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# **Mimesis and Ritual: Girardian Critique of the Social Contract**

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## **Abstract**

The social contract has become the dominant basis for political society, yet political theology is still prevalent in many countries. Rene Girard's theory of human nature as involving mimesis and ritual offers a more sufficient account for this continuity than that of the social contract theorists. This paper will demonstrate how the views of human nature and the formation of society given by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau not only failed to account for our religious and ritualistic aspects, but provided a basis for the evolution of the social contract into a pragmatic contract. Originally it was conceived as predicated upon natural rights; but the pragmatic use creates arbitrary rights agreed upon by a society. When considered in light of humanity's imitative and rivalistic tendencies, this poses a serious worry. Girard's theory provides the understanding that society isn't only predicated upon agreement, but also upon imitation, religion, and ritual.

This paper will critique the social contract theorists' conceptions of human nature and the formation of society through Rene Girard's theories of mimesis, scapegoating, and ritual. Girard's views account for the continuance and prevalence of political theology; conversely the current conception of the social contract deprives those situated in western democracy of any such account of political theology. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau proposed varying theories regarding the content, legitimacy, and purpose of the social contract. Their methods introduced pragmatic approaches to structuring political institutions, approaches that eventually rendered appeals to natural rights arbitrary. Girard's theories of mimetic desire, scapegoating, and the ritualistic basis of society critique the intellectual traditions of each social contract theorist. The rationalistic, pragmatic approach to political authority influenced by Hobbes fails to recognize the role of ritual and spirituality in the origins of society. Locke's view of property rights as the grounds of the social contract is ultimately refuted by the pragmatic approach and is ignorant of the mimetic nature of desire; rational agreement is an insufficient means for preventing mimetic tensions regarding

property. Rousseau's view of the independence of man is blind to man's dependence on imitation and tradition. A Girardian critique of the social contract theories provides a more comprehensive understanding of the continued prevalence of political theology.

## The Social Contract & Pragmatism

Thomas Hobbes claims the social contract is necessary in order to maintain the social order and prevent a violent state of nature. He writes, "the passions that incline men to peace are: fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them."<sup>1</sup> Fear of losing one's life or comfort is necessary for humanity to be inclined to pursue peace. However, though we pursue peace, we also do all we can to defend ourselves.<sup>2</sup> According to Hobbes, this drives societies to enter into social contracts to protect these interests, but in order for such an agreement to be successful, it must be enforced by a common, absolutely sovereign power: the leviathan. This agreement to submit to the leviathan is necessary due to Hobbes' conception of man's existence in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"<sup>3</sup> due to his fickle and violent nature.

John Locke conceived of the purpose of this formation of society as a method of preserving the natural rights of those who enter into it. He refers to such a society as a common wealth; an independent community that comes together with the consent of each individual.<sup>4</sup> Locke's view of the purpose of such a common wealth originates in his conception of 'property of person'.

"The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided... he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property."<sup>5</sup>

An individual is the proprietor of their own body, and, by extension, the proprietor over anything on which they labor. Lockean natural rights such as life, liberty, and property are such extensions of self-propriatorship. A common wealth is primarily concerned with the preservation of personal property; its conception is for this

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, XIV.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, XIII.

<sup>4</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 66.

purpose. Common wealths, “by compact and agreement, settled the property which labour and industry began... either expressly or tacitly disowning all claim and right to the land in the others possession”<sup>6</sup>.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceives of the social contract as a matter of convenience, predicated on the autonomy of the individual. He asserts the independence of man; “once the children are freed from the obedience they owed the father and their father is freed from the care he owed his children, all return equally to independence.”<sup>7</sup> The family is the only natural society, yet it’s predicated on temporary need and would proceed to remain “only by means of convention.”<sup>8</sup> Humans are characterized by their common liberty. They are driven to enter into a social contract, not by violence and fear of each other, but by fear of nature. Humanity reaches “the point where obstacles that are harmful to their maintenance in the state of nature gain the upper hand by their resistance to the forces that each individual can bring to bear to maintain himself in that state.”<sup>9</sup> It becomes evident that one might not be able to survive independently; therefore it becomes advantageous to “form by aggregation a sum of forces that could gain the upper hand over the resistance.”<sup>10</sup> Rousseau holds that government is only legitimized by the consent of every individual due to the natural autonomy of each; the general will.

