

Towards a Rational Critique of Violence: Beyond Habermas' Semantic Genealogy and Girard's Mimetic Anthropology

In an interview given shortly after the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, Jürgen Habermas argued, “the spiral of violence begins as a spiral of distorted communication that leads through the spiral of uncontrolled reciprocal mistrust, to the breakdown of communication.”¹ In his more recent work on the persistence of politically potent forms of “post-secular” religion, Habermas has sought to break this spiral of violence by addressing the deficit of trust that exists between a reigning secular political rationality, which has become insecure about its own normative foundations, and those faith traditions that might seek to “exploit”² this vulnerability. In order to fortify the legitimacy of a rational political order that has been damaged by the “structural violence”³ of non-discursive market forces and institutional powers, Habermas has attempted to “assimilate the semantic legacy of religious traditions [i.e. “the creativity of world-disclosure”].”⁴

In the first part of what follows, I will argue that Habermas' attempted assimilation is, in fact, a refusal of the very resources he seeks to appropriate from religion, because his “methodological atheism”⁵ does not allow the historically-situated, will-forming, ritual aspects of religious traditions to pass through his narrow semantic filter. I will show that the challenge that religiously-articulated violence poses for the legitimacy of the modern nation-state requires more than a genealogical awareness of the “semantic legacy” of religious discourse. What is called for, rather, is a more robust account of will-formation itself. In the second section of this paper, I will turn to the work of René Girard, whose anthropological explorations of mimetic desire promise to give such an account. In the end, however, I will show that Girard goes too far in his critique of the “turn to language,” and, thus, is left without the conceptual resources to fully situate his theory of desire within the democratic practice of discursive rationality. Without such resources, Girard's account of desire remains too schematic and ahistorical. In my final section, I will attempt to move beyond Habermas' semantic genealogy and Girard's mimetic anthropology through the work of Walter Benjamin, who, like Girard, saw a continuity between modern and mythic

¹ Borradori, Giovanna. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2003. pg. 35.

² *ibid.*, 34.

³ *ibid.*, 35.

⁴ Habermas, Jürgen. *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Ciaran Cronin, translator). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 2009. pg. 211.

⁵ See: Habermas, Jürgen. “Transcendence from Within, Transcendence in this World” in Mendieta, Eduardo. *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*. New York: Routledge. 2005. pgs. 303-325.

violence in the ritual maintenance of social order, but who, like Habermas, understood the historical incarnation of this social order as primarily mediated in and through language.

Legitimation Crisis and Semantic Genealogy

Habermas is well known for his defense of the normative autonomy of “nonreligious, postmetaphysical” political liberalism. He has argued that the perceived “gap in legitimation opened up by a secularization that deprives the state of religious legitimation”⁶ is filled by constitutional procedure. This thoroughly secular understanding of political power gives rise to the idea that “state power is legally regulated to its very core, so that law permeates political power through and through.”⁷ This modern conception of “a ‘constituted’ (rather than merely a constitutionally ‘tamed’) state power”⁸ is predicated on two material expectations: “first, the equal participation of all citizens [...]; and, second, the epistemic dimension of a deliberation that grounds the presumption of rationally acceptable outcomes.”⁹ At the theoretical level, Habermas seems prepared to defend the normative autonomy of this understanding of the modern nation-state; however, he also admits, “there remain doubts from the motivational side.”¹⁰

Concerning the expectation of equal participation, Habermas recognizes that the democratic state is always vulnerable to breakdowns in political solidarity, which “demands a more costly form of motivation that cannot be legally exacted.”¹¹ In lieu of the law, Habermas appeals to the social cohesion generated by “constitutional patriotism,” which he says harnesses the community-building, anamnestic modes of discourse that have given religions their traditional vitality, while avoiding the metaphysical excesses of an insufficiently critical reliance on revealed history. Habermas envisions a role for religion as the semantic ancestor of a philosophical discourse that, since Hegel, has been trying to find its feet in history.¹² As Habermas understands it, “historical thinking”¹³ gave rise to “a philosophy which has become self-critical [and] does not

⁶ *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 121.

⁷ *ibid*, 103.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ *ibid*, 121.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 104.

¹¹ *ibid*, 105.

¹² See: Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Frederick G. Lawrence, translator). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1990. esp. pgs. 1-44.

