

Mimetic Desire and Mechanisms of Sacrifice: A Critical Analysis of René Girard's Theory of Violence

Mimetik Arzu ve Kurban Mekanizmaları: René Girard'ın Şiddet Teorisi Üzerine Eleştirel Bir İnceleme

Erhan Korkmaz  0000-0002-9744-6484

Ankara University

ABSTRACT

René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, sacrificial mechanism, and violence has significantly shaped interdisciplinary analyses of social conflict. According to Girard, desire is not autonomous but imitative, generating rivalry and ultimately a mimetic crisis. This crisis, he argues, is resolved through sacrificial mechanisms that direct collective violence toward a scapegoat, restoring social stability. His seminal works, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986), and his most comprehensive synthesis, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), offer both historical analysis of sacrificial rituals and theoretical tools for interpreting modern social phenomena. Employing a methodology of comparative theoretical analysis and critical textual inquiry, this article critically engages with Girard's framework. It highlights the theory's limitations in addressing anthropological and historical diversity, its theological underpinnings, and its antagonism toward psychoanalytic and Marxist approaches. Drawing on critical animal studies, the paper interrogates Girard's human-animal dichotomy and examines the implications of his theory for critiquing speciesism. Additionally, the article explores the theoretical tension between Girard's Hobbesian view of violence as innate and Kropotkin's anarchist vision of mutual aid. By integrating these critiques, the paper evaluates Girard's relevance to contemporary issues such as digital shaming, identity politics, xenophobia, and ecological collapse. While Girard's model remains a powerful tool for analyzing modern violence, it requires a critical reassessment that incorporates speciesism, social plurality, and anarchist perspectives.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 Apr 2025

Accepted 24 Aug 2025

KEYWORDS

René Girard, mimetic desire, sacrificial mechanism, critical animal studies, anarchism

Introduction

René Girard was a 20th-century thinker whose theoretical approaches profoundly influenced disciplines ranging from literary criticism to anthropology. Beginning his career as a literary critic, Girard eventually formulated theoretical syntheses that integrated anthropology, sociology, and theology. His intellectual framework is built on two foundational concepts: mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism. According to Girard, desire is not an autonomous feeling but a social process that arises from imitating others. This imitation inevitably leads to rivalry and social crisis. Societies resolve this crisis by directing collective violence toward a single target—the “scapegoat”—thereby restoring order. With this approach, Girard reinterpreted practices like sacrificial rituals, often dismissed by modern social sciences as “irrational,” as foundational

© 2025 The Author(s). CUJHSS (e-ISSN 3062-0112) Published by Çankaya University.

Erhan Korkmaz, Post graduate, Dept. of Folklore, Ankara University, Türkiye |

erhan.krkmzoglu@gmail.com; ORCID# 0000-0002-9744-6484; <https://doi.org/10.47777/cankujhss>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

mechanisms of social order.

While Girard's theory retains its explanatory power, it faces significant challenges from contemporary critical thought, necessitating a re-evaluation. This context gives rise to the article's central research problem: What is the validity of Girard's universalist model when confronted with critiques from contemporary critical animal studies and anarchist thought? Specifically, how does his anthropocentric framework conflict with critiques of speciesism, and how do his Hobbesian assumptions about innate violence clash with the anarchist thesis of mutual aid? This article aims to fill these theoretical gaps by placing Girard in dialogue with these critical perspectives, thereby reassessing the limits of his theory. To achieve this aim, the article adopts a methodology of comparative theoretical analysis. It will comprehensively examine Girard's theoretical framework through his foundational works, primarily focusing on *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), *The Scapegoat* (1986), and his most systematic synthesis, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987). The former two investigate how sacrificial rituals control violence and trace the scapegoat mechanism through history, while the latter expands this into a comprehensive theory of hominization and cultural origins.

The article is structured as follows. First, it will introduce Girard's key concepts. Next, it will analyze the main arguments of the two works mentioned above. The main body of the paper will then discuss multi-faceted critiques of Girard. It will cover established criticisms, such as his neglect of anthropological diversity and his theological underpinnings. The analysis will then develop the article's original contributions, providing an in-depth critique based on speciesism and anarchist theory. Finally, the conclusion will evaluate the relevance of Girard's framework for understanding contemporary processes such as digital shaming, identity politics, and the ecological crisis.

Mimetic Desire and Sacrificial Mechanisms

At the core of René Girard's theoretical universe lies the concept of mimetic desire. This foundational idea was not first developed through anthropology, but through literary criticism in his seminal early work, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965). In it, Girard analyzes novelists like Cervantes, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoevsky to reveal what he calls "triangular desire." He argues that desire is not a direct line between a subject and an object, but is instead mediated by a third party: the model. This model, who is admired and imitated, inevitably becomes a rival once the subject desires the same object, setting the stage for the conflict that Girard would later explore in his anthropological works. Understanding these literary origins is crucial for grasping the full scope of his theory.

