Girard's Philosophy of Innovation
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What does a theorist of imitation have to teach us about innovation? What could a thinker focused on the distant past have to offer us in building the immediate future? The answer to both questions, I hope to show, is: a significant amount. I aim to rescue a neglected strand of Girardian thought from one of his overlooked essays on a topic seemingly antithetical to imitation: innovation. This task will proceed in three steps. First, I will articulate two contemporary perspectives on innovation, one dominant and one in the minority. Second, I will reconstruct Girard's historical argument from "Innovation and Repetition" in favor of the minority view. Lastly, I will show how Girard's philosophy of innovation preserves crucial features of the dominant view, diagnoses a modern pathology, and provides an alternative prescription for engendering the future.

1.   Innovation and Imitation

The dominant view of innovation is that it is distinct from imitation. Economist Jacob Schmookler's utterance is representative: "The first enterprise to make a given technical change is an innovator. Its action is innovation. Another enterprise making the same technical change later is presumably an imitator, and its action, imitation."[1] This is a sentiment almost universally shared in the social sciences, from economists such as Theodore Levitt[2] and Chris Freeman[3] to sociologists like Lester Ward. Even stronger, innovation is often portrayed as being, in the words of Ward, "*opposed* to conservatism and imitation."[4] That is to say, not only are the two actions distinct, they are incompatible: one must choose between being an imitator or an innovator. The humanities' corollary is the idea of the "untutored Genius" whose source of creativity is solely internal: a fully-formed natural endowment not requiring learning nor external inspiration from divinity nor nature. This idea gained ascendancy in the 17th and 18th centuries and, according to sociologist Edward Shils, proponents believed that imitation and "submission to tradition actually impeded the manifestation of the creative power of genius."[5] Of course, not all thinkers within this dominant view saw innovation and imitation as oppositional — Joseph Schumpeter, Dennis Mueller, and John Tilton, for example, believed the two to be harmonious and spoke positively of imitation.[6] But, even then, imitation is relegated to a secondary after-thought as the mere mechanism by which innovation — the primary source of value creation — spreads.

The minority view, on the other hand, sees imitation as on a continuum with innovation. For example, Shils, rejecting the notion of the untutored genius, talked in terms of a dialectic between the two: tradition is made of past innovations, and innovation proceeds through the imitation of tradition.[7] Imitation is harmonious with innovation, not just as an afterthought by which it spreads, but as a necessary precondition. Even stronger, the dependency between the two are so constitutive to each that imitation and innovation can't be delineated — one seamlessly morphs into the other without a clear boundary. Sociologist Gabriel Tarde's comments capture the essence of this view well: "he imitated at the same time that he invented [innovated]."[8] As a first stab, we shall place Girard among this rare minority of thinkers who see imitation and innovation as on a continuum:

> In the first phase, no doubt, imitation will be rigid and myopic … after a while, however, the element of novelty in the competitor's practice will be mastered and imitation will

become bolder. At that moment, it may — or may not — generate some additional improvement [innovation] … In a truly innovative process, it is often so continuous with imitation that its presence can be discovered only after the fact, through a process of abstraction.[9]

Girard gives empirical arguments for this view, for example, citing how the economic imitators in the past three hundred years so readily become innovators in their own right: Germany to England, America to Europe, and Japan to America.[10] But the main thrust of Girard's argument, which I will turn to now, is a hermeneutical-historical one. The convincingness of his philosophy of innovation is dependent on the sense it can make out of otherwise puzzling historical phenomena.

