

Sacrifice, gift and general economy: Moral foundations for rebuilding economy and society after coronavirus

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1 | INTRODUCTION

This essay articulates two general theoretical paradigms to help us account for both the bad (violent) and good (collaborative) manifestations of the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis by drawing on theories of René Girard and Marcel Mauss. First, Girard's theory is used to explain and understand the crisis of 'undifferentiation' that Girard says is characteristic of both social and viral contagion, and the scapegoating violence triggered by populist authoritarianism. These phenomena are formulated in the context of a broader critique of neoliberal capitalism and bio-power responsible for a crisis that is not only medical but also political, economic, social and environmental. Second, on the other hand, and as an antidote to the pathological effects of mimetic contagion, I revisit Mauss' famous *Essay on the Gift* – written in the aftermath of WWI and of the Spanish flu pandemic – in order to account for the positive social responses to coronavirus that are characterized by empathy, solidarity and generosity. Mauss' theory of the Gift, originally derived from ethnography in Polynesia, was adapted to formulate foundations for the French Republic as concrete practices of redistribution and circulation of goods and services mediated through Revenue. Gift relations in the form of publicly funded education, housing and health care developed in the inter-war and the post-WWII decades have since been the basis of the general economy of modern civilization. The paradigm of the Gift helps to account for the positive mimetic responses to the pandemic from balcony singing and everyday acts of generosity, to state, public health and municipal responses. The divergent paradigms of Girard and Mauss are brought into conversation with one another through Bataille's notion of 'general economy', wherein sacrifice is formulated as a variety of the gift. Historicizing the Western privilege given to sacrificial spectacles still dominated by a romantic fascination for the sublime I argue for a revitalization of a general economy of the gift, one that encompasses also the logic of sacrifice as future-oriented 'giving up'; a life-affirming expenditure-investment in inter-generational solidarity to turn around the death spiral of late modern utilitarian individualism so as to 're-create life out of life.'

2 | RENÉ GIRARD: MIMESIS, SCAPEGOATING, AND A RESTORATION OF AUTHORITARIAN NEOLIBERALISM

One response to the Covid-19 crisis can be seen from within the paradigm of René Girard's (2017) *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, and his key concepts of 'contagious mimesis', 'the scapegoat mechanism', and the re-foundation of social order on 'sacrificial violence.' Contagious mimesis is exemplified by panic buying and hoarding, that is 'acquisitive mimesis', with the latent (sometimes open) competitive rivalry spiralling towards violence, into what Girard calls 'conflictual mimesis', when rivalry becomes more intense, and the object becomes less the focus than a search for a scapegoat: someone or something is 'to blame' for this, and individuals who are swept up in a spiral of mimetic rivalry 'converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down' (Girard, 2017, p. 25).

The spiral of contagion from acquisitive into conflictual mimesis and scapegoating is manifest in Trump's calling coronavirus the 'Wuhan foreign virus'; that gun sales in the United States spiked by 180% in one week; the ways in which coronavirus will be used as a definitive argument against migrants and refugees; the raft of 'emergency powers' – some draconian; the shift in language: this is a 'war,' we must 'attack,' to 'defend ourselves' against an 'invisible enemy'; 'heroes' on the 'front line' in 'field hospitals,' and so on. And this shift in the symbolic order towards an imaginary of war intimates a future scenario: the daily body count; bodies piling up into a tomb, a burial mound of heroes and martyrs (the elderly and the vulnerable; those victims who are healthcare workers) a sacrificial pyre which may become the foundation upon which a new order will be built. What might that new order be?

Prophylactic measures against coronavirus are directed at the moral foundations of economy and society, the social institutions of everyday life – family, friendship, community, civility, sociability, solidarity and social trust. Social distancing and self-quarantine protocols force people apart: do not trust your neighbours or friends, not even husbands and wives, even children – as they are 'super-carriers' – must not visit grandparents. We were already hyper-individuated and lacking inter-generational solidarity; these protocols bring internal tensions and latent animosities to the foreground: there is now good reason to be paranoid and suspicious of one another, in fact it is a duty and responsibility. It is interesting, [and worrying, from this perspective] to see how compliant, how docile people already are with the emerging and consolidating bio-power regime. We were already governmentalized, but social distancing takes it to a whole new level of subjectivization: we 'assume responsibility for the constraints of power'; we internalize and 'bring power to bear on ourselves and become part of its mechanism' (Foucault, 1991, pp. 201–202). The pandemic is overdetermined with dilemmas of power and control since internalizing some mechanisms of control could save many lives, and while laudable though that goal is, it feeds recursively into an overlapping and interpenetrating field of forces of neoliberalism, populist authoritarianism, biopower and governmentality. Will 'the new normal' be neo-Malthusian, social-Darwinian authoritarian neoliberalism, legitimated by a discourse of social hygiene, a regime of bio-power wherein 'numerous and diverse techniques achieve the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' (Foucault, 1978, p. 140)?

The plague, Girard says, 'is universally represented as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities ... General anarchy and confusion then set in and that is the worst evil by which the common wealth can be assailed; for that is the moment when the dissolute bring *another and worse plague* into the town' (1974, p. 834). The microbial plague is followed by 'another and worse' political-economic plague. And not only does general anarchy and confusion come in with the plague, they precede and prepare the ground upon which the plague takes hold and spreads: 'Social upheaval can bring about conditions favourable to an outbreak of the plague. Historians still argue whether the Black Death was a cause or a consequence of the social upheavals in the fourteenth century' (Girard 1974, p.834). Historically, in art and literature 'the words we translate as "plague" can be viewed as a generic label for a variety of ills that affect the community as a whole and threaten or seem to threaten the very existence of social life' (Girard 1974, p.834). In the coronavirus crisis, the insidious plague-before-the-plague that characterized political culture in the period before the pandemic are the 'social upheavals and various ills' associated with extremes of economic inequality, conflicts around race and gender injustices, as well as struggles for dominance over symbolic differences of

