

# Not with a Bang but a Whimper: Muen Shakai and Its Implications

Matthew Taylor

Kinjo Gakuin University

Nagoya, Japan

[taylor@kinjo-u.ac.jp](mailto:taylor@kinjo-u.ac.jp)

## The Unknown Citizen

Before the East Japan earthquake and tsunami and their aftermath overwhelmed the national consciousness of Japan in 2011, the expression “*muen shakai*” (literally “no-relationship society”) had begun to appear in the media as an umbrella term for emerging forms of social isolation. A bleak NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) documentary with that title aired in 2010. It presented a handful of cases in some detail and captured the texture of life among the aging and disconnected. The paradigmatic example was “*muen shi*” (solitary death), in which people died unnoticed, their bodies undiscovered for days or weeks or longer, and no known family or acquaintances to claim the remains, take care of the personal effects, or handle the funeral or interment. An occupation called *tokushu seisou gyousha* (“special cleaning people”) had come into existence with the specific task of clearing out the belongings of the deceased from their vacant living quarters, while the ashes of the dead were interred at Buddhist temples at government expense.

The invisible deaths implied invisible lives: people spending years or even decades with weak or nonexistent ties to any family, friends, or neighbors, getting by with the minimum human interaction required to work, shop, or attend to their needs. *Muen shakai* will seem especially striking in a country known (and not too long ago) for its filial piety and strong social ties. Yet the well-known facts of demographic decline in Japan, as well as other less-known indicators such as the expanding number of single person households, suggest that something like *muen shakai*—whatever new terminology evolves to describe it—will come to permeate more and more of society. That is, Japan is not just a rapidly graying society but in some ways a rapidly disconnecting one, with an increasing percentage of the population that is not just old but living an extremely isolated existence into old age and until death.

W. H. Auden’s indictment of society in “The Unknown Citizen” seems almost quaint by comparison. Written as a parodic epitaph, Auden’s poem famously describes an anonymous man whose dignity has been erased in the sterile, all-encompassing bureaucracy of the modern state. It concludes:

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard. (28-29)

Measured against the real-life subjects in the NHK documentary, however, Auden's fictional Citizen possesses an embarrassment of social riches: He "was popular with his mates and liked a drink" (13), and "was married and added five children to the population" (25). Presumably, the Unknown Citizen died surrounded by family and had a relatively well attended funeral, as well as a headstone in a cemetery. The "unknown" man, in other words, is relatively well known; he dies with a level of social connectedness far exceeding that of the invisible souls inhabiting Japan's *muen shakai*, who are characteristically without a spouse, children, or even marginally close acquaintances. Furthermore, the "faceless bureaucracy" of Japan, rather than effacing the dignity and worth of the deceased in the case of *muen shi*, is the only remaining entity that makes an effort to retrieve whatever might remain of either.

*Muen shakai* merits attention, not just for sake of understanding Japan, but for the sake of understanding the future in general, since much of the rest of the world is facing similar demographic realities, or will sometime within the next several decades. Beyond the numbers, *muen shakai* indicates the texture of life that may begin to prevail in a graying world if social bonds also unravel. Mimetic theory (MT) will be useful and even indispensable in analyzing such social trends. In practice, however, mimetic theory seems wedded to a particular kind of psychosocial relation and a particular kind of eschatological vision, alternating between extreme cataclysmic rivalry on the one hand, and absolute transformative pacifism on the other. Generative anthropology (GA), for its part, largely rejects such apocalyptic thinking in favor of guarded optimism about the future, where the generation of difference stays one step ahead of the backlog of resentment.

A future characterized by demographic decline and social isolation is a scenario that challenges the projections of MT and GA. In the case of MT, *muen shakai* suggests that not all disordered relations are conflictual, and that civilization might end with a whimper rather than a bang. In the case of GA, *muen shakai* suggests that the exchange system might be debilitating, even in the most highly developed of consumer cultures, if its "human capital" is not supported and regenerated. However, these are not deficiencies but rather lacunae in the two "mimetic anthropologies," gaps which exist not from any fundamental deficiency in core assumptions but simply because neither MT nor GA is in the habit of looking at these kinds of problems. If there is a deeper theoretical concern, it is that MT and GA lack a positive anthropology. Human good must mean more, as *muen shakai* emphatically demonstrates, than simply the absence of conflict.

These issues can be canvassed here only in a very broad way, but it is hoped that some contours emerge which might deepen the perspectives of MT and GA. The next section briefly overviews *muen shakai* and associated trends. The third section outlines some of the

challenges that such trends present for MT and GA. The fourth section engages some of these challenges, particularly from the perspective of MT, to show what *muen shakai* might mean in mimetic terms. The final section underscores the need for both MT and GA to flesh out the idea of positive mimesis. I briefly consider efforts in that direction and note an unexpected convergence between MT and GA.

## ***Muen Shakai* and Demographic Trends**

Though the term *muen shakai* is new, this is not the first time social isolation has come into the national spotlight in Japan, and I have had occasion to discuss it in a previous article for *Anthropoetics*. At that time (the millennial decade) the focus of media attention was on social withdrawal among a much younger cohort, reaching particularly exaggerated forms in “school refusal” (children who stopped attending school, typically because of social fears), NEET (young people Not in Employment, Education or Training) and most particularly “*hikikomori*” (literally “pull inside”), shut-ins, predominantly young men or male teenagers, who refused to leave their homes for months or years, and sometimes even barricaded themselves in a particular room.