2.   External and Internal Mediation

The historical backdrop of Girard's argument is the transition from societies of external mediation, 17th century and prior, to internal mediation, 18th century and later.[11] In external mediation, the models whom people imitate are distant. They are distant either because they are historical figures in the past (temporal distance) or because they are contemporaries *considered* different-in-essence: such as the relationship between lord and subject (social distance). In internal mediation, the models are proximate because they are contemporaries *considered* more-or-less equal. "Considered" is emphasized because the point is less about the reduction of real, material inequality than the expansion of the ideal of equality; the modern billionaire and worker may consider each other more equal than did the medieval lord and subject even if real, material inequality has not reduced. Another way to describe this transition is that the benchmark against which an individual's value was measured shifted: from proximity to a historical figure or relationship with a greater contemporary to relative standing amongst peers. Of course, external mediation exists after the 18th century and internal mediation existed prior to the 17th; Girard's point is simply that there has been a *relative* shift in the dominant mores: *imitatio Christi* giving way to "Keeping Up with the Kardashians."

This shift was accompanied by three philosophical changes. First, our relationship towards time changed from being past-focused to present-and-future-oriented. Put differently, our respect for tradition — for past people, events, and accomplishments — waned. This idea flows naturally out of the shift from external mediation (past and present) to internal mediation (only present) which represents a decrease of historical imitation. To imitate someone, for Girard, is an implicit admission that their being is desirable, worthy of imitation. The decline of the imitation of the past, as cause and consequence, reveals the decreased value we attribute to it. Second, the connotations of innovation were rehabilitated from negative to positive. The primary cause of this, Girard explains, is a change in the domain which we primarily associate innovation with. Prior to the 17th century, theology and politics were the primary domains of innovation, where it became synonymous with "heresy" and "revolution" respectively.[12] After the 18th, the primary domain of innovation was technology, where it called to mind useful inventions.[13] The denotative meaning of the word didn't change but its connotative aura did and spilled over into domains outside where that aura was formed. This story could be retold under the shift from external to internal mediation. In the external paradigm, one's value is judged by one's proximity to a distant ideal (in the case of theology, Christ). Any deviation/innovation is, of course, bad. In the internal paradigm, one's value is judged by one's relative standing against a fluctuating group

of peers (in the case of technology, competitors). Any distinctions/innovation from others is good. This intuition — that there has been a shift from "be like" to "be different from" — sets up the third philosophical change that Girard highlights: individualism. The idea here is that we now believe individuals can be self-sufficient: even though our value is *shown* through our difference against others, its *source* is solely internal. Like the untutored Genius, we don't need to rely on tradition or our proximity to great figures to grant us legitimacy.

Together, these cultural-philosophical changes accompanying internal mediation sets up the modern historical moment with two competing forces on imitation: an increased *possibility* of imitation combined with a decreased *willingness* to imitate. The reason for the increase in possibility is straightforward: in external mediation, imitation is unidirectional and stable. One imitates Christ without provoking Christ to imitate. The subject imitates the lord often without even being noticed. In internal mediation, imitation is bidirectional and dynamic: a capitalist firm copying a rival only to have its advantages copied in turn *ad infinitum*. The reason for the decrease in willingness stems from each of the three philosophical changes. First, because we aim to be self-sufficient individuals we feel it shameful to admit any imitation — any dependence on another. In a less individualistically-minded time, it was never a question of *whether* to imitate but *whom* to imitate. What was shameful was not the fact of imitation but imitating poor models. Girard suggests that our popular telling of the Renaissance humanists and Protestant reformers as exemplars who broke free from the yoke of tradition to carve their own path betrays this modern myopia.[14] Their self-conception was just the opposite. The Protestants hated innovation, which was their main accusation against the Catholics: introducing worldly elements, the Church of Rome, to the pure teachings of Christ. Their project is not one of progress but of return. And, of course, the humanists didn't have issue with the imitation of tradition rather than the lapse from it, specifically from classical antiquity. Second, innovation is now a positive concept to be strived for rather than a negative concept to be avoided. This, in conjunction with the dominant view that imitation and innovation are opposed and even conflicting, compounds the distaste to be "mere imitators." Third, our models have shifted from distant figures often in the past to proximate rivals exclusively in the present. We more readily imitate the former because their superiority to us is undeniable and the distance prevents the formation of petty rivalries. Imitation does not bring additional shame because, as Girard puts it, "in 'external mediation,' either the models have the advantage of being long-dead or of standing so far above their imitators."[15] Proximate contemporary rivals, on the other hand, are more on equal footing with us. Furthermore, whatever advantages they do have could be temporary and surpassable as our stories aren't over. Open imitation would be an admission that they are superior to us — an admission, unlike in the case of external mediation, we wouldn't have to make otherwise. In Girard's own words:

