The Riot of the Mind

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'The feeling of an unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain-process: how does it come about that this does not come into the considerations of our ordinary life? This idea of a difference in kind is accompanied by a slight giddiness, -which occurs when we are performing a piece of logical sleight-of-hand. (The same giddiness attacks us when we think of certain theorems in set theory.) When does this feeling occur in the present case? It is when I, for example, turn my attention in a particular way on to my own consciousness, and, astonished, say to myself: THIS is supposed to be produced by a process in the brain!' L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §412.

What animates groups of people? From where does the anger that fuels a mob come, or the admiration that drives a crowd of football spectators or an audience of opera-goers? Does each individual feel, and wilfully express, all the anger or admiration that the crowd expresses? Or does an individual within the group possess an exact fraction of both the admiration or anger itself and the determination to express it? Both these possibilities are absurd, which does not remove the problem of where the anger and the decision are. A worshipping community or an angry mob manifestly give rise to some collective life that can be destructive or creative for the individuals involved and indeed for the objects of their shared emotions. If I am a scapegoat then my destruction is terrible and real. I want to argue that a fruitful way to understand my self is by analogy to a crowd, or rather not a crowd (which sounds like it could just be a collective or additive whole) but a riot. Like a fire, a riot acquires its own continuity and motivating energy out of some combination of parts that throw up a greater whole.

It is true that the self is made up of parts to which it can easily be reduced without prospect of reassembly, whether I am talking about my physical nature, my mental character, or my ability to interact through language. It is true that we are contingent to an extent we generally ignore; not simply dependent on our friends and communities, but arising only out of a particular social environment in the absence of which we could not have come into existence. Nevertheless, whether through willful ignorance of the facts of our lives or because it reflects something true about being a person, we in fact experience our selves as having continuity, with clear intentions,

transparent motives and a reflective core. I want to consider situations in which our sense of self becomes undifferentiated from our interaction with other selves as a way of discovering fruitful analogies for what is occurring when I think; for what the sense of me is.

René Girard claims for his mimetic theory the status of a truly scientific explanation for religion. Mimetic theory holds that it is in imitation of another that I aspire to become, or desire to possess, or reflect on myself as some thing. Since both I myself and the individual I want to make my pattern cannot have possession of the same thing, we are destined for conflict – we have become undifferentiated in our agreement that a particular thing is worth having and, if we are both to survive, have to find a way out of our conflict (it depends on the particularities of the case whether survival means the survival of our selves for each other in friendship, or our survival in a more literal sense). Our conflict ends in the annihilation of either my rival or my self (Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus) unless we find together a device that relieves the tension in our relationship. If I am to avoid killing my rival – or pattern – or at least maintain my relationship with him then we must conspire to assign responsibility for our conflict which arises actually from rivalry to a third party in whose death or exclusion (whereby they become dead for us) our relationship is healed. 'Ah,' we can say, 'the reason for our conflict was not in either of us, but the fault of this other fellow'. If then we are honest and acknowledge how purging ourselves of the disreputable one (Job, Joseph, Jonah, Judas, Jesus; Oedipus, Dionysus) has healed our society we might come to believe that for their destruction to have such a powerful effect they must have been rather special. We are then on the threshold of ascribing great significance to the excluded one, because our life together has been built out of his expulsion.

Whether or not this mechanism for the resolution of desire-in-imitation-of-another represents the scientific basis of religion, the evidence for its role in the foundation and continuation of human society is compelling. This is where Girard began – outside religion, with anthropological and literary texts concerning societies based on human sacrifice, Oedipal texts, Dionysian texts, plague history in France and persecution texts, Wagner and Nietzsche, and *La Rage* and *L'Etranger* of Camus. The key elements are that there is conflict and it is contagious. If it is not resolved – the plague is not quelled, the violence halted – then total destruction (all against all) will ensue. With apparent spontaneity and unanimity among the mimetic rivals a cause of the plague, or the violent rivalry, must be found. Once chosen, the victim is expelled or killed. Because all agree on the victim's responsibility and all expel him, and because thereby peace or health is restored, the victim is *de facto* the foundation of the new society (we should say this word with emphasis and relish its meaning).

