

Mimetic Theory and Its Rivals

A Reply to Pablo Bandera

RICHARD VAN OORT

University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

There are three ways to respond to a rival theory. You can ignore it, you can assimilate it to what you already believe, or you can assess its merits independently and then either reject it or adopt it as the better, more powerful theory. Let us briefly review these three strategies.

(1) Assuming you are already in possession of a sufficiently powerful theory, a safe bet is simply to ignore the newcomer. Contrary to appearances, this is not a totally unreasonable strategy. Time is in short supply. Those in possession of a theory adequate to their purposes will naturally be hesitant to investigate a new one, the understanding of which may require considerable investment in time and imaginative effort. Better to let others do the risky and quite possibly foolhardy work of inventing and elaborating new theories. Chances are their attempts will fail anyway. Truly original ideas are hard to come by and, given this fact, it only makes sense to stick with what works rather than waste time on unfamiliar and unproven ideas.

(2) The second response is, on the surface at least, more gracious and benevolent, but this benevolence masks an intransigence quite as dogmatic

as the first. Thus we welcome the new theory into the fold, but with a view to assimilating it to what we already know. The new theory is not our rival but our friend. Rather than emphasize the differences, we point to the theory's similarities with our existing framework. The new theory is said to improve our understanding of one or two details, but these are held to be merely minor modifications and not at odds with what we hold to be fundamentally true. Thus the new theory is not really new at all. It is but another disciple of the old. Its claim to a place at the table is not at the head, as a rival leader and master, but alongside the other disciples whose collective task it is to disseminate the teachings of the one true master. This strategy is in fact extremely common and entirely understandable, from the viewpoint of both the adherents of the old theory and those of the new. For while the adherents of the old theory receive further confirmation of the superiority of their way of looking at the world, the adherents of the new theory receive a measure of respect by gaining access to an existing center of attention. As we all know, the mimetic attention space is by definition limited. We can't focus on everything at once, and sometimes the best strategy for a new theory is, so to speak, to follow the money. One piggybacks on the existing centers of attention. But the drawback is that the more one piggybacks, the less "new" one becomes.

(3) The third and final response is to take the new theory seriously as a rival center of attention. But this forces us into a genuine dilemma. For now we have to choose between theories that are accepted, for the time being at least, as equals in terms of their rivalry for our attention. But if both claim to be equally foundational, equally deserving of our attention to first things, then both cannot be equally true. One theory must come first; one must be superior to the other. But which?

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In a recent issue of *Contagion*, Pablo Bandera urges Girardians to adopt the third strategy when assessing Eric Gans's generative anthropology.¹ We must recognize the theory's status as a genuine rival. Bandera believes that once the assessment has been fairly made, we must end up rejecting Gans's theory, at least insofar as it purports to be a theory of mimetic desire. The trouble is, Bandera claims, that most Girardians have adopted the second strategy, that is, they have simply assimilated Gans as a (slightly modified) version of Girard, without bothering to notice the very real differences between the two. The first strategy, complete ignorance of Gans's work, Bandera believes to be inaccurate as a description of the current situation. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that, on the contrary, there is "a growing school of thought" that generative

anthropology and mimetic theory “complement each other, and together yield a more complete and correct mimetic theory. More and more frequently one hears the claim that ‘both Girard and Gans are right,’ and ‘you can’t have one without the other.’”² Bandera rejects this strategy of assimilation, which he believes to be seriously misleading. Girard and Gans disagree on fundamental matters. “The logic of [Gans’s] ‘originary scene’ and its implications,” Bandera writes, “are in fact fundamentally incompatible with the Girardian understanding of mimetic desire.”³

Let me say right away that I wholeheartedly agree with Bandera’s claim that there are fundamental differences between generative anthropology and mimetic theory. These differences make the straightforward assimilation of generative anthropology to mimetic theory, if not impossible, certainly problematic. If Girard and Gans disagree on fundamental matters, it follows, as Bandera says, that “ultimately both cannot be correct.”⁴ We must eventually make a choice between the two. And this choice will inevitably be based on the claim that one theory is more fundamental than the other.

