

# Interview with René Girard

## René Girard with Markus Müller

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**Q:** Prof. Girard, the forthcoming issue of *Anthropoetics* is devoted to your work and I would like to take the opportunity of this interview to establish a dialogue between your work and **Generative Anthropology**. Let me start with what one could call a basic definition of **GA**: “The deferral of violence through representation”. This definition brings together in a unique way key elements of modern thinking: the notion of violence, which is central to your work, and deferral, an essential Derridean concept. **GA**, finally, focuses on representation as a paradoxical tool which not only defines the human but also proposes a means to defer violence. How do you evaluate this new way of thinking?

**A:** I evaluate it positively. I think the differences between Eric and myself are much less important than the similarities. There are many essential ideas in **GA**: the idea of the originary scene and the deferral of violence are important concepts to me. However, the main difference is that, from my perspective, there is a missing link in **GA** as conceived by Eric. I have great admiration for his intellectual power, you know, for his ability to define problems. He has a first class philosophical mind which is very unusual in departments of French, it’s very unusual in departments of philosophy as well. It is especially remarkable because, as far as I know, he had no formal training in philosophy. There is real power and authority in what he says, so my criticism of him will always be subordinate to my admiration.

So, what do I mean by missing link? Representation is essential and I think that Eric is right to say that I have not talked enough about these problems. You know, my whole idea of representation, which is already present in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, is treated in a very cursory fashion because it played a minor role in my thinking at the time and, curiously, it is one of the aspects of that work which has provoked the greatest amount of comments and interest. So, I agree that I have neglected up to a point the problem of representation. But to me the problem of representation is second to the sacred. Eric is a philosopher and he likes what he calls minimal thinking which is really the same thing as what scientists call the elegance of real theory. I like all this but he is not enough of an ethnologist, to my taste, in his version of GA.

It seems to me that his version resembles too much that of social contract theorists because the deferral is a free and deliberate decision on the part of both individuals, it’s a mutual

agreement. In my view the sacrificial crisis is a mimetic escalation and it is of such a nature that it takes a tremendous shock, something tremendously violent itself, to interrupt the scapegoat mechanism. And the scapegoat mechanism, in order to be effective, must be *une grande chose*, in other words people must really project their tensions and aggressions against the victim.

**Q:** Sorry if I interrupt you here. You mean to say that scapegoating cannot be done effectively if we are conscious of it?

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**A:** Exactly, there is no such thing as conscious scapegoating. Conscious scapegoating is a modern parody of this scapegoating which is of the order of propaganda, because it implies prior representation. But for me the first representation is really the sacred because if scapegoating works, that is, if you are not aware of the projection against the victim and if the scapegoating is unanimous, if the mimetic impulse is rigorous enough to make it unanimous, which may happen only after a great deal of violence and after a phase of what I would call partial scapegoatings... I think that **Shakespeare** has something to say about that in *Julius Caesar*. You know there is the phase of the conspiracy against Caesar and the various factions fighting each other that culminates in civil war. It's only at the end that you have a complete and unanimous scapegoating. To make a long story short, the first representations to me would be false representations of scapegoating, which are the **sacred**. And scapegoating really means that we are genuinely reconciled. We are reconciled by what or by whom? The only possible answer, if you do understand scapegoating as genuine, is that we must be reconciled by that same **victim** that divided us. Therefore this victim is both extremely bad and extremely good. The sacred is right there as a powerful experience that precedes representation but constantly moves towards representation. And at a certain stage which of course cannot be defined it must become a kind of representation.

**Q:** Thus you would disagree with the hypothesis of an originary scene from which language and the sacred emerge simultaneously?

**A:** Moving towards representation would be an extremely slow process and one cannot say anything about it in a concrete historical way, to be sure. It would be a long series of "scenes." Before representation, rituals and prohibitions would be born. What are prohibitions and rituals? Prohibition tells us not to do again what the victim did to put us in trouble; which really means the same as to separate ourselves from each other, to have the people who were divided, move away from each other so that they will not start fighting again. And nevertheless, trouble seems to loom again. If mimetic disruption comes back, our instinct will tell us to do again what the sacred has done to save us, which is to kill the scapegoat. Therefore it would be the force of substitution of immolating another victim

instead of the first. But the relationship of this process with representation is not one that can be defined in a clear-cut way. This process would be one that moves towards representation of the sacred, towards the definition of the ritual as ritual and of prohibition as prohibition. But this process would already begin prior to representation, you see, because it is directly produced by the experience of the misunderstood scapegoat. The misunderstood scapegoat must lead to separation and at the same time to repetition of the scapegoat mechanism for the purpose of avoiding another crisis.

