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Should we take sides?: Girard, Mouffe, *et al* on graceful divisiveness

Abstract: This paper interprets the rhetoric and social phenomena of “taking sides” and “scapegoating” amidst radical societal division. Exploring the social mechanics of unity and division, I visit the work of René Girard and Chantal Mouffe, who offer a lucid ambivalence regarding the dilemma that neutrality is a practical impossibility. And in turning to implications of their shared paradox—that to be genuinely “peaceful” may require graceful divisiveness—I consider cases and theory on nonviolently fomenting conflict. In contrast with certain liberal social theories of transcending division, this paper treats the desire for politics beyond hegemony—or politics without a scapegoat—as something of an eschatological ideal, toward which Girard, Mouffe, and others offer a tension-filled, crypto-Augustinian, agonistic pluralism.

Keywords: René Girard, Chantal Mouffe, Agonism, Division, Divisiveness, Unity

*If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against.
The struggle between 'for' and 'against' is the mind's worst disease.*

Seng-T'san (d. 609 BCE)

(Conze, Horner, Snellgrove and Waley, 1954, p. 296).

Introduction

Amidst increasing political polarization in our day (Klein, 2021), T'San's wisdom would seem to raise before our consciousness the human propensity to scapegoat others and invite us instead to abandon our tribalism, deescalate rivalries of us versus them, and embrace our shared humanity. It might call to mind Christ's breaking down barriers between people and his prayer that "they may be one," or St. Paul's exhortation to live in peaceful accord with one another. And it may seem to affirm Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tolerance-maxim of social harmony: "anything that destroys social unity is useless" (Rousseau, 1997, p. 147). One of the great recent peace activists, Thích Nhất Hạnh, similarly voiced the need to transcend combative dualism, critiquing even liberation theology's common refrain of a "preferential option for the poor." He writes, "I do not think God wants us to take sides, even with the poor...those with the highest understanding will be able to see the suffering in both the poor and the rich...When we take sides, we misunderstand the will of God" (Hạnh, 1995, 79f). Liu Xiaobo similarly gave his Nobel Peace Prize speech, entitled "I Have No Enemies," pointing us beyond adversarial side-taking (Xiaobo, 2010). Some theological works today speak in a similar tone, appealing to a spirituality beyond divisiveness, seeking to create an "us without a them"—like *The Church of Us Vs. Them* (Fitch, 2019), or *Jesus Outside the Lines* (Sauls and Lyons, 2015), or *Life at the End of Us Versus Them* (Rempel, 2017). In all, T'san's renunciation of the for-against disease would seem to be essential wisdom for a world roiling with antagonism, in which one often hears calls to turn down the temperature, find common ground, and cease partisan divisiveness.

But, knowing that "unity" can be poisoned with falsehood and injustice, *how exactly* do we transcend division? Theologian Kristen Deede Johnson (2007), maps out two major categories of answers offered by social theorists regarding the factiousness of difference: liberal-tolerance approaches and post-Nietzschean agonist approaches. If we use this classification, liberal tolerance theory today is particularly manifest in discourse resembling the above irenicism which aims to create a politics without polarization, a politics beyond hegemony. On the academic front of liberal-tolerance, Johnson engages figures like John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Rorty. But

on the public front, liberal-tolerance can take on far less disciplined forms, seen especially in discourse that aims to speak from a position of neutrality, identifying how there are “both sides” to rivalries, and that the speaker stands above the fray. Among recent controversial examples, we might recall responses to the 2017 Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, a maelstrom of Nazi salutes, Confederate flags, counter-protests, fistfights, and a murder. In its wake, then President Trump, in what might be considered an extremist take on “tolerance,” avoided taking sides by rhetorically framing the event as a problem stemming from “both sides.” In this and other cases, even though he and his vocal supporters have been regularly characterized as “divisive” by critics, one of his movement’s chief rhetorical modes has been to invoke *unity* and *peace* while accusing critics of being irascible dividers bent on scapegoating and “witch hunts.” For example, advocates of “critical race theory,” he has said, are “divisive”—irrationality festering upon past battles. In a similar rhetorical framework, the Georgia State Senate, for example, passed a bill (HB1084) that forbade any K-12 classroom teaching about “divisive” concepts, particularly teaching on race and U.S. history. The bill and others like it aim to prohibit any teaching that could make students feel that they bear personal responsibility for historic wrongs because of their race, color, sex, or national origin (Bernstein, 2022). While these might represent extreme cases among politicians, public polling also evidences an abiding reticence to express political opinions—fearing that divisive remarks could spark social backlash and threaten job security. The Cato Institute, for example, reports an increase in self-censorship regarding political ideas, wherein 62% of Americans feel prevented from speaking their opinions out of social fear (Ekins, 2020.) We might then suggest that, regarding liberal tolerance motifs, we are seeing a contorted public torpor, wherein rhetoric of “unity” and “transcending” partisanism is regularly employed in service of otherwise controversial agendas, while anything “divisive” is regularly freighted with negative connotations. With “tolerance” so regularly deployed in confusing manners, it follows that a generation of social theory has been contemplating the end of liberalism (e.g. Deneen, 2018).

A chief alternative to liberal-tolerance approaches, the *agonistic*, suggests a more paradoxical reading of T’San’s exhortation in a facially opposed thesis: that to be against-againstness and strive for truth in our world almost invariably involves *taking sides*. This agonistic approach has been advanced by Bonnie Honig, Stephen K. White, William Connolly, and, prominently, Belgian social theorist Chantal Mouffe, who will be explored below in this paper. Mouffe critiques liberal tolerance approaches as misguided attempts

to create a “politics beyond hegemony.” Seeing this as an impossibility, her political agonism resonates with the haunting words of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who insisted that if we want to transcend division, then paradoxically “*we must take sides...neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim...Sometimes we must interfere*” (Wiesel, 1986). Martin Luther King Jr. too, as we will see, exhorted that, to build peace, we may even need to *foment* conflict, to bring hidden injustices to the surface. While King is almost universally praised in our day, one cannot help but recall that, at the time of his assassination he was regarded as a *divisive* fomenter of discord, with a disapproval rating of around 75% (Cobb, 2018). In unpacking Mouffe’s agonism, we will better see how Wiesel or Dr. King were not misguided in their “taking sides.” *A fortiori*, we might also see how the Prince of Peace was not contradicting his pacific teachings in the fractious dictum, “I came *not to bring peace but division.*” Rather, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, I will argue, can help us mediate the reigning antinomy between irenic unity and divisive embattlement that so marks our context.

If Mouffe sifts liberalism’s aim to “construct a politics without hegemony,” René Girard’s mimetic theory, too, presents us with the parallel question of whether we can ever have a “politics without a scapegoat.” A wide-ranging scholar, his mimetic theory has been framed in many ways—a theory of comparative mythology, a study of the transition from archaic to revealed religions, a hypothesis on the origins of human culture, etc. But one sure description is that his is *a theory of conflict*, and it is particularly suited toward this problem of “taking sides.” In an article examining political conflict through the lens of mimetic theory, scholar Nathan Colborne (2013) crystallized the theory’s implications about divisiveness, asking, *can we ever engage in a politics without a scapegoat?* The question stems from mimetic theory’s diagnosis that human consciousness is marked by a blindness to our own scapegoating, and this defect has ubiquitously penetrated all of humanity’s desires and institutions. As such, mimetic theory seems to demonstrate that we are stuck within “a political, religious, and cultural problem *without a political, religious, or cultural solution.*” For any attempt to remedy societal injustices—whether through laws, consensus, inclusive procedures, education, religion, taboos, public shaming, cancelling, even critique itself—will paradoxically manifest as yet another iteration of partisan rivalry. None of our available solutions seem to truly transcend division, for none are neutral. It would seem *any* participation in our political and cultural milieu, any “taking sides,” *de facto* leads to scapegoating. Can one engage our political turmoil

without becoming further ensnared in rivalry? Or must anyone sensitized to the mechanics of scapegoating be consigned to irenic, apolitical quietude?