¹³ Habermas writes, “The irruption of historical thinking into philosophy has finally encouraged the understanding of the ‘deferred’ character of vital time; it has made us aware of the narrative structure of the history in which we find ourselves involved and of the contingent character of all that happens to us.” See: Habermas, Jürgen. “Israel and Athens, or to Whom Does Anamnestic Reason Belong?” in Mendieta, Eduardo. *The Frankfurt School on Religion: Key Writings by the Major Thinkers*. New York: Routledge. 2005. pg. 296.

trust itself any longer to offer universal assertions about the concrete whole of exemplary forms of life [...].”¹⁴

The semantic potential of religious discourse, then, lies in its ability to narrate historically-situated conceptions of the good life, which fund solidarity-based action guided by practical rationality. Habermas argues that a “multidimensional reason that is not exclusively fixated on its reference to the objective world” can assimilate this anamnestic semantic potential of religion “through a reconstruction of its own genesis.”¹⁵ A self-critical genealogy of post-metaphysical reason should trace its origins not only to Greek metaphysics, but also to those world religions that were co-emergent with it. This genealogical affirmation of a common origin is meant to ground practical reason in an awareness of its own history that is analogous to the historical consciousness of religion. The problem with this is that it is not only the formal semantic features of religious traditions that Habermas says procedural rationality requires, but it is the specific content of those traditions that an “awareness of what’s missing”¹⁶ generated by practical reason must commend to the attention of secular citizens. Yet, Habermas insists, “At best, philosophy *circumscribes* the opaque core of religious experience when it reflects on the specific character of religious language and on the intrinsic meaning of faith. This core remains as profoundly alien to discursive thought as the hermetic core of aesthetic experience [...].”¹⁷

Thus, at the moment religion makes its appearance as the long-lost sibling of modern rationality, it is refused entry into the sphere of discursive exchange. This creates two problems. First, once the specific content of religion is hidden within an “opaque core of religious experience,” the thick descriptions of exemplary forms of life, which religion is meant to provide, are lost to mere apophatic indication. This means that the historically-situated articulations of the good life that are needed to motivate the transition from procedural norm to social action grounded in solidarity can only be recommended by practical reason if they are dislocated from the concrete events that give them their historicity.

Worse than this, however, is the skepticism regarding the epistemic capacity of communicative rationality itself that is motivated by the confrontation with a sphere of human experience that it must and yet is unable to appropriate. For Habermas, rational discourse should

¹⁴ “Transcendence from Within,” 306.

¹⁵ *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 141.

¹⁶ See: Habermas, Jürgen, et al. *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Ciaran Cronin, translator). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 2010.

¹⁷ *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 143.

be able to exhaustively ground the laws that it generates, but if religious experience evades the reach of communicative rationality and is simultaneously necessary, in some sense, for the conversion of norms into actions, then Habermas seems stuck in the unfortunate position of having to admit a power that outstrips the only secular regulatory system by which it might be recognized as legitimate. At this point, the motivational worry over the deficits of solidarity that might erode the first expectation of legitimately constituted power has generated a further epistemic worry related to the second expectation that citizens will be able to engage in the deliberation necessary to identify what counts as “rationally acceptable.” The non-discursive nature of religious experience (on Habermas’ view) means that this important feature of Habermas’ public sphere cannot be epistemically accounted for within the bounds of post-metaphysical communicative action alone.

In spite of the dire consequences of the legitimation crisis outlined above, Habermas maintains that these apparent limits on undistorted communication should be regarded as “normal failures,”¹⁸ and he reaffirms his faith in the eventual exhaustive extension of rational discourse in an ever expanding democratic public sphere. The problem remains, however, that without the rational resources to demystify the “opaque core” of that which threatens the legitimacy of this deliberative process, the only option left is to confront an ontologized enemy with ontological force. Without a historically grounded account of the mechanisms of will-formation required for a well-functioning and peaceful public sphere, social orders will continue to be plagued by mythic stand-offs between villains and heroes and the circle of violence will remain unbroken. I would now like to analyze Girard’s mimetic anthropology as one such account of will-formation.

Sacrificial Crisis and Mimetic Anthropology

Girard, like Habermas, understands violence as arising from a breakdown in civic solidarity that “cannot be easily fixed with laws.”¹⁹ Yet, Girard rejects any attempt to fill the gaps in the legal order with linguistic analysis. In fact, he argues that the “philosophical nihilism” that threatens Habermas’ political rationality stems from the realization that “our language does not coincide with human reality, which resists translation into words.”²⁰ Girard, then, agrees with Habermas, that from the perspective of discourse theory, the authorizing experiences that give rise

¹⁸ *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 38.