> When we imitate successful rivals, we acknowledge what we would prefer to deny — their superiority. The urge to imitate is strong, since it opens up possibilities of bettering the competition. But the urge not to imitate is also strong. The only thing that the losers can deny the winners is the homage of their imitation.[16]

With these backdrops in place — the transition from external to internal mediation, the three changes in philosophical attitudes, and the two competing forces on imitation — Girard poses the historical puzzle he aims to resolve: innovation is held in such high regard in both

industry and the humanities, why has the former engendered so much of it while the latter has stagnated? Even the staunchest critic of industry and defender of the humanities must concede that, relatively at least, the past century will be remembered for its technological innovations (the Bomb, the computer, space flight, consumer appliances, etc.) more so than the flourishing of culture. Girard's answer is that different domains in modernity encourage the two competing forces — the increased possibility or the decreased willingness to imitate — in different proportions. If the former gains ascendency, *real* innovation — innovation that is meaningful beyond the fact that it is new — ensues. If the latter is dominant, fashion — innovations noteable mostly for the sake of novelty — follows.

Industry has produced so many real innovations *because* it forces participants to imitate and alleviates the unwillingness to imitate through the profit mechanism. For Girard, profit is a reality-check, a universally-acknowledged way of determining victors and losers amongst competitive firms. This alleviates the unwillingness to imitate because if one is on the losing, less profitable side, one is forced to admit defeat. Much like external mediation, there's not a lot of mental gymnastics to be done to convince oneself otherwise and, so, there's no additional shame to imitation. On the other hand, profit encourages imitation because one needs to catch up to competitors even for bear survival; those who don't, don't last. Industry is a sobering and ruthless arena where players are so thoroughly shamed that there is no additional shame in being a "mere imitator" for basic survival. This engenders a tremendous amount of brazen imitation and a culture that has normalized it, facilitating a rapid exchange of ideas, mastery, and, eventually, innovation.

In the humanities, Girard observes, such "universally-acknowledged means of evaluation are lacking."[17] And so, the decrease in willingness overpowers the increase in possibility of imitation. For reasons we've described, "the *humility* of discipleship is experienced as *humiliating*" in modernity.[18] Where the mechanism to decide between masters and disciples — those with something to teach and those in need of learning — are weak, disciples tend to pursue the obverse strategy to industrial imitation: negative mimesis or, what Nietzsche termed, *resentment*. They "try to demonstrate their independence by systematically taking the course opposite to that of the" masters.[19] The desires to be a self-sufficient individual, to be considered innovative, to not give one's rivals the homage of imitation is so strong that if our status as "mere" disciple is at all inconclusive, we would rather renounce the domain of the master even if it goes against our own self-interest in order to preserve our pride. Girard's comments here shouldn't be mistaken for a critique limited to people in the humanities, he concedes that:

> Even in economic life, where material incentives to imitate are strongest, the urge not to imitate may prove even stronger, especially in international trade which is affected by questions of "national pride." When a nation cannot successfully compete, it is tempted to blame its failure on unfair competition, thus paving the way for protectionist measures [which goes against its own interests] that put an end to peaceful competition.[20]

