, therefore, that one does *not* desire them by nature. But for Girard, the fact that desire is a learned behavior means that it cannot have any natural end, any intrinsic objects, and that all "values" are thus arbitrary

and imaginary. The human world is, for Pascal, a distraction and a tacit strategy against the nihilism of boredom, composed entirely of fictions. Girard, too, seems stuck within the conventionalism of modern thought. He has mistaken a social condition for a metaphysical one. Still, most philosophers have understood that culture is a kind of "second nature" for man, in the sense that his true nature unfolds only on this level. The cultural form of human existence does not subvert the classical notion of a "human nature," as post-modernists hastily infer; rather, it is the basis of it.

In Girard's theoretical world, then, the fact that all desires are social, acquired by imitation and so conventional, means that there is no properly social desire, a definingly human desire *for* commonality, humanity, communion as such, either with others, or with the divine. In "mimetic theory," human beings are spontaneously, mimetically bound to one another; they are social and cultural beings, irreducible to nature. Yet they have no reason to be social, and their relation to common life, especially in polity, is bound, on these terms, to remain watery and lukewarm at best. Girard's solution to the problem of social existence is a balance between distance and proximity, and a kind of juggling of relations to specific individuals so one never becomes overly close to any one, and so exposed to obsessive mimesis or fixation. His model for this is the mad hermit, the poet Hölderlin. In the end, though, it looks very close to what Tocqueville understood by democratic individualism, a kind of arms-length withdrawal. That for him was not the solution to the problem of democratic modernity, but the heart of it. It weakened the social bond to the point where (as we might say with Durkheim) it threatened the cohesion of the self, the health and character of the psyche. Girard, by contrast, seems to be inherently suspicious of the social bond, as if it were hopelessly tainted by the original sin of sacrificial violence. As a defense for dealing with the false intimacy and demonic anonymity of the modern public, arms-length taciturnity is unavoidable and even salutary to a point. But is it the *imitatio Christi*, as Girard seems to suggest? Does society itself needs to be dismantled for the sake of avenging the violence of sacrifice?

Girard is deeply ambivalent, but in that he is like modernity itself. He is caught between the Tocquevillean-Durkheimian conservatism of his anthropology, and the modernism of his Pascalian assumptions. To intimate this underlying contradiction of modernity, I suspect, is his achievement as a thinker of the "human sciences." Democratic modernity is torn by what will sooner or later be an unbearable tension between the 'modern' itself and the 'archaic,' the democratic and the sacred, the secular and the religious demands of the social bond. This fraternal enmity between the modern and its older "sacred" brother is rooted not simply in the primeval past but in the sempiternal reflexes of human (social) nature. The modern has never extirpated (and never can extirpate) the "sacred," as Enlightenment hacks might have us believe, any more than it can alter the fact that man is an irreducibly social being, not an autonomous atom. In that sense "secularization" is a fantasy. Modernity does not abolish the sacred; rather, it pits it in *never-ending rivalry* with the profane. In modernity the two dimensions of human existence, the sacred and the profane, become enemies. Thus modernity intensifies the sacred, but as it does, it also debases it, and that, perhaps, is the real problem. The sacred will return to avenge its desecration by the democratic enlightenment, but its effect will not be to restore social order or polity but to accelerate their demise.

This is a side of The Book of Revelation Girard intimates rather than spells out. This is what post-modernists miss when the track Freud's notion of the archaic unconscious. Freud the Lamarckian saw this as the total accumulated racial and cultural inheritance of the human genome. Both timeless and historical, it was like a recording of all prior generations inscribed over each other that could never be erased and could return at any moment, like an inexplicable attack of Hitchcockian birds. What post-modernists fail to grasp is the insuperable tension of the archaic and the modern that defines the *modern* itself—a sacred impulse that is anti-modern but produced by and contaminated with the modern itself. The problem with Enlightenment is not that it demolishes the sacred but that it degrades it. It is not simply the endless haunting of the present by the past, as in the gothic

imagination. It is a *social* reflex of human existence, a matrix of the living not of the dead. It is only the mythological imagination of democratic man that turns this into the night of the living dead, in which the dead refuse to die and prey instead on the living. Marxists, Freudians, Levi-Strausseans, and their descendants have scant sympathy for the sacred and cannot acknowledge its anthropology (having long since declared the end of humanism). For them it is only a pathology or an aesthetic trope. They pretend to like savages because they imagine savages are really like them. Like Philip Rieff, though, Girard senses an inner conflict in modern life that cannot be resolved but most grow more intense, possibly to the point of the self-immolation of institutions. Modernity is a deepening *impasse*, a fraternal enmity between itself and the sacred, one that cannot be resolved but only temporized, postponed, maintained. Sooner or later the clock will run out, to the Christian point of view. Post-modernists pronounce the "end of man" but lack the courage of their apocalyptic intuitions. They think they can slacken the tension of the sacred by translating it into structuralist-semiotic-Freudian-psychoanalytic-aesthetic terms. They revert to the Enlightenment in the end, in which, though, they have long since lost confidence. They talk glibly about the return of the repressed but in fact practice the repression of repression, as Rieff put it. They imagine some post-human successor to "man" and think that by proclaiming the "death of man" they will ward off that death. It is this flaccid view of the sacred in the post-modernist appropriations of Freud and classical anthropology that Girard destroys.

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