*Muen shi* (solitary death) is paradigmatic in the same way that *hikikomori* were in the previous decade; both reflect in concentrated form a broader social problem, the fact that human bonds are not just fraying or weakening but disappearing. Many people are disengaging from the fundamental roles that define their place in the community: spouse, parent, neighbor, employee, co-worker, friend, student, classmate, child (since some *hikikomori* are attempting to end the relationship even with their own parents, though they live in the same house). The dissociation from these roles is taking place not as a transition to different roles, but as a process of retraction, an abdication of *all* social roles, an elimination of as many human relationships as possible, and a reduction of social presence until hardly any remains.

For those who die alone and untended, this disengagement process has clearly been in operation over a number of years, but unlike *hikikomori*, they have been functioning people, able to live (that is, without dependency), work, and otherwise attend to their basic needs. On the one hand, this is an “improvement” over the helpless and dependent state of the *hikikomori*, but on the other (since *hikikomori* are young, can and do recover, and have some kind of familial support) *muen shi* represents arguably the more disturbing development: a functional but extreme human isolation emerging as a norm. Yet there is little to indicate that this trend will reverse itself, and much to suggest that it will accelerate.

Japan’s demographic decline is now well known in broad outline. Projections for the total population by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research show a downward plunge, even with the more optimistic assumptions about fertility:

2010: 128 million

2060: 94.6 million

2110: 59 million (17, 38)

If this trend holds, the population will be less than half what it is now in less than 100 years. Japan's fertility rate (hovering around 1.3) is among the very lowest in the world (Eberstadt, Douthat). At the same time, the percentage of people over 65 is the highest in the world. It was 23.3% in 2011 and is projected to increase to 38.8% by 2050 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Statistics). That is, well over a third of the population will be over 65 by mid-century.

This development (*koureika*, or "high age trend") is problematized by the low birth rate (*shoushika*, or "fewer children trend"). More children are needed, among other things to grow up, enter the labor force and contribute to the social safety net for the increasing numbers of retirees. However, as fewer children have been born, fewer workers have been supporting more and more retirees. In 1990 there were about six workers for every retiree. The ratio fell to about four to one in 2000 and about three to one in 2010. By 2025 (that is, a little more than ten years from now) about two workers will be supporting each retiree, and the projection for mid-century is about 1.3 workers (Fogarty, Dale).

Modern societies simply have no experience managing their entitlements under these kinds of conditions, and we cannot really conceive of what it will be like, even with the rosier of economic scenarios. Clearly, a good course for Japan would be to allow more immigration for the sake of demographic balance. But as manufacturing declines in the economic downturn, further hobbled by the unfavorable exchange rate and competition with other Asian nations, growth industries in Japan are increasingly limited to the health care sector, involving care for the elderly; it is in this field that young workers from other countries have most often been sought recently. This is becoming one of a limited number of careers options available to many young Japanese workers as well. Important as the work is, it is not a sector that promises to *produce* anything for the country or for upcoming generations. Realistically, the optimal scenario for Japan is not future growth, but carefully managed decline. Young people may thus have a difficult time believing in the future or summoning up enough optimism to start their own families.

*Muen shakai* connects with different but related statistics: the number of people who live, or will live, alone. This is of course the base living condition from which the "no-relationship society" develops. In 2005 the number of single person households was 29.5%, almost exactly equal to the percentage of households of married couples with children (and increasingly, just one child) (29.9%). In 2010 the number of single person households had risen to 31.2%, and in 2030 it is expected to rise to 37.4% (with a corresponding drop to 21.9% in the number of households with a child or children) (Nishioka et al 41). That is, in

less than 20 years, well over one third of households will be single person households (*"tanshinsetai"*) while well under a fourth will have any children.

Thus, the basic conditions behind social isolation (the graying society and the single person household) are not going away and can be expected to be exacerbated. Yet, though the trends described here are "Japanese trends," and though there are certainly features of *muen shakai* peculiar to Japan, they should not be taken as characterizing Japan itself. Japan is still a vibrant and dynamic culture, struggling in mostly humane ways with its emerging demographic problems. These particular problems themselves are not unique to Japan, and in many ways simply mirror in advance the conditions that will be arising in many other nations.

Recent articles in the US (for instance, Martin Bayne and Jane Gross) have begun to ponder with dread the twin problems of aging and isolation looming ahead for the boomer generation. Among industrialized nations, European countries, the US, Korea and China show broadly similar demographic trends (OECD, McCardle). And there is a growing realization that the "graying" of society is encroaching upon the developing world as well (Saunders, Longman). Thus, the swelling of the aging population, and the almost inevitable problems that arise when the elderly can no longer rely on a protective web of familial support, can be considered a general global trend and not just a problem of Japan or of the industrialized democracies. This is what the world begins to look like when its "human capital" begins to evaporate.

## **Implications for Mimetic Theory and Generative Anthropology**

A phenomenon like *muen shakai* presents, to put it mildly, some interpretive challenges for mimetic theory and generative anthropology, both of which see humans as being interpersonally constituted and driven by mimesis. *Muen shakai* does not conform in any obvious way to a mimetic understanding and could, at least on the surface, call into question the validity of mimesis itself. What, from a mimetic point of view, are we to make of a social existence that consists of a lack of a social existence? What can we conclude about human lives devoid of interpersonal conflict, but also of any beneficial human connection? And finally, considering particularly the apocalyptic focus of MT and in Girard himself in his recent *Battling to the End*, how might we comprehend that the world is threatened as much by a "whimper" as it is by a bang?