values, beliefs and practices: the politics of identity, sexuality, multiculturalism and similar 'hot button' issues and 'dog-whistle' politics that have made managing the pandemic difficult, in England and America particularly, but throughout the world, from Brazil to India, where the 'crisis of undifferentiation' caused by the pandemic has revealed, reinscribed and recursively amplified pre-existing differences in so far as different populations have been affected very differently – as the current BLM movements have powerfully articulated, for instance, and the rhetoric of solidarity – that 'We are all in this together' is belied by a reality in which America's tech billionaire oligarchs have increased their wealth by \$500 bn during the pandemic, while 50 million Americans have been dis-employed and made precarious. Thus the tensions between difference, un-differentiation, and re-differentiation complicates, or rather nuances and brings up to date some anachronisms in Girard's universalizing thesis, which was initially inferred from smaller, archaic and arguably more egalitarian societies. Similarly, Girard, in the past, has tended to downplay the medical side of contagion, treating it as a 'disguise' of a more profound mimetic truth. This hermeneutical choice is historically determined and can be dated to the post-World War II period, which shaped Girard's theoretical imagination. Equally dated is Girard's diagnostic that we now live in a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics (Lawtoo, 2016). In fact, in the Anthropocene, due to climate breakdown, habitat destruction and hyper-consumerist zoophagia, Covid-19 is only one of many waves of new viral contagions.

Schismatic political culture, exemplified by the divisiveness of Brexit in the United Kingdom and the Trump presidency in the USA, Bolsonaro's Brazil, Orban's Hungary, Modi's India and elsewhere, is, within the Girardian paradigm, symptomatic of 'undifferentiation and destruction of specificities' that the new populist authoritarianisms seek to reinscribe, following Schmitt's (1932/2007) formula of making 'friend'-'enemy' distinctions, whether through the bio-power governmentalizing idiom of 'compliant' versus 'irresponsible' citizens, or through calculated inflammatory political rhetoric whereby armed white supremacist vigilantes are designated 'patriots' while unarmed demonstrators are deemed to be 'terrorists' and BLM is a 'symbol of hate'. The deep source of this generalized and expanding recursive spiral of undifferentiation and re-differentiation which in Girard's language is the decline of mediation of mimetic rivalry by 'external models' has echoes and reverberations in many registers of contemporary theory: the 'exhaustion of meta-narratives of legitimation' (Lyotard, 1979/1984); the deconstruction of 'logocentrism' and desire for a 'transcendental signified' (Derrida, 1976); erasure of 'Names of the Father' (Dufour, 2007); the unravelling of '*points de capiton*' that quilt the symbolic order (Lacan, 1993); 'social acceleration, and loss of resonance in our relationship to the world' (Rosa, 2019). The lack, or loosening of the symbolic order of post-[or 'late' or 'hyper'] modernity has been the source of a rapidly spreading contagion of reciprocal symbolic violence, always threatening to break out into actual violence: climate science deniers confront climate activists; racist and xenophobic authoritarian populists face off against politically correct radical progressives; the public sphere dissolves into social-media formed hatreds and passions of all sorts, a contagion that spreads in the form of 'viral' 'memes' that amplify and inflame antagonism and hostility amongst 'monstrous doubles' (Girard, 1979, p. 79). 'Nothing more resembles a raging man than another raging man', and this is the 'undifferentiation' that Girard says is the characteristic feature of all plagues, both microbial and socio-political.

Under circumstances when external mediation by exalted models and transcendent master signifiers become confused and uncertain, contagious mimetic conflict spreads: society can no longer be solidary, but becomes 'a mere collection of heterogeneous objects, but not as a "totality" or, if we prefer, a "structure," a system of differences commanded by a single differentiating principle' (Girard, 1974, p. 838). 'When the difference goes, the relationship becomes violent and sterile as it becomes more symmetrical, as everything becomes more perfectly identical on both sides: 'Each thing meets in mere oppugnancy' (Girard, 1974, p. 839). Pent-up animosities and propensity to violence accumulates, threatening to overflow and inundate everyone, and the solution to endemic conflict is found through the scapegoat mechanism.

'The virus' against which we wage war provides such a scapegoat: we are all united against this common enemy. This scapegoat masks and exculpates us from what is really at work, for in the global eco-political-economy our relentless assault on Nature has caused climate breakdown and species extinction on a massive and accelerating scale. In the Anthropocene, it is modern human beings that are the pandemic pathogen species, and the coronavirus, insofar as it is

the form of life characteristic of late modern civilization that unleashed it, and spread it, is a symptom of our endemic and chronic morbidity.

However, Girard says, 'it is not that there is, as a "real culprit," a man who bears alone the entire responsibility for the plague. Such a man cannot exist, of course. ... [one is] really talking about a victim who is "right," in the sense that against and around that victim everyone can unite' (Girard, 1974, p. 842). Coronavirus is such a "right" scapegoat, at least it is for now: the virus is an absolutely primitive life form; barely life at all, but a prolific life, obscene, teeming, a promiscuous life whose sole drive is to procreate; a superfluous, purely parasitic life; a life that we have ennobled, crowned - 'The "Corona" - virus!'; a disgusting, sickening, wicked king; evil incarnate, with obscure origins in a non-human species; a quintessential stranger - Other; but also a powerful enemy and a worthy adversary, that, when heroic biomedicine finds the vaccine for, will be defeated and everything will be restored. 'If the polarization of the crisis upon a single victim really effects a cure, this victim's guilt is confirmed, but his role as a saviour is no less evident' (Girard, 1974, p. 844). Coronavirus may become the saviour authorizing and facilitating a Restoration.

