
SOPHOCLES' 'OEDIPUS REX' IN RENÉ GIRARD'S 'VIOLENCE AND THE SACRED'

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Abstract

The article examines the problem of antagonism - how the problem is interpreted in René Girard's works (primarily in 'Violence and the Sacred'), in psychoanalytic theory and structuralism, as well as in the book contemporary with 'Violence and the Sacred' - 'Anti-Oedipus' by G. Deleuze and F. Guattari written in the tradition of Marxism. It is shown that the antagonistic conflict can be considered both imaginary (in Girard's work) and fundamental (in the rest of the listed concepts), which has both certain explanatory advantages and causes disadvantages of each of the approaches.

Keywords: myth, religion, culture, demystification, dualism

1. Introduction

The book 'Violence and the Sacred' by René Girard (1972) [1], dedicated to the problem of the genesis of human culture and religion, is close to and, at the same time, agonistic towards 'Totem and Taboo' by S. Freud (1913) [2]. Close because in both books collective violence, namely collective murder, is considered as the initial event from which human society and culture originated. Agonistic because Girard criticizes Freud for the wrong, as the philosopher believes, interpretation of this murder. From Girard's point of view, this is not about the sons' murder of their despotic father out of revenge and jealousy, but about the collective murder of a more or less accidental victim - a substitute, i.e. a murder not motivated by the victim's previous actions.

The myth of the Bororo people about the origin of culture, the plot of which is the story of the conflict between father and son over a woman (the father is jealous of his son's affections for his wife - his mother - and tries to kill him but in the end, the son kills the father) is considered as a 'reference myth' by C. Lévi-Strauss [3] - the creator of structuralism - another influential model of human culture which is also criticized by Girard. In the structuralist interpretation, myths, perhaps not reflecting the truth of our desires, are, rather,

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the ontological basis of human perception of the world, appearing as a complex system of oppositions (dichotomies) such as ‘life-death’, ‘nature-culture’, ‘earth-sky’, and their numerous more particular forms.

In Girard’s model, oppositions also play an important role but these are oppositions consisting of antagonists that are mutually hostile but at the same time identical. Thus, this refers to unity but only for an external observer; each participant in antagonism sees the other as the opposite of themselves. Girard calls the state when society breaks up into opposing individuals a ‘sacrificial crisis’ [4]. Every society inevitably falls into such a state from time to time, and the way out of the crisis is, according to Girard, the spontaneous transfer of diffused hostility to one victim and a collective reprisal against the victim. Therefore, in Girard’s theory, oppositions are one of the stages in the periodicity ‘unity - opposition - unity’, whereas in structuralism, Girard reminds, oppositions are considered as an initial and unchanging principle. Thus, structuralism has “nothing to say about undifferentiation and the undifferentiated” [4], with which the cultural cycle, in Girard’s theory, begins and ends.

The source of society’s transition to the stage of multiple conflicts, or oppositions, is what Girard calls ‘mimetic desire’. Human desire, Girard argues, is mediated by the other: a person desires what the other has. In the eyes of the desirer, this other turns out to be simultaneously an ‘ideal double’ who should be imitated and a rival who must be eliminated (Girard reveals the mechanism of such duplicity in the work preceding ‘Violence and the Sacred’ on the example of Dostoevsky’s early works) [5].

At the same time, Girard continues, the relationship of duality is not one-sided but mutual, and the more antagonism and hostility separate rivals, the more alike the rivals become: “As the crisis grows more acute, the community members are transformed into ‘twins’, matching images of violence. I would be tempted to say that they are each doubles of the other” [6]. It is this similarity between them that transforms the stage of the ‘sacrificial crisis’ into the stage of ‘cleansing from filth’, or the stage of reprisal against the ‘scapegoat’, which is facilitated, according to Girard, by the ‘intense mimeticism of violence’, which can easily change its original object to another influenced by an example.

As in Freud’s theory, the victim of ‘constituent violence’ for Girard often turns out to be sacralised (and in general is the source of the entire sphere of the sacred) but not because of feelings of remorse and guilt, which, according to Freud, should seize the sons who killed their ‘despotic father’. The emerging society, Girard argues, reveals a connection between the violence that has just happened and the coming peace, endowing the victim with the abilities of a demiurge or at the very least worshipping the victim as a god. Together with the cult, the entire social organization and culture as such arise (or are recreated).

