

# Differing over Originary Violence: Between Girard and Gans

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## Abstract

René Girard's critical remarks on the originary hypothesis of Eric Gans in *Evolution and Conversion* (trans. 2007) risk closing off rather than opening up conversations between disciples of Gans and those of Girard. Any sense of moral superiority produced by preoccupation with scapegoats depends on a misreading of Girard. It is possible to think of Gans's originary language event as a process of morphogenesis; as morphogenesis dependent on mimetic processes, the originary event of language origin in Gans resembles the scapegoat mechanism of Girard. Although mindless collective murder is not central to Gans's originary thinking, a keen awareness of mimetic violence pervades the theory. Girard and Gans should be studied together, not kept apart.

**Keywords:** Scapegoat mechanism, mimesis, desire, the sacred, morphogenesis, origin of language, violence, culture, human exceptionalism

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In this study, I explore some differences between the ideas of Eric Gans and those of René Girard concerning the identity and role of "violence" in human affairs. Girard has made negative remarks about the originary hypothesis proposed by Gans; Gans has questioned Girard's concept of the scapegoat mechanism (*End* 135-45; "René Girard"; *Scenic* 163-69). Although I will identify and probe certain impediments to dialogue in what follows, I trust that in the end it will be clear that the escalation of a mutually negating rivalry is not my goal. I will, however, open provokingly, with an ironic thesis intended to capture the attention of those "Girardians" who have subscribed to the orthodox teaching that permits an easy dismissal of Gans as a "social contract" thinker: *there is more "violence" in the originary event of Eric Gans than in the scapegoat mechanism of Girard.*

That thesis counters René Girard's most public dismissal of generative anthropology, which I will assume stands still as his most influential verdict on the question of whether Gans's work deserves the attention of thinkers interested in "mimetic theory." In *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (2008), we can read accounts of seven

chapter-length interviews Pierpaolo Antonello and Joao Cezar de Castro Rocha conducted with René Girard in 1995, 1999, and 2003 (12n3). In a chapter titled “The Symbolic Species” (69-96), in its closing section (88-92), they give Girard the opportunity to pass judgment on the originary hypothesis. They quote a passage from the “Introduction” chapter in Gans’s *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (1993). Here is some of Girard’s response. I will quote it at length, because this study will seek to identify and untangle some of the misunderstandings to which the dismissal might well give rise.

Secondly, why should this “fearful symmetry” make violence really impossible? How can a simple gesture, regardless of how ostensible it may be, prevent the mimetic doubles from killing each other? As if violence did not exist! It is another way of denying violence. I think this is, again, a rhetorical manoeuvre to negate the primacy of religion in human culture. If one accepts Gans’s hypothesis, then all other forms of social contract have also to be accepted. In order to have language, an embryonic form of culture is needed, some kind of cultural sheltering from violence. There must already be a non-linguistic solution to the problem of violence, which inevitably is a religious solution, and that [non-linguistic solution] is the result of the scapegoating mechanism, of the spontaneous grouping against an arbitrary common victim....

...

We cannot do away with the actual killing of a victim. This is the moment of supreme crisis. The moment when the group should be most willing to give up violence—the moment of maximum undifferentiation, when pure revenge is working at all levels—is also the moment when they can least give up violence, because they are angry, and their fury gets the best of them. At this stage—at the moment of supreme rage, supreme excitement, when you are out of your mind, ecstatic in the way of violence—there is no scope, no possibility for social contracts. This is the problem with Gans: he minimizes violence, for he suggests an entirely linguistic form of dealing with violence. Indeed, he simply suppresses violence, and he envisages an embryonic social contract. Rather, I posit it [violence] at the very centre as far as the beginning of culture is concerned. (89)

It must be confessed that those habituated to thinking in the way of Eric Gans may struggle even to make sense of some of Girard’s remarks.

Let us begin with the fact that Gans’s originary thinking assumes that sign exchange initiates culture. Therefore, Girard’s idea of an “embryonic form of culture” or a “cultural sheltering from violence” operating *prior to* symbolic exchange will to us appear to be a self-contradiction. What kind of culture, even “embryonic,” could precede symbolic exchange? To answer that question, one may observe that some anthropologists count as “culture” the collective learning in animal groups of behaviours not genetically programmed but

transmitted intergenerationally. For purely Girardian mimetic theory, such learning without words counts as culture. For originary thinking downstream from the hypothesis Gans offers, such learning does not count as culture (van Oort, "Critic" 88-89). At the same time, not to exaggerate differences, let us notice that Gans's originary event does presuppose "learning" without words prior to the emergence of symbolic culture. It presupposes the scenic centrality of an animal victim of collective hunting behaviour. Getting a bit of dirt on generative anthropology's own conceptual purities, we can concede that the cognitive capacities that contributed to the hunt's success might be labelled a kind of pre-symbolic "culture." So much depends on a definition of "culture."

The chances of misunderstanding created by incommensurate vocabularies continue with another of Girard's formulations: that contained in the phrase a "non-linguistic solution to the problem of violence, which is inevitably a religious solution." A disciple of Gans will probably be stumped by the idea of a "religious solution" that is at once a "non-linguistic solution." Just as Girard assumes culture may pre-exist language, he lets religion pre-exist language. But what kind of "religion" could function without words? How would it coordinate pre-symbolic action? How can "religion" pre-exist a minimally self-aware human naming of a sacred Other? There may be answers to those questions, but the answers would emerge only after we become comfortable with the fact that Girard's version of the process of hominization includes many pictures of unself-conscious ritual action that deserve, for him and his followers, the label "religion." Once again, to quiet rather than exacerbate the dissonance that increases chances of misunderstanding, we might concede that the protohumans tangled up in the earliest spontaneous scapegoating episodes were being named, although not doing themselves any naming. But the originary thinker more in tune with the thought patterns of Gans will be asking, does the branded cow own the symbol burnt into its side?

