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Fascism and the Antifestival

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(Part 2 of the Girard series. [Part 1 here](#))

Today, the Western world and particularly the United States appears to be in the midst of a classic Girardian sacrificial crisis. Once-reliable social institutions crumble. The public loses trust in its authorities: political, financial, legal, and medical. The new generation is poorer and sicker than the last. Few of any political persuasion believe that society is working or that we are on the right track. Reason, markets, and technology have failed to redeem their utopian promise. The gods have failed us, and we glimpse monsters emerging from their shadows: ecological collapse, nuclear armageddon, the poisoning of our bodies, minds, and world. Simmering differences and rivalries, once subsumed under a general civic consensus, take on a new intensity as each side grows more militant. As confidence wanes in the state's capacity to hold evil at bay, latent ritualistic instincts come back to life.

Philosopher Rene Girard argued that these ritualistic instincts derive from social upheavals in which runaway cycles of vengeance – the original social disease – were converted into unifying violence against scapegoated victims. Rituals, religions, festivals, and political institutions evolved to prevent similar outbreaks from recurring.

One such ritual pattern that Girard identifies is the “antifestival,” in which “The rites of sacrificial expulsion are not preceded by a period of frenzied anarchy, but by an extreme austerity and an increased rigor in the observance of all interdicts.” In modern times this takes an extended institutional form in totalitarianism. Both Soviet communism and Nazi fascism had a strong puritanical streak, as both were hostile to anything outside their own order. Fascism is essentially an extended antifestival, and it arises, as does the antifestival, in response to looming social breakdown, real or imagined. In many societies, the priestly caste takes every opportunity to impose these rigorous interdicts, taboos, and rituals, which after all increase their own power. The best opportunity is a crisis that can be attributed to people’s sinful ways. A crisis like an earthquake, a flood, or... a plague.

We seem today to be partially emerging from an extended series of antifestivals, otherwise known as “lockdowns.” They have accompanied totalitarian tendencies and a quasi-fascistic hostility to true festivals or indeed to anything resembling public fun. Moreover, many of our public health measures bear a distinct ritualistic cast, and share with both fascism and with numerous archaic antifestivals an obsession with “pollution.” Consider the following passage from the early 20th-century anthropologist James Frazer, entitled “The Collapse of the Nredom Tribe: A Case of Religious Hysteria.”

Jenkins' chronicle begins at a moment when the Nredom "tribe" (actually a numerous and highly organized society) was already showing signs of social, political, and ecological decline. For years its priests had been warning of evil spirits on the verge of attacking the people. Finally on the third year of Jenkins' ethnographic residency, some members of the tribe began to take ill. An evil spirit was afoot! As the priests explained it, the spirit could possess anyone who did not abide by various new taboos and perform necessary rituals. Once possessed by the spirit, a person became unclean, at risk of transmitting it to anyone they associated with. No one could see the spirit without special ceremonial instruments such as the priests possessed, but they made drawings of it to show the populace.

A ritual was devised to determine whether any given person was possessed by the spirit. A specially consecrated wand was moistened with the bodily fluids of the person suspected of possession, and then sent to a special hut where priests would subject the stick to further divinatory rituals designed to force the evil spirit to reveal itself. Thereupon, agents of the priests would notify the unfortunate tribesperson of his or her possession. Anyone so adjudged of possession had to remain in strict separation from the rest of the tribe for a fortnight.

Some of the taboos and rituals that the unfortunate superstitious natives adopted were quite bizarre. For example, the priests had marks placed a fathom-length apart in all public places, stating that if everyone stood no closer to each other than the marks indicated, that they would enjoy magical protection. They also demanded that everyone who might come into proximity to the unclean perform frequent ritual ablutions and other forms of bodily purification, and

wear various forms of ceremonial headgear to frighten off the spirit. All public gatherings were prohibited, and even normal functions of life severely curtailed. No activity was permitted except with the priests' explicit sanction.

As you can imagine, this regime generated intense social stress, hardship, and some degree of opposition. Soon the priests were busy stamping out various heresies. Some heretics claimed that the rituals to stop transmission of the evil spirit wouldn't work, or that the spirit was not so dangerous. Some heretics doubted in the very existence of the evil spirit, saying the heightened levels of sickness were due to some other cause. Others loudly proclaimed that the evil spirit had been loosed upon the populace by the priests themselves. Social tensions mounted as the priests tried to silence the heretics and arouse the populace against them.

Most people in the tribe trusted the priests, but many apparently harbored doubts too, because adherence to the rituals was inconsistent. Knowing that public rejection of the strict regime of taboos and rituals was inevitable, the priests announced they were developing a new sacrament, a magic potion that would protect the recipient forever from possession. Administered by a deputized priest via a slightly painful ritual of skin piercing, the potion sanctified all those who received it. These sanctified brethren could engage in normal life again, although they still had to abide by certain of the new rituals and taboos. Those refusing the potion remained unclean and were subject to all kinds of penalties, shaming, and ostracism.

