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<b>Title</b>	Organisation as containment of acquisitive mimetic rivalry: The contribution of René Girard
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<b>Publication date</b>	2003
<b>Publication information</b>	Desmond, John, and Donncha Kavanagh. "Organisation as Containment of Acquisitive Mimetic Rivalry: The Contribution of René Girard." Taylor and Francis, 2003. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/1475955042000195427">https://doi.org/10.1080/1475955042000195427</a> .
<b>Publisher</b>	Taylor and Francis
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5861">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5861</a>
<b>Publisher's statement</b>	This is an electronic version of an article published in Culture and Organization, 9(4): 239-251 (2003). Culture and Organization is available online at: <a href="http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1475955042000195427">www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1475955042000195427</a>
<b>Publisher's version (DOI)</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/1475955042000195427">10.1080/1475955042000195427</a>

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**Organization as Containment of Acquisitive Mimetic Rivalry:  
The Contribution of René Girard**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers relations between violence and organization as seen through the lens moulded by Rene Girard. This is because more than any other writer of his generation Girard postulates the primacy of violence in his sociological theorising. In this paper we first outline Girard's theory. Next we discuss this in relation to Freudian theories of organization. We then draw out some of the implications of his theory for the understanding of topics within Organization Theory, such as bureaucracy and sexual harassment. Finally we suggest a research agenda.

## INTRODUCTION

While René Girard is best known as a literary critic and theorist of religion, there are several reasons why he is important to Organizational Theory. Most importantly his theory contributes towards the understanding of violence in relation to social organization. In this respect Girard can be read alongside Sigmund Freud ~~and as well~~ as Norbert Elias, who borrows from Freud's Oedipal scheme in seeking to explain the role played by the re-organization of the psyche in the civilising process. As we shall see, Girard's *interdividual* psychology departs from Freud by abandoning the latter's topographical structure of the psyche. Girard provides an alternative explanation of violence to that offered by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1960), which leads him to dispense with the Oedipus complex. Secondly Girard is important because he is a contemporary with, and his ideas form a counterpoint to, those of Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, who have had a major impact on social theory and organization. Girard's views, to use his own words, "are scandalously out of proportion with the general temper of the times"; an indication of how much things have changed since 1968 when Girard was positioned as an "oblate", close to the centre of the French academy, in contradistinction to "consecrated heretics" who lay at its fringes (Bourdieu, 1988). In line with his opposition to post-structuralist and de-constructionist thought he offers an original, insightful and occasionally troubling

view that some theorists may find surprising. Finally and importantly for this paper Girard's theory has implications for a range of topics in Organization Theory, including our understanding of bureaucracy and sexual harassment.

In Girard's account, the relation between violence and organization is fundamental; as Mack (1987:14) observes, Girard holds that a "radically tensive and dynamic mechanism of rivalry is what determines social behaviour"; a rivalry which must be effectively constrained for cooperative ventures to take place. In other words, violence is not merely facilitated by organization; nor is organization simply a means for directing it; violence is foundational. For Girard, organization is not about facilitation or direction; rather, alongside myth, ritual and the law, organization *contains* rage. We begin our paper by outlining our reading of the main shape of Girard's explanation which centres on the central and contagious role played by violence in human life against which organization acts as a foil and a prohibition. We then proceed to set his ideas in the context of related writings, especially literatures that discuss the role of organization in repressing/liberating desire in relation to Freudian theory. Finally, we conclude with a general discussion on how Girard's ideas might contribute to theories of organising in Management Studies.

## **SUMMARY OF GIRARD'S HYPOTHESIS**

To summarize Girard, if one individual imitates another when the latter appropriates some object, the result cannot fail to be rivalry, leading ultimately to conflict. Girard contends that one can readily detect such mimetic conflict in animals, including hominids, whereby beyond a certain level of intensity the antagonists shift the focus of rivalry from the disputed object to the model (the other). The crux of his argument

is that in animal groups the outcome is determined by sheer physical strength and is often restricted to “one-on-one” conflict in (re)-establishing relations within a pecking order. However humans share a unique feature, an opposable thumb and thereby have the ability to use prostheses, including weaponry. For Girard this renders the problem of the organization of mimetic rivalry more complex in human society than for non-human species. He hypothesizes that in early forms of human society, epidemics of mimetic rivalry found ultimate discharge in scapegoating. In Girard’s view the scapegoat founds the basis of community and of a hierarchy through the creation of religious rituals and myths. From these spring legal institutions and more complex forms of organization evolve to secure against irruptions of mimetic rivalry. We now turn to explore these issues in more detail.