Girard in the quoted passage complains also that Gans's originary hypothesis proposes and remains satisfied with "an entirely linguistic form of dealing with violence." The accusation is unfounded to the extent that the very concept of "violence" that preoccupies Girard so deeply, the violence of mindless collective murder, does not preoccupy Gans. In other words, Girard's implication that Gans is asking us to focus our attention on the emergence of a "linguistic form" is fair. But to presuppose that the problem of "violence" to which Gans is posing a solution is specifically that of mindless collective murder is not fair. Rather, we might observe, Gans is interested in the problem of the origin of minimally *self-conscious* collective violence. Nowhere does Gans, as Girard does or at least risks doing, anthropomorphize the "ecstatic in the way of violence" primate hordes from which we have descended ever so gradually. On the contrary, in seeking the origin of representation, of language, of symbolic culture itself, Gans seeks the origin of anthropomorphism itself.

In perhaps the most revealing of his sentences in the quoted passage, René Girard owns boldly the way that his project seeks not to construct a plausible model of the originary

minimally self-conscious human subject, but rather to theorize the model of a process to which all human animals are subjected.

Religion is a structure without a subject, because the subject is the mimetic principle. I think one can have a purely realistic and materialistic interpretation of [religion]. (90)

The “religion” to which Girard alludes could bear no analogy to (say) animism or Daoism or Judaism or Christianity or even, as in ordinary thinking, the event of a glimmering of self-transcendence based in the event of the sacralization of a food object collectively remembered. It could bear no such analogy because to provide a “purely realistic and materialistic interpretation” of the events on which such religions base themselves would prove undoable. For generative anthropology, the exchangeable sign itself is not a “purely... materialistic” thing, and so the notion of a “purely... materialistic” interpretation of it seems implausible. For Gans, the exchangeable sign may be interpreted in a purely “realistic” mode, yes. But for Gans, the exchangeable sign once it emerges in nature—Nature?—is that which creates a new level of reality emergent from the purely material.

It might seem unfair of me to deploy repetitiously the phrase “mindless collective murder” as a label for the initial event in the model of hominization that Girard proposes, to the extent that from the mindlessness, in Girard’s way of thinking, human mind gradually, very gradually in the orthodox Darwinian mode of the accumulation of small differences, emerges. But let us pause over Girard’s rhetoric in the quoted passage above, to remind ourselves how attached he wishes his followers to be to the primordality of the spectacle of shocking bloodshed, intense anger, mob-like brutality, and physiological damage: “maximum undifferentiation... pure revenge... fury... supreme rage [and] supreme excitement, when you are out of your mind, ecstatic in the way of violence.” Now how does human mind come out of such a behavioral melee, or emerge from such a state of things? Well, once the arbitrarily chosen victim is killed, so Girard proposes, all the members of the community feel a peace. Without the inclusion of that subsequent-to-the-frenzy feeling or sensation of peace, the description of the scapegoat mechanism is incomplete. It is the feeling of peace that makes the community feel grateful, and it is the feeling of peace that makes the community of protohumans attribute to the body of the cadaver a sacrality the origins of which they misrecognize. I want to pause here, because mimetic theory invests so very heavily in the positivist truth of that claim of *what must have happened* repeatedly over many thousands of years of prelinguistic protohuman ritual action: maximal murderous fury succeeded by maximal peace. The transition from maximal violence to maximal (and misunderstood) peace is essential to all descriptions of the scapegoat mechanism at work on the ground. The prelinguistic feeling of peace is strong and decisive, as formidable in impact as is the felt chaos and madness of the prelinguistic “violence” that precedes it.

Another point needs to be made before we turn to a description of the different model of violent energies that Eric Gans hypothesizes and invites us to imagine in human origins. For

mimetic theory, the first symbol is not performed by the hominid body; it is not anything performed by a self-conscious agent. I confess that fact is perhaps the biggest obstacle to my feeling satisfied by or at ease with Girard's account of human origins. For Girard, the originary symbol is not a spectator's performed representation of the single victim cadaver; rather, the originary symbol is the dead body itself in the center of the scene. Girard asks us to see the body in the scenic center itself as the signifier, the material thing that signifies; and the inventory of collective memories produced by it becomes the signified (*Things Hidden* 103).

By contrast, in Gans's originary scene, the dead body at the center of the scene (and it is most often imagined as a hunted animal, a food object) is not a signifier but a referent. The signs are abortive gestures exchanged by the earliest human animals on the periphery of the scenic circle; they are gestures which represent that central object-body-referent. Girard's notion that the cadaver itself is the first sign reminds me of a moment from book III of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. One of the projects to which Lemuel Gulliver's hosts at the Academy of Lagado introduce him is "a Scheme for abolishing all Words whatsoever" (157). Despite some resistance from the common people, Gulliver reports, some academicians try to do without words by simply carrying about the things that those words represent:

...many of the most Learned and Wise adhere to the New Scheme of expressing themselves by Things, which hath only this Inconvenience attending it, that if a Man's Business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of Things upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him. (157)

For Girard, the cadaver is the Thing that "expresses" and makes visible "the mimetic principle" ("Religion is a structure without a subject, because the subject is the mimetic principle"). And the cadaver does its strange, silent work without any words being spoken or symbols being performed on the scene. The cadaver, I suggest, is the thing which pure mimetic theory (detached from originary thinking) will have to carry about as a substitute for the word that might have (in another form of event) replaced it.

### **Three Reminders**

In wondering why so many readers find René Girard's model of emissary murder attractive while comparatively few attend to Gans's far less dramatic and shocking version of originary events, I hope I am not being cynical when I suspect that those who seize upon the model's intuitive appeal are moved by certain moral intuitions; and I rush to include myself in that group, for I have felt and will continue to feel the self-situating appeal of the idea that humankind originates in countless episodes of mindless collective murder. "Violence is ugly," René Girard judged when interviewed by David Cayley of the CBC. Who would

disagree? Who wants to be on the side of violent unanimity, ganging up all against one and killing a living being?

