

Desire and the Politics of Anti-culture: René Girard and Philip Rieff
on the Mystique of Transgression

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Philip Rieff turns the word repression against the fundamental teaching of its founder and principal theorist Freud. For Rieff, repression best describes, not the struggle against unconscious instincts, but the repression and redirection of the human urge upward toward the sacred. The “repressive imperative” against the vertical dimension comes not from the instinctual proletariat, from below, but from modernity’s aristocracy, its theoretical and cultural steersmen. The foremost leaders in Rieff’s reading of modern culture are its distinguished officers, the theorists and artists like Freud, James Joyce, or Marcel Duchamp. Ours is not a culture that is becoming peacefully unmoored from its foundations but is, with leadership from its cultural officers, actively destroying them: “Our culture is adversarial: against what is interdictory... The repression of the human urge upward describes the authority of the present” (*Crisis* 35). Nowadays heroism, as much as authority, lies in the transgressive.

This repression, in which the central imperative is, at the behest of culture’s new officers, to release desire from the controls provided by sacred interdictions or prohibitions, is what Rieff terms anti-culture. Culture, he argues, always depended on the recognition of sacred “no’s,” interdictions: “Every world ... has been a form of address to some ultimate authority” (*Deathworks* 4). Anti-culture is the project of release from prohibitions, the affirmation of desires and instincts, and the assertion of individual satisfaction as the proper goal of collective

organization. Rieff also insists, however, that culture rooted in sacred order always made provision for remission, for occasional release and reversal of prohibition (*Deathworks* 12). Remission is not to be confused with the contemporary liberation of the instincts, however, as its goal is not continuous therapeutic release and management of desires, but the repetition of order, the re-tuning of desire, and the reaffirmation of authority and the sacred. Interdictions that are too rigidly applied become “decivilizing,” but so, too, do unconstrained remissions: “A remission too severely constrained becomes a decivilizing interdict, whereas one too broadly granted becomes an uncivilizing transgression” (*Deathworks* 12). It is clear here that Rieff’s position cannot be construed as a return to one orthodoxy or another. “For me, too,” he has affirmed, “orthodoxies of all sorts smell of the narrowness that they permit in their characters” (*Jew* 124. See also Girard, *Things Hidden* 286: “I do find it absurd that people should greet ... a return to constraints, which is impossible”).

Rieff’s point of view is inseparable from Max Weber’s fundamental insight into the relationship between science and disenchantment. The repressive imperative of modern officers of anti-culture is perhaps the purest product of the rationalization of life by science. This “intellectualization and rationalization”

... means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious forces existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. (Weber 139)

The repressive imperative existed as a fundamental impulse in science long before Freud. What Weber accepted as inevitable, however, Rieff sees as the willful release of the individual from the symbolic co-ordinates of the sacred, which cannot be articulated, much less understood, by “technical means and calculations” alone. Still, Weber’s analysis is essential to understanding the emergence of what Rieff calls the therapeutic, because therapy, the contemporary reading and management of desires, is clearly a product of disenchantment in the sphere of desire, an application of technical means and calculations to the instincts. Freud’s critique of religion, his demythologization of the Father and its replacement by the therapeutic transference, reduced the authority of the vertical and replaced it with the therapeutic ideal of adjustment with the therapist as a negational priest. At one time, says Rieff, “Cultures gave readings of sacred order and ourselves somewhere in it.” No more. With anti-culture begins the project of a “culture that persists independent of all sacred orders” that is “unprecedented in human history” (*Deathworks* 13).

The links of Rieff’s analysis with that of René Girard become apparent when one considers the intimate relationship between desire and violence in that analysis. Nothing is more destructive of culture, for either Rieff or Girard, than the Rousseauan belief in the primordial innocence of the desires. (That neither endorses a Manichean view, however, requires more space for discussion than is available here.) For Rieff, the therapeutic lowering of the requirements of guilt and prohibition essential to anti-culture leaves desire to escalate into the struggle for power. The theoretical attack on guilt and the interdictions that sustain it foster a war of all against all, a “deritualizing of intimate relations, the dissolution of all manners and reticence, so that men leap upon one another, to achieve their own persons in the submission, unto death, of another” (*Charisma* 19).