Girard argues that this phenomenon is not exclusive to literary fiction but also reflects the fundamental mechanism of human desire itself. Human desires are not spontaneous or self-generated; rather, individuals form their desires by observing what others desire (Girard 1977). This perspective provides a significant critique of modern philosophy's tendency to treat the inner life of the individual as unique or original. For Girard, desire is less an individual inclination than a process of "mimicking the desire of the Other." The dynamic between the subject, object, and model creates the Model-Rival dialectic (Girard 1986), in which the person we take as a model transforms into a competitor. What initially appears as admiration gradually becomes conflict, and consequently, individuals who desire the same object or status become both each other's models and rivals.

When mimetic desire spreads across a social context, it generates a more extensive dynamic of conflict. For instance, a rivalry between two individuals may escalate into a spiral of collective violence, and this spread can give rise to a contagious social crisis (Fleming 2004; Palaver 2013). Based on his readings of anthropological findings and literary texts, Girard argues that mimetic

crises have historically been among the most destabilizing forces within communities, as individuals become rivals of one another, causing distinctions between them to collapse (Girard 1986). When large segments of society pursue the same object, such as power, status, or a particular resource, uncontrolled internal conflict ensues. In a Hobbesian framework, this conflict can escalate into a state of “everyone against everyone,” unleashing a destructive potential for violence. Girard’s fundamental question, therefore, is as follows: how has such destructive violence been restrained, from pre-modern societies to modern nation-states? It is at this very point that the sacrificial mechanism comes into play. In his magnum opus, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), Girard pushes this logic to its ultimate conclusion, arguing that this mechanism is not merely a tool for resolving crises within existing cultures but is the very engine of hominization (pp. 84-105). He posits a “founding murder” (pp. 105-124): a spontaneous, collective murder of a single victim by a proto-human group trapped in a mimetic crisis. This primordial event, for Girard, is what creates the first prohibition and the first ritual, thereby giving birth to the sacred, language, and all subsequent human culture. The sacrificial mechanism is thus repositioned from a social regulator to the foundational event that separates humanity from the animal kingdom.

Sacrifice functions as a means through which social violence is expressed in a controlled and regulated manner. In addition to the bloody sacrifices of humans or animals in “primitive” or archaic societies, symbolic forms of sacrifice can also be observed in modern societies. In every case, the underlying principle remains the same: the community unites around the sentiment of “all against one,” thereby directing their internal tensions toward a single target. Girard posits that the sacrificial victim is often an individual who is perceived as “vulnerable” or lacking support within the community (Hubert & Mauss 1981). This victim may manifest as a physical human or animal, a specific group, or even an abstract “external enemy.” What matters is that the sacrificed figure is devoid of the capacity for retaliation. This dynamic enables the community to temporarily alleviate its internal conflict.

Girard draws attention to a phenomenon he calls “misrecognition” in the act of sacrifice. The community’s perception of a victim is characterized by either guilt or a perception of the need for sacrifice to the gods. This collective illusion, in turn, justifies the violence and is often reinforced by mythical or religious narratives. Over time, the community comes to believe that order has been restored through the death or expulsion of the victim and thus begins to commemorate the sacrificed figure as a “savior” (Girard 1986). This paradox where the victim is both a scapegoat who bears the sins of society and a redemptive figure lies at the heart of the recurring “guilty-savior-god” motif found in many religious mythologies.

According to Girard, sacrifice -regarded as the oldest and most widespread form of social resolution throughout history- is a mechanism developed to neutralize the chaos generated by conflicting desires. By channeling its internal violence toward a single target, the community undergoes a form of purification. This target is typically a vulnerable outsider or a marginalized figure. The primary criterion in selecting the sacrificial victim is that death must not provoke further cycles of vengeance. Studies by Hubert and Mauss (1981) on sacrificial rituals indicate that this figure is often an animal or an individual who is weak, foreign, lacking kinship ties, or belonging to a different ethnic or religious identity. Girard contends that this mechanism lies at the core of the process by which “scapegoats” are produced. This process serves a dual function: first, potential violence within the community is discharged onto an external or defenseless target; and second, this act of exclusion or destruction temporarily unites the community through a shared sense of “purification” and “solidarity.” Girard asserts that this model recurs throughout history and can be traced in nearly all religious or mythological narratives (Golsan 2001, pp. 33-38; Kozal 2013, pp. 59-61). He often treats the “scapegoat mechanism” as a modern or historical variation of

the “sacrificial mechanism.” While *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) primarily explores the relationship between ritual sacrifice and social violence, *The Scapegoat* (1986) analyzes the same dynamic in relation to pogroms, witch hunts, genocides, and the persecution of minorities. In both of these works, the shared premise is that the mimetic crisis within the community is mitigated by the identification and elimination of a sacrificial victim (Palaver 2013, pp. 154-155).

A distinguishing feature of Girard's theoretical framework pertains to its capacity to reframe religious practices. Rather than perceiving them as either irrational or mystical phenomena, Girard's thought redefines them as functional mechanisms for managing social violence. This approach has resonated deeply within the fields of anthropology and religious studies. For instance, D. Vincent Riordan (2021, pp. 243-249) suggests that Girard's theory, centered on *mimetic desire* and *sacrifice*, may also help explain how early human communities managed to overcome internal conflict during the course of evolution. In line with this argument, it is proposed that one of the key factors enabling hominid ancestors to live and cooperate in large groups was the practice of identifying a “common enemy” or “collective victim.” In such large communities, the likelihood of rivalry and jealousy increases, and one way to reduce the risk of internal warfare is to focus all anger and anxiety onto a single target. This strategy has been shown to facilitate the deferral of potential threats to the cohesion and stability of the community.

