

The Youth Worker as Secular Priest

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Introduction

René Girard's mimetic theory explores the twofold paradoxical structure of human tragedy. On one side, tragedy involves violent events that interrupt human life, which tend to snowball into catastrophic moments and the destruction of life. The other side of the paradox involves a renewal of human life in which new forms of life emerge from the ashes of the violent crisis. This paradoxical structure of violence finds an interesting expression in the contemporary tragedy of youth homelessness. However, from the perspective of youth in crisis in the postmodern urban sphere, the new forms of life that emerge continue to function within the logic of violence from which they were born. In this paper my method will be twofold. Firstly, I will trace the genealogy of the concept of 'youth' throughout the experience of modernity in the west, suggesting that the Girardian concept of the scapegoat mechanism provides a helpful tool in understanding the experience of marginalised young people. Secondly, I will draw from my own experience as a youth worker alongside some of Sydney's marginalised young people to provide a phenomenological account of the contemporary victimhood that homeless youth experience. From this twofold analysis I will argue that through focusing on the young victims of modern capitalism we can reveal the presumptions of political theory that is unable to account for the logic of violence, thus leading society to continue to create victims. I will conclude with some suggestions toward a mimetic approach to political theory that is sensitive to the experience of social groups on the margins.

The Contemporary Context of Youth Homelessness

In Australia, it is estimated that approximately half of its 105 000 homeless people are under the age of 25.¹ This represents a tragedy on a scale shared in relative terms by the

¹ National Youth Commission, 2008, *Australia's Homeless Youth: A Report of the National Youth Commission Inquiry into Youth Homelessness*, Victoria, Australia: NYL ltd. p. 72.

US and the UK, with an estimated 1.3 million youth experiencing homeless every night in the US,² and 75 000 in the UK.³ The term ‘youth homelessness’ is used loosely, meaning not just the ‘sleeping rough’ of youth on the streets, but includes couch surfing, homeless shelters and other imaginative ways of living without a stable home. The stereotypical forms of homelessness, such as old men on park benches and metro beggars cover over the reality of homeless youth who attempt to blend into the social fabric rather than actively stand against it.

The tragedies experienced by homeless youth vary, and there is no prevailing experience that typically leads to homelessness, apart from the presence of violence and discord. The US Department for Health and Public Services estimated that 46% of homeless young people have experienced physical violence, and 32% have been forced to participate in sexual activity against their will.⁴ However, the forms of violence extend beyond the physical and sexual to emotional, verbal and situational forms.

A genealogy of the concept of ‘youth’

I will begin this enquiry with a genealogy by tracing the development of the concept of ‘youth’ in modern history. This genealogy will highlight that ‘youth’ is not a transcendental category but a historically contingent term that developed within the discourse of the middle class to categorise the problematic existence of young people in the city. Further, I will argue that ‘youth *work*’ developed concurrently as a form of Christian pastoral care, focusing on the salvation of an alienated minority.

The precise category of ‘youth’ that we know today emerged during the traumatic experience of the industrial revolution during the 19th and 20th centuries. This period of time was characterised by a rapid social transformation, as young men began leaving the

² National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010, Fact Sheet: *Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research*, URL: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/1659>, viewed on 15/06/10.

³ Quilgars, D. Johnsen, S. & Pleace, N. 2008, *Youth Homelessness in the UK*, York: York Publishing Services Ltd.

⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2010.

home and the geographical location of their families to work in the factories of major cities. The growing urban field of young people removed from their families resulted in a new category of personhood between the child and the adult, seen as a working subject but with a certain vulnerability of pre-adulthood. At first, the term 'youth' was employed by the middle class to describe delinquent working class young men, who became symbolic of a break down in social order and accepted morals.