For instance, when I speak with students of mimetic theory, they report a change in perception: they see rivalrous imitation everywhere where it was once hidden—in others and in themselves. They begin to see how we are more often unwittingly driven by unconscious posturing, projecting, and scapegoating. And in beginning to see this, it introduces a temptation to entirely *withdraw* from or “stand above” all social discourse and controversial disagreements—about everything from climate change to racism to vaccines. For, now more aware of our unconsciously imitative psychology, we can see how in many conflicts there is indeed a mirroring dynamic in which “both sides” are party to the escalation. But if we think this way, almost any urge to engage in disputation, education, or advocacy is now checked by an internal interruption: are *you* scapegoating? One is here reminded of Girard’s scholarly counterpart, Walter Burkert, who said that enlightenment inescapably impresses *insecurity* upon us: for if every assertion can be contested, we are unsure of where to turn and perhaps secede from all conflictual matters (1991, p. 312).

In the following, I show how René Girard and Chantal Mouffe help illuminate this dilemma about peaceableness and “taking sides.” After exploring their conflict theories, in a third and final section I explore practical illustrations of graceful divisiveness, of respectful agonism, via seasoned practitioners and scholars of conflict. In all, I argue that appeals to “unity” and anti-divisiveness in cultural discourse today are dangerously ambivalent while the real challenge before us is one of a love-shaped *agonism*—of struggle oriented by nonviolence, epistemological humility, and patience, even while it may take divisive form. This is a seemingly impossible path, as challenging as being shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves. But I argue that this path has already been walked by many who show us how to purify—not abrogate—our critical engagement with neighbors, adversaries, and even enemies.

Girard and containing violence

René Girard’s mimetic theory and its exponents have argued that humans desire not in a rational and direct way, but in an unconsciously imitative way. This form of desire has been channeled, safeguarded, and abetted—since human origins, for better and worse—through the imitative observance of taboos, myths, and rituals. Such religio-cultural features, he argues, were critical in domesticating *homo sapiens* into a uniquely ultra-imitative species

capable of immense freedom, discovery, and love—as well as Auschwitz, Inquisition, and Hiroshima (see Haw, 2022).

In centering *mimesis* in his anthropology, Girard joins the critique of social contract theory, which has tended to feature rationality as foundational for human sociality. Rather, Girard sees how what often passes for “reason” in a society is not so much the objective *opposite* of violence, but more often a byproduct of the scapegoating mechanics of human organization. Paul Dumouchel thus inflects Girard into political theory: “*The difference between reason and violence, on which we would like to base the unanimous agreement of members of society, does not precede the action that establishes the political order, but flows from it*” (2015, p. xvii). As such, the problem of peaceful coexistence for Girard concerns not merely technocratic applications of law and reason—these *contain* our violence in the double sense of the word. The problem is further upstream, in an anterior, radical, species-wide deformation of our desires.

Like many scholars working at the level of encompassing meta-theory, Girard’s capacious oeuvre evidences certain sharp turns, even seeming contradictions. Two such places of friction within mimetic theory are particularly relevant to the problem of divisiveness and being “neither for or against”: the concept of “sacrifice,” and the phenomena of “violence containment” in societal conflict, ultimately two very related notions.

Sacrifice: for or against?

Regarding the first, *sacrifice*, Girard’s ambivalence on the concept stems especially from his early, admittedly almost anti-religious sentiment: resonant with methods akin to Durkheim, Freud, *et al*, Girard deconstructed the mechanics at the heart of religion and all human culture to expose it as a “protective misapprehension”—i.e., our species, since its origins, has been subject to a delusional perception of reality and its own consciousness. This delusion concerns the psychological “exteriorization” of our own violence—in the chaotic, naturally-selected transition from primate dominance patterns to human culture—wherein we perceive our violence as an independent Being who secures our unity. Such projecting of group violence, mediated via the sacred (with its taboos, rituals, myths, gods, etc), was generative in our evolution insofar as proto-human groups experienced peace and mimetic *unity* after collective acts of victimage. And thus, in James Alison’s gloss on Girard, “human consciousness, culture, and signification came into being with the self-deception surrounding an act of victimization” (Alison, 1998, p. 225). Our sense of the sacred is not an invention—of priests trying to control,

or of early failed-scientists trying to explain—but the midwife of our consciousness. Our consciousness emerged with the sacred, unwittingly, as the turning of our own violence into objective, reified existence, an exogenous agent that eventually became the gods (Girard, 1987, p. 81, 89). The sacred as such was naturally selected as it escorted us through the turbulent decay of alpha male structures into aggressive egalitarianism, birthing our new, especially imitative cultural consciousness (Girard, 1999, p. 94; 2007, p. 65; 1987, p. 94). Humanity is not the inventor but the *byproduct* of the protective misapprehension that we call religion (2007, p. 72, 97). This theory—with its seeming forthright *against-ness* toward the practice of religious sacrifices and the sacred itself, etc.—won certain academic and popular praises, that Girard had developed “the first authentically atheistic account of religion” (Radkowski, 1972).

But soon, to the dismay of his boosters, Girard turned his hermeneutic to Christianity and Judaism, finding in the biblical traditions a radical demystification of the sacred, the original *avante garde*, an attack on religion. He argued that the biblical tradition was slowly developing an anti-sacred movement, a critique of all human culture as rooted in violence and shrouded in religious superstition. Girard argued, as Nietzsche too observed, that this attack is ultimately crystallized in the continued representation of Christ’s crucifixion, the unjust mobbing of a purely innocent victim. Finding such an *against-ness* in Christianity, Girard briefly attacked the book of Hebrews (later recanted) because its author seemed to have cast Jesus’ death not as a critique of the sacred but as a mystified “sacrifice” offered to the blood-thirsty deity of the sacred. As such, Hebrews would seem to renege on the anti-sacrificial revelation otherwise permeating the New Testament, namely Christ’s unwillingness to sacrifice others and his peaceable love of enemies. All of this was an attack upon the delusion of a divinity who requires blood. “So great is the distance between the sacrifice of Christ in this sense and archaic sacrifice that a greater one cannot be imagined” (Girard, 2014, p. 40f; 1987, p. 178-9; Vattimo and Girard, 2010, p. 25).

Notice we have here a stark and triumphalist “*for and against*”: Girard reads Christianity’s anthropological insight regarding anti-sacrificial nonviolence as “superior” to alternate anthropologies, even adding that this superiority is “scientifically demonstrable” (2007, p. 210; 2014, p. 37).

But Girard qualified the excesses of this antinomy, seeing in Christianity “an exit from religion,” which nonetheless manifests “in the form of a demythified religion” (Girard, 2010, 24-25). He admitted of having spoken with exaggeration, and that he wanted to “rectify the error of the so-called

anti-sacrificial argument I made in my first writings on this subject, especially in *Things Hidden...* [bringing] my perspective into closer alignment with traditional theologies” (Girard, 2014, p. xi, 42). In this, Girard had added an epistemological feature of *inescapability* to his analysis, an awareness that even attacks on religion paradoxically become their own religion: Marxism, e.g., does away with God only to deify the State; the Enlightenment did away with parochial reason, in favor of “universals,” only to become a Napoleonic European jihad; the destruction of all superstitious taboos simply births new mega-taboos (“thou shalt not say *thou shalt not*”). This inescapability extends even to Jesus’ anti-sacrificial program: his attacking of all human culture as rooted in murder and lies, nonetheless manifests as a mimetic *culture*, a “Church,” with its obligatory creeds and rituals. We can critique religion, but we cannot escape it, just as there is no escape from culture, ritual, or the contingencies of language (Girard, 2014, p. 126).