Unlike psychoanalytic or Marxist approaches, Girard's theoretical framework emphasizes that violence cannot be fully explained by economic-political factors or sexual drives alone. According to Girard, mimetic desire is an innate tendency of the human being, yet one that is shaped by cultural and historical factors. Throughout history, religious and mythical symbolic systems have served to regulate this tendency, and sacrificial rituals have played a pivotal role in the formation of culture by moderating violence. This regulatory function becomes especially crucial in large, complex groups, where the potential for rivalry and internal conflict increases. The scapegoat mechanism, in this sense, operates as a cultural strategy for preserving social cohesion by redirecting collective aggression toward a single, symbolic victim and thereby deferring internal violence.

From this perspective, Girard's theoretical system offers an illuminating framework for understanding both sacrificial rituals in archaic societies and contemporary practices of *othering* in modern politics. For instance, during periods of social or economic crisis, populist discourses that designate specific minority or immigrant groups as the root of all problems can be interpreted as contemporary manifestations of the scapegoat dynamic described by Girard. In summary, the examination of *mimetic desire* and *sacrificial mechanisms* serves as a universal key for understanding how human societies cope with violence.

Girard's Framework on Sacrificial Violence and The Scapegoat

René Girard's foundational works, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986), develop a comprehensive theory on the function of collective violence in establishing and maintaining social order. Moving beyond classical anthropological approaches, Girard argues that sacrificial rituals are not merely offerings to gods but are essential social mechanisms for regulating internal conflict (Hubert & Mauss 1981). He posits that violence, rather than being purely chaotic, serves as a founding force for human culture by containing the very crises that threaten to dissolve it.

Girard's starting point is the immense danger posed by the “cycle of revenge” or blood feud in communities lacking centralized legal systems. In such societies, a single act of violence can trigger an unstoppable spiral of retaliation, escalating from individuals to families and clans. Girard suggests this dynamic risks culminating in a Hobbesian “war of all against all” (*bellum omnium contra omnes*), a state where all members are in conflict with one another (Fleming 2004). This

breakdown of social distinctions is the ultimate mimetic crisis. It is at this critical juncture that the sacrificial mechanism becomes necessary. To halt the cycle, the community's destructive energy is redirected toward a substitute victim. This figure is typically marginalized, defenseless, and incapable of being avenged—such as a slave, a captive, a foreigner, or a non-human animal. The sacrifice provides a controlled release for social tensions, and its legitimacy is secured by framing it within a sacred context, creating the illusion that the act is a purifying offering to the divine. For Girard, the “sacred” is therefore inseparable from violence; it is the sphere in which society manages its own violent potential.

In *The Scapegoat*, Girard expands this analysis beyond archaic rituals to historical instances of persecution, such as witch hunts, pogroms, and genocides. He argues that the underlying scapegoat mechanism is activated during major social crises like epidemics, famines, or political instability. In these moments of collective panic, societies seek a single target to blame for their misfortunes. This process follows a recurring pattern of “persecution stereotypes”: (1) a crisis effaces social differences; (2) a vulnerable minority is labeled as “different” or “dangerous”; (3) this group is targeted with false accusations; and (4) a collective act of violence (lynching, expulsion, massacre) is carried out, which temporarily restores a sense of unity and peace.

Girard's framework culminates in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987, p. 28), his most synthetic and ambitious work. Framed as a dialogue, the book presents a full-fledged theory of cultural origins built on a triptych of institutions that regulate mimetic contagion: prohibitions (to prevent rivalry), rituals (to re-enact and discharge violence onto a surrogate), and myths (to conceal the victim's innocence). This work also deepens the psychology of mimesis by adopting an “interindividual” model of the self and analyzing the “double binds” (pp. 290-291) that lock rivals in cycles of fascination and repulsion. Crucially, it intensifies the theological stakes by casting the Gospel as a unique “revelation” of the scapegoat mechanism and proposing a non-violent “positive mimesis” (*imitatio Christi*) (p. 430) as the only escape from retaliatory cycles.

A key argument in Girard's work is that myths and historical records are often the distorted narratives of these violent events, told from the perspective of the persecutors. To justify its actions, the community exaggerates the victim's guilt, sometimes even transforming the executed figure into a monstrous or divine being post-mortem (Girard 1986; Golsan 2001, pp. 36-38). Girard famously identifies the story of Jesus' crucifixion in the Bible as a radical “reversal” of this logic. Unlike myths that affirm the victim's guilt, the Gospel narrative, in his view, represents a radical epistemological break. As he argues most forcefully in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (pp. 141-158), the Judeo-Christian scriptures, culminating in the Gospels, constitute a “revelation” in the literal sense: they unveil the truth of the innocent victim that myths have always concealed. This process of revealing what was “hidden since the foundation of the world” -namely, the foundational violence against the scapegoat- is, for Girard, the unique contribution of these texts to human consciousness.