However, during the mid 1800s in Europe the first forms of 'youth work' emerged through religious organisations such as George William's YMCA and William Smith's Boys' Brigade which were led by individuals who began to side with the young victims of the industrial revolution (Leighton 1972: 13). These activists responded to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the young people separated from traditional modes of support. They were not widely supported by society, the church, or the state, as the young people were seen as a moral threat, and their marginal conditions allowed factory owners to utilise cheap youth labour. However, in the late 19th century, these organisations became more institutionalised and integrated into the church, extending around the industrialised cities of the world. They began catering for young women, as the industrial revolution began to draw females from previous patterns of the family which had formerly secured their basic needs.

In the 20th century the need for youth care expanded, particularly in the post-war years, and the struggle for youth representation was recognised by society, as the state began encouraging religious bodies to meet the growing needs of homeless young people. During the 1950s, young people began to assert their agency apart from the authority structures of the family and the nation through the emerging mediums of popular culture, as they began to imagine themselves as part of a global youth culture united in the same struggle rather than as part of their local, national communities.

In Britain, this caused outbreaks of youth violence and gang culture in the streets of London, causing a large scale moral panic amongst the middle and upper classes. Further, it gave expression to a fear that the young people of the day would be unable to defend

the nation if war broke out again. The British government responded in 1960 with the *Albermarle Report*, outlining the responsibilities of local governments to 'better equip [young people] to live the life of mature, creative and responsible members of a free society' (in Leighton 1972: 28). The *Albermarle Report* led to a governmentality which sought to correct dissident youth into responsible citizens, a process which Bernard Davies (1999) describes as the attempt to instil a middle class set of values into working class youth. This trend in Britain extended over the industrialised world, meaning that the responsibility for youth services was handed over from independent, predominantly religious bodies, to state governance. Furthermore, this process continued the transference of the responsibility for the violence and rapid social change of the post war years onto the problem of 'youth'.

The period from the 1980s till present has held a curious twofold development of the state in regard to youth work, one that Foucault (2007) would describe as the transition from the governmental to the administrative society. On one side, youth services shifted from a state-directed approach to a 'youth-led youth work' model, where youth workers began to conceive of the young person as the centre of their concern. This involved a shift of the emphasis of youth work from the creation of national subjects to allowing the young people to direct their own goals and objectives for their participation in youth services. Concurrently, the proliferation of neoliberal policy of western states during this era resulted in a significant reduction of government funds for youth services, and an increase in the aggressiveness of police to prevent youth from 'socially unacceptable' behaviour. This trend of policing is explained by many sociologists as the attempt to increase the security of capital in global cities (see Harvey 1990, Marshall 1994 & Mitchell 1997).

This genealogy allows us to see that youth work continues to operate within the schema of 'salvation' from which it began, finding its origins in the pastoral care of the Christian church. This 'salvation' developed into the horizon of nationalism in the post-war rebuilding of the west, as the state took ownership of youth work with the view of redirecting the lives of young people into its national values and aspirations. The final

stage of this development, involving a 'youth-led' model, highlights the collapse of the horizons of youth work to a personal, imminent salvation under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

The history of the development of 'youth' tells a story of marginalisation and the attempts of the middle class to eradicate the problem of homeless youth rather than to stand by the victim, and to realise that the traumatic experience of young people during modernity was largely a product of bourgeois aspirations. The phenomenon of youth homelessness extends into the 21st century as the social security of the household continues to decline and young people become increasingly dislocated from the family. The cultural forms of 'youth' and 'youth homelessness' are not the bounded, given concepts that words connote, but are cultural fragments contingent on the past experience of the west through the industrial revolution up until present times.

Phenomenological experience of homeless youth

The second level of inquiry into youth homelessness involves the lived experience of homeless young people. On the phenomenological plane, youth who experience violence at an early age, and then the loss of stability of homelessness, tend to build unique individual religious schemas on the experience of violence. Firstly, this involves a novel schema of time and space. From years of developing coping mechanisms to survive an unstable and often violent childhood, youth in crisis tend to develop a collapsed sense of past and future. In the face of upheaval and insecurity, the hopeful horizon of the future is reduced to what can bring freedom or safety in the immediate setting, guiding their action toward what can guarantee safety in the nearest possible moment. Generalising from my experience, young people in crisis typically do not conceive of themselves in light of the history of a family or a nation, but as a floating individual, where past and future are radically reduced to their own experience of violence and safety.

