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‘Charlie Hebdo’ and the two sides of imitation

Elisabetta Brighi

Abstract [not to be included in the printed version]: In a 2009 paper, one of the neuroscientists instrumental to the discovery of ‘mirror neurons’, Vittorio Gallese, argued that there are always ‘two sides’ to mimesis – in and of itself mimesis is ‘neither good nor bad’, argued Gallese, as it can be declined in terms of both conflictual or social behavior. While the great majority of work on imitation, contagion and suggestion (ICS) have emphasized imitation as either a vector of the social or as the building block of our social ontology, René Girard’s mimetic theory stands out as perhaps the approach most preoccupied with the ill effects of mimesis. Why is this so? Is Girard’s position an excessively one-sided and negative take on imitation? Drawing on the example of the 2015 ‘Charlie Hebdo’ terror attacks, in this chapter I argue, firstly, that imitation was central to both the violence perpetrated by attackers and the political and affective order that emerged around of the attacks. Thus, there is a fundamental ambivalence about the social and political workings of imitation. Secondly, I argue that behind Girard’s negative view of imitation lies an unacknowledged concern about the power of suggestion, and in particular *affective suggestion*. In fact, behind Girard’s growing concern about today’s escalating mimetic crisis there is a specific concern about the global and mimetic escalation of affects.

One of the neuroscientists instrumental to the discovery of 'mirror neurons' in the early 1990s commented a few years ago that there are always 'two sides to mimesis'. In his 2009 paper 'The Two Sides of Mimesis: Girard's Mimetic Theory, Embodied Simulation and Social Identification', Vittorio Gallese argued that imitation is one of the most basic yet important functional mechanism of human beings. The fact that from birth we are wired to imitate means that through life we experience a radical openness to the Other which, amongst other things, constitutes the basis for the development of our *subjectivity as intersubjectivity*. In and of itself mimesis is 'neither good nor bad', argued Gallese – it is simply a core quality of the human and social condition:

> Our constitutive openness to others, of which mimesis is one of the main expressions, can be declined both in terms of conflictual or social behaviour. It has the potential to lead not only to mimetic violence but also to the most creative aspects of human cognition', particularly processes of 'social identification, henceforth to sociality. (Gallese, 2009: 38, 21)

Imitation provides the scaffolding upon which the whole edifice of consciousness, society and politics are built – domains shot through with power, conflict, as well as cooperation and peace.

One of the most significant theoretical perspectives of the last half century to have foregrounded the centrality of imitation in the functioning of societies and cultures is René Girard's mimetic theory. A maverick intellectual, elected in 2005 as one of *les immortels* of the *Academie Fran□aise* after decades of relative side-lining, Girard single-handedly fashioned a synthesis of anthropological, cultural and linguistic insights into a theory whose

main axiom concerns mimesis, and in particular the nature and workings of *mimetic desire*. The human ability to imitate, and to imitate especially the desire of Others, constitutes the fundamental structure of human existence, according to Girard. However, rather than as a neutral observation, Girard offered this insight as a warning. In fact, Girard's entire *œuvre* is arguably preoccupied with showing the ill effects of imitation and illustrate the range of 'coping mechanisms' that humans and societies developed to contain them. All conflict, according to Girard, originates in imitation because the nature of mimetic desire is always rivalrous and potentially violent.

Although sympathetic to mimetic theory, Gallese opened his paper with a cautionary remark: 'one could in principle object against such apparently negative and one-sided view of mankind, in general, and of mimesis, in particular' (2009: 21). The aim of this chapter is to take this remark and this objection seriously. The great majority of work on imitation, contagion and suggestion (ICS) have after all emphasized imitation as either a vector of the social or as the building block of our social ontology (Borch, 2018). The 'ill effects' with which these approaches have been preoccupied have typically related to the irrational behavior of the masses, the suggestible nature of the human psyche, or the speed and intensity of the contagious circulation of social mores, economic trends and human affects (Borch, 2012). Mimetic theory stands out as perhaps the only approach that has significantly raised the stakes, in that it has elevated imitation to the status not of 'vector of sociality', but rather of ultimate cause for the breakdown of such sociality. Why is this so?