Proof that ritual does this lies in the fact that it begins with a mock crisis; in other words, it tries to reenact the whole process once again, but what interests me most in this genesis of ritual and prohibition is that it does not demand full representation yet, just as the sacred does not demand an understanding of scapegoating. In other words, and this is not clearly defined in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, in some way the process of the sacred and the process that moves towards representation could be one and the same, but we would need countless repetitions of rituals to bring it about and then, of course, the initial representation would be more or less of the same type as Eric's. The question is to defer violence but to me, the idea that the sole consciousness of a violent conflict ahead would be sufficient to cause its deferral is not convincing.

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**Q:** You talk here about the **originary scene** where the participants recognize the sign as the *aborted gesture of appropriation*?

**A:** That is correct. To me there must be more than one originary scene. It is the originary scapegoating which prolongs itself in a process which can be infinitely long in moving from, how should I say, from instinctive ritualization, instinctive prohibition, instinctive separation of the antagonists, which you already find to a certain extent in animals, towards representation. How this process of representation actually occurs, I do not know, I cannot define it, but I think there are many things in Eric's analysis which are very helpful in moving toward that goal. Because ultimately people become aware that ritual and prohibition defer violence. Therefore the tendency to visualize and represent what is going on is getting stronger and stronger. But what I would like to see is a more genetic engine of representation rather than a scene which to me is too philosophical, too conceptual to start with. What I like about the scapegoat genesis is precisely the fact that it avoids the philosophical dilemma of a sudden shift from non-representation to representation. You understand, the main thing here is that ritual and prohibition in their most elementary form *precede* representation. They slowly become representable and finally they are represented. The problem for me with Eric is that he never talks about archaic material; rituals in particular. Ritual, myth and prohibition are interpretable through the scapegoat theory, which I think has never happened before. So everything Eric says rightly in **GA** should be said, I believe, in the context of archaic religion.

**Q:** This focus on archaic ritual and myth in your work and on the modern in **GA** leads me to another question which is that of external and internal mediation. We could say that the ritual and the archaic are the preferred mode of external mediation whereas the modern world is the world of internal mediation. It seems that both forms of mediation have their advantages and disadvantages. Could you elaborate on this?

**A:** Ritual and the archaic are the deferral of violence; religion is the main deferral of violence but the means of this deferral, prohibition and ritual, are not inexhaustible; they tend to wear out, they become useless because they lose their power. This is, by the way, the reason why anthropologists almost never discover the power of ritual; they observed ritual mostly in situations where ritual had lost its power, if only by the fact of their very presence. The few exceptions to this would be situations that we cannot appraise very well, like the very few people who were in a position to observe the **Aztec** culture such as the Spaniard **Bernardino de Sahagún**, for example, who wrote a full account of their rituals.

But let me return to the initial question of **external mediation**. External mediation is a function of society in religious terms, a society in which ritual and prohibition still effectively defer violence. Later on more and more mimetic rivalry comes in and people become more and more disenchanted with their religion and tend to move back into a mimetic crisis, into what I call an internal mediation, the doubles and so forth, but there is always a historical process there. So, archaic religions have a tendency to lose their power and then to renew themselves in a new crisis and a new scapegoat mechanism. In modern history, we can see some of that, but very little, because modern history is influenced by religious systems which move against or disintegrate the scapegoat mechanism for good. For me, these religious systems are primarily **Judaism** and **Christianity**. But to a certain extent all religions move against the sacrificial system, and it can be seen very clearly in India in the great mystical period, or in **Buddhism**, but the process is always less complete, I think, than it is in Judaism and Christianity.

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**Q:** How about the efficiency of external and internal mediation in regard to the deferral of violence. Isn't there the illusion in ritual and external mediation, considering God as an external mediator, that by engaging in rituals violence can be deferred for good from a given society?