This is, in fact, exactly how Bandera’s argument proceeds. Bandera begins by denying the basic compatibility between Girard and Gans. He then argues that Girard’s originary scene is more fundamental than Gans’s. And he ends by asserting that, despite Girard’s greater originaryity and therefore theoretical superiority, the merits of Gans’s work can nonetheless be recognized once we situate it safely back inside the Girardian fold. For example, Bandera argues that Gans’s ideas about the origin of language, though original and important, must be situated *after* Girard’s originary scene of victimage. Language is not as fundamental as Gans claims. Scapegoating is more fundamental. Language is a historical derivation from the more fundamental origin of scapegoating. In short, Gans’s originary hypothesis is not really originary. His hypothesis is, rather, supplemental to Girard’s idea of the founding mimetic crisis.

I admire the logical structure of this argument. In fact, I agree 100 percent with Bandera’s stated strategy. We must first assess whose theory is more originary, more fundamental. Is it the “victimage mechanism”? Or is it rather, as Gans believes, “the deferral of violence through representation”? Since Bandera has made the case for Girard, I think it only fair to make the case for Gans. In my view, Bandera has it exactly backwards. It is Girard’s theory that is not truly originary. Girard’s theory of the scapegoat is a powerful idea, one that applies to a very broad sweep of human history. But the scapegoat mechanism that Girard places at the origin of the human assumes the prior origin of the means by which humans are able to transmit concepts, even concepts as deeply buried in our collective psyche as scapegoating. The fundamental means by

which humans transmit concepts is by language. This does not mean that our hypothetical first humans went around speaking natural languages like English or Chinese. By language I mean simply the capacity for symbolic representation, the use of nongenetically transmitted—that is, arbitrary and conventionally learned—signs. This is the simplest definition of what we mean by culture. Insofar as scapegoating is a cultural phenomenon—and I don't see how, if we are to take Girard seriously, we can deny that it is—then scapegoating assumes the prior emergence of this capacity for symbolic representation. The difference between a corpse and a scapegoat is a matter of symbolic imagination. A scapegoat is not merely a dead body. It is above all an idea. And ideas are communicable because we share a language by which to express them. A dead body can become a scapegoat only if those who have killed it believe that it represents something else—God, transcendence, guilt, the devil, or whatever. The point is that this capacity for establishing a nonmaterial relationship between real objects and abstract ideas is the nuts and bolts of language. In this sense, scapegoating is a form of language. It's true that Girard is on record as saying that the origin of language and the origin of scapegoating are coeval. For example, in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, he says: "it is not possible to resolve the problem of violence with the surrogate victim without at the same time elaborating a theory of the sign and signification," and he goes on to say that the first victim is the object of "the first non-instinctual attention."⁵ I think this is absolutely right. But Girard doesn't seem to realize that in order for the victim to be perceived noninstinctually—that is, as a sacred object—the symbolic capacity must already exist. It is precisely this realization that prompted Gans to suggest that, in the originary scene, the representation of the central object must *precede* the latter's destruction or violent immolation. A further corollary of this is that, empirically speaking, the central object need not be a human being. The sparagmos, or tearing apart of the victim, may in fact be vented on a food object. I will return to this difference between victim and food object a bit later in the essay. First, however, we need to address the specifics of Bandera's argument.

Scapegoating as a form of language is precisely the main source of Bandera's disagreement with Gans. Bandera has a number of reasons for rejecting language as fundamental—for example, he objects to the idea of a conscious versus an unconscious origin (a distinction I will return to at the end of this essay). But his main bone of contention is with Gans's "counterintuitive" reversal of the dynamic between subject, model-mediator, and object, the fundamental ingredients of the original Girardian mimetic triangle. Specifically, Bandera regards Gans's emphasis on the central appetitive object rather than

the peripheral rivals to be a betrayal of Girard's idea of the mimetic crisis. Bandera spends a fair bit of time criticizing Gans on this score, but I think that in the process he ends up saying some misleading things about generative anthropology. In the interests of setting the record straight, I would like to take some time to review these criticisms.