In order to answer this question, the chapter will proceed in three stages. In the first section, I will briefly review the main themes of mimetic theory and the way in which they place imitation at the center of its conceptual palimpsest. The second section will also situate mimetic theory in the broader literature on ICS and argue that mimetic theory suffers from a curious selective amnesia – for an approach so interested in the question of origins and

historical development, mimetic theory has dismissed its links to nineteenth-century thinkers such as Gabriel Tarde, despite its fascination with *fin de siècle* philosophers, and preferred to build bridges with pre-modern approaches to imitation, arguably in an effort to foreground the link between imitation and violence. In the third section, the chapter will return to Gallese's remarks about the double-sided nature of imitation and will attempt to throw light on the social and conflictual potential of imitation by turning to a highly imitative political phenomenon, namely terrorism, and in particular to 2015 'Charlie Hebdo' terror attacks. My argument is that the attacks demonstrate, firstly, that imitation was central to *both* the violence perpetrated by attackers *and* the political and affective order that emerged around of the attacks. However, secondly, I argue that each of these sides of the 'Charlie Hebdo' affair contains a further set of mirrors – terrorist violence can be also thought of as a social activity driven by imitation, just as political order can be revealed to contain violent and rivalrous strains deriving from imitation. Mimesis therefore is two-sided not only in the sense that it can lead to social or conflictual behavior, but in the sense that traces of each are always contained in their opposite. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the future of democracy and political order in our hyper-mimetic age, characterized by the contagious spread of affect and the ever increasing dominance of mimetic forms of communication.

The mimesis of desire: Réne Girard on violence

After a rather peripatetic academic career and a self-imposed exile form France, in the 1960s Girard started to assemble the conceptual building blocks that would, over the span of two decades, coalesce around an innovative approach to imitation, i.e., mimetic theory (Girard, 1996: 1–6). Despite his heterodox position with respect to the intellectual fashions of the day, Girard's mimetic theory was in fact the result of the peculiar convergence of a number of influences: from Girard's interest in Jacques Derrida's use of the concept of *pharmakon*

(which would form the basis of Girard's scapegoat mechanism) to Jacques Lacan's understanding of the relation between desire and the Other, to Girard's own interests in the great modern novelists and, ultimately, his Christian anthropology.

The fundamental insight behind Girard's mimetic theory is that humans are mimetic animals, born with a fundamental openness and permeability to the Other (for an introduction to mimetic theory, see Palaver, 2013; and Brighi and Cerella, 2015). As imitative creatures, humans are driven by a tendency to imitation in many different ways and areas, but the most fundamental form of imitation is that which relates to desires, namely what we want. Human beings, Girard argues, are animals that desire – but they do not know what to desire: 'the reason is that he [sic] desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess' (Girard, 1972: 146). For this reason, individuals borrow their desires from the Other: our desires, then, are always mediated by the Other. According to Girard, our subjectivity and autonomy, if one can still use terms that reveal themselves to be problematic under the mimetic magnifying lens, emerge only through a complex matrix of imitative dynamics of which we are often unaware. Further, while we learn what to desire from Others, certain 'Others' are more important and formative than other 'Others'. To those 'significant others', Girard gives the name of models: 'We assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects. The third party is usually the one who is closest, the neighbour' (Girard, 2001: 9).

Rather than dyadic or monistic, according to Girard, therefore, the fundamental structure of human relationships is triangular – connecting subjects, models and their mimetic object of desire in intimate ways. This triangular dynamic, however, ends up complicating the neat relationship between Self and Other, to the point of nesting a huge potential for violence in every significant relationship. As Girard explains, 'If individuals tend to desire what their neighbours possess, or to desire what their neighbours even simply desire, this means that

rivalry exists at the very heart of human relations' (Girard, 2001: 9). Love and admiration for our models can quickly turn into bitterness and rancor precisely because what they are, and what they desire, is *necessarily* also what we want. 'The positive feelings resulting from the first identification – imitation, admiration, veneration – are fated to change into negative sentiments: despair, guilt, resentment' (Girard, 1972: 182). Imitation shows its rivalrous and conflictual side when it manifests itself in its acquisitive, appropriative incarnation – when it structurally sets individuals on a collision course over the same object over which their desires mimetically converge.

