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The wounds of war and the scars of culture: Simone Weil and René Girard on the symmetry of violence

Abstract: The philosophical discourses of violence developed in the 20th century can be grasped in two fundamental paradigms: the paradigm of force (Simone Weil) and the paradigm of domination (Horkheimer and Adorno). This article aims at situating René Girard's theory of the culture within the paradigm of violence as an immediate force, stemming from Simone Weil's phenomenological description of force in *The Iliad*. Simone Weil can be read as a model for modern reflection on violence in different ways. One of them can be identifying her interpretation of *The Iliad* as a starting point for the critique or even unmasking of blind reifying violence through the philosophy of culture: an example of this kind of translation can be found in Girard and his analyses of the figure of the scapegoat and rituals of violence, (sanctioned within myth), transferring violence into a sacral sphere. The pivotal point of the comparison is the concept of *kydos*, "the triumphant fascination of superior violence," developed by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*. The Greek term, which connects violence, understood in the mode of immediate force, with the magical and sacral dimension, serves as a key concept for comparison of the two thinkers' conceptualizations of force. It allows interpretation of the conceptual tenets of Girardian theory, such as unanimity, symmetry, *mimesis*, and myth in the light of the key concepts of Weil, such as reification, symmetry, unawareness, and the blind mechanism of force. It also allows us to point out the discrepancies between the two conceptualizations (above all, the tensions between the rationality and irrationality of violence) and to grasp Girard's theory as a philosophical

commentary on Weil's insights. This is going to fill a space on the map of modern discourses of violence.

Keywords: Simone Weil, René Girard, force, domination, *kydos*.

Introduction: two paradigms

The following article is based on the premise that modern (20th century) discourses of violence can be read within two fundamental paradigms: the paradigm of force and the paradigm of domination. While the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno) can be easily identified as having set up the pattern of the philosophical critique of domination, hidden in instrumental reason, Simone Weil delivered a profound phenomenological description of violence understood as an immediate force.

Both patterns of understanding violence, although in most aspects opposite, surprisingly show some formal affinities: (1) both have their background in the 20th-century's World Wars and both are attempts to grasp our human condition within the context of current historical development; (2) nevertheless, precisely for the sake of understanding the present, they reach very deeply into the past, into the archaic spiritual history of the West. Both deliver great modern interpretations of Homer. Simone Weil, with her analysis of *The Iliad* (Weil, 1965) on the one hand, and Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, with their reading of *The Odyssey* on the other (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002), seem to have found archaic sources for our modern self-understanding.

Moreover, different modern accounts of violence and force seem to more or less unconsciously refer to these two fundamental patterns. But this reference is far from being straightforward or unproblematic. History and developed civilization modified, sublimated, and mediated these patterns so that they are not simply copied in the events of our most recent history and our 20th century discourses of violence and force. One can read these discourses as reminiscent of their sources, even if this reminiscence is blurred.¹

¹ This article is a part of a wider project to read both accounts of violence as reflections through which we understand our present condition, or as paradigms of our contemporary complex understandings of violence. These interpretations can be read as interpretations of symbols in the Ricouerian sense: the bringing out of a secondary sense hidden in the primary sense. Thus, through Weil and Adorno, Achilles and Odysseus become symbolic representations of contemporary modes of violence.

After the trauma of the Holocaust, various critiques of instrumental rationality connected with violence and domination were an echo of Adorno's accusations against reason and the Enlightenment: it reverberates in Heidegger's critique of calculative thinking (Heidegger, 1966, 1998, 2008) in Bauman's connection between the Shoah and bureaucracy (Bauman, 2008, pp. 83–116), less strongly in Hannah Arendt's critique of modern society (Arendt, 1998). In a less direct way it also reverberates in Foucault's multifarious analyses of the interdependence between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1980, 1995).

Simone Weil did not have followers in this sense. Nevertheless, I assume that she can also be read as a paradigm for modern reflection on violence in more than one way. One of them would be to read conceptual frameworks of modern political theories that somehow repeat and support, although on a different level, the rules of war violence as described in her essay *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*. Perhaps the most straightforward exemplifications of the affirmation of force against "reflection, justice, and prudence," incorporated in the modern history of thought, can be found in the German political and juridical discourse of the Weimar Republic, inspired by George Sorel and his *Reflections on Violence* (Sorel, 1999) – early Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt would be paradigmatic examples here.