Instead, Girard is critiquing the modern "theology of the self" — an exaggerated, prideful ideal of independence and refusal to be subservient that is God-like (or, more accurately, Satanic) — which permeates society but is better checked by certain domains than others.[21] When not properly contained, this excessive yearning for self-sufficiency degenerates into a seeking of difference for difference's sake which leads to fashion. What is ironic about this strategy of

negative mimesis is that it fails at the very thing it aims to achieve, independence. Negative mimesis is derivative, first, because one is still dependent on the model by being exactly other than what they are. Originality is not independence. It is derivative, second, because there tend to be trends of negative mimesis. Often, one is simply imitating a model who is distancing from the primary model. Not even is negative mimesis not independent, often, it isn't even original! Girard gives the example of the late-20th century continental intellectual climate which, infatuated with Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* as an exemplar of rebellion from structure, "drove everyone to make himself more incomprehensible than his peers."[22] This example goes to show the other major problem of negative mimesis and fashion. Tradition, such as writing with clarity and structure, often exists for good reason, and so "the obligation always to rebel may be more destructive of [real innovation] than the obligation never to rebel."[23] We may say, then, that fashion is an immanent failure: conforming to contrarianism, slavishly rallying under the banner of rebellion, and faithfully reproducing the dogmas of originality.

Girard's answer to the historical puzzle contains two arguments for the minority view. The first argument is negative and genealogical. Girard attributes the ascendency of the dominant view to the modern popularity of negative mimesis: "the tendency to define 'innovation' in more and more 'radical' and anti-mimetic terms … reflect a surrender of modern intelligence to this mimetic pressure [of fashion], a collective embrace of self-deception."[24] The idea here might be this: under the minority view, to engender real innovation "you have to openly admire the model you're imitating, you have to acknowledge your imitation. You have to explicitly recognize the superiority of those who succeed better than you and set about learning from them."[25] Since this is existentially threatening to our theology of self, the dominant view is a defensive ideology to repress this truth. By demarcating innovation and imitation, painting the two as incompatible, and elevating the former over the latter, not only do we not have to experience the humiliation of discipleship, we can proudly display the absence of imitation as proof that we are superior innovators. The second argument is positive and direct. If the dominant view is correct, then we should expect the humanities to have generated more real innovations than industry given its relative lack of imitation. The fact that the opposite is true — the domain which systematically encourages imitation has also generated more innovation — lends support to the idea that the two activities are synergistic and on a continuum.

3.   Scylla and Charybdis

Girard's argumentation so far, however, raises an immediate objection: evidently, imitation does not always lead to innovation. In fact, it often leads to sterile, lifeless reproduction. At best, Girard has shown it to be necessary, but what are the other sufficient prerequisites for real innovation? The full formulation of Girard's philosophy of innovation is encapsulated in this one utterance: "The main prerequisite for real innovation is a minimal respect of the past and a mastery of its achievements."[26] There are two points here to be unpacked. First, it is mastery and not imitation that is being prescribed. Why is this distinction important, especially since Girard sees imitation, mastery, and innovation as existing on a boundary-less continuum? Is there anything notable other than that mastery connotes a stronger command than imitation? What he may additionally have in mind is that just as negative mimesis produces comical failures when one innovates for innovation's sake, imitating for imitation's sake produces equally sterile results. Opposites at first glance, both are really motivated by the

same pathology: a radical concern for the model in either seeking distance (innovation) or seeking proximity (imitation). Mastery, on the other hand, is concerned with the object: one masters things, one imitates people. Girard's choice of language simply echoes the prescription found in his other works: "being rational — functioning properly — is a matter of having objects and being busy with them; being mad is a matter of letting oneself be taken over completely by the mimetic models."[27] Either a fetish or a resentment of the model is limiting, mastery — focusing on the object — gives one the freedom to pick and choose: imitating when expedient, innovating when necessary. Real innovation requires one to be focused with real objects and not in "being different from" nor "being like" people associated with those objects. This first point can be described as a phenomenology of innovation: the real innovator must be open to both discipleship or breaking away from tradition but not have either one as the primary goal. Innovation is a good which cannot be achieved by being aimed at, it must ensue and cannot be pursued. What makes this orientation of being object-focused possible? The second point is encapsulated in "minimal respect": minimal, as to not treat the past as unsurpassable; respect, as to see tradition as having something important to teach us. This attitude is a middle way between the Scylla of reactionary idolatry and the Charybdis of progressive renunciation.