Mimetic theory, then, does not conceptualize violence as a result of scarcity, egoism or self-affirmation. Rather, violence is purely processual, created by the mimetic entanglements of self and other: 'violence is generated by this process, or rather violence *is the process itself* when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means' (Girard, 1976: 9). The inevitable rivalry that stems from the convergence of desires onto the same 'object' of desire constitutes the origin of all conflict – and the imitative spiral at the heart of this process is responsible for its escalation and spread, namely for contagion. As Girard states, mimetic desire is 'eminently contagious […]. It "catches" a nearby desire just as one would catch the plague or cholera, simply by contact with an infected person' (1966: 96, 99). Contagion has the power to transform a community into a 'mass of interchangeable beings. In this homogeneous mass the mimetic impulses no longer encounter any obstacle and spread at high speed' (Girard, 2001: 22). Crucially, the closer the rivals, the higher the possibility of violent contagion: when the rival becomes 'part of the imitating subject's world […], mediation is no longer external […]: Girard calls this phenomenon *internal mediation*' (Palaver, 2013: 59). Further, when all differences between model and imitator disappear, the result is escalating rounds of

indifferentiation and a further intensification of mimetic tendencies. According to Girard, both instances lead to a *mimetic crisis* and the eruption of contagious violence.

In a bold interpretative wager, Girard hypothesizes that this particular predicament must have over time pushed primitive societies to adopt a mechanism able to contain the enormous potential for violence generated by imitation, either by channeling or ritualizing it. For Girard, this mechanism is the scapegoat. Confronted with a mimetic crisis and the possibility of ever escalating violence leading to annihilation, crowds are driven to channel violence toward a surrogate victim, or scapegoat, through which 'the opposition of everyone against everyone else' is 'replaced by the opposition of all against one' (Girard, 1987: 24). At once, through its sacrifice, the scapegoat becomes the object onto which the community discharges its mimetic violence *as well as* that which restores peace within the community. This murder therefore marks a moment of distinction, constructing meaning out of chaos and establishing the conditions for peace and violence – thus, it is responsible for the birth of culture. Furthermore, the scapegoat would be invested with sacrality, insofar as it 'magically' enabled the community to leave violence behind and return to peace. Thus, Girard argues, this mechanism would be the founding form of signification and the origin of culture and (ancient) religion, understood as ritualized form of sacrificial violence. Religion, according to Girard, is nothing but 'an immense effort to keep the peace' (Girard, 1987: 32) in conditions of imitation.

The parallel worlds of ICS and mimetic theory

For a theory that holds up such a probing mirror to imitation and that imputes such dire consequences to it, one would expect Girard to be well versed in the nineteenth-century literature on ICS, considering also how engaged Girard is precisely with some of the philosophers of that time, including Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler (Palaver, 2013).

And yet, this is not the case. As Trevor Merrill has most recently noted, 'Girard has flatly denied that [Gabriel] Tarde is one of his sources' (Merrill, 2017: 457). In fact, it is not so much that Girard has dismissed Tarde's influence. Rather, he has directly taken issue with the nineteenth-century 'sociologists and psychologists of imitation', accusing them of being intellectuals of the triumphant bourgeoisie of the time, whose optimism they channeled into an exclusively positive view of imitation understood as source of social harmony and progress' (Girard, 1987: 8). Striking and unexpected resonances between mimetic theory and ICS become apparent, however, upon closer inspection.

As seen above, of the three concepts that coalesce at the end of the nineteenth century to inject life into the emerging fields of sociology and psychology – namely imitation, contagion and suggestion – Girard has a lot to say about the first two. While imitation functions as the Archimedean point of the entire edifice of mimetic theory, contagion is discussed widely across his work as a necessary consequence of mimetic desire and rivalry. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of The World,* for instance, Girard states that 'pathological contagion resembles mimetic contagion' (Girard, 1987: 13). Twenty years earlier he was even more categorical when arguing that 'metaphysical desire is eminently contagious' (Girard, 1966: 96). The one concept which Girard hardly ever utilizes in his theories, however, is that of suggestion. And yet, traces of the language of suggestion can be found especially in the description of mimetic desire, which Girard initiates in his first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Here, one finds connections between suggestion and mimetic desire that Girard's later work simply bears no witness to, or actively seeks to conceal it.