Weil's phenomenological analysis of force can be paradigmatic for modern discourses in a different mode: it can be read as a starting point for the critique or even unmasking of blind reifying violence through the philosophy of culture. An example of this kind of translation is René Girard and his analyses of the scapegoat figure and rituals of violence transferring violence into a sacral sphere.

This article aims at situating Girard's theory of culture within the paradigm of violence as an immediate force, i.e., within Simone Weil's understanding of violence.

Simone Weil's paradigm: symmetry

The immediate historical context of the emergence of Simone Weil's essay *The Iliad, or the Poem of Force* is telling: it was written during the summer and fall of 1940, immediately after France capitulated under the yoke of modern German forces (June 22, 1940). Nevertheless, Weil's insights are not a straightforward result of the most recent events of the Battle of France. The first source of the essay stems from her school lectures of 1937/8. It is reminiscent more of the hopelessness of the First World War than Hitler's military and political power, whose full consequences were at that moment unclear.

But even if we could not know this, it would be evident that Weil's reading of *The Iliad* is very far from purely historical or literary interest, but that it is rather a phenomenology of the nature of immediate physical violence, i.e., force: "For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the *Iliad* could appear as a historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the *Iliad* is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors" (Weil, 1965, p. 5). This phenomenological description is not an immediate eidetic analysis but is an outcome of mediated interpretation of symbols, myths, and literary sources.

Paul Ricoeur showed how philosophical reflection has nothing to do with immediate consciousness or intuition. Instead of being given, reflection emerges from the task of interpretation of symbols. If symbols refer us to at least a double meaning, then myths can be considered similar symbolic systems requiring interpretation. But there is more to it: symbolic structures require not only interpretation (as an explanation of this duality of meanings present in language), but they also call us for thinking and philosophic reflection whose task it is to recover their meaning for our own existence: "I cannot grasp the act of existing except in signs scattered in the world" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 46). It is precisely what Simone Weil (or, differently, the Frankfurt School) does: her account of Homer can be read as a mediator or reminder of this sign of our existence and strives at "recovering something which has first been lost" (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 45).

Now, the question has to be posed: what kind of reflection can we see in this 'mirror'? How does force modify our condition?

The first and main characteristic of violence, according to Weil, is *reification*. Subjection to force or physical violence turns a human being into a thing. There are at least three modes of reification present in Weil's essay: Reification is possible literally as killing, i.e., turning a living body into a corpse. But reification happens also in the 'not-yet,' in the brief moment of awaiting certain death. The figure of Priam's son Lycaon begging Achilles for life is a paradigm of a person who "becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him" (Weil, 1965, p. 7). This also concerns Priam himself, begging for Hector's body, which for Achilles, was an inert object. Yet another mode of reification, a sort of prolonged not-yet, is present in slavery, an outcome of brute force. The paradigmatic figure here is Briseis, a slave concubine of Achilles, compelled to love him, although she has all the reasons to hate him. She mourns his friend Patroclus instead of her loved ones: slaughtered

parents, brothers, and husband. Employing this replacement of feelings, the enslaved person “loses his own inner life” (Weil, 1965, p. 11).

The second fundamental characteristic of violence is *symmetry*. The greatness of *The Iliad*, according to Simone Weil, contrary to other great books of Western and Jewish civilization, is its neutrality: “One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek” (Weil, 1965, p. 26). The favors given to one side would mask another feature of force, pitilessly shown in the epos. The reification, obviously inflicting the victims, concerns and also intoxicates those who are *by chance* in power. In *The Iliad*, nobody is spared from suffering, pain, fear, and misery: “In this poem, there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force” (Weil, 1965, p. 11). This symmetry is visible on several levels. On the level of events, each crowing hero at a certain moment becomes a victim of force, even Achilles. But symmetry has another dimension: each character using force simultaneously undergoes its reciprocal power, which reifies him even before the change of roles. By reifying others, a hero is also reifying himself: he believes he is the one who uses force, and while it is the force that overwhelms him: his deeds and reactions become predictable. Moreover, symmetry also appears on the level of narration: it is bitter but simultaneously a cool and distanced description of death and suffering, neutral to the conflicted parties. It is a description stripped of any “comforting fiction,” as Weil puts it.