Considering the influence of these theories in modern politics and philosophy will demonstrate the following points. First, that the social contract theories encouraged a more pragmatic approach to politics and government. Second, that the resultant approach reduces notions of natural rights and freedom to mechanisms of the social contract, rather than principles the contract is predicated upon. Third, this pragmatic approach influenced by the social contract thinkers produces the view that the formation of community and peace consists in a rational agreement.

Mark Lilla’s article, *The Politics of God*, recognizes such pragmatic tendencies. Division and violence produced by religious war prompted Hobbes to “plant a seed, a thought that it might be possible to build legitimate political institutions without grounding them on divine revelation.”<sup>11</sup> He asserts that peace is to be found through government structure rather than through a religion that legitimizes it. Locke similarly

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*, 142.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lilla, *The Politics of God*, 4.

advocates for the social contract because it is useful for protecting property, while Rousseau sees its value in maintaining mankind's independence while allowing them to maintain themselves. Though Rousseau valued religion, he didn't necessarily search for a divine principle; "...all particular religions are good when one serves God usefully in them."<sup>12</sup>

The social contract theorists were not pure pragmatists, but their ideas prepared the way for such thought. Though Locke and Rousseau do appeal to natural rights and the autonomy of the individual as legitimizing political authority, ultimately, the implications of the social contract will undermine those rights. If the foundation of society is rational agreement, then rights become arbitrary; they can merely be what the society has agreed to respect; they are not necessarily 'natural'. Individual choice does not legitimize the contract; the contract legitimizes recognition of individual choice. Within a pragmatic society, appeals to "natural rights" and even freedom as intrinsically desirable are arbitrary outside a social contract. Ironically, the history and conception of the social contract itself opened up the possibility of such pragmatic notions.

Without original principles as the origin of the contract, governance becomes a procedural mechanism rather than a consecration of natural rights. Common to the social contract theorists is the notion that the best way to form society consists in rational agreement. They differ in the purpose, necessity and scope of this agreement, yet they all perpetuate the notion of community being predicated upon a contract. Hobbes asserts that an agreement is necessary to refrain from violence and therefore create the peaceful conditions for community. Locke views agreement to respect property rights as essential in order to trust others and thus join in relationship with them. Rousseau expounds on the natural independence of man and how he only joins in society with others due to need and convenience.

### **Girard's Theory and Critique**

Our current intellectual tradition relies heavily on the social contract theorists in elucidating human nature and formation of societies, but this tradition leaves us dry. Rene Girard's theories of mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism provide a more complete conception of these notions, providing us better resources for understanding our current political situation.

Mimetic theory asserts that humans are imitative by nature; we borrow from those to whom we are exposed, particularly those closest to us. Thoughts, mannerisms, and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 5.

especially desires are mimetic. Girard focuses on the latter, asserting that desire<sup>13</sup> is not determined by ourselves; “we do not each have our own desire, one really our own”<sup>14</sup>. Desires do not arise individually; rather, they are predicated upon community.

The mimetic nature of desire explains the need for the scapegoat mechanism. Through imitation, humans start adopting the same objects of desire. If the object is scarce, those who imitate each other and therefore desiring one and the same object become rivals.<sup>15</sup> The multiplication and continuation of such rivalries has the potential for birthing a Hobbesian war of all against all. “Far from making ourselves independent and autonomous, we give ourselves over to never ending rivalries.”<sup>16</sup>

The scapegoat mechanism is the means by which such a brutish existence is avoided. Rivalries are dispelled and peace is reinstated through the blaming of a member of society and their subsequent expulsion or murder. Girard explains in detail how archaic societies performed ritual sacrifice in an attempt to relieve the desires that caused tension in their communities. “Indeed, to escape from animal instinct... humans have to discipline their desire, and they cannot accomplish that except by means of sacrifices.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Girard, the agreement upon which the social contract is predicated is not the product of consensus among autonomous individuals. Rather, the agreement is a product of the mimetic nature of humans and the scapegoat mechanism. Similarity in opinion is reached through imitation of opinion; therefore a consensus is likely to be based on communal desire rather than individual rationality. This directly discounts not only the theory of the foundation of society, but also Locke and Rousseau’s conceptions of the just methods of creating and promulgating law. Locke’s majority rule appears much less rational; granting power to mimetic mob mentality.<sup>18</sup> Rousseau’s general will is no better; the agreement of *all* is probably more indicative of the workings of mimetic desire and less indicative of the autonomy and individuality he holds as the foundation of the general will. Mimetic theory indicates that “this autonomy, however, is really nothing but a reflection of the illusions projected by our admiration for [those we imitate].”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Girard asserts that desire, mimetic in nature, is distinguished from need.