Ultimately, both books argue that this logic of scapegoating persists in the modern world, even in the absence of formal ritual. While the state's monopoly on violence and the legal system have replaced archaic sacrifice, the underlying mechanism endures. Girard contends that contemporary political practices—such as blaming the “other,” labeling minorities as “traitors” or “terrorists,” and inciting mass reactions against migrants—are secularized forms of the same ancient process. In this view, even social media pile-ons and digital shaming can be interpreted as modern rituals of collective expulsion, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Girard's framework for understanding contemporary social violence (Fleming 2004).

Critical Approaches: The Limits and Debates of Girard's Theory

René Girard's theory which is centered on *mimetic desire* and the *sacrificial mechanism* has sparked new lines of inquiry across various disciplines -including anthropology, literary criticism, theology, and sociology- since the second half of the twentieth century. However, the influence of a theory does not imply that it should be treated as sacred within scientific discourse. Instead, Girard's universal model and his analysis of social violence have been subjected to criticism from multiple perspectives. These critiques encompass a broad spectrum, ranging from the theoretical underpinnings and methodological choices of the theory to its treatment of anthropological diversity, theological presuppositions, and even its interplay with modern critical animal studies and the emphasis on *cooperation* in the works of anarchist thinkers such as Kropotkin. In the following sections, I will outline these critical perspectives and examine the limits and contested aspects of Girard's theoretical framework.

Anthropological and Historical Variability

In *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986), Girard proposes the *sacrificial mechanism* as a universal explanatory model. The sequence of this model is as follows: "crisis triggered by mimetic desire" → "escalation of social violence" → "channeling of violence through consensus on a sacrificial victim" → "temporary peace and unity" (Girard 1977; 1986). However, anthropological research has revealed a much broader range of variation in belief systems and ritual practices across different communities. Ethnographic data derived from fieldwork has demonstrated that sacrificial rituals are not organized in a single, uniform manner, nor do they always serve the same function. Moreover, the concept of "sacrifice" itself can carry significantly different meanings in different cultural contexts (Bloch 1992, pp. 25-40; Kapferer 2004, pp. 35-54).

Significant differences can be observed between the functions of sacrificial practices in the Polynesian islands and those in various regions of the African continent. In some communities, sacrifice operates primarily as a ritual of sharing and feasting, reinforcing social hierarchies through the public display of generosity -as exemplified by potlatch ceremonies and other ritualized exchanges in Oceania and Polynesia (Mauss 2002, pp. 49-54; Sahlins 1985, pp. 41-45). In contrast, in other contexts, sacrificial practices serve to cleanse moral transgressions or displace collective guilt onto a symbolic victim (Hubert & Mauss 1981). Therefore, Girard's reduction of sacrifice primarily to the function of "expelling internal violence and reintegrating the community" may overlook the culturally embedded and structurally diverse nature of sacrificial meanings - an approach that Lévi-Strauss (1962, as cited in Bloch 1992, pp. 25) would regard as analytically reductive. Similarly, the role of sacrifice has been shaped by political power relations in different historical contexts. For instance, while the "witch hunts" of feudal Europe and the systematic pogroms against Jews throughout the Middle Ages bear resemblance to Girard's scapegoat dynamic, these waves of violence were also closely linked to economic interests, political power struggles, sectarian religious conflicts, and even epidemics such as the plague (Cohn 2001). Girard's analysis does not entirely ignore these multidimensional factors; however, critics contend that his tendency to subsume all explanations under a single universal model limits the scope of his analysis. Likewise, the motifs of *mimetic desire* and *sacrifice* may not sufficiently account for the economic, legal, and institutional dynamics at play in these historical processes.

Finally, there are also certain methodological concerns regarding Girard's approach. He reads mythical narratives, historical documents, and literary texts through the same framework of *mimetic desire* and *sacrifice*, allowing him to draw cross-cultural generalizations. This methodological approach, however, is susceptible to "confirmation bias," which often results in oversimplification of complex social dynamics, a concern raised by various critics who question

the empirical grounding of his grand theory (see Livingston 1992). In summary, while Girard's model can serve as a compelling starting point for understanding complex social relationships, it risks becoming reductive when treated as a "universal paradigm" for all contexts. This universalizing tendency is most programmatic in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987, pp. 3-125), where the prohibition-ritual-myth triptych systematically re-codes cultural diversity into three functional forms, carrying a significant risk of the reductionism that critics like Bloch and Kapferer warn against.