## **GIRARD’S OEUVRE**

Like Freud (1962), Girard seeks a ground for his theory in literature, in particular the novels of Dostoevsky, in addition to anthropological accounts of myth, especially the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In this vein, we will illustrate the more detailed explication of Girard’s explanation by drawing upon William Golding’s Nobel-prize winning novel, *The Lord of the Flies* (Golding 1954). The story is particularly apt as it recreates the primordial scene envisaged by Girard as the start point for his theory. The story begins with an aeroplane crashing into a desert island. All of the adults on board are killed, leaving a group of boys who are more or less strangers to one another stranded on the island. As we shall see, Golding’s storyline develops from this initial state of ‘social undifferentiation’ in a way that is remarkably consistent with Girard’s theory.

Girard's main thesis is advanced in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977). This is illuminated by several other works including *The Scapegoat* (1979) and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987). The notion of conflictual mimesis is central to Girard's explanation. While writing on the topic of mimesis can be traced to Plato, the focus of scholarship has shifted over time. Plato and Aristotle were interested in mimesis from the point of view of the imitation of the work of art (Verdenius, 1962) but did not consider desire and appropriation to be among the types subject to imitation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries biologists became interested in the use of mimesis as an adaptive defence mechanism among species which used camouflage (Punnett, 1965; Wickler, 1968). Here the work of Caillouis (1935) is noteworthy due to his influence on the Dada group, including the psychologist Jacques Lacan (1977), whose concept of the "mirror stage" in human development draws upon the former's views on the (flawed) adaptive strategy adopted by the mantis. Girard's theory is different to that of Lacan in that he posits an active relationship between a subject and a model which is more dynamic than the subject/mirror formulation of Lacan. Girard's theory seems to fit best with more recent psychological explanations of mimesis that seek to explain it as a learning strategy that is characteristic of all animals, including humans (Piaget, 1962; Custance, 1995). These explanations focus on the manner by which a subject learns by modelling her behaviour that of another. Girard takes these theories a stage further by conjecturing the flow of events that ensues when both subject and model reach for the same object.

The concept of acquisitive mimetic desire describes the relations between the human subject, the model that forms the basis for emulation and ultimately rivalry, and those objects possessed by the model. For instance, much of *The Lord of the Flies* story describes the developing rivalry between the boys and their shared desire to acquire objects (e.g. special shells, fire, food, glasses, etc.) possessed by others. Such imitation contains within it a double bind; taken as a model the imperative is ‘imitate me’; taken as a rival the imperative is ‘do not imitate me’, and it is this contradictory double imperative that provides the basis for Girard’s theory. In seeking to emulate the model, the subject comes to desire the object(s) that the model desires; Girard terms this *mimetic desire*. Attention focuses progressively onto the object as that which the model has and which the subject lacks. The subject comes to perceive possession of the object as being the vital difference between subject and model. Consequently, the object becomes ‘superabundantly real’ for the subject. By this Girard means that the object becomes displaced from any notion of the satisfaction of physiological need and becomes charged with symbolic power as a mark of prestige. The relation may now become more complex as the model (who is also a subject) may seek to emulate the desire of the subject. Once engaged, the mimetic circles escalate inexorably through positive feedback in a ‘runaway’ manner so that the combatants come to resemble one another. The paradox that seems to be at the heart of Girard’s explanation is that the subject, in seeking to differentiate herself, imitates another (the model) and in doing so initiates a process which culminates in the creation of an intolerable sameness: “we designate them as doubles because from the point of view of the antagonism, nothing distinguishes them” (Girard 1987 p. 26). While Girard does not offer much by way of example, one can think of a number of conflicts where the greater the similarity of the combatants, the greater the violence.