<sup>14</sup> Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this elucidates Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

This account of humans as mimetic beings implies that Rousseau was mistaken in his understanding of mankind as naturally independent. By nature, our desires are dependent on each other. Therefore, our choices are dependent on each other to some extent. Girard is adamant that “truly to desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires.”<sup>20</sup> We lack the ability to *want* anything without any mimetic connection to others.<sup>21</sup> Our imitative tendencies draw us into connections naturally, therefore the family is not the only natural society; every society is predicated upon the connections that arise out of imitation and form human culture.

On Girard’s view, society is also predicated upon ritualistic sacrifice through the scapegoat mechanism. Though Hobbes was trying to bring about societal order by avoiding the controversial subjects of religion and ritual, he consequently missed the key to societal order itself. Order comes about by the release of mimetic tensions through the expulsion or sacrifice of a scapegoat. Rational agreement is an insufficient means to prevent or relieve tensions of desire. Hobbes does recognize the limits of such rationality due to man’s passionate nature, but the leviathan acting as a strong central authority is the means to bring order from human nature. According to Girard, this is not enough; the scapegoat mechanism must still be in operation. Religion, ritual, and tradition continue this mechanism in societies in some form or another.<sup>22</sup> Hobbes’ early pragmatic tendencies caused him to reject any such religious principle.

Mimetic theory also indicates that Locke was mistaken in his conception of property. Though Locke had some recognition of mimetic conflict resulting from disagreements over property, he didn’t see that a contracted agreement would lack the ability to prevent or dispel such conflict. In fact, forming a political community might even increase the occurrence of rivalries. Society brings individuals into relation with each other and highlights the desires for property in its desperate strivings to secure property rights. Materialistic desires might be introduced due to the emphasis the contract places on property rights. Furthermore, the pragmatic approach influenced by the social contract renders ‘natural’ property rights arbitrary; a clause in the malleable contract. A property right would only exist insofar as everyone agrees to respect it.

The current pragmatic view of a contract that is changeable based on agreement has been informed by theorists who themselves were misinformed; they lacked the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Granted, Girard’s theory has yet to be carefully qualified in terms of desires for food, sex, sleep, etc. He might qualify these as needs which have a non-imitative basis.

<sup>22</sup> It’s possible that this occurs in a non-violent manner. The Israelites, for example, used animal sacrifice as their method of enacting the scapegoat mechanism.

knowledge of humanity's mimetic nature and society's religious, ritualistic basis. This has created our current dilemma: we have disposed of the misguided principles behind the social contract, but have kept the procedural aspects of the contract which were originally founded upon those principles. If Girard is correct, we need to question the misunderstandings of human nature on which the social contract was founded.

### **The Implications: Political Theology**

Political theology, in short, is the age-old method of basing governing structures and authority on divine principles. Lilla states our current condition in regards to political theology:

“We in the West are disturbed and confused. Though we have our own fundamentalists, we find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still stir up messianic passions, leaving societies in ruin. We had assumed this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.”<sup>23</sup>

He continues to argue that our lack of understanding is due to the influence of our political tradition, beginning with Hobbes. He views Rousseau's partiality to and appreciation of religion as a preservational force for religious influence in politics.<sup>24</sup> This is true, but the pragmatic shift that the social contract thinkers set in motion has come to view religion and ritual in terms of its procedural value rather than its explanatory value. Mere religious *influence* in government is understood as pragmatically advantageous; the radical political theology in Islamic nations is not. Why is an approach which causes such conflict and contradicts our conception of a contract as the best way to proceed still so prevalent? Our pragmatic framework which conceives of a changeable social contract provides little explanation.

