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Crowd Psychology Redux

The link between fascism's power of affection (or *pathos*) and mimetic behavior was once well-known at the dawn of the twentieth century. Imitation, in its conscious and, especially, unconscious manifestations, was then a popular subject of analysis. It concerned not only philosophy and psychology but also emerging human sciences (or *logoi*) such as sociology, anthropology, and especially crowd psychology, a discipline that provided a patho-*logical* account of the mimetic contagion that fascist leaders were quick to put to political use—and abuse.

And yet, as the phantom of fascism eventually dissolved in the second half of the twentieth century, the shadow of mimesis, and its legendary power to trigger affective contagion in the crowd, progressively fell to the background of the theoretical scene and, with few exceptions, was eventually relegated to an aberrant political anomaly that concerned only the few European countries who had openly embraced fascist governments, most notably Italy and Germany.

This theoretical neglect did not prevent mimesis from operating in political practices, though. Since humans remain, for better *and* worse, eminently mimetic creatures who are formed, informed, and transformed by dominant models, including political models, we should thus not be surprised to see that as tyrannical figures reappear in times of crisis, the shadow of mimesis—understood as an affective and infective force that leads people to mimic, often unconsciously, models—falls once again on the political scene.

A genealogical approach informed by past and present developments in mimetic theory can thus help us foreground a key trigger in the rise of (new) fascist movements that has been marginalized by mainstream social and political theories, but that is now, nolens volens, center stage in political practices: namely, the irrational trigger of mimetic contagion.

Mimetic Contagion Revisited

Much of what is currently at play in the process of becoming master of the actor does not sound completely new to mimetic theorists. From the pathological narcissism of mediatized leader figures to the mimetic desires of followers modeled on such figures, from violent rivalries with political adversaries to scapegoating mechanisms against minorities, from the readiness to sacrifice innocent victims (including children) to the potential escalation of nuclear wars that, more than ever, threaten to ensue as mirroring accusations between hypermilitarized governments are set in motion, the central mimetic mechanisms René Girard described can no longer be considered part of a theory of the violent origins of culture alone. Quite the contrary. In a mirroring inversion of perspectives, mimetic theory now directly informs political practices that, as Girard was quick to sense, are currently accelerating our violent progress toward potentially catastrophic destinations.[1]

The relevance of mimetic theory for catastrophic behavior has not gone unnoticed. Informed by the work of René Girard but drawing explicitly on a tradition in crowd psychology that was attentive to mimetic contagion, the French theorist Jean-Pierre Dupuy has stressed the centrality of crowd behavior in situations of catastrophe. Drawing on Le Bon, Tarde, and especially Freud, Dupuy

usefully reminds us that "the crowd is the privileged medium [*support*] for contagious phenomena."[2] He also offers a searching study of the "ambivalence" generated by the mimetic phenomenon of panic that is attentive to the process of "violent deindividualization" that dissolves the subject.[3] This double movement, as we shall see, operates not only in situations of panic. It is also constitutive of the ambivalent affects (new) fascist leaders generate in physical crowds and virtual publics during social and political conditions that may be momentarily experienced as "normal"—yet can lead to catastrophes in the long term.

There are thus ample reasons to justify a mimetic approach to authoritarian leaders that shadow fascist models, especially since (new) fascism, and the fluxes of affective contagion it generates, is still a largely unexplored area of investigation in mimetic theory. At the same time, mimetic theory is a growing, moving, and expanding field involved in a constant process of adaptation necessary to keep up with emerging mimetic pathologies that infect the present and future. There are thus other patho-*logical* reasons as well to convoke the register of mimesis.