The third predominating feature of violence is *blindness* and an illusion of *natural necessity*. The symmetrical character of force eventually creates the illusion that it is given by destiny, that it possesses us rather than we possess it. The Trojan War warriors behave, with no exception, as if they were caught in a blind mechanism. They reject any reasonable voice that mitigates the use of violence and further fighting (like the voice of Thersites). They prevent the war from finishing as if they were programmed to proceed toward the final destruction. The Greeks do not want the riches of Paris and Helen. They want to see Troy in ruins. The Trojans cannot feel satisfaction seeing the fleeing Achaeans: Hector knows that “the day will come when Holy Troy will perish” (Homer, 2015) and still does everything to make certain it really happens, setting fire to the ships which prevent the Greeks from escaping. “What they want is, in fact, everything” (Weil, 1965, p. 15). Both parties make sure the war does not finish too early, as if they were programmed to drive toward the final destruction. All this comes up to a special understanding of force by those who exercise, or suffer it: force is conceived as an attribute of individuals only at the beginning, until it reveals its symmetrical and mechanical character. Later it is understood as a natural or divine, but not

as a human power. Man is only a marionette in the hand of destiny, nature, or gods. “Thus violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch, it comes to seem just as external to its employer as to its victim. And from this springs the idea of a destiny before which executioner and victim stand equally innocent” (Weil, 1965, p. 17).

All this excludes moderation in the use of force. The symmetrical, blind, and seemingly natural character of reification forfeits any reflection or mediation that would mitigate violence. This makes boys slaughtering each other in the mud of Flanders in 1917, similar to mythic Achaean and Trojan warriors. After the first childish embrace of war as a game, there comes a day of fear. They feel condemned by Zeus, or the hand of necessity, or in a more modern manner, history. Any reflection or moderation “would expose their mind to suffering so naked, so violent that it could not be borne” (Weil, 1965, p. 20). Their blindness secures them and haunts them at the same time: “the conquering soldier is like a scourge of nature. Possessed by war, he, like the slave, becomes a thing” (Weil, 1965, p. 22).

Simone Weil gave an account of the nature of immediate physical violence, or force, as she most frequently put it. The force of war and the spiritual situation of a soldier could be interpreted as one of the possible patterns of understanding violence in the West.

Girard: symmetry as mimesis

Before connecting Girard with Weil’s phenomenology of violence, we need to briefly reconstruct his main idea. I will not present it thoroughly but concentrate mainly on the symmetrical character of violence, as it allows us to find a parallel between his theory of culture and Weil’s account.

Contrary to popular views, violence is not founded on the difference (Girard, 1989, p. 49). It is not a different skin color, cultural distinctions, ethnic or religious tensions that are the primary soil for the proliferation of violence. It is precisely the opposite: it is the similarity of human beings that facilitates hostility. Violence appears wherever people become more and more alike, i.e., in mutual rivalry for the same object. The desire behind the competition makes people similar to the point of sameness. The common denominator of desire makes other differences irrelevant.

The first act of violence emerges from the situation where a human community, for some reason, can no longer live according to hitherto operating rules and has to establish itself anew. Such a crisis can have objective causes (war, calamity, epidemics), but it becomes a crisis only on a societal level: “Men feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture; they

are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster but never look into the natural causes; the concept that they might affect those causes by learning more about them remains embryonic. Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes” (Girard, 1986, p. 14). It abolishes settled rules and hierarchies and destroys culture through human social reactions. Such a situation makes people equal in one desire (e.g., victory) and makes previously functioning rules and distinctions irrelevant. On this account, Girard often defines it as a “mimetic crisis,” where *mimesis* is not an aesthetic term but an anthropological one, referring to the symmetry of desire. It is very close to the “contagious indifference” - the state of soldiers’ minds depicted by Simone Weil (Weil, 1965, p. 18). A “mimetic crisis” is also a “sacrificial crisis”: a situation in which hitherto practiced religious rituals lose their social disciplinary function in legitimizing established hierarchies and distinctions. Therefore, such a crisis can easily lead to a carnival of violence, a ubiquitous fight between people, and rivalry, which is not mitigated by norms and prohibitions anymore. What is important now is that the crux of a sacrificial crisis is always a mimetic tension that emerges in extraordinary circumstances. A community overwhelmed by a calamity forgets previous distinctions, which foremostly means forgetting the prescribed and differentiating rules of desire: who and in what social position is allowed to desire what. All of a sudden, everyone wants the same.