So too, Girard insisted, there is no *pure* escape from sacrifice, nor can one be merely “against” it. He argued there is either “sacrifice of others” or *self*-sacrifice, but they are both sacrifice (Girard, 2010, 35; 2014, p. 43, 71f). This coincides with the fact that there is no access to purely objective or absolute knowledge. In Christ refusing to sacrifice others, he engaged in self-sacrifice. Giving up violence involves preparedness to suffer it. Given such inescapability, the modern liberal pretension to utterly “*renounce* sacrifice” or exclusion, and thereby escape the ugliness of violence, he insists, is simply performative purity. For there is no position available that is completely foreign to violence—just as there is no access to absolute knowledge or reason unmediated by a cultural matrix stemming from the scapegoat mechanism (Girard, 2010, p. 216). And thus even though Christ’s nonviolence was diametrically opposed to sacrificial logic, it is still called by the same name, “sacrifice”: “Use of the same word in each case dispels the *illusion of a neutral ground* where violence is nowhere to be seen.” Thus, for Girard, Christianity’s using the same word “sacrifice” for *formally similar but substantially opposed realities* “paradoxically hints at going beyond the opposition between them” (Girard, 2014, p. 43).

With this inescapability in mind, and resonant with our Seng-T’san’s epigraph, Girard cautioned his readers to not pit Christianity into a for/against rivalry with other religions or the archaic sacred. Any diametric opposition between archaic and revealed religion simply reiterates the very mimetic rivalry one hopes to abolish (Girard, 2007, p. 204). Such nuances have been lost on some of Girard’s critics, who lock him into his pre-revised position or misconstrue him, somehow, as an *advocate* of sacrifice or an

ontology of violence (see Eagleton 2018; Jantzen, 2007, p. 271–90; Coakley, 2012, p. 25). Mediating this antinomy on the question of “being for or against” sacrifice, has been explored by various mimetic theorists (e.g. Schwager, 1985; Haw, 2021).

Containing violence: for or against?

We can bear in mind Girard’s management of this freighted word *sacrifice*—which remains a bit abstract—as we turn to the more concrete and practical topic of *socio-political conflict* and its “containment.” On this matter, Girard appears more complicated, even seemingly contradictory. At certain points Girard voices a near full-throated pacifism, a complete renunciation of violence, resonant with his seeming complete attack upon the sacred’s sacrificial logic. He urges us all to refuse the logic of the duel and embrace love; we must “abstain completely from retaliation and renounce the escalation to extremes” (Girard, 2010, p. xiv). Or, “The one who believes he can control violence by setting up defenses is in fact controlled by violence.” Or, “it is impossible to eliminate violence through violence, to expel reciprocity violently.” Our strategies for dealing with societal chaos, he insists, can no longer be military or political. “Politics is in itself powerless to control the rise of negative undifferentiation.” Violence can never reduce violence (Girard, 2010, p. 17, 17, 20, 24, 46, 63, 131; 1987, p. 198).

Such emphases draw from Christ’s stark injunctions to nonresistance of enemies, underwritten with an awareness of the mimetic contagiousness of violence. Some activists connect this feature of Girard’s nonviolence with a social program, as one finds in Vern Redekop (2012, 2002) linking mimetic insights with nonviolent activism, or Duncan Morrow (2015, p. 169-189) analyzing the Northern Ireland conflict, wherein he seeks to stop “the game of dividing between the good guys and the bad guys.” For Girard, the abstention from violence takes shape, at least partially, in *Battling to the End*, in his praising Hölderlin, the reclusive poet, who retreats from the Napoleonic frenzy of his day to quietly stare into the abyss of the gods’ twilight. Girard reads Christ through a Hölderlinian lens, as one who “withdraws” from the sacred, who lets go of grasping after being imitated as a model; and we must “imitate his withdrawal” (Girard, 2010, p. 51, 120, 122). Left with *only* this Hölderlinian note from Girard, one might feel his socio-political vision strongly tilts toward a secluded and pure pacifism of a befuddled apocalypticist—one who has concluded it is impossible to have any politics without a scapegoat: thus, one must have no politics. Being devoted to refraining

from such sacrificial exertions, we are presented with a model of seemingly near-complete withdrawal from political engagement.

From this perspective, one detects notes of Augustinian pessimism in Girard's voice—about the intractably conflictual human family and how little we can expect law and governance to remedy it (*City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 5). The bishop of Hippo had spoken of “the Earthly City,” a metonymy for all human culture and politics, as being unjustly based upon founding murders, divided against itself by the *libido dominandi* (*City of God*, Preface, Book XI, *et passim*.) With scant indulgence of idealism, St. Augustine regarded governing structures, *sans* justice, as nothing but large gangs (*City of God*, Bk IV, ch 4). From this angle, the Heavenly City—founded in Christ's divine, pacific love—is contrastively pitted “*against* the pagans.” And Girard would seem to resonate: “The divine truth is no longer in the ancient city or in a chosen people: it has been expelled from the city of man, along with the scapegoat victim.” And while Augustine wrote amidst the collapse of the Roman Empire, Girard adds modern apocalyptic tones, arguing that politics can no longer control war, and history is accelerating beyond our control: “Law itself is finished. It is failing everywhere, and even excellent jurists, whom I know well, no longer believe in it” (2010, p. 50, 53f, 108, 113). One imagines anarchist pacifists nodding vigorously.

But from the other side of Girard's mouth emits a more realist and messy engagement with violence: he also argues there is a severe danger in pacifism: to outlaw war is paradoxically to allow it to spread everywhere (2010, p. 65, 186-7). He speaks of the tragic calculus in which even pacifism bears its own share of guilt, too, in the mimetic rivalries in our world—not the least in the dictum that “weakness is provocative.” As Clausewitz was able to intuit, the reciprocal action of war “both provokes and *suspends* the escalation to extremes at the same time” (Girard, 2010, p. 17, emphasis added). Thus Girard admitted there is “a role for national and international institutions in limiting violence” (2014, p. 83, 101)—even if that ability to restrain and suspend escalation has been weakening since Clausewitz. Politics “contains” violence: it simultaneously entails *and restrains* violence. In *The One by Whom Scandal Comes*, Girard strongly critiqued moralist pledges to pacifism, just as he critiqued purist renunciations of sacrifice. He argued that there are no simple socio-political answers to the erratic contagiousness of human violence; and he regards some forms of defense against violence to be legitimate, for we are constrained to consider the use of “lesser violence” (2007, p. 247; 2014, p. 97f, 101, 18ff, 41, 71-72, 131n3).

We are always in debt to sacrificial violence...and when we get rid of it in a great burst of self-righteous indignation against hypocrisy, it may be a worse violence that, unwittingly, we help unleash...one must refrain from evaluating the influence of the biblical religions and of other religions from the standpoint of a simple opposition between violence and non-violence. The elimination of sacrificial violence is not simply “good” or “bad”: it is an ambiguous and ambivalent progress in the struggle against violence. (Girard, 2004, p. 19)

Girard thus counter-balanced his own pessimism about law and politics with a modest realism—a move shared in Augustine. Augustine described how the tenuous peace obtained by the violence of the Earthly City is nonetheless its own minor good (*City of God*, Book XV, chapter 4). Such negative peace might not be the positive peace of charity; but law and order, even amidst their injustices and vicious motives, supply their own modest benefits. Negative peace is not nothing. Augustine thus admitted that participation in governing structures, the sublimated conflict we call politics, may be a regrettable necessity (e.g. *City of God*, Book XIX). In light of this, we can see why Girard stated, “I probably represent an Augustinian reaction against an excess of humanism” (2014, p. 91).

In all, Girard might here be judged as stuck in a contradiction, as speaking from both sides of his mouth. One reviewer laments this perplexing “pacifism-not-pacifism” (Gardner, 2010, p. 452-60; Bartlett, 2016). But a charitable reading might see him as simply making full use of his mouth—or that he is simply identifying the two poles of being as innocent as a dove and shrewd as a snake. More specifically, one might see that he was refusing to ossify his socio-political analysis into a singular, fixed position, “neither for or against” pure pacifism or Just War theory, neither aloof idealism nor resigned realism, as it were. Girard’s refraining from the *absolute* renunciation of violence is his nuanced balancing of the complex factors of violence-containment, an awareness of the impossibility of neutrality, and a refusal to indulge the consolation of easy bifurcations. Thus, he retains a befuddlement about law’s ambivalent role in our lurching through the apocalypse, pointing not only toward Hölderlin, but also toward Augustine’s combination of pessimistic alienation and realist engagement.