In Girard's original formulation, the mimetic crisis is fomented by the shift in focus from the appetitive object to the rivals. When two hands reach for the same object, both cannot possess it. This conflictive situation provides the conditions of the mimetic crisis, in which the rivals focus increasingly on each other until, at the height of the crisis, the original focus of attention, the appetitive object, is forgotten altogether. The crisis is resolved only when the rivals, in a dramatic reversal of mimetic anarchy or "reciprocal violence," vent their hostility on a central victim, a marginal member of the group who becomes the butt of the group's collective, and now clearly focused, aggression.

As Gans points out, what Girard cannot explain in his version of the originary scene is the shift in focus from appetitive object to victim.⁶ Either the appetitive object is already imbued with the sacrality of victimhood, in which case the scene is not truly originary, or the selection of the victim must be motivated by pure appetite or instinct, in which case there is nothing to distinguish the victim's killing from the kind of lethal killing of conspecifics engaged in by other social animals—chimpanzees, for example.⁷ There is a sense in which Girard invites this second, sociobiological interpretation. For example, it is quite possible to interpret scapegoating as a biological mechanism that has evolved as a means for defending territory and establishing group boundaries. This is truly to accept the idea that it is "unconscious" and that nothing short of a miracle will allow us to transcend it. But I think emphasizing this biological aspect rather detracts from the far more interesting and indeed more powerful role of the hypothesis as a historical thesis. The theory is first and foremost an explanation of cultural-historical change, not of biological evolution, nor even of biological-cultural coevolution. If, on the contrary, the major claim is that scapegoating is "in our genes," then the whole Girardian theory of Christianity unveiling the end of sacrifice becomes rather pointless. But historical transformations such as those Girard associates with Christianity are transmitted by culture, and culture is not transmitted by genetic means. So even if scapegoating is a biologically evolved mechanism, this still does not affect the question of the historical validity of Girard's ideas about the rise of Christianity in the West or the universality of scapegoating among tribal cultures. What is powerful in Girard's theory is precisely the fact that his hypothesis provides us with a way to explain the significance of these historical transformations.

To return to the essential bone of contention, Bandera finds it difficult to see how in the originary scene the mimetic conflict over an appetitive object could lead to the representation of that object by the sign. Gans assumes precisely what Girard says is impossible, namely, that the object becomes more, not less, significant to the rivals. Far from imitating each other in a Hegelian “struggle to the death” in which the original object is forgotten, Gans proposes that the subject’s mimetic focus on the model leads to the oscillation of the subject’s attention between model and object. The model points the subject toward the object, but the model also functions as an obstacle precisely because he stands in the way of the subject’s appropriation of the object. This is a “pragmatic paradox” in the sense that the normal animal or instinctive pattern of appropriative behavior is blocked by the actual pragmatic configuration of the scene. This pragmatic situation, according to Gans, is what makes the subject’s relationship to the object “paradoxical.”⁸ On the one hand, the object functions as the central appetitive focus for both subject and model; on the other, the appropriation of the object that is the normal conclusion of instinctive or appetitive behavior is blocked by the presence of the mimetic other. What makes the central object potentially the focus of a collectively experienced joint scene of attention is precisely the instability of this triadic relationship among subject, model-mediator, and object. Gans’s suggestion is that the symbolic sign is the solution that allows mimesis to continue in the face of the stasis of mimetic crisis. “Pragmatic paradox” is thus merely another term for mimetic crisis. The aborted gesture-cum-sign is what enables mimesis to continue, this time as a “mimesis of the object” rather than as Girard’s “mimesis of the other.”

