

“The enemy is the external form
of our own question”:
Four Notes on the Mimetic Roots
of Political Identities

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This essay concerns political identities as related to the existence of an enemy. Here are four methodological key points as topics for discussion.

1. SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON IMITATION AS
A RELATIONSHIP, NOT AS A COMPULSION.

Even in the natural biological environment, where imitation has its real beginning, we find not only a subject and an object, but also a third element: René Girard calls it “the model of desire.”¹ The subject desires the object insofar as the model is imagined to want the same object. Therefore, mankind’s dependence on the model is, as it always was, the *modus operandi* of *hyper-mimetic* beings. It is not solely a distorted compulsion (*affectus*) that transforms the model into a “material” obstacle to obtaining the object.

As for mimetism, it must be underlined that rivalry is not simply a result of an accidental convergence of two desires on the same object. If it were, we would welcome the return of a hypothetical and original autonomy of desire,

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leading to mankind's freedom from his first imitative guilt. But, from the origin and, hopefully, until the end, *felix culpa* leads the imitator to confront the model!

The imitator's negative/positive dependence on his model shows the prevailing affection within the process of imitative acquisition. Such dependence explains the large variety of the attitudes of human desire; it also explains the reason why imitation can arouse radical and extreme feelings of both jealousy and aversion towards the model. Moreover, it can drive the imitator to a pathological relapse.² But, in order not to be trapped into a cross-mechanism of mimetic-rivalitarian desire, we ought to avoid immediately thinking of the model as a rival and instead to recognize the imitation of the model as mankind's way of taking possession of and acquainting himself with the world.

2. THE MODEL IS A MEDIATOR AND AN OBSTACLE TO APPROPRIATIVE DESIRE.

In short, we can say that the same affective relationship:

- a. Mediates the appropriation of the "object." The relation to the model allows one to approach such appropriation in an emotional and cognitive way.
- b. Transforms the model into an "obstacle," carrying out the double binding command. The unavoidable obstacle affects the imitator definitely. However, these psychological effects are secondary. What is primary is the indication of the object of appropriation led by the desire of the model.

Most of the literature developing the Mimetic theory focuses on the "inner" relationship of the imitator to the model-obstacle, which René Girard calls "internal mediation" due to the effects on the psychological sphere of the imitator. Under this aspect, the relationship is metaphysically transformed into a deification of the model. On the other hand, sometimes these studies have disregarded the manner in which the model, acting as mediator, produces real and manifest changes. Hence, "external mediation" has been confined, first, within the domain of religious institutions, and second, within that of juridical and political ones.³ On the contrary, the two aspects, model as an "inner" obstacle and model as an "external" mediator, constantly overlap, as it is easy to observe in cultural history.

Thus, we should focus on the conflicting effects of the meeting with a model in order to achieve a more global vision of the creative relations of humans.⁴

3.A. MIMETIC NATURE AND THE SCANDAL OF DESIRE.

For the imitator, the model-obstacle is a scandal. In fact, double-binding desire contains all the features of scandal. Whoever is affected by scandal is confused; on the one hand, the scandal astonishes him, and on the other hand, it deprives him of what leads to the object of desire. The imitator loses sight of his aim. To put it more tangibly, confusion toward the model is a scandal to the eye that is transmitted to the hands and feet, thus hindering movement.⁵ Girard's image of hobbling along evokes the visible effect of this impediment. The contradictory movement forward always halts at the same point. This makes a cripple of whoever looks at a cripple! However, in this way, the neurotic movement of the one who repeats obstacles never becomes too widespread.

In the Gospels we find many bad masters who provoke scandal and are then severely condemned: We read in Matthew 18.7, "Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" (see also Luke 17.1). But many times in the Gospels, Jesus provokes scandal by presenting himself as the only "guide," and as a consequence nominates himself to take the position of the victim. This is the old scandal of sacrificing the prophets; this is the scandal that Pharisees attempt to conceal with "whitewashed tombs" (Matthew 23.1–38) and that Jesus uncovers, because he is the scandal that cannot be hidden.