**A:** External mediation only solves the problem of violence temporarily and imperfectly from our ethical viewpoint because it solves it with victims, and even with victims it solves it less and less. So, if you look at the beginning of the **Bible** you have the **Cain** and **Abel** story. The murder of Abel is, in fact, the first scapegoat business. If you look carefully it is a collective story and not an individual one. Cain says "Now that I killed my brother everybody will kill me". This "everybody" makes very little sense if you interpret this story

as a dual scene between two brothers. But then you have a law against murder which emerges directly from this first murder: every time Cain will be killed, the killer will be killed seven times. In other words you have something that regulates vengeance. Seven victims is not infinite vengeance, but if you continue in the story you can see that the successors of Cain become more and more violent and need more and more victims. There is the song of Lamech saying: Cain killed seven times and I killed seven times seven and ultimately it ends in another crisis which is the big flood.

At the beginning of the Bible you have the Adam and Eve story which is a story of mimetic desire because desire never comes from the subject but always from someone else. Eve's desire is inspired by the serpent, Adam's desire is suggested by Eve. The story of Adam and Eve is obviously a mimetic story. When God asks them what has happened, Adam says it was Eve's fault and Eve's says it was the serpent's fault; and they are not completely wrong in the sense that they both borrowed their desire from someone else. But then you have Cain and Abel, the real consequences of this mimetic desire which is the scapegoat mechanism and the foundation of the first culture. Then you have this first culture, which, bad as it is: seven killings for one, gets worse and worse until it collapses entirely in the great flood.

**Q:** Your comment on the Cain and Abel story as the real consequence of the Adam and Eve story emphasizes this problem of external and internal mediation. The intriguing aspect of internal mediation is precisely the fact that there is no external mediator, the serpent, Satan, God, that can be blamed.

**A:** External mediation means that there is a transcendence and that the rules of the culture are respected.

**Q:** Why is there a shift from external to internal mediation and how does this shift occur?

**A:** In internal mediation, you move towards more and more violence and then ultimately, in archaic societies, you have another scapegoat business and the rebeginning of the culture. What ancient cultures, especially the Hindus and the pre-Socratics, call the *eternal return*, for me is a series of cycles of the scapegoat mechanism.

**Q:** Could we talk about modern society where we do not have, or try to move away from, such rituals and more towards internal mediation?

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**A:** Because we have no absolute way to get rid of internal mediation or mimetic rivalry, we have more and more mimetic rivalry but, at the same time, we have abstention from mimetic rivalry because the biblical influence is even more positive than negative. We live in a world where mimetic crises are always threatening but they don't run away in the sense that they do in archaic societies. We have wars and all sorts of conflicts which should be studied

mimetically, and we are trying to prevent them without resorting to too much victimage, but this rejection does not go without saying, of course, and implies a lot of violence which are the vicissitudes of history that Eric sees just as clearly as anyone else.

**Q:** Let me talk a bit about your book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. At the end of this book, you talk about **Dostoevsky's** *Underground Man* who is portrayed as the modern man of resentment. From my reading of these passages in your book, I got the impression that you have a somewhat apocalyptic idea about modernity, about the world of internal mediation.

**A:** Well, that idea is always present, but in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, it is of course very different from the later books because it is a book that precedes the discovery of the scapegoat mechanism and the genesis of religion which is absolutely fundamental to my system. This book is incomplete since it deals only with the modern period; therefore what we have there is a *dérive*, a kind of sliding more and more into the crisis but never completely, never in the sense of the scapegoat mechanism, which would be impossible anyway because the scapegoat mechanism cannot be, by definition, perceived, in the sense that if you are able to perceive it you succumb to it and you become a believer in the guilt of the victim. Therefore the scapegoat mechanism should never be revealed because either people resist it and then there is no scapegoat mechanism, or they succumb to it and then it becomes a unanimous event.

This is the reason why the biblical texts are exceptional. In them you have a little minority, a *remnant*, which victoriously resists the scapegoat mechanism. At the same time, the gospels show you that Jesus's disciples are almost sucked into the scapegoat mechanism. This is the reason why Peter's denial of Jesus is theoretically one of the most important texts, because Peter is himself caught in the scapegoat mechanism. Peter's denial should *not* be read as a reflection on the psychology of Peter, on the personal weakness of Peter, it should be read as the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. We should have no revelation of it since even Peter, the best of the disciples, joins the mob. And this is very different from the death of **Socrates**. Because if you look at the death of Socrates, you will see that the philosopher never succumbs to the scapegoat mechanism. The philosophers always see that Socrates is innocent and always defend him against the city. To me that's the main difference between **Plato**, who is a great religious thinker nevertheless, and the **Gospels**. The supreme paradox of the Gospels is that the revelation should never happen. And therefore Plato's work is not a revelation of the scapegoat mechanism since philosophy is immune to it.