In the formation of societies, people group themselves around a victim for the kill, and find in that experience a common story to which all can relate; the individuals become undifferentiated and thereby find a way of telling themselves who they are. In just such a process has hominization of pre-human beings been pictured (*Things hidden since the foundation of the world* Girard with Oughoulian and Lefort). By expelling the Jews, or killing the Christ, or through the Holocaust, in sending kulaks to the Gulag, in the execution of murderers, in the polarization within social groups (schools, workplaces, universities, whatever) societies are built. Mass accusation accumulates by an exchange of suggestion and suspicion in a self-enhancing cycle. So arise societies of the clean, purified from the plague; societies of the righteous justified by the law; societies of the racially pure; societies of the socialist; societies of the morally righteous; societies of the fashionable, or beautiful, the sexy, the clever, the successful – societies of mutual admiration bolstered by our definition of our selves over-against some other group – against the individual who is ugly, repellent, stupid, a failure. By their wounds we are healed. But what happens when a victim is chosen and expelled; what is occurring inside a self-organizing group of people? What occurs in the unanimous selection of a victim; what organic, collective, unifying experience transforms a group of people at a loss because of the basic incompatibilities of their desires into a mob, a crowd, an audience, a people, a church, a faith, a nation?

I find that I cannot doubt the existence of manias such as mob anger, or scapegoating in the Girardian analysis, or the approval of a football crowd. A riot has no *particular* reality, but its victims would not deny it was real. The ability of collections of human beings to self-organize with unanimity into a univocal group is too often demonstrated, and experienced, for it to be denied. A banal example is the roaring football crowd after the scoring of a goal; no less banal but somehow more picturesque is the cheering that accompanies the appearance of a famous conductor on his podium (before he has orchestrated a note). More amazing was the response to the death of the Princess of Wales where large groups of people became collectively motivated – quickened, inspired – by the drama of her death. For a Girardian analysis the way we treat the bodies of our kings and princes is little separated from prehistoric sacred kingship.

More disturbing was the way in which an angry mob in Portsmouth turned as one against a paediatrician living in their midst (thinking them a paedophile); more challenging is a riot against 'globalization'. What occurs when a mob or a crowd or audience behaves univocally in this way? The process appears to be unconscious – or un-self-conscious rather. The member of the football crowd does not think 'Now I am going to cheer this person because he has scored a goal'. He does not think at all but responds viscerally,

and as part of a larger structure (the crowd) to what he has shared with it, the collective observation of a goal being scored met with collective approval. Again, there is nothing rational – self-conscious – in shouting *bravo* for a famous conductor, or joining thousands of others in laying flowers for a young princess who has died, or attacking the home of a paediatrician. The individual taking part in the process is part of a collective animation that captures a group of people.

Now to return to a telling, pivotal question: What fraction of a riot is one rioter? Or what fraction of a football crowd one spectator? What fractional contribution does one mourner make when he lays flowers for a dead princess? One could be more romantic: what fraction of a partnership is one lover? What fraction of a family one child? What fraction of a congregation one worshipper? It must be clear that these questions are meaningless. The whole of a riot is greater than the sum of people who compose it. The riot, crowd, marriage, church is irreducible. It is a complex entity that exceeds its own structure. In the physical world chaos theory shows how simple iterations gives rise to emergent, unpredictable, whole structures and we are dealing with a similar thing but instead of galaxies self-organizing it is people who are doing so. People, instead of bees in a hive or termites in a supercolony. Here we have top-down causation, top-down meaning, top-down significance – in a similar way to the top-down situations of psychosomatic illness or experimental intervention in a system suffering quantum indeterminacy.

What other systems might be understood using the model of a riot of self-conscious persons? I am a complex whole and my rationality and sense of self arises from the functions of my brain, which is a complex physical entity. One modern attempt to understand how self-consciousness arises, the structure of personality, has made use of the concept of a meme. Memes are replicating aspects of human behaviour that are spread by imitation (there is an interesting comparison with Girard's mimetic theory to be made here). They were first posited by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* and have been championed by Susan Blackmore (*The Meme Machine*) and Daniel Dennett (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea*). Memes are extensions of the model of selfish genes to the world of human interactions: how our personalities come into being through interaction with others and our environment. A good (successful) meme is merely a good replicative entity, just as a good gene is merely a successful replicator. Personally, I find the concept of memes rather trivializing – this is perhaps something one should have grasped on the basis of the trivial examples often given for memes such as snatches of music or the facial ticks of Wittgenstein (*The Selfish Gene*). Memes represent an attempt to atomize human behaviour, to understand a whole (personality) by reducing it to arbitrary parts (how one walks, one's facial ticks, one's sexual preferences learnt in imitation of others

somehow). Genes are digital in their construction – in their fabric; memes are not, but are an attempt to impose quantum structure on a fluid process, imitation.

