

THE ROLE OF ECONOMY AND ART IN THE SOCIAL REGULATION OF VIOLENCE

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Abstract: The regulation of the violence in the society was problematized in several of Rene Girard's important works. Girard based his theory mostly on the detailed analysis of literary works but the results spurred attention within the wider academic circles. His claim is that the great literary and mythological texts cover up the truth about the human nature and the way the violence was regulated in the society. The hidden truth is anthropological in nature: it veils the true nature of the human desire. The anthropological essence of man lies in his tendency to possess the world. This tendency is deeply rooted in his desires and needs. Since his desires are unconscious, man has no contact with the reality of his needs and the objects of the desire. Man, simply does not know what he wants and his desires are, as Lacan has truculently pointed out, "the desires of the *other*". The other conversely does not desire man: quite the contrary, the other is completely disinterested about human individual existence. The way to approach the other or the sacred is only through the collective by the way of the utter disrespect for the individual existence. The article attempts to investigate whether the role of this collective suppression of violence is in modern times allocated to the market economy. In addition, the text considers how art reflects on the strategy of the system to utterly suppress the mythological view on violence from its cultural representation.

Keywords: Rene Girard, Michel Serres, sacrifice, scapegoat, sacred object, market economy

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF THE COLLECTIVE

The purpose of this investigation is to reflect on the paradoxical role of violence in the creation and organization of human societies. This certainly asks for a strict anthropological approach but our view is that the philosophical and economic parallel may shed new light on this social phenomenon. The collective is organized on the basis of the provocation and then the systematic regulation of the violence. Violence is both a system necessity and the axis that makes the existence of the society possible. And though the violence starts at the individual level it takes its complete form at the level of the collective. Every violent act starts with the individual: *I don't know what I want but I want it now!* Rene Girard claims that being unable to define his desires, man learns by *mimesis*: on a strictly practical level his consciousness copies the desires of other people so that he basically desires other's desires. At first, he admires others since they relieve him from the impossible task of having to deal with the nature of his own desires. Others focus his energy towards the acquisition of certain objects and develop his capacity for the organization and work towards the fulfilment of his desires. But the problem arises when the unpleasant triad between him, the other and the object of the desire is formed. Soon the admired other becomes an obstacle that blocks the acquisition of the object: the rivalry begins. The other is now hated and it has to be removed from the system. Hence the violence.

Girard does not support Hobbesian perspective of all at war against each other. He believes that the societies have developed a collective system that prevents the all-out outburst of violence. Once the violence threatens the very existence of the society it has to be purified from the well-being of the collective through the creation of the quasi object. Girard argues that, "blood sacrifice is at the origin of every archaic society. The logic of sacrifice follows the mechanism inherent in mimetic behaviour. Humans are mimetic creatures; they copy each other. When they copy each other's desires, they become conflictual when the objects desired cannot be shared. Beyond a certain threshold, perhaps simply beyond a certain size population, human groups cannot restore peace through dominance patterns after conflict breaks out. Brute power and intimidation can only carry so far."

In principal, the sacred object (or the quasi object in Serres) is used to divert the negative energy of the violence towards it. The Hobbsean "all against all" got inverted into "all against one." For Girard the scapegoating mechanism is economical in nature, "Sacrifice formalizes, commemorates the spontaneous outbreak and resolution of runaway violence, economizing it. For the survival of the group, the best, final score is all against one."

2. THE SACRED OBJECT AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The invention and the development of the sacred or quasi object as a way of channelling the violence away from the larger community marked the whole human history. Girard notes that, “sacrifice has the last word of violence, spoken against a scapegoat whose side no one takes.” The quasi object possesses an enormous power for the society since its circulation protects the collective from dissolution. In order to do so, the quasi object must carry multivalued dimension as its main characteristic: it should be similar to a joker that can be deployed at any position and can channel the game to all the possible directions. Throughout human history there were several multivalued quasi objects that regulated the inner violence and made possible the very existence of the collective.

The sacrifice of an innocent man or the hero in the myths was based on the logic of doing lesser evil to protect the eruption of a greater one - the outbreak of uncontrollable violence that will affect the existence of the whole communities and even nation and races. According to Serres, the introduction of the religion, the wars and the economy is a reflection of the additional embellishment of the organizing principle for the prevention of violence. The quasi objects changed respectively: instead of scapegoat it was the God himself that got sacrificed in order to appease the violent rage of the society; his sacred items (the Grail, the cloth, the icons) became the quasi objects of the religious order. But the most important relic, specifically designed to regulate the violence, was the Bible itself. Its ten commandments directly address the need to act preemptively in regards to violence. For Girard, the Bible is the first anthropological text as, “religious taboo and prohibition function to avoid rivalry, and wherever possible take retribution out of the hands of the accusers, the aggrieved.” In other words, religion prevents the further outburst of violence on the side of the family of the victims. The Bible, and the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus is designed to permanently put an end to the viscous circles of hostilities. In that respect, the Bible breaks the mythical tradition of scapegoating. Girard says, “Myth is a narrative centered in [violent] scapegoat events.” The Christian tradition and the story of Jesus he claims, is an organized effort to redirect human cultures from producing further scapegoats and inflicting pain on innocent victims.