That which makes Girard's model of human origins deeply disturbing, however, is that which makes it superficially morally attractive. Its superficial moral attractions function in the following way: by assenting to the hypothesis, we implicitly confess that, yes, however uncomfortable it makes us, we will gather under the umbrella of responsibility for our deep-seated propensity toward unspeakable cruelty and thoughtless atrocity, so as to help prevent the recurrence of such scenes and move toward being "on the side of victims." Whatever we do, we do not want to participate in scapegoating. Again, who would disagree? Who is prepared to declare: "I like scapegoating. Can you please give me an opportunity to participate in some scapegoating?" By contrast, the originary event of Gans's mimetic crisis altered by a hesitation that significantly reduces intraspecific violence is strikingly ascetic in terms of the dramatic intuitions it asks us to grasp.

I offer three reminders to point out the way indulging in the superficial moral attractions of an awareness of the "scapegoat mechanism" follows from a misreading of Girard. The first reminder is this: keeping distinct the form of spontaneous scapegoating from that of its sacrificial re-enactment, Girardian thought contains the paradox that (in the words of Guy Lefort) "...the only true scapegoats are those we cannot recognize as such" (*Things Hidden* 129). According to the model, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for any of us to bring to individual awareness the deepest collective delusions in which our group-dependent identities originate and by which they are sustained. At one conference on mimetic theory I attended, there were distributed jacket-buttons with a symbol meaning "no more scapegoats!" The buttons were circular, maybe an inch in diameter; a little goat was surrounded by red circle and the diagonal "do not" slash cut across the scapegoat, barring it from access. "No more scapegoats!" I can sympathize with the motives for the advertising campaign, but it does represent a measure of conflict with the paradox that *the only true scapegoats are the ones we do not recognize*. Those oblivious to the ineradicability of the scapegoat mechanism as psychological reality may well become tempted (if untutored) by the tee-shirts that display the painfully unironic slogan *Hate the haters*.

A second reminder is that, even at the level of the kind of conscious participation that comes with the advanced performance of rituals that contain violence (substituting for the incidents of mindless mob violence that they reconstruct through *méconnaissance*), the sacrificial treatment (expulsion, exclusion, murder) of the single victim can never be completely overcome on this side of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Just as the kingdom in which Jesus rules is not of this world, not in this world will we ever construct a society utterly free of "scapegoats." It fascinates me that some of the most ostensibly pacifist communities, those populated by separatist apocalyptic Anabaptists, are among the communities most procedurally adept at rituals of full-scale sacrificial expulsion. Regardless, Girard was not a pacifist separatist; he was not a revolutionary utopian;

nowhere does Girard project or promise a beatific state of nonviolence as the end-goal for the social order. Gans's uncompromising impatience with "victimary thinking" in many of the *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* resembles not a little Girard's critique of political correctness (*I See Satan* 161-93). Knowledge of the scapegoat mechanism, therefore, may not have that many consequences for pragmatic action, apart from the implication that we should do our best to follow Jesus, who would do us no violence and have us do no violence to one another. All the sound advice Luke Burgis offers in his delightful volume *Wanting: The Power of Mimetic Desire in Everyday Life* (2020) is, in a way, Christian wisdom tastefully plated for readers who would never wish to be churchied.

And the call to follow Jesus brings me to a third reminder, the historiographical projection of Girard, which resembles a culture critique so deeply pessimistic it risks giving way to a counsel paralytic of hopeful good will. In the Girardian model, the Christian revelation, which exposes the scapegoat mechanism for what it is and makes human communities aware of the arbitrariness and amorality of their collective violence, the "innocence" of their victims, is a revelation that brings not peace but a sword. The scapegoat mechanism divides people because once members of human communities believe less and less in the innocence of their scapegoats, and the more the Christian revelation seeps into secular global society, there will follow less and less social cohesion (which needs insiders and outsiders) and more and more a disastrous increase in mimetic competition, indifferenciation, instability, that which Girard calls "internal mediation." Given such negative consequences, it would perhaps be wise to wonder whether the mindless murderous frenzy with which Girard's theory begins ends up pervading all the predictions it makes about our prospects for social order and human self-conceptualizing. It risks operating as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The only hope it offers is that which might follow a despairing awareness of our helplessness before the reality of our constitutive species' "violence," something to which our hypermimetic nature condemns us.

### **"Violence": Damage-doing Aggressiveness or Immoral Performance?**

Given even the negative consequences of Girard's preoccupation with collective murder, let alone the positive investment the theory makes in it, how can I possibly argue that in the originary event brought to our attention by Eric Gans, there is more violence than that in the process of the mimetic evolution of culture proposed by Girard and his followers? I begin by starting from the position that "violence" properly speaking is more than destructive animal aggression, from the position that real "violence" must involve a measure—and I would alert all to the fact that in Gans's originary event the measure is an absolutely *minimal* measure—a measure of self-aware intentional action. I will wonder whether some light might be shed by drawing a line between prehuman animal aggressiveness and genuinely human violence, which requires the knowing violation of prohibited scenic centers.

Let me therefore now climb onto the stony fence of refusal that Girard's intimidating dismissal in the interview with Antonello and de Castro Rocha might well seem to have created. Sitting there in the way of a little-man Humpty Dumpty trembling with equal parts impudence and uncertainty in the face of Girard's big-man declarations, I begin by asking explicitly whether "violence" worthy of the label requires something more than damage-doing animal aggression. Let us examine an account of "ambush killing" performed by chimpanzees. Melvin Konner offers the following summary in his chapter-contribution to Scott Garrels' 2011 collection, *Mimesis and Science*.

In a group of 150 chimpanzees in the Kibale National Park studied for five years, the critical mass was about 18. At about this number, the males would grow more excited until they went out into the forest in single file. On these expeditions they were uncharacteristically quiet, and they bypassed hunting opportunities along the way, until they crossed beyond the range of their own territory. If they then came upon a lone male from the neighbouring group, they collectively beat this victim; on five different occasions, the beating was deadly. (159)

Given the quality of stealth in the chimpanzees' goal-seeking and given the way such hunting-party ambush beatings did not always end with the death of the assault victim, I do not share Konner's summary description of the episode to invite comparison between it and the hypothetical scapegoat mechanism fleshed into dramatic form. But let us ask: do we attribute to the chimpanzees' performance a *moral intention*? Yes, the violence is ugly, to pass an esthetic judgment. It is an unequal contest so damaging to its victim that it must feel "bad" to us. But at the same time, it lacks something which is, ironically, even more lacking in the frenzied violence in Girard's scapegoat mechanism.