To dramatize these questions, consider the life of a person representative of those depicted in the NHK documentary. We will call this person Mr. Sano. He is in his mid 60s and lives alone in a small apartment in an urban area of Japan. He has been divorced for many years, has no children or friends, does not know his neighbors, and has not contacted anyone in his family for decades. His employer barely speaks to him but knows him as a sad, silent man. Because he neglects getting regular medical check-ups, he collapses in his home from what

would otherwise be a very manageable medical condition, and dies because no first responders are aware of his existence. His body is not discovered for several weeks. After some effort by local authorities, a few members of Mr. Sano's family are successfully contacted, but none want anything to do with the matter. No-one will take charge of Mr. Sano's remains or personal effects, or see to the funeral or interment. A *tokushu seisou gyousha* ("special cleaning") crew is engaged to clear out Mr. Sano's living quarters. The local government arranges to have his remains interred at a temple. Some of its priests offer occasional prayers in a small structure housing the remains of Mr. Sano and others like him.

The problem with MT is that, from the standpoint of MT, this could plausibly be considered a *good outcome*. There is no apparent mimetic conflict in Mr. Sano's life—or if there was, it has been resolved peacefully. There are no escalating conflicts, no doubling rivalries, and no acts of violence. Further, if we generalize Mr. Sano's state to the fate of the globe we can envisage a world full of people dying quietly in their homes, and humanity coming to a gentle close, with no frenzied mimetic crisis and cataclysmic Armageddon of the sort so often discussed in mimetic theory.

Of course, MT scholars would deplore the conditions of Mr. Sano's life, but probably on the basis of compassion and accumulated ethics, not on the basis of the moral framework of MT itself. The challenge for MT is not simply to account for how and why Mr. Sano's sad, crippling, disordered life may have developed in this way, but to define what exactly it is that is disordered about it. That ultimately means that MT needs to define a positive good, not just as an absence of violence, but as something that makes human life worth living, human relations worth having, or humanity worth preserving. (MT's efforts in that direction will be discussed later.) Undoubtedly that must seem obvious, not to say sanctimonious, but the *muen shakai* trend shows that it may not be quite as obvious as it seems. A growing plurality of humanity is choosing to opt out of all human relationships. They do not need to be persuaded not to fight, but they do need to be persuaded that human relationships are worth the bother at all.

GA has an advantage in defining human good because, as the name "generative" implies, it takes from the beginning an inherent interest not just in human violence but in human flourishing. Yet from the standpoint of GA, we might also be hard pressed to discover anything specific to object to in Mr. Sano's life above. By almost any account, Japan represents a spectacularly successful development of the exchange system, an outstanding example of the modern, secular state. Mr. Sano has been a productive member in it, and has both benefited and contributed to this highly developed market economy. He appears to have successfully occupied the center of his private scene, and if there was resentment, his life reflects a more or less successful resolution to it. Auden's words return to resonate: "Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard."

In the end, GA is faced with the same challenge here as MT, which is to define human good as a positive and not just as the lack of a negative (violence, resentment), but GA's focus on the exchange system intensifies this problem, because *muen shakai* demonstrates (as I hope to suggest in more detail below) how the modern exchange system can be a victim of its own success. Extreme social isolation develops to some extent because it is materially possible; as soon as people can eliminate human relationships (or so I would assert), many will. This leads in turn to the demographic question, since isolated people will, by detaching themselves from human relationships, obviously also detach themselves from the reproductive process.

In my view, generative anthropology (and for that matter MT as well) can no longer take it for granted that humans need to be generated for there to be an anthropology. The exchange of signs requires people to exchange signs with. The exchange of goods requires people to exchange goods with. The burgeoning crisis of a "relation-less" society is closely connected with the burgeoning demographic crisis, the childless society. Thus, the problem of defining human good mimetically extends beyond the question of what is the "good" of human relations, to what is the good of extending humans themselves into the next generation.

A central axiom of GA is that humans are, in Eric Gans' words "the species that itself poses the greatest danger for its own survival."<sup>(1)</sup> The danger is of course violence, but there is another way that humanity threatens its own survival: by not reproducing. This is the basis of the imperative of evolutionary theory from the organism-eye-view: eat, survive, reproduce. MT could be said to focus its anthropology on the survival question: humans need to survive the ever present threat of violence. GA is one step ahead of MT, insofar as it recognizes that humans also have to *eat*; the distribution of food amongst mimetically charged humans is a nontrivial matter. However, neither MT nor GA has incorporated the problem of human generation into their overall anthropologies.

Perhaps it is assumed that this is a *biological* problem, and not a particular matter of concern for either MT or GA. Men and women, like the birds and the bees, will presumably keep doing what they do, and children will result. However, this is no longer an unarguable assumption, and if the archaic fertility cults are any indication, neither was it in the distant past. It is an anthropological and not just biological issue. From a mimetic point of view, the problem of male-female relations may not simply be that sexual rivals might kill each other, but that men and women will fail to get along, and the community will fail to regenerate. The mere lack of violence will not in itself regenerate a culture. To put it more provocatively, ancient fertility cults and evolutionary theory know what MT and GA apparently do not: humans must reproduce for humanity to survive.

This is a problematic assertion in a number of ways, many of which will be discussed later. And to be fair, MT implicitly acknowledges the issue; the "unitive" function of scapegoating

and the sacrificial order no doubt includes the strengthening of male-female relations, with the specific goal of sex and regeneration.<sup>(2)</sup> Fertility cults, after all, are sacrificial. In other words, sacrificial violence is (among other things) an aphrodisiac and fertility drug.