2. Oedipus and his antagonists in Girard’s interpretation

Rituals, myths, as well as subsequent social institutions, reproduce but at the same time conceal the original constituent violence. However, if desired, one

can also see in culture “an inchoate, obstinate reaction against the violence and falsehood found in any human society” [6, p. 188]. This protest becomes the most distinct (according to Girard) in the great works of literature, for example, in the works by Sophocles who went much further along the path of demystifying the myth than Freud [6, p. 215-216]. Hence the attention that Girard paid to literature, including in ‘Violence and the Sacred’, the ‘heart’ of which, giving credibility to all of Girard’s developments, is his reinterpretation of Sophocles’ tragedy ‘Oedipus Rex’ based on the myth that Levi-Strauss also used to demonstrate how his method worked in ‘Structural Anthropology’ [3]. As for the meaning of the triangle ‘Laius - Oedipus - Jocasta’ for psychoanalytic theory, everyone knows that the triangle appears as a paradigmatic example. As Freud wrote in ‘The Interpretation of Dreams’: “King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely show us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes” [7]. According to Freud, “It can scarcely be owing to chance that three of the masterpieces of the literature of all time - the Oedipus Rex of Sophocles, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazou - should all deal with the same subject, parricide)” [7, vol. 21, p. 188]. However, Sophocles’ tragedy where there is both the murder of a father by his son and the motive of incest is best suited as an illustration of psychoanalytic theory. The fact that Girard also used ‘Oedipus Rex’ in his book as a ‘good example’ indicates, according to some researchers, that the philosopher, arguing with psychoanalysis (and, incidentally, with structuralism), wanted to defeat them in their own field, using their material [8].

If this is the case, then something else seems to be more important: for Girard’s concept, the material provided by Sophocles’ tragedy is also very convenient: Girard draws attention primarily to the plot of the tragedy, its outcome, and the events following the exile of Oedipus described in Sophocles’ tragedy ‘Oedipus at Colonus’.

The plot of ‘Oedipus Rex’ begins with a description of the plague ravaging Thebes, which looks even more pervasive misfortune than ‘just’ an epidemic (death of cattle, infertility of women, loss of crops), being, according to Girard, nothing more than a metaphorical description of the sacrificial crisis, where mutual hostility of people is transferred to destructive natural processes. Attempts to resolve the crisis quickly turn into a search for the culprit, and then into a clash of antagonists, each of whom seeks to ‘designate’ the other as the culprit (this is Oedipus himself, Oedipus’ co-ruler and Jocasta’s brother Creon, and the prophet Tiresias). In contrast to the traditional interpretation, according to which Oedipus is solely to blame for the dispute between Oedipus, Tiresias, and Creon - due to his anger and pride (hybris) (not to mention that it is Oedipus - the patricide and the incestuous - who is the cause of the anger of the gods on Thebes), Girard points out the role indistinguishability of the participants in the conflict: all three exhibit anger and pride (“‘anger’ crops up everywhere”) [6, p. 72-73]. Moreover, all the protagonists of the dispute “believe themselves to be above the battle. After all, Oedipus is not from Thebes, Creon is not king, and Tiresias is soaring a loft, high amid the clouds.” [6, p. 73] The result of such a

dispute, continues Girard, is “far from seeming a sudden lightning flash of the truth, striking down the guilty party and illuminating all the mortal participants, seems nothing more than the camouflaged victory of one version of the story over the other...” [6, p. 77].

It is easy to see that Girard’s interpretation of this scene by Sophocles makes us see an essentially comic situation in a tragic shell. Girard himself confirms this, comparing the dispute between Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias with the quarrel between Jourdain’s teachers from Moliere’s comedy ‘The Bourgeois Gentleman’ (here a philosopher who claims to be an arbiter in a dispute tries to resolve the teachers’ quarrel on the topic of which of the sciences is the most useful, but of course the philosopher inevitably turns out to be a participant in a conflict that turned into a fight) [9]. In general, a comedy featuring is a symbolic rejection of ‘evil’ through ridicule, according to Girard, often better reflects the structure of the sacrificial crisis and its resolution.

Thus, Oedipus, the loser in the dispute, in Girard’s interpretation is not a victim of fate as his role is regarded within the framework of the traditional interpretation of Sophocles’ tragedy [10, 11]. Neither is Oedipus a victim of an irrepressible thirst for knowledge (a kind of ‘Socrates before Socrates’), as Oedipus appears in the works by the authors who consider the historical process as a process of rationalization [12-15]. To some extent, Oedipus plays a similar role in psychoanalytic theory, revealing to us the truth of our own secret desires.