What is that something? I poach a bit of wisdom from the late English philosopher Roger Scruton, who has engaged respectfully with Girard's thought on multiple occasions (*On Human* 128-33; *The West* 35-37; *Soul* 18-22, 180-82; *Political* 126-41; *Uses* 76-77, 202-203).

It is not the difference of species that I endow with moral significance, when I distinguish people from other animals. It is rather the difference between a moral being, who lives as the subject and object of judgment, and a non-moral being, who merely lives. (*Political* 50)

For Scruton, philosophical reflection leads us to appreciate that our human being is not reducible to our species being: anthropology cannot be reduced to biology. Generative anthropology would welcome and endorse that appreciation. That we are moral beings does not mean we are "good." It means only that we are capable of making practical judgments about "good" and "bad" courses of action. Gans has frequently argued that the specifically human intuition of moral reciprocity emerged alongside the originary exchange of signs (*Originary* 31-61).



It is true that the violence in the originary event Gans hypothesizes is not a violence assimilable to that of Girard's mindless mob frenzy. On that point, I have no objection to Girard's impatience with his student's decision not to identify fully with the teacher's version of the originary scene. However, it can be only (at best) an inattentive misrepresentation to imply that the emergence of Gans's abortive gesture of appropriation assimilates to social contract theory, to the discredited picture of man-like creatures already endowed with reason who deliberate to decide what they had better do to co-operate. In what follows, I hope to show that, not unlike the idea of the scapegoat mechanism, the originary hypothesis invests deeply in the "violent" irrationality of pragmatic paradox and morphogenetic processes, and that there is a way in which there is more violence in the originary event of Gans than there is in the scapegoat mechanism of Girard.

### **Morphogenesis and Gans's Originary Event of Violence**

I have begun to introduce myself to the ideas of self-organization and morphogenesis in mimetic theory. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, a disciple of Girard who resembles Gans partly in that he too is a thinker fond of paradox and invested in paradoxical binds as constitutive of social origins, has helped with that introduction. The paradoxical elements in Gans's originary event bear some similarities to a process of morphogenesis. Here is one account of the mimetic process as morphogenesis that Dupuy offers in his essay "Naturalizing the Mind."

Mimetic rivalry and the object of conflicting desires determine each other; neither [rivalry nor the object] preexists the other. The actions that reveal the converging desires cause them [those desires] to emerge and intensify. Desire does not preexist action. There is a feedback loop of action onto desire. (198)

The process that Dupuy there describes fits very nicely with the process in Gans's originary event. It fits nicely partly because Gans's understanding of Girard's thought is every bit as thorough, deep, and respectful as is Dupuy's understanding of it. Skeptics might jump up and say: "Not so: Gans places an appetitive food object in the originary event, so the object does preexist the rivalry in his model and that is his mistake!" The objection would be misplaced. The point of the originary hypothesis is to explain not the mechanism by which the surrounded animal victim of hominid hunts appears, but rather, the mechanism by which such a "victim" becomes a represented object, a *transcendent* object of purely human desire and exceptionally human resentment. And it is the case that according to the originary hypothesis the *sacralized* food object is a fruit of *nothing but* the kind of double mediation that Jean-Pierre Dupuy above describes. The food object sacralized (as opposed to the object of mere animal appetite and prelinguistic mimesis) does not preexist the mimetic paradox at the event of human language origin.

When Dupuy elaborates on the way Girard's superimposed mimetic triangles come to create new objects, again the description fits the emergence of the abortive gesture of

appropriation considered as itself an object:

Now, the starting point of the emergence of the object possesses an apparently contradictory twofold property: it is nothing or almost nothing, a *je ne sais quoi*; a caprice, a chance encounter; and yet, it plays a crucial role, since everything takes place *as if* it were the thing that “determined” the object, the “objective” reality that is to emerge. There is a beginning, but the beginning is evanescent; there is determinism, but the determining factor is in the final instance... beyond grasp. (198)

It helps to think of Gans’s originary sign, the abortive gesture of appropriation, a performance visible in bodily form, as itself a new “object,” a new thing in nature the “determining factor” the emergence of which is also “in the final instance... beyond grasp.” The abortive gesture of appropriation is physical; the abortive gesture of appropriation is visible and perceptible; it is a performance that occupies space and takes time. And yet the abortive gesture of appropriation is at the beginning “nothing or almost nothing.” It is the representation of a minimal hesitation; it is a gesture less extended than the pointing gesture of appetite it replaces. Seen from the outside, it would appear “a caprice, a chance encounter”; if we were to ask what *caused* the first sign user to “come up with it,” we could not appeal to the laws of physics or chemistry or biological necessity alone. There is nothing external to the mimetic paradox that makes it have to happen: “the determining factor is in the final instance... beyond grasp.” Therefore, I will be so bold as to suggest that when in the interview quoted above René Girard accused Eric Gans of engaging in “social contract” theory, Girard may have been (ironically) underappreciative of the fidelity to the principle of mimesis in Gans’s deployment of his teacher’s ideas. Girard for whatever reasons appears to have closed himself to the possibility that intellectual and spiritual labour might have been shared between the mimetic paradox at work in the mindless collective murder of scapegoating and the same at work in the mind-generating originary violence of Gans’s language event.

