

Rene Girard, *Les Origines de la Culture*, Entretiens avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João de Castro Rocha, Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 2004, 280pp, ISBN 2-220-05355-5

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Before *Les Origines de la Culture* appeared in French in March 2004, it was published in Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro (*Um longo argumento do princípio ao fim*, Dialogos com João Cezar de Castro Rocha Pierpaolo Antonello, Rio de Janeiro: TopBooks, 2003, 230pp, ISBN 85.7475.020 Brazil and in Italian (*Origine della cultura e fine della storia*, Dialoghi con Pierpaolo Antonello e João de Castro Rocha, xxi + 221 pp, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2003, pp180, ISBN 88.7078.827X.). Both in the Italian and French texts the work of translators is acknowledged. The French translation and text has been upgraded in consultation with René Girard. The French book ends with Rene Girard's reply to the criticism of his work made by Régis Debray in *Le feu sacré* (Fayard, 2003), a text not included in the Italian and Portuguese versions.

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In its structure *Les Origines de la Culture* reminds us of *Choses cachées*. It is built up as a series of dialogues with two gentlemen: Pierpaolo Antonello, professor of Italian at the University of Cambridge and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, professor of Comparative Literature at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. Compared to *Choses cachées*, the interviewers keep a lower profile offering René Girard maximum opportunity to give clarifications on the theory. The text does not indicate who of the two is asking a particular question. Both interviewers are well prepared for their task. They are at home in most fields to which mimetic theory has been applied by Girard and by others. Whether their questions relate to the anthropological issues, to the Bible, or philosophy, they are well argued and to the point.

Practitioners of the social sciences should be particularly grateful with this book. Never before did Girard position his research so clearly in the heart of anthropology as a developing discipline. For the anthropologist *La Violence et le sacré* and *Choses cachées* were inspiring texts suggesting a whole range of new questions and new possibilities of integrating the different human sciences. However, Girard's relationship with ongoing research and with the established schools of thought remained largely predatory and polemical. He took from existing knowledge what suited his argument while exposing the patches of blindness. Despite formal protests of the contrary, social scientists were never given the illusion they were dealing with a fellow traveller. The fact that Rene Girard remained at the doorstep of academic debate, at least in the social sciences, cannot be wholly attributed to the blindness of academic interlocutors.

In this book Girard presents his contribution to the study of culture in continuity with other endeavours to explain the emergence and variation of human culture. He places himself in the evolutionist tradition. There is no protest, or expression of reservations, when his interlocutors compare his way of working and his ambition to that of Darwin. The book emphasises the affinity between the two scholars in many ways. Almost all chapters open with quotations from Darwin's autobiography or from the notebooks. The Brazilian title quotes Darwin who, towards the end of his life characterised his work as "a long argument from beginning to the end" (*um longo argumento do principio ao fim*). The French title must have been Darwinised at the last moment. Internet booksellers still advertise the book with the predictable Girardian title *La culture dévoilée* ("Cultured Unveiled"). The definitive title stops short of mimicking Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Girard has attributed the singular to 'culture' and the plural to 'origin', a gesture to those who criticise him for a single-factor explanations?

Anthropological evolutionists have been on the whole been materialists, giving pre-eminence to technological and economic changes as motors of evolution. For Girard the

discovery of the effectiveness of sacrifice and the subsequent revelation of the violent sacrificial mechanism as the precondition of peaceful human coexistence, are the benchmarks of human evolution. In the fourth chapter *L'homme: un "animal symbolique"* Girard argues how a mimetic understanding of the role of sacrifice can contribute to tackling unresolved issues in human evolution. He sees an intimate connection between Darwin's concept of 'natural selection' and 'sacrifice' both being processes resulting in death.<sup>1</sup>

He enters in debate with leading scholars in the study of human evolution with Edward Osborne Wilson (who admits an adaptive role of religion in human evolution, animal hierarchy as protection against violence), with Richard Dawkins, ("memes"), Konrad Lorenz (observations on human laughter, redirection of mutual aggression to an external object among animals), Merlin Donald (the three stages of mental evolution: from mimetic via myth to theory, the anteriority of myth to articulated language), Terence Duncan (from indexation to symbolicity), Irenaeus Eibl-Eiberfeldt (dehumanisation in enemy scenario), Carl Vogt (cannibalism as an advanced, at times "civilised" form of sacrifice). Girard offers further comments on his old thesis of the religious origin of the domestication of animals which is here extended to agriculture. The chapter with Frazer and Lévi-Strauss in the title provides precision on sources of inspiration other than these two gentlemen: Emile Durkheim (who, we discover here with some surprise, was marginal to Girard's intellectual itinerary, Walter Burkert, Gabriel Tarde.

The last chapter deals with the problem of verification, the proof of the validity of mimetic theory. As during the first years of the development of evolutionist theory, direct proof if there is any, cannot convince. The first skull found exhibiting properties intermediate between primates and humans did not convince. It needed the context of the comparative method that led to a systematic search of the missing link that eventually turned direct evidence into proof. While the validity of Girard's theory lacks the degree of solidity that Darwinist model has acquired, there is a multitude of indications that have not been contradicted. A comparative method is required that can turn this scattered indications in scientific proof. Today's anthropologist has to proceed on the basis of circumstantial evidence very much as a police investigation. The work of the anthropologist Arthur M. Hocart and the historian Carlo Ginzburg are discussed as exemplary of this detective approach.

The first chapters *Origines de la culture* are devoted to Rene Girard's intellectual and spiritual biography including memories of his youth and adolescence in wartime France. We follow Girard's career in different American universities: meet Girard as one of the organisers of the historic conference at Johns Hopkins University that introduced structuralism and de-constructivism to the United States and in which many members of the French intellectual avant-garde of the time participated (Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and others). At the same university a first circle of disciples was formed (Eric Gans, Andrew McKenna, Cesareo Bandera, Eugenio Donato). There is more on the relationship with Michel Serres (guest professor in Buffalo, Lucien Goldmann (Girard's promoter in Europe in the 60s), the anthropologist Victor Turner. Successive interests -the novel, ethnographic monographs, Greek tragedies, Shakespeare- are given a university context: Johns Hopkins University in (Baltimore), New York State University (Buffalo) and Stanford University (Palo Alto). It also becomes clear that Girard's successive interests were hardly influenced by the intellectual climate in his immediate environment. In fact, he decided to leave Johns Hopkins when the 'French ideas' started booming there.

In other parts of the book ideas that have been the subject of earlier publications are passed in review and further articulated. For those who are new to Girard's work these can serve as a summary of his ideas. Those familiar with his work will find known arguments

applied to new cases , old cases put in a new light (for example: the two meanings of sacrifice immolation and renouncing on one's self-interest in the story of the Judgment of Salomon). Nietzsche and Freud demand their usual space but there is also attention for thinkers that remained marginal in earlier books (Auerbach, Hocart), for recent responses to Girard's work (Robert Calasso), for the work of anthropologists applying the mimetic theory (Lucien Scubla). The chapter on Christianity makes interesting observations on the fundamental difference of monotheism and polytheism discussing the case of the non-violence of Jainism.

In the last part of the book Rene Girard defends himself against the criticism made of his work by Regis Debray in his last book *Le feu sacré* (Paris: 2003 Fayard). Debray is a French intellectual well known for the controversial positions he has taken on political development in South America during the 1970s. In this book he deals with religious violence in the context of the 9.11.2001. Since I do not have Debray's text at my disposal I will refrain from mingling in the debate.

Langano (Ethiopia), 14.2.2005.