Bandera claims that this description of the conversion of “reciprocal mimesis” between undifferentiated rivals into the “triangular mimesis” of the sign is incompatible with Girard’s original idea of the mimetic crisis. I agree that as an originary explanation it is incompatible with Girard’s notion of the mimetic crisis, but I disagree that this is a sufficient reason for rejecting it. In fact, the problem with Girard’s idea of the mimetic crisis is precisely its inadequacy as an account of the *first* crisis. Bandera objects to Gans’s hypothesis on the grounds that it reverses Girard’s original explanation of crisis as involving a shift in focus from object to rival. But Gans is not talking about your garden-variety mimetic crisis here. He is talking about the first mimetic crisis—crisis as a reproducible, historical structure. If the narrative pattern of crisis-and-resolution that is the scapegoat mechanism is to become a historical reality, then included in this narrative pattern must be the conditions of nongenetic reproduction. This is the fundamental reason for Gans’s attempt to show that Girard’s idea of an

originary crisis must include within itself the idea not merely of mimetic crisis but of the representation of mimetic crisis.

Here I have to point to a larger problem in Bandera's argument. Bandera begins by arguing, quite sensibly, that it is misleading to assimilate Gans to Girard without recognizing the significant revisions Gans makes to Girard's originary hypothesis. Bandera then explains why it is misleading by correctly identifying the importance of language in Gans's theory. But having noticed this difference, he then rejects Gans's account, not because of the latter's emphasis on language but because there is simply too much to lose for disciples of the Girardian worldview. At stake, Bandera claims, is the very heart and soul of mimetic theory, namely, the belief that human civilization is founded on a primordial murder. "Removing the victim," Bandera says, "changes everything."⁹ There can be no mimetic theory without the victim. The reasoning appears to be based on the following syllogism: (1) mimetic theory absolutely requires an originary scene with a real flesh-and-bones human victim; (2) Gans's scene lacks such a flesh-and-bones human victim. Conclusion: Gans's theory is not really mimetic theory and it must be summarily dismissed from the mimetic household.

The tentatiousness of the argument becomes clearer if we refer back to the strategies I outlined at the beginning. Bandera begins by arguing, rightly, for the third strategy: we must assess the merits of Gans's theory independently. But his actual argument proceeds by the second strategy: he attempts to assimilate Gans to Girard, but when this fails, as it inevitably must, he rejects the rival theory for failing to reproduce the structure of its precursor. Gans's model of mimetic desire must fail because it is not the same as Girard's. But whence comes this blind trust in the Girardian model?

The problem is that we cannot take the master concepts of any theory for granted. Bandera assumes that the concept of mimetic crisis is untouchable. After all, what could be more self-evident, more intuitively true, than the violence of the mimetic crisis? Once we have accepted the reality of the mimetic crisis as fact, it becomes extremely hard to take seriously any theory that does not similarly foreground this fact. How exactly is the "aborted gesture of appropriation" possible in a genuine mimetic crisis, and I mean not a purely hypothetical crisis but a real crisis with blood and bodies strewn all over the place? Violence is contagious. This is not at all difficult to understand. The idea that scapegoating should play a key role in the genesis and history of humanity is immediately and transparently appealing for this reason. One might call this view of humanity the "dismal" theory of human origin. Humanity is essentially irrational and violent. We must have scapegoats! (This presents a problem

for explaining how, in nontheological terms, humanity can ever transcend its bloodthirsty desire for victims, but let us leave that aside for the moment.) Compare this “dismal” theory of human origin with the idea that humanity originates in the deferral of crisis. For those of the dismal persuasion, this is simply too much to ask. People are not that rational. Gans suffers from the same delusions as the eighteenth-century philosophers who believed that man originated in a polite and gentlemanly social contract.¹⁰