Thus, when describing the way in which characters in Gustave Flaubert's novels come to acquire desires, Girard approvingly draws on Jules de Gaultier's analysis of 'bovarysm'. With this term, de Gaultier describes Emma Bovary's lack of character, which makes her 'fated to obey the *suggestion* of an external milieu, for lack of an auto-suggestion

from within' (Girard, 1966: 5, emphasis added). From here, Girard generalizes that all of Flaubert's characters are indeed marked by 'an essential lack of a fixed character and originality of their own […] so that being nothing by themselves, they become something, one thing or another, through the *suggestion* which they obey' (Girard, 1966: 63, emphasis added). It is this that sets the stage for the emergence of mimetic desire. According to Girard, human beings are animals that desire, but not knowing what to desire, they borrow desire from the Other. However, *what is Girard's mimetic desire if not a form of suggestion* and a concealed acknowledgment of its power? Curiously, Girard comes close to saying so himself when describing Don Quixote, stating that 'behind [his] desires there is indeed *suggestion*' (Girard, 1966: 5, emphasis added) – yet, this insight is denied further space in his later works.

Despite the obfuscation, it seems clear that suggestion and hypnosis do some of the work of mimetic desire. As Jean-Michel Oughourlian has noted, Girard's description of human beings as mimetic creatures whose desires are never authentic, but rather borrowed, reduces them to puppets, 'puppets of desire' (Oughourlian, 1991). As a psychiatrist himself, Oughourlian concedes that this is the result of human being's susceptibility to suggestion and hypnosis. Interestingly, Oughourlian considers the latter as expressions of mimesis and mimetic desire – not the other way around. It is clear, however, that in Girard's triangular understanding of desire, the model whose desires are imitated functions as a *suggesteur* or indeed a hypnotist. Further, it is curious to note that although Girard describes in detail the experience of the loss of self that mimetic desire generates in the imitator, he never explicitly links this to the larger question of hypnosis. To paraphrase Ruth Leys, and in ways that are reminiscent of Freud's own predicaments concerning hypnosis, Girard's mimetic theory is thus 'an attempt to solve the problem of the hypnotic rapport by transforming suggestion into desire' (Leys, 1993: 283) – and specifically, in the case of Girard, *mimetic desire*.

Two further considerations seem important at this stage in order to draw out further connections between the ICS literature and mimetic theory. Firstly, the almost exclusive focus on the negative properties of mimesis sets mimetic theory aside from other approaches to imitation and, as such, needs investigating. Just as Girard is skeptical, in fact overtly critical, of the pretensions of the liberal autonomous subject, he is wary of mimesis – although celebrating it, through his work he resists and ultimately opposes it. The human capacity to imitate is unceremoniously blamed for conflict: because we imitate, we turn envious, petty, and violent and from there we lose ourselves in the lynch mob, we become 'possessed' by forces outside of our control. In his examination of the figure of Satan in mimetic theory, the Girardian theologian Wolfgang Palaver has recently argued that 'the devil is nothing other than the mimesis' itself, in its endless cycle of rivalry and vengeance (Palaver, 2013: 260). It is hard not to see in Girard's view of mimesis the echo of an old preoccupation with the power of suggestion and of crowd behavior (Borch, 2012: 23). It is not by chance that Girard expresses reservations about the principles of popular sovereignty and equality on which liberal democracies are founded. Girard's well-known conservatism shines through in his claim that only well-established hierarchies have the power to stop process of internal mediation through which mimesis turns violent and contagious. Equality is dangerous, just as mimesis is.