Girard's understanding of society as predicated upon religious ritual provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the continued presence of political theology. Given that human society is founded upon mimesis and ritual, it seems inconceivable that any society would be able to continue its existence without its religious and ritualistic framework which provides the occurrence of the scapegoat mechanism. In this sense, we are an anomaly; western political societies found a way to have such a framework apart from government. Lilla describes the American experience as “utterly exceptional: there is no other fully developed industrial society with a population so committed to its faiths (and such exotic ones), while being

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<sup>23</sup> Lilla, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 6.

equally committed to the Great Separation.”<sup>25</sup> We have embraced a social contract yet maintained a principled approach to it.

Furthermore, the mimetic nature of humans renders a departure from strong, imitated principles ingrained in Islamic society highly unlikely. Their society is bonded through imitation and their communal ritualistic mechanisms. Again, American society is unique in its successful completion of this pragmatic move, but we shouldn't assume that we have lost our imitative tendencies and need for the scapegoat mechanism; they have simply manifested themselves in different ways. A recognition of these tendencies in religion, politics, and popular culture will help us to end our flawed perception that humanity can ultimately progress beyond principles, beyond the needs which political theology fills.

Our current procedural notions regarding government and society were originally founded upon the flawed principles presented and influenced by the social contract theorists. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau conceived of political societies as founded upon rational agreement; even Hobbes overestimated humanity's autonomy and rationality. Girard's theory concludes that such an understanding does not recognize the mimetic nature of humans and underestimates the role of ritual in the formation of society, and the continued need for such ritual. Ironically, the best way to proceed is only discovered or understood through a comprehension of Girard's principles. Girard's understanding illuminates the continuation of political theology, demonstrating that a complete move away from divine principles to rational procedures is difficult and unlikely given certain aspects of human nature: mimesis and the scapegoat mechanism.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 10.

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Abortion as Ritual Sacrifice: A Girardian Take on the Scapegoat Mechanism in Sexual Politics. Facebook0. Tweet0. The real nature of the violence and the victim are concealed, in defiance of rationality, for the violence works in a powerfully conservative way to preserve the current social structure while satisfying mimetic cravings. The structural violence of a society which values the achievements of male bodies and denigrates those of female bodies remains in place, but women are allowed the chance to escape the violence by shedding their own blood and that of their offspring. The women remain eternal disciples, despising their own bodies as the source of their social constriction and seeking always to deflect the death of being that seems to be their lot. Mimesis and Violence -An Introduction to the Thought of Rene Girard. Chris Fleming. University of Western Sydney. Unlike Quixote's admiration for Amadis, the antagonists of *The Red and the Black* serve to be both models for each other's desire, but also, most importantly, as obstacles to its consummation. Drawing on that aspect of his work that detailed the propensity for mimesis to increasingly generate internal mediation, and hence conflict, Girard expanded his interests to cultural and social anthropology. By the time of the appearance of his third book in 1972, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard had incorporated his notion of mimetic desire into a more general theory of cultural formation. Despite this caveat, the similarities between Girardian mimesis and SLT are striking. Girard, using primarily anthropological data and analyses of fictional narratives to support his theory, rarely points to the mass of data from social psychology that supports his mimetic theory. A critique of Girardian theory might be proposed regarding this classificatory schema, based on the breadth and diversity of people that can fall into this group. It could be said that any person could be placed into this category on hindsight, after they have been scapegoated. Regardless of Girard's failure to utilize the social sciences, Social Learning Theory and the study of group dynamics appear to confirm at least this one part of Girard's theory.

Rene Girard (November 25, 1923 – November 4, 2015) was a French historian, literary critic, and philosopher of social science whose work belongs to the tradition of anthropological philosophy. Girard was the author of nearly thirty books, with his writings spanning many academic domains. Although the reception of his work is different in each of these areas, there is a growing body of secondary literature on his work and his influence on disciplines such as... The social contract has become the dominant basis for political society, yet political theology is still prevalent in many countries. Rene Girard's theory of human nature as involving mimesis and ritual offers a more sufficient account for this continuity than that of the social contract theorists. This paper will demonstrate how the views of human nature and the formation of society given by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau not only failed to account for our religious and ritualistic aspects, but provided a basis for the evolution of the social contract into a pragmatic contract. Originally it was conceived as predicated upon natural rights; but the pragmatic use creates arbitrary rights agreed upon by a society.