I am exaggerating somewhat, but only to make a key point. The purpose of the originary hypothesis is not to imagine what it would have been like had we been there, but Bandera seems to treat the originary hypothesis in this fashion. He finds it difficult to imagine how, in a real crisis, the participants in the originary scene could pay attention both to each other and to the central object. Is not the condition of the mimetic crisis to destroy the original significance of the object in exactly the manner Girard says is true of all mimetic crises? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that, as the first historical mimetic crisis, the original appetitive significance of the object must indeed be destroyed or, more accurately, transcended. No, in the sense that the object must still serve an appetitive function, but this time—and this difference makes all the difference—the appetitive function is mediated by the attentions of the others on the periphery. This mediation is more than mere animal awareness of the presence of the other(s). It is a form of joint attention in which the subject’s attention oscillates between the other-model and the central appetitive object. In his comparative studies of cognitive development in children and chimpanzees, the cognitive psychologist Michael Tomasello discusses the significance of joint attention for the child.¹¹ Children begin to participate in joint scenes of attention at around nine months of age. Tomasello believes that this is a critical stage for the child, because the ability to participate with adults in paying attention to external objects is the basis for learning purely abstract or arbitrary relationships between the world and the other’s intention. Chimpanzees, on the other hand, though they are very attentive to the behavior of other chimpanzees, do not appear to engage in such consciously produced and jointly constructed scenes of attention. For example, they have never been observed to engage in pointing gestures in the wild. Language-trained chimps, on the other hand, are a notable exception. But this simply confirms my argument about mimesis assuming the joint scene of attention. In order to imitate not just gestures but arbitrary signs, the laboratory chimp has to be taught to share in the symbolic world of its human trainers, and this means being able to attend to objects in terms of values that are not intrinsic to the object but imposed on it by the trainer.

My point is that Girard's concept of the mimetic crisis should not be construed too narrowly or rigidly. We should be open to the possibility that when Girard talks about mimetic crisis and dedifferentiation, this may have a broader application than Girard himself anticipated. Bandera worries about such unanticipated reformulations. He believes that opening Girard up to such revisions is to risk altering "the nature of mimetic desire itself,"¹² and he fears that this will have a corrosive effect on Girardian thought in general. In this regard, Bandera positions himself as the spokesman for the Girardian orthodoxy, "conserving the intuitive power of mimetic theory in general."¹³

I would suggest that the true power of Girard's hypothesis is precisely to remain open to such reformulations. If, on the contrary, the hypothesis really is immune to revision, then these ideas will have a very short life span indeed. But I do not think this is the case. I would therefore like to conclude with a few suggestions about how Gans's revisions, far from being a betrayal of Girard, in fact provide a constructive opening for future work in the field.

Bandera claims that generative anthropology has nothing to say about "positive mimesis." "There is simply no room," Bandera writes, "for positive mimesis in generative anthropology."¹⁴ Bandera adheres to a strict definition of positive mimesis based on Girard's definition of it "as mimetic desire without rivalry," and he cites Girard's statement that "nothing is more mimetic than the desire of the child, and yet it is good."¹⁵ Let us reflect a little on what this statement could mean. In what sense is the mimetic desire of the child good and nonrivalrous? Surely what Girard means here is not that children don't engage in mimetic rivalry, but that there are always two sides to imitation. Imitation can lead to excessive forms of rivalry. In the worst-case scenario, we can even talk about a "dedifferentiation" of rivals. But if such crises were the norm, it seems doubtful that humanity would have lasted as long as it has. The other side of imitation—the good or "positive" side—is the initiation of the child into the joint scene of attention. It is by now a truism in mimetic theory and developmental psychology that children are "imitation machines." This fact, however, does not mean that children are always fighting with each other, though of course they do fight a good deal. It means that, from a very early age, children learn to be participants with adults in the joint attentional scene that we call culture. This cultural scene can be acquired only by imitating those, usually the children's parents and older siblings, who already possess it. We freely give to children the opportunity to acquire this scene, and we consider those instances where this opportunity has been purposely withheld to be monstrous and criminal aberrations. Elsewhere I have argued that Girard's idea of rivalry, as the "dual" imitation of the other at the expense of an external object, is a