Unfortunately, the new potion proved less effective than the priests originally promised. According to the

priests, other ghosts and spirits were laying in wait, against whom new rituals and taboos must be applied and new potions administered. The power given unto the priests in this time of crisis would need to be permanent. And, they hinted darkly, this plague of evil was a kind of punishment for the tribe's sinful ways, particularly the sins of the heretics. Heresy must be stamped out! The unclean must be sanctified! Soon religious pogroms swept the land, followed by counter-pogroms against the priests themselves. And Nredom society collapsed.

Okay, I confess. I made up this passage. The priests are the scientists. The wand is the PCR test swab. The unclean are those who test positive. The potion is the vaccine. My point is not that Covid is nothing but a religious hysteria. My point is that, whatever else Covid is, it is also a religious hysteria; that this lens greatly illuminates our current condition and quite probably upcoming events. Our social responses to Covid bear so striking a resemblance to ritual practices and ideas (masks, potions, tabooed persons, sanctification, etc.) that we have to ask how much of our public health policy is really scientific, and how much is religion in disguise. It might even lead to a deeper question: how and whether science differs from (other) religions. (Before you start protesting, "Ridiculous. What about objectivity? The Scientific Method? Peer review?" please read [this explanation](#). The idea cannot be dismissed on trivial grounds.)

I hesitate to call anything "just a ritual," a dismissal that ignores the mysterious relationship between ritual and reality; however, the dubious efficacy of many of our public health practices invites the judgment that they are, indeed, "just rituals." I will not attempt here to make a case that masks, lockdowns, distancing, and so forth are dubious. Ultimately the argument comes down to whether our systems of knowledge production (science and journalism)

are sound, and whether our medical and political authorities are trustworthy. To doubt public health orthodoxy is to answer no, they are not sound, they are not trustworthy. However, anyone who tries to make this case must, by necessity, source evidence from outside official institutions – evidence which, for the true believers, is illegitimate by definition.

One is unlikely to prove the priests wrong using information sanctioned by the priests. If you try, you are exposed as a heretic.

One contemporary term for a heretic is a “conspiracy theorist.” The term belongs in quotes because it is one thing to claim our institutions are unsound, and quite another to claim that a conscious conspiracy makes them so. “Conspiracy theorist” has become one of the ways to dismiss and dehumanize dissidents to public health orthodoxy.

The swiftness with which deviants from Covid orthodoxy are consigned to subhuman categories is alarming. It is just what is needed to prepare them for their role as Girardian scapegoats. A perennial human reflex, in times of trouble, is to find or create heretics and outcasts. Today they are called “anti-maskers,” “anti-vaxxers,” “science deniers,” “Q-adjacent,” “conspiracy theorists,” “covidiot,” and “domestic extremists,” subjects of a kind of virtual pogrom that humiliates, blames, and often digitally extinguishes its targets. And sometimes the consequences are more than digital.

Like modern fascists with their ideas of ethnic cleansing, and modern communists with their party purges, ancient societies according to Girard were often obsessed with pollution. The original pollutant was violence, which once instigated could quickly spread out of control, much like an infection. To quote Girard, “If the sacrificial catharsis

actually succeeds in preventing the unlimited propagation of violence, a sort of infection is in fact being checked.... The tendency of violence to hurl itself on a surrogate if deprived of its original object can surely be described as a contaminating process." Thus it was that sacrificial victims were often quarantined from normal society, and that the violence of the sacrifice was strictly contained within ritual structures.

What totalitarian societies, traditional antifestivals, and Covid lockdowns have in common is a reflex of control. This reflex meets any failure of control with more of it. When herbicide-resistant weeds appear, the solution is a new herbicide. When immigrants cross the border, we build a wall. When a school shooter gets into a locked school building, we fortify it further. When germs develop resistance to antibiotics, we develop new and stronger ones. When masks fail to stop the spread of covid, we wear two. When our taboos fail to keep evil at bay, we redouble them. The controlling mind foresees a paradise in which every action and every object is monitored, labeled, and controlled. There will be no room for any bad thing to exist. Nothing and no one will be out of place. Every action will be authorized. Everyone will be safe.

Those who attribute the controlling programs of Bill Gates and the technocratic elite to malice do not see the idealism behind the Technological Program. To the elites, their critics seem incomprehensible: deluded, ignorant enemies of progress itself, enemies of the betterment of humanity.

Unfortunately for them and for us, the paradise of total control is a mirage, receding all the more quickly the faster we approach it. The more tightly we impose order, the more chaos squeezes out through the cracks. Girard: "Violence too long held in check will overflow its bounds—and woe to those who happen to be nearby." The same for other

aspects of the Wild: desire, anger, fear, eros. Extreme order creates its opposite.

A subtle parallel connects the dynamics of the sacrificial victim with other programs of control. Ultimately, both depend on a false reduction whose temporary appearance of success allows deeper problems to persist. The cause of immigration is not just immigrants; the cause of school shootings is not just shooters; the cause of disease is not just pathogens; the cause of climate change is not just greenhouse gases. These are but the terminal agents of a long process; they are the most conspicuous among a complex of causes; they are, like a scapegoat, convenient targets for the exercise of power. Having exercised it, we rest satisfied that something has been done.

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