The idea of grace in Christianity or Judaism is precisely that the truth cannot be known by human means because it is always buried by the mechanism of **Satan**. What is the idea of Satan? How can Satan cast out Satan? Satan casts out Satan through the unanimity of scapegoating, which forces absolutely everybody not to see the victim as the scapegoat any more but as the weird combination of guilt and salvation that a primitive god is. Whereas, in Judaism and Christianity, you have a totally different type of God who is not dependent on

the victimage mechanism.

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**Q:** Here the positions of the victimizer and the object of desire and rejection, the victim, are rather clearly defined and stable. This does not seem to be the case in internal mediation, where we can no longer distinguish between victim and pursuer.

**A:** Right, it is a circle. Internal mediation implies what I call double mediation; in other words, the model becomes the imitator of his imitator and the imitator becomes his model of its model; that's what mimetic escalation is. It is a storage of violent energy which tends towards explosion and this explosion takes place all the time, of course. In order for this violence to be deferred, there must be a collective transference against a collective victim that can be completely arbitrary and against whom all tensions are projected, the scapegoat. If all believe in its guilt, the destruction of that victim will leave the community without an enemy. It is this state of being without an enemy, attributed to the victim, which brings about the mystery of the sacred. Because the scapegoat embodies all evil and the next second, it embodies all good, so the sacred would be there and the sacred would be the first to be represented, after a long apprenticeship with prohibitions and rituals.

**Q:** Earlier, you mentioned religion as the most important means for the deferral of violence. One can say that the market system, as it is defined in **GA**, assumes many of the functions of religion in regard to the deferral of violence. What is your opinion in regard to the market's capacity of replacing religion?

**A:** The market and the multiplication of goods should be regarded as part of the sacrificial mechanism. In other words, the message of mimetic rivalry is that we all want the same things, and the market allows us to have the same things. So, the market can be considered a religion, I would say a substitute religion, but one should not overdo it because in its best aspects, the market is not rationally intelligible. But you could say that there are no victims in the market, there are only beneficiaries. People make money, people consume and exchange and so forth but this is not necessarily sacrificial. First, this is questionable; there are many *losers*, many victims. Second, the market is to a certain degree like all sacrificial means and the proof is that it has a limited life span.

Consider for example the people who, at the end of the war would devote their entire activity, their energy to the possession of washing machines, dishwashers, or automobiles—they are no longer satisfied with that, they take it for granted. The market is ignorant as to what we really want or need. Nowadays you hear for example that we need computers, we are not even sure that computers can satisfy our desire in as wide a way as other things but the computers kept the economy going, at least for a while. Therefore the market maybe is more self-sustaining than many other systems but it is not completely so: its efficiency participates in historicity. And there is also a mimetic escalation which has

counterproductive effects for the ecology and all sorts of things. So, I would agree to a certain extent with a positive view of the market but I would say in many respects it's the same old thing and that there is no absolute solution to the problem of man who, however unfashionable it may be to say at this time, yearns for the absolute.

**Q:** At least in principle, the market system implicitly has faith in its endless capability of deferral ....

**A:** .... of renewal

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**Q:** .... of renewal and deferring the potential violence inherent in mimetic desire.

**A:** Yes, at the same time, I don't want to be too pessimistic, but, at this very moment, there are some disturbing aspects in the down-sizing mania, for instance, which bring out the negative aspects of mimetic rivalry. It seems to me that the market, fundamentally, like all modern institutions, is a complex combination of an archaic sacrificial basis combined with aspects of Jewish-Christian revelation and, as you say, its better than anything we had before, and I don't want to sell it short. But at the same time, it constantly gives signs of crisis. So far it has had the ability to renew itself but it has also had moments of great crises which have led to monstrous events. One can see that the totalitarian crises of the 30s and 40s and the whole communist system were in a way problems caused by a collapse of the market and these problems are still with us. Therefore, without denying the theoretical capacity of the market to renew itself, we can have serious doubts about the ease with which it will do it.