Ultimately imitation may reach such a pitch that the object itself is lost and all that remains is the model. This is reflected in Golding's story, wherein the group of boys divides into two factions that initially compete with one another for objects, such as fire. Over time, the competition for objects escalates to a level where the object becomes irrelevant, where all that matters is the (destruction of the) model, comprising the 'other' group of boys, who become the target for extreme physical violence. The crisis at last finds discharge through the sacrifice of a scapegoat. Girard bases this part of his thesis on a number of historical incidents where a community perversely attributes the cause of its current ills, which are in fact due to the violence that mimesis produces, towards an arbitrarily chosen individual or group. This is played out in Golding's story when one of the young boys, who had been bullied from the beginning, is finally killed by one of the factions. Girard terms this the *scapegoat mechanism*, which he asserts is a generative principle that works unconsciously in culture and society (Girard 1987, 1989, 1996). He argues that the scapegoat brings unanimity and thus relief from violence. Girard argues that scapegoating generates an originary distinction between "us" and the victim - "it". According to Girard, "[f]rom this distinction all others stem: language, roles, rules, institutions, etc." (Girard 1996, p. 289). In *The Lord of the Flies*, this peace occurs at the very end of the story, when the two factions unite in horror at the killing of the scapegoat, Piggy. Whether this peace can last is not clear, because it is at this point that the boys are rescued by a navy unit from a passing gunship. The final scene in Golding's story, where the bloodied boys gaze at the warship, is rich in metaphor and symbolism.

Girard argues that primitive and modern societies have constructed and evolved prohibitions to forestall the process just described. This containment works at a



number of levels. First, a system of differences and hierarchies is put in place. Second, Girard's theory provides a rationale for the development of political and religious sovereignty. His proposition is that:

in all human institutions it is necessary to reproduce a reconciliatory murder by means of new victims. The original victim is endowed with superhuman, terrifying prestige because it is seen as the source of all disorder and order. Subsequent victims inherit some of this prestige. One must look to this prestige for the source of all political and religious sovereignty (Girard 1987 p. 53).

Thus the "king [second victim] is at first nothing more than the victim with a sort of suspended sentence" (ibid. p. 52). However, the new victim is also seen to be powerful and sacred (through his connection with the original victim) and Girard argues that this ultimately explains the power and sacredness of kings – and by extension leaders — in general. Third, Girard argues that all human myths conceal the foundational violence which created them. The construction of myths and rituals around this event acts as the foundation for religion (and ultimately law) and acts to stave off the likelihood of future crises. Myth acts as a form of warning of the implications of such violence, while ritual substitutes for it. While myth tells the 'story' of the crisis, it acts to conceal the real violence carried within it; ritual on the other hand in replaying the crisis, re-enacts it and thus has the aim of reliving it symbolically. Girard's apocalyptic argument is that without the brakes of ritual and myth, the mimetic crisis would build once more, threatening to unleash a new wave of violence. Fourth, Girard argues that it is *law* (rather than religion or morality) that provides the necessary constraint to violence in modernity. Legal authority is not based on some notion of equilibrium or 'balance' but on an asymmetry based on the submission of powerful interests to a (sovereign) abstract justice which all respect. In

this respect ‘the law’ has a spiritual or theological dimension insofar as it requires faith in a system of meaning that decrees the necessity of the hierarchical order. For instance, the ‘basic right’ to own property is better understood, from a Girardian viewpoint, as a ‘basic prohibition’ invoked to inhibit the conflict that acquisitive mimesis would otherwise engender. Another way in which violence is contained is by transmuting it into rivalry for highly symbolised objects whose very existence is made possible by symbolic institutions. In modern society, mimetic conflict does not normally degenerate into a fight unto death. In Girard’s view this is because social organization has reached a level of refinement such that it can permit and encourage mimetic rivalries which otherwise would be forbidden. However, “if the transcendence of the judicial institution is no longer there, if the institution loses its efficacy or becomes incapable of commanding respect, the imitative and repetitious character of violence becomes manifest once more” (Girard 1987: 12).

This, then, is Girard’s theory in summary form. At first sight Girard’s ‘interdividual’ approach shares certain similarities with symbolic interactionism, and in particular that espoused by Goffman (1967). However, Girard’s theory is less ‘self’-centred and more truly interactional than the symbolic interactionist approaches described by Gecas (1982). Of course we have abbreviated his work considerably and left out many of his ideas, especially his extensive writings on the Bible, the Gospels and Christ. This is inevitable given the confines and scope of our paper. Before moving on, we will briefly address some criticisms of his theory.