This is all admittedly irritating. Insofar as Girard approximates Augustine’s treating the Earthly City’s improvement as a necessary feature of the pilgrimage to the Heavenly City, this involves some separating of means and ends; for few improvements of the Earthly City come without controversy, conflict, even violent coercion. In the political realm, this is to set out on

the volatile path of “taking sides” and violating the irenicism of Hölderlinian withdrawal: it can involve, say, becoming a judge (although Augustine notably commanded that Christian judges practice extreme clemency [See, e.g., Fortin and Kries, 1994, p. 246f.]), fighting for a party (perhaps even an army), and, simply, becoming part of the societal fray. Girard’s reading of culture and politics as violence-containment mechanisms simply cannot fully align with the serene poetic withdrawal or a comprehensive purification of all imitative rivalry: for *any participation* is to risk taking sides in what could very well be divisiveness.

By my lights, Girard most effectively mediated this antinomy in a 2001 interview with David Cayley (Canadian Broadcast Company, 2016, 12:00). There Girard described our predicament as a “*circular*” dilemma in which we must, indeed, engage in *critique*. Christ’s himself engaged in critique; he offered no escape into some depoliticized transcending of divisions. Christ’s prophetic ministry of division, as it were, fervently critiqued the world with great political consequence: denouncing the principalities and oppressive religious hypocrites, freely healing in violation of sacred boundaries, and cleansing the temple of its Mammon. This divisive spirit of Christ has historically spread, as Girard notes, in our increasingly critiquing worldly power from the perspective of the victim. This spirit of critique is dangerous insofar as it can weaponize concern for victims and sanctify retributive violence in their name. *But*, as dangerous as this critical spirit can become, Girard insisted *we should not do away with that divisiveness*. In other words, even though we mirror one another, we ought not succumb to seeing the world through both-sides-ism. Rather, he said, we must grasp the paradox of “how critique works” and “purify it with nonviolence.” Even so, such purification will never be total. Girard states, “critique embodies part of the same violence—it is always in the same circle of violence.” We must thus see the “mimetic *circularity* of the psychic space in which we live.” We must critique; but that critique remains susceptible to critique—a critique which also remains open to critique, in an *ad infinitum* contestability. In contrast to this circular view, our minds distorted by scapegoating tend to wrongly view critique as *linear* and neatly distinguishable between individuals—in the judgment that expels or cancels the wicked. But this simplistic, linear view fails to see our circular mimetic situation with epistemic humility: such judgment, Girard notes, “always wants to turn the other into something that would be *solidly posed*, there in front of you and separate from you, because you are good, and they are bad. And in a judicial affair, you have a physical separation between the two.” But, stemming from Christ’s (anti-)judgment,

and reflecting our mimetic nature, “Christianity is constantly abolishing this separation.” As contestable mimetic interdividuals, we are in the other, and they are in us.

With no access to a neutral position from which to perfectly judge—or even to *refrain* from judging in some pretension to neutrality—we are all thus daily enmeshed in a certain undecidability. While *Battling to the End’s* theme of apocalyptic escalation might seem remote from most average citizens’ daily lives, this simple notion of *critique*—with the prevalent possibility that it curdles into scapegoating—is as close to us as the social-media drenched cell phone in our pocket and quotidian discourse about policies and candidates. We regularly face decisions to separate out alternatives and take sides. Embracing our circular condition, Girard argues, means engaging in critique—which may even manifest as divisive—but purifying this with nonviolence and self-aware contestability.

As to exemplary models in this purified, circular critique, Girard never offered much elaboration. One might retort that he pointed us toward Christ’s modeling, of course. But even this was underdetermined in his oeuvre—interpreting Christ through a sometimes narrow Hölderlinian lens—and his otherwise relative silence on offering models beyond Hölderlin is disappointing. He might have pointed us toward numerous other historic, practical actors. Is not the anarchist personalism of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, for example, a practical locus for those who suspect law is apocalyptically crumbling? And how is it that the Civil Rights movement received but a few words in Girard’s oeuvre, when its activists often powerfully worked to improve the worldly city’s laws employing heavenly means?

Such qualms notwithstanding, one might still appreciate how Girard ultimately leaves his reader with a dynamic awareness fitting to our live situation: Christianity has been diminishing the unifying power of the sacred; and in our own context, Madisonian democracy is *designed* to sustain divisions and polarities to perpetually cross check ambition with ambition (e.g. Madison, 1787); and thus, with unanimous catharsis and unity seemingly out of reach (perhaps for the better), we must learn how to live impossibly as snake-doves amidst such conflict. We must engage in critique that is nonetheless susceptible to further critique; this consciousness of our circular, mimetic situation is essential to purifying critical engagement with nonviolence.

Chantal Mouffe's agonistic pluralism

Belgian political theorist of agonistic pluralism, Chantal Mouffe, also understands the problem about “taking sides” paradoxically: the refusal to take sides is its own side-taking. That is, her oeuvre clarifies how there is an inescapable dimension of side-taking that we can call “*the political*.” Different from *politics*—which is but the machinations of governing and organizing human life—*the political* refers to the inescapably divisive aspect of all human association, even in its most inclusive of forms (2013, p. 130f, 2, 3; 2005, p. 43). As such, we will see Mouffe interpret “the political” akin to the way Girard does sacrifice.

Mouffe argues that conventional reigning liberal political theorists—including Rawls, Habermas, Benhabib, Arendt, *et al* (2013, p. 10, 55; 2005, p. 91, 29, 47)—have each in their own way sought to overcome the political and create a politics without exclusion—or, we might say, a politics without a scapegoat. Rawls, for example, advocated especially for the construction of an overlapping consensus, to create a society not founded on exclusion but on consent. Creating such an encompassing and neutral basis for social unity—wherein we tolerate objectionable differences amidst our pluralities—would eliminate the political from politics and make society more stable and pacific, not an imposed tyranny. Similarly, Habermas emphasized “inclusive procedures” in deliberative democracy, in which nobody is excluded on principle from organizing society, and all voices are somehow heard. With this value undergirding public life, we can promote the exchange of reason and deliberation as an alternative to the exclusion of opponents, lending “credibility and legitimacy to the democratic process, guaranteeing that such a consensus was obtained by reasoned assent and not mere agreement or subjugation” (2005, 87). In all these great liberal theorists, Mouffe detects an aim to renounce the political and create an inclusive politics beyond hegemony. Readers will detect a parallel with Girard, regarding the temptation to be *against* sacrifice.

In contrast with these figures, while not rejecting their liberalism outright, Mouffe insists that any and every attempt to create an inclusive consensus, an “us,” invariably creates a “them.” Even the benevolent attempts to create an “us without a them” still engage in the political, in the decisive act of cutting off the acceptable from the unacceptable. That is, even if liberalism’s ideals were ever to become fully realized into politico-judicial form it would *paradoxically no longer be liberalism*, at least in any objective sense of inclusivity, pluralism, and openness. Even the most inclusive, plural cosmopolitanism would nonetheless, in practice, be an exclusive hegemony.

Consensus still excludes. This is the paradox of side-taking lost on liberal theorists. Lacking this awareness, liberal theorists have habitually evaded the political and become “depoliticized.” They have ignored the fact that “the very condition of the creation of consensus is the elimination of pluralism from the public sphere.” In light of this, we ought not imagine that “pluralist democracy could ever be perfectly instantiated, since the condition of possibility of a pluralist democracy is at the same time the condition of impossibility of its perfect implementation” (2005, p. 101, 49, 43, 16).