The post-sacrificial ethos is another matter. To repeat the point: human beings can now simply opt out. Even while functioning in the modern market system, they can choose not to reproduce and indeed, will increasingly choose to do so. They can choose to be alone and limit any human interaction at all, and will increasingly choose to do so. I would assert that the triumph of the market system, which means the triumph of the post-sacrificial order, makes solitary life not only possible, but, increasingly, preferable. This could be the age of *homo solitarius*. One can live and die alone, quietly and peacefully, apparently untroubled by any mimetic entanglements.

## ***Muen Shakai* and Mimesis**

Against the objection that mimesis fails to account for *muen shakai*, it can be argued that mimesis *does* in fact account for it, and in a number of ways. They are outlined below. All are revealing, and I think most are at the very least partially valid. The problem may indeed be that they explain *too much*, and that they cannot all be right at the same time. At any rate, the mimetic accounts of *muen shakai* sort themselves roughly into three broad explanations, which overlap in several ways: 1) the generalization of violence, 2) the generalization of scapegoating, and 3) internal mediation and the post-sacrificial order.

### **The Generalization of Violence**

It can be argued from the mimetic point of view that *muen shakai* is precisely a kind of violence, an ongoing interpersonal conflict. The outward manifestation of placidity is entirely superficial and (in terms of my exercise above with Mr. Sano) quite misleading. The isolation of recluses has undoubtedly been shaped by a history of interpersonal friction and conflict. The very structure of this kind of social detachment carries in it the shape of these past conflicts: a turning inward and away from some *other*, or more precisely a long string of others. On this subject, I have had occasion to quote Gil Bailie, whose observation in his lecture series *The Gift of Self* is important enough to quote again in full:

[T]he hysteric is one who is being influenced by another, who resents and rebels against the influence. And the hysteric has two arch ways of warding off this influence. One is to become autistic, in a sense—an emotional dissociation. So the hysteric goes blank as a way of trying to ward off the influence. And the other [way] is histrionics, to ‘act out,’ to try to exorcise the other, and to demonstrate that the hysteric is, in fact, the real subject. . . . Hysteria is clearly the self pathologically entangled with another. Bailie’s insight is very useful, and (if we transpose the Freudian vocabulary) clearly puts the phenomenon of social isolation within the purview of mimetic theory. This is the basis for a model in which



interpersonal aggravation (that is, internal mediation) can lead *either* to conflict, or to withdrawal. The main problem with Bailie's observation is that it should be so *rare* in Girard studies; for Bailie himself it comes as an incidental observation toward the end of a long lecture series (itself rather hard to obtain). Yet the "emotional dissociation" Bailey outlines can hardly be considered rare in the world. It is likely as at least as common as the more agitated struggles characteristically analyzed in mimetic theory.

The sparse treatment in mimetic theory does not indicate a theoretical deficiency as such, but rather an incomplete focus. Girardians are simply not *in the habit* of looking at things like introversion and isolation, preponderantly focused as they are on overt conflict and violence. An important corrective to this customary focus on "bad" (conflictual) mimesis has been the increasing attention of some Girard scholars to "good" (non-conflictual) mimesis (to be discussed later). However, *muen shakai* and similar phenomena fail to fall into either category and could be considered "bad good mimesis"—a putatively non-violent mimesis that is nonetheless clearly disordered.

But the case for social isolation being a form of violence is further strengthened by its affinity to suicide. Extreme social isolation could arguably be considered one step away from suicide, which has been associated with the *muen shakai* phenomenon. The NHK documentary discussed above opens with a scene of the crew on a police boat in Tokyo Bay preparing to pull the body of an older male, almost certainly a suicide, out of the water. This is a routine operation, and identification of the bodies often proves to be impossible. These nameless and faceless suicides (mostly men) could be thought to be more representative of *muen shakai* than the solitary deaths described earlier.[\(3\)](#)

Yet one problem of generalizing violence in the ways sketched above—of including *muen shakai* under an overall rubric of violence—is that it universalizes violence in a way that may be unhelpful not only in understanding social isolation, but in understanding violence itself. Is it useful for every problem in human relations, including the lack of human relations at all, to be defined as violence? In Popperian terms, if violence can be invoked for everything, how can it be invoked for anything? The very term loses definition, and as a consequence mimesis itself may become somewhat less compelling. I have had the experience of intelligent interlocutors resisting mimetic theory for exactly this reason: it over-defines violence in its otherwise compelling interpersonal psychology, and they won't accept that, for instance, to be upset by someone is to experience some kind of "violence." This problem also emerges in the generalization of scapegoating.

## **The Generalization of Scapegoating**

An equally strong if not stronger case can be made for looking at *muen shakai* as a form of scapegoating. The pulling away from human relations that is manifested in extreme social isolation must certainly be, in most cases, a self-exclusion which is either clearly a direct

response to scapegoating, or less directly, a kind of internalization of the dynamics of scapegoating. In the first case, the scapegoating can be very real indeed, especially in younger cases. *Hikikomori*, who are mostly young male shut-ins, often develop their condition as a result of bullying at school (Jones). Bullying has also been directly implicated in a wave of suicides among children that have rocked the nation recently (Hongo).

As for older people who are representative of *muen shakai*, they could be considered “scapegoats” in the more indirect sense of being gradually abandoned by society. Alternately (and this is my own view), there may be the “internalized” scapegoating mentioned above; one might withdraw from human contact because one finds it oppressive. That is, the subjects have not been abandoned or driven into isolation so much as they have chosen it. This accords, at least, with my incidental observation over the past few decades. Many people are shutting down socially because they feel harassed by human relationships and social expectations. They do not want to be asked about their lives or have to explain themselves to others. It invites invidious comparison and disdain, and it may very well be used against them out of their hearing. People insinuate themselves into your life, make you feel bad or inadequate, and badmouth you to others; it’s better to keep your distance. Whether such fears are ever articulated as such, they may figure strongly into social isolation, especially as it develops over a long period, and may go some way toward explaining in particular gradual estrangement among family members.