In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard outlines how Lucifer's hubris dissolved the cosmic order built on the authority of the Father, making everyone equally a god unto himself and a rival to others, unleashing a spiral of envy, conflict and scapegoating violence. Girard's eschatology echoes Plato's critique of Democracy in *Republic*: that liberty and equality pave the way for tyranny. Plato's solution is a society of limits, governed by the enlightened despotism of philosopher Kings and their caste of Guardians. Girard's is similar: mimetic rivalry's propensity for violence can be limited by elevating a 'model', a Subject(s) a great distance above other subjects: an external mediator, who cannot be envied, only revered, quells mimetic rivalry and restores order. A radical conservative Restoration can be imagined within the Girardian paradigm as a neo-monarchism of billionaire neoliberal fundamentalists, achieved by creating an insurmountable gulf of material and symbolic social inequality between a new elite of the 0.01% and the masses; a gulf maintained by a military authoritarian caste of guardians, a strong state, that will be, Plato imagined, 'as dogs to the flock of sheep' that they will keep in order, organized and legitimated within a discourse of biopower, and enabled with the latest high-tech surveillance military and security apparatus.¹

3 | MARCEL MAUSS: GIFT, HAU, MANA, AND RENEWING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

On the other hand, our responses to the coronavirus crisis can be seen in terms of Marcel Mauss's (2002) *Essay on the Gift*. The Maussian response to coronavirus is all about 'hau' and 'mana', two words from Oceania that signify the unifying and assimilating magico-religious 'spirit' of the gift and gift-exchange, an activity that has ramifications that 'are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, and morphological ... involving the totality of society and its institutions' (Mauss, 1925/2002, pp. 100–101). Gift exchange is a socially integrating general economy of material and moral relationships that are reciprocal, obligatory and incremental, and that are the source of honour and prestige, wealth and authority for all of the parties involved.

Hau and *mana* are loan words from the cultures of Oceania, but all languages and cultures have words with approximate equivalent meanings. The semantic cluster that share what Wittgenstein (1994) calls 'family resemblances' to *hau* and *mana* include, for instance, *Geist*, *esprit*, aura, soul, charisma (*charis*, *kharis* (Gr) [and karma, (Sanskrit -the spiritual principle of cause and effect)]; charm (delight, magic); gift from god, grace; *gracias* (thankfulness), and so on. *Mana* is 'a quality... an essence... a spiritual force': '*mana* is power, *par excellence*, the genuine effectiveness of things ... This extraneous substance is invisible, marvelous, spiritual -in fact, it is the spirit which contains all efficacy and all life' (Mauss, 1902/2001, p. 137). *Hau* is the spirit of the gift, the spirit in which the gift is given, and received, reciprocated and circulated. Something more than the material thing itself, some of the giver's spirit accrues to the gift and adheres to it even after it has been given; and this symbolic surplus of *hau* reciprocally binds givers and receivers, mutually enhancing and increasing *mana* for all people who are involved and implicated in some way in the gift relationship. *Hau* and *mana* have been especially puzzling and difficult to grasp because of the positivism, materialism and individualism of modern economics, which emphasizes individual contracts in a purportedly transparent and rational

market, obscuring 'the social glue of 'the non-contractual element in the contract' that makes the economy possible – a combination of law, state, customs, morality and shared history' (Hart, 2012, p. 168). Materialism, individualism and utilitarianism notwithstanding, the personal, social and spiritual dimensions of exchanges persist, and this is everywhere effective and evident during coronavirus.

The unifying and morally vivifying aspects of our gift-based responses to the coronavirus are illustrated, for example, by the Italians singing to their neighbours from their balconies, sustaining *esprit de corps* and solidarity; by New Yorkers and Londoners' nightly rituals of applause, to thank and to honour healthcare workers; by people volunteering, shopping for their neighbours, by countless small acts of kindness and civility. The '*hau*' and '*mana*' of the gift economy is also at the heart of institutional responses: governments' mass mobilization and coordination of powers and resources in the public interest and for the common good, with increased legitimation of authority, popular support and collective national pride in leaders and governments that are seen to have managed the crisis well, but with a loss of face and national prestige, and eventually political reprobation for others. The most fatal consequence of the pandemic will probably be loss of prestige and moral authority and the historical eclipse of Anglo-American global hegemony. Meanwhile China, having initially suffered severe loss of face, aspires to elevate itself in the eyes of the world with generous gifts of ventilators, masks and PPE.

The *hau* and *mana* of the gift is also shown by employers continuing to pay employees; banks giving mortgage holidays; suspending utilities bills, rents and evictions; all of which seems very good and generous, of course, even though this gifting, underwritten by states' revenues is given in the interest of avoiding civil unrest, and that these are gifts given on the expectation that they will be accepted graciously, ensuring harmony, and that they will be repaid later, with interest. Nonetheless, Maussian, gift-based responses, insofar as they take the form of a 'a total system of services rendered and reciprocated,' a system of prestation incorporating and permeating all of the members of society as a whole entity, an exchange between all individual citizens, businesses and economic institutions, mediated through revenues/treasuries/ exchequers and all of the offices and apparatus of the state, articulated by political leaders, wrought under emergency conditions for now, but a 'fair deal' that resonates with the historical 'New Deal' and with the horizon of a future 'Green New Deal' the *hau* and *mana* of the gift is a more hopeful foundation for rebuilding the world than Girardian scapegoating, violence and sacrifice.

What has mattered during coronavirus has been people's willingness to comply with protocols, and willingness means at the same time to feel free to give, to feel obliged to accept and to feel both free and obliged to reciprocate. This fusion of liberty and obligation is the nexus of the gift relation: people feel beholden to an inclusive and continuous cycle of give-and-take, they understand and experience themselves as belonging to a virtuous circle of *hau* and *mana* constituted and reproduced by their willing participation in mutual exchanges of gifts of 'total services'.

Coronavirus has revealed how in spite of 200 years of utilitarianism, materialism and individualism, and neoliberalism's claim that 'there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women', society although it has been weakened, is resilient and very much alive in late modernity. With the signal exception of extremists like the Michigan militia, the vast majority of people freely and willingly and generously 'give': they give one another respectful distance and graciously exchange passing courtesies; they give their confidence and trust to medical experts and good leaders; they give their consent to restrictive rules and measures; they give up their freedoms and their personal liberties, give up the pleasures of sociability, family and friendships, and they give up their work and their livelihoods, all for the benefit of others. And those others are mostly persons who are entirely unknown to them personally, anonymous strangers; they give everything up for 'the common good', for the abstract idea of 'Society'. People's benevolent actions and good behaviour cannot be explained in terms of docile compliance, nor a merely individual self-interested utilitarian calculus of what is 'for one's own good', because when they are asked, even though they do not use the language of *hau* and *mana* people say that what they are doing is 'right', and 'moral', 'a civic duty' and 'good for all of us'; and they give their gifts with grace, compassion and magnanimity.