**Q:** One point about the market which I consider quite interesting is the fact that it allows the victim to turn its victimary position into a value. **Affirmative Action** would be one example.

**A:** Affirmative Action seems to me to be another sign of the fact that even the mystique of anti-scapegoating can turn into other forms of scapegoating; the main purpose of PC thinking, which is a perversion of Affirmative Action, is not to defend victims but to make victims once again by accusing certain people of being victimizers. Therefore, here again, we are always on the razor's edge but the importance and the relevance of **GA** in regard to these problems is the fact that we can talk about it in a more efficient way than anyone else and in a way that is *economical* and *minimal* in the scene defined by Eric. It enables for us the constant rehashing of first principles which has never been possible before. So I agree with Eric that sooner or later these ideas will be discovered and widely used.

**Q:** I think we still have to say something about the question of scapegoating and the end of history.



**A:** Yes, I read Eric's comments on **Fukuyama** and the end of history. And he says quite rightly that it has very little to do with the end of history as conceived by Hegel because the end of history today would be the result of the violent threat that hangs over humanity. But you see, here we can see that there is a value in talking about religion, of integrating archaic texts on the one hand into our reflection, and Judaic and Christian texts, on the other hand. All these texts include, as you said, an **apocalyptic** dimension. There is apocalypse in our future. And what does apocalypse mean? It means revelation: *apocalypso* means to *open up* and to *show the truth*. But it also means absolute violence, so the apocalypse is a violent revelation and a revelation of violence and immediately you see the relevance of this.

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The religious dimension pushes all mimetic paradoxes to their logical extremes. Most people believe that the apocalyptic dimension of Christianity was just some kind of mad effervescence. But today you can see that this is not true. In societies where the sacrificial protections are gone, certain forms of knowledge become possible, technical knowledge, the world is emptied of magical powers and can be tampered with in a way that was not possible earlier. Therefore the world is under a threat coming from man, which is a total threat, and humanism does not measure up to that threat, has nothing to say about it, is forced to deal with it by using concepts coming from a rationalism for which what we are talking about is unthinkable. And suddenly these concepts that appear completely crazy, like for instance apocalypse, make complete sense in that context. They are in a way the most economical concepts because they show you that the revelation of violence and the nuclear threat are one and the same thing. Therefore they are part of the most economical and efficient thinking that Eric sees rightly, in my view, as the real goal of social science, not the falsifiability principle of **Popper**. When you include religion in the game, far from losing internal coherence, you gain more because you have concepts, like the apocalyptic, which suddenly demonstrate their rationality. We can also show that, far from being a mad fantasy, Satan makes sense if you view him as the mimetic paradox which is on the one hand disorder and violence and on the other hand the scapegoat mechanism and thus the return to order. The Satan of order used to expel the disorderly Satan but cannot do any more. He is *unleashed*. There again, far from displaying insanity, you have a hold of reality which we did not have before.

**Q:** I would like to return for a moment to this question of runaway violence. It is obvious from what you said that we cannot escape from a certain amount of scapegoating violence if we want to avoid an overall war. Given the technological possibilities and the fact that the world is getting smaller and smaller, the threat of escalating mimetic violence seems to be becoming a reality. Do you see any ways of coping with this phenomenon?

**A:** It is difficult to answer your question. There are two main types of runaway violence, at

the individual level and at the collective level. The second kind produces such phenomena as Lebanon, or Bosnia. Political scientists have tried to explain why these things happen, but they do not have the appropriate concepts. Once the escalation has started, nothing can end it; this was especially true in Lebanon. However, the interesting thing about Bosnia so far is the fact that foreign intervention has ended it and foreign intervention is now being accepted by the international community. This is an absolutely new phenomenon. The idea that there can be a military intervention which is not for reasons of imperialism, we do not realize how new that is. For me, that is one of the hopeful elements in the developments of our time and obviously the end of the cold war has something to do with it. I think the end of the cold war was very interesting from the point of view of mimetic violence because it was really the understanding by one or several, probably a quite large group of people, and primarily **Gorbachev** himself, that a certain type of imperialism was outmoded; the competition for territory, the gathering of as many African satellites as possible, meant no increase of power for the Soviet Union. I think that the end of the cold war was the understanding of that, which had never happened before in history.