¹⁹ Girard, René and Gianni Vattimo. *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* (Pierpaolo Antonello, editor). New York: Columbia University Press. 2010. pg. 60.

²⁰ *ibid*, 61.

to the prepolitical sources of democratic solidarity remain essentially opaque. However, Girard believes that his mimetic theory is able to succeed where Habermas' communicative action appears to fail.

Girard shares Habermas' intuition that religious traditions provide an important source of extra-legal support for the modern social order, but he is extremely critical of the tendency to see this support coming in the form of a semantic legacy. Instead, Girard attempts to give a behavioral analysis of the ritual forms that religious discourses seek to capture. In these rituals, Girard claims to have discovered the hermeneutic key for reading their subsequent representation in mythic narratives. Girard argues that a cross-cultural comparative analysis of ritual practice reveals the "common denominator" of "internal violence—all the dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the community that the sacrifices are designed to suppress."²¹ The source of this internal violence is the competitive structure of social interaction that is created by the mimetic processes of desire acquisition. Where Habermas comes up short in his attempts to give a substantive account of will-formation, Girard seems to have penetrated through the history of mythic narrative and ritual practice to uncover the foundations of human desire.

Drawing critical inspiration from Freudian psychoanalysis, Girard argues that desire for an object begins in the identification with a model who exemplifies to the disciple what objects and/or behaviors should be seen as desirable. Thus, desire is, in language quite amenable to Habermas, "intersubjective" at its genesis. Departing from Freud, however, for Girard, the specific choice of model in will-formation is not as important as the fact that there is such a model, and at the outset, this mimesis is not competitive. Initially, mimetic desire is externally mediated such that "the distance [between mediator and disciple] is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers."²²

Mimetic desire turns into violent competition when the desirability of the object becomes dissociated from the desire of the Other, because the difference between the subject and the mediator has been sufficiently leveled to bring the subject into immediate competition with the mediator for direct access to the object. The Other, then, becomes an enemy aimed at thwarting the satisfaction of the subject's "metaphysical desire"²³ to become everything that the Other is, as

²¹ Girard, René. *The Girard Reader* (James G. Williams, editor). New York: Crossroad Publishing. 1996. pgs. 77-8.

²² *ibid*, 39.

²³ *ibid*, 49.

defined by taking on all of her aspirations. In this move to consider a desire-turned-metaphysical, Girard's anthropology seems to slide into the same mystification that plagued Habermas' semantic genealogy.

It is unclear, on Girard's account, exactly why peaceful, external mediation should turn into violent, internal mediation. Girard has already claimed that language is not up to the task of revealing the complex behavioral aspects of intersubjective desire, and he goes so far as to dismiss Lacan's discursive appropriation of Freud as "linguistic fetishism."²⁴ Girard argues that desire is mediated "prerationally" and "prerepresentationally," which means that shifts from external to internal mediation involve revolutions in the "personality" of the subject.²⁵ In the absence of mediating *concepts* that would allow one to analyze such revolutions, Girard and the communities he analyses seem unable to make sense of the loss of solidarity and resultant violence that seem symptomatic of their life together except as ontologically constitutive of persons. An account of desire that began as intersubjective, now seems hopelessly solipsistic, at least as it is manifested in the social order. Worse than this is the fact that violence now appears to have its own agency.²⁶

This metaphysical conception of violence as a force, which must be satisfied through sacrifice, means that all of the details of mythic narratives and ritual practice suddenly become "purely arbitrary."²⁷ All that is important for Girard's mimetic theory are the *formal* mechanics of desire-acquisition, violent competition, and its sacrificial exorcism. Thus, the historical specificity of particular narratives is lost to the hermeneutic method, which paradoxically forces Girard into the very "linguistic fetishism" he derided in Lacan. Even though, Girard's ritual analysis is at its most fundamental level intended to be a historical and anthropological analysis of behavior, the ritual practice he is analyzing is still mediated to him through texts, which, for him, require a linguistic key to unlock the understanding of human nature they contain. For Girard, this "transcendental signifier," to borrow a phrase from Lacan, is the scapegoat. The scapegoat who is sacrificed for and/or to the violence of the community is the "historical referent"²⁸ of all mythic texts, regardless of what the text *actually* says. Ironically, then, it is Girard's own narrow

²⁴ *ibid*, 242.

