

# Writing an afterword on pandemics in 2020

(Curtis Gruenler asked for contribution for the COV&R-Bulletin on the subject of reflections on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of mimetic theory. This is a draft of a contribution I intend write.)

In January 2020 I finished the Dutch text of a book on psychosis and mimetic theory. In order to make the reader familiar with mimetic theory, I leaned heavily on the metaphor of the epidemic, focusing on Girard's treatment of Raskalnikov's dream in Dostojevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as discussed in Girard's *Le Mensonge Romantique et la Vérité Romanesque* (1961) and *The Plague in Literature and Myth* (1974). It is this essay, published in *To Double Business Bound* (1978), I took as the main text for explaining the relationship between Girard's psychological theorem on mimetic desire and his anthropological theorem on the scapegoat mechanism.

In this essay the contemporary age is presented as a world in which epidemics are virtually absent: 'Judging from the role of the plague in Western literature up to the present, this metaphor is endowed with an almost incredible vitality, in a world where the plague and epidemics in general have disappeared almost altogether.' In January I added a footnote, emphasizing that the essay was written as early as 1974, and that the world had not yet gone through the experience of AIDS, Ebola or SARS, making Girard's observation here somewhat outdated. During the lockdown in April I felt obliged to rewrite the paragraphs in which I introduce this essay in the main text, referring explicitly to Covid-19, then still using the word 'corona crisis'. In the Dutch Girard Society, we discussed this essay in a zoom session on April 10<sup>th</sup>. In May I added an afterword focusing on the pandemic. At that moment I felt I was not at all able to say something definitive about Covid-19. At the moment I write this notice, with August coming, I will be approaching the last moment in which I can update my text before the book will go into print. I still sense my observations about the pandemic might become obsolete just within a couple of weeks.

The governing question in all my thoughts has, from the beginning on – what type of crisis is this? This question is not meant to find a definite label for pinpointing the crisis. Rather, on the contrary, I wanted to pay attention to a certain fluidity I felt to be present in this crisis. One of the core insights in Girard's *The Plague in Literature and Myth* is that an epidemic, starting out as a medical crisis, as a disease, may transgress the barrier of the purely medical and evolve into a mimetic crisis. As so often, Girard manages to illustrate his idea with the help of a historical text which underlines the transgression Girard wants to point at. It is worthwhile to quote Girard's quote from the French surgeon Ambroise Paré, writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> century:

'At the outbreak of the plague, even the highest authorities are likely to flee, so that the administration of justice is rendered impossible and no one can obtain his rights. General anarchy and confusion then

set in and that is the worst evil by which the commonwealth can be assailed: *for that is the moment when the dissolute bring another and worse plague into the town* (emphasis Girard's).'

The idea that one crisis in one area may affect other areas and even can cause more severe crises in other areas, seemed to me highly insightful and relevant both to psychosis and Covid-19. Girard's idea that the epidemic often functions as a metaphor for something even more serious, the 'mimetic crisis' or the 'sacrificial crisis', is already present in Paré's words. One crisis may trigger other crises, which, when they get momentum cannot be contained any more. Any crisis may theoretically degenerate into a full-blown sacrificial crisis, because mimesis, like viral contagion runs according to the logic of a feedback-loop.

So here Girard is insightful. But Covid-19, as yet, at the end of July 2020, has not developed into a true mimetic crisis. The horrid scenario sketched by Ambroise Paré, of directly affecting the judiciary system and delivering societies to sheer chaos, nowhere materialized on a national, let alone larger scale. What we are dealing with in 2020 is far more complex than the two-crisis scheme – medical and mimetic – Girard employs in his essay.

We want to use the term 'mimetic crisis' here as an equivalent of the term 'sacrificial crisis', that is, a crisis which threatens the community, the village – in our time this would be the 'global village' – as a whole. Of course there have been all kinds of mimetic phenomena during Covid-19 so far, but something genuinely apocalyptic, resembling the threat of nuclear warfare – which is often, when referring to the present days, the socio-political paradigm in Girard's thinking about the 'mimetic crisis', has not taken place.

As to Paré's 'general anarchy and confusion', that is, as to crimes and misdemeanors, we can even say that during the lockdown in April crime rates have been drastically dropping in most countries. For a good burglary is far more difficult to undertake when everybody is obliged to stay at home. Thus, ironically, I would say, we have a pandemic which managed to produce effects which are the opposite of what Paré describes.

So, what type of crisis is this? Commentators have been writing about a 'social' crisis, a 'political' crisis and, more frequently, about an 'economic' crisis. Still there has been a reluctance to relabel this crisis as something predominantly social, political or economic. Though the economic repercussions are already being strongly felt all over the world, Donald Trump's tweet, made as early as March 23<sup>rd</sup>, that the coronavirus cure cannot 'be worse than the problem itself', is still controversial. Up till now the medical mindset seems to prevail in this crisis and the spike-studded virus seems to remain its icon.

Ambroise Paré's words are, remarkably enough, not accurate for describing what is going on right now. A true 16<sup>th</sup> century epidemic threatening a whole town, is not a model for describing the pandemic we are going through. Then, there would have to be a sudden upscaling, a sudden acceleration with only one tipping point where a medical/humanitarian crisis turns into something world threatening. Up till now we have seen nothing of the sort.

Moods can change fast, and in Europe there has been a sense of relaxation over the last two months. But where will we be in November, or in spring 2021? I am still pondering the sentences I will have to write in my afterword before the deadline really closes. At the moment, July 2020, I find it impossible to fathom what course events will take. I even cannot say how much time it will take before we can make a

more or less complete historical overview of the crisis as a whole. Will it take one year? Will it take five years? Will this period ever evolve into a single 'crisis as a whole'?