**Q:** One could argue that the end of the Cold War is the understanding of the mimetic process as these people seem to have realized that a continuation of their mimetic behavior would lead to a global catastrophe. In this regard, the mere threat of violence would have been enough to bring an end at least to this particular crisis. I think that your talk at **UCLA** about religion and the global village went in that direction.

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**A:** Today we have more and more deferral of violence of the kind Eric is talking about. Archaic religion is becoming outmoded. There are remnants of it, there are aspects of collective idolatry but they are prone to cause violence. But this is becoming an archaic phenomenon in our world, and one may hope that Lebanon and Yugoslavia are phenomena that cannot happen in Western Europe or in this country, but I'm not sure.

**Q:** We have talked about external and internal mediation, the scapegoating mechanism and the deferral of violence. At this point, I would like to shift the focus of our discussion towards the question of representation in general and language in particular. **GA** argues that the sign, and consequently language, is born in the originary scene under the threat of violence and I think that **Nietzsche** has an interesting comment in that regard. In an essay called "On Truth and Falsity in their Ultramoral Sense" (1873), Nietzsche says that because humanity wants to live socially and gregariously together, because it wants to avoid the "greatest *bellum omnium contra omnes*," it invents an arbitrary yet binding system of language and consequently also of laws to fix "truth."

**A:** This is a fascinating quote. What bothers me there is what bothers me a little bit with **GA**, as this process implies foresight. It implies thinking and one of the purposes of the

scapegoat business is to have a genesis of culture that makes this completely unnecessary; that it is really a mechanism, you know, that it is a transition between a biological mechanism and culture. All social contracts, in my opinion, are unbelievable. But Nietzsche is an interesting case in regard to questions of scapegoating and victimization. We live in a world where we cannot accuse people directly, we have to accuse accusers, we have to persecute persecutors. So, I would say there is always a perverted Christian problematic inside our conflicts. And I really think that if Nietzsche had the views he had, that combination of extreme insight and complete foolishness, it is that he was the first to react against **PC**. PC was at its beginning, it was nothing compared to what it is today.

Nevertheless, if you read Nietzsche carefully you can see that, from my point of view, he mistakes the caricature of Christianity for the real thing. He sees the origin of Christianity, the idea of all the weak getting together against the strong, as some kind of super PC. This in my view doesn't make any sense, because Nietzsche is blind to the principle of the mob, whereas the early Christians were obviously a small minority fighting the mob. And Nietzsche sees **Dionysus** as the opposite of the mob, the *individual*, whereas it is obvious from **Euripides** and from everything we know, and the most elementary common sense, that Dionysus is the mob, is that *mania*, that homicidal fury of the lynch mob that the tragedy portrays. So he is both the most lucid and the most blind in regard to **GA**. He's a total cultural mystery, he is indispensable because he discovered, I think, the difference between the archaic and the Christian when he said that the latter are *for the victims*, but instead of finding that good in principle, he says it's bad.

**Q:** Do you want to say that you put Nietzsche *on his feet*?

**A:** In a certain way that's what I do, the reversal of Nietzsche. In Nietzsche, there are unpublished passages that say outright that we need human sacrifice. He accuses Christianity of making human sacrifice impossible by defending the victim. This is out in the open in Nietzsche. And it is extremely profound; it is greater than any theologian of the 19th and the 20th century, but it is also the most perverse conception, because to be against PC and to be *for victimization* are two entirely different things. We are against PC because we are against victimization and because it is the most insidious and hypocritical form of victimization. And this is indeed how Nietzsche interpreted Christianity: as **PC**.

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**Q:** Could you elaborate a bit more on the relationship between language and the sacred?

**A:** What Eric says on the subject suits me fine if it is preceded by a long experience of the sacred which is pre-representational. I don't see what you lose by going through the sacred, and the textual gains are enormous, unless, of course, you reject the preeminence of religion for ideological reasons. In my view, our encyclopedia of archaic cults responds to the scapegoat genesis of religion in such a positive way that this possibility cannot be

disregarded. It simply works too well and results present all the specifics that Eric mentions as necessary for a good theory. In addition, this solution provides the drama, or the urgency, which is necessary in order to avoid the unbelievability of social contracts in any form. Once again, I think that Eric's schema is too close to a social contract because violence is deferred from the start. And I think that all religious texts militate against that. You are going to tell me that religious texts are recent texts, even the oldest ones we have but, at the same time, they are much more suggestive than any text of contemporary culture of the scheme which could generate the sacred. The sacred in archaic society is something really dreadful and destructive and dangerous like atomic power on the loose, you see, and in order to have that you need to have the full crisis. Most contemporary anthropologists do not agree, of course, but they have surrendered to nihilism and, sooner or later, young people will realize how sterile and boring the current theoretical stagnation really is.

