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7. Reciprocal Violence

So far, we have introduced protest crowds and have shown how the passion that they bring to dissent is linked to their human identity needs. The police were introduced with the recognition that their work is similarly intertwined with their identity. We showed that the protest crowd–police relational system may involve a radical ‘Othering’ whereby each group is dehumanized. This Othering process may take the form of scapegoating in which the frustrations each side is struggling with are projected onto the Other side resulting in a violence of differentiation. Another form of a violence of differentiation is a hegemonic structure where one side dominates the other. Scapegoating and hegemonic structures are different forms of mimetic structures of violence—structures we examine in greater depth in this chapter.

In the last chapter we introduced targets of protest, bystanders and the media. We also showed that the protest crowd phenomenon with all its attendant relational systems and unpredictability is a complex system that can very well end up at the edge of chaos at which point any small thing can make a big difference and anything can happen. This ‘anything’ that suddenly results in a moment could be interpreted as either a bifurcation point in complexity theory or a flashpoint in the police literature, the point when it becomes imperative that decisive action be taken.

In this chapter, we will use the mimetic theory of René Girard to illuminate the dynamics within a relational system. In the process we will develop the concepts of mimetic desire, reciprocal violence, mimetic contagion, and mimetic structure of violence.

Mimetic Desire

Mimetic desire is a helpful concept at this point for two reasons: first, the concept helps to explain some of the actions of protesters, police and others involved in the crowd process; second, mimetic desire points to the mimetic nature of humanity and this helps to explain why people join crowds in the first place.

We have already made the basic link between *mimesis*, the Greek word, and *imitation* the more popular English word derived from it. What Girard has done, through academic research spanning more than half a century,

is to show how deeply our lives are permeated with mimetic impulses. It is clear that knowledge of language and culture is learned by mimesis—we watch, we listen, and we imitate. Girard's key insight is that what we desire, what motivates to extend our reach to do, become, or acquire something is arrived at mimetically. That is we watch one another and when someone else has something, does something or becomes something that appears to be satisfying to them we want the same for ourselves. If other people give recognition to this other person for possessions, actions or prestige, the value of the object becomes so much greater and our desire, arrived at mimetically, becomes much greater. However, as Girard points out, as soon as we have acquired something, it loses its value to us because the game was to get what the other wanted; so we find something else to desire.

The person or group whose desires we imitate, Girard calls the Model (Girard, [1965] 1990). If the Model stands in the way of us getting the object of mimetic desire, the Model becomes an Obstacle. If we succeed in getting what the Model/Obstacle has prompted us to desire, we look for a more challenging Model/Obstacle.

Mimetic desire increases when the Model is someone we can identify with (Girard, [1965] 1990; Redekop, 2002). If there is a hegemonic structure in place, those who are subjected cannot identify with people from the dominant group, rather they have intense mimetic desire for those who, like them, are subjected. In instances where a crowd looks up to the police as a dominant group, they will not desire control of the situation. In this instance they are simply happy to have the police help them with their protest. In instances where a protest is organized by professional, sophisticated organizers, control becomes a matter of mimetic desire which operates in a reciprocal fashion. The more the police try to control the situation the more the demonstrators want to take control. The bigger the obstacle the police put in place, the more determined the protesters to find a way around it. Hence, the police need back up plans with lots of force whether they be in the form of troops, forceful tactics or weapons. Mimetic effects can also be seen in regard to clothing and tactics. As police have donned protective clothing that covers their faces, protesters have covered their faces. As fences have gone up, the desire on the part of protesters to penetrate fences has grown. With tear gas have come cloths soaked in vinegar to protect against its effects; at times tear gas canisters have been hurled back toward the police.

With escalation of violence, intelligence gathering plays an increased role, becoming increasingly intrusive; on the other side, protesters take concrete steps to keep police infiltrators out of their meetings. The same mimetic dynamics take place between protesters and those they target. Suppose the object of desire is an old growth forest. A forestry company makes plans to cut it down for lumber. Environmentalists are convinced that it needs to be preserved intact. Each side does its research to corroborate its position. When the time comes for the cutting to begin, protesters live in the trees, chain themselves to trees, blockade logging roads—they do anything they can to keep the forest. The more they try to preserve the forest, the more the logging company is determined to go ahead. They file court injunctions, call on the police, and take advantage of any opening they can. Each side has its own interests behind their position but the mimetic desire effect increases the commitment and the passions on both sides.