In Gans’s originary event, there is first pure animal violence or, to speak Girardian, acquisitive mimesis in the presence of a freshly killed food object, an object of appetite. There is mutual imitation at an ethological level, prelinguistic, in which animal appetite (not human sign-mediated desire) is the motivating factor. So *prelinguistic mimesis does contribute* to the conflict in the originary language event: those who wish for human origins to include the “prelinguistic,” who do not wish to start with language, should take comfort there. Furthermore, there is something that looks like prelinguistic “violence”; it is the psychological violence of escalating animal rivalry. This acquisitive mimesis escalates into conflictual mimesis, to use the Girardian category, because the rivals encircling the appetitively stimulating food object cannot share it without conflict. Again, the purist Girardian should take note: *prelinguistic double mediation* is at work, for the primate gestures that point toward the food object as an object of appetite are one kind of gesture; and such pointing gestures, prior to their truncation and diminishing in the emergence of

renunciation of appetite, will escalate the rivalry. Now these appetite-driven gestures that point to the food object as an object of appetite are not—we must register—the abortive gesture of appropriation, the first linguistic sign. Inasmuch as Girard's scapegoat mechanism asks us to picture a psychological state of intolerable, irresolvable tension in the modes of acquisitive and conflictual mimesis, the model of the originary event as Gans presents it borrows from Girard's conceptual repertoire and contains an intolerable quantity of psychological violence that those preoccupied by the necessity of "fury" at the origin might find satisfying.

In Gans's originary language event, there is no way the rivals will be able to satisfy their appetites or to abandon their conflictual mimesis. Either a collapse back into behavioral regulation through dominance hierarchies will return them to a state of pre-human primatological being, or they will rip each other to pieces and (to borrow a key phrase from Girard) fall into the trap of "losing sight of the object entirely and only being concerned with the model" (*Things Hidden* 311). Observe that, even before the emergence and "taking on" of Gans's distinctive and new element of *the abortive gesture of appropriation*, the scene is loaded with tension, incompatible and escalating appetites, prelinguistic mimetic fury and the loss of degree, the breakdown of dominance hierarchies. I do not omit the fact that because the victim has already been killed, this "violence" might seem a scandal to Girardian thinking, which holds fast to the idea that furiously mob-mad collective killing itself is the thing that mysterious brings about its opposite peace. But I do ask those enthralled by the maximal violence-maximal peace opposition to attend a little to the deep similarities that still abide between the two ways of thinking.

When and how, according to Gans, does the originary sign of language, the abortive gesture of appropriation, enter into the "violence" of conflictual mimesis over the food object? Originary sign exchange "happens" when one of the participants—and there need be only two, if we wish to use the triangular version—"invents" the abortive gesture of appropriation and "discovers" thereby a feeling of minimal peace that hesitating before the food object creates. Where does the gesture come from? The abortive gesture alone may from one perspective be taken as the initially "random" equivalent in Gans's scenic process of the "random" selection of the scapegoat in the orthodox Girardian mimetic hypothesis. I refer the reader to the fact mentioned above that from the "outside," the emergence of the abortive gesture of appropriation appears random, but from the inside the rivals will eventually and gradually experience its effects as a form of self-organizing mediation of conflict. Gans posits that at the origin, the minimal hesitation—I repeat, *minimal* hesitation—would create a minimal reduction of mimetic tension. The mimetic double bind caused by acquisitive mimesis is reduced by the mutual mediation that "discovers" the beneficial peace-making effects of the sign, without any one of the participants, or either of the two rivals in the triangular version, fully understanding the process. It is not a model of the supernatural injection from the sky of pacific rationality into a situation of mimetic conflict. Once the abortive gesture is invented or discovered, and imitated, and its imitation

imitated by the imitators of other imitators, more mimetic paradox and more mimetic escalation follow. What had been animal appetite for the central object now becomes sign-mediated human desire, properly speaking. Again, it is not a matter of social contract rationality; on the contrary, it is nothing other than mimetic escalation at work.

*Language is born of mimesis* in the thought of Eric Gans. Yet there in that fact is another risk of confusion caused by significant differences of vocabulary: the disciple of Gans when reading Girardian scholarship may feel a conceptual blurring in the ethologically inclined descriptions of “mimesis,” where what we would call “appetite,” an orthodox Girardian will happily label “desire.” For generative anthropology, strictly speaking, the slogan might be that where there is no language, there is no *human* desire. For us, the central food object becomes desirable only when sign-exchange substitutes briefly for the satisfaction of appetite, and as the signs continue to be exchanged, the central food object becomes more and more desirable. Originary sign exchange creates a kind of minimal peace *before* the sparagmos, because as long as we can re-present the object rather than appropriating the object, we are deferring our violence through representation. That is the formula in Gans: the function of language, of religion, of culture, is the deferral of violence through representation. Therefore, the “violence” between the peripheral rivals on the scene is reduced in these instants of minimal peace, minimal hesitation, before the consumption of the food object.

I beg the reader to notice that the “peace” is minimal; in terms of quantity of feeling, as it were, it is indeed much less than the powerful, awe-inspiring peace that follows the mob frenzy in the Girardian version of the originary process. Furthermore, the violence deferred locates itself in circulation between the rivals at the two corners of the triangle other than the one occupied by the food object; or, to use the structure of center and periphery, the violence deferred circulates between the protohuman sign-exchangers on the periphery of the circle and the food object occupies the contested central locus. It is inaccurate of Girard to claim that Gans’s model of the emergence of the sign is a “solution” to a problem; on the contrary, language itself is a new problem, to the extent that properly human desire with its infinite and in principle unsatisfiable transcendental capacity is far more problem-making than animal appetite, which is easily satisfied. Any environmental activist will eagerly explain the difference. Gans’s references to the deferral of violence are in no way references to the abolition of violence. It is unfair to caricature his model of human interaction as if it is suggesting that language comes out of nowhere and solves the problem of violence instantly. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

### **A Reading of “Originary Violence” in *Signs of Paradox***

In the tenth chapter of *Signs of Paradox* (1997), “Originary Violence,” Eric Gans more than a dozen times refers to the process of originary resentment accumulating an excess of energy that must eventually be discharged in the sparagmos. Now as “violence” is

foundational to Girard, “resentment” is foundational to Gans. In originary thinking, desire says: I want to possess the scenic center and its contents for myself. Resentment says: whoever occupies the scenic center must get out of it and let me have it. Desire desires the center imagined as unoccupied by anyone other than the all-powerful, all-consuming usurping self. Resentment resents the occupant of the center, who (or which) appears to be an all-powerful obstacle to usurpation and consumption. Gans writes: “The moment of division discharges the mimetic tension that had been redirected from their fellow participants to the central object in the form of originary resentment” (*Signs* 133). In other words, although sign exchange creates some peace between agents on the periphery when they exchange signs (the deferral of violence through representation), sign exchange increases resentment of the central sacralized object conceived as a self-withholding agent.