## **CRITIQUING GIRARD**

Perhaps the most obvious criticism is that Girard's theory is an exemplar of totalising theory and the temptation to 'grand' narrative. Akin to other grand narratives, the theory is empirically unverifiable. Girard, of course, was well aware of the general critique of grand narratives and the particular criticism that his own theory was overly reductive (i.e. it hypothesises that the heterogeneity of the world could be explained in terms of some common denominator, such as mimetic desire). His response is two-pronged. First, he argues that "On this point I am in full agreement with Lévi-Strauss. Scientific inquiry is reductive or it is nothing at all" (1987, p. 39). Indeed there are few theories that have stood the test of time which are not totalising in some way. Second, he claims that his:

model includes the possibility of infinite variation precisely because the event it describes is never concretely observed - it is, in fact, the object of a fundamental and founding misrecognition. Such misrecognition opens the way not only for difference itself, for religious and cultural differentiation, but also for the infinite diversity of concrete forms of religion. The whole theory is based on the already interpretative character of religious phenomena in relation to the founding event. (1987, p. 44).

He also preempts the criticism that his theory does not explain the difference between the human and the non-human world. Animals share with humans a "fundamental rule.... that of preventing conflict, which the convergence of two or several avid hands towards one and the same object cannot help but provoke" (Girard 1987: 8). Simple dominance hierarchies are evident in animal groups and this provides a robust order within a group (for example, the dominance hierarchy of chimpanzees ensures that a subordinate chimpanzee will opt to starve to death rather than challenge a dominant male for food). But the existence of any dominance hierarchy, based purely on physical attributes, can be and has been undone as the result of the development of

weapons. In this account, human organization has had, over millennia, to deal with a series of crises that threatened to extinguish the species. Girard (1987) suggests that if chimpanzees threw stones and not branches at one another, either the species would disappear or, like humanity, they would have to impose their own prohibitions. This suggests that the complexity of human organization has co-evolved with the increasingly sophisticated and lethal nature of human weaponry.

Others might criticise Girard as being an unreflexive supporter of the status quo, regardless of the status quo's merits. From this perspective, Girard is no more than a reactionary who flaunts a conservative agenda in the face of those who seek reform. Thus, Girard's position is essentially the same argument that Edmund Burke – the so-called father of conservatism – used in the early 19th century against the French Revolution and in support of the monarchy. In brief, the conservative argument in support of elites – e.g. the monarchy – is that they are important because this system of difference contains the basically violent, selfish, dangerous human instincts. Obliterating difference brings with it the potential to unleash the violence of mimetic rivalry. But of course high levels of stratification are sometimes maintained through violence and exploitation that the ruling 'caste', because of its standpoint, will either not see or see but ignore. In turn, disturbing the status quo can sometimes only be achieved through violence. To be fair to Girard, he is neither seeking to prescribe nor proscribe particular actions in particular situations, but is rather seeking to explain why the world exists in the way it does. Moreover, to dismiss him as a reactionary without engaging seriously with his work is itself to be reactionary.

If Girard is taken seriously then what are the implications of his theory for thought and research in relation to organization? For us, his central contribution is with

respect to the contagious nature of the desire that fuels acquisitive mimetic rivalry and the manner by which organization can be said to contain it. In the remainder of the paper, we will consider how his ideas relate to other theories, especially to theories that also make a connection between violence and (social) organization. We argue that his ideas set a clear agenda for thought and for research.

## **VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION**

Girard is certainly not the first or only writer to identify a strong connection between violence and social organization, and in this section we briefly review a number of related contributions. We ignore, maybe at our peril, conflict theorists like Simmel (1955), Coser (1956) and Dahrendorf (1958, 1959) who assert that social order and conflict are prerequisites of one another (since we cannot have conflict unless there is some prior consensus on what to fight about). First, we focus in this paper on Freud and the post-Freudians since Freud was an important model for Girard and because Freud articulated an important connection between social organization and the containment of violence. This in turn has implications for the discussion of our second topic which seeks to relate Girard to topics within Organization Theory.