For instance, it is well-known that fascist leaders, old and new, appeal to emotions rather than reason, *pathos* rather than *logos*, in order to generate an enthusiastic frenzy among potential voters assembled in what used to be called a "crowd." Robert Paxton, in his informed *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2004), goes as far as saying that "subterranean passions and emotions" function as fascism's "most important register"—and rightly so, for this register is contagious, and thus mimetic, and generates what Paxton calls "the emotional lava that set fascism's foundations."[4] These foundations, he continues, include the "sense of overwhelming crisis," "the belief that one group is a victim," the desire for a "purer community," the belief in "the superiority of the leader's instinct," "the beauty of violence," "the right of the chosen people to dominate others," among other distinctive symptoms that, he specifies, "belong more to the realm of visceral feelings than to the real of reasoned propositions."[5]

What we must add is that the contagious nature of these feelings central to the subterranean foundations of fascism has been diagnosed in detail well before the rise of fascist movements. For instance, Friedrich Nietzsche is a philosopher who had the historical misfortune of having a nationalist, anti-Semitic sister who cast a political shadow on his legacy by implicating his name in the very fascist forces he denounced in his writings. Both Hitler and Mussolini presumably found a source of inspiration in Nietzsche's conception of the overman. And yet, if one takes the time to read Nietzsche, his virulent opposition to anti-Semitism, not to speak of German nationalism, should be clear enough.

Further, if one practices the art of reading as Nietzsche understands it—that is, as an art of "rumination"—then it soon becomes apparent that despite his fascination with forms of sovereign will to power, or rather because of it, he is one of the most insightful critics of mimetic pathos central to mobilizing the lava that flows through the channels of the psychology of fascism. Connecting the ancient philosophical concept of mimetic "pathos" with the modern psychological concept of "hypnosis," Nietzsche was among the first to diagnose the will to power of a "leader" (*Führer*) to cast a spell over the "masses" (*Massen*), which eventually led to massive submissions to the fascist ideologies he opposed, such as nationalism and anti-Semitism.[6]

Nietzsche was not alone in his diagnostic. The paradigm of hypnosis to account for mimetic contagion was in the air in fin-de-siècle Europe. Advocates of the newly founded discipline of crowd psychology, such as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, wanted to account for a psychological change that overcame people assembled in a crowd. Otherwise rational individuals, they observed, were suddenly easily affected by emotions—especially violent emotions that would spread contagiously, generating mimetic continuities between self and others. In their views, imitation and contagion could not easily be disentangled. As Le Bon puts it, in *Psychologie des foules* (1895), "in a crowd, every feeling, every act is contagious"; and he adds, "imitation, a phenomenon which is considered so influential on social behavior, is a simple effect of contagion."[7] Le Bon is here inverting Tarde's affirmation in *Les lois de l'imitation* (1890) that "all social similitude has imitation

as a cause," an affective cause that triggers what he calls "imitative contagions" (*contagions imitatives*).[8] Either way, on either side of the cause/effect opposition, both contagion and imitation were considered as two sides of the same coin.

Now, given that Girard is one of the few contemporary thinkers who, writing against dominant academic trends in the humanities and social sciences, has furthered the connection between mimesis and affective contagion—stressing that "contagion is at one with reciprocal violence" and generates the "effect of quasi instantaneous *mimesis*"[9]—the connection between mimetic theory and crowd psychology should be obvious, direct, and well-established.

And yet, this is not the case. Girard, for one, insisted on the mimetic dimension of the crowd in the context of sacrificial violence characteristic of past cultures, but he paid less attention to the power of fascist leaders to make us live outside of ourselves in the context of political rituals characteristic of modern cultures. Consequently, the striking continuities between mimetic theory and crowd psychology on shared matters such as mimetic contagion, loss of difference, confusion of truth and lies, *méconnaissance*, and frenzied dispossessions have largely gone unnoticed on both side of the disciplinary divide.

The aloofness is reciprocal. If crowd psychology is usually not internal to the burgeoning field of mimetic theory, Girard is not mentioned in the most informed accounts of crowd psychology.[10] This mutual neglect is unfortunate, especially when the subject of investigation is a double mimetic phenomenon that emerges from the contagious interplay between the mimetic crowd and its (new) fascist leader. Hence the need to adopt a Janus-faced perspective that brings the insights of mimetic theory into closer collaboration with the insights of crowd psychology, and vice versa.

The reasons for building a bridge between these perspectives to cast light on the shadow of fascism are manifold, but let me at least mention a few general ones at the outset. First, historically, crowd psychology emerges in critical dialogue with human sciences such as sociology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis, which are equally central to mimetic theory. Second, both perspectives share an interest in challenging a solipsistic view of subjectivity in order to call attention to the relational, affective, and interpersonal power of mimetic affects. And third, both are in line with a theory of the unconscious that is not based on a repressive hypothesis but on a mimetic hypothesis instead. That is, a hypothesis that pays attention to an involuntary mirroring tendency to reproduce expressions and thoughts of others, especially dominant, authoritarian, and fascist others.