For Girard, the rituals and prohibitions in archaic societies are conceived as a set of controls that both shepherd desire and restrain its excesses. Above all they act as prophylactics on competitive desire. In the presence of tradition, of stable social hierarchies, and of sustaining rituals, differences are freely acknowledged and desires do not compete for the same objects. In a situation of social breakdown, plague, or war, however, differences are fragile and desires are unrestrained by sacred order. Differences are erased and desires converge on the same objects – family member turns on family member, the subject on the king, the poor on the rich. Difference is replaced by sameness, and neighbours become more “alike” the more their desires converge on the same things. Each becomes the double of the other. Here emerges the sacrificial crisis that Girard asserts stands at the origin of religion, the myths and rituals of which are disguised memorials of a social “war of all against all” that was defused by a war of all against one, the killing of a scapegoat. The social differences that were erased in the catastrophe of the sacrificial crisis are resurrected with the new unanimity conferred by collective victimization. The rituals of sacrifice, the magical beliefs in contagion, and the taboos that memorialize them are remnants of the original and historic contagion of mimetic violence, subdued by the death of a now divinized victim.

The mechanism that Girard sees as driving this crisis is, of course, mimetic desire. That desire is fundamentally imitative, guided not by an inner teleology but by external models, stands in powerful contrast to the dominant models of autonomous selfhood that remain central to the modern West. His principal opponent in this matter is Freud, who felt that the objects of desire were fixed from infancy, if subject to continuous revision by the operations of repression and repetition on behalf of a besieged ego. Girard’s later theory of the scapegoat and the origins of religion began with the formulation of the notion of triangular, or mimetic, desire in *Deceit*,

Desire and the Novel, formulated in specific rebuttal to the Freudian notion of desire. According to Girard, desire always aims at a state of being, of self-sufficiency, of a kind of power or “godhood.” Inevitably, desire fixes on models that seem to embody that charismatic perfection. In childhood, it may be the parent. But unlike Freud, for whom the links between child and parent are never severed, Girard suggests that an infinite number of models may be substituted. Depending on the model *du jour* our desires change in line with the desires of the model. Desire, he argues, is triangular, the relation between the subject and the object of desire always mediated by a third, by the model. For some it may be anathema to assert that individual desire is without an autonomous or prescribed teleology. It may seem an affront to the modern Romantic dogma of authenticity that desire is treated less like a Freudian guided missile than a leaf blown by the wind. But Girard argues such a conception makes phenomena such as erotic fascination, rivalry, and the escalation of violence in its train comprehensible.

Those who interpret desire as a facet of human autonomy, as fixed in its objects and teleology, become blind to the tendency in desire to mimetic escalation. In the absence of prohibition and taboo, it is argued, desire will find satisfaction in its autonomous *teloi*. Like Rieff, Girard refers to modern officers of culture such as Foucault or Lacan who stigmatize religious taboos and cultural prohibitions as illegitimate constraints upon desire: “They think that once this confinement is over, desire will be able to blossom forth; its wonderful innocence will finally be able to bear fruit” (*Things Hidden* 285). In contrast to Lacan, for whom desire is a “by-product” of the law, Girard conceives desire as largely a product of what “others” desire, constantly subject to revision or escalation, and potentially dangerous as a source of competitive conflict in social order. In light of this, Girard underlines the protective function of prohibition. The stigmatization of law and prohibition has fostered a pervasive “mystique of transgression”

among its cultural officers to the point that transgression alone is seen to be the expression of authentic human selfhood. (To observe the by-product of such theorizing, one need only note how, in relation to modern cultural products, the descriptor “subversive” is now a word of indirect but unequivocal praise.)