Theological Critiques and Girard's Christian Background

Throughout his academic career, Girard developed highly original and imaginative interpretations of the "scapegoat" motif, particularly within the context of Christian theology. In *The Scapegoat*, Girard interprets the story of Jesus's crucifixion as a reversal of *misrecognition*. Whereas in medieval pogroms against Jews, the victim is always perceived as guilty, Girard emphasizes that the biblical narrative foregrounds "innocence rather than suspicion" toward the victim. While these interpretations have been groundbreaking for many theologians, they have also opened the door to strong criticisms. One such critique asserts that Girard's Christian convictions may have excessively influenced his universal theory of sacrifice. For instance, theologians such as James Alison (1996, pp. 24-28) contend that Girard positions the figure of Jesus as the culmination of all sacrificial narratives and the ultimate redeemer, thereby suggesting that his theory is not merely a cultural one, but rather a theological proposition. Consequently, his work can be interpreted not as a scientific or empirical theory, but as a discourse aimed at affirming a divine narrative. This interpretation is cemented in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987, pp. 141-179), which places the Gospel's proclamation of the innocent victim at the very core of the theory, suggesting that a full analysis is impossible without the Christian revelation—a move that makes the boundaries between his scientific and theological claims all the more permeable. Therefore, when the intersection between Girard's theoretical model and his theological convictions is not delineated, a certain methodological ambiguity may arise (Kirwan, 2009, pp. 28-30). "On the other hand, Girard's theory of sacrifice, while rooted in Christian theological motifs such as individual sin and purification, may not be universally applicable across all religious traditions. As Paul Dumouchel (2015, pp. 5-19) argues, the mimetic theory's explanatory power becomes limited when applied to political or religious systems that do not share the same conceptual foundations regarding guilt, atonement, or sacrificial logic." This critique underscores the problematic nature of assuming a single theological framework for understanding sacrifice across diverse religious contexts.

Comparison with Psychoanalysis and Marxism

In developing his concept of *mimetic desire*, Girard maintains a critical distance from both Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of desire and Karl Marx's historical materialism with its emphasis on economic-political determinism. Girard's central claim asserts that neither sexual repression nor conflict over the means of production can adequately explain the origins of social violence. *Mimetic desire* is positioned as the fundamental human motivation, while sexual drives and economic interests are regarded as derivatives of this underlying structure of imitation.

The main criticism of this approach lies in its tendency to subordinate the institutional, economic, and class-based foundations of violence to a secondary status. Marxist scholars argue that events such as genocide, pogroms, and religious conflicts almost always carry an economic-class dimension and that neglecting this aspect results in analyses that are deemed incomplete. For example, in medieval Europe, the violence directed toward Jewish communities cannot be explained solely through the scapegoat mechanism. Instead, it must be understood factors such as the economic power of Jews in areas like moneylending and trade, the envy this provoked within

Christian societies, manipulative societal responses to that power, and the desire of feudal lords to erase their debts (Cohn 2001; Moore 2007, pp. 36-42, 98-100).

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Girard's concept of *desire* stands in stark contrast to Freud's *pleasure principle* and *Oedipal relational system*. In *Things Hidden* (1987, p. 353), for instance, he re-reads Freud's Oedipus narrative not as a story of unconscious drives but as a "mythic reversal" that blames the victim, rewriting it as a resolution to mimetic tension; yet, this maneuver risks subordinating psychoanalytic or materialist planes of analysis, such as repression, class, and institutional power. Girard's perspective diverges from Freud's notion of the Oedipus complex as the structural core of the individual unconscious, proposing instead that it is a culturally constructed, imagistic-dramatic narrative. In contrast, Freud's theory situates desire firmly within the framework of Oedipal conflict and familial relations. This view has been criticized within psychoanalytic traditions for being reductive. For instance, thinkers like Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1988, p. 37) have challenged Girard's interpretation of the Oedipus complex, arguing that he dismisses the structural role of the unconscious too quickly and replaces it with a purely interpersonal dynamic. This contrast is sharpened in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (pp. 299-326), where Girard develops his concept of an "interindividual psychology." Here, he systematically dismantles Freudian desire, which is rooted in the individual's internal, familial drama (the Oedipus complex), and replaces it with a model where the self is constituted entirely through its mimetic relationship with others. For Girard, there is no "authentic" or "unconscious" desire preceding the mimetic interaction; desire is always acquired from an external model, making conflict an interpersonal, not intrapsychic, phenomenon. Moreover, the conceptual depth developed by psychoanalysis in relation to the trauma, unconscious processes, early childhood experiences, and individual pathology is largely absent in Girard's framework, which focuses instead on collective behavior and cultural crises. Girard treats desire not as an individual, inner dynamic, but as a socially contagious form of crisis, thereby sidelining the subjective and intrapsychic dimensions emphasized in psychoanalysis.

In this respect, the clear opposition Girard establishes in constructing his theory -between psychoanalytic interiority and social structure, or between economic interest and mimetic orientation- contributes to the internal coherence of his thought. However, these oppositions also reveal certain limitations. His theory oscillates between "hardened totalities" without a thorough examination of the permeability between them. Micro-level psychological processes and class-based or economic structures often remain in the background (Palaver 2013, pp. 168-169). Therefore, while Girard's deliberate distancing from psychoanalytic and Marxist frameworks reinforces the internal coherence of his theoretical model, this same distance also restricts the interdisciplinary potential of his thought and complicates its engagement with contemporary critical theories.¹