Girard’s point of view is seemingly close to those of modern authors who, like the philosopher, believe that the evidence in favour of Oedipus being guilty is at least insufficient [16, 17]. However, in any case, Girard would not agree with the position according to which, removing the blame from Oedipus, “we may be better able to resist a limiting and defeatist view of human possibility” [18, p. 167] since Girard does not at all consider Oedipus the personification of man as such, or, say, a man of a new postmythological era. For Girard, the image of Oedipus remains entirely within the circle of the sacrificial cycle. Moreover, Oedipus and the Sphinx for Girard are the same. However, not in the sense in which some of the cultural historians see their identity, and regard the Sphinx as the unconscious of Oedipus, the ‘dark side’ of his soul [19]. The antagonism of Oedipus and the Sphinx, Girard writes, precedes the antagonism of Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias, but both antagonisms are built according to the same pattern: all characters are doubles, therefore, all of them are also monsters [6, p. 266].

However, for Oedipus, Girard continues, the story does not end with the blinding and the exile. The next part of the sacrificial cycle comes into play: the object of collective violence suddenly acquires a sacred meaning, and now Thebes are striving to get the exiled Oedipus back (the possession of his body now, according to the oracle, would be a guarantee of the invincibility of Thebes). As Girard writes, “The beneficial Oedipus at Colonus supercedes the earlier, evil Oedipus, but he does not negate him” [6, p. 91].

3. Academic reception of Girard's theory

The conclusions drawn by Girard make it possible not only to re-evaluate Sophocles' drama but also, as Girard insists, to see the problem of the origin of religion and culture in a new light. However, Girard's critics, recognizing the impressive power and internal consistency of the philosopher's interpretation of the Oedipus story, added to this that it was not so much about interpretation as about a significant distortion of the original text [20]. The critics also wrote that in his interpretations of mythology as a whole, Girard ignored the relationship between man and Nature [21], in sacrifices Girard did not notice the aspect of thanksgiving [22], did not pay attention to human desires that were not connected with mimesis (food, clothing, freedom) [7, p. 124]. Researchers also wondered why Girard preferred the story of Oedipus as narrated by Sophocles, i.e. myth in literary processing, to much more reliable events of ancient history (the trial of Pericles, Anaxagoras, etc.) [8]. Finally, the fact that Girard describes the world exclusively in negative terms raises a theologically motivated objection: we cannot attribute the world created by God exclusively to violence [10]. However, while criticizing Girard, researchers cannot deny the presence of violence and mimetic desire in the world - in the sense mentioned by Girard.

Girard's theory seemingly becomes more vulnerable to criticism when the theory switches from the past to the present and the future, indicating a possible way out of the circle of violence, which, according to the philosopher, modernity cannot escape on its own, giving rise to only an endless 'sacrificial crisis'. As a disadvantage of 'modern theories of culture' (meaning primarily structuralism), Girard notes the utopian nature of their main thesis: "Because we have discovered the 'original sin' of human thought, we think ourselves free of it" [6, p. 245]. Given that Girard in his works following 'Violence and the Sacred' [23, 24] talked a lot about the importance of realizing the true meaning of the biblical message (the essence of which is that in describing scenes of violence, the Old and New Testaments always stand on the side of the innocent victim, not the violators), the words quoted above can be attributed to his theory. According to one of the authors, Girard's emphasis on awareness paradoxically places his position in the context of the project of Enlightenment denied by Girard [E. Tortarolo, *René Girard: Enlightenment > Disenchantment?/Religion > Violence?*, International Conference Violence and the Sacred in a Post-Secular Age: Challenges and Future Perspectives of Historical Theory, Adam Mickiewicz University at Poznan, Poznan, 2013], thus making the referral to the authority of the Bible redundant. This raises the question: is detection, i.e. awareness of the circle of violence enough to go beyond it?

However, what if violence is something that constantly affects us from the outside, limiting our capabilities and freedom? What if these are not spontaneous acts of collective aggression, destructive on the one hand and beneficial on the other (since they re-generate peace and order), but, on the contrary, are a multi-level strategy that includes both direct coercion and the ideology of 'false consciousness'?

4. Criticism of capitalism by Deleuze and Guattari through the lens of the myth of Oedipus

It is from this perspective that the problem of violence is examined in the book 'Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia' by J. Deleuze and F. Guattari that was published in the same year as 'Violence and the Sacred' [25]. The simultaneous appearance and a certain similarity of both books have already attracted attention. In particular, L. Rudnytsky in his article 'Oedipus and Anti-Oedipus' wrote that both books were emphatically polemical in relation to the psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth of Oedipus and strive to go beyond the interpretation, which, however, is not entirely possible for them [26]. Both Girard and Deleuze-Guattari, L. Rudnytsky writes, were trying to overcome the closedness of the family triangle 'father-mother-son', in which psychoanalysis places the meaning of the Oedipus myth.