Let us look at this hypothesis more closely.[11]

The Age of the Crowd (Le Bon to Tarde)

The laws of imitation are psychological in nature, but crowd psychologists were quick to sense their direct political applications. Both Le Bon and Tarde, in fact, pointed out that "leaders" (*meneurs*) rely on mimetic laws in order to cast a spell on the psychic life of crowds. Comparing the power of leaders to the power of hypnotists, they drew from a psychological tradition that had hypnosis as a *via regia* to the unconscious in order to account for the fluxes of affective contagion that introduce collective sameness in place of individual difference. In particular, they relied on the notion of "suggestion" understood as a psychological propensity of crowds to unconsciously or semiconsciously mimic and assimilate ideas, opinions, and attitudes coming from others, especially respected, dominant, or prestigious others.

Crowd psychology, we should be prepared, does not hold up a flattering, narcissistic mirror to the psychic life of the ego in a crowd. It is perhaps also for this reason that, even in a post-Romantic period in which originality has been proved to be a *mensonge* (Girard's term), its major insights tend to be ignored. Le Bon summarizes the major psychological characteristics of the crowd thus:

> Dissolution of conscious personality, dominance of the unconscious personality, orientation by way of
> suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas toward the same direction; tendency to transform suggested

ideas immediately into actions: these are the principal characteristics of the individual who is part of a crowd. He is no longer himself but an automaton whose will no longer has the power to lead.[12]

Not only does an automaton lack the power to lead; he also desires to be led. This is, indeed, a troubling image not only for the mimetic psychology it presupposes but also, and above all, for the politics it can lead to. If we take this diagnostic of the mimetic crowd literally, the politics that ensues can in fact be potentially complicit with, rather than critical of, fascism.

The shadow of authoritarian politics haunts crowd psychology. Le Bon, for one, writing out of fear of the socialist masses, argued for the need of a prestigious leader or *meneur,* which, according to his conservative political agenda, was necessary to give the body politic a head. Considered from a political perspective, then, Le Bon is not the most obvious candidate to convoke in a *critique* of fascism, be it old or new—if only because his conservative politics, his fear of the specter of socialism (rather than of fascism), and above all, his openly racist, sexist, and classist assumptions of crowds as "feminine," "primitive," "savage," etc., did not withstand the test of history, contribute to the problem we are denouncing, and deserve to be diagnosed in terms of what I call a "mimetic pathology."[13] Le Bon will thus certainly not serve as our *political* guide in the critique of (new) fascism that follows.

And yet, at the same time, we should not hasten to throw out the baby of crowd psychology with the conservative political water in which it was born. Although the two are sometimes difficult to disentangle, the fact that we radically disagree with Le Bon's political conclusions does not mean that we should reject his mimetic insights. That both Mussolini and Hitler benefited from Le Bon's strategies to cast a spell on the crowd speaks against his politics but unfortunately also confirms his mimetic theory. Similarly, if Trump benefited from Girardian insights into the logic of mimesis, we should condemn its political use, but we have one more reason to take the theory seriously.[14] Crowds and scapegoats tend to go hand in hand, and (new) fascist leaders can be quick to learn the mimetic lesson. Hence we better catch up.

Genealogically speaking, crowd psychology paved the way and articulated laws of imitation that reach into the present. Le Bon, for instance, had identified distinctive rhetorical mechanisms that fascist leaders would soon use to trigger mimetic contagion in the crowd. They included, among other things, the power of repetition, the affective role of gestures and facial mimicry, the use of images rather than thoughts, of concise affirmations rather than rational explanations, the adoption of an authoritarian tone and posture—all of which, he specified, have the power to "impress the imaginations of crowds."[15] As he puts it: "The crowd being only impressed by excessive feelings, the orator who wants to seduce it must rely excessively on violent affirmations: exaggerating, affirming, repeating and never attempting to demonstrate anything through reason";[16] these are the strategies familiar to both orators and fascist leaders. Of particular importance, he also added, is the repetition of a simple nationalist "slogan" (say, a country made "great again") that unites the crowd, accompanied by a "captivating and clear image" (say, a "wall") that resolves a complex problem, as if by "magic."[17]