In this era of globalization, the objects of desire can become abstract and symbolic. They can include the terms of international treaties and agreements that make it possible for multinational corporations to extract resources with minimum compensation to local populations, keep moving production to places with few rights for workers, and so on.

Mimetic Contagion

While mimetic desire is operative in situations where two parties develop a rivalry for the same things, mimetic contagion is a phenomenon in which people get onto the same band wagon. It is a matter of people imitating the movement, action and ideas of those around them. This is clear to see in the stock market where if there appears to be a strong movement to buy a certain stock, everyone wants a part of the action and the price goes up dramatically. Similarly if word gets out to sell, everybody sells and the price goes down fast. This has three dimensions as is illustrated by the saying ‘them that has gets.’ First, ‘them that has’ always want more; they compare themselves to ‘them others that has.’ Second, ‘them that has not’ desire ‘what them that has’ have. Third, because ‘them that has’ are mimetic models, people follow their lead; hence, if they invest in a given corporation, others follow them and it becomes self fulfilling since share prices in that company go up.

Similarly, crowds assemble and grow through a mimetic contagion whereby word gets out that something is happening; some people assemble

and others who see or hear about what's going on think that because some people are there, it must be the thing to do and the crowd grows. Within the crowd there may be a mimetic contagion around a certain action. Some people start chanting a slogan and before you know it, many are doing the same thing.

Not everything that is initiated catches on. It is one of those complex dynamics of crowd behaviour. If the right people start it at the right time when the circumstances are right, it can take off. The fact that many people are gathered together and are close enough to see, hear and touch each other increases the chances of a mimetic contagion happening.

Among crowd theorists there is some debate about the concept of contagion, which we are now in a position to address. Gustaf LeBon and other theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth century developed the notion of contagion within a crowd suggesting that people lost their individuality and with the anonymity of the crowd surrendered their rationality and became totally subject to the power of contagion so as to act unanimously. Empirical researchers who have carefully observed many crowds have clearly shown that people go to crowds with groups of friends and tend to keep their independence and their rationality.

Mimesis means that somehow or other we are always picking up on things going on around us and to some degree or another imitate that. If crowds are highly diverse, there are so many things to imitate at any given moment that it is unlikely that anything will take off in a mimetic contagion that involves everyone. Girard says we will choose to imitate those who are within the closest relational system to us—those who we admire most. It is the size of the commonality that determines the extent of the contagion. If frustrations increase and if everyone starts feeling the same level of frustration and some action, which is perceived unjust and is a shared experience of a group, is perpetrated by an actor that can be blamed for this frustration, a scapegoat emerges and everyone has a cathartic experience as they express passionately and perhaps violently their anger at the scapegoat. Scapegoating is one strong form of mimetic contagion.

In a large crowd like the demonstrations at summit gatherings, there can be limited versions of a mimetic contagion as a small portion of a crowd gets involved in attacking a vehicle or in trying to dislodge a fence that is used to limit access to the venue where leaders are gathered.

We can now see how both sides of the argument can come together. LeBon and others witnessed examples of what we describe as mimetic contagion where a crowd got carried away in collective action. They interpreted what they saw as a propensity for people to lose their minds and individuality in the crowd. Empirical students of crowds saw that people tend to keep their faculties and individual identities. With the concept of mimetic contagion we can nuance the discussion. People see themselves as individuals but at the same time are subject to influence in crowds no less than in any other area of life. Mimetic contagion will take off where there is mimetic resonance; that is people will identify with the passions, concerns, frustrations and behaviours of certain mimetic models. In certain cases, like 'hooligans' after a sports game there is a sense that a certain type of rioting is 'the thing to do.' Many will have seen or participated in such rioting in the past. Where the circumstances are right, a flashpoint around a wrong call, a win or a loss, they will get involved in the rioting activity. Some will have wanted to do this in the first place. Those that start the rioting will have a mimetic resonance with those who have a similar sub-cultural mentality and the mimetic contagion will happen. In protest crowds, there is a more likely potential for mimetic resonance than in a random group from the general public because certain shared motivations have brought them together in the first place.