**Q:** Violence, not only the perspective of it ...

**A:** Right. Because why should this perspective of violence defer the crisis. Its effects are just too great for the lack of drama you have there. The idea of tragedy is very important here; you see, it is not tragic enough to force people into unity.

**Q:** In the originary scene, the designation of the object is also the emergence of the sacred ...

**A:** ... and this object, because it is sacred, is also taboo. This taboo, however, is constantly transgressed in ritual. So, the question is, how can you reconcile the two? With the scapegoat, you can, as there is a double imperative which comes with the scapegoat: do not do what I did to put the culture in trouble, but if and when the culture is in trouble, do again what I did to put the culture out of trouble. Follow the example of my redemptive death and kill me again in order to bring back the peace. I don't see the possibility to get rid of this. My scheme is primarily an interpretation of archaic religion. The birth of language, or the very idea of substitution cannot come unaided. The victim is first a sign when the repetition occurs. So, the victim is a sign of the originary event which is itself the same violence; this is why the victim is sacred. And this victim, if you look at ritual, is very polluted and polluting before the immolation occurs. The immolation transforms its status instantaneously, it becomes holy. The only type of ritual where this is not true is probably some of most archaic rituals, scapegoat rituals properly speaking, where you literally load the dirt onto the victim and then you cast it out. But in classical sacrifice, you can keep the victim because the victim gets worse and worse as you get closer to the killing and the killing makes it edible and transforms it into a good thing. This is, of course, very important for my reading of the sacred because it cannot be a pure fiction, a fabrication. Its universality and its combination of unity and diversity testify to a reality which is never interpreted exactly in the same way but which is always the same in its main outline.

**Q:** We are talking here about the concept of the *sparagmos*, the communal devouring of the sacrificial animal which at one point replaced the human victim?

**A:** Yes, and many similar examples as well. The phenomenon of the *sparagmos* is extremely important as it is tied to representation. In many societies (Greece, Australia) the naming of geographical entities, inside the community, is tied to pieces of the victim. You can see it even in *Phèdre*. When Hippolytus is killed, pieces of his body are scattered here and there and they provide the places where they fall with an identity. It is pretty amazing to find this also in Australia where body pieces of sacred animals or human beings are used for the naming of places and other things.

And of course it is present as well in India, at the most archaic level. You know in India, the holy scriptures of Hinduism are very complex. But it begins with the *Rg-Veda*, and the *Rg-Veda* section 10 #90, the most famous myth of all Indian literature, is the myth of **Purushia**, the primordial man, who was killed by a multitude of sacrificers, holy men and so forth, and from his body the three main castes are born. From his head: the priest, from his chest: the warrior and from his legs: the craftsmen. There again you have the naming not only of local entities but of social units, and you will find that relationship between pieces of the victim and language all over the world. I see the origin of language must be ultimately there. But it must be preceded by pre-human stages in which sacrifice is practiced and prohibition are observed prior to the birth of language.

And this fits neatly with the modern theory of evolution, because one thing we know, one great characteristic of man is what they call **neoteny**, the fact that the human infant is born premature, with an open skull, no hair and a total inability to fend for himself. To keep it alive, therefore, there must be some form of cultural protection, because in the world of mammals, such infants would not survive, they would be destroyed. Therefore there is a reason to believe that in the later stages of human evolution, culture and nature are in constant interaction. The first stages of this interaction must occur prior to language, but they must include forms of sacrifice and prohibition that create a space of non-violence around the mother and the children which make it possible to reach still higher stages of human development. You can postulate as many such stages as are needed. Thus, you can have a transition between ethology and anthropology which removes, I think, all philosophical postulates. The discontinuities would never be of such a nature as to demand some kind of sudden intellectual illumination.

**Q:** One kind of criticism brought up against your work and Eric Gans's **GA** is that both of you are too "practical" in the way you use literature, that there is too much of a purpose. How do you react to this?

