

# René Girard's Fundamental Anthropology

Antun Pavešković

Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute for the History of Croatian Literature, Theater and Music, Zagreb, Croatia

## ABSTRACT

*As a social science cultural anthropology shares the problems of all preparadigmatic sciences. Cultural anthropology textbooks primarily aim to overcome the traditional division to natural and social sciences, and they see anthropology as an ideal space for uniting the two. However, this aspiration does not remove doubts about the subject and methods of cultural anthropology. René Girard, a French-American theoretician, tried to solve the aporias of the science about man by deliberating on the origin of man and his culture. For that purpose, he created so-called fundamental anthropology, whose basic theoretic idea is the mimeticity of a human being resulting by violence. By repressing the true nature of the so-called founding murder, and by its ritualization, a man defers his violence and creates culture. Girard's inspiring theory, though widely accepted, is still not completely recognized among professional anthropologists. However, all prerequisites for that have been created, and this short review endeavors to provide evidence for that.*

**Key words:** anthropology, science, culture, mimetic, violence, ritual, religion

## Introduction

A popular article (*Merriam-Webster dictionary*) offers two definitions of anthropology: 1) the science of human beings; especially: the study of human beings and their ancestors through time and space and in relation to physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture, and 2) theology dealing with the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings<sup>1</sup> This or any other current and serious definition of anthropology always primarily emphasizes that it is a science. But, what is science?

The book by Thomas S. Kuhn entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>2</sup> a valuable contribution to epistemology, in spite of the traditional concept of scientific development through progressive accumulation of scientific facts, proves that the novelty in science is brought by a paradigm shift, i.e. by new interpretation of facts. A scientific paradigm is an achievement sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity, but simultaneously sufficiently open-ended to leave different kinds of problems open for a redefined group of practitioners to resolve (p. 18).<sup>2</sup> By its nature, a paradigm is the accepted model for, or the pattern of scientific procedure.<sup>2</sup> A change of paradigm is a revolution in which there is rejection of a scientific theory or the paradigm once respected by the community. Before the revolution – but also after it – there is so-called »normal science,« i.e. research firmly based

upon one or more past scientific achievements; achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice (p. 23).<sup>2</sup> Normal science often suppresses fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitment.<sup>2</sup> Yuri Mikhailovich Lotman,<sup>a</sup> a theoretician of culture, literary researcher and semiotician, came to concurring conclusions some thirty years after Kuhn.<sup>3</sup>

Biomedical research claiming to be anthropology can be considered paradigmatic; not as per nature of anthropology (that is of everything nowadays called anthropology), but as per fact that biomedical disciplines, considering their belonging to natural sciences, are paradigmatic. Unlike such research, cultural anthropology may in principle be classified to pre-paradigmatic sciences.<sup>b</sup> Ethnology, a discipline very close to cultural anthropology, would be the study of a culture from a comparative or historic point of view, using ethnographic depictions. By defining an ethnologist as an ethnographer who studies a human

<sup>a</sup> Lotman's terms »explosion« and »culture« correspond in a slightly different theoretical context to Kuhn's terms »change of paradigm« and »normal science«

<sup>b</sup> This should not include the sciences like linguistics or archeology that are currently usurped by anthropology, as they have already before this »adoption« gained the status of sciences with a clear methodology and contents, and also with a clear expectation of what a research can provide to them.

culture by participating in it (p 14),<sup>4</sup> and an anthropologist as a scientist whose holistic perspective gives a wider insight into any specialized knowledge,<sup>5</sup> we have done nothing but multiply the *aporias*.

Manuals on cultural anthropology mostly persevere to overcome the traditional division to natural and social, i.e. humanistic sciences: »Although natural and humanistic sciences are often considered to be approaches to knowledge that are mutually exclusive, in anthropology they are united. (p 27)«<sup>4</sup> However, the fact that today there is also philosophic anthropology, anthropology of politics, literary anthropology, anthropology of religion, etc., serves as proof that the subject and methodology of cultural anthropology are still quite hazy. Additional evidence for that is a statement published in a relevant almanac on the anthropology of politics: »What gives political anthropology its vitality«<sup>5</sup> is the complex play of field research with ethnography, ethnography with theory, and theory with critique. (p 1)«<sup>6</sup>