### **Girard and Freudian Theories of Organization**

In *Violence and the Sacred* (p. 169-85), Girard asserts that mimetic desire is central to Freud's theory. Freud, for instance, argued that "A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like and be like him, and take his place everywhere. We may say simply that he takes his father as his ideal" (Freud 1953-66, vol. 18, p. 105). Moreover, the containment of violence is also at the heart of Freud's

explanation of the pivotal Oedipus complex, whereby the male child repudiates his desire for the mother through fear of castration by the father. Freud initially suggested that this mimetic desire is primordial, but he subsequently gives primacy to the fixation of the libido onto the mother. Girard, in contrast, sees this as *secondary* to the mimetic urge. This allows him to present an economic alternative to Freud's theory that does not require Freud's conceptual carapace. Thus, Girard dispenses with central Freudian constructs such as the Oedipus complex, the concept of castration anxiety, and thereby Freud's depiction of the psyche's topography.

Freud's theory has proved to be hugely influential and his writings are at the centre of a long discourse on the relationship between violence and organization. His theory is dynamic to the extent that the structure of the psyche is not given once and for all, but accommodates itself to the prevailing social conditions of the time. Consequently this suggests that in exploring the role of organization in the containment of violence it is not sufficient to focus purely on interpersonal and structural levels of association; one should also take into account the structure of the psyche. The relation of psychogenesis to sociogenesis, which contends that the topography of the psyche mirrors social organization, forms a central theme in social theory, informing the work of Elias, Levi-Strauss, and the post-Freudians among many others. Elias's ([1939] 1994) explanation of the civilising process in early modern Europe describes this in relation to a gradual reconfiguration of the psyche in response to growing levels of social interdependency as the result of a key transition in social organization through the move to court societies. In Freudian terms, growing social interdependency in European society from the Middle Ages onwards has led to the construction of a more differentiated psyche with the development of a stronger

superego formation and correspondingly of an ego which is suitably equipped to match this in mediating relations with the id. Elias argues that the progressive civilisation of human manners has been accounted for through the development of individual self-control as the result of the repression of violence from the social sphere into the reconfigured topography of the psyche. Consequently dealing with the irruption of such internal conflict becomes a major preoccupation in contemporary society. Elias's explanation has been placed in question through the work of Maffesoli (1996), who suggests that the modernising tendency towards individuation and privatisation has imploded with the irruption of new forms of affect-laden community. Elias's response has been to retort that the expressions of affect are constructed behind a façade of 'controlled de-control'. Entering into the argument Bauman (1991, 1993) seems to accept Maffesoli's contention at face value but differs from him in arguing that far from being liberatory, the principle of *communitas* embodies the spirit and the morality of the crowd – in so far as a community does not embody a robust *hierarchical* system of difference – with the attendant probability of violence.

There is much in the foregoing discussion which accords with Girard's view of organization in relation to the containment of violence. Elias explains the movement towards a more peaceful society as a necessity bred of growing social interdependency, with violence progressively contained in the reorganised space of the psyche. Like Girard, Bauman is concerned that resurgent communitarianism may provoke the spirit of the crowd. From this, one general current containing Freud, Elias and Bauman suggests that (hierarchic) organization is a good thing in that it contains violence. An oppositional stream argues that such repression is a bad thing

and that the expression of desire should be given free rein. For instance, several post-Freudian theorists (c.f. Reich, 1975; Marcuse 1964) have argued that the liberation of such desire holds the key for the transformation of society. Girard keeps to the mainstream, arguing that it would be folly to seek the 'liberation' of desire;

The more people think that they are realizing the Utopias dreamed up by their desire – the more they embrace ideologies of liberation – the more they will in fact be working to reinforce the competitive world that is stifling them...The best method of chastising mankind is to give people all that they want on all occasions. (1987: 286)

That Freud forms a 'model-rival' for Girard is evident when one considers his radical revision of 'Freudian' thinking through the wholesale dismissal of the 'repression-liberation' construct. In this respect he follows broadly in line with Foucault (1976) and differs from Elias and Freud in that there is no room for repression in his account. He shares with Foucault a distrust for explanations based on transgression of the 'law', or 'sovereign' power. Unlike Foucault, he does not resort to an omnipresent form of disciplinary power, linked to the gaze, as the key to his explanation. While he does not comment directly on the 'gaze' one might conjecture that Girard would consider this to be much less effective in producing docile bodies than Foucault suggests, in that it plays down the ingenuity, artifice and cunning of skilled social actors, while simultaneously completely ignoring the powerful motive force of mimetic desire. Like Bauman (op. cit.) he is deeply distrustful of calls to 'community' or of anything that might displace/discharge the hierarchical system of difference, since this would provoke social undifferentiation, rivalry and violence.