This diagnostic has not been popular in the second half of the past century, but unfortunately the rhetoric of fascism continues to cast a spell on the present century. It is thus perhaps useful to note that Le Bon was not alone in his diagnostic of the irrationality of the masses—he was simply the most popular divulgator. Before Le Bon, Gabriel Tarde provided sociological foundations to the connection between imitation and crowd behavior, stretching to define not only the crowd, but society as a whole in terms of contagious imitation.

While politically moderate, Tarde's diagnostic of imitation is no less severe, for he extends the laws of imitation from the crowd to society as a whole. Thus he defines the social group as "a collection of individuals who are imitating each other . . . insofar as their common traits are ancient copies of the same model."[18] And stressing the role of "unconscious imitation" (*imitation inconsciente*), which operates on the model of hypnotic suggestion in the formation of the social bond, he specifies: "Having only suggested ideas and believing them spontaneous: this is the illusion proper to the somnambulist and to the social man."[19] Like Le Bon, Tarde relies on the psychological

notion of hypnotic suggestion in order to account for the unconscious tendency of social beings to adopt ideas that are external to the self as one's own, as if in a kind of somnambulistic sleep.

Again, the image is not flattering, but does it mean that it is false? It is actually shared by a number of influential theorists who do not explicitly work within the field of crowd psychology, yet further this tradition nonetheless. Elias Canetti, for instance, will define the crowd in terms of a "state of absolute equality," for "it is for the sake of this equality that people become a crowd"; but he also immediately adds, along lines that have clear political undertones: "Direction is essential for the continuing existence of the crowd. Its constant fear of disintegration means that it will accept *any* goal."[20] On a philosophical front, Hannah Arendt specifies: "Society is always prone to accept a person offhand for what he pretends to be, so that a crackpot posing as a genius always has a certain chance to be believed."[21] And she adds in terms that have not lost their validity but found ample confirmation in recent manifestations of self-proclaimed "stable geniuses" instead: "In modern society, with its characteristic lack of discerning judgment, this tendency is strengthened, so that someone who not only holds opinions but presents them in a tone of unshakable conviction will not so easily forfeit his prestige, no matter how many times he has been demonstrably wrong."[22]

A critical look at the contemporary political scene should be sufficient to prove the accuracy of such a diagnostic: we remain, indeed, eminently vulnerable to suggestion. It does not sound nice to say it, but crowd psychology urges us to consider that our ideas, emotions, opinions, and goals might not always be as original as they appear to be. They may at least be partially shaped mimetically, unconsciously, and hypnotically by the models or leaders that surround us. This is the reason why the mimetic unconscious is already a political unconscious. Its relational nature makes us vulnerable to all kinds of external influences, be they positive or negative, therapeutic or pathological, democratic or fascist.

Mimetic influences are especially visible in the crowd as subjects capitulate to fascist leaders who exploit the insights of crowd psychology to foster authoritarian regimes. But since fascist leaders grew out of mass support, we should not feel exempt from such mimetic influences in democratic countries as well. The spell of the word "democracy" is no protection for all kinds of mass-manipulations. As Jacob Bernays recognized in *Propaganda* (1928): "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic societies."[23] And capitalizing on crowd psychology, as well as on the insight that "politics was the first big business in America," Bernays sets out to explain how "the minority [i.e., the rich] has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities [by] mold[ing] the mind of the masses [so] that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction."[24] His book, which relied on Le Bon's and Tarde's theses, might be little read today in classes of critical theory, but his lessons in "public relations" are fully exploited in economic and political practices.

In the wake of the massive success of crowd psychology in the past, we can perhaps better understand why more recent social theorists have urged us to revisit this marginalized tradition. Serge Moscovici, for instance, in his informed account of crowd psychology, *The Age of the Crowd* (1985), finds it "astonishing that even today we believe that we can ignore its concepts and dispense with them."[25] His cautionary reminder is worth repeating: "At some time or another, every individual passively submits to the decisions of his chiefs and his superiors"; and he adds, in a mimetic mood, "the crowd is everyone, you, me, all of us."[26] More recently, Christian Borch ends his wide-ranging *The Politics of Crowds* (2012) with the realization that the "specter of crowds haunt[s] again sociological thought."[27] Borch also specifies that the "notion of suggestion, might prove more analytically useful than its bad reputation suggests."[28] What we must add is that this psychological notion remains especially useful if what is at stake is the politics of fascist crowds.