Critical Animal Studies and Speciesism

René Girard's theory of sacrifice, as presented in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *The Scapegoat* (1986), provides substantial insights into the regulation of social violence and the mechanisms of collective purification. However, because the theory primarily centers on tensions and conflicts within human communities, it lacks a systematic analysis of the role of animals in these processes. In exploring the cultural continuity of sacrificial rituals, Girard's analysis treats nonhuman animals solely as the *objects* of ritual, neglecting to consider their subjectivity. In contrast, contemporary *critical animal studies* posit that nonhuman animals should not be viewed merely as passive recipients of human violence; rather, they should be considered sentient beings with their

¹ For a comprehensive biographical account that emphasizes the breadth and interdisciplinary ambitions of Girard's thought, see Haven's (2018) *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*.

subjectivity, directly affected by social violence (Cudworth 2011; Taylor & Signal 2011). From this perspective, Girard's theory exhibits a significant gap in its neglect of speciesism. Within the logic of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987, pp. 69-73), animal sacrifice is positioned as the ideal regulatory tool precisely because the animal is a "safe surrogate" incapable of retaliation; this logic of substitution, which renders the animal's subjective suffering invisible, creates a perfect speciesist system of "misrecognition" when combined with the scale of modern industrial slaughter.

In *The Scapegoat* (1986), Girard outlines the "scapegoat mechanism" as a process in which, during periods of social crisis, a particular group or individual becomes the target of collective aggression. A distinguishing characteristic of this mechanism, as Girard posits, is that the victim must be powerless enough to prevent any form of retaliation. Nonhuman animals fit precisely within this dynamic in that they are defenseless, possess a limited capacity for resistance, and are often viewed by the majority as killable, disposable, or even naturally destined for sacrifice (Dunayer 2001). This dynamic directly parallels Girard's theory of *misrecognition*. By perceiving nonhuman animals solely as "meat," "test subjects," "prey," or "resources," society systematically denies their capacity for suffering and subjectivity (Nibert 2013). Thus, the sacrifice of nonhuman animals is not only an economic phenomenon; it is also profound societal misrecognition, a structural illusion perpetuated by speciesism.

Modern slaughterhouses and industrial animal production facilities can be interpreted as a contemporary update of Girard's theory of sacrifice. Annually, billions of nonhuman animals are killed in slaughterhouses and industrial farming operations (Twine 2010). This sacrificial process is often presented as a "necessary" practice for the continuity of human society, thereby excluding its ethical dimensions from serious debate. Studies focusing on slaughterhouse workers demonstrate that these processes result in not only physical and psychological harm to nonhuman animals but also profound emotional and ethical damage to human beings involved in the system (Dillard 2008; Pachirat 2011). While Girard argues that sacrifice is justified through sacralization in religious and mythical narratives, the mass death of nonhuman animals in modern industrial production has become a hidden aspect of this system. This raises a crucial question: could nonhuman animals be the true scapegoats of modern societies? If this is indeed the case, then Girard's theory of sacrifice must be integrated with a critique of speciesism in order to adequately explain how this process functions.

Another important point is that Girard's account of violence and sacrificial mechanisms significantly overlooks the historical transformation of human-animal relationships. The conceptualization of nonhuman animals as sacrificial victims has served to both mitigate internal tensions within human societies and function as a mechanism through which humans assert their privileged status over other species. In contemporary Western societies, violence against nonhuman animals has become highly institutionalized, and deeply embedded in systems of political and economic power. The capitalist transformation of nonhuman animals into "means of production" has shifted the practice of sacrifice from a primarily religious or cultural phenomenon into an economic necessity (Nibert 2013).

An important gap in Girard's theory is its lack of inquiry into how the selection of the sacrificial victim functions within the paradigm of speciesism. Throughout history, human societies have repeatedly produced forms of "othering" to perpetuate violence and domination. However, the greatest victims throughout human history have arguably been nonhuman animals (Dunayer 2001). For nonhuman animals to be considered true sacrificial victims in the Girardian sense, societies must have cultivated discourses that rationalize the violence directed towards them. In this context, speciesism functions precisely as a scapegoat-producing mechanism, serving to deny the subjectivity of nonhuman animals and thereby legitimize human society through their

exploitation and death.

In conclusion, while Girard's theory of violence and sacrifice offers a powerful tool for understanding the internal dynamics of human societies, it presents an incomplete model when viewed from the perspective of speciesism. *Critical animal studies* help to fill this gap by revealing how modern societies systematically sacrifice nonhuman animals in the name of maintaining internal peace and social cohesion. If, as Girard claims, the mechanisms of violence persist in the contemporary world, then should we not also consider the nonhuman animals who bear the greatest burden of this violence and the systematic nature of their erasure? While Girard's framework does not explicitly address this question, *critical animal studies* can utilize the tools he provides to further develop and enrich his theory.

Kropotkinian Anarchism and the Debate on the Nature of Violence

René Girard's theory of violence and the sacrificial mechanism is, at its core, grounded in a Hobbesian worldview: human societies exist within a framework in which violence is inherent, and sacrificial mechanisms are necessary to control and channel that violence. According to Girard, *mimetic desire* inevitably leads to rivalry, which in turn generates conflict. To resolve internal crises, society ultimately seeks to designate a scapegoat as the target of collective violence. However, this perspective gives rise to a more profound question of whether human nature lies in cooperation or competition. The anarchist theorist Pyotr Kropotkin offers a view that is in direct opposition to Girard's fundamental assumptions. For Kropotkin, the primary dynamic of human communities is not violence, but mutual aid (Kropotkin 2009).