This critical situation is very similar to that depicted in the *Iliad*: the Achaeans forget about Helen, they want everything; the Trojans forget their desire to save Troy, and they also want everything. The object of desire is not relevant. What is important is the rivalry. While Simone Weil’s description is focused exactly on this carnival of violence, Girard’s account concerns the cultural and religious means of avoiding the final destruction. In his view, there is only one remedy for such a critical situation: the afflicted community has to transfer the ubiquitous and mutual violence upon one individual, who becomes the victim of a collective murder. Such a rivalrous community is, by definition, persecutory (Girard, 1986, p. 16). The *mimesis* of conflict and rivalry, which, at the same time, antagonized and unified the community members, now becomes the *mimesis* of unanimity in the choice of a victim. Such a collective and spontaneous murder becomes a new beginning and forms a new culture by a renewal of the basis of cultural order, the system of social distinctions in desires. The act of collective murder is a shock, a *katharsis*, a purification for the community, which cuts off the dangerous process of unification.

What is important now is the ambivalence of the victim: once burdened with the community's guilt, after being sacrificed, he/she is recognized as a savior, a person who averted the crisis (Girard, 1986, p. 42). The culture begins to worship him as a god who saved the community, or as the god-founder of a new community. In other words, the scapegoat is transferred from the profane into the sacred: "The return of peace and order is ascribed to the same cause as the earlier troubles to the victim himself. That is what makes the victim sacred and transforms the persecution into a point of religious and cultural departure" (Girard, 1986, p. 55). The first spontaneous act of violence is the foundation of culture, and it must be saved in the cultural memory. It will be repeated as a ritual that commemorates the first act, and, at the same time, it will be mystified in myths; the role of such narrations blurs the randomness of the act of lynching and stress the sacral aspect of this event. In this way, the accidentality and humanness of the primal sacrificial selection are hidden from the collective consciousness: "The sacrificial crisis is never described in myths and ritual as it really is. There, human violence is envisioned as issuing from some force exterior to man" (Girard, 1989, p. 82). It is akin to force misunderstood as a natural necessity, as depicted by Simone Weil.

Thus, the myth is a story mystifying collective human violence and depicting it as something natural or divine for which humans have no responsibility. The mechanism seems to be parallel to what happens with the Weilian warriors after the first embrace of force: once it eludes personal control and proves to afflict those who believe had possessed it, it is de-humanized and ascribed to superhuman powers, like destiny, history or nature.

The rituals and corresponding myths are reminders of the first victim in changed, mollified forms that either blur the responsibility of the collective murder or even hides the very event. Nevertheless, the sacrificial religious rituals are the traces of the collective spontaneous murder, scars from the wound in the community. But, thanks to myth and its mystifying function, nobody remembers that this wound was self-afflicted.

Kydos: the fascination of violence

Now, let's turn our attention to the Greek word *kydos*, explained by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*. *Kydos* connects violence, understood in the mode of immediate force, with the magical and sacral dimension; by the same token, it focuses on the intellectual affinity between Simone Weil and René Girard.

In English, there exists a late derivative of this Greek word, the informal noun *kudos*, which, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means so much as prestige, praise, fame, or renown as a result of achievement. However, the English *kudos*, although stemming from *kydos*, has lost a substantial part of its original connotation. In Homer, and Greek tragedies, *kydos* is glory as the result of military advantage, but, at the same time, it contains magical-sacral components, which make it directly untranslatable. Its connotation reveals the “relationship between violence, desire, and divinity” (Girard, 1989, p. 151). *Kydos* is a stake in the single combat between Achean and Trojan warriors, but it is not a mere human advantage: “It is the fascination of superior violence. Violence strikes men as at once seductive and terrifying; never a simple means to an end, but as an epiphany” (Girard, 1989, p. 152).