### Girard's fundamental anthropology

René Girard (1923–2015, (full name: René Noël Théophile Girard), an extremely influential French-American theoretician, attempted to solve the *aporias* of the subject and the methods of anthropology by deliberating on the origin of man – not biological, not of the man as species, but of the man as a phenomenon with a specific culture, different and unique in our entire known universe.<sup>4</sup> His professional biography is not a typical one. (p. 1–6)<sup>7</sup> He graduated as an archivist-paleographer, i.e., a specialist in medieval studies, and in 1947 he had an opportunity to spend a year in the United States. The year turned into almost 70 years. He matriculated at Indiana University in history, where he received his Ph.D. (p. 1)<sup>7</sup> During his stay in Indiana, he was asked to offer courses in literature that he had never read. It was his shift to literature and interdisciplinary research (p. 27).<sup>4</sup> He spent the rest of his career at numerous American universities: Duke University, Johns Hopkins University (twice), State University of New York at Buffalo, and finally at Stanford University.<sup>8</sup> On March 17, 2005 he was elected to the *Académie française*.

Let us briefly cover the directions in the development of his thought. He began with the thematic analysis of great literary works and the fundamental relations in them.<sup>8</sup> He analyzed Proust<sup>9</sup> and Dostoyevsky.<sup>10</sup> Immediately after that, he published one of his two crucial works:<sup>f</sup> *La Violence et le Sacré*.<sup>11</sup> That book represents the completion of his

former work. It begins with the analysis of the myth of Oedipus, myth itself being both the traditional narration, and a literary form.<sup>12</sup> His definitive turnaround to the reflections summarized by this book began in 1966 when he, together with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, organized an international conference »The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man«<sup>8</sup> at Johns Hopkins University. A crucial moment was his meeting with Derrida,<sup>h</sup> as he found Derrida's subsequent essay »La pharmacie de Platon« to be particularly significant. Girard transferred the *pharmakos*, or scapegoat aspect of Derrida's analysis of writing/poison from language and intertextuality, into history and actual social existence. (p. 2)<sup>7</sup>

The scapegoat is the outcome of another phenomenon – violence. In one of his subsequent books, by thematizing violence Girard formulates the thesis that will be elaborated by his student Eric Lawrence Gans: of all the threats posed to humanity, humanity itself is the most abominable one, and it is the only real threat to itself (p. 15–17).<sup>13</sup> Instead of customary approaches to man's violence as the consequence of influences from an imperfect society on the naturally good man, or the perception of man as the only violent species within the pacific animal world, Girard is offering the hypothesis whose key term is *imitation* (p. 15–17).<sup>13</sup> Imitation is the foundation of acquiring the skills necessary for survival. It enables man to adjust to his natural and social environments – the most complex environments assigned to a living being (p. 25).<sup>14</sup>

### Mimetic desire, violence, establishment of society

The complex phenomenon of human culture is possible thanks to the mimetic capacity of the human brain. However, the mimeticity per se is not an instrument of direct conflictless progress of an individual and of humankind – on the contrary! Mimeticity enables learning that comprises the existence of an ideal, or a role model from which one can learn. To learn means to acquire a wish, a desire for the thing that the role model desires.<sup>i</sup> The subject moves either in the same world as his model or in a different world. In the latter case, the subject naturally cannot possess what his model desires, and with the model he can establish only an *external mediation* that does not cause any conflicts. If the subject and the model live in the same world, in the same environment, then the model's objects of desire are available to the subject. Consequently, rivalry occurs, and that is a kind of mimetic relation called by Girard an *internal mediation*. Due to physical and psychological proximity of the subject and his model, the in-

<sup>c</sup> That is said with no definition of political anthropology. As if it was understood per se.

<sup>d</sup> That is why his doctrine is sometimes also called fundamental anthropology.

<sup>e</sup> Girard is, therefore, a literary expert without any formal literary-scientific education, and also a theoretician (and an influential one) in the field of cultural anthropology, with no formal anthropological education.

<sup>f</sup> Girard wrote many books, but his study *La Violence et le Sacré* and the book (interview) *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* are crucial for the understanding of his thought.

<sup>g</sup> Participants were Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Lucien Goldman, Jean Hyppolite, Jacques Lacan, Georges Poulet, Tsvetan Todorov, Jean Pierre Vernant, and others.

<sup>h</sup> At the conference, Derrida presented his article »*La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines*« that became famous afterwards.