The proof of this is that while people's initial willingness to give may have been motivated by fear of contagion, people have continued to give their gifts generously even after it has become clear and widely known that coronavirus is really life-threatening only to a very small minority, the very old, and those already seriously ill with

pre-existing chronic illness. If it were the case that modern people were in fact fully in the grip of materialism, utilitarianism and individualism, that we are, or have become, merely selfish individualized 'utility-maximizing-rational-choice calculating machines', then a Malthusian–social Darwinian logic would have come to the fore in political rhetoric, policy and action. And it has occasionally, for instance, the policy proposal of 'herd immunity' and the suggestion that 'elderly people should be willing to sacrifice themselves to save the American economy'; but such rhetoric finds little resonance, no purchase on hearts and minds. Instead, what coronavirus has brought to the surface is the anthropological substratum, the moral foundations of economy and society: 'Above, below and all around... is a system of gift-through-exchange that permeates all of economic and moral life... a constant 'give and take'... a continuous flow in all directions of presents given, accepted, and reciprocated, obligatorily and out of self-interest, by reason of greatness and for services rendered, through challenges and pledges' (Mauss, 1925/2002, p. 37). Social life is 'impregnated' by *hau* and *mana* in the general economy of the gift, Mauss says, and this is the deep source that New York's Governor Cuomo tapped by reminding 'New Yorkers, and all Americans that 'Blue and Red states subsidize each other', and that 'New York is the number one giver' to the Federal 'pot' [speaking as though he were a chief hosting a potlatch!]' 'But now is not the time to make a tally of the accounts in dollars and cents', Cuomo says, 'what really makes America great, and beautiful, and good is when people are working together, and sharing, and sending ventilators across the nation to be helpful, and 60,000 people are volunteering, and they're showing love and they're showing unity...' ²

Coronavirus has been managed well where people feel empathy and mutual obligation in a gift economy: 'we owe it to one another' to give our trust to our experts and good leaders, and to take their advice, to work together. Through this gift-exchange of total services we give one another *hau*, and reciprocally our leaders and experts and all of us collectively gain legitimacy, prestige and honour – *mana*. We recognize, reproduce and we celebrate *hau* and *mana* as our commonwealth. *Hau* and *mana* signify our commonwealth as a sort of 'national treasure'; a unique and precious 'Thing'; our *agalma*; something intangible, but very real and of incalculable value. *Hau* and *mana* are overdetermined; they have 'excess' (Lacan), 'symbolic surplus' (Derrida); they entail 'expenditure beyond utility' (Bataille). Traces of an elusive and allusive transcendental dimension, an infinite and ineffable spirit, supernatural, divine and magical comes into play in the gift. This is the source of individual and collective worth and worthiness, the 'added value' that accrues from membership of a holistic and healthy society, whether that be in New York, Seoul, Athens or Dublin. ³

Humanity, Mauss says, has always been 'more than *Homo oeconomicus*, a mere utilitarian calculating machine... For a very long time man was something different, and he has not been a machine for very long' (Mauss, 1925/2002, p. 98). Underpinning the financial and real economies is an ancient, anthropologically deep-seated and universal 'gift economy', wherein people exchange something much more than material products of work, monetarily calculated; namely, they give and exchange something of *themselves* – their time, their care; part of their 'spirit', for which intangible, incalculable, but very meaningful gifts they expect to be recognized, respected and rewarded reciprocally. This 'general', 'total' gift economy is what we can see functioning, Mauss says, 'in the hearts of the masses, who possess, very often better than their leaders, a sense of their own interests, and of the common interest'. Thus the spirit of the gift 'throws light upon the path that nations must follow, both in their morality and in their economy' (2002, p. 100).

Unlike the rational actors of classical economy who are motivated by self-interest and scarcity, in Bataille's (1988) [Maussian] conception of general economy, social life normally has an 'excess' of energy available to it. This extra energy can be used productively for the organism's growth or it can be lavishly expended. 'Real life, which is composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of purely productive expenditure... The movement... of excess energy expended extravagantly, 'given up', sacrificed, is translated and transfigured into the effervescence of life... it is the ebullition which animates the globe' (Bataille, 1988, 10). Sacrifice, Bataille says, is the highest form of expenditure; a 'giving up' by the whole community in order to secure its own well-being, to bring into being (to bring to life a world of real things, whose reality belongs to a long term and never resides in the moment, a world that creates and preserves (that creates for the benefit of a lasting reality) (Bataille, 1998, p. 63). Such a general economy of sacrificial gifting that animates, sustains and energizes the life of the world, a general economy that has resurfaced during the coronavirus crisis particularly is exemplified generally in expenditures of communal and inter-generational health care,

a golden thread linking the palaeoanthropology of humanity through to the core social institutions of contemporary civilization.

4 | THE GIFT OF HEALTH CARE

A student once asked anthropologist Margaret Mead, “What is the earliest sign of civilization?” The student expected her to say a clay pot, a grinding stone, or maybe a weapon. Margaret Mead thought for a moment, then she said, “A healed femur.” ... A femur is the longest bone in the body, linking hip to knee. In societies without the benefits of modern medicine, it takes about six weeks of rest for a fractured femur to heal. A healed femur shows that someone cared for the injured person, did their hunting and gathering, stayed with them, and offered physical protection and human companionship until the injury could mend. Mead explained that where the law of the jungle – the survival of the fittest – rules, no healed femurs are found. The first sign of civilization is compassion, seen in a healed femur. (Byock, 2012, pp. 254–255)