In the common liberal frameworks, she argues, “the public space is the terrain where one aims at creating consensus.” But with the inescapability of the political, it is simply not possible to form a completely inclusive consensus. We must admit that politics involves “necessarily unstable forms” which rationality, procedures, and tolerance simply cannot eliminate (2005, p. 11). This implies struggle, an *agonism*, in which the public space is instead where “conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation” (2013, p. 92). (This is the grounds on which Kristen Deedee Johnson summarized the agonistic alternative to liberal tolerance as *post-Nietzschean*, as it implies a critique of Enlightenment epistemology, problematizing universal reason.) Politics is never the *elimination* of hostility; or even if it were, it would simply reiterate a new hegemony. Rather, politics “consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations...there can only be contingent hegemonic forms of stabilization of their conflict” (Mouffe, 2006, 323). We could say politics *contains* hostility in the double sense of the word.

Mouffe’s “inescapability of the political” partially draws from the controversial Reich jurist Carl Schmitt. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt critiqued the “humanitarian” League of nations—the post-Versailles liberal world order, the “brotherhood of all humanity”—as not nearly as inclusive as it advertises (Schmitt, 2007, p. 60-71; 43, 25, 32, 35, 37). Even the most inclusive of arrangements ultimately decides who is in and who is out. Liberal democracies just tend to rely on more hidden, depoliticized forms of exclusion—e.g., economically pulverizing sanctions instead of bullets. Schmitt advocated a brutal honesty about this and a vigilance against declaring ourselves on “the side of humanity,” which easily leads to viewing the enemy as inhuman. (The irony is admittedly thick here, in that a seeming perspicacity of scapegoating is emitting from within the apparatus of the Shoah.)

While Mouffe strongly rejects Schmitt’s abandonment of liberalism, she insists he had a crucial point: liberalism, for all its aspirations, cannot evade the political. Liberalism may *modify* and reshape the constraints of

democracy—emphasizing themes like rule of law, tolerance, inclusion, universal human rights, and respect of individual liberty, all of which constitute her broad definition of liberalism (Mouffe, 2006, 319). But liberalism can never escape taking *political form*. The democratic tradition—which emphasizes different themes, like “equality, identity between governing and governed, and popular sovereignty” (2005, p. 3; 2013, p. 29)—operates more precisely in touch with exclusions of the political, while the liberal tradition has sought to mitigate the restraints and dangers of the political. In all, the democratic and liberal traditions emphasize different, even incompatible, principles.

Once we come to grips with this incompatibility, Mouffe argues not that we *choose* between them, but we instead sustain the two in a never-resolved tension (2013, p. xiii). Mouffe bears no sympathies with the right-wing, anti-liberal goals of Schmitt; she praises what liberalism’s ideals have done and can do for expanding the scope and humanity of modern democracies (2005, p. 5, 45). Liberal democracies can seek to create a more plural and inclusive society, more generous and fair applications of law. But these will still inescapably be exclusive hegemonies—contingently interpreting and policing rules and exclusions through contestable referees—not an escape from hegemony. Adherents to liberalism must be chastised of any depoliticized pretensions to transcending division through inclusion. For politics is not the overcoming of division and conflict but their channelization. There is no exit from the for-against dilemma because there is no access to non-hegemonic, non-divisive politics.

Schmitt saw the essential paradigm in politics as the decision between who is friend and who is enemy. But Mouffe plies a subtler distinction: the more common and essential feature of our democratic context is the *adversary*. An enemy is one with whom no founding principles are shared, and they are subject to expulsion/enema from democratic processes; but *adversaries* share founding principles while being opposed in interpreting and employing them. Adversaries fight to implement their interpretation of founding principles, even while respecting their adversary as a legitimate societal member. “Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position” (2013, p. 7). From this view, democracy and political norms are not the cessation of conflict or adversity, but the subduing of enemy antagonism into agonism, the domestication of potential enemies into adversaries (2013, p. xii. See also Springs, 2020).

We can say that Mouffe advances, in analogy to the ethical discourse of Just War Theory, something like a Just Politics Theory—a framework for conducting conflict through the reduced-violence-arena of politics and law. But her approach differs from the usual ethical debates between Just War and pacifism insofar as the latter are both often framed in social contract political ontology. Per the social contract tradition, “war is politics by other means.” (I.e., war is seen as a boiling over of the agreed-upon-orderliness of politics; war is the social contract breaking down into the chaos of war. Through this liberal lens, liberal democracy can be wrongly seen as the realm of transcending division, where we all supposedly “get along” and find common cause: the political realm is not where we are pitted in conflict but where we have suspended that conflict.) While war is admittedly the breakdown of common order in a superficial sense, Mouffe, resonating with mimetic theory, invites us to see beyond social contract interpretation. Rather: politics is war by other means. Put more precisely, politics is the domestication of warfare into competition. Politics subdues antagonism into agonism much like, for Girard, sacrifice *contains* chaotic violence with a lesser, ritual violence. Politics is not the suspension of violence but its containment.

If we say Mouffe’s agonism is like an extension of Just War logic into politics, she is asking: how does one justly engage in the competing coercions, the violence-containing mechanisms of the political realm, the hegemonic means of legislation, the judiciary, and reasoning itself? When occupied with such questions, contemporary appeals to “benanti-divisive” feel as out of touch as telling a warrior to stop being so combative. While Mouffe aims to conduct such struggle with humanizing respect, she insists that any attempt to create a politics beyond hegemony and beyond adversaries is mistaken. Her agonistic pluralism suggests we have no access to a non-divisive perspective from which to definitively found and stabilize a social order. This demands of us a certain pluralism—not merely one of inclusivity-beyond-judgment, but rather an ever-open, agonistic, forbearing critique. She asks not “can’t we just get along,” but, “can’t we just argue?”

A synthetic note on escapability

For both Girard and Mouffe, we should note that the “inescapability” of sacrifice, violence-containment, and the political is not a cause for inaction, hopelessness, hawkish pessimism, or hand-wringing withdrawal. Admittedly, on the one hand, both indeed emphasize how division is *inescapable*. With resemblances to Girard, Mouffe argues that all human association is marked by something of an originary division: the formation of a “we” has long been

forged through the formation of a “they.” Girard argued more in the evolutionary register, that a certain blind spot to scapegoating has sedimented into human bodies and culture through various manifestations of the victim mechanism. Mouffe speaks more in the register of political theory, arguing liberalism cannot escape the exclusions of the political: it is impossible to constitute a “form of social objectivity which would not be grounded on an originary exclusion” (2005, p. 11). For both, there is no neutral ground devoid of exclusion available to us; there is an ineliminable dimension of exclusion in all sociality; and even if one seeks to transcend exclusivity, this simply reiterates new exclusions, if perhaps more generous ones. And even in the most pacific case of Christ’s “non-sacrificial” love of enemies, this incurs the possibility of suffering violence.

But, in another sense of *escapability*, our two authors do *not* trap us in an ontology of violence: we *can*, to some extent, escape sacrificial logic and behaviour—treating it as an error, a mark of our original sin, not some requisite essence of who we are. In Girard’s idiom, we might call sacrificial logic a contingent artifact of our natural selection—or, citing the doctrine of Original Sin, that it is “unnatural.” In contrast with human norms, Christ modelled an alternative human nature, a new mode of being, more attuned to reality. In Mouffe’s idiom, we can and must unearth how society is “the product of a series of hegemonic practices... which conceal the originary act of their contingent political institution and which are taken for granted as if they were self-grounded.” That is, habit makes custom seem *natural* and common sense. But this mythic order, while often striking us as sacred and solid, must be unveiled as “temporary and precarious,” open to “hegemonic intervention” when needs be (Mouffe, 2019, p. 44f, 88; 2013, p. 90). The political might be unavoidable; but politics are transformable. Per Girard, we must follow Christ to expose our evolutionary formation as a mistaken chain of events that *did not have to happen the way it did*. Far from arguing that the “primordial division” in society’s scapegoat mechanism is the essence of humanity, we can historicize and denaturalize it. Per Mouffe, we must denaturalize and contest any unjust divisions that have been mistaken as natural, patiently engaging in the unstable agon to rectify them—even if our contestations are also contestable.