The self-exclusion of isolated people can be plausibly said to have the structure of scapegoating, both externally (by virtue of their isolation) or internally (by virtue of feeling psychologically oppressed by others). Are the social recluses of *muen shakai* the hidden scapegoats of society? Over-generalizing scapegoating to explain social isolation may be problematic in the same way that over-generalizing about violence was above. If everyone is being scapegoated, even when they *voluntarily* shut out human relationships, what practical value does scapegoating have as an account of human behavior or society? Yet, intuitively, this seems more of a pedantic quibble than in the previous case with the over-generalization of violence. While social isolation may not manifest any obvious violent or conflictual aspect (since there are no people present with whom to have conflicts), it nearly always possesses the structure of exclusion, even when it is self-exclusion.

The fact that people might *choose* scapegoating for themselves (in the form of social isolation) needs to be accounted for. One possibility (which to my knowledge has not been addressed in mimetic studies) is that the material cost of scapegoating, at least in the form of social exclusion, is markedly diminished in a desacralized market society. This point emerges indirectly in one of Lafcadio Hearn’s works, when he tries to convey to early 20<sup>th</sup> century readers the severity of expulsion in the Edo period (premodern Japan):

In former years the man expelled from his native place by the communal will—cast out from his home, his clan, his occupation—found himself face to face with misery

absolute. In another community there would be no place for him, unless he happened to have relatives there; and these would be obliged to consult with local authorities, and also with the officials in the fugitive's native place, before venturing to harbouring him. No stranger was suffered to settle in another district without official permission . . . . A banished man was homeless and friendless. (96-97)

. . . banishment signified hunger, solitude, and privation unspeakable. For be it remembered that the legal existence of the individual, at that period, ceased entirely outside of his relation to the family and to the commune. Everybody lived and worked for some household; every household for some clan; outside of the household, and the related aggregation of households, there was no life to be lived—except the life of criminals, beggars, and pariahs. Save with official permission, one could not even become a Buddhist monk. The very outcastes—such as the Eta classes—formed self-governing communities, with traditions of their own, and would not voluntarily accept strangers. So the banished man was most often doomed to become a *hinin*, —one of that wretched class of wandering pariahs who were officially termed “non-men,” and lived by beggary, or by the exercise of some vulgar profession, such as that of ambulant musician/or mountebank. (98-99)

In an archaic and pre-modern context, exclusion from society held the threat of extreme social and material deprivation that Lafcadio Hearn describes. In a still more primitive context, where Girard's work on cultural foundations is relevant, exclusion from the community meant almost certain death. As I usually mention when trying to explain Girard's scapegoat thesis, a person driven out of an archaic community could not simply find a different job, rent an apartment on the other side of town, or seek provisions in a convenience store further down the street. This is in fact a standard explanatory device to explain Girard's theory, since the severity of expulsion is less easy to grasp in the modern world.

However, the very thing that makes it difficult for modern people to grasp the severity of expulsion—the relative ease with which one can provide for oneself—could also be turned around to explain why some people may no longer dread it as much, and may in fact choose to “expel” themselves. The social and material conditions of post-sacrificial culture have substantially altered the cultural compact. One no longer has to “go along to get along.”

### **Internal Mediation and the Post-Sacrificial Order**

For MT and to a large extent GA, the Judeo-Christian revelation is thought to have decisively overturned the sacrificial ethos (though this is not the descriptive vocabulary of GA), and the effects, however indirect and uneven, have permeated the globe, both for better and for worse. Gil Bailie (*Violence Unveiled*) and James Alison (*The Joy of Being Wrong*) have presented some of the more compelling elaborations of this aspect of MT at the cultural

level. There may be plenty of frantic scapegoating in our world now, but there is no longer any “sacrifice” in the sense of a culturally legitimate bloodletting that draws society together and sustains authority, or long term cultural viability. (Totalitarian regimes, notably those of the fascist variety which explicitly invoke the sacred, can be considered a series of last gasps rather than counter evidence.) We are living in a post-sacrificial order. We are in this sense “post-cultural.”

“Internal mediation” comes to predominate in this post-sacrificial world, which means that as differences maintained by the sacred collapse, people rub up against each other more and more antagonistically in their personal spheres. This is the subject of most of Girard’s brilliant literary analyses (though much of that work was done before Girard had developed the sacred element of MT) and in general one of his most consistent observations about modernity.<sup>(4)</sup> This cultural development is conceived very differently in GA, as the collapse of the sacred center into the private scene, and mediation is *not* essentially or intrinsically disordered.<sup>(5)</sup> But this gives MT a certain advantage when it comes to *muen shakai* because MT expects and predicts psychosocial disorder in the post-sacrificial world. *Muen shakai* can thus be seen as a characteristic interpersonal distortion. It is the result of the unrelenting exacerbation of mimetic desire in our ethos. Instead of struggling with the other (as do most of the subjects of Girard’s work), the subject gives up the fight and retreats into him- or herself. This process is summarized very well in the earlier quote by Gil Bailie.