Within Mauss’s paradigm of the Gift, we have an ample evidence base showing that if sacrificial violence is something ‘hidden since the foundation of the world’ so too is expenditure on caring for the sick, disabled and vulnerable. ‘Shanidar 1’ is a 45,000 years old skeleton of a man from Iraq, who, at different times, had lost an arm, and an eye, as well as suffering several other injuries. He died around age 50, an old man by the standards of the time, his healed injuries showing that he had received a great deal of care over the course of his life. ‘Romito 2’, from Italy 10,000 years ago, had severe dwarfism with very short arms. His people were mountain hunter-gatherers. He did not need nursing care, but he was a dependent, who received care and support through periods of severe shortage. ‘Windover boy,’ about 7,500 years ago in Florida, had spina bifida, but he lived to around age 15, indicating he had been given constant support and care. ‘Man Bac burial 9’ is a 4,000 years old skeleton from Vietnam, with fused vertebrae. Paralyzed since childhood, unable to feed himself or keep himself clean, he lived another 10 years, totally dependent on others for meeting his most basic needs, his survival evidence of the expenditure of high quality, dedicated and time-consuming care. A 4,000 years old female skeleton from a site on the Arabian Peninsula indicates that from early childhood she had a neuromuscular disease, perhaps polio. To survive to adulthood she must have been given round the clock care, and her tooth decay indicates that she had been given sweet foods. From tens of thousands of years earlier, the Neanderthal skeletons of La Ferrassie and Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in France show similar evidence of care for the injured and for the elderly, care during childbirth and infancy, care for the dying, and care for the dead. ‘Looking after those who are unable to look after themselves is a behaviour that defines what it is to be human, and the evidence shows that giving care to one another has been practiced within the human family for at least 100,000 years’ (Tilley, 2012, p. 1).

This, and similar evidence is one of the bases on which feminist philosophers Carol Gilligan, Carole Pateman, Nel Noddings, amongst others have been correcting the masculinist bias in human evolutionary narratives’ emphases on hunting and warfare, and on the emergence of the purportedly independent consciousness of the autonomous individual, the self-interested rational actor, *homo oeconomicus* (Norlock, 2019). Rather, the record shows the anthropologically and sociologically fundamental universality of a primordial ethics of empathy, care and a political-economy based on the gift. To ‘give birth’ is the first gift, developed and cultivated and generalized by asymmetrical, reciprocal, recursively incremental concrete gifts of mutual care. Morality begins and develops from the moral sentiments of empathy and the concrete relational contexts and practices of care, rather than in abstract principles of reason and individual autonomy. In fact, how the evolution of the species, the development of civilization, the global political economy and the ‘real’ economy, is all underpinned by the gift economy of care are really the things which have been ‘hidden since the foundation of the world’.

In this context, it becomes important to make explicit something that is, so to speak, hidden since Girard's foundation of mimetic theory, for against Girard's dark picture of humanity's tendency to spiral into contagious violence it could be also argued that empathy, solidarity, generous reciprocity and expenditure on celebratory, joyous, life-affirming communal rituals, are equally experiences that generate a positive form of mimetic contagion. After all, Plato's *Republic* already advocates for the imitation of good models. Moreover, emerging voices in the increasingly diverse field of mimetic theory straddle the good/evil divide in order to account for the mimetic foundations of sympathy, compassion and solidarity – from the neuronal level (Gallese et al., 2011) to psychoanalysis (Borch-Jakkobsen, 1991) and extending socio-cultural psychoanalytics to broader social and political levels (Borch-Jakkobsen, 2019; Lawtoo, 2016, 2019). This positive mimetic spiral of reciprocal care is illustrated by the exemplary case of Mauss himself as someone who, having received gifts of care on many occasions, reciprocated the gift generously, keeping it in circulation throughout his life and generalized it, so that from the spirit of the gift of expenditure on socialized reciprocal health care there emerged one of the key pillars of modern European civilization.

Marcel Mauss had a great deal of first-hand personal experience of both mimetic violence and of mutual gift relations of health care. A WWI veteran, in action at Passchendaele, Ypres and The Somme and decorated several times for bravery, Mauss spent two periods in field hospitals, suffering from jaundice, and from pneumonia. After the War, and for the rest of his life Mauss suffered chronic 'pulmonary disease' necessitating long periods of rest and recuperation, and every year he spent several weeks at a spa. Mauss spent periods in hospital for dysentery and for abscesses, and in addition to recurring bouts of what he called his 'major illness' Mauss often suffered the excruciating pain of sciatica. In later years, he developed diabetes, and he had dementia for five years before his death. As well as receiving care, Mauss, reciprocally was a care-giver. Mauss cared for his mother while she was dying, and Mauss's wife, Marthe, who almost died by gas poisoning, spent a year in hospital. Mauss visited her every day, and after a long rehabilitation, (and perhaps suffering chronic depression), she was invalided for the remaining 15 years of her life, during which time Mauss nursed her constantly (Fournier, 2006, pp. 301–302). 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of society can be understood without understanding both' C. Wright Mills (1959) famously says of the *Sociological Imagination*, and Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* sprang from the intersection of his personal biography and the history of French society: a gregarious, generous man with life-long friendships and deep involvement in several social and cultural scenes, progressive politics and social movements, preceding and in the aftermath of the War, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish flu pandemic, and the schismatic political culture that embroiled the world, culminating in new tyrannies, War and Holocaust, through which Mauss survived, an impoverished, elderly Jewish man and his bedridden wife, in a cold Paris basement.