Correlating to this reduced ability to project beyond the imminent plane, young people in crisis tend to develop a novel schema of good and evil. Good becomes that which will

guarantee safety, orientating action towards self preservation in the present. Evil becomes that which will deny safety and comfort in the present moment, and is to be expelled at all costs. One young person I knew experienced this in supernatural terms, becoming preoccupied with demonic forces. He projected the responsibility for all the negative things that occurred in his life onto demons, including the things he himself had done that led to negative consequences. He understood his life as a curse, beginning with violence in his home and extending to state punishment that resulted from his own actions. Transferring responsibility onto the determining supernatural entities allowed him to blame the 'evil' and chaos which had occurred in his life onto controllable and distinct realities.

Youth worker as secular priest

In the context of the emergence of youth in modern history, and the phenomenological experience of homeless youth today, youth workers are left to appeal to the religious schema of the young people, constituting a new form of secular priesthood. Originally, the guides of youth salvation were the religious leaders, but were forced to give over this administrative authority to the paternal state in the 20th century. Now the state has handed this authority over to youth workers, who occupy a middle space between the law and the family; an ambiguous space of the confluence of many aspirations from times past. They are not the state or the police, and offer young people advice and advocacy rather than the threat of punishment. However, they are not the family either, and cannot offer the emotional support of a relative or friend. Rather, they are left to negotiate the religious schemas of young people, calling them from damnation to the imminent salvation of living within the state's parameters. They must urge the young people not to reciprocate the violence that is such a formative part of their lives so that they will not receive the negative reciprocation of violence from the state.

The problems for political theory

As we have identified, the contemporary setting of youth work is an extremely complex confluence of many different forces. The young people who experience the cross pressures of these forces offer several challenges to the legitimacy of state action - challenges which the majority of society has been unwilling to listen too since the beginnings of the industrial revolution. I will make three observations that the experience of homeless youth bring to political theory, suggesting that a mimetic approach to the political realm is more sufficient in explaining the anthropological reality of human society.

My first observation is that youth homelessness and the new position of the youth worker reveal the problematic presumptions of a political theory based on the Hobbsian rubric of the social contract (see Hobbes 1991). Contractarianism entails both a political and a moral theory, where the political element claims that the authority of government is made legitimate through the consent of the governed in the form of a contract, while the moral element claims that moral norms find their normative force from mutual agreement. On the level of anthropology, contractarianism presupposes a political ontology in the Kantian tradition, seeing political subjects as rational, self-interested entities. As contractarian Jan Narveson (1988: 148) states, political subjects are motivated to act morally 'first because we are vulnerable to the depredations of others, and second because we can all benefit from cooperation with others.' Contractarians such as Narveson presume a particular type of political subject who is able to imagine themselves in relation to the aspirations of the political community, and who can rationally decide to pass their sovereignty to the state in order to cease the violent war of all against all.

However, from the example of youth who have experienced little but abuse and neglect we can see that homeless young people refuse to give up their rights to the sovereign. Their navigation of the world through individualistic religious schemas exist in a spacio-temporality that is foreign to the kind of contract that Hobbes envisioned. Their experiences give a terrible insight into the human tendency to reflect violent gestures that we receive, and the inability of humans to decide to renounce violence when the conflict is at its most extreme and it feels that we have been wronged.

Contractarian anthropology assumes that humans can decide to renounce violence if they choose, allowing for the equal chance of all citizens to pursue their self-interest.