Like Rieff, Girard sensibly rejects the reactionary political response to the liberation of the instincts that would involve a re-imposition of constraints, as “any attempt to reconstitute them artificially can only result in the most appalling tyranny” (*Things Hidden* 286). Besides, with the decline of traditional restraints, controls of other kinds have been developed in the form of property rights and law courts. But while such controls replace, with some efficiency, the cycles of vengeance that issued in victimization and scapegoating in cultures of the past, desire, with the decline of prohibitions, remains inflated by mimesis. Echoing de Tocqueville, Girard points out that the structured, differentiated, and hierarchical societies that obtained prior to modernity have been replaced by dynamic capitalist cultures in which “no more taboos forbid one person to take what is reserved for another” (*Things Hidden* 291). While eliminating the safety-valves of taboo and prohibition and substituting rational management of desires, modernity has increased the potential for the expansion and increase of rivalry. Human relationships remain mimetic: “Desire is what happens to human relationships when there is no longer any resolution through the victim” (*Things Hidden* 288). The current sacrificial crisis in desiring is rendered invisible in the outward economic and political peace, but recorded in the underground symptoms of literature, film, and individual psychosis.

For his part, to explicate his understanding of modernity and desire, Rieff divides the history of culture in the West into three basic synchronic categories. “First culture” is the culture of “fate,” in which the sacred is defined as that which prevails or has power and is set about with

limitations of taboo and prohibition. Authority derives from mythic primacies of possibility “whether Platonic essences or aboriginal dreamtimes ... being above and in all its agent authorities in all first worlds” (*Deathworks* 3). “Second culture” stems primarily from the Judeo-Christian or Biblical revelation, where the sacred is not identified with fate or powers but with the unchanging, commanding address of an eternal standard, a “Thou Shalt.” Included in this category, however, is Plato, a late “officer” of the first world, who identifies a similar standard philosophically, a second order of being that commands, lying outside the order of fate. “Third culture,” however, is the therapeutic culture, the product of the critique and deconstruction of all enduring truths and “other worlds” and an identification of the sacred with transgression. In one sense, third culture is a repetition of the first, except that what Rieff calls the “primacy of possibility,” that rules in first culture, is no longer ringed about in the third with taboos or the aura of danger. Instead the “dangerous desire” that was hemmed in and channeled by religion and, at its highest summit, the art of Attic tragedy is systematically released from its controlling prohibitions. The goals of human action are reduced, domesticated.

With the emergence of third culture, the culture of the therapeutic, a version of what Girard conceives as mimetic escalation occurs. With the detachment of social from sacred order a kind of free market of desiring emerges, a theatrical hospital of the spirit. Being and acting (in the sense of theatrical performance) are no longer distinguished, and prohibitions on desiring are minimized. Second cultures once gave a matrix of commanding truths within which the self could find orientation. Such cultures gave “readings of sacred order and ourselves somewhere in it” (*Deathworks* 13). The self found a sense of direction, according to Rieff, by locating itself “somewhere in the vertical of authority” (*Crisis* 29). Citing Kierkegaard, Rieff states the following: “That the object of address is a movement upward in sacred order means,

unalterably, that truth is subjective.” No more than Kierkegaard, however, is Rieff asserting that truth is relative. Much the opposite. Instead, he claims that the “Second world identity” to which he and Kierkegaard adhere “balances despair with the sense of inwardness that is inseparable from the highest authority,” an authority that is, by definition, changeless. Such authority cannot be acknowledged or discovered as an object of reasoning or “calculation” but as what is always already constitutive of the self: “Once composed, the divinely created motif of self finds itself free to rewrite the score; but never outside the scale of sacred order” (*Deathworks* 57). There is the ever-present possibility of raisings or lowerings on the scale of the sacred, and the best art provides a plumb by which the raisings and lowerings are seen, understood, and passionately addressed. According to Rieff, works of art, such as those of Shakespeare, are also works of theory in the highest sense, theory that is also vision. The work of art addresses us passionately insofar as it teaches, reasserts the vertical plumb-line of authority in the midst of the prevailing world mess:

We do not approach a work of theoretic art to be pleased, but to be taught; not to form a judgment, but to receive a lesson. To receive that lesson is to be touched by it, pierced by it. A work of theory is the art of faith. The art of faith is a passionate understanding, tantamount to guilt in the implied presence of supreme authority. (*Crisis* 35)

This is not the account of art, theory, or faith that finds its home in anti-culture, which Rieff argues lives to destroy the possibility of ascent along the vertical. For the third culture, self is a fictive creation, living indistinguishable from acting. Third culture, Rieff suggests, is parasitical on first and second world cultures: “Anti-cultures translate no sacred order into social.