Secondly, the centrality of the scapegoat to the mechanisms of containment of violence also deserves a closer look, if only by way of a detour. As Michel Borch-Jacobsen has noted, in both Tarde and Freud, the origins of political order are to be found in leaders that function as absolute subjects, or hypnotist-leaders (Borch-Jacobsen, 1988: 144; cf. Borch, 2012: 52). Leaders are required in order to channel the crowd's erratic behavior, bring order to chaos and establish governance. A leader *subjects* the crowd in the sense that he/she emerges as *subject* out of the loss of subject, or self, experienced by the crowd. Leaders are

involved, in other words, in a process of signification that clearly marks a difference and establishes a 'before' and an 'after'. It is not far-fetched to establish a link between this take on leaders and Girard's use of the scapegoat. The scapegoat too emerges as a subject out of the indistinction experienced by crowds; the scapegoat too 'magically' re-establishes order and peace by virtue of its appearance; the scapegoat too is considered by Girard as the origin of signification. As a negative image of the leader, the scapegoat comes to symbolize that moment of supreme 'decision', the *diktat* that makes horizontal contagion cease by establishing a vertical identification believed to resolve the crisis of the self.

Terrorism and the two sides of mimesis: who is 'Charlie'?

To sketch the different pictures of imitation that mimetic theory and ICS paint by virtue of their divergent conceptual and normative commitments, I shall now turn to a set of events that revolve around the twin terror attacks of 7–9 January 2015 in Paris, the so-called 'Charlie Hebdo' attacks. As Mark Sedgwick (2007) among others has illustrated, terrorism has been often considered a particularly mimetic or contagious form of political violence (for a few notable contributions in a long-standing debate, see Midlarsky, Crenshaw, and Yoshida, 1980; Gleditsch, 2007; Buhaug and Gleditsch, 2008; and Braithwaite, 2010). Understood as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through the threat or use of violence in the pursuit of political change, terrorism appears also as a quintessentially affective political phenomenon, trading in emotions at both ends – in its motivations (rage, resentment) and its effects (fear, terror). For these and other reasons, therefore, terrorism represents a particularly fruitful area of investigation if approached through the analytical lens of imitation. After a brief account of the events of January 2015, in what follows I argue that imitation was central to *both* the violence perpetrated by attackers *and* the political and affective order that emerged around of the attacks. I will further demonstrate, however, that these 'two sides of

imitation' contain counterintuitive elements which can also be traced back to mimesis, thus showing the fundamental ambivalence of the social and political workings of imitation.

At around 11:30 am on 7 January 2015, two brothers in their thirties named Chérif and Said Kouachi, French citizens of Algerian descent, burst into number 6 Rue Nicolas-Appert armed with AK-47s and shouted: 'Is this Charlie Hebdo?'. After firing a few bullets, they left the premises and headed for number 10, the headquarters of the satirical French weekly 'Charlie Hebdo'. Here they broke into the morning editorial meeting of the magazine and proceeded to kill 11 people, including the magazine's Director Stéphane '*Charb*' Charbonnier and other cartoonists as well as staff members. After leaving the scene and killing a Muslim police officer named Ahmed Merabet who stood in their way, the two brothers escaped in a getaway car, a black Citroën C3 in which jihadist flags and Molotov cocktails were later found. The terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed the attacks justifying it as protest for the magazine's depictions of the Prophet Muhammad. On 9 January, with the two gunmen still at large, a 32-year-old friend of the two brothers and self-declared member of the Islamic State, Amédy Coulibaly, stormed a *Hypercacher* kosher supermarket in Porte de Vincennes, taking several hostages inside the store. While in contact with the Kouachi brothers and as he was recorded by a supermarket phone left off the hook, Coulibaly murdered four Jewish hostages and held fifteen other hostages. After a long stand-off, both the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly were killed within minutes of each other at around 5 pm, when the police blasted the warehouse where the brothers were hiding and the supermarket where Coulibaly was barricaded (Vice News, 2015).