## **Girard and Organization Theory in Management Studies**

So far, we have discussed general theories of putative relations between organization and violence. But what of the organizational forms best suited to capitalism? Here we must tentatively advance beyond Girard's work as he does not dwell much on the contemporary management field. It is likely that he would be interested in the ways in which myth and ritual combine with other forms with respect to the regulation of organizational activity. Thus business firms operate in a regulated capitalist economy where the "war of all against all" is effectively turned into something quite different, oligopolistic competition. Here one must acknowledge the contribution of new institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Haveman, 1993; Greve, 1996) which seeks to explain the issue of institutional isomorphism. One of the three key explanations includes mimetic isomorphism where, it is argued, in situations in which a clear course of action is unavailable, organizations may decide that the best course of action is to mimic the successful operations of a peer. From a Girardian point of view one would expect that as they become more similar, so the likelihood of violence occurring between organizations should increase. However one might retort that in the capitalist system violence is generally transmuted from the physical to the symbolic realm where winners and losers are adjudicated according to codes such as "market-share" and "return on investment". The Girardian perspective invites one to enquire further into this state of affairs to explore why it is that most organizations stand by these codes and why some go beyond them? One of the most prevalent "rules-based" systems in Organization Theory is bureaucracy. We discuss below how it is possible to effect a reading of bureaucracy that accentuates its role as a rules-based system

predicated upon principles of fairness. Following this we briefly discuss some implications for the literature on empowerment and sexual harassment.

*Bureaucracy as containment of violence:* Weber (1947) argued that bureaucracy served capital's '*urgent need for stable, strict, intensive and calculable administration*' (p. 339 his italics). Within this explanation, bureaucracy is the perfect complement to the market, which is its most rational base. Weber further argues that economic action based upon the 'free' market, where individuals act economically and rationally in their self-interest, is very stable. His logic for this is that the more strictly rational their actions the more they will tend to react similarly to the same situation and in this way similarities and continuity of action is much more stable than if they were following norms (Weber 1947: 123). While Girard would argue that the similarity bred of the free market would serve to increase acquisitive mimetic rivalry instead of fostering stability, he would probably accept that an orderly system of distinctions based on some form of impersonal rule would be essential for the curtailment of acquisitive mimetic desire. To survive, bureaucracy must be seen to work and ultimately bureaucracy works not only through the exercise of disciplines but because it is legitimated by those who operate it and/or engage with it. Bureaucracy may be exerted from the top-down, but is also sustained from the bottom-up as people subscribe to it as the least-worst means of ensuring fairness. This Girardian reading of bureaucracy and hierarchy highlights its value in containing violence, which is often overlooked. In common with Foucault, his work encourages

researchers to consider the positive aspect of the organization of power. In this sense, then, bureaucracy might be seen as an ideal type of the 'least-worst' form of organization to be found in capitalism. Rivalry is displaced/discharged through the hierarchical system of difference. Girard's point is that violence occurs when, in a time of crisis, this order is broken up into a kind of primal chaotic mess where mimetic rivalry ultimately discharges itself through the tit-for-tat reprisals until a scapegoat is found.

The above raises the obvious question about whether there is any evidence for a reading of bureaucracy that emphasises its role in prohibiting acquisitive mimetic rivalry. Courpasson (2000) discusses this issue indirectly in relation to two case studies. The first case relates to a situation involving redundancy. The author argues that senior managers used three devices in seeking to legitimise the main dismissal decision. First, they took pains to construct a rationale for the 'necessity' of the redundancy based upon what a job was worth (FF 200,000). Second, they adopted an egalitarian approach when deciding whom and where would be directly affected. Finally, they systematically invoked the argument of external threat and pressure, thus highlighting the 'inevitability' of the decision. By dissimulating their personal decision making they constructed the preferred reading that they were powerless in the face of this threat, and that the decision was disinterested and impersonal. Courpasson notes that this is a paradoxical legitimacy:

the legitimacy of senior managers constrained to make violent decisions, in other words  
a legitimacy based on powerlessness' (2000: 148)

It may seem startlingly obvious but nonetheless true to assert that this entire strategy was also contrived so as to contain violence.