reversal of the situation typical of the child's acquisition of language.¹⁶ If the child focused *only* on the parent's pointing gesture, it would never grasp *what* it was being asked to attend to. Like the cat that sniffs my index finger instead of the dish of food I am pointing to, the child mistakes the sign for the thing itself. Without the aborted gesture, the protohumans in Girard's originary scapegoating scene are in a similar situation. They cannot grasp the difference between the body and the victim, the difference between the sign and the thing itself. To rely on the notion that this difference is given purely physiologically, by the sudden release of pent-up mimetic energy, is to beg the question. The child who continues to pay attention to my finger, rather than the object I am pointing to, has not yet discovered the joint scene of attention. For the child, this presents no problem, because the scene still exists among adults and therefore remains to be discovered. For the first humans, no such happy circumstance exists. It is therefore pointless to speak about a scene prior to this as though it were an origin. The origin must be minimally conscious, or it could not exist at all.¹⁷

I hope it is clear from these remarks that language is not merely a necessary ingredient of the originary hypothesis but indisputably an example of "positive mimesis." I confess, when I first read Bandera's suggestion that generative anthropology has no room for positive mimesis, I was truly astonished. What could be more positive than the deferral of violence through representation? I also find Bandera's criticism rather illogical in the context of his own argument. After spending considerable time criticizing generative anthropology for not being sufficiently attentive to the violence of the mimetic crisis, Bandera then turns around and criticizes the theory for not being sufficiently positive in its conception of mimesis!

Let me conclude with a final remark about the correspondence of these speculative and deductive theories to the available historical facts. Since *The End of Culture* (1985), Gans has maintained that Girard's theory of the scapegoat describes a particular kind of society, namely, those tribal societies that rely, at least in part, on the availability of a surplus and long-term food storage. The small hunting and gathering communities that anthropologists believe to have been the norm in Paleolithic times did not possess the means for long-term food storage. Whether this was by design or ignorance does not matter. Marshall Sahlins's argument that the hunters and gatherers of the Stone Age were "freer" than their agrarian descendants is not easily dismissed.¹⁸ What is important to recognize, however, is the kind of society such a hunting and gathering existence entails. In a life lived in constant mobility, possessions are a burden. Consequently, the opportunities for the independent accumulation of wealth, in the form of storable food or possessions, are severely limited. But

all this changes with the Neolithic revolution. The cultivation of crops, or the presence of abundant natural food sources (such as exist, for example, in the fisheries of the Pacific Northwest), means the creation of a food surplus that must be protected in times of scarcity. For the first time, the division of labor really means something beyond individual specialization or preference. The division of labor among warriors, priests, and slaves takes on an ontological meaning in the social hierarchy, which now becomes permanent rather than limited to the life span of the individual. Gans interprets this transformation in terms of the center-periphery structure of the originary hypothesis.¹⁹ At first, none are free, since all are equally subordinate before the sacred center, which is associated with the redistributive feast. But with the advent of domesticated food production and storage, the central position can be usurped by the “big man,” who takes on the distributive function formerly reserved for the god. Resentment of the big man’s status is a consequence of this usurpation. The sacrificial systems Girard analyses in the ethnographic literature have their origin here, that is, in the hierarchization of society inaugurated by what Ernest Gellner calls “agraria.”²⁰

I mention the episode of the “big man” because a common misconception of Gans’s work, one reproduced by Bandera, is that Girard’s theory of the scapegoat must deal with a more primitive epoch of human history than Gans’s theory is capable of explaining. Thus it is held that Gans’s ideas about the market and aesthetic history are applicable to modernity, but that Girard’s theory of the scapegoat, because it deals with actual primitive societies, “historicizes” or “anthropologizes” Gans’s decidedly philosophical and rationalistic account of human history. Girard’s theory of sacrificial religion provides the lead-up to Gans’s secular theory of modernity. In a very limited sense, this is perhaps true. Gans’s account of modernity, as elaborated for example in *The End of Culture*, does take its inspiration from Girard’s analyses of both sacrificial religion and Judeo-Christianity. But there is, so to speak, a lead-up to the lead-up. The origin and evolution of language is the lead-up to Girard’s analyses of scapegoating. The institution of human sacrifice is a relatively late development in human history, one associated with the emergence of the big man and institutional hierarchy rather than the egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands that roamed the plains of the Paleolithic era.²¹