The whole purpose of Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* was to identify the anthropologically deep-seated moral facts that would build social solidarity as foundations for France's Republic. Moral facts are imperatives. They prescribe duties that are obligatory. These imperatives are not 'categorical', abstractions derived from pure reason (Kant) but rather they are sociological, derived from concrete historical and anthropological social practices, like empathy with fellow suffering, and recognition of the deep human need for mutual care. The socially integrating logic of the gift is the principle of social solidarity upon which society, from the most primitive settlement to the modern state is founded. Through the Revenue apparatus 'excess' is equalized and 'surplus' is redistributed through the 'expenditures' of nations and supra-national states, whether Federal in the United States or the united states of a future European Union. Tax is a form of modern sacrifice: (painful) 'cuts' that are 'given-up' in exchange for 'gifts' of unemployment assistance, pensions, education, housing, health care and other services within a general economy of total prestation. This form of sacrifice–gift–expenditure ameliorates and placates conflict and builds solidarity by integrating the vulnerable – children, elderly, poor, and sick people – into society conceived of ideally as a collective household – society as *oikos*, the etymological root of both economics and ecology. The principle of this fundamental general economy of exchanges of total services is mostly taken for granted or entirely overlooked in modern political economy and social policy. Re-imagining and re-inventing economy and society after coronavirus will necessitate urgently addressing the tax-minimizing strategies that global corporations have been using to contribute less than their fair share to states' and federal revenues, causing 'BEPS' [base erosion by profit shifting]. To rebuild the world after coronavirus on renewed

foundations of sacrifice–gift–expenditure, there will need to be excess and surplus to expend, which means that that the concrete of taxation needs to be mixed in richer proportions.

Why is it that Girardian sacrificial violence is represented in a myriad of historical and anthropological instances and that the historical canon of Western literature is replete with mimetic envy spiralling into sacrificial crises and scapegoating, while Mauss's universal gift relations seem to be so quietly subdued and taken-for-granted that we have difficulty representing and celebrating institutionalized practices of gift relations? Why do we not have annual commemorations of Europe's public health care; of free education; of pensions and social security? These institutionalized gifts also have a history; they have genealogies, dates, crucial moments and founding events; and they have heroes, though mostly unsung heroes.⁴

The reason is that sacredness associated with sacrificial violence is spectacular and conspicuous. It has an aura of death and horror: it belongs to the sublime. 'Terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime' (Burke, 1757/1999, p. 54). Because the sublime originates in violence and spirals through institutional forms towards death, it is always anchored in terror and trauma; and because trauma cannot be represented but yet demands to be expressed, it returns, and we must try again (always failing) to represent it 'properly' as it were. Thus sacrificial violence, being bound to the principle of the sublime, is perpetually commemorated, usually by statues of men that are heroes to some but monsters to others, sites of confrontation. By contrast, the sacredness associated with the gift is quiet and calm. It is surrounded by an aura of peace, of serenity, and life; it is harmonious; balanced, self-contained; the ruling principle of the gift is Beauty, which 'induces in us a sense of affection and tenderness' (Burke, 1757/1999, p. 47). The gift is sufficient, whole, integral, beautiful; it neither needs nor demands loud recognition or monumental statues. It slips quietly into the narrativized stream of life; submerged, sedimented, becoming substratum, gradually building a concrete foundation of social solidarity to support the edifice of civilization. The beauty of the gift, given, received and reciprocated, is not in *béance*; it does not cry out for symbolization, as the terror of sublime sacrificial violence does. Thus the beautiful work of the gift, originating in *eros*, spiralling outwards and upwards, through institutional forms of *philia*, towards *agape*, magically goes on giving, as a taken-for-granted that, unfortunately, suffers the risk of being overlooked and too soon forgotten. This will be one of the most serious risks of the current coronavirus crisis: that after it has passed, the gifts of care of nurses and frontline workers, and all of the quiet, seemingly small and insignificant and beautiful gifts, singing from balconies, small acts of kindness and sociability, the courageous gifts of people who give themselves wholly to their work of care will be passed over and too easily forgotten.

5 | CONCLUSION

Mostly our responses to the coronavirus crisis exemplify both Girardian and Maussian tendencies together, at least they do for now! and the kind of society that will emerge is in the balance.

We have a foreboding of the dangers of some kind of restoration of the *status quo ante*. Free marketeers will use the crisis as an opportunity: unload and transfer private corporate debts onto taxpayers; massive lay-offs, downsizing, rationalization and precariatization achieved at a stroke; small businesses will be 'mass casualties', collateral damage, in terminal debt, to be salvaged in a future fire-sale to global vulture funds, while instantly vastly enriching global tech giants and online retailers – Microsoft, Facebook Amazon, and others that, having being subvented by public revenues, will be proclaimed as having proven themselves adaptable and strong enough to survive and thrive; coronavirus has driven an instantaneous shift to online work, which would otherwise have entailed protracted and costly labour negotiations; huge public funding will be shunted to Biotech, AI and big data analytics; crash public utilities: public health services, already weakened by decades of cuts and underfunding may be overwhelmed by a second wave of the pandemic and made to appear to fail as auspices for their further privatization; close schools and universities, move education onto Big Tech's private proprietary online platforms; militarize the democratic state, and securitize civil society;

mobilize, and at the same time discipline public life into a permanent state of emergency, entailing total surveillance, 'lockdown' and 'social distance' as 'the new normal.'

The outlines of what the ultraliberals want to happen are clear enough: von Hayek, Friedman and Nozick's manifestoes have become the commonsense.⁵ The more recent campaign plans of the 0.01% – Bezos and Zuckerberg, the Kochs, Robert Mercer, Peter Thiel, are obscure, but they are certainly very real. Peter Thiel, former student of René Girard, chess life-master, Silicon Valley's liaison and strategist in the Trump transition team says, 'business is like chess: you must study the endgame before everything else' (Thiel, 2014, p. 2). The coronavirus crisis could be used as an opportunity for a key move in a global neoliberal endgame, and Trump may very well be a pawn in that endgame as an apocalyptic circus in which he play-acts the Great Dictator but he is merely the great distractor. Trump will probably be scapegoated and sacrificed eventually as a Girardian 'sacrificial king', a false king who led his people astray, a 'sacred clown' as *pharmakon*, poison and antidote combined into one. This ancient drama is presently unfolding:

In the works of Hesiod and Homer it is the king, an offspring of Zeus, who is responsible for the fertility of the soil, the herds and the women. As long as he shows himself irreproachable in the dispensing of justice, his people prosper; but if he falters, the whole community pays the penalty for the failing of this one individual. The gods then visit misfortune on all – *limos* and *liomos* "famine" and "plague." The men kill each other, the women cease to bear children, the earth remains sterile and the flocks and herds no longer reproduce. When such a divine calamity descends on a people their natural recourse is to sacrifice their king. For if the king is responsible for the community's fertility and this fertility ceases, that indicates that the power invested in him as sovereign has somehow become inverted; his justice turns to crime, his integrity to corruption, and the best (*aristos*) seems to be replaced by the worst (*kakistos*). The legends ... therefore involve, as a means of putting the *liomos* to rout, the lapidation of the king, his ritual murder. (Girard, 1979, 108)