However, unlike Girard, for Deleuze and Guattari the correct interpretation of the Oedipus myth is to consider psychoanalytic practice itself as an instrument of power in the capitalist era, when "By placing the distorting mirror of incest before desire (that's what you wanted, isn't it?), desire is shamed, stupefied, it is placed in a situation without exit" [25, p. 120]. 'Desire', in which Deleuze and Guattari, unlike Girard, see the initial positivity of human existence, has always been suppressed in one way or another or was the object of manipulation by any historical form of power, but only capitalism armed with psychoanalysis linked desire and guilt together, imposing on desire the inner meaning of rebellion against the father ("isn't that what you want, to kill me, to sleep with your mother?" [25, p. 373]. That is why the inherent power of the 'super-ego', coming from within, endows capitalism "by a cruelty having no parallel in the primitive system of cruelty, and by a terror having no parallel in the despotic regime of terror" [25, p. 373]).

It is easy to see that both Girard and Deleuze-Guattari agree in assessing modernity as an era of escalating violence, and not at all a gradual movement towards finally overcoming it. Accordingly, no emphasis is given to the concept of 'sublimation' either in 'Violence and the Sacred' or in 'Anti-Oedipus' - the concept so important for Freud's psychoanalytic theory which nevertheless remains within the framework of the 'paradigm of progress'.

For Freud, Girard, and Deleuze-Guattari, the basic mechanism that triggers the formation of religion, society and culture is the link between desire and violence. However, if for Freud and Deleuze-Guattari this connection is filled with content and energy in the context of the original 'antagonism of the different' (father and sons for Freud, the ruler, and subjects for Deleuze-Guattari), then Girard refers to the 'antagonism of the similar'. In other words, for Girard, the opposition of rivals hostile to each other is imaginary in the sense that rivalry itself makes them similar to each other - to the point of being completely indistinguishable when rivalry reaches the stage of antagonism.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the indistinguishability of individuals (in the legal, educational, general cultural sense) that conceals the differences of 'slave and master' that have existed for centuries is illusory. Using also the Oedipus myth, capitalism successfully neutralizes this basic difference, placing everyone indiscriminately in the triangle of family relations ("I too am a slave" - these are the new words spoken by the master" [25, p. 254]). That is why, Deleuze and Guattari conclude, "the link between psychoanalysis and capitalism is no less profound than that between political economy and capitalism" [25, p. 302].

In the book by Deleuze and Guattari, violence is presented in a form in which it is completely absent in Girard's book: not as spontaneous outbursts of aggression but as a systematic policy. Such violence, according to the general meaning of 'Anti-Oedipus', cannot be eliminated simply by realizing it: its source is not the individual but the very social order in which one finds oneself. In the most general sense, the source of violence is in this case the dualism of the exploiter and the exploited.

5. 'Violence and the Sacred' and 'Anti-Oedipus' are two alternative concepts of violence

In relation to the main thesis of 'Violence and the Sacred' (the cause of violence is not in the 'bad other' but in oneself), 'Anti-Oedipus' is a strict antithesis: the cause of violence is not in oneself but in another, albeit depersonified.

At the same time, one must admit that Girard's concept, first presented in a systematic form in 'Violence and the Sacred', has become a game-changer in cultural studies. The debate about the concept has not subsided for half a century, the bibliography on the topic is huge, and this is a rare case when the response to new ideas takes the form of the emergence of special journals ('Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture' since 1994).

The book by Deleuze and Guattari is just as relevant in design since the book gives an assessment of modernity, and just as polemical in relation to it - the book did not evoke a wide public response, although it attracted the attention of the philosophical community. The reason for this may be the complexity of the language of 'Anti-Oedipus', some elitism of its ironic style, a certain secondariness in relation to the works by M. Foucault [27], G. Marcuse [28], L. Mumford [29], and others.

Finally and most importantly, while exposing, as they claim, the secret of capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari do not in the slightest encroach on capitalism itself and do not see any alternative to it, proposing only to seek refuge from the psychoanalysis imposed by capitalism in some not entirely clear 'schizoanalysis'. Girard, on the other hand, with a pathos truly worthy of the Marx at the time of the 'Communist Manifesto', speaks of an imminent impending revolution, or rather a radical transformation of modern society, trapped in a protracted sacrificial crisis, the symptoms of which are more and more obvious to the society, but the nature of which it still does not understand.