The term “sparagmos” denotes the consumption of the food object. The consumption includes the tearing apart into pieces and dividing up of something that once was a living whole. Witness: there in that tearing up of the central food object, a tearing-up *more violent than it would have been before the emergence of the sign*, will be that which truly merits the name human “violence.”

In the following, Gans differentiates the energies operative in nonhuman aggression and those operative in the violence of sign-mediated sparagmatic damage.

The sign expels violence from the group by concentrating it against the central figure. In historical phenomena [such as the Dionysian rituals or Robertson-Smith’s camel sacrifice] ... the violence of the action *far exceeds that required for the rational division of the object; this excess* is the measure of the specifically human phenomena of violence. (*Signs* 134) [emphasis added]

In this passage, we see the closest thing in the originary hypothesis to the “scapegoat mechanism” which exteriorizes the violent energies that were internal to the group and would have destroyed the group: “The sign *expels violence from the group* by concentrating it against the central figure.” Notice that the division of the remains of the central food object entails an excess that goes beyond the rational. Once more, a fair-minded reader would be disinclined to project into such a model a latent social contract. Rather than establishing a rational script, the economic conclusion in the hypothetical originary event of Gans, as we shall see, is a conclusion almost overwhelmed by the excess of resentment—of “violence”—being discharged.

Before the mimetically tense sign exchangers on the periphery collapse into consumption of the central victim, their attention is oscillating between the sign-as-referring-to-the-object (their gestures) and the-object-as-referred-to-by-the-sign (the food object to which their gestures refer). That oscillation is a model of the first glimmerings of esthetic experience. Gans proposes that an analogous oscillation operates during the violence of collective

consumption of the food object. This latter oscillation derives from a tension between restrained division—the will to preserve a memory of the sacred object as a formal whole—and unlimited defiguration—the will to obliterate all trace, all memory of the whole object.

Similarly, in the sparagmos, the rational appetitive operation of dividing the object is *supplemented by the violent discharge of this tension* in what is also a defiguration, a destruction of the very formal-esthetic closure that was imitated in the transformation of the appropriate gesture into a sign. (*Signs* 135)

A violent discharge that seeks to destroy the referent of language itself: does that not suffice to resemble something like what Girard was attached to under the sign of “pure fury”?

Regardless, let us translate the rather abstract formulation above into homelier terms. I invite us to think of it this way: we prepare food to eat; we cut things up, spice and sauce them, cook them; we dress the food and plate it, perhaps pray to a god before dishing it out and eating it. Compare the oblivious thoughtlessness inside which the robin chews up the worm, the eagle takes the lamb, the cheetah bites into the breathing oryx, the cow tugs out and chomps into the rough grass. The point is that once the human animal comes to *name* with exchangeable signs those things it eats, nothing—I say nothing—removes from its mind the minimal awareness of destroying another’s life to sustain one’s own. Thanks to the reality that we as humans unlike every other animal on the planet have come to represent such “victims” before consuming them, we as humans unlike every other animal on the planet have come to know the difference between eater and eaten. (It may be worth noticing that in the story of Adam and Eve, everything changes only when they eat an apple—not when they chop down the tree or pound the fruit’s pulp into juice in a mindless frenzy. Adam and Eve became aware of the knowledge of good and evil after simply... eating.) In Gans’s originary event, the awareness of the difference between eater and eaten founds ethical reflection. It may not be enough to define the human as the only animal that engages in artifactual representation; it is better to include the fact that as human animals we represent symbolically only those things that we consume; and to those things which we consume, we do “violence.” Anyone doubtful of this might ask any philosophically inclined vegan or fasting ascetic to explain.

I am suggesting that in Gans the invention/discovery of language itself has the cost of creating violence in the sense of opening the door to self-consciousness about and transcendental motives for “violence.” In the following formulation, Gans offers support for that suggestion.

The sparagmos shows that the originary deferral of potential violence through the sign was not free of cost; the resentment generated by this deferral provokes this *supplementary violent discharge of mimetically bound energy* when the deferral is terminated. (*Signs* 138) [emphasis added]

The minimal hesitation or peace enabled by sign exchange is renamed in the phrase “originary deferral of potential violence through the sign.” The minimal peace carries with it a “cost,” and that cost is a violence expended on the sacralized object that would not have been expended if the symbolic had not come into play. Therefore, language, although it creates that space of deferral that makes possible the human transcendence of purely mindless animal aggression, creates alongside itself an excess of “mimetically bound energy” that is discharged on the central sacred object.

Furthermore, we resent the objects we consume in proportion to the energy by which they appear to withhold themselves from our consumption: the sacred object is no less resented as a seeming cause of violence than desired as a source of transcendence. If all consumption itself is taken up as “violence,” is that not enough for the Girard-loyal skeptic attached to his master’s dismissal of the originary hypothesis to think twice before comfortably side-stepping any obligation to engage in dialogue with Gans by dismissing him as a “social contract” thinker who “minimizes” violence?

Furthermore, Eric Gans does not limit the inventory of items that might count as single “victims” in the scenic center to humans converted into meat for peace-bewildered cannibals. Every human everywhere must eat to live, but it is not true that everybody everywhere must confess to ancestry in cannibals only a few generations hence. The sacred center in originary thinking can be occupied by many objects, not just the human victims of collective murder: by a tract of land, by a mineral-rich mountain, by a fish-filled river, by a contested concept or item of intellectual property. The slogan *Silence is Violence* has recently enjoyed a vogue: we have reached the point where even the meaning of “silence” is a sacred central object we cannot help but tear to pieces. These facts too might help support the thesis that there is more “violence” in the originary event of Eric Gans than there is in the scapegoat mechanism of René Girard.