²⁵ *ibid*, 267-8.

²⁶ Girard writes, "[Violence] has reasons, however, and can marshal some rather convincing ones when the need arises. Yet these reasons cannot be taken seriously, no matter how valid they may appear. Violence itself will discard them if the initial object remains persistently out of reach and continues to provoke hostility. When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand." (*ibid*, 72).

²⁷ *ibid*, 81.

²⁸ *ibid*, 97-106.

interpretive approach to religion that undermines the “historical thinking” he originally promised to bring to a “linguistic turn” in philosophy that has grown weary of “facts.” It is Girard himself, in the end, who argues in favor of privileging the repetition of “traditional words, such as sacrifice,”²⁹ regardless of the contexts that shape their use.

Girard rightly highlights the importance of ritual analysis for revealing the will-forming success of religious traditions, but his structural, semiotic approach fails to locate these rituals within the contexts that shaped them and the modern contexts that they are meant to influence. Indicative of this limitation is Girard’s failure to recognize the role of markets in shaping the channels through which desire is mediated and its acquisition is transformed. According to Girard, focusing on such material conditions threatens to distract theorists from seeing the truly gratuitous nature of violence, leaving the perpetrators with potential excuses for their scapegoating crimes. Yet, the ontologization of this violence seems to undermine responsibility from another direction. If there are no reasons for violence, then there can be no deliberation as to its legitimacy. On Girard’s account, violence simply is, and all persons are guilty simply because of the mysterious, but inevitable, perversion of human desire.

If Habermas failed to give a satisfactory account of the causes of and solutions to violence, because his semantic genealogy lacked the resources to sufficiently assimilate historically-situated practices of will-formation, Girard’s mimetic anthropology seems to have foundered on the need for a more complex understanding of the conceptual mediation required for will-formation to be understood as a rationally analyzable process. In the final part of my paper, I would like to briefly outline a possible way beyond these two paradigms based on the work of Walter Benjamin.

Towards a Rational Critique of Violence

In his essay, *Towards a Critique of Violence*, Benjamin attempts to move beyond the two reigning Western legal traditions, which he argues have failed to fully disclose the causes and effects of social violence. Within the tradition of natural law, the absoluteness of ends is privileged over the contingency of means such that violence is simply taken to be a “natural datum”³⁰ of human beings, who will employ whatever means are necessary to secure their desired ends. As is the case with Girard, on this account, the historical circumstances of violence are seen as arbitrary in light of the fact that violence itself is a basic feature of competitive human

²⁹ *Christianity, Truth, and Weakening Faith*, 93.

³⁰ Benjamin, Walter. “Critique of Violence.” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken Books. 2007. pg. 278.

interaction, which must be pacified by often brutal means in order to promote “just” corporate ends. The problem with this conception of violence, as I argued with regard to Girard, is that violence itself is reduced to a principle of action that, whether rejected (as in Girard) or accepted (as in, for example, Hobbes), is not given to analysis as a product of historically contingent causes and effects. Thus, violence itself exists outside the legal system as a non-rational leviathan tamed to serve whatever ends are deemed just or unjust within the system.

The positive legal tradition sought to overcome this all-or-nothing conception of violence by privileging contingent means over absolute ends in the analysis of human action such that violence came to be seen as a “product of history.”³¹ As such, violence itself can be distinguished as sanctioned or unsanctioned by the legitimate juridical procedures determining its use. As is the case with Habermas, law is now seen as regulating power “all the way down,” and now, violence itself can be brought within the bounds of procedural rationality. The problem for positive law, in Benjamin’s view, is that, as with Habermas, the legitimacy of the formal procedures determining the “just” use of force is further dependent on the acceptance of certain foundational preconditions, which necessarily appeal to the absolute value of certain ends.³²

Benjamin argues that if natural law fails to mount a successful critique of violence because it is unable to differentiate between various conceptual manifestations of force, positive law fails to understand that mere conceptual difference is not enough to ground an assessment of violence. The either/or that the traditions of natural and positive law maintain between contingent means and absolute ends leaves both traditions oscillating between attempts to manage the non-rational, law-establishing and legitimating exercise of force and the rationally justified practice of law-preserving, procedurally sanctioned violence. The key to a successful critique of violence, for Benjamin, involves locating the determination of supposedly “absolute” ends within a conceptually-mediated, historically-situated economy of means. He writes, “The sphere of nonviolent means opens up in the realm of human conflicts relating to goods. [...] This makes it clear that there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding,’ language.”³³

³¹ Benjamin writes, “To sum up: if the criterion established by positive law to assess the legality of violence can be analyzed with regard to its meaning, then the sphere of its application must be criticized with regard to its value. For this critique a stand-point outside positive legal philosophy but also outside natural law must be found” (ibid).