In the *logoi* (words) of Jesus, to be a scandal and to be scandalized primarily mean the lack of faith that prevents one from receiving him as the Christ.⁶ The rejection of the "unique mediator" is the obstacle on which the unfaithful imitators will be shattered. "The stone the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone, and a stumbling stone, and a rock of offense, even to them who stumble at the word" (1 Peter 2.6–7). Nevertheless, this is a paradoxical fall, since the lack of faith irreversibly legitimizes the event of the crucifixion—a cause of the fall for many within the Jewish world, which then produces fruits within another nation (Matthew 21.43)—and it will be "the riches of the world" (Romans 11.11). First through Peter's words and then through Paul's, we may recognize the twofold movement of rejection-fall and falling-resurrection that is the real scandal of the Cross (Luke 2.34).

The idea that faith comes into the world through scandal seems to hint at "the double binding" desire. The scandal of the "double bind" is just a mirror, though a misleading one, to the scandal of the Cross.

3.B. CAN WE RID OURSELVES OF THE SCANDAL?

Without scandal, imitation wouldn't be authentic imitation, but only compulsion (*conatus, affectus*) or, at most, moral edification. Faith is the biggest scandal we can't get rid of. It is the "sign of contradiction" which we always shrink from and trip over in search of autonomy.⁷ Of course, as an alternative to the scandal, we may rely upon cultural emancipation (individual or collective) as an obvious escape from the rivalries of human desire and from genealogically elaborated morality and politics.

In his well-known work *The Legitimacy of Modern Age*, Hans Blumenberg elaborates on this theme when he writes that men inflict awful punishment on one another, justifying "today's fault with yesterday's."⁸ Blumenberg thinks that the Modern Age goes beyond this genealogical injustice by finding legitimization in and of itself, as a rational self-assertion, rather than being legitimized by external elements. As we know, Girard believes that such a claim to self-legitimization is the last step of "internal mediation," which confirms the evolutionary progression of desire towards its destruction. At the same time, Girard prophesies an apocalyptic conclusion to the conflict between rivals when such a conflict is no longer ruled by the scapegoat mechanism. Thus, the role reversal between the model of desire and his imitator cannot be stopped. In fact, mimetic theory emphasizes the negative or unrealistic consequences of the "double bind" in many different ways.⁹

In contrast to both Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, and to Girard's conclusions of *Battling to the End*, I think it is better to accept the challenges of the aforementioned "double bind" of desire, and to use them as a key for a more positive and realistic comprehension of problems that are not only psychological but also political and juridical. Autonomy, it must be said, is not simply a romantic lie; it is also canceled by what Carl Schmitt calls "the ineradicable need for legitimization that every man and every community has."¹⁰ I think we can gain some insight into the imitative and conflicting nature of identities in politics and history if we look at this need for legitimization.

4. THE ENEMY AS THE EXTERNAL FORM OF OUR OWN QUESTION.

Now, let's go back to the sentence that I have chosen as the title of this paper: "the enemy is the external form of our own personal question. He will pursue us and we will pursue him to the same end."¹¹ Schmitt's quotation has provoked several interpretations by scholars. For our purpose it is sufficient to say that

in contradiction to formal logic (i.e., both the law of identity and the law of sufficient reason),¹² Schmitt contends that we can't define ourselves. Using the symbols of logic, he denies that A is the same as A. He also denies that A (ourselves) can be reduced to B (the enemy), or, to put it in another way, he denies that the enemy is a sufficient reason to provide evidence of the existence of A. Furthermore, he excludes the idea that B can be reduced to the further previous B as an endless regression whose origin can't be traced back. So, if A is not A, and B is not A, not even in our perturbing reality, we thus face the "question" that the enemy provides in its external form. The "question" we are speaking about, which is always made up of a material and spiritual history, connects A to B or enemies to each other. "Our own personal question" is neither completely internal to the relationship, nor external. It is our own question understood through the enemy. But we understand it only because the enemy gives it a historical significance.

Now we must ask: "Who is this enemy pursuing us and being pursued by us to the same end, and to what end are we driven by him?" To reply we must discover—according to Schmitt—who is the one offering himself for a historical succession. At the beginning of the Christian era, the significance of imperial political power was to hold back the destruction of the earth. In the present, in many different, contradictory and concealed ways, it is still the historical succession that hints at the real objective and at the task of political power. This task justifies the power as being sacrificial and reparative—in a word, *katechontic* in the meaning of Saint Paul and Schmitt (as the force that holds back the end). Nevertheless, according to Girard, at the end of this era, the increase of mutual violence, never focusing on an object, leaves us no other choice but to abandon the mimetic way of living or suffer the Apocalypse.