Girard warned: “This misconception cannot prevail much longer ... but we are now about to rediscover it. The essential violence returns to us in a spectacular manner - not only in the form of a violent history but also in the form of subversive knowledge.” [6, p. 233, 336]

We are facing a paradoxical picture: Girard’s work, theological ‘according to the formal classification’, captures the revolutionary spirit of classical Marxism, while the Marxist approach of Deleuze-Guattari itself focuses on the deconstruction of the capitalist ideology without considering the possibility of going beyond its limits. Girard speaks of the possibility of radically escaping violence (although in ‘Violence and the Sacred’ the philosopher only hints at this way out), while Deleuze and Guattari speak only of the possibility of making secret violence (in terms of ‘Anti-Oedipus’ - exploitation) explicit.

6. Conclusions

In this controversy in absentia, it is easy to see the dispute between the one and the many fundamental for philosophical discourse, each of the sides of which is right in its own way. In this case, Girard is on the side of the ‘one’, and the side of the ‘many’ is represented by psychoanalysis with its father-son antagonism, structuralism with its dual oppositions, and, finally, Marxism as interpreted by the European ‘new left’. On the one hand, this Marxism, enriched with existential problems (primarily through Sartre), and a structuralist approach so unlike existentialism, recognized the inevitability of the ‘Other’ - in the broadest sense of the word - while getting rid of the historiosophical utopianism, which viewed the historical process as a movement from initial communism (that is, an individual society) through a series of class antagonisms to communism as the result of development. At the same time, as an inevitable consequence, Marxism has lost its revolutionary nature, its reputation as a philosophy of action, as well as clear methodological boundaries.

In contrast to this, for Girard’s theological approach based on consistently carried out monotheism, there is only Unity, the anthropological projection of which is human unity, in two opposite forms. This unity is either based on love - ‘unity in oneself and for oneself’, in Hegel’s terms, - or unity based on mutual hatred - this is ‘unity in oneself’ but not ‘for oneself’, because the antagonists do not realize that it is enmity also makes them similar to each other. This is exactly what happens, Girard argues, at the beginning of the plot of ‘Oedipus Rex’ by Sophocles, the playwright, who, coming close to solving the riddle of man, can just be called the ‘true Oedipus’, whose work is continued by Girard. As for the antagonists on the stage - Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias, their conflict can be interpreted in terms of ‘social inequality’ (for example, as Creon’s desire to become the king of Thebes himself). However, Girard’s mimetic theory (‘I want what the other wants, that is, I want to become different’) immensely expands the initial basis of social antagonism, depriving estate and class differences of any specificity.

Girard's interpretation of violence as a permanent conflict of multidirectional wills, forcing human societies to constantly revolve in the circle of the sacrificial cycle, cannot be simply discarded - this interpretation indeed explains a lot, in particular the personification of the forces of evil, that no mythology can do without and that any concept of cultural identity in its modern interpretation can hardly exist without. At the same time, there are types of violence that cannot be explained in any way by Girard's concept. For example, institutional violence, which can often take the form of violence of knowledge and reason. This form of 'violence in the name of Science' was described by M. Foucault [27] and J. Habermas [30]. For example, psychoanalysis as interpreted by Deleuze and Guattari is precisely this kind of violence of knowledge against 'untamed' desire.

Girard's theory failed, as the philosopher partly admits himself, to stand above the 'antagonism of concepts', which would have made it possible to interpret this antagonism as the antagonism of individuals - as illusory. Sharing to a degree the assessment of the 'mass' and 'crowd' by J. Ortega y Gasset [31], E. Canetti [32], S. Moscovici [33], i.e. as an active force subjugating elites and power, Girard's theory, like the philosopher from Moliere's comedy, finds itself drawn into a conflict that it hoped to resolve, thereby implicitly recognizing the inevitability of this conflict. After all, the antagonism between 'Violence and the Sacred' and 'Anti-Oedipus' is an example of this conflict, the very existence of which is an argument in favour of 'duality' and against 'unity'. At the same time, Girard's convincing deconstruction of the 'other' as an antagonist and a monster indicates the illusory nature of any antagonisms, the fundamental possibility of overcoming them. A possibility that is eliminated by more pragmatic, but somewhat more limited 'dualistic concepts', remaining, according to Levi-Strauss, new variations of the myth but not an attempt to go beyond it.

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