During the interregnum (*inter-regis* 'between kings'), the liminality of the present crisis, Trudeau, Macron, Varadkar, Biden and others seem as paragons of reasonable politics and competent government when compared with Trump, masking their own fundamental commitments to neoliberalism. The (symbolic, legal) sacrificial violence that will be visited on Trump may be used to consecrate the foundations of a new order: a strong state, shoring up 'business-as-usual'; authoritarian neoliberalism as 'the new normal'. When the crisis passes, 'check mate!' Market Oligarchy wins, Democratic Society loses. Game over!

But the coronavirus crisis could become the occasion for social deceleration, of rediscovering community and society; a time for generous giving and gracious receiving, of exchanging recognition and respect, a time of restoring relations of resonance with the world, finding a new modality of dynamic stabilization (Rosa, 2019) in the form of a Green New Deal and a great revalorization of public institutions: collective security rather than individualized precarity; social insurance and public health services instead of individual's pay-as-you-go existential risk, extending even to an 'ethical, integrative and ecological fifth wave, future Public Health', with the planetary biosphere as our object of care (Hanlon et al., 2012, p. 138).

Mauss's *Essay on the Gift* was written in the immediate aftermath of WWI and the Spanish flu pandemic, and the idea of general/total gift economy can help us to imagine a better future beyond this unfolding catastrophe, because good ideas 'are already anchored in a deep tradition, in ways of life which have already been lived. ... The validly new is a recreation of a tradition' (Taylor, 2007, p. 748). In emergency conditions that seem to urgently demand entirely new thinking, we need the presence of mind to know that 'imagination is nothing but the working over of what is remembered ... imagination is memory' (Vico, 1744/1999, p. 699).

Mauss uncovered 'one of the human bedrocks upon which societies are built' (2002, p. 5), and indeed the Gift did become quite explicitly the foundation of France's inter-War Fourth Republic, and also the post-WWII reconstruction of the Europe. René Girard emigrated from France to America in 1947, and he had no experience of *le trente glorieuses* and the rebuilding of European civilization, but Richard Titmuss, who, with Beveridge and Bevan was an architect

of post-war England and its flagship institution of the National Health Service used Mauss verbatim. More generally, the idea underpinning the Treaty of Rome and a united Europe, social cohesion and solidarity gradually built by asymmetrical transnational revenues cross-subsidizing and grant-aiding regional development – all of that great project of re-building civilization by reciprocal exchange relations of total services prestation needed a deep and concrete foundation, a theory of general economy developed upon an evidence base in universal anthropology, and articulated in terms of an inspiring deep mythic-historical narrative: ‘There is no other morality, nor any other form of economy, nor any other social practices save these’, Mauss says, concluding his *Essay on the Gift* with one of Europe’s ancient stories:

The Bretons and the Chronicles of Arthur tell how King Arthur, with the help of a Cornish carpenter invented that wonder of his court, the miraculous Round Table, seated around which the knights no longer fought. Formerly, ‘out of sordid envy’ in stupid struggles, duels and murders stained with blood the finest banquets. The carpenter said to Arthur “I will make you a beautiful table, around which sixteen hundred and more can sit, and move around, and from which no one will be excluded. No knight will be able to engage in fighting, for there the highest placed will be among the lowliest.’ There was no longer a ‘high table’, and consequently no more quarrelling. Everywhere that Arthur took his table his noble company remained happy and unconquerable. In this way nations today can make themselves strong and rich, happy and good. Peoples, social classes, families and individuals will be able to grow rich and will only be happy when they have learned to sit down, like the knights around the common store of wealth. (Mauss, 2002, p. 106)

Re-building the world after coronavirus means remembering, re-imagining and re-inventing the traditions that Mauss identified as the moral foundations of economy and society:

‘let us reinvent mores of noble expenditure and recover the joys of giving in public, the pleasure of generous artistic expenditure, of hospitality, of the private and the public festival, the social security and solicitude arising from reciprocity and cooperation ... Rather than the egoism of our contemporaries and the individualism of our laws... we need a ‘new ethics’ founded on mutual respect and reciprocal generosity. (Mauss, 1925/2002, pp. 88–89)

Gift relations, at least as much as sacrificial violence, and probably more so, constitute the things hidden since the foundation of the world; in fact for Mauss sacrifice, rather than being the first principle, is only one variety of the gift: ‘Fundamentally, there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element. The two parties present exchange their services and each gets his due. For the gods too have need of the profane’ (Mauss & Hubert, 1898/1981, p. 100). At the deep anthropological and sociological grounds of the transition from chaos and endemic conflict into social solidarity, the generative, self-reinforcing character of the gift embraces also the logic of sacrifice: the gift of care, exemplified by Mead’s story of the broken femur and the care given to severely disabled children is a form of sacrifice, expenditure beyond utility, something that is ‘given up’, given in advance, fore-given, to infants, to the elderly, to the sick and injured and chronically disabled. It is by forgiving (giving-up) that is, by sacrificing selfish desires for immediate individual gratification and calculated utility that a vicious circle of downward spiralling competitive individualism towards violence may be turned around into an upward spiralling virtuous circle of cooperative social solidarity.