I hope I have made it clear why, in strictly logical terms, *any* originary hypothesis must include an account of language within itself. But if this is insufficient to persuade readers, I think that, in addition, the historical evidence is on Gans’s side. From the little evidence we do possess of Paleolithic cultures, the representation of humans in Paleolithic art is either nonexistent

or extremely rudimentary. This is in contrast to the highly detailed and realistic portrayals of animal victims. If Girard is right in his assessment of the ancientness of human sacrifice, why aren't there any representations of it in the surviving evidence we have of these cultures? Why are the dominant images always those of animal victims?

Recognizing the challenge this presents to mimetic theory, Bandera offers the following explanation. Since the scapegoat mechanism is unconscious, it makes sense that the original scapegoaters were deceived in their representation of the victim: "the significance of the victim itself would not have been understood . . . and therefore would not have been represented directly in something like a cave painting."²² Rather than depicting the actual human victims they had dispatched, these early scapegoaters painted animals instead. One might well ask why these early humans found it so difficult to distinguish between themselves and the animals they ate. No doubt Bandera would reply that he is not talking about the actual perceptions of the individual scapegoaters as they lynched one of their fellows. Then, to be sure, there was no mistaking who was to be killed. All hands pointed unanimously to the unlucky individual. Cognitively speaking, the trouble begins when this event is represented afterward, in ritual and art. Here, the lynching is transformed into something beautiful, a lynching recollected in tranquility, so to speak. These early humans, we may presume, knew that in the heat of the moment they were ganging up against one of their own kind, but when it came to their artwork—their culture—they conveniently chose to forget it. The beautiful paintings of animals are in reality a displacement of an actual historical act of human sacrifice. And how do we know that? Because scapegoating is, for these Stone Age humans at any rate, unconscious!

Notice the tactical brilliance of this argument. It cannot be refuted by any evidence. If scapegoating is unconscious, then every representation of it is by definition a misrepresentation. Indeed, it is unclear how we could meaningfully speak of an attempt to represent scapegoating at all. For how are we to represent something of which we are unconscious? Like the Freudian unconscious, the Girardian unconscious remains opaque to every effort of correct apprehension—every effort except, of course, one. But in order to obtain the correct and true analysis, one is required—again, the comparison with Freudian psychotherapy is instructive—to undergo a special and prolonged training in the interpretive procedures established by the undisputed master. We seem to have a bulletproof theory. But is this really what we want? At what cost is the theory bulletproof?

We are back where we began, namely, with the question of whether mimetic theory can tolerate a genuine rival in its own house. A great deal depends, I

think, on this question of the unconscious nature of scapegoating upon which Bandera absolutely insists. For the assumption has two extremely interesting consequences. First, it renders the theory invulnerable to any evidence that might be held against it, because it can always be argued that this evidence is a ruse distracting us from the essential question, namely, the unconscious nature of scapegoating. Second—and this takes us to the heart of the issue of “mimetic theory and its rivals”—it leaves the interpretive procedure securely in the hands of the master and his disciples. They alone are able to locate the proper method by which to unveil the workings of the mechanism that otherwise eludes ordinary human consciousness. Stripped of the standard means of assessing and evaluating evidence—that is, reliance on what our senses seem to tell us about the world—we have to rely on the inner logic of the theory itself. It alone is blessed with the truth. But at this point what we seem to have is less a theory than a religion.

Of course, we shall never know what the original hunter-gatherer societies were really like. Referring to the many moral and political uses to which “primitive man” has been put by modern anthropologists, Ernest Gellner wryly remarks: “Stone Age man remains a floating voter in the coming general election.”²³ We project onto him what we want to see. Indeed, sometimes we project onto him the most ingenious fantasies, as when Bandera interprets the predominance of animal images in the Paleolithic era as evidence for—rather than against—the historical reality of scapegoating among early humans. Gellner’s solution to the opacity of the Paleolithic cultural record is to avoid burdening it with unnecessary assumptions. The same strategy is pursued by Eric Gans. The inclusion of the victim in the originary hypothesis is an unnecessary and far from parsimonious empirical assumption. It is based on the belief that human sacrifice has been practiced by all societies in all periods of all human history. I think it is time to reassess this belief. Doing so will not necessarily be fatal to Girard’s theory. On the contrary, it may provide us with a renewed sense of the urgency of Girard’s analyses for the study of actual human history.