The status of *kydos* is ambivalent: between divine and human, subjective and objective. *Kydos* is a triumphant majesty, characteristic of gods, as “for the Greeks, the issue of violence carried to its extreme was divinity itself” (Girard, 1989, p. 152). *Kydos* is a form of talisman. When it appears, it creates unanimity on both sides of the confrontation. Those who possess *kydos* feel enormous and growing power; those who do not feel defeated and paralyzed. As a feature of human relations, it is always changeable and fleeting, although, for both sides of the conflict, it seems to be barely reversible at the decisive moment. It signifies the combat between Ajax and Hector, where *kydos* is transferred from Hector to Ajax and back to Hector. The one who is actually with *kydos*, feels invincible, and the other party is overwhelmed with fear (Homer, 2015). Even Patroklos is filled with *kydos* and spreads fear in the Trojan army encircling the Greek ships (Homer, 2015) – a momentary advantage that seems to be irreversible. *Kydos* excludes any moderation and leads to catastrophe.

Although elusive and abstract (a fleeting sign of a temporary victory), *kydos* is the highest object of mimetic rivalry, much more important than the seemingly real point of war (like Helen or treasures).

Kydos, according to Girard, shows affinity with another Greek concept: that of *thymos*. Like *kydos*, *thymos* is an object of rivalry: “the adversaries are trying to wrest from each other’s grasp their very souls, their vital force, their being. Each finds this being reflected in the other’s violence, because their mimetic desires have converged on one and the same object” (Girard 1989, 154). Like *kydos*, *thymos* is also ambivalent and alternative (has an alternating character): it means soul, spirit, or anger. However, unlike psyche

(which refers to soul or mind as an inalienable human attribute), one can actually possess it or not.

Kydos and its connate *thymos*, as described by Girard, focalize the main features of Simone Weil's force: reification, symmetry, and blindness (that is, the false interpretation of force as a natural necessity).

Thus, the very essence of reification can be grasped in terms of *thymos*: it fills Achilles, who "harshly" replies to Likaon, begging for his life. Likaon is the one stripped of *thymos* before his soul leaves his body: "And the other's knees and heart failed him. Dropping his spear, knelt down, holding out his arms" (Homer, 2015). Achilles, in Girard's words, "grasps his soul, his vital force, their being" (Girard, 1989, p. 154), and Likaon, in Weil's words, "becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him" (Weil, 1965, p. 7). The same happens later to his father Priam: "He stopped, clasped the knees of Achilles, kissed his hand, Those terrible man-killing hands that had slaughtered so many of his sons" (Homer, 2015).

Further, those who actually possess *kydos* (and *thymos*), feel godlike and do not understand its symmetrical and alternative character; they do not understand the symmetry of mimetism, whose law it is to afflict both sides equally, irrespective of any momentary passing advantage. Once force reveals its symmetrical, alternative character, *kydos* loses its characteristic as a human gain, but it does not disappear. It is not demystified as a human illusion; it becomes even more "objective" as if given by a god: and it is a myth that supports its interpretation as a divine or natural necessity. After every hero tastes a moment of defeat, "victory is less a matter of valor than of blind destiny" (Weil, 1965, p. 13). The perfect example was the moment when Zeus put the destiny of the Trojans and Achaeans on the scales and "seized the scales in the middle; it was the fatal day of Greece that sank" (Homer, 2015). *Kydos* is not a gain anymore. It is even beyond the Olympians and is simply given interchangeably by destiny (*Moirai*). This (false) recognition leads to the escalation of conflict, which becomes a divine affair, where humans are downgraded to helpless marionettes. The military clash is reshaped into a war for bleeding.