The magical, miraculous healing power of gift–sacrifice–expenditure transubstantiates profane selfish utilitarian individual rivalry into the sublime substance of community and society as a vivifying, unifying and assimilating sacred power: the magic of *Hau* and *Mana* in the cultures of Oceania is the same as the ‘Holy Spirit’ is in Christianity, and the same as ‘Manatou’ amongst the North American First Nations: a panacea against mimetic violence; the spirit that heals and makes whole; the spirit of life. Girard [and Plato] refracted through the lens of Mauss [and Bataille] shows that rather than life springing from death, the whole purpose of the general economy of gift–sacrifice–expenditure is

to 're-create life out of life' (Joyce, 1916/2001, p. 132). What is given through giving-up is 'for the benefit of a lasting reality' (Bataille, 1998, p. 63); it is the gift of futurity: the condition of possibility of a future Good Life, wherein envious mimesis is quelled and turned around into the positive mimesis of social reproduction and intergenerational solidarity. And this has been the function of publicly funded health care in modern society. Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health who founded England's National Health Service, said

Society becomes more wholesome, more serene, and spiritually healthier, if it knows that its citizens have at the back of their consciousness the knowledge that not only themselves, but all their fellows, have access, when ill, to the best that medical skill can provide ... No society can legitimately call itself civilized if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means. (Bevan, 1952, p. 79; 75)

Bevan's NHS was built on the *Beveridge Report*, a core social policy framework produced in 1942, at the height of the War, in a crisis moment when the history of modern civilization could have turned out very differently than it eventually did. Beveridge understood how in that critical moment when the future of civilization was in the balance, it was absolutely essential for the war effort that the gifts of duty and dedication, the sacrifices of millions of ordinary people must be fully recognized and generously reciprocated. As an alternative to a future of Fascist or Communist totalitarianism England's 'new deal' was based on a reciprocal gift exchange of total services. 'Now, when the war is abolishing landmarks of every kind, is the opportunity ... A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching' (Beveridge, 1942, p. 6).

The same risks and opportunities are in the balance today. As landmarks are being abolished in a crisis of undifferentiation, we are haunted by the spectre of authoritarianism; but we can also hear resonances with our most fundamental relationships to the world that give us good reason to be hopeful, for coronavirus is showing us that when everything has been shut down and radically decelerated society is still alive and well: the *hau* and *mana* of reciprocal exchanges of total services that permeate, animate and impregnate all of our social and bodies politic continues to be our source-code.

Looking ahead, it is not at all clear what path will unfold: further escalations of contagious violence towards Girardian sacrificial crisis and the recurrence of a myth of community in (new) fascism (Lawtoo, 2019; or towards a Maussian revitalization of community and solidarity in a general economy of total services restoring resonance in our relations to the world (Rosa, 2019)? Meanwhile, the ambivalence and liminality of the coronavirus moment may help explain the other pathological epidemics of contemporary civilization, epidemics of anxiety and depression associated with the morbid stasis of interregnum (Keohane, Petersen, & van den Bergh, 2017). That the dialectic of these two antithetical tendencies, Girardian and Maussian, will be resolved in a new progressive synthesis would (once upon a time!) have been thought of as an Hegelian-Marxist historical necessity, but since Gramsci, and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), we know the shape of the post-Coronavirus world will be a matter of hegemony and political leadership.

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NOTES

¹ Girard is a doyen of radical conservatives. While it should not be assumed that Girard would be in agreement with the ways in which his theoretical paradigm has been taken up by Peter Thiel and his associates in the Koch Foundation's 'Cato Institute' and their networked market fundamentalist think tanks, there is, what Weber would call a strong 'elective affinity' between them; and Girard has, what one may call some pedigree. René Girard (his name *rené* means 're-born', 'born again'; his birthday

is 25 December, Christmas day); his mother's ancestral family name was Deloye, formerly de Loye, an Aristocratic and very religious family, and René was raised in his maternal grandparents' house in Avignon. Three sisters of the Catholic monarchist de Loye house, Benedictine nuns, were guillotined in 1794 by the Revolutionary court in Orange for not swearing allegiance to the state. Pius XI beatified them in 1925. Before he died, Girard was pleased to hear that the noble family name 'de Loye' had been restored. Although he was purported to have Republican and socialist sympathies, Girard's father was curator of the *Palais des Papes* in Avignon, a professional conservator and guardian of deep patriarchal tradition. There are other curiosities too, that are passed over uncritically in Haven's (2018) hagiography, such as the fact that despite being a young man of the right age, unlike many others René Girard was able to avoid war duties of any kind, even the 'service travail obligatoire'. And there is also the rather striking example from the wartime period that Girard recounts as being a formative influence on his work, namely the scapegoating of collaborators immediately after the war, which of course was appalling, as many of the scapegoats were relatively 'innocent victims', non-combatants and women accused of 'horizontal collaboration'. But the Girard house on Avenue de l'Arrousaire was just beside the central train station, the station from which Avignon's large Jewish community was herded and shipped to the concentration camps. This scapegoat is passed over in silence, curiously.

² Andrew Cuomo, 27 April 2020 press briefing.

³ The differences need some explaining. Greece and Ireland have some residual mechanical solidarity, sense of community and *conscience collective*, and Korea too, as even though Seoul's population of 11 million is comparable to New York City's, only 2.5% of the people of Seoul are not native Korean, of Korean descent, or near Asia neighbours, so while it is a megacity Seoul remains relatively homogenous, demographically and culturally. But New York City is the quintessential modern metropolis. How can it find symbolic identity and unification? Cuomo's political charismatic genius is in articulating a spirit that underpins and transcends the multiplicity of the metropolis, and not just any metropolis, but the particularity of New York City. New York City people, Cuomo says, for all of their multiplicity and diversity 'black and white and brown and Asian, and short and tall and gay and straight'... are united, and love each other, because New York people are smart, 'you have to be smart to make it in New York... and we are tough – New York tough! – we are tough, because this place makes you tough – tough in a good way...' 'NY tough' is the specifically modern metropolitan, unique and particular *mana* that underpins and transcends, and unites and vitalizes all New Yorkers.

⁴ Even though they are in practically every community across America New Deal public works were rarely marked, so the era's contribution to American life goes largely unseen and underappreciated.

⁵ The three manifestos of the neoliberal revolution are von Hayek's (2007) *The Road to Serfdom*; Friedman's (2002) *Capitalism and Freedom*; and Nozick's (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. The fourth horseman is James Buchanan, a more obscure figure than the other three, though even more explicitly dedicated to overthrowing democracy (MacLean, 2017).

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