Another, cruder way to put it is that if society had a really good scapegoat, people would get along better. Psychosocial disorders like extreme social isolation would be much less likely to develop because the “we feeling” of sacrificial culture would permeate society, and the everyday frustrations and aggravations that now drive people into isolation could be discharged through sacrifice. Some support for this view might come from recent events. The earthquake and tsunami were a wrenching disaster but also generated a certain sacred aura, and along with it, a feeling of unity and purpose. The tragedy drew the country together. The discussion of *muen shakai* ceased immediately after the disaster took place, which is to be expected, but the discussion has not been renewed. The disaster could be said to have unified the country, at least for a time, and caused the Japanese to believe afresh in themselves and in their nation. Thus, the disaster could serve as a reminder of the way sacrifice used to renew culture and solidify social relations.

I think that the “post-sacrificial” account above is a fair extrapolation from mimetic theory, that it is at least partially true, and that internal mediation certainly presents the best psychological framework for approaching most types of social isolation. At the same time, I am unsure how to properly assess the sacred component. It seems suspiciously convenient that I am able to invoke scapegoating (profane) to explain social isolation in one breath (in the previous section), then invoke the lack of scapegoating (sacred) to explain it in the next (the paragraph above)—though this is precisely the kind of interpretive discrimination that many scholars think gives MT its great subtlety and explanatory power.

A bigger problem (and GA thinkers might agree) is that it is very difficult in MT to conceive of a *non*-disordered counterpart to *muen shakai*, unless it is religious and almost impossibly idealistic. That is, though extreme social isolation must be the result of disordered mediation, there can be no wholesome reintegration into society in the categories of MT because group harmony must by definition be tainted with sacrificial violence. Unless the recluse converts and demonstrates a radical personal transformation, we must look suspiciously (at least in theory) at his or her social rehabilitation. Here yet again, MT explains too much too plausibly and in too many ways on the one hand (therefore making itself unfalsifiable in the Popperian sense), and offers no realistic alternative to disorder on the other, because it has not sufficiently developed a positive anthropology of the human person, unless it is abstractly spiritual and fantastically idealistic. This is overstated and unfair, but lays out some of the terms for the search for positive mimesis, which does in fact occupy a number of Girardian thinkers and will be our final consideration.

## **Toward a “Generative Mimesis”?**

I have been stressing the need for both MT and GA to develop a positive anthropology, spurred by two observations. 1) Human good (as *muen shakai* demonstrates) must be more than the mere absence of violence. 2) Human reproduction (as the demographic crisis demonstrates) cannot be taken for granted and ultimately has to be taken into account in any consideration of the human good. There has to be a reason to go on living, a reason to have relationships with others, and a reason to continue to *have human beings* who can have relationships with others. If there is none, then isolated people are essentially doing the right thing in removing themselves from the sordid process, and (if the idea catches on sufficiently) bringing the human story to a merciful and peaceful end.

## **Positive Mimesis and the Originary Scene**

Of course, it is unfair to speak of GA as not having a “positive anthropology” since (in its own view) it has always been premised on the positive and does not define humanity in terms of an originary injustice.<sup>(6)</sup> Likewise, it is unfair to speak of “positive mimesis” as if no-one in MT had considered it. Girard himself has emphasized it in several scattered (though unelaborated) comments, most notably in the well-known interview with Rebecca Adams. Adams herself has gone on to develop the idea of positive or loving mimesis, as have James Alison, Raymund Schwager, Petra Steinmair-Pösel, Martha Reineke, and Pablo Bandera. Most treatments of positive mimesis are anchored in theology, and Steinmair-Pösel’s essay contains probably the most usefully compact review of that work.

Christian theology demands a primary good from which evil is a derivative distortion with no independent being, hence the theoretical impetus of Christian Girardians to get beyond the violence and disorder of mimesis. There must be a primary good, otherwise one is led to a dark, pessimistic demiurge as creator, to a Manichean position where good and evil are

equal, or to a monistic “Star Wars” theology in which mimesis is like “the force,” a neutral power with a dark side and light side. Good and evil cannot have equal ontological weight, and in fact evil, since it is a negation, should not have any ontological weight at all. In Steinmair-Pösel’s words, “One of the most frequent objections to mimetic theory is that Girard ontologizes violence and that the problem of conflicts and violence is given too much significance within the theory” (1). In addressing that issue, Bandera (as part of a critique of GA to be discussed further below) outlines positive mimesis as follows:

. . . mimetic theory maintains that there is a positive dimension to mimetic desire. In fact, while mimetic relations usually become rivalistic, especially on a social or cultural scale, there is nothing inherently negative about mimetic desire itself. There is a difference between mimetic desire, which is a fundamental characteristic of humanity, and mimetic rivalry, which is the unfortunate usual outcome of most human relationships. To put it in more concrete terms, positive mimetic desire is more properly called love. (19) I had hoped to avoid the originary questions that so divide MT and GA, but questions of human good lead inexorably to questions of ultimate good and thus, for MT and GA, originary good. Unexpectedly, when the dust settles, there may be much more common ground between MT and GA here, on this question of originary goodness, than in the divisive issue of whether scapegoating is constitutive of the originary event. This is because MT scholars are themselves forced to push beyond scapegoating, whether it is a split second before it in the case of James Alison (who posits that the first scapegoaters had a latent moral choice to identify with the victim and not to engage in scapegoating) (253-256), or back to “the creation of the human person opened toward the divine” in Petra Steinmair-Pösel’s study (2-3).

Christian Girardians are impelled to locate a good prior to scapegoating because they need to know, if good is primary, how human goodness can possibly make any human sense. That is, humans had to realize something right before there was something wrong. It is not just that things were good prior to humans knowing anything about it, in their newly emerged post-scapegoating consciousness; the first humans had to have at least *some* consciousness of good prior to scapegoating, which also means (though this is an unintended consequence of the search for “positive mimesis”) that there had to be a specifically human consciousness preceding scapegoating.