During the 48 hours of the attacks and in the days that followed, mass demonstrations swept the streets of Paris as well as global social media. On the night of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, spontaneous rallies were held at the Place de la République, gathering thousands of

people, many holding up pens and pencils in solidarity with the slain journalists and in support of freedom of expression. A few hours after the attacks, French artist Joachim Roncin tweeted an image with a black background and the words ‘Je suis Charlie’ – in less than an hour the hashtag *#jesuischarlie* reached 6500 tweets per minute and started trending on Twitter; it went on to become one of the most popular news hashtags in the history of Twitter, with over six million uses across social media (The Telegraph, 2015). Demonstrations spread around the world over the following two days, gathering significant crowds, many holding the ‘Je Suis Charlie’ sign. This mass mobilisation climaxed on 11 January, when the largest public rally in France since World War II was held in Paris under the name of ‘rally of national unity’ (*marche républicaine)*. Marching from Place de la République to Place de la Nation, a crowd of two million people was led by French President Hollande and joined by more than 40 world leaders. A week later, Prime Minister Valls introduced a package of ‘exceptional’ anti-terror measures, including new security and surveillance measures that were compared to the post 9/11 ‘Patriot Act’ and were further consolidated in November, when France declared an on-going ‘state of emergency’ due to terrorism (The Guardian, 2015b).

There can be little doubt that issues of imitation, contagion and suggestion were central to the response to the Paris terror attacks. Firstly, from the day of the first attack, and despite minimal knowledge of events still unfolding, crowds started to aggregate spontaneously on the streets of Paris. Through a process of mass mobilization and a contagious feeling of solidarity that lasted for days, crowds formed and hit the streets – with the *Liberation* newspaper titling: ‘We are one people’ (Fassin, 2015). That the politics of response to the crisis was a politics of crowds became also apparent with the march *en masse* of 11 January, which was called to condemn violence, reassert freedom of expression and celebrate national unity. Arguably, this functioned as an effective way for political leadership

to harness the power of the crowd and channel contagion, reinscribing the boundaries of the existing political and social order. It did not matter, as it was later revealed, that world leaders carefully staged their participation in the rally and posed arm in arm only long enough for photographs to be taken (The Independent, 2015; Gürsel, 2017); it also did not matter that some of the leaders at the front of the march were also at the bottom of global press freedom indexes (The Guardian, 2015a), for the march to have its intended effect. However, possibly the most evident manifestation of imitation and especially suggestion revolved around the slogan-turned-hashtag *#jesuischarlie*. After all, the solidarity motto functioned linguistically as the affirmation of a borrowed subjectivity – something deeply reminiscent of suggestion. While the hashtag was spreading contagiously through social media, the 'Je Suis Charlie' image quickly turned into a *meme* – and one whose fundamental structure of meaning ('Je Suis') continues to be applied today to all manner of causes (BBC News, 2016). As demonstrated in the literature, the remarkable circulation of *#jesuischarlie* was due to its highly affective content, which the social media amplified and spread by virtue of their own imitative structure (Johansson et al., 2018). The hashtag not only served to constitute a global community of mourners and thus, create a social space through mimesis. As Burgess, Mitchell, and Münch (2018) have recently argued, just as in the case of celebrity deaths, it also underpinned a social media *ritual* as well, with conventions and performances that brought together the social and the personal plane.

If this shows 'one side' of mimesis – the social, gregarious behavior it generates – one could also read the Paris terror attacks from a different angle and come to much less reassuring conclusions as to the effects of imitation and, in particular, its relation to violence. A reading of the attacks inspired by mimetic theory and, in particular, mimetic desire, would investigate relationship between victims and perpetrators as a form of rivalry (Brighi, 2016). Just as mimetic desire is about rivalry, the encounter between Islamic terrorists and the West

could be traced back to a logic of rivalry – however, not a rivalry deriving from (cultural, religious) differences, but rather a rivalry deriving from *identity*, especially frustrated identity. As Slavoj Zizek (2015) stated at the time of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, 'the problem is not cultural difference and [the terrorists'] effort to preserve their identity, but the opposite fact that the fundamentalists *are already like us*, that, secretly, they have already internalized our standards and *measure themselves by them*'. This is the imitative logic that mimetic theory recognizes at the heart of desire and its workings, which is the logic of envy and resentment. In this case, this reading would show that the radical openness created by globalization, with its inescapable mediatic/mimetic spectacle and its endless reverberations, can lead to relentless competitive, rather than cooperative, effects and the potential for the rise of disaffection whenever winning or successfully emulating the model becomes impossible (Brighi, 2015). The Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly would therefore be further examples of mimetic 'lone-wolves': radicalized through the internet or in prison, disaffected by a failed multiculturalist or integrationist paradigm, combining personal and collective resentments regarding the perceived humiliation of Arabs and Muslims, turning violently against a model (French society) that systematically precludes them access to what the model has, is, or desires (Diallo, 2015).