Recycling fantasy firsts, third worlds exist only as negations of sacred order in seconds” (*Deathworks* 6). The third culture of negation recycles the first culture in which fate rules, yet without the taboos and prohibitions, mystery, or authority that first cultures recognize in fate. Witchcraft is recycled as suburban entertainment and, along with yoga, becomes a pleasant means of self-realization, or sexuality is asserted without a framework of the sacred, where even tepid commitments or mutually abusive relationships may become, in a kind of therapeutic contractualism, consensual and life-affirming. Freud is pivotal for Rieff, as for Girard. Though he remains a transitional figure between second and third worlds and because he still acknowledged the need for socially beneficial repressions, he did more than any to enact anti-culture, to free men from passionate attachments to truth, by an attack on the whole notion of the vertical dimension in the self. While in second cultures there is “always a world beyond the visible world,” in Freud, this is reversed “so that the hidden world is always in the lower world” (*Deathworks* 21).

The engagement of both Girard and Rieff with Freud is unique and central to their respective understandings of modernity. For Girard, Freud was a kind of inverted Platonist. Though he discerned important facets of desire that would influence Girard’s own theory of mimetic desire – ambivalence, contagious propagation, and repression –, Girard thought Freud imprisoned by the rigid categories of narcissism, the Oedipus complex, and the death instinct, the unmoving “essences” by which all the operations of desire were framed and interpreted. What Girard calls the “autonomy of desire” in Freud, its independence of imitation and the mechanism of escalation, links Freud to the great tradition of Western rationalism. For rationalism desire is a facet of the hermetically sealed and autonomous self, a conception which makes it blind to the non-rational links between self and other in mimetic desire.

Rieff similarly acknowledges Freud's reversal of Plato, his Platonic anti-Platonism, in his claim that, for Freud, the empire of the instincts becomes the new category of authority. Freud contributed to the "re-mythologizing of authority by interpreting it as primordially sexual" (*Deathworks* 62). In the face of its primordial origin in the sex and death instincts, the self becomes a provisional construct, a product at once of involuntary repressions of more primal instinctual drives and the therapy which counteracts those repressions. The secularized post-Freudian therapeutic self is what results from the gradual, patient unpacking of the self from the obsessions of guilt and religion, the management and reasonable satisfaction of inherently calamitous instincts. It remained for Freud's epigones, Reich and Marcuse, to declare the instincts innocent and to question the necessity for any repression at all to maintain the order of culture and civilization, and to advocate releasing desire to seek any ends whatever. The doctrine of the liberation of the instincts and the doctrine of self as performance and theatrical artifice, while superficially a negation of rationalism in the name of Romantic authenticity, is ironically best understood as its last decayed descendant. The road from Descartes to Freud to Lady Gaga is circuitous but important to grasp. Interestingly, Rieff suggests that in second cultures of revelation the self never was autonomous in the sense demanded by rationalism. Referring to a late and failed officer of the second culture, Kierkegaard, he suggests that cultures of command circumvented both the myth of autonomy and the theatrical hospital of modern selfhood with a demand for character informed by obedience to the order of the sacred. The self could not be a self until it was acquired by passionate engagement, in concealment, with its own ultimate source. Inwardness, a better expression for what Kierkegaard understood by subjectivity, is the selfhood that is "engraved" in character and never accessible to calculation or the senses.

Inwardness is nowadays an aberration in the Facebook culture of un-concealment and instant publicity. The one condition lacking in contemporary therapeutic culture is, according to Rieff,

... *inwardness*, the quality of self-concealment. That has become, as Kierkegaard predicted, an aberrancy. The growth of this aberrancy is linked to the mistaken idea, held by both rationalists and sentimentalists, of an autonomous inner man. (*Jew* 117)

The rationalist, as much as Lady Gaga, insists on an autonomous self that is the subject of desire, a self that is both free and instantly communicable in the next role or costume, holding all theological accounts as unjustifiable mystifications. In opposition to this, Kierkegaard traced character back to its etymological origins in Greek: “the engraved”: “Morality is character. Character is that which is engraved (*charasso*)” (*The Present Age* 43). The self must become itself, as he liked to say, but only in concealment “before God” or the vertical in authority by which the self, in its fumbings and staggerings, inevitably moves and has its being.

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