Both authors imply that our predicaments require not the abandonment of divisiveness—which would only reiterate new forms of division—but the agonistic engagement in it. For Girard, such critique must be purified by nonviolence and humble acceptance of our mimetic circularity. For Mouffe, our predicament requires respect toward adversaries; in such engagement,

one affirms the dangerous intolerance embedded in liberalism's inclusivity, its agitation to expand boundaries to embrace a more plural humanism. And yet for both, with eschatological notes of Augustine, *this promised land cannot be reached in this aeon*: in political practice, inclusive liberalism can only be worked out through the hegemonic exclusions of democracy. In all the above, our two figures offer us concepts for navigating the misleading (purist, escapist) hopes of creating a politics beyond hegemony or a politics without a scapegoat. In the interests of rendering their ideals more concrete, I finally turn to a few contemporary models of such a purified agonism.

Practical notes toward graceful divisiveness

It would be misguided to see the above considerations of agonism as suggesting an unmitigated "will to power," an unrestrained ontology of violent conflict. To the contrary, the critical agonism discussed above requires a heart purified of malice, a disposition toward patience, and empathic exchange amidst heated divisions. To consider concrete examples of this, I turn to two cases wherein the cheap rhetoric of "unity" clashes against "divisive" movements agitating for racial and economic justice. I finally extend such insights to consider the snake-dove disposition, of gracefully engaging in conflict but purified with nonviolence.

Case: "the white moderate"

The paradox of taking sides is supremely dramatized in Martin Luther King Jr's 1963 "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (Washington, 1992). Cathleen Kaveny, in her incisive *Prophesy Without Contempt*, deems King's letter as "the gold standard of the rhetoric of prophetic indictment" (2016, p. 320). And yet in King's indictments of America's racist apathy, he exemplifies critique purified with nonviolence and patient divisiveness. The letter responds to the accusation that the Civil Rights movement was sowing division. In the wake of public unrest, boycotts, protests, and arrests, Alabama clergymen had argued that the movement had "caused racial friction and unrest," had "incited hatred and violence." And in contrast the clergy appealed to "the principles of law and order and common sense." King's rejoinder was that the absence of conflict, for which the clergy long, is, in fact, not devoid of pre-existing divisions. Rather, the clergy's "common sense" peace and unity is a placid mirage hiding segregation's injustices; and, he adds, the pursuit of justice may in fact require fostering tensions.

But King knew that such tension-fostering requires careful application, and he laid out four steps to disaggregate his agonism. First, one must conduct in depth analysis of the injustice, assuring that one's appraisal of the situation is not haphazard, inconsistent, or mere antagonistic reactivity against rules in themselves. (For it is quite possible to erroneously protest on misinformed grounds and then justify it through valorizing one's underdog-, victim-, or outsider-status etc. One calls to mind St. Augustine's caveat: "it [is] not always right to infer that one is on the better side because he suffers persecution, although that is almost always the case" [Schaff, (1994), 287]).

Secondly, after a thorough analysis of the injustice in mind, one must exhaust all conventional means of negotiation. This would include not only face-to-face encounters, but also legal proceedings. Using such shared, legal avenues for rectification is reinforcing the objective referent of constitutional principles that one shares with adversaries. In this Catherine Kaveny describes how King is exemplary in the American prophetic indictment tradition, for he not only appeals to natural law but a shared, codified politico-legal order. She writes, "would-be prophets ought to orient their normative claims toward the fundamental commitments of *their* political community, not the commitments of a utopian community existing only in their imaginations and hopes." By contrast, she adds, "factionalist prophets pretend to honor a universal and generally applicable law while advancing narrow and particular interests and causes" (2016, p. 323, 331).

Thirdly, King continues, one must purify oneself of any inner hatred. Here, King shows his attentiveness to the Gandhian practice of deep *ahimsa*, wherein purification of internal animosity is essential to the movement's truth and reality. In Girard's words, this purification involves humble awareness of one's own contestability, seeking to purge any merely *rivalistic*, object-free mimesis. In Kaveny's treatment, this involves "kindness toward political opponents," which requires, "resisting the temptation to whip up the audience's hostility by proffering misleading statements and analogies... [refraining] from seizing upon badly worded statements of political enemies... refusing an easy opportunity to treat a fringe element as a central example of an opponent's goals and methods" (2016, p. 330). King here also finds resonance in Thomas Merton, who invited activists to focus on the log in one's own eye: "instead of hating the people you think are warmongers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed—but hate these things in *yourself*, not in another" (Merton, 1997, p. 19).

Engaged in analysis and self-purification, and with all conventional avenues of rectification exhausted, one must, then, fourthly, seek to “create such a crisis” that forces confrontation of the issue—i.e., direct action or civil disobedience. We must note here that this “forcing” the issue is indeed a precarious step into not only divisiveness but nonviolent coercion. Walter Wink interprets such coercion in tandem with Christ’s Sermon on the Mount; such enemy love aims to “convert the opponent; failing that, it hopes for accommodation, where the opponent is willing to make some changes simply to get the protestors off his back. But if that too fails, nonviolence entails coercion: the opponent is forced to make a change rather than suffering the loss of power, even though he remains hostile. But Jesus’ way does not employ *violent* coercion” (Wink, 1992, p. 192).

Dr. King’s three precautions on the way to action (analyzing the injustice, exhausting negotiations, and deep *ahimsa*) purify his agonism. He wants to ensure that those who foment such a crisis, are *not* “the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive” (Washington, 1992). This is a necessary clarification, as he and his fellow activists were often criticized for being divisive and ruining public order; meanwhile those safeguarding the conditions of injustice, “the white moderate,” are rhetorically framed as the cool-headed bastions of gentility and unity. In light of this optical illusion, King argues the white moderates who champion “unity” and denounce division are a greater threat to the cause of civil rights than Klansman or the White Citizens’ Council. For their appeal to “peace” in the context of segregation is a verbal lockdown that quarantines deeper injustices and divisions from rectification. They defer conflict, and thus resolution, under the deceptively serene conditions of reason, law, and order. By contrast, the fourth step into civil disobedience marks a step into what could very well be framed—like Mouffe’s agonism—as an application of Just War Theory for nonviolent, civil conflict (see Childress, 1971).

Case: “the 1%”

We may also consider the evidently divisive verbal construct of “the 1%.” This concept, used by leftist populists like senator Bernie Sanders and others, emphasizes that the richest 1% of the U.S.—the billionaire class—has obtained their outsized share of wealth not merely through hard work but through exploitation and tax evasion. The 1% theme rhetorically constructs an “us” and a “them” so that the “them” might be taxed at more mid-20th-century levels. Anyone initiated into mimetic theory may grow anxious about verbally aligning the 99 against the 1, given its resemblance to the ratio of

a lynch mob. It has all the shape of “for and against” and would seem to be a recipe for scapegoating. (On a similar front, senator Sanders rhetorically shapes another “we,” saying “we all hate the pharmaceutical companies” [Colbert, 2022]). Are we on the path to pitch forks here?

Conventional liberal theory might be hesitant to employ such us/ them categories here, on the putative grounds that it enflames divisiveness by using exclusive verbal social constructions that efface our universal belonging. Par for that liberal course, whenever increasing taxes on the rich is broached, many politicians tend to rejoin, “but we are all in this together.” For example, in the 2021-22 political battles about rolling back the 2017 tax cuts for the richest tiers of taxpayers to fund an elaborate climate bill, senators Manchin and Sinema opposed the bill—until it was whittled to a fraction of its initial scope—on the grounds that it was “divisive,” saying it did not adequately reach across the aisle or cool the heated polarization. What matters here is less the technical details and more the rhetoric: Senator Manchin opposed the bill citing “unity” and denounced it as divisive—even though such a provision frequently polls very positively (Weisman 2021)—adding, “I don’t like the connotation that we’re targeting different people...It’s time that we all pull together and row together.”