While Girard's framework aligns closely with the classical Hobbesian view of human nature as conflict-driven, Kropotkin explicitly rejects this interpretation. According to Hobbes (1996), the state of nature is characterized by the idea that "human beings are wolves to one another" (*homo homini lupus*), implying that human beings are instinctively competitive and destructive. Girard's model of mimetic desire reflects this assumption by positing that desire inevitably gives rise to conflict, which can only be contained through sacrificial mechanisms. In contrast, Kropotkin draws on natural sciences and historical observation, contending that cooperation, not violence, has been the predominant evolutionary force. According to Kropotkin (2009), humans, and indeed other species, have survived and flourished not through domination, but through solidarity and mutual assistance.

Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, published in 1902, directly challenges Girard's view of human nature. Kropotkin challenges common misinterpretations of Charles Darwin's notion of "survival of the fittest" and argues that it is cooperation -not competition- that shapes evolutionary development. In particular, the acts of solidarity observed among nonhuman social animals, Kropotkin claims, constitute the biological and social foundation of progress. In contrast to Girard's model of *mimetic desire* and the cycle of violence, Kropotkin suggests that cooperation can also be mimetic, suggesting that humans imitate not only rivalry but also acts of mutual aid and solidarity. According to Kropotkin (2009), the foundational principles of early human communities lie not in violence, but in collective survival practices. For example, the presence of systems of shared property, food distribution, and reciprocal support within tribes are central pillars of social organization in hunter-gatherer societies (Graeber & Wengrow 2021).

Contemporary anthropological research lends support to Kropotkin's claims. For instance, Marshall Sahlins (1972) showed that violence and competition were significantly less prevalent in hunter-gatherer societies than in post-agricultural civilizations. Furthermore, the works of David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) demonstrate that portraying Girardian cycles of violence as an inevitable feature of human communities is historically reductive. Consequently, if violence is not a natural necessity, then we must ask: is the sacrificial mechanism in Girard's model truly the

foundational pillar of social order?

According to Girard, communities are dependent on the creation of a scapegoat to regulate the potential for violence within themselves. However, from Kropotkin's perspective, this may be less a universal human necessity than a historical choice made by authoritarian societies. Anarchist theory maintains that violence can be minimized not through the mechanisms of authority or sacrificial practices, but rather through horizontal organization, voluntary association, and mutual aid. Several historical societies grounded in anarchist practice appear to support this view. For example, the Zapatista movement in Chiapas has challenged the modern nation-state model by constructing a form of social organization based not on hierarchy, but on collective autonomy. Rather than producing a scapegoat in the face of conflict, the movement has developed ethical-political mechanisms aimed at resolving disputes internally, thereby revealing that Girardian sacrifice is not a necessity. A similar dynamic was observed during the 1936 anarchist revolution in Spain, where collectives comprised of workers and peasants reorganized economic production and social life along self-managed, cooperative lines. This initiative aimed to establish an alternative model that operated outside both state violence and scapegoating reflexes (Dolgoft 1974). These examples demonstrate that Girard's theory of sacrifice is not a universal requirement, but rather a cultural mechanism that emerges under specific historical conditions. These experiences show that social order -and even justice- is possible without sacrifice, thus offering new ways of thinking about society based on solidarity rather than violence.

In conclusion, while Girard asserts that human desire is inherently competitive, he largely overlooks the possibility that *mimetic desire* can also result in cooperation and mutual aid. In Girard's theoretical framework, individuals' desires are cultivated through the imitation of their rivals. Conversely, within cooperative models, individuals learn habits of support and sharing from one another. If competition and conflict are contagious, then cooperation may be contagious as well. Girard's theory aligns with the classical Hobbesian tradition in which violence is seen as inevitable and intrinsic to human nature. However, the empirical evidence presented by Kropotkin and modern anarchist anthropologists suggests that humans are not merely competitive beings; solidarity, reciprocity, and collective care are also part of our nature. This prompts an important question: does Girard's theory, in assuming violence to be inevitable, offer an incomplete model that disregards the possibility of alternative forms of social organization?

Conclusion: Reassessing Girard for the 21st Century

This article has critically re-evaluated René Girard's theory of mimetic desire and sacrificial violence. While affirming the framework's enduring power for analyzing social conflict -from digital shaming to identity politics- it has also highlighted its significant limitations when confronted with contemporary critical thought. By placing Girard in dialogue with critical animal studies and anarchist theory, this paper argued that the model's inherent anthropocentrism and its Hobbesian assumptions about violence restrict its analytical scope and must be challenged.