The religious principle did not stop violence, though. On the contrary, religion, up to these days, has been even used as an excuse for more and more violence. The principle of war was, in a way, a supplement to the religious organization of violence. The war temporarily allowed for the outbreak of hostilities by taking the usual scapegoat (the neighbour, the different race, ethnicity or religion) as an excuse. The principle of war has its own quasi object: Serres calls it a *stake*, or all the honours, the glory and the prestige one gets by defeating the enemy at war. When combined with the religious quasi object, the stake becomes a *fetish* - something one is ready to die acquiring. That could be a weapon or a medal or a simple enemy flag. Girard was certainly aware of the limitation of his anthropological view on religion. He states, “I certainly do not believe that the Bible gives us a political recipe for escaping violence and turning the world into a utopia. Rather, the Bible discloses certain truths about violence, which the readers are free to use as they see fit. So it is possible that the Bible can make many people more violent...”

3. THE POLITICS OF ART: BETWEEN THE ETHICS AND THE AESTHETICS

Following Girard's traces of investigation we may easily point to several artistic expressions that position the role of sacrifice in the human societies. Peter Breughel might be the perfect example. By all accounts he was a controversial painter. Nowadays, much of his art is debated not only among art critics alone but among philosophers, social theoreticians and anthropologists. His paintings uncannily comment on certain paradoxical aspects of the human societies. As with Velasquez, he became famous for the *blind spots* in his paintings – perceptual incoherences that destabilize the viewer's need for the representational clarity.

The poet Winston Hugh Auden wrote one of his most memorable songs at Brussels's *Musee des Beau Arts* where Breughel's *The Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, is permanently exhibited. To Auden, the mastery of Breughel was to point out the marginalization of the suffering in the everyday life of the humans. His poem initially describes a painting of the unknown painter that honours the most revered religious event - the birth of Christ. What he noticed is that at the corners, at some “untidy spot”, the profanity of the everyday existence seems to contradict the solemnity of the blessed birth. The scene is profoundly disturbing: while children were carelessly playing in the wood, the animals were performing their animal functions (shitting, protecting themselves from insects). Somehow, a birth of the Messiah means nothing to them. The second stanza is devoted to Breughel's painting. To Auden, it is even more radical in its presentation as it openly reveals the fact that people seems not to care about misfortunes of others. While Icarus is falling from the sky, the shepherd, the fisherman and the ploughman carried on their usual daily routine. Another scene in the painting depicts further lack of empathy among humans. Being busy to deliver goods to make profit, the commercial ship nearby, that witnessed the tragedy, does not bother with the boy's misfortune. Even the events that are significant for the destiny of the humankind in general (the birth and death of Jesus and the mythological story of Icarus) are presented as peripheral. The basic truth about human condition is that being busy with their life, the children, the animals, the adults and the nature alike are not especially moved by the

sacrifices that appear right in front of their eyes. The perception of the humans is limited to the preservation of their own existence. It takes the historical distance for the effects of the great events to be properly accounted for in the collective memory.

The question is whether this is still the case in the modern technological time we are living now. After all, we have the sense of time and space completely different than the Renaissance man: we know and evaluate the quality of the events and its significance much faster now: does that mean that we are now able to separate and be aware of the miracles that might appear among the daily routines of all of us? The answer is regrettably, no! We are utterly oblivious to the sufferings and all the good and the bad events that are surrounding us the same way as Auden was oblivious to the rise of Hitler at the end of the 30s. There is no difference between Auden sprawling dully on the hallways of the Brussels's museum and the ignorance of Neville Chamberlain who believed Hitler could be contained by a piece of paper.