But in contrast with such appeals to a supposed unity anterior to conflict, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism suggests we not avoid the rhetorical construction of an “us” who is party to some conflict. Instead, we must carefully employ the language of collective identity formation to define, clarify, and transform conflicts and injustices that are, per King, perhaps hidden. Because of the inescapability of the political, there is no question as to *whether* we should use identity constructs or verbal reifications. Linguistic divisions—i.e., interpretations of the situation—are undoubtedly *always-already there*. The question is, *how* are divisions operating? Interpreting and using language to decide who is an “adversary” on this tax provision is undoubtedly *political*—that is, it is the imposition of a linguistic cutting, a *de-cision*. But neutral decision-lessness is unavailable to us; even leaving the 2017 tax cuts in place is also a partisan decision. Thus, Mouffe affirms, for example, the rhetoric employed by a social movement like Via Campesina—an international peasant’s movement fighting for environmental justice, water, land, and migrant rights. Like the 1% construct, Via speaks of a “them” by opposing itself to “big multinational agribusiness corporations” (2013, p. 63). Is this politics with a scapegoat? Mouffe suggests that insofar as Via is not dehumanizing their opponents but *opposing them as adversaries*, they are engaging in a just agonism devoid of antagonism. (More ply, their taing

a the 1% refrains from treating them s *enemies*, insofar as they seek not for their removal from society but their increased taxation).

It is very telling to recognize that our Manchin/Sinema example is not an outlier, but party to a larger historic rhetorical pattern of wealthy parties framing any economic conflict—whether waged via unions or tax policy—as divisive. The common liberal framework, put bluntly, is often averse to any reference to “class war.” Dorothy Day, for example, observed in her day that the predictable ethical positions of Just War oddly flip when “class conflict” or “class war” is broached. The rich, she says, are usually reliable defenders of Just War theory, regularly asserting that sometimes we must resort to violence to settle disputes. But these warriors mysteriously turn into idealist pacifists once class war is raised. She says, “they even pretend that the conflict is not there” (1942, p. 1). Day here resonates with Mouffe and King in unearthing the hidden, sedimented divisions of class war. William Cavanaugh has similarly observed a playbook in public discourse regarding tax cuts for the ultra-rich: first, a myth of national “unity” is invoked by proponents; and then any critics are framed as “sowing divisiveness” (2004, p. 264). In a simple verbal construct, conflict is whitewashed while contingencies are reified as natural; thus any effort to name the conflict is denounced as divisive—which is univocally taken to mean “deleterious.”

On being a snake-dove

I lastly turn from these cases to consider the disposition of gracefully engaging in division. If agonism is the domestication of antagonism into political conflict, it requires what we might call a “snake-dove” mind, with reference to Christ’s famous dictum. This disposition involves a critical divisiveness shaped by extreme patience, discipline, compassion, charity, humility, and the ever-contestable mechanics of human behavior.

A variety of psychologists and practitioners have explored the subtleties of engaging in conflict across seemingly intractable divisions. One the most influential of which today is Jonathan Haidt. Amidst various emphases, his work has explored the best rhetorical practices of persuasion. This involves speaking not only to people’s “rationality” (*logos*), which is but a tiny “rider” on a massive elephant. Rather, we must speak to peoples’ “elephant”: borrowing from Aristotelian categories, this includes peoples’ *pathos* and *ethos*, emotions, empathic responses, humor, mimetic rapport, finding common ground, etc (Haidt, 2006, 2013). Far more than rational, ideological structures, these are seen as the more elephantine factors in conflict; and from the gut and heart, persuasive energies tend to filter *upward* to the “brain” only

afterward, in an anti-gravitational feat as it were. As a model in employing pathos and ethos mingled with logos, some have highlighted Fred Rogers' master class address to a Senate panel on May 1st, 1969, wherein he spoke with an exquisite combination of generosity, connection, and non-combative firmness that melted his infamously trenchant listener (Schroder, 2017).

Such approaches are readily attested in other literature. Neuroscientist Tali Sharot, for example, outlines how “facts don't win fights,” but connection, empathy, and personal engagement are the more fitting tools for changing minds, however slowly and imperfectly (O'Neal, 2017; Sharot, 2017a, 2017b; Sharot and Sunstein, 2020, p. 14-19). Or, psychologist Janet Lansbury advocates a posture toward conflictual communication in which one refuses to take offense at an interlocutor's aggression and combativeness (Lansbury, 2014; Klein, 2022). This posture, which refrains from mirroring or internalizing the antagonism of one's adversary, is an insight well attuned to the danger of rivalry's mimetic contagiousness. Others who have left white supremacist groups, like Christian Picciolini (2017; Davies 2018), have clarified that relational connection, not reasoned argumentation, is what helped him shed his delusions. Indeed, he testifies that “undeserved compassion” is what truly changed his heart and mind. Such cues are especially helpful in tending to those today involved in rationally-unhinged conspiracy theories—where we have lost any sense of shared reason—by nurturing connections through our shared humanity (Warzel, 2020; Basu, 2020).

Mahatma Gandhi extensively analyzed the psychological dynamics of conflict. In his volatile, colonial context he insisted upon trying to convert enemies into friends. Why? Because if they defeat their adversaries “there is no rancor left behind... That was my experience in South Africa and General Smuts. He started with being my bitterest opponent and critic. Today he is my warmest friend” (Gandhi, 1997, 88). But at no point should this feature of Gandhi's disposition be taken as dimming his agonistic “againstness”: “No man could be actively nonviolent and not rise against social injustice no matter where it occurred.” And, echoing our comments on inescapability, he spoke of how “perfect nonviolence is impossible...but we have to endeavor.” A votary of *ahimsa* “can never become entirely free from outward *himsa* [violence]...it is impossible to eschew violence completely.” And regarding critical engagement, he insisted:

false notions of propriety or fear of wounding susceptibilities often deter people from saying what they mean and ultimately land them on the shores of hypocrisy. But if nonviolence of thought is to be evolved in individuals, societies, or nations, truth has to be told, however harsh or unpopular it may appear to be for the moment. (Gandhi, 1997, p. 81, 83, 5, 91)

Here the snake and dove coexist.

The Buddhist writer mentioned in the Introduction, Thích N. Hân, also endeavored tirelessly to purify his heart of antagonism amidst conflict. He sustained dangerous humanitarian work during the Vietnam war, earning him a Nobel peace Prize nomination from Dr. King Jr. And in the decades following, he taught about essential spiritual work amidst division. As noted, he objected to “taking the side of the poor”; but, nuancing this, he points toward an enemy love that leans *into* engagement, not away from it:

Even if our enemy is cruel, even if he is crushing us...we have to love him...There is only one way—to understand him. We have to understand why he is that way, how he has come to be like that, why he does not see things the way we do. Understanding a person brings us the power to love and accept him. And the moment we love and accept him, he ceases to be our enemy. To ‘love our enemy’ is impossible, because the moment we love him, he is no longer our enemy... The idea of ‘enemy’ vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone who is suffering and needs your compassion. (Hân, 1995, 84f, 79f)

Extending from his perception of all things being inter-related, Hân seeks to understand the suffering of his enemy, even visualizing himself within the enemy—that he shares in their nature. This enlightens us to the awareness that, “we could have become exactly like him,” (1995, 83; 2005) transforming the energy of anger into compassion, turning the enemy into brother or sister.