The primary implication of this critique is that for Girard's theory to maintain its relevance, it must evolve beyond its 20th-century origins. It is no longer sufficient to analyze the scapegoat mechanism solely within the human realm; the theory must be expanded to address the systematic scapegoating of non-human animals, who are arguably the primary sacrificial victims of our globalized world. Furthermore, the theory's foundational premise -that social order is necessarily born from contained violence- must be questioned. The anarchist principle of mutual aid suggests that mimesis is not doomed to generate conflict; it can also be a powerful engine for cooperation, empathy, and solidarity, offering paths to social cohesion that do not require a victim. Thus, this study concludes that Girard's framework is not a static dogma but a diagnostic tool that must itself be updated to contend with the ethical and political questions of our time, particularly the

challenges of speciesism and the possibility of non-violent social organization.

This critical re-evaluation opens several avenues for future research:

1. Further empirical work could apply a combined Girardian-anarchist lens to contemporary social movements, examining how they navigate internal mimetic rivalries without resorting to sacrificial logics.
2. Drawing on critical animal studies, researchers could conduct a discourse analysis of media surrounding factory farming and climate change to investigate how non-human animals are systematically framed as necessary scapegoats for ecological and economic crises.
3. Finally, future theoretical work could aim to develop a "cooperative mimetic theory" that synthesizes Girard's insights on imitative behavior with Kropotkin's work on mutual aid, providing a more holistic model of social dynamics.

By pursuing these questions, the unsettling but vital insights of René Girard can continue to illuminate the mechanisms of violence, not as an inescapable fate, but as a historical pattern that can -and must- be overcome.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Alison, J. (1996). *Raising Abel: The recovery of the eschatological imagination*. Crossroad Publishing.
- Bloch, M. (1992). *Prey into hunter: The politics of religious experience*. Cambridge University Press.
- Borch-Jacobsen, M. (1988). *The Freudian subject* (C. Porter, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Cohn, N. (2001). *Europe's inner demons: The demonization of Christians in medieval Christendom*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cudworth, E. (2011). *Social lives with other animals: Tales of sex, death and love*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dillard, J. (2008). *A slaughterhouse nightmare: Psychological harm suffered by slaughterhouse employees and the possibility of redress through legal reform*. *Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law & Policy*, 15(2), 391–408. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1016401>
- Dolgoff, S. (1974). *Anarchist collectives: Workers' self-management in the Spanish revolution, 1936–1939*. Black Rose Books.
- Dumouchel, P. (2015). *The barren sacrifice: An essay on political violence* (M. Baker, Trans.). Michigan State University Press.
- Dunayer, J. (2001). *Animal equality: Language and liberation*. Ryce Publishing.
- Fleming, C. (2004). *René Girard: Violence, mimesis, and culture*. Polity Press.
- Girard, R. (1965). *Deceit, desire, and the novel: Self and other in literary structure* (Y. Freccero, Trans.). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the sacred* (P. Gregory, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R. (1986). *The scapegoat* (Y. Freccero, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R., Oughourlian, J.-M., & Lefort, G. (1987). *Things hidden since the foundation of the world* (S. Bann & M. Metteer, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Girard, R. (2010). *Battling to the end: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (M. Baker, Trans.). Michigan State University Press.

- Golsan, R. J. (2001). *René Girard and myth: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Graeber, D. (2004). *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Graeber, D., & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything: A new history of humanity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Haven, C. (2018). *Evolution of desire: A life of René Girard*. Michigan State University Press.
- Hobbes, T. (1996). *Leviathan* (R. Tuck, Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Hubert, H., & Mauss, M. (1981). *Sacrifice: Its nature and function* (W. Halls, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- Kapferer, B. (2004). Ritual dynamics and virtual practices in changing social contexts. *Social Analysis*, 48(2), 35-54.
- Kirwan, M. (2009). *Girard and theology*. T&T Clark.
- Kozal, G. (2013). René Girard'ın tragedya kuramını ve şiddet kavramını Arthur Miller'ın "Cadı Kazanı" metninden okumak. *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi*, 22, 55-80.
- Kropotkin, P. (2009). *Mutual aid: A factor of evolution*. Dover.
- Mauss, M. (2002). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (W. D. Halls, Trans.). Routledge.
- Sahlins, M. (1985). *Islands of history*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *Totemism* (R. Needham, Trans.). Merlin Press.
- Livingston, P. (1992). *Models of desire: René Girard and the psychology of mimesis*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Moore, R. I. (2007). *The formation of a persecuting society: Authority and deviance in Western Europe 950–1250*. Blackwell.
- Nibert, D. (2013). *Animal oppression and human violence: Domesecration, capitalism, and global conflict*. Columbia University Press.
- Pachirat, T. (2011). *Every twelve seconds: Industrialized slaughter and the politics of sight*. Yale University Press.
- Palaver, W. (2013). *René Girard's mimetic theory*. Michigan State University Press.
- Riordan, D. V. (2021). The scapegoat mechanism in human evolution: An analysis of René Girard's hypothesis on the process of hominization. *Biological Theory*, 16, 242-256. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13752-021-00381-y>
- Taylor, N., & Signal, T. D. (2011). *Theorizing animals: Re-thinking human-animal relations*. Brill.
- Twine, R. (2010). *Animals as biotechnology: Ethics, sustainability and critical animal studies*. Routledge.