Erika Goble makes a different parallel in regards to Breughel's painting. Instead of Auden's ethical stance she looks at the painting from the aesthetic standpoint. She uses as an example the rendering of Breughel's painting by the famous Italian movie director Dario Argento in his movie – *The Stendhal Syndrome*. The approach is an old one. She uses the Romantic concept of *sublime* to explicate the most important scene of the movie when the main protagonist, allegedly suffering from Stendhal Syndrome plunges into Breughel's painting, losing consciousness in the process. For Goble, this is a clear sign of the workings of the sublime in art. The sublime - as a feeling of extreme pleasure and extreme awe at the same time - was discussed by Kant in relation to the Romantic poetry. However, Gable and possibly Argento believe that this feeling of complete loss of self is typical for all ages. Gable explains the sublime experience as something uncommon, inexplicable and undetermined. The experience is always individual so there is no way to use language as a collective tool to describe its effect. She goes on to say that while mass of people can share the experience of something that is beautiful in the work of art, the similar report is impossible when experiencing the sublime. The important thing to note in that respect is that the effect of the sublime is much stronger than the effect of the beautiful, "the sublime appears to challenge us as beauty does not". While the beautiful has some practical purpose as Kant claims, the sublime opens us to the experience of the universe and of the infinite. Being unable to reasonably conceive of such notions, we experience the dizzying factor that actually signals the limits of our understanding. Something invisible is suddenly made visible to us, similarly like when the painter realizes that he is being watched by the picture itself. The visibility of the unknown universe watching us is a frightening experience. For Serres's mentor Bachelard, the sublime opens up the *poetic space of the image* – a revelatory spot, possibly felt only by other artists, or as Gable posits, "Might we understand the experience of the sublime as reverberations of the art object running deep within us?" Later she concludes, "It may be that, when we experience the sublime, it is, in fact, the only time we ever truly see the art object." What makes us afraid of experiencing the sublime is the effect of insignificance of our lives in regard to these magnificent works of artistic ecstasy, or of our individual inadequacy in the face of the enormity of the universe. Gable quotes Schopenhauer on this, "Compared to the sublime, to the art objects themselves, we appear nothing. It is an exaltation beyond our own individuality, a feeling of the sublime."

Aesthetically, this condition is paradoxically very enjoyable for the person experiencing the effect of the sublime. Faced with the insignificance of the self, the viewer is feeling free of the weight of the willing of the being which opens us to the true possibilities of us being true artists of the world. That is why future artists have to undergo this initiating process. But as Breughel depicts in his painting, in order to feel the power of the artistic expression one is left to himself. "It is a solitary journey, where we leave the comfort and certainty of our received notions of art. And like the ploughman, shepherd and angler, those around us may not see our fall or may find it incomprehensible, and they offer no solace."

Alexander Nemerov moves away from the ethical concept of Auden or the aesthetic position of Gable in regards to Breughel. He sees the political strategy of the artist in the *Fall of Icarus*. The politics of Breughel is apparent in the detachment of all the figures in the picture from each other. That for Nemerov is a political act. In a similar manner, Nemerov considers Auden's stance. Seeing that politicians are oblivious to the upcoming catastrophe, Auden himself turns his back on the possibility of changing the world by political means, **"The ploughman is the figure of the poet's turning away from the political world, from its violence and suffering."** For Nemerov the artist is the one who ploughs his own art neglecting the events of the world.

4. CONCLUSION: MARKET ECONOMY AS A MIMESIS OF SACRIFICE

Art in itself cannot and does not devise collective mechanisms that relieve the society from the burden of violence. Quite the contrary: as Auden's poem exquisitely explicates, the role of art lies in its power to represent the failures on the previous modes of the social regulation of the violence – being the mythical scapegoating, or the biblical "love your neighbor" model. That in itself, as Nemerov points out, is a political statement, even though artists

deeply resent any collective political activity. So what are the options left for the collective appeasement of the violent urges in humans? The economical principle of protection from the general violence appears to be not only our last resort but also the most subtle of all. The invention of the value system that had *money* as its quasi object started the processes where all the energy of the population is employed into the cycles of endless production and market struggle. Money regulated the circulation of different fetishes that economists define as *merchandise*. The acquisition of certain fetish objects and the general redirection of the energy towards the abstract worshipping of the power of money were supposed to drain the extra societal energy that might erupt into violence. The economical principle attached a quasi-religious, almost sacred character to the possession of certain objects; at the same time it even advocated different forms of hostilities and violent acts (from the market strife to open wars) as a solid logic to realize its goals. With that logic in mind, Trump's current statement that he attacked Iran violently to prevent the all-out-world-violence makes sense. The Gulf War follows the economic logic of scavenging foreign lands to obtain free energy. But at the same time, it is draining the surplus violent energy from the population in the West, using the proven mix - a scapegoating system (Iran as a quasi object) and religious scriptures treated as a fetish object. All in the name of the end of violence in the world.

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