However, the experience of homeless youth highlights that even in the most regulated contractarian states today, societies manage to create inequalities, and violence continues to reflect through the community. Contractarian political theory does not attempt to consider the empirical realities of victims, but insists on remaining in the domain of theory, separated from the anthropological functioning of real societies. A mimetic approach to social phenomena allows us to see that violence cannot be projected onto another mode of subjectivity, such as a pre-contract anarchy or the dissident youth, but exists anthropologically between all humans. A mimetic approach to political theory begins with the nexus of empirical experience rather than a conceptual anthropology, suggesting that any theory which assumes that humans are rational, predictable entities operate at the expense of victims.

My second observation offers a further question to political theory which attempts to justify the state's legitimacy as a rational, impartial institution. The experience of youth homelessness gives an expression of the realities of mimetic violence, and the difficulty of keeping violence in check by the use of force. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard (1988: 24) argues that 'the procedures that keep man's violence in bounds have one thing in common: they are no strangers to the ways of violence.' The phenomenological experience of youth homelessness offers a perspective on state violence that unveils the 'religious' nature of these institutions which secure the efficacy of a violence that is holy and just.

An example of this from my experience involved a girl from inner city Sydney called Martha.⁵ Martha was raped by a gang of her partner's friends, and after she had recovered from the tragic event, she responded by verbally abusing a girl called Jan, a girlfriend of one of Martha's attackers. This began a tussle between Jan and Martha which quickly turned violent. Jan began threatening Martha, claiming that she would get the boys to

⁵ Names have been changed for this paper.

come back and sexually assault her again. She then turned up aggressively at Martha's door to threaten her further, and Martha stabbed her in retaliation. Martha was then taken to court, and charged with assault. The others went free. As one punched the other blocked, mirroring the attack of their opponent. Both had reasons for attacking and both were caught up in mimetic rivalry, but only one was charged. Martha's story demonstrates that acts of violence are not isolated and that responsibility cannot be traced back to a single action.

Martha's story highlights the complexities of the political realm that exist empirically, and suggests that violence is a deeply problematic solution to the problem of violence. The reality of youth homelessness allows us to see that political theory which outlines the legitimate use of violence cannot account for the logic of violence that always occurs at the expense of a victim without losing its effectiveness. The obscurity of the experience of the victim at the hands of the state such as Martha's, 'coincides,' according to Girard (1988: 24), 'with the transcendental effectiveness of a violence that is holy, legal, and legitimate successfully opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal, and illegitimate.' Mimetic theory helps us to see that when violence is involved, wrongs are always shared. When human conflict is at its most intense, humans are incapable of ceasing hostilities by means of a rational contract. Political theories which presuppose the rationality of individuals and social institutions fail to see how enraged individuals and groups actually behave, and often serves to justify the sentiment of the majority against the construction of a non-political, dissident minority.

My third observation involves the practical outworking of contemporary neoliberal political theory which sees the market as the determining source of the economic and political priorities of the state. Homeless youth expose the tendency of neoliberal social agendas to allow the capitalist majority to exploit poor minorities, seen in the example of the contemporary 'Zero Tolerance' policing of the urban sphere which seeks to expand the fluidity of capital. The forces of globalisation meet predominantly in the city, meaning that under neoliberal agendas governments are forced to base policy on 'beautifying' urban areas to attract global capital (Mitchell 1997). This legalisation of bourgeois

interests allows for the legitimisation of unequal rights in society, a process that David Harvey (1990: 3) describes as the construction of an ‘otherness’ against which those in power define themselves and establish their citizenship rights. Homeless youth today continue to have the stigma of the delinquent youth of the post-war years, posing a threat to the values and capital of the middle class. Policy based on securing capital operates to eradicate the problem of youth homelessness rather than to listen to the experience of what it is like to be a victim. Neoliberal governments must cover over the experience of victims in order to allow capital flow to be effective.