In the following formulation from the chapter, Gans quietly indicates that his model of anthropogenesis is not a model of the social contract by explicitly stating that the “state of nonviolence” that language initiates is not durable.

The criterion of parsimony would indeed be violated by any model that required a durable state of nonviolence as a consequence of the emission of the originary sign. The sparagmos is the originary violent act, for violence is conceivable only within the human order of representation. (*Signs* 142)

The Girard-loyalist skeptic may be puzzled by the claim “violence is conceivable only within the human order of representation.” We confront another crossroad at which confusion is created by the branching apart of different concepts of “violence.” Which way to take? In the phrase “conceivable only within the human order of representation,” Gans is not saying that humans are incapable of mindless mob violence; he is neither naïve nor oblivious to our

capacity for atrocious cruelty. Nor is he implying that ethologists never witness “animal violence” in the field, although, as I have hinted, much clarity would follow if all nonhuman “violence” were renamed aggression and we ceased anthropomorphizing nonhuman animal aggression, which should not carry with it any connotation of moral judgment. To grasp Gans’s sentence, it is best to interpret rather flat-footedly the verb “to conceive.” The idea is that we cannot conceive our violence, think about our violence, name it, reflect upon it, remember it, become self-conscious about it or become morally responsible for it, even at the most basic level of reflective intuition, unless we are “within the human order of representation”—unless we are minimally equal as language users, exchangers of the sign, unless the victim can name itself to the persecutor as if capable of belonging to the realm of words and the persecutor can “hear” the name of the victim. Until we are “within the human order of representation,” we do not have *human* violence. One of the things that a real dialogue between Gans and Girard might eventually help to clarify is that the scapegoat mechanism at work in the earliest stages of human history, prior to language, is named “violence” only at the cost of risking the slide from a sensible esthetic judgment to an unreasoned moral judgment. Is aggressive harmful damage done to a physical body the only thing we need to name the action “violence”? Is all intraspecific aggression “violence”?

As the chapter “Originary Violence” proceeds, Gans shifts his lexical choices a little and the term “aggression” comes into play. I believe the shift is significant; it reflects the sharpening of Gans’s sense that the deferral of violence through representation by implication recommends regathering images of anthropomorphized “violence” done by nonhuman languageless creatures under a different label.

In resentment, the aggression deferred by the sign is accumulated within *the new human order* in preparation for its discharge in the sparagmos, which [discharge] is indispensable to the successful conclusion of the event. (*Signs* 145) [emphasis added]

The “delusion,” if you like, that the mimetic paradox in the originary event creates is the feeling or belief in the rivals that the object is an agency or personhood withholding itself. Gans’s counterpart to Girardian *méconnaissance* occurs here: the deferral of violence through representation creates the misrecognized sacred. As I argued above, only with difficulty can the cadaver alone in Girard’s scene be considered an agential source of prohibitions and ritual prescriptions; or we can say that it is really that, but only in the remembering minds of the mimetic subjects emerging in the aftermath of violence. In the same way, we can say that the food object in Gans’s scene is not really an agential source of self-withholding power; or we can say that it is really that, but only in the minds of the mimetic subjects emerging in scenic conflict. Mimetic desire, mimetic paradox, and *méconnaissance* operate in both cases.

In the end, Gans associates his hypothetical model of the origin of language with the theological model of the decisive separation of humankind from “nature” in the paradox of



the fortunate fall. Before moving to our final quotation in this series, and the longest, recall that the violence expended on the sacralized food object results from the *méconnaissance* entangled with the paradox-induced belief in its self-withholding. The violence is directed toward the seeming “personhood” of the center which, in reality, is nothing other than the morphogenetic result of the statistical accumulation of abortive gestures of appropriation being exchanged. Now although the originary human animals in their sacrificial violence (in the *sparagmos*) tear up, divide, and destroy by eating the single slain animal in the center, the experience has been sufficiently powerful—and that powerfulness may be taken as a counterpart in Gans of the “peace” that follows the mob violence in Girard’s scapegoat mechanism—sufficiently powerful that the participants will recall the now-empty center of the scene as a locus or site of significance.

The happy failure of this resentful aim [the aim to obliterate the center entirely] becomes manifest only after the event, in the subsistence of the sign and of the central locus as the support of its significance. Interpersonal aggression has failed in its ultimate aim: the sacred person has remained intact. The universe of signification has saved the human community from returning to animality. We are justified in calling aggression against the central being “evil” even in the purely human sense of “antisocial.” But our analysis also makes clear that evil in the latter sense [the purely human sense of “antisocial”] is a derivative notion: in the absence of the central guarantee of communal loyalty referred to by the sign, aggression, intraspecific or otherwise, would be merely an animal phenomenon. (*Signs* 52)

Permit me to add the implied inversion: In the *presence* of the central guarantee of communal loyalty referred to by the sign, human aggression becomes a thing different in kind and merits the name “violence.” It merits the name because only it carries within itself the infinity of a “violence” that transcends anything conceivable in the animal kingdom, because we are capable of reflecting on the violence that we do but we do it anyway; and doing it anyway, even though we can represent it to ourselves, is the thing which definitely separates human violence from mindless animal aggression and—yes—separates it from the mindless collective murder of the scapegoat mechanism. The aim of obliterating the sacred center of the originary scene is the project of destroying God. Girardians are often theological thinkers, so I ask: is there a desire more violent than the desire to obliterate God? Once again, we have an opportunity to observe that there is *more violence in the originary event hypothesized by Eric Gans than there is in the scapegoat mechanism proposed by René Girard*.

Girard’s accusation that Gans fails to appreciate the power of violence in anthropogenesis because he is proposing a model of the origin of language as a solution to the problem of violence is, I hope it has become clear, at least a little unfortunately misleading. So much depends on how one conceptualizes “violence.” For Girard, any conflictual mimetic behavior whatsoever, including damaging competitive behaviors of cats and dogs and geese and fish,

may well deserve the name “violence.” By contrast, Eric Gans is from the beginning seeking a model to describe and explain only that “violence” given to our specifically human self-consciousness, as mediated by symbolic exchange.