It must be noted in passing that this paper, focused on social problems in a largely non-Christian country, has drifted into the categories of Christian theology. This is not because there is no relevance with regard to Japanese religion (a highly complex synthesis of Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, existing within a highly secularized culture, and which also includes influential Christian elements). It is because the discussion has of necessity moved into the specific interpretive problems of MT, which is deeply informed by Judeo-Christian premises. Yet, to the extent that Japan is a very “secularized” nation, these premises could be said to apply, since (at least according to mimetic theory)

secularism is part of the process of “desacralization” resulting from the Judeo-Christian revelation as outlined in the previous section. These terms are not above challenge, by any means, but they *are* the terms, for better or worse, by which mimetic theory usually works out its anthropology.

In fact, the exchange between Pablo Bandera and Richard van Oort regarding MT and GA reflects the divide between religious and secular assumptions. Yet the exchange is useful precisely for the way a positive anthropology begins to emerge between them, if not fully defined, at least as a kernel that *can* be defined. In asserting that positive, non-rivalistic mimesis is more fundamental and therefore more primary, Bandera seems to think an advantage is gained for MT over GA. By insisting on an originary good, MT can claim to have discovered love first, as non-rivalrous mimesis, while (to Bandera) GA can only discover it later, after violence is averted, and then ever after as an accommodation to resentment. However, Richard van Oort protests:

I confess, when I first read Bandera’s suggestion that generative anthropology has no room for positive mimesis, I was truly astonished. What could be more positive than the deferral of violence through representation? I also find Bandera’s criticism rather illogical in the context of his own argument. After spending considerable time criticizing generative anthropology for not being sufficiently attentive to the violence of the mimetic crisis, Bandera then turns around and criticizes the theory for not being sufficiently positive in its conception of mimesis! (198) But one reason van Oort may have been blind-sided is that Bandera is (I suspect) using secular language while proceeding in theological terms. As explained, Christian Girardians (or secular Girardians who think within a Christian framework) need to define a primary good in mimetic desire—and this is apart from any dispute that might exist with GA. In this regard MT *has* discovered something “more positive than the deferral of violence” (in van Oort’s words): non-rivalrous mimesis. Bandera might argue that van Oort has just conceded the point, by admitting above that “the deferral of violence” is key, and thereby admitting that in GA originary consciousness is framed in negative possibility, not the positive of beneficent mimesis.[\(7\)](#)

GA thinkers will be unmoved by this; they do not seek to explain the mystery of good or evil per se, but the mystery of how human beings could conceive of something called good and evil; to some extent the discourse has passed into mutual incomprehensibility. Nevertheless, though MT may indeed have an advantage here (at least theologically) in positing positive mimesis before resentment, it has now conceded a rather substantial point: positive mimesis had to have preceded scapegoating. The center of the debate has thus shifted into GA’s territory, through MT’s new insistence that emergent humans had to be aware of a primary good, at least to some extent, prior to scapegoating.

For me, this is like watching theoretical astrophysicists arguing over the finer nanoseconds of the big bang. Each counterclaim clarifies the issue. First, MT emphatically claims



originary violence, against GA's claim of originary peace. Then MT claims originary good, which must predate GA's originary resentment. But in claiming such an originary good, MT has admitted that scapegoating is not a sufficient explanation for human emergence. Though I may be naïve, I see this back and forth as suggesting ultimately a kind of convergence between MT and GA, because both MT and GA agree now that *human consciousness had to have been present in some form prior to scapegoating*.

## **Positive Mimesis and Human Generation**

Where neither MT nor GA has pushed the discussion of positive mimesis is toward the question of human generation, though Jean-Michel Oughourlian proposed what he calls a "Universal Mimesis": "mimesis is imitation in space, repetition in time, and reproduction in the species" (4). Is human reproduction simply a biological function, beyond mimetic desire, or is it tied up with the goodness of mimetic desire, to love? Or, to put it in a way perhaps only an intellectual could not understand, does love have anything to do with making babies?

It would be easy to think it does not, considering how often love, including Eros, comes up in MT and GA, and how very rarely does procreation. At times, GA's emphasis on erotic reciprocity as the optimal model for positive mimesis may seem little more than a theoretically advanced version of the proposition, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." (8) But in fact, here too there is an unexpected convergence between GA and MT in the search for positive mimesis, and one that might lead to a mimetic anthropology that encompasses (but is not limited to) human generation.

Of course, the humanistic orientation of MT and GA militates against any gross reduction of human relations to reproductive output. However, Martha J. Reineke, synthesizing a number of thinkers including Rebecca Adams, discusses both "mothering" and "fathering" in relation to loving mimesis (90-91). There are ways of thinking about human "generation" in this non-biological sense. This is not necessarily straying from the demographic problem at hand, because worrisome fertility rates (whether in Japan or elsewhere) are less cause than they are effect. Isolated people are finding less reason to have any relations at all, much less biologically fecund relations. A positive orientation toward child-bearing or parenthood is likely to be a secondary effect that would arise out of positive human interaction in general. The demographic crash is in this sense a mimetic problem that needs a mimetic solution.