If this account is able to reveal the 'two sides of mimesis', mirroring each other like mimetic doubles, I would argue that it is necessary to complicate the picture further by adding another vector through which imitation flows. The 'social' and 'conflictual' narratives of imitation are not mutually exclusive – in fact, I would like to argue that they each contain elements of their opposites.

Thus, for instance, there was a highly conflictual and exclusionary side to the social and gregarious manifestations of imitation as witnessed around the Paris attacks. The show of solidarity for the victims went hand in hand with an endorsement of 'freedom of speech' that

soon turned into a form of policing (Fassin, 2015; El-Enany and Keenan, 2015). The voices that dared question the absolute status of this principle or denounce its myopic, classist defence in French society were side-lined or actively silenced. Islamophobic attacks spiked after the attacks, with Muslims targeted with harassment or called out to apologize for the attacks on behalf of their religion (Diallo, 2015). If one crosses analytical lenses and applies mimetic theory to read social events that ICS literature is naturally placed to explain, different information is allowed to emerge. In this case, how forms of scapegoating were actively pursued during the aftermath of the attack to secure the 'body politic' and social order emerged through mimesis – a process further entrenched by the declaration of a 'state of exception' (Bigo, 2015). The *marche républicaine* was stigmatized for being predominantly white and middle class, while the process of mourning itself became the occasion to reinforce hierarchies and exclusions intended to keep the community pure (Cole, 2015). Thus, the bodies of the dead terrorists were first sent back to Algeria and Mali, respectively; they were returned by those states, however, on the ground that those bodies were of French citizens; finally, they were buried at night in unmarked graves in the apparent attempt to erase any of their traces. In contrast, the body of one of the policemen killed, Ahmed Merabet, also Muslim and also of Algerian descent, was symbolically placed at the center of state funerals, where he was celebrated as the 'good Muslim' who had sacrificed his life to defend the France *laïque* (Balkan, 2016).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the point where imitation and conflict converge, we also find unexpected elements of gregariousness and sociality. As Olivier Roy (2016) observed in the aftermath of the Paris terror attacks, a very social and mimetic concept is at the heart of Islamic terrorism, and that is the concept of brotherhood. Terrorism scholars such as Marc Sageman and Scott Atran have argued Islamic terrorism must be investigated less in relation to the dogmas of this religion and its leaders and more in relation to the 'leaderless',

horizontal congeries of networks and 'bands of brothers' it consists of (see, for instance, Atran, 2010). After all, the Islamic State identifies itself as a group of 'brothers who have refused to live a life of humiliation' (Al-'Adnani, 2014) – and, of course, as has been the case in a few recent terror attacks, Chérif and Said Kouachi were literally brothers (Brighi, 2015). Beyond this point, however, as Silke and O'Gorman have recently argued, lies an understanding of terrorism as a form of empathetic, altruistic and pro-social behavior that rests on imitative behavior. Terrorists generally believe not only to be acting justly but, most importantly, to be serving others: 'a terrorist movement usually presents itself as a self-declared vanguard representing the interests of the aggrieved' (O'Gorman and Silke, 2015: 158). This is perhaps a less comfortable side to analyze, but as Emmanuel Todd argued, the terror attacks held up a mirror to French society and forced it to see the degree of resentment experienced by some of its citizens due to structural forms of injustice and discrimination (Bauman, 2015). Rather than the lack of social and moral concerns, the attacks therefore emphasize a commitment to sociality through a different side of imitation.