Discrepancies: the rationality and irrationality of violence

Probably the most original aspect of Girard's theory of violence is that contrary to common sense and philosophical tradition, violence is not irrational (Girard, 1989, p. 2). It is not an expression of a dark, demonic or biological instinct. It is not, like in Hobbes, a primitive state of nature where everyone is at war with everyone else. This state can be abolished by

the political act of ceding one's inborn right to aggression and defense of the sovereign. In Girard, on the contrary, violence is a defense mechanism developed in culture. And as such, it is characterized by specific logic and severe consequences. Looking for a victim as a remedy for evil emerging from natural causes might seem utterly irrational to objective judgment. Still, it is rational if we look at it from the perspective of the logic of culture. The scapegoat mechanism prevents an unlimited escalation of violence by unloading the spiral of symmetry (*mimesis*). Its rationality can be seen in the mechanism and the ritual of selecting and sacrificing victims (whose detailed description I am putting aside). There is a certain lack of social bonds between the community and the potential scapegoat: victims need to be set apart from the community, either on the bottom of the social ladder or as someone distinguished. Such isolation minimizes the risk of revenge and an outbreak of uncontrolled violence.

In Simone Weil, by contrast, violence is irrational, insofar as it is a result of a lack of reflection, and: "Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice and prudence. Hence we see men in arms behaving harshly and madly" (Weil, 1965, p. 13). Unlike the critics of reason, Simone Weil blames the lack of rational recognition of the limits of force (that is, "that interval of hesitation, wherein lies all our consideration for our brothers in humanity" (Weil, 1965, p. 14)) for the blindness and contingency of pain suffered and inflicted. Seen more globally, the randomness and arbitrariness of force that has exceeded its measure take the form of impersonal and automatic geometrical retribution. As such, it becomes a literary theme (Aeschylus's tragedy) and a point of departure for philosophy. Greek philosophy, with its conceptions of "limit, measure, equilibrium which ought to determine the conduct of life" (Weil, 1965, p. 15), is a remedy (alas, according to Weil, forgotten) for the abuse of force.

The rationality of violence in Girard cannot be simply juxtaposed with the irrationality of force in Weil. Weil's irrationality of force is, contrarily, personal and human: it is always a soldier, a warrior, a human being who forgets the limits and measure of reason, letting violence acquire semi-natural, or semi-sacral, superhuman dimensions. Girard's rationality of violent mechanisms and rituals is utterly impersonal and, in a way, non-human: it is culture, i.e., a superhuman structure which develops self-defense mechanisms. Nevertheless, although Weil, unlike Girard, believes in the power of thought and philosophy, both referred to the higher rationality of Christianity – Girard in the demascating myth function of the Gospels, Weil in its

revelatory source of understanding of human suffering. And both believed that Christian tradition forgot, or blurred, its message.

History and modernity

Above, I have described the cyclic rhythm of the beginning and renewal of culture in Girard. This corresponded to the difference between the spontaneous mechanism of the surrogate victim and the scapegoat ritual. This dual structure has, in Girard's thought, a double function. On the one hand, it is a historical hypothesis describing the logic hidden in archaic cultures and "primitive" religious systems. On the other hand, it depicts a model, a transhistorical and transcultural anthropological description of the laws of human culture in general. One can say that the historical, genetic aspect of the scapegoat ritual constitutes a sort of cultural residue: the scapegoat mechanism is the ultimate, yet primitive, rescue for a culture in distress. Thus, one can see the history of culture as a returning echo of collective violence, independently from the religious turn Girard saw in Christianity. In this approach, the core can be historically modified and reshaped into stable institutions, but it never disappears. It can always be recollected and repeated in this or that form.

Nevertheless, in the descriptions of historical times and modernity, there is another possibility within Girard's thought. In his last book (Girard & Chantre, 2010), Girard returns to the unsolved mimetic conflict, namely, to the Weilian force. Here, culture is no more seen as a cyclic repetition of sacrificial crisis and its remedy in sacrifice. Christianity changed our civilization irreversibly. It revealed violence hidden in myths, and by doing so, it disarmed the mechanism of transference of the collective guilt onto individuals. By the same token, it dismantled the sacrificial ritual by means of depotentialisation. But even Christianity and its powerful message was unable to weaken the mechanism of the escalation of tension in mimetic rivalry. It, so to say, stopped halfway: it deprived us of the cultural tools to prevent the undue escalation of violence, but it did not prevent violence itself.