In a final, humorous example of the snake-dove disposition, we can consider an ad hoc activist group by the name Coup Clutz Klowns. In one of their more famous manifestations, they visited a KKK rally in Knoxville, May 2007. But the clowns feigned misunderstanding of the advertised theme on the flyer, white power. They, innocent as doves, hoping the best in others, thought that what was being promoted was a “white flour” rally. This excited all the clowns to uproariously engage in a messy flour fight right in the middle of the klan. Upon finding they were mistaken, they again misheard that the rally was, in fact, really about “wife power.” At this point, a dozen more

clowns clad in bridal gowns joined in the festal rally, hoisting and parading around their spousal-clowns in their arms—again to the consternation of the serious rally goers. But, amidst all the gay flurry, however, it turns out the clowns had again misheard: the rally was actually about “white flower.” Re-announcing this clarification to all clowns, they gleefully distributed dozens of white flowers to all present. This went on with several such comical iterations, all to such a disruptive degree that the KKK called the rally off early (LaMotte and Hales, 2012; Claiborne, 2012).

One is here reminded of Kaveny’s *Prophecy Without Contempt*, particularly her chapter on “Best Practices” regarding prophetic indictment marked by compassion and humility. While envisioning critique shorn of contempt, she nonetheless affirms the conflictual tradition of prophetic indictment. She even suggests that prophesy is a form of “verbal warfare”; and just as we might temper war via Just War Theory, we too must weigh what constitutes Just Prophecy (2016, p. 321). Drawing lessons from the prophets and some of the great American prophets, she outlines how just prophetic critique may include lamenting, preaching divine mercy along with divine judgment, envisioning a shared future with those being critiqued, judiciously employing humor and irony, and vulnerably displaying humble honesty, reluctance, and ambiguity when necessary. And if such prophesy is ever tempted toward the simplification of a “sinful you and a righteous us,” it will aim to express empathic co-identification with the sinners being denounced (2016, p. 371; 375ff). We might call this all an attempt to engage in critique without a scapegoat—even while it remains its own contestable critique, indictment, and intervention.

Conclusion

The psychological virtues above are animated by an ability to refrain from what René Girard calls *scandalization*. Scandal involves the internalization of offense felt by another, a desire that escalates rivalry, which then *tends toward expulsion*—that is, an *un-shared future*. As such, scandal is oriented around the cathartic friend-enemy distinction. Scandal is indeed a deeply habituated orientation of our species. But its antidote is well summarized in the Proverb, “A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a wise person overlooks an insult” (12:16). Our models explored here, I think, suggest how to resist indulgence in scandal without watering down critical, prophetic indictment. There may indeed be exceptional enemies—occasions which beckon their own exceptional kind of treatment, whether through the pacifist’s enemy love, or the expulsion from a constitutional order. But, as Mouffe suggests,

the most common temptation for most of us concerns scandalization toward an *adversary*, not an enemy. But *how* to relate to an adversary—how to purify critique in contempt-free engagement, even competition—is the crucial issue raised here. As we have seen, this can involve not only persuasion and empathic connection, but also conflict-evoking civil disobedience, courageous nonviolent encounters with violent combatants, or the political competition for victory. These must remain viable, however dangerous and divisive, avenues. Instead of themes advocating “moving beyond us-vs-them,” my thesis here finds more resonance with some recent titles like *Jesus Takes a Side* (Rashid, 2022) or *How to Have an Enemy* (Florer-Bixler, 2021).

In this light we come full circle to see how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s refusal to “take sides” at the beginning of this essay should not be abused to underwrite tepid, moderate acquiescence:

I know it will be possible for some people to use these words [“do not take sides”] to prolong social injustice, but that is an abuse of what I am saying. We have to find the *real causes* for social injustice, and when we do, we will not condemn a certain type of people. We will ask, Why has the situation of these people remained like that? (1995, 79f)

Thus, when Hanh appeals to understanding “both sides,” this is not an appeal to neutralize a conflict or pretend to be above the fray; it urges engagement. He invites us past the mirages of the conflictual surface toward understanding another’s suffering:

To reconcile the conflicting parties, we must have the ability to understand the suffering of both sides. If we take sides, it is impossible for us to do the work of reconciliation. And humans want to take sides. That is why the situation gets worse and worse. Are there people who are still available to both sides? They need not do much. They need to do only one thing: go to one side and tell all about the suffering endured by the other side, and go to the other side and tell all about the suffering endured by this side. That is our chance of peace. That alone can change the situation. (Hanh, 2000, p. 157)

In this call to compassion, his refraining from taking sides does not stymie exchange but courageously intensifies it.

In 2021, *Lumen Christi* hosted a panel on Girard’s mimetic theory, discussing some of the challenges regarding contemporary cancel-culture dynamics (Lumen Christi, 2021). Some panelists rightly critiqued how Twitter-mania and cancel culture uses victims as weapons to attack our neighbors

in a blood thirsty Puritanism without grace. And the Girardian notion of conversion was broached by the panel—repentance that we could be victimizers without knowing it, and that we must grapple with our own complicity in societal evils. And in place of cancel culture’s false modes of belonging, panelists discussed how we must *build communities based on forgiveness to replace ostracizing culture*. We must get beyond us/them. We must put our stones down and pick up our pots and pans, to create community centered around forgiveness and to dialogue, even with people with whom we strongly differ.

While my above reflections affirm sentiments within that vision, I have shown how this vision must be supplemented with a certain agonistic spirit, a graceful divisiveness. Placing two such contrastive words in tandem is, again, at home in the Scriptural tradition, most notably in Christ’s snake-dove *modus operandi*. His social method evidenced a graceful norm and a disciplinary exception: he was undoubtedly saturated with an inclusive concern; yet he also spoke of the *limits* of attempting to win others over, of eventually shaking the dust off one’s feet (Matthew 10). He not only blessed the poor but also indicted the rich with “woe.” He blessed peacemakers and yet said he came to bring division. And along with prophetic indictments, like Matthew 23, so facially divisive, he also spoke of a community of increasingly pastoral and even excommunicative discipline (Matthew 18). (Notably, this “exclusion” involves “treating them like gentiles and tax collectors”—a status that, for Jesus, evidently warranted intensified gracious outreach.) He dove-ishly spoke of carrying a cross, but he also shrewdly walked away from his Nazareth stoning. Paul, too, not only patiently suffered arrests, but he also invoked his citizenship in the idolatrous power, Rome. Christ was not only silent before his abusers but criticized their delusional abuse of power; he not only reached out a hand of generous inclusion, but he also cast out money changers and let the rich man reject his invitation. And even the possession-sharing community of Acts seemed to have in it some weird, communist angel of guilt who evidently slayed Ananias and Sapphira.

In all of this, we must come to terms with the awkward, uneasy coexistence of snake and dove. Or, per Augustine, we live in a messy mixture of the Earthly and Heavenly cities. Per William Cavanaugh’s riff on Augustine, Christ’s movement is like a play that shares the stage with a diametrically distinct play, one featuring worldly powers containing violence (Cavanaugh, 2011). This is a stage in which the political has evidently not disappeared. Even the most unconditional God, in whom there is no shadow but only light, nonetheless paradoxically manifests in our world with certain boundaries.

Even if She endlessly pours forth all light, we inescapably cast shadows on this stage.

In other words, the language of inclusivity, welcome, and forgiveness must remain as ever-present, essential, and forceful as that of the dove image. That must be combined, impossibly, and without diminishment, with a fearless, shrewd, serpentine agonism. Mouffe says our maturation here is not in the disappearance of hegemony and enemies, but the reduction of antagonism into agonism. Supplementing unconditional grace and inclusivity with a realist agonism resonates with the Augustinian tradition of political ambivalence that endures engagement with the world and public life (see Mathewes 2007). And that saint promised no easy solutions—not even pacifism—in the raging fires of politics (*City of God*, 15:4; 19:5-6). To uphold a snake-dove life of graceful conflict risks the mischaracterization of irenicism, as one could read Thích Nhất Hạnh, or the backlash of “divisiveness” that many felt toward Jesus, St. Stephen, or Dr. King. But while the command to be a snake-dove may indeed feel uncomfortable, even impossible, in our Earthly city, I contend that it is also the only way to the Heavenly city.

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