<sup>i</sup> »Teacher« here does not imply an institutional authority, but a general term for a model pursuant to which, regardless of the nature of the relation, certain knowledge about the world is acquired.

ternal mediation always creates greater symmetry: the subject will tend to imitate his model as much as his model imitates him. Eventually, the subject will become the model of his model, and the imitator will become the imitator of his imitator. One is always moving towards more symmetry, therefore always towards a larger conflict. This is what Girard calls the relation of *doubles*. The object disappears in the heat of the rivalry. The two rivals become more and more concerned with defeating the opponent, rather than obtaining the object, which eventually becomes irrelevant, as it only exists as an excuse in the desperate reciprocity. The rivals become more and more undifferentiated: they become *doubles*. A mimetic crisis is always a crisis of the undifferentiation erupting when the roles of subject and model are reduced to that of rivals. It is the disappearance of the object that makes the crisis possible and strengthens it, and the crisis spreads like contagion in the environment. (p. 62–63)<sup>15</sup>

This general pattern of occurrence of mimetic desire and duplication engendering uncontrolled violence is in primitive communities of hominids that cannot quite be called humans a mortal danger to the survival of both the individuals and the group. Girard's theoretical perspective is »double«: he talks about the violence in general which can then be applied to a historic situation. However, he also talks about violence and the scapegoat as moments of the establishment of human society. The moment of humanization of hominids is the one in which a community spontaneously changes the situation of *all-against-all* violence into a life-saving strategy of *all-against-one* violence. That *one* is the victim, chosen completely by accident, in a primal community, i.e. arbitrarily in already established human communities.

The collective murder of a victim, spontaneously chosen by a primitive community, is at the same time the moment of the founding of *human* community. That is where the term founding murder comes from. »The victim represents the violence of the community, and its subsequent peace as coming from outside itself, as other than its own. In sacralizing the victim, the community turns its violence inside out, and it is just this inversion from effect to cause that (1) affords the possibility of experiencing an inside and an outside, (2) generates for the first time its temporal coordinates of before and after, and (3) generates the very notions of cause and effect, of consequentiality itself. The victim is sacralized for representing the origin of both the community and the destruction of the victim. The sacred is just this quid pro quo, which takes the effect of violence for its cause; the sacred is this misconstruction of its origin by the community. (p. 15)«<sup>16</sup>

### Culture, ritual, religion

Establishment of community is also the establishment of culture, whose task and essence is the deferral of violence.<sup>j</sup> Culture develops through ritual. In order to pre-

vent unpredictable and frequent episodes of mimetic violence, cultures organize acts of planned, controlled, ritualized, mediated violence, set up on precisely determined days. By repeating the same scapegoat mechanism over and over again on substitute victims<sup>k</sup>, ritual in this way becomes a way of learning. Since ritual is the resolution of a mimetic crisis, it always intervenes at the same point of mimetic crisis. Ritual will thus turn into the institution that regulates any sort of crisis, like the crisis of adolescence and the rites of passage, like the crisis of death, which generates funeral rituals, etc.<sup>15</sup> Out of the ritual as the core of religion, culture is developed. That is Girard's key conclusion. It is not religion that is the product of culture; it is culture that is the product of religion. And humanity is the child of religion.

In the center of ritual, there is sacrifice. If we start from the origins of ritual, we always find a victim at the source; a human victim. The victim of the founding murder is truly accidental. The victim's »horrible« characteristics, due to which it was murdered, are the matter of subsequent rationalization. Here Girard does not say precisely that the subsequent victims, those from the era of the already established, humanized society, are not completely arbitrary. They are innocent, but they have certain characteristics that predestine them as victims. In the situation of mimetic violence that tends to resolution, the persecutor is the most important, and the way in which he/they chooses/chose the victim. »Sickness, madness, genetic deformities, accidental injuries, and even disabilities in general tend to polarize persecutors. We need only to look around or within to understand the universality. Even today people cannot control momentary recoil from physical abnormality. (p. 18)«<sup>17</sup> In the already established human societies, the double identity of the victim is also important: the victim is a member of the society, and a stranger. The most suitable victims are children, being still the non-included part of the society, or the newcomers, with no blood relations within a group, that is all those individuals whose death, most importantly, will not start the chain of revenge. Primitive cultures prevent revenge by ritual acts; developed ones do that by institutionalization of justice<sup>11</sup> A juridical system, impersonal and thus impartial, is more reliable than the ritual because the judgement of the perpetrator, and the punishment, definitely annihilate revenge, while ritual, as well as unanimous murder, can always turn into another cycle of violence.<sup>11</sup>

The not in the least accidental title *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*<sup>e</sup> suggests one important truth: the development of society is not based only on the prohibition of violence and of all actions and situations that can lead to violence, but also on the man's constant concealment of his own violence from himself. That is the purpose of scapegoats, the purpose of ritual, of social pro-

<sup>j</sup> Eric Lawrence Gans will reformulate this thesis into the original hypothesis of generative anthropology: Deferral of violence by representation.