This second scenario of historical development, evidently present in Girard's last book, shows affinities with Simone Weil's account of force even more directly. Here, modernity is not described as a series of scapegoat rituals for the sake of cultural renewals (oblivious to the Christian revelation). The opposite is true: religion demystified the scapegoat mechanisms and rituals and depotentialized them as remedies protecting communities from mimetic violence. We acquired the cultural knowledge of Christianity, but we could

not follow the ethical appeal to withhold the desire for revenge and hold the spiral of symmetrical violence.

In *Battling to the End*, Girard transfers the principle of mimesis from individuals within a community to global war relations. He interprets Clausewitz's treatise *On war* as an account of mimetic international conflict. Clausewitz, having grasped the essence of war as a "duel on a larger scale" (Clausewitz, 2006, p. 13), and stating that "war is an act of force and *there is no logical limit to the application of that force*" (Clausewitz, 2006, p. 15), has inscribed war in the model of mimetic rivalry (known from the pre-Christian times). In late modernity, this model becomes a global and spreading conflict, where force has no limits, theoretically. Practically, the historical circumstances of conflict do not end with an Apocalypse because conflict waxes and wanes. Its dynamics are a sort of pulsation of rivalrous tension. After reaching a certain point and applying acute remedies, the spiral of mimesis loosens up, and conflict goes back to the limitations it exceeded earlier. *Katharsis*, known from "primitive" cultures, never comes, and conflict is never truly resolved.

Mutual imitation is increasingly vehement: the mimetic symmetry comes out from behind the scenes and becomes a global principle of the world. In other words, the unappeased global conflict is a modern version of the ancient sacrificial crisis. Simultaneously, according to Girard, in the first decades of the 21st century, the institutions slowing down the escalation of conflicts started to become less and less efficient. The only thing that stays hidden from the actors of such conflicts is their progressing similarity. For instance, contrary to Huntington, Girard interprets the conflict between China and the US not as a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996, pp. 182–226), two different powers, different cultures, values, and so on, but as a dispute "between two forms of capitalism that are becoming more and more similar" (Girard & Chantre, 2010, p. 42). The reaction of George W. Bush to September 11 is not a clash of Jihad and the McWorld (as Benjamin Barber's famous book title proclaims (Barber, 1996)), but a new form of global *mimesis*. What the actors see, each from his point of view, as combat between good and evil, from the global perspective, looks more and more similar: terrorists versus Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. In the context of the north-eastern Polish border, one could also say that Poland in 2021 became more and more like the anti-Christian regimes it has always opposed (or believed to have opposed).

Simone Weil and René Girard noticed, each in their way, the social and symmetrical character of immediate force. Towards the end of his life, Girard translated the tensions between individuals into global relations. Weil, for obvious biographical reasons, couldn't develop her phenomenology of force in new historical circumstances. Nevertheless, she realized how vital the insight is that "human destinies are not separated, but are intertwined and become a whole" (Leder, 2018, p. 76). This insight facilitates the experience of the symmetrical balance of power and the right measure or limitation in using force. Weil was convinced that the concepts of measure, balance, and limit, "which ought to determine the conduct of life, are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics" (Weil, 1965, p. 15). Although she wrote these words on the verge of WWII, it is clear that they have not lost their relevance in the third decade of the 21st century. The new Millennium announced itself with a return of force in a new-old form: the festive mood of the fall of the iron curtain faded, suppressed contempt could be uttered again, hate re-found its place in the public sphere, and naked military violence returned to Europe, *kydos* proliferated again. In other words, to stick to the metaphoric of this essay: human culture opened up its scars and returned to the stage of mutually inflicting wounds.

In this way, Simone Weil's and René Girard's accounts of force have become topical in the first decades of the 21st century. As Andrzej Leder noticed: After the post-war decades of suppressed aggression (remember the slogan: "Never again war!"), where the role of philosophy was to demystify and unmask the hidden violence of bureaucratic systems in the mode of the Frankfurt School, now philosophy faces the necessity to intellectually embrace force again (Leder, 2018, p. 36). It is the role of philosophy to recover the concepts of measure, limit, and balance from their restricted meaning in technology, or to reflect on the nature of direct, war-like violence. Geo-politically it seems an all too weak weapon against self-perpetuating mechanisms, but the only one we can be truly responsible for.

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