Principles of impersonality, disinterestedness and egalitarianism underlining bureaucracy may be used creatively to contain the violence of subordinates, but what of organizational elites where everyone is purportedly on the same level? Courpasson's second case discusses one such instance. It is noteworthy that the very definition of the term 'elite' as 'those who have merited good marks in the competition of life or who have drawn a winning number in the lottery of social existence' is based not on favoured position but on chance. In the case under examination, even though the group of consultants had established a 'flat' structure, members developed a hierarchical authority which served to speak for the 'group' interests (which was for autonomy) and to act as a foil for the desires of senior managers. Lazega's (2000) study of 'lateral control' of senior partners in a law firm takes the flattest possible structure. In this situation acquisitive mimetic rivalry was explicitly forbidden. Partners shared profits according to a rigid lockstep security system with the result that there was no direct relationship between contributions and returns and no compensation-based competition between them.

*Empowerment:* There are parallels between those who have called for freedom from what they perceive to be the bureaucratic nightmare (Marcuse, 1964; Lasch, 1979) and the psychoanalytic discourse centred around 'repression-liberation' which we discussed earlier. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Weber himself saw the "dark side" of bureaucracy, describing the "despair" that he feels when he perceives that the world will be filled with little cogs "little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones" (Weber, 1978: 995). From the point of view of seeking to prevent the spread of mimetic rivalry, this seems like a perfectly reasonable idea!

However critics of bureaucracy tend to round on its routine and oppressive aspects and its restrictions on individual freedom (c.f. Merton, 1936; Gouldner, 1954), implying that greater ‘freedom’ will lead to less oppression. In recent years the talk of “empowerment” (Terez, 2001), “lean-organization” and “team-working” have been offered as a means for circumventing the deficiencies of bureaucracy. However a “Girardian” reading of such develops would caution that such moves could lead to an increase in acquisitive mimetic rivalry.

*Sexual harassment:* A Girardian perspective might also contribute towards the literature on sexual harassment. Conventional views of sexual harassment (McKinnon, 1979) discuss this primarily as a gendered activity that is quite separate from bullying. Wilson and Thompson (2001: 62) note that in this view; “sexual behaviour becomes sexual harassment when it is unwanted and intrusive; sexual harassment is not welcome, it offends and it threatens.” Here it is useful to consider a “Girardian” reading alongside Brewis’s (2001) “Foucauldian” reading of harassment. Neither Foucault nor Girard mention the specificity of gender in the construction of social relations. However Girard discusses “male-to-male” modelling (as for instance in his discussion of the modelling of Nietzsche on Wagner, (1988, ch. 4) in addition to heterosexual modelling. It is unlikely, however, that Girard would partition sexual harassment from other forms of modelling, such as bullying. As Brewis notes, to portray this as gendered activity alone “to some extent neutralizes the noxiousness of the conduct involved.” (2001: 50). Girard would probably likewise challenge the conventional definition of sexual harassment which portrays this as being principally about gender, but for a different reason to that advanced by Brewis. He would not see it as possible to define a haven of “mutual” sex which is somehow free from power as

all sexual relationships are also relationships between subjects and models. A Girardian explanation would be more likely to focus on sexual harassment as resulting from an increase in mimetic rivalry occurring as the result of a decrease in distance between subject and model. Alongside Brewis and in distinction to conventional explanations, Girard would dispute the conventional portrayal of the harassment “relationship” as one between subject and object, whereby the woman is rendered into the role of victim. Rather he would be more likely to characterize this in a more dynamic form as a subject-model interaction, including cycles of attraction and engagement as well as repulsion and distancing. Where a “Girardian” explanation might depart from Brewis is with respect to her (guarded) sympathy for the “power feminist” argument. If there is a mimetic basis for sexual harassment then calls by authors such as ~~s~~ advanced by Roiphe (1994), among others, that the man should be “put in his place” might do little more than raise the stakes.

## **TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA**

Girard’s work focuses attention on mimetic behaviour within organizations and the means that evolve to prevent this from escalating into acquisitive mimetic rivalry. This directs research activity to explore the modeling activity that Girard argues would ultimately lead to the development of acquisitive mimetic rivalry and to scapegoating, hierarchy, myth and rituals which in his view ought to check the escalation of rivalry. In the context of management and organization studies, this leads us to consider the models taken by organizational members and the objects which form the stake of rivalry between them. The most elementary nucleus is thus subject-model-object, although as the model may take the subject as a model and as

mimetic rivalry has a contagious aspect to it, this quickly becomes very much more complex, especially when one includes the idea of scapegoating. There is much scope for empirical research, informed by Girard's theory on this phenomenon of modeling. Research might consider how, why and when individuals, groups or organizations model one another. At a macro level there is the opportunity of extending the literature on 'institutional isomorphism' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) from a Girardian perspective.