<sup>k</sup> First it is the matter of substitutional victims, then a victim becomes symbolic – first an animal, then maybe a thing, etc.

<sup>e</sup> English translation: Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World.

hibitions, of religions, especially the primitive ones; most of all of the purpose myths. Girard sees all myths as persecution texts of the same or very similar structure (p. 14),<sup>18</sup> whose strategies of victim persecution are also inherited by a whole range of subsequent texts, and are used also in the situations of pogrom and lynch, all the way to current days. The strategy of mythical and post-mythical proceeding covers primarily the nature of the founding murder.<sup>19</sup> Even here there is no clear distinction between the founding murder in the primal community and the murder of a scapegoat in more developed societies. As opposed to the latter, a significant effect of the founding murder in a primitive community is the transformation of the victim into the holy one – its divinization. It is an unconscious, collective, and momentary act that appeared as a consequence of projecting the momentary appeasement of chaotic violence into the victim itself.

### Conclusion: idea of praxis and Christianity

According to Girard, the logic of a large number of persecution texts and proceedings is interrupted by the historic mission of Christianity. Its central figure, Jesus Christ, by his own sacrifice reveals to the people the profoundly sinful and criminal nature of the scapegoat mechanism. The latter thesis, along with the fact that Girard declared himself as a practicing believer, is the reason why modern Catholic theology has embraced his doctrine. Considering this, it needs to be emphasized that his two fundamental books, *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978)<sup>m</sup> differ. In the first one he speaks primarily of the mythical patterns of the scapegoat mechanism and the duality of the cursed and the sacred, as well as of the divinization of the scapegoat.

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In the second one, he significantly extends the subject matter and explains in details his view of Christianity as the denunciation of the persecution and mythical logic.

In conclusion, it can be said that from Marx on, Girard's is the most significant attempt of deliberating and resuming the praxis. Marx put his thought to the service of revolution. Girard put his to the service of resuming the spirit of Christianity as the only guarantee for the protection against chaotic violence. Why does Girard's thought either attract or reject, with no third receptive option? The secret is in the fact that he moves a concrete phenomenon from the field of text production into the production of reality. Reality is no longer interpreted symbolically, and symbols are turned into signs that conceal the real nature of reality. One part of theoretical community find this model obnoxious and strange, especially as its members feel the danger of the replacement of »pure« theory with »impure« practice. The others like precisely the fact that this break into reality is a kind of escape, in Freudian terms, from »the uneasiness in culture«. If cultural anthropology is a science of culture, and the analysis of culture is not an experimental science in search of law, but interpretative science in search of a meaning,<sup>20</sup> then we agree that Girard's thought is a significant contribution to the interpretation of culture. At this moment, it possesses only the assumptions for a revolutionary change of paradigm. The academic community respects it, although it remains in general skeptical towards it, partly also because of the psychological refusal of »professionals« to admit an anthropological »amateur« as equal to themselves. The existence of Girardian schools and a large number of Girardians today, serves as a proof of the notable influence of this theoretician of culture (p. 42–45).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>m</sup> I could have taken most of the citations from these two books. However, as in the majority of his books he mostly variates the thesis formulated in aforementioned books, I used that fact so that I can draw attention to at least one part of his rich bibliography.

A. Pavešković

Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute for the History of Croatian Literature, Theater and Music, Opatička 18, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia

e-mail: apav@hazu.hr

## **FUNDAMENTALNA ANTROPOLOGIJA RENÉA GIRARDA**

### **SAŽETAK**

*Kao društvena znanost kulturna antropologija dijeli probleme svih predparadigmatskih znanosti. Priručnici iz kulturne antropologije prvenstveno teže prevladavanju tradicionalne podjele između prirodnih i društvenih znanosti, predočavajući antropologiju kao idealan prostor za njihovo objedinjavanje. Ova težnja, međutim, ne uklanja dvojbe o predmetu i metodama kulturne antropologije. René Girard, francusko-američki teoretičar, nastojao je razriješiti aporije znanosti o čovjeku promišljanjem o porijeklu čovjeka i njegove kulture. U tu svrhu izgradio je tzv. fundamentalnu antropologiju, čiji teorijski temelj predstavlja mimetičnost ljudskog bića koja proizlazi iz nasilja. Potiskivanjem prave prirode tzv. prvotnog ubojstva i njegovom ritualizacijom, čovjek zatamljuje svoje nasilje i stvara kulturu. Iako široko prihvaćena, Girardova inspirativna teorija još nije potpuno prepoznata među antropolozima. Ipak, za to su stvoreni svi preduvjeti, na što ovaj kratak pregled nastoji ukazati.*