NOTES

1. Pablo Bandera, “Love vs. Resentment: The Absence of Positive Mimesis in Generative Anthropology,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 14 (2007): 13–26.
2. Bandera, “Love vs. Resentment,” 13.
3. Bandera, “Love vs. Resentment,” 14.
4. Bandera, “Love vs. Resentment,” 14.

5. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
6. Gans makes the argument in many places, but perhaps the clearest exposition can be found in Eric Gans, "Differences," *Modern Language Notes* 96 (1981): 792–808.
7. See, for example, Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996).
8. See Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), esp. chap. 2. The term "pragmatic paradox" comes from Paul Watzlawick, Janet Helmick Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: Norton, 1967). See also Bateson's notion of the "double bind," in Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1972).
9. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 24.
10. To his credit, Bandera doesn't actually accuse Gans of being a social contract theorist (though he does object to Gans on the grounds that Gans's theory is intuitively implausible when compared to our common-sense understanding of mob violence). Girard, however, does criticize Gans on this score. In his 1996 *Anthropoetics* interview, for example, Girard says: "It seems to me that his [i.e., Gans's] version resembles too much that of social contract theorists because the deferral is a free and deliberate decision on the part of both individuals, it's a mutual agreement. In my view the sacrificial crisis is a mimetic escalation and it is of such a nature that it takes a tremendous shock, something tremendously violent itself, to interrupt the scapegoat mechanism." See Markus Müller, "Interview with René Girard," *Anthropoetics* 2, no. 1 (1996), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/AP0201/interv.htm> (accessed February 25 2010).
11. See, in particular, Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
12. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 14.
13. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 25.
14. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 22.
15. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 19, 21.
16. See Richard van Oort, *The End of Literature: Essays in Anthropological Aesthetics* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2009), chap. 2. A version of this chapter, "Imitation and Human Ontogeny: Michael Tomasello and the Joint Scene of Attention," is also available in *Anthropoetics* 13, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2007), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1301/1301vano.htm> (accessed February 25, 2010).
17. The conscious nature of the origin is precisely what Girard denies. Consider, for example, the following remark from *Things Hidden*: "It is necessary to conceive of stages . . . which were perhaps the longest in all human history, in which the signifying effects have still not truly taken shape. One would have to answer your question [about the representation of the victim as sacred] by saying that once the victim has appeared, however dimly, the process leading toward the sacred has begun, although concepts and representations are not yet part of it" (too). But how can the "victim" exist if it is not, precisely, *represented as a victim*? What is to distinguish the historical institution of human sacrifice from, for example, the kind of killing observed among chimpanzees? In denying the conscious nature of the origin, Girard risks dissolving his anthropology

- into sociobiology.
18. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).
 19. See Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 150–62.
 20. For the idea that the division of labor becomes significant only with the advent of domestic food production, see Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). For the original analysis of the big man, see Marshall Sahlins's celebrated essay, "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 285–303.
 21. Certainly, this is implied by Marshall Sahlins's theory of hunter-gatherer economies. The big man is the first step in the hierarchization of society. But the big man is not yet a sacred king, precisely because his centralization depends upon his successful manipulation of the preexisting kinship relations of the egalitarian hunter-gatherer society. In order to become a king, the big man must inherit the center, rather than winning it through greater charisma and hard work. The sacrifice of the king, as in the "dying god" theory of J. G. Frazer and his school, assumes this shift from hunter-gatherer to agrarian society.
 22. Bandera, "Love vs. Resentment," 24.
 23. Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book*, 37.