Glimpses of a new way

What I would like to argue in this paper is that a mimetic approach to politics allows us to see that each subject is political inasmuch as they have the propensity to reflect or renounce violence, to continue or to reveal the violent workings of society. A political ontology inspired by the insights of mimetic theory allows us to discuss the shape of political communities in a way that is sensitive to anthropological reality. In *Battling to the End*, Girard (2010: 22) argues that ‘the other has always decided for me and forces me to answer.’ Homeless young people have (in a Heideggerian sense) been thrown into a world of violence and chaos only to be subordinated onto the margins of society.

In order to prevent society from continuing within the logic of violence, political communities require a collapse of scope, one that refuses to give a completed vision of the future in advance, as such visions often capture the aspirations of the ruling class. This is radically opposed to the tradition of ideal political theory from Aristotle to John Rawls. For example, Rawls argues for a reasonable utopian perspective, arguing in *The Law of Peoples* that:

The limits of the possible are not given by the actual, for we can to a greater or lesser extent change political and social institutions and much else. Hence we have to rely on conjecture and speculation, arguing as best we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist (Rawls 1999: 12).

Here we can see that Rawls assumes a separation between the domains of theoretical and empirical enquiry, where the work to improve society is done by rational individuals to convince the liberal institutions of their need for change. His conclusion is to argue for a 'reasonable pluralism,' a society of greater political justice and liberty than that which we have now.⁶ His conclusion exists within a liberal theory of justice, arguing that a just society is one where each person has access to basic rights and liberties, and that is structurally orientated towards the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society (Rawls 1996: 5). His conclusion is (arguably) sound if we accept his presumption that both humans and their institutions are primarily rational (in the enlightenment sense). However, as we have argued in this paper, this is a false premise, because humans are unable to renounce violence on their own accord, and tend to see themselves in the right in the midst of a conflict. Political institutions often encapsulate this tendency, serving the powerful and their scapegoating agendas. Liberal political theory covers over the fact that all people are responsible for the violence that occurs between all on an anthropological level, and involves the couching of this misconception in theory. This allows us to devolve the responsibility for inequality onto institutions or political agents which 'are not rational enough.'

The social contract does not end the war of all against all, but allows it to continue under the illusion of control, where the pursuit of individual self-interest is the basic assumption of political agents. Alternatively, by refusing to reflect violence and insisting on being-with the victims of society, political agents are able to experience what is like to be confined to the margins, and to begin to see the propensity of societies to constitute their identity and notions of citizenship at the expense of a victim. Such a perspective offers the beginnings of a fresh, praxis-orientated political theory based not on rationality, but on action in solidarity with the victim.

Conclusion

⁶ Rawls develops his conception of reasonable pluralism in *Political Liberalism* (1996: 36ff).

To conclude, the marginal position of youth in history, characterised by the experience of homelessness and violence, provides a perspective that reveals the propensity of society to create victims. In Girard's (2010: 18) terms, 'the aggressor has always already been attacked,' meaning that people always have the impression that the other attacked first, resulting in the felt need to expel their threatening existence. This is true of both homeless youth *and* the middle classes of society. Girard's mimetic approach reveals that the individualism of contemporary political theory is a deception, continuing the always present illusion that 'we' are in the right, and that 'they' are the cause of moral and social problems. It is only through emptying ourselves of claims to rights and capital security and by standing beside those with no rights that this revelation can continue.

From the experience of being a youth worker, left to appeal to the religious schemas of marginalised young people, I have observed that the one thing that unifies the multiplicity of the experiences of homeless youth is their remarkable capacity to respond to rapid and traumatic change with creative ways, finding new paths to navigate both the city and the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. From the nexus of the empirical reality of young people in modern history, we can see that the creation of a category such as 'youth' to deal with a problematic minority involves a tendency to transfer responsibility onto a weaker group within the logic of Girard's scapegoat mechanism. A mimetic approach to politics needs to be sensitive to both the incredible creativity of humanity, but also our dark tendency to hold our own perspective as ultimate, and to expel other experiences of life which pose a threat to our identity.

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