

# Imitation, Desire and the Toilet Roll

How mimetic rivalry makes toilet paper violent? ©

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## Imitation and desire – I'll have what she's having

I have become increasingly frustrated of late how my profession as a psychologist has explained to the public why people are stocking up on toilet paper during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Hijacked by utilitarian and evolutionary psychological models, the unimaginative psychologist says it all has to do with our survival needs and our limbic reactions to threat. While this could well be true, I believe there is a far deeper dynamic going on which could be explained anthropologically by the genius of philosopher and literary critic René Girard. Let me explain but be warned, it has something to do with goats, imitation and unbridled desire.

According to Girard, for humans, objects have no intrinsic value in themselves, it is only when someone else desires them that they have value. In Gil Bailie's book *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, he speaks of two children. The first child walks into a room full of toys and grabs the first one he sees – a red fire truck. About ten minutes later the second child walks into the room – and I have asked this following question to 100's of organisations and no one has ever got the question wrong – *which toy does the second child desire?* Of course, it's the red fire truck! Now how do we know this? Girard explains this as mimetic desire.



*We imitate the desire of others – I'll have what he has*

The fire truck has been given a mimetic charge from the second child because the first child desired it – this is because according to Girard we are “mimetic creatures” or in other words we imitate each other. The problem of course is that in our highly individualistic and I would say narcissistic culture (more on this in subsequent papers) we repress this truth – that is, we desire what others have not by virtue of the value of the object but the desire other's have. This explains why the craze of Cabbage Patch Dolls, flared jeans and hoola hoops are not as expensive now when they were “all the rage.”

What is so remarkable about Girard's work is that in an era of post-modern claims of no essential truths, he argued (and I think convincingly) that memetic desire is universal, across all ages, cultures, genders and time. As a literary critic he was bold to make these claims and spent the rest of his academic career defending them – but I digress. What's important for me as an Organisational Psychologist is how simple the observation is, how elegant the theory, and how explosive the implications are when you take his theory to its logical conclusions – now we must talk about goats – well a specific kind of goat.

## Desire as contagion and the need for a scapegoat

The problem with mimetic desire is that it can quickly get out of hand. Especially if the object is rare or perceived to be rare – then the desire moves to a form of contagion. It is remarkable really that Girard speaks of desire as contagion using the analogy of a virus. This means that desire breaks out, it runs away from itself as we come increasingly entangled in the object of desire and those who desire it. In his remarkable book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard went against fashionable academic trends and attempted to find common narratological themes in famous literary works. Time and again he saw how we deceive ourselves and others when the object of our desires become unbridled and break out into violence. From the plays of Shakespeare to the brilliance of Miguel Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, Girard could see the same themes again and again – the deceit of ourselves and others, the rivalrous desire of an object or person, the breakout of violence and the need for a scapegoat to restore order.



*Scapegoating is not a solution, its an anthropological process – and its very dangerous*

I think the image above which I often use in training on collaboration pretty much sums up the scapegoating mechanism – simply put *a good scapegoat is nearly as welcome as a solution to the problem*. So, let us go back to the toilet roll shall we? Now through a crisis of desire the toilet roll has taken on a new mimetic charge, not because of its intrinsic value (I can hear the protests now – but I need to wipe my bum in a pandemic how dare you!) but because others desire it. And how do we know this? Well because not all places in the world have run out of toilet paper – in Italy where the pandemic is most hardly felt there is no run on toilet paper. In fact, people there

are bemused to hear reports in Australian supermarkets that Police have been called in to restore order over violence that has broken out in the toilet roll aisle – (attention shoppers emergency in aisle 9!).

According to Girard, when mimetic contagion breaks out in sufficient charge, violence inevitably follows. This is because of the entanglement of desire. Ancient cultures knew this problem intrinsically and created rules and rituals around desire to stop it from breaking out into murderous rivalry. It is no mistake that Girard plumbs the Bible for a rich source of evidence on how desire breaks out into rivalrous murderous violence. In fact, its already there in the 10 commandments – coveting wives and donkeys was not on in ancient times – the genius of the Hebrews knew that this is the source and origin of violence. In the book of Leviticus (16:21-22) there was two kid goats. The first was sacrificed in the community but the scapegoat (the second goat) after placing all the sins from the community onto the goat was released into the barren desert wilderness for the release of personal and collective sin. The goat takes on the transgressions of the community so that the community can restore order. In other words, we cannot handle our wayward desire and if not placed somewhere can soon break out in surprising ways – even with toilet paper. The object is unimportant, it's the desire that is, there's plenty of toilet paper to go around, but not when people covet it. To give you an idea of how dangerous mimetic contagion is, a friend of mine relayed the story that driving home on the freeway the traffic was at a crawl pace due to what? a single toilet roll thrown onto the road. We both marvelled at the fact that barely 2 weeks ago this would not warrant a Police cordon as the traffic slowly moved around the toilet paper – but now the desire would be too great for someone to stop their car and pick this sacred toilet roll thus creating further hazards on the freeway.

And this is the point, the toilet roll becomes sacred, it has a new charge and new meaning that barely two weeks ago would never have figured into the consciousness of anyone, anywhere around the world.

The scapegoat is not there to solve a problem but to attribute blame. Psychologists are aware of attribution theory as a form of cognitive bias. Cognitive bias is a shorthand of understanding the world that we “attribute meaning”. A fundamental attribution error occurs when we attribute blame to a person and not to our secret rivalry of each other. Once the scapegoat is attributed everyone is off the hook and the focus is on the scapegoat. Once this occurs the community can restore order by cohering around the scapegoat. Think about rivalrous football teams – often fans will find a particular egregious player from the other team they don't like and berate them the moment they walk on the field. Everyone for that moment are now in one voice, one identity around and against the scapegoat. You see this in organisations and institutions everywhere – and I'm afraid we will see it with the pandemic

crisis. The genius and alarm for Girard's mimetic theory is that it can and does scale to the size of nations and peoples – it has happened up and down the ages with tragic consequences



*When will toilet paper no longer have the mimetic charge it has now – who can we blame for this rivalrous madness?*

### The Chinese virus and other scapegoats

At this stage remarkably there has been little contagion of the scapegoats during this pandemic. If I am right, this is likely to occur in two ways – when resources become increasingly scarce or when the pandemic is contained. To make sense of the chaos that is ensued with the breakout of this pandemic our tendency to look for a scapegoat increases. We will then attribute blame to a people or place and this can be very dangerous, indeed according to Girard it can be catastrophic. For Girard this reveals rivalry underneath our cultural processes and this revelation can be very difficult for us to either face or contain. The sad truth is a scapegoat is nearly as welcome to a solution to this problem of the COVID-19 pandemic. The true solution to this problem is to change our sense of consciousness to focus on solutions not scapegoats. The solutions are many and one of these unfortunately is scapegoating. The scapegoat is there to create order out of chaos by focussing the blame onto others and a way of cohering a group of people around an identity. When it is acted out symbolically like on a football oval it can be contained and ritualised, but in other human endeavours it can quickly be contagious just like a virus. If we need to “flatten the curve” as was often stated during the pandemic, we also need to flatten it on our tendency to scapegoat. In this way our precious resources can be focussed on finding a vaccine and understanding complex adaptive and maladaptive systems that give rise to emergent properties like pandemics, and not scapegoats that are cast out to restore order for our all too fragile world.

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