The originary hypothesis creates a model for the emergence of the peaceful creativity that language makes possible. However, it also creates a minimal model for the destructive creativity that language makes possible. There is no room for beatific innocence anywhere in Gans’s model of the deferral of representation through violence. That we represent our damaging aggressiveness but continue to perform it anyway makes it worse and more “violent” than anything animals do. The deferral of violence through representation entails, with the discharge of sign-mediated resentment in the sparagmos, a self-consciousness of the very “crime” of consumption. The following sentences refer to the “resentment” that has been created by sacralization of the central object before its consumption.

Resentment of the central object accompanies recognition of its sacrality. The evil action of the sparagmos is preceded by evil intent. Each participant commits the crime of appropriation in his imagination at the very moment he renounces it in practice; the renunciation and the crime are inseparable. (*Signs* 144-45)

Originary ostensive representation means that the participants have only a name for the central object (they do not yet predicate anything of it). Even so, the naming and its deferral of violence permit those originary humans who exchange the abortive gestures to hold the food object in mind as an object of “imagination.” Imagine the moments before the sparagmos, during which the mimetic rivals are representing the object rather than appropriating it, their desire and resentment both escalating. To represent the object before consuming it is, precisely, to consume it in imagination rather than consuming it in reality: that is why “the renunciation [in practice] and the crime [in imagination] are inseparable” (145).

The self-consciousness of originary humans in the sparagmos is a “crime,” according to Gans.

The original “crime” of culture is not intraspecific murder—which other species commit as well on occasion—but the uniquely human act of representation, which defers appetitive action and creates difference. (*Signs* 144)

I point out Gans’s rejection of the primacy of Girard’s scapegoat mechanism in the passage (“The original crime is not intraspecific murder”). We might also notice the nod to Derrida’s deconstructive principle of *différance* (“which defers... and creates difference”). Gans continues: “It is this difference that gives rise to the ethical laws that define and forbid murder as well as to the desire that motivates it” (144). What exactly is “this difference”? I remind the reader of the wisdom I poached from Roger Scruton above. It is that between the animal that can represent its “violence” to itself (the human) and the animal without

language that cannot represent its “violence” to itself. There is no murder in the animal kingdom, strictly speaking, for in the animal kingdom there is no linguistic capacity to represent, define, hesitate before, or prohibit killing—because one has not yet named the object that is there in the scenic center about to be “murdered.” It might be sensational and thought-provoking to think of mindless scapegoating as “murder”; but it is also at least a little misleading.

## **Coda**

To close, I borrow and play with a passage from Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s indispensable study *The Mark of the Sacred* (2008; trans. 2013). Prepare to observe Dupuy describing a morphogenetic process that is morally paradoxical. A mimetic interaction exclusive of any “intentional act” will somehow produce through an “unconscious process,” a “conviction” about that act. But where there is conviction, there must be reflection on the intention that was (ironically) thought not to be part of the act in the first place.

The scapegoat mechanism... does not function as an intentional act. Persons who persecute others do so without knowing what they do. This, perhaps, is why they must be forgiven: the very act of persecution produces in them, through an unconscious process, the conviction that their victim is guilty. (117)

I will now playfully transpose Dupuy’s formulations into the key of the originary event, particularly the sparagmos, where resentful sign-mediated violence against the sacralized object would have caused communal dissolution but for the effect of the sign.

The sacralization of the central object... does not function as an intentional act. Humans who consume the objects they sacralize do so without knowing what they do. This, perhaps, is why they must be forgiven: the violence of consumption produces in them, through an unconscious process, the conviction that their consumption is innocent.

I would suggest that the consumption *is* innocent, to the extent that we must eat in order to live, and the Loving Creator surely did not give us life so that we might starve ourselves to death. If we permit René Girard to have his “guilty” violence at the origin of languageless human culture, perhaps we should open ourselves to grant Eric Gans the permission to present a hypothesis of “innocent” violence at the origin of language-based human culture. In any case, I submit that reflection on Dupuy’s text alongside the Gans-inspired transposition of it may open us up to the resonant proximity between Girard’s and Gans’s ways of thinking.

René Girard calls us with apocalyptic Christian urgency to renounce all our “violence” (an impossible task, finally). Eric Gans calls us with generous judgment in the spirit of Jewish wisdom to recognize that in representing our “violence” we do defer, and so renounce, some

of it (a less dramatic but more doable project). For Gans, we defer the damage-doing animal aggressiveness that would have destroyed our species in its originary context of hypermimetic self-destruction (just as the “scapegoat mechanism” allowed our gradual emergence from animality in Girard’s view). For Gans, thanks to the originary sign (in my view, the sign has been from the beginning a gift of the Loving Creator, not the shameful trace of an atrociously mindless cruelty), we also open ourselves to the ontological realm of representation, where conscience will risk making cowards of us all and where the powerful technologies that come in the train of symbolic culture bring us into the position of the superspecies threatening to destroy its own planetary habitat.

For both Girard and Gans, representation *contains* intraspecific violence. For both Girard and Gans, the human is the hypermimetic religious animal, a maker of the sacred. The time has come to cease projecting an image of discontinuous rivalry onto the Girard-Gans relationship. Rather than permitting the remarks that René Girard made in some interviews decades ago perpetually to legitimate a peremptory dismissal of the work of Eric Gans, the case of Gans versus Girard or Girard versus Gans should be dismissed. A genuine understanding of the originary thinking of Eric Gans can only deepen the understanding of and increase the explanatory power of “mimetic theory.” Those interested in “mimetic theory” should acknowledge and study the work of Gans rather than (more or less) ignoring it. Neither René Girard nor Eric Gans has to occupy exclusively the inaccessible center of anthropological truth. It would be better to let the two anthropological thinkers dance around that center together, pseudo-enemy brothers delighting in self-deprecating mimesis. The truth is that Girard and Gans, Gans and Girard, will always belong together.

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