Suggestion and Desire (Freud to Girard)

Why is the reputation of suggestion bad? And if it was bad in the past century, is it worth reevaluating it for the present century? At first sight, fin-de-siècle statements about the suggestibility of crowds could indeed be seen as the product of a past generation of social theorists who relied on an old-fashioned and long disproved model of hypnosis to account for the power of leaders to influence the masses. This view is much influenced by Sigmund Freud, who was himself a theorist of crowd behavior. In *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921), the father of psychoanalysis, in fact, dismissed suggestion as a "magical" concept that "explains everything [and] was itself to be exempt from explanation."[29] As I have outlined Freud's trial of hypnosis elsewhere, a brief summary must suffice here.[30]

Freud's diagnostic of what he called "crowd psychology" (*Massenpsychologie*) rests on the shoulders of the tradition we have just considered. In fact, he explicitly echoed Le Bon's and Tarde's question as he asked: "Why . . . do we invariably give way to this contagion when we are in a group?"[31] The answer, however, proved originally different. Freud, in fact, broke with the mimetic tradition that had suggestion as a main door to the unconscious by establishing a distinction between two "emotional ties" that bind the crowd to the leader, most notably "desire" and "identification"—or as Freud also puts it, wanting to *have* as opposed to wanting to *be* the other.[32]

Schematically put, Freud stretches his personal psychology to account for crowd psychology via three structurally related theoretical steps. First, he posits that "libido" or "love" (wanting to have) is what constitutes "the essence of the group mind" in the sense that members of the crowd love the leader, just as members of an army love their commander, and members of the Church love Christ. Second, he complicates this account by inserting a second emotional tie, namely, "identification" (wanting to be), by saying in a more recognizably mimetic language that "identification endeavours to mould a person's own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model." And finally, he triangulates these two emotional ties by stating that "identification is based on the possibility or *desire* of putting oneself in the same situation."[33] Desire, in other words, paves the way for identification; wanting to have what the model has leads to wanting to be the model.

But is it really so? Or is it the other way around? This is, indeed, Girard's question as he zeroes in on a structural ambivalence in Freud's account of social formation in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), thereby aligning himself with the tradition of crowd psychology that concerns us. On the one hand, Girard points out that Freud posits the primacy of desire (or object cathexis) over identification (or mimesis); on the other hand, he also notices that Freud defines identification as "the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person."[34] Which version is true? As Girard argued, "Freud saw that path of mimetic desire stretching out before him and deliberately turned aside."[35] In Girard's inversion of the Freudian model, then, it is because the subject of the crowd identifies with the model qua leader *first* that he or she ends up desiring what he desires. Hence, in his view, "the mimetic model directs the disciple's desire to a particular object by desiring it himself."[36] Mimesis, for Girard, is thus central not only to personal psychology, but to crowd psychology as well.

In the wake of Girard's reframing of Freud's account of crowd psychology, the problematic of identification has been amply discussed in mimetic theory. The connection with fascist politics has also been noticed, most notably by Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, who in *The Freudian Subject* (1982) persuasively exposed the narcissistic nature of Freudian politics. As Borch-Jacobsen puts it toward the conclusion of a rigorous reading of *Group Psychology*: "The leader is a narcissistic object: the group members love *themselves* in him, they recognize him as their master because they recognize *themselves* in him."[37] Even without having read Freud, this dynamic of recognition should now be familiar. Mirroring reflections are all too visibly exploited by narcissistic leaders qua masters who turn this desire for recognition to new fascist uses.