**A:** I don't regard myself as a literary critic. Therefore I do not say that the mimetic problem

exhausts literature. I would say that there are many types of literature which are either too mimetically ignorant or too fooled by mimesis in order to be revelatory in any way. And there are other ones which, to a certain extent, are alien to it, such as certain forms of poetry. To me, the objection of literary critics who say *you do not give a full account of literary works* seems irrelevant. Why should all of us give a full account of the literary works we are talking about? If one does cultural theory, one is entitled to discuss only the problems one is interested in. I don't attach much importance to that sort of literary objection because there is something completely artificial and ritualistic in the bad sense about the idea of the total literary critic who is accounting fully for the work of art. This is especially artificial in our present academic world. Let's face the fact, there are many literary critics there, and very few readers. So, we are absolutely free to do what we want because we do not have responsibilities toward the *average reader* who does not exist. In the academic world, we are dialoguing among ourselves. For me, the most important literary text is tragedy, that is Greek tragedy. The most important cultural text is the ensemble formed by man, ritual and prohibition, which cannot be regarded as literary in the usual sense of the word.

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**Q:** This problem of literature leads me to another question. You started out with *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* and then turned to anthropology with *The Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. What caused you to go back to a more traditionally and literarily oriented study in your book on **Shakespeare**?

**A:** When I wrote *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, instead of following the formalist and subjectivist fashion of the time, which is still the fashion of our time, my instinct was more "scientific": I looked for *similarities* among these books and the main similarity that I found was that of **mimetic desire**, mimetic rivalry. I was very impressed by the fact that it was the great literary works which reveal the mimetic problematic in a way which social sciences never discovered. Even philosophy cannot do this and I assume Eric agrees with that. Then I started to read anthropology because I hoped to find something about mimetic desire in it. So I read it avidly, and in this sense there was a purpose to my search. In fact, my work is divided into three stages: the mimetic desire stage which is purely literary, then the archaic religion stage which is that of *Violence and the Sacred*. Finally, there is the Judeo-Christian stage which is *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. The reason I later went to Shakespeare is because in Shakespeare, unlike what happens in the great novels, I found all these stages together. Of course, the critics accuse me of always saying the same things, but Shakespeare has them all. He goes beyond the Greeks in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism.

I'll give you one example. In Greek tragedy, the scapegoat mechanism is always at the end of the play and is never represented on the stage, and that is part of the difference between

tragedy and sacrifice. In *Julius Caesar*, the collective murder of Caesar is treated as the foundational event of the Roman Empire, and it occurs on the stage, at the center of the play. The spotlight is on the murder. And then there are sentences which are really a definition of the founding murder. On the morning of the murder, when one of the conspirators comes to fetch Caesar, to bring him to the Senate, Caesar does not want to go because his wife, who had a dream about his being murdered, had scared him into staying home. But Shakespeare added a reply to the arguments of Caesar's wife against his going and this argument is very strange because it is precisely not that he should not go; instead it says: "From thee great Rome shall suck reviving blood." Therefore, Shakespeare reveals the pride and the vanity of Caesar. The conspirator does not reassure Caesar. He does not say: "You are not going to be killed." Instead he says: "your murder will be the greatest thing that will ever happen to Rome." In Shakespeare you have these amazing insights into generative anthropology which pushed me towards him. You also have definitions of mimetic desire more explicit than anywhere else, such as "To choose love by another's eyes", or "love by hearsay." **Shakespeare** is the most formidable revealer of the whole mimetic cycle of all the writers I know.

**Q:** Wouldn't **Dostoevsky's** *Eternal Husband* reveal the same mimetic desire?

**A:** No doubt, but there you don't find the scapegoat mechanism as a foundational event. If you read **Plutarch** you will see that he is very profound but Shakespeare completes Plutarch in the direction of the founding murder. He also links the founding murder of Caesar to an earlier one, the expulsion of Rome's last king, which was the founding violence of the Republic. Brutus is the descendant of one of these conspirators. This idea reveals Shakespeare's awareness that all great historical forms are rooted in a founding violence.

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**Q:** Professor Girard, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts about **GA** and other related issues with us. Your observations have foregrounded the similarities in essence and the differences in development between your work and Eric Gans's **Generative Anthropology**.