But if we extend the pattern of love, co-creation, and procreation to mimetic relations, we might discover something that is less than a gross biological reduction, and more than mere metaphor. Rather than equating making love with making babies, we could envision an anthropology in which "making love," in the sense of positive interaction, generates, not specifically babies, but more fundamentally, beneficial *effects*. For instance, instead of the classic mimetic triangle with subject and model oriented through each other toward an



object, we might have subject and model oriented toward each other—perhaps in the manner Rebecca Adams proposes, desiring one another’s subjectivity—and actually *generating* or *producing* an object (a beneficial effect, word, deed, etc.).[\(9\)](#)

As noted, Adams’ thinking is surprisingly close that of Eric Gans, specifically his occasional focus on the erotic.[\(10\)](#) And after all, Gans does not stress the erotic because he wants to promote “eroticism,” but because he wants positive mimesis to be realistic, beyond the abstract and utopian concept of “brotherly love.” Yet putting Adams’ and Gans’ thinking together, it may be possible to extend both toward a “generative” version of the mimetic triangle. The third point of the triangle would *issue forth* from the positive mimetic relationship, rather than being an object of contention (negative mimesis) or mere renunciation (positive mimesis, but defined in the negative). This is in line with the Trinitarian element that emerges in discussions of positive mimesis.[\(11\)](#) “Love” would actually issue forth from the relation.

“Good mimesis” should perhaps be pressed in this direction, in the direction not just of “positive mimesis” (characterizing the relation) but of “fertile mimesis” or “generative mimesis” (characterizing its productive nature, the *fruit* of the relationship). In this model, mimetic relations “bear fruit” in the broadest sense of *generating good* (and not just being good). Christian theology explicitly extends biological reproduction in this way. The Incarnation is to be patterned in us, not specifically through making babies, but quite specifically through conceiving and giving birth to good through cooperation with grace—in a very literal sense bearing Christ in the world as an act of love toward God.

Yet again, this (though it is purely exploratory and speculative) represents a convergence with GA. It is because the generative model here (minus the Incarnation and grace) lines up with the dynamic terms of GA, wherein humans, in their first moment *as* humans, collectively “birth” a sign and thereafter all signs.[\(12\)](#) For me, this opens up space to talk realistically about “positive mimesis” and “brotherly love” in ways that GA thinkers might accept. To put it another way, in the “universal mimesis” proposed by Jean-Michel Oughourlian above (“imitation in space, repetition in time, and reproduction in the species”) “reproduction” could be extended as well to acts, words, gestures, relationships, collaborations, and the like. These too are imitated in space, repeated in time, and reproduced among others.

An example of this in the Japanese context might be the classic *sempai-kohai* relation which is still widely honored among young people. The *sempai-kohai* relation is essentially the external mediation of junior members in a group (*kohai*) by senior members (*sempai*). *Kohai* in their turn pass knowledge and values down to the next group of *kohai* when their time comes. For Girard, the latent *conflict* in such master-disciple relations is the most salient feature. But—and here the approach of generative anthropology shows its strength—is it not more salient that a master-disciple relation can exist *at all*? This is another instance in

which GA appears to be somewhat ahead of the game because it starts with a human community that peacefully exchanges gestures and generates good.

In light of this discussion, the aberration of *muen shakai* may come into sharper relief. It is the complete, or nearly complete, elimination of good mimesis. The “universal mimesis” that Oughourlian proposes is denied. There is no imitation (in space), repetition (in time), or reproduction (in the species). It is not that isolated people are unlikely to have children (many people could arguably do more good without children) but that they do not “pass themselves on” in *any* way. This is the tragic distortion of the lost souls of *muen shakai*: neither they nor we can experience the generation of good that would come from their participation in common life. We are bereft of them, and of the good that could come from them, and from our interaction from them.

### **Closing Words**

There is no need to attempt a shallow reconciliation between MT and GA that involves either surrendering its core principles. Both theoretical communities are able to function quite well on their own. At the same time, there is no need to exaggerate differences when MT and GA are actually moving in the same direction. By admitting that scapegoating is not the ultimate point of human origin in its search for positive mimesis, MT has opened up considerable space to work out its anthropology on parallel tracks with GA, rather than in contention. If a “generative” model of positive mimesis were pursued, even more commonality might be discovered. The cumulative efforts, even in friendly rivalry, might help to create a positive vision for humanity that accords with what is most human about us. Of course, this will not solve the world’s demographic problems, or the related problems of social isolation, but it might give us a good *reason* to solve them.

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### Notes

1. "Roy Rappaport and the Originary Anthropology of the Sacred" in *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. [\(back\)](#)
2. See for instance *Violence and the Sacred* 108, including the note on that page. [\(back\)](#)
3. I am grateful to Edmond Wright (during the 2012 GASC meeting) for bringing up the issue of suicide in relation to *muen shakai*. [\(back\)](#)
4. See for instance *Things Hidden* 307-308, *Resurrection* 58-59, *Deceit* 135-137. [\(back\)](#)
5. For a very extensive example, see Part Two of *Originary Thinking* 117-219. [\(back\)](#)
6. For a useful account of the differences between the two originary hypotheses see chapter four of Gans' recent monograph *The Girardian Origins of Generative Anthropology* 42-72. [\(back\)](#)
7. See also Eric Gans' discussion of "the Good" as deferral of violence in "On Firstness," *The Originary Hypothesis* 41. [\(back\)](#)
8. A representative example of this longstanding contention is Gans' "Love, Resentment, and Generative Anthropology" in *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*. [\(back\)](#)
9. The best explication of the "mimetic triangle" remains the first chapter of Girard's *Deceit* 1-51. [\(back\)](#)
10. See again Gans' "Love, Resentment, and Generative Anthropology." [\(back\)](#)
11. See for instance Steinmair-Pösel 9. [\(back\)](#)
12. See for instance *Signs of Paradox* 102-106. [\(back\)](#)