With respect to isomorphism Girard also calls our attention to fashion as an outcome of modeling behaviours; the apparently momentary transmission of modes of behaviour and display within and between organizations. This recalls the fundamental paradox of consumer society noted by Baudrillard (1990), that in the quest for difference everyone and every organization becomes reduced ultimately to the same.

Girard also focuses our attention on the models we use in organization theory and on the phenomenon of acquisitive mimetic rivalry among academics who must embrace particular subject-positions while distancing themselves from others. There are similarities here with Bloom's (1973) thesis that all literary texts are forms of misreading of those that precede them. Recently, Brown (1999) has used Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' thesis to trace the mimetic rivalry between two of marketing theory's principal writers. In addition, Girard would argue that the more academics seek to differentiate themselves from one another, the more similar they become through cyclothymia. Mizruchi & Fein (1999) explore this in relation to academics' selective use of DiMaggio & Powell's explanation of institutional isomorphism. Lilley (1997) discusses the common ground shared by two oppositional

constituencies, managers and critical academics, who despite their differences, exhibit a common reliance upon guru<sup>2</sup>s and the development of schemes of classification in furthering their ends. Bourdieu (1988) discusses the rivalry that broke out in France in the period around 1968 between the mainstream ‘oblates’ and of the Ecole Normale and the ‘consecrated heretics’ of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. While all of the studies discussed above share a common orientation in seeking to understand why it is that opponents begin to resemble one another, they are informed by quite different theoretical approaches. The area of ‘academic modeling’ is thus ripe for further investigation. This would include not only a comparison between different theories (e.g. Girard, Burke, Bourdieu), but also empirical research to gauge which theory best accounts for such rivalry.

Other topics for a research project might consider the distinctions between Girard’s concept of the model and other related concepts such as the ‘anti-hero’, the ‘rebel’ and the ‘scapegoat’. In Girard’s analysis of myth, the hero and the scapegoat are one and the same person. In this respect the hero is marked out in some way (for example because of some unwitting transgression of the code such as incest, or because he is a stranger) and this facilitates his choice as scapegoat. The real violence employed is expunged in the fabrication and retelling of the story. In organizational parlance the ‘whistleblower’, as someone who is marked in some way, who is often violently expelled from the organization, may come closest to Girard’s depiction of hero.

The organizational scapegoat forms another topic for study. Girard argues that this would be an extremely difficult topic to research, as most actors will tend to deny that this ever takes place. This perhaps explains why studies of scapegoating are relatively rare in organization studies (see, for instance, Bonazzi (1983), Eagle and Newton



(1981)). A Girardian framework suggest that not only should we inquire into how the scapegoating mechanism works in practice, but also examine its link to other organizational phenomena such as organizational restructuring. So, for instance, Storey (1992) has observed that first-line managers become scapegoats when planned organizational change is not implemented or fails to meet its objectives. A Girardian perspective provides a theoretical basis for exploring this and similar phenomena in more depth. Linked to this is the issue of ‘flat’ organizations. Following Girard, one could construct the hypothesis that the containment of acquisitive mimetic rivalry would surface as more of an issue in these organizations than in those organised according to a ‘classical’ bureaucratic frame.

Another factor worthy of more research is the role played by ritual in mediating mimetic rivalry within organizational contexts. We might tentatively suggest that in general ritual seems to direct symbolic and actual violence in directions that further the goals of the organization and which prevents the outbreak of acquisitive mimetic rivalry. For example Ackroyd & Crowdy (1990) offer examples to show that the targets for “practical jokes” in the slaughterhouse that formed the basis of their study were usually those who were slower and less efficient at tasks than the perpetrators. Discussing the general role of insults in organization Gabriel (1998), argues that this is a political process that establishes a kind of ‘pecking order’, thus restricting rivalry to ~~that for~~ the next slot available in the hierarchy. These arguments support the view that mimetic behaviour is ever present in organizational contexts but that this rarely escalates to acquisitive mimetic rivalry.

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