Even the arbitrary parts into which wholes are broken are themselves rather complex (*cf* walking, having a particular thing about blondes) so we have the problem of an infinite regress, atomizing the atoms until nothing is left. This is the existential experience of Blackmore, for instance (*The Meme Machine*). Real genes start with digital elements (atomic things) and work up; memetic theory starts with a whole and smashes it. I feel that treating human behaviour in this way misses the point, but it does represent a useful tool for understanding how people work – especially perhaps if applied with Girard's analysis of what memes produce. And a key element of the arbitrary atomizing of human behaviour, and its infinite regress, is that smashing personality into the bits that make it up, and breaking those bits up further, underlines the absence of an irreducible core that is 'me', the absence of a Cartesian *ego*. But it tells us nothing about what it means to be a person, to ache with love for someone, or to be someone's friend.

Actually, Wittgenstein's arguments in this area are hugely more fertile than those of memeticists. One reason why Wittgenstein's approach works particularly well is that he starts with atoms, and works upwards – he does not start with complex wholes and attempt to break them down into elements from which they can be rebuilt (this is impossible). Wittgenstein starts with words, and acknowledges immediately that the meaning of a word is largely to be found in its context, in the way it is used in a complex procedure such as buying apples or praying. It is not a unit of fixed meaning by which exchange is rationally orchestrated – it is the exchange, it is the logic itself. The means are the substance (just as 'I' am a lump of meat).

When one has acknowledged that the means of thinking are also the substance of our personality – that there is no irreducible other 'I' which is applying tools, words – is one left with nothing? When all that exists is the means of exchange then is nothing doing the exchanging? (No, I am in the exchange – not there when I turn round but in the turning (R. S. Thomas)). I want to suggest that in the manner that something greater than the component human beings animates a collection of people that becomes a riot (or a church) so something real is brought into existence by the collection of means, words, by the firing of neurons, by their interconnectedness. I want to suggest that this is how we are – a riot of effects felt and signals given, and that in that sense soul or personality can be rationally understood and unembarrasedly spoken of (the means is the substance). In the process of composing a symphony, in the singing of a song, in time spent carelessly with friends, our experience is one of wholeness, of a

reality with continuity – not of a nothing without meaning, a white noise of pointless exchange. I want to suggest this is real, is what the individual firings of neurons adds up to, has a history, is a spirit – is elastic, shareable, can be treasured and remembered. Between the structures from which we are made, in the gaps between, in the combination of the means of exchange, is our life, our soul. This is something in which others can truly share (Wittgenstein – others may know what I am thinking before I do myself) and which can genuinely be taken up in lives built from still greater structures than ourselves – into communities, nations, religions and indeed into the life of God.

It is not the numerousness of the neurons within the brain that makes for its exceptional capacities: it is their inter-connection. If I am the riot of my neurons (the riot that interfaces with other riots, not with other neurons) I cannot know it, cannot study it, cannot get outside it. There is no escape. Just as a rioter cannot rationally understand his actions, nor a member of a lynch mob, nor a lover in a relationship, I cannot rationally understand my self because 'I' lie between what I can observe, in the gaps and connections. I am a riot, a superstructural reality; superstructural realities are what Wittgenstein called word games, and George Steiner calls real presences. Like a great poem or novel or symphony I am a reality emergent from an innumerable series of little things, little words, little notes, little gestures. In music I can be told why a particular interval is pleasing on biochemical or psychological grounds, but the meaning of a piece of music is to be found in its totality (and its performance). To substitute for the cumulative effect of a musical score a series of nervous events is to miss the point and in fact to substitute one superstructural reality for another.

> 'Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. Why is just *this* the pattern of variation in loudness and tempo? One would like to say 'Because I know what it's all about.' But what is it all about? I should not be able to say. In order to 'explain' I could only compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean the same pattern).'

> L. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* §527

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