Conclusion: mimesis, affect, politics

The story of the encounter between affect theory and Girard's mimetic theory is yet to be written. Yet, this encounter appears inevitable in so far as both approaches deal with a modality of human interaction that challenges the modern conception of a rational, deliberative self. As amply illustrated by the works of Nigel Thrift, Brian Massumi and William Connolly, the recent turn to affect has helped foreground the pre-personal, non-cognitive, non-conscious level at which affective intensities travel and propagate. As suggested above, mimetic theory developed out of Girard's fascination not only with the workings of imitation, but with the workings of a particular form of mimesis, the mimesis of *desire*. Two implications follow from this consideration. Firstly, the way in which desire is

mirrored in others, travels and propagates irremediably does away with the notion of the modern, autonomous, rational self – a conclusion that parallels that endorsed by affect theorists. Secondly and perhaps even more importantly, the chapter advanced the argument that what lies behind Girard's concerns with mimetic desire, although never explicitly articulated, is a concern about the power of suggestion, and in particular *affective suggestion*. In the last segment of his life and work, Girard experienced a turn interpreted by many as apocalyptic (Girard, 1996; 2012). It is not far-fetched to hypothesize that behind Girard's growing concern about today's escalating mimetic crisis was also a more specific concern about the *mimetic escalation of affects*.

According to Girard, the mimetic tendencies underpinning globalization have created a huge potential for interpersonal relations and exchange, but they have also driven rivalry and envy, already normally present in human relations given their inevitably imitative nature, out of proportion. The triumph of the very operating principles of liberal and capitalist societies – namely, equality and the market, and their competitive effects – are now amplified on a global scale and the result is that 'the whole planet now finds itself, with regard to violence, in a situation comparable to that of the most primitive groups of human beings, except that this time we are fully aware of it' (Girard, 1987: 260–1). Immanence and the loss of any transcendental points of reference have consigned humanity to give up its normative horizons, and to live and fight its battles mimetically which, according to mimetic theory, means violently. In resonance with other political theorists, Girard argues that this creates the conditions for a contagious wave of negative emotions and for progressively alienated, frustrated, and especially resentful, individuals. As argued by Wendy Brown, individuals are at once saturated with human power and yet are increasingly alienated from their capacity to truly act politically. 'Starkly accountable, yet dramatically impotent', the individual 'quite literally seethes with *ressentiment*' (Brown, 1993: 402).

Curiously, Girard's negative assessment of the contemporary condition echoes some of the critiques levied against affect theorists and the implications of a global politics of affect. In warning about the danger of misappropriating findings from the neurosciences, Ruth Leys has recently cautioned against assuming the primacy of the visceral, corporeal and a-signifying dimension of affect. Leys maintains that the anti-intentionalism of affect theory inevitably shifts our attention away from questions of meaning, signification and 'ideology' – all of which can be intersubjectively negotiated and contested through 'reason' – towards the 'subject's sub-personal material affective responses, where, it is claimed, political and other influences do their real work' (Leys, 2017: 322). The kind of politics that is envisaged by affect theorists is, according to Leys, one not only dangerously incapacitated by an 'affective fallacy' – i.e., by the error of judging things not for their meaning or truth, but for how they make us feel – but also one in which it becomes virtually impossible to adjudicate between values, let alone intervene intentionally and politically. We arrive here at a very familiar position, which encapsulates Girard's own struggle against imitation. In Leys' own words, 'what is at stake […] in the struggle against mimesis is the very possibility of a rational, democratic politics, which is to say the possibility of a rational, democratic subject' (Leys 1993, 301fn62). According to both Girard and Leys, a politics yoked to mimesis and affect – which, as the chapter has sought to demonstrate, ultimately dissolve one into the other – is a dangerous kind of politics.

In this paper, I have advanced a less stark position on the question of mimesis, arguing that there are always 'two sides to imitation'. Our radical openness to the Other, which forms the basis of all phenomena of imitation, suggestion and contagion, has the ability to generate social as well as conflictual behavior. The fact that mimetic theory tends to be preoccupied predominantly with the latter, while ignoring the literature on ICS and the former, is worth investigating. This chapter has advanced a few interpretations as to why this

may be so – from Girard's attempt to conceal the power of suggestion to his fear of the 'irrational' power of mimesis. Be that as it may, the current political conjuncture seems to present possibilities and challenges that are worth interrogating from a plurality of angles. Indeed, phenomena such as contemporary terrorism testify to the complex patterns of sociality and conflict generated in this hyper-mimetic and hyper-mediatized age.

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