Reciprocal Violence

When people experience violence, they have a strong tendency to return the violence, mimetically, with interest (Girard, 1987). The other side then imitates the violence and again returns it with even greater force. The result is an upward spiral of violence. Violence that is imitated escalates as each side gets even with the other, which in turn gets even again.

Protesters in a crowd may view the actions of the government or of business (e.g. clear-cutting an old-growth forest) as essentially violent. They feel they have no choice but to use violent means to stop what they consider a greater violence. Security is called in to control the violence. As security experiences the violence of the protesters they feel they have no choice but to use violent means to stop what they perceive to be the greater violence. What the crowd experiences as the violence of the police in turn prompts them to become more violent. With a trend toward ever increasing violence associated with major international events, everyone is concerned. Security personnel have been assuming better and stronger physical protection, better and stronger

fences and, as one police participant said, ‘What next—barbed wire?’ One activist commented that when being attacked you have to take action—there is a time when talking is over.

In the case of reciprocal violence, there is a mimetic contagion on both sides as they try to return violence mimetically to one another.

Mimetic Structures of Violence

When the attitudes, actions and orientation of both parties are turned against one another as they attempt to control, hurt, diminish or otherwise do violence to one another, we have a mimetic structure of violence. The mimetic dimension includes mutual mimesis of one another in terms of orientation—mutual hate. It can include reciprocal acts of violence. Also evident are competing interpretive frameworks and public relations strategies in which each party minimizes its own violence and maximizes the unjust violence perpetrated by the other side. There is no desire for mutual understanding. The mimetic effect prompts new ways of diminishing the other side based on an imitation of violence in other relational systems.

Within mimetic structures of violence identity needs are defined in terms of getting power at the expense of the Other. All of the dimensions of hegemonic structures can be part of mimetic structures of violence. Memories of past injustices and victimization are kept alive. There is no way out of the negative energy associated with past traumas.

Mimetic structures of violence can characterize a number of relational structures implicated in protest crowd dynamics. The protest itself may be between parties caught in a mimetic structure of violence. Let us provide a few examples:

Protest Crowd–Target

- Citizens of a repressive dictatorship have moved to another country and the dictator pays a state visit to that country. The expatriates protest.
- An indigenous group is being harmed by multinational corporation resource development perpetrated by a hegemonic entity. Activists in solidarity demonize the supporting hegemonic entity in protesting native’s victimization.
- A Government is hosting an international event and protest activity that insults foreign visitors is interpreted as an embarrassment. Government determines that protester crowds need to be repressed.

Protest Crowd–Police

- What is interpreted as a ‘diversity of tactics’ or civil disobedience by activists is interpreted as illegitimate violence by police. Leaders advocating these tactics are treated as subversive troublemakers and police make pre-emptive arrests.
- Police become angry at individual protesters throwing projectiles at them; when they have a chance to make an arrest they use more force than necessary to subdue the protesters.
- In Los Angeles, in the early 1990s there was a history of tensions between the police and Afro-Americans who felt discriminated against. The video tape of police beating Rodney King invoked feelings of anger on the part of people for whom this was one example of what was happening on a broader basis. When the police seen beating Rodney King were given a not-guilty verdict, rioting ensued (Times, 1992).

Protest Crowd–Bystander

- During the Rodney King riots many businesses were looted; a white truck driver who happened to be in the wrong place was mimetically clubbed in the same manner as was Rodney King.
- Bystanders can take a position contrary to protesters resulting in violent exchanges.

Mimetic structures of violence can easily draw others into their vortex as members of the public end up taking sides on an issue. Family members on one continent can be hostile with one another on the basis of each taking different sides in a violent conflict in another part of the world. Mimetic structures of violence tend to be closed, acquisitive (each trying to get as much as possible at the expense of the other), aggressive and death-oriented (Redekop, 2002).

After having introduced the many different parties implicated in protest crowd activity we have shown that mimetic dynamics crop up all over the place. Some of these have the effect of generating violence, some increase violence, some entrench violence, and some spread violence. When there is an on-going pattern of violence in a relational system we have a mimetic structure of violence. The peacebuilding strategy in this situation is to transform the structure. In the next chapter we will look at mimetic structures of blessing as an alternative to violence.