³² *ibid*, 279.

³³ *ibid*, 289.

Like Habermas, then, Benjamin holds up language as the sphere in which violence can be overcome, but, in a move that should find sympathy from Girard, he rejects the Habermasian view of language as that which abstracts from and merely interprets embodied human practice. Rather, Benjamin sees the nonviolent potential of linguistic exchange as necessarily connected to the material practice of naming and exchanging “goods.” In the ritual of economic exchange, Benjamin suggests, we do not simply use language to instrumentally indicate objects, but our linguistic practice actually establishes the world of objects. As Benjamin writes, “Language is therefore both creative and finished creation, it is word and name.”³⁴ Benjamin attempts to overcome the ontologization of violence through making his own version of the linguistic turn towards a semantic system in which the signifier not only preserves but also, in some sense, establishes the signified.

On this view of language, the means and ends of violence can be analyzed as contingent in so far as they are produced by a history of economic exchange, and their absolute character can be granted relative to the creative, world-establishing potential of the linguistic medium itself. It is in and through language so construed that the causes and effects of violence can be seen as having a history that delivers itself over to critique.³⁵ Violence itself is an idea located within a linguistic economy, the evolution of which must be analyzed with respect to both the material conditions of its referent and the creative significations produced by its concept. Thus, violence in its causes and effects cannot be simply a brute fact, however unfortunate, of human being, as Girard would have it, nor can it be understood as merely epiphenomenal to more fundamental distortions in communicative rationality, à la Habermas. Violence is a reality embedded in human history that is contingent insofar as it is the result of temporal circumstances, but an absolute fact relative to the creative power exercised both within the context of those past circumstances and the present practice of their retelling.

For Benjamin, then, the challenge of “historical thinking” is precisely to realize both the ultimate contingency of philosophical concepts and the creative power and responsibility that this realization bestows on the historian. “A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which

³⁴ Benjamin, Walter. “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken Books. 2007. pg. 323.

³⁵ Benjamin writes, “The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history—the ‘philosophy’ of this history, because only the idea of its development makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its temporal data.” (“Critique of Violence,” 300).

his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.”³⁶ For both Habermas and Girard, this means that the religious past, insofar as it contributes to a modern critique of violence, cannot be simply recovered and recounted as either the nostalgically longed-for “opaque core” of lost human experience or the one-time revelation of the mysterious hermeneutic key to understanding the human condition. Rather, any past, religious or secular, must be received as essentially bound up with and shaped by the present concerns of a lived practice of linguistically mediated and created economic exchange. By recognizing the contingency not only of the violent past but also of its present (re)constructions, violence itself becomes something that gives itself over to constant (re)presentation and analysis guided by current interests and motivations. Thus, the metaphysical violence that confronts both Habermas and Girard can be given a human face and a humane response.

In this paper, I have argued that both Habermas’ “semantic genealogy” and Girard’s “mimetic anthropology” reach dead-ends in their attempts to mount a successful critique of violence. Both thinkers fail to achieve the kind of post-metaphysical, historicized understanding of violence they claim is necessary for its overcoming. Habermas’ approach is unable to insulate his procedurally justified political rationality from the challenges to its legitimacy presented by failures of undistorted communication, and his methodological atheism is unable to integrate the motivational resources of religious language found in historically-situated conceptions of the good life. Girard’s account of human desire, in rejecting the precise historical circumstances and conceptual representations of will-formation as arbitrary, proved to be just as “formal” as Habermas’ semantic genealogy. In this concluding section, I hope to have pointed a way forward through the work of Benjamin, whose philosophy of history seems to value both the desire-forming practices that take place within material contexts as well as the linguistic, conceptual mediation that both creates and is created by these practices. For Benjamin, because human being is linguistic through and through, there is no feature of our lives together that cannot be critiqued in an explicit and interpersonal economy of exchange. Thus, there is no violence that remains metaphysically inaccessible. There is no darkness that cannot be brought into the light. There is no monstrosity that cannot be made human again.

³⁶ Benjamin, Walter. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books. 1968. pg. 263.