In *Battling to the End*, the aforementioned situation is the theme of Girard's historical inquiry. The tragic, inescapable double bind in the relationship of Clausewitz to Napoleon demonstrates that the enemy is at the same time an obstacle and an attractive model. Thus, in this exemplary case the imitative desire leads to its own acceleration, always trailing its model, rapidly propagating the scandal of rivalry's imitation. In this way Girard interprets the European passage from traditional war ("war within forms") to the "escalation of war," which follows what he calls the "law of the duel,"¹³ the internal metaphysical law determining both military strategy as well as mimetic strategies of desire.

Both before and after Napoleon, however, there are many instances of "every man and every community's ineradicable need for legitimization." This is the authentic medium of succession in the authority and inheritance of individuals, communities, and states.¹⁴ Consequently, we should consider

the “need for legitimization” as the real domain or the existential basis, which always exists whenever rivalries mature, even the most foolish ones—and also whenever deification of the model or mortal fighting against the rival becomes an essential part of political relations.

In conclusion, while trying to obtain the answer to our own question from the enemy, two more critical questions emerge. Is the “double bind of desire” creative or destructive to political identities? And, can we think of imitation as being separate from “every man and every community’s ineradicable need for legitimization,” or is this need precisely our own personal question?

NOTES

1. Mimetic anthropology states that human learning (as well as animal learning) rests upon the imitation of acquired behaviors, although natural deficiencies, biological immaturity, and, above all, the imitative power of hominids have strongly influenced the increase of *intra speciem* mimetism.
2. In the wake of G. Bateson’s theory, Girard emphasizes the “double bind” in the emotional relationship to the model. It arises when the imitator is, simultaneously, attracted and rejected by the model in an opposite injunction: “Imitate me” and suddenly “Do not imitate me.” Here stands the contradiction of the message that makes the eager imitator follow the model through the humiliating defeat of the double bind desire. On “double bind” and imitation, see R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris, France: Grasset, 1978).
3. In his recent work, *Achéver Clausewitz*, Girard rethinks the institutional dimension of “external mediation” and claims that imitation of the model can only be resolved and must be resolved by an “inner conversion” (e.g., Friedrich Hölderlin). According to Girard, in our present time, no external mediation can work against the automatic escalation of conflict. See Girard, *Achéver Clausewitz* (Paris, France: Carnets Nord, 2007); English translation. Girard, *Battling to the End* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 2010).
4. In relation to Alexis de Tocqueville and the nature of democracy, Pierre Manent explains: “Separated from the influences of others, democratic man has no access to things themselves, because in order to know things, he has to go outside himself, and this is something only another person can teach well. *The changes in the relations of men change the relations of men to things.*” Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville and the Nature of Democracy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 40.
5. Matthew 5.29, 18.9; Mark 9.47; Romans 14.13.
6. See also Romans 9.32–33.
7. We tend to dwell on the scandals that we constitute for each other, whether slight or serious, but we can free ourselves from them by transferring “the thorn” to someone who is close to us. “The transfer of the thorn” is felt as a liberation by the sender, while for the recipient it is perceived as an injustice. The eloquent symbol used by Elias Canetti

well describes the effort to free oneself from the double bind that ties the imitator to the model, using the classical substitutive mode.

8. In particular, Blumenberg thinks of the role reversal between the Catholic Church and the Modern State as “a category of historical injustice.” See also Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology II* (Malvern, MA: Polity Press, 2008).
9. In this way we understand why Girard proclaims himself a super Darwinian thinker and an apocalyptic Christian.
10. See Schmitt, *Political Theology II*.
11. “Der Feind ist unsere eigene Frage als Gestalt. Und er wird uns, wir ihn zum selben Ende hetzen,” T. Däubler, *Hymne an Italien*, (3 Auflage) (Leipzig, Germany: Insel Verlag, 1924), S. 65–66, quoted by C. Schmitt in *Glossarium* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 25.12.48; See also C. Schmitt, *Ex Captivitate Salus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2002).
12. See Pavel Aleksandrovich Florenskii, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 553.
13. See R. Girard, *Battling to the End*, op. cit., 20 ss.; see also Girard, Achever Clausewitz, 32.
14. See C. Schmitt, “Clausewitz als politischer Denker. Bemerkungen und Hinweise,” in *Der Staat* 6 (1967).