　　This full formulation of Girard's philosophy of innovation reveals the blockers to real innovation in both historical epochs of mediation. During the era of external mediation, the danger was to veer too close to Scylla. These societies are flooded with sterile and superficial copies punctured by rare innovations whenever an individual — whether by arrogance, necessity, or lunacy — gains the courage to break from tradition. What prevents mastery is the pathology of excess imitation. The philosopher's role is to delegitimize tradition so that more may feel license to break from it. During our era of internal mediation, the threat is to chart too close to Charybdis. Our societies are littered with derivative and groundless convulsions demarcated by rare masterpieces whenever an individual — whether through grace or necessity — gains the patience and humility to learn from tradition. What prevents mastery now is the pathology of excess innovation. The philosopher's role is to elevate tradition to make it seem more worthy of emulation. In the final analysis, then, Girard spills most of his ink rehabilitating imitation only as a corrective measure addressed to our current historical moment. The full formulation of his philosophy of innovation — to have a minimal respect of the past and a mastery of its achievements — is a balanced view that sublates two extremes. It absorbs the insight from the minority view that real innovation is inseparable from imitation without believing that the latter is enough to engender the former. It preserves the concern that tradition *can* stifle innovation from the dominant view without abandoning the past altogether.

Conclusion

　　In conclusion, Girard's contributions are twofold. First, he reveals the immanent failure of the dominant view on innovation and rescues the minority view mostly abandoned by contemporary scholars. Even more, the full formulation of Girard's philosophy of innovation preserves essential qualities of both perspectives. Second, Girard untangles real innovation from its obverse, fashion. He diagnoses a modern pathology in an otherwise universally lauded virtue — our love for innovation — and articulates the necessary corrective measures. Both these contributions are theoretical in nature but with substantive practical utility: whether it be for entrepreneurs (such as myself) whose livelihoods depend on engendering real innovations or

policy makers designing systems with reality-checks to discourage negative mimesis. The two motivating questions which began this essay, then, betray modern myopia. It is precisely the theorist of imitation that has the most to teach us about innovation. And we can not build a meaningful future without engaging the past any more than we can "expect a plant to grow with its roots up in the air."[28]

Notes

1. Jacob Schmookler, *Invention and Economic Growth.* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1966), 2.

2. Theodore Levitt, "Innovative Imitation," *Harvard Business Review*, 1966, 63.

3. Chris Freeman, *Economics of Industrial Innovation.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 257.

4. Lester Frank Ward, *Pure Sociology: A Treatise on the Origin and Spontaneous Development of Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 246.

5. Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 154.

6. Godin Benoît, *Innovation Contested the Idea of Innovation over the Centuries* (Routledge, 2015), 228.

7. Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

8. Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), 143.

9. René Girard, "Innovation and Repetition," *Substance* 19, no. 63 (1990): 14.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 8.

12. Godin Benoît, *Innovation Contested the Idea of Innovation over the Centuries* (Routledge, 2015), 75–122.

13. René Girard, "Innovation and Repetition," *Substance* 19, no. 63 (1990): 10.

14. Ibid., 8.

15. Ibid., 15.

16. Ibid., 15-16.

17. Ibid., 16.

18. Ibid., 17.

19. Ibid., 16.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 19.
22. René Girard, *When These Things Begin* (MSU Press, 2014), 44.
23. René Girard, "Innovation and Repetition," *Substance* 19, no. 63 (1990): 19.
24. Ibid., 16.
25. René Girard, *When These Things Begin* (MSU Press, 2014), 44.
26. René Girard, "Innovation and Repetition," *Substance* 19, no. 63 (1990): 19.
27. René Girard, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1987), 311.
28. René Girard, "Innovation and Repetition," *Substance* 19, no. 63 (1990): 19.