But Borch-Jacobsen goes farther as he notices not only a narcissistic but also an authoritarian bent implicit in Freudian politics. As he puts it: "Like Gustave Le Bon, to whose analyses he owes more than he is ready to acknowledge, Freud places the chief at the beginning and the helm of the group, the Masse. . . . Only the chief (only the *Führer*, since that is how Freud translates Le Bon's

meneur) assures the cohesion of that mass."[38] This is a serious objection that casts a shadow on psychoanalysis. For Borch-Jacobsen, in fact, Freudian politics, not unlike Le Bon's politics, is mimetic, narcissistic, and potentially fascist politics.

The Return of Suggestion

Again, this politics should be condemned for political reasons; yet this does not mean that the model of hypnotic suggestion Freud foreclosed in his account of the crowd for theoretical reasons has stopped operating on a massive scale. There are in fact at least two problems with Freud's avowed "resistance"[39] to the hypnotic tradition of the unconscious internal to crowd psychology—one historical, the other theoretical. Historical because, as I mentioned, both Hitler and Mussolini directly benefited from Le Bon's manual on how to cast a spell on the crowd, relying not only on the concept of "suggestion" but also on hypnotic practices like authoritarian affirmation, repetition, use of gestures and images, postponements of meetings in the evening in order to better induce hypnosis—mimetic techniques that, as William Connolly recently argued, are still effectively mobilized by aspirational fascist leaders who trigger "fascist contagion."[40] Theoretical because Freud never stopped being haunted by the riddle of suggestion, which, as Borch-Jacobsen demonstrated, continues to latently inform his notion of identification and transference.[41]

If we further these important historical/theoretical objections, a mimetic supplement is in order. While Freud denied the existence of a direct "sympathy" responsible for the affective "contagion" that spreads from self to others in a crowd,[42] Tarde affirmed the possibility of a type of "sympathy" or "unconscious imitation" based on what he called, on the shoulders of a physio-psychological diagnostic of the mimetic unconscious, "an innate tendency in the nervous system toward imitation."[43] Do I feel the *pathos* of the other directly, so that a mirroring *sym-pathos* ensues, or is a form of mediation or triangulation necessary? This riddle remained unresolved for a long time, but with the benefit of political and theoretical hindsight, we should now be in a position to adjudicate between these competing accounts of the unconscious that (new) fascist leaders have learned to manipulate.

Crowd psychologists relied on a psychological—or better, physio-psychological—conception of the mimetic unconscious that was much neglected in the past Freudian century but that is currently returning to the foreground in the twenty-first century. An important scientific discovery is in fact lending increasing support to the mimetic foundations of human behavior, including, albeit indirectly, collective, mass behavior. A group of Italian neuroscientists led by Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese discovered in the 1990s so-called mirror neurons in macaque monkeys, with striking implications for understanding human behavior as well.

Mirror neurons are motor neurons, that is, neurons responsible for motion, that fire not only when we move but also at the sight of movements such as gestures and facial expressions performed by others. Thus, the mirror neuron system (MNS), as it is now called in humans, "triggers" in the subject the unconscious reflex of reproducing the gestures or expressions of others, generating mirroring effects that are not under the full control of consciousness and are in this sense un-conscious.[44] Since empirical evidence is currently supporting the pre-Freudian idea that there is, indeed, an innate tendency to imitate in the nervous system, a mimetic conception of the unconscious that had long been forgotten becomes strikingly relevant again.

This mimetic reproduction might not be fully conscious, but it is nonetheless useful to consciousness. Advocates of the mimetic unconscious like Nietzsche and Tarde, Pierre Janet or Georges Bataille had in fact already pointed out that such mirroring effects play a crucial role in nonverbal forms of mimetic communication that are central to subject formation. And neuroscientists are currently confirming the role of the MNS in "understanding" the actions and intentions of others on the basis of a relational conception of subjectivity in which the gestures and expressions of the other are immediately felt, and thus understood, by the ego. As Rizzolatti and

Sinigaglia put it, the "primary" function of the "mirror neuron system" concerns their "role linked to understand the meaning of the actions of others."[45] According to this view, we don't understand others only through the mediation of our mind (though we certainly do that too). At a most basic level, we understand others through an "embodied simulation" that gives us an immediate access to the psychic life of the other.[46] Hence "understanding" is now considered one of the primary functions of mirror neurons.

And yet, the double lenses of mimetic theory and crowd psychology also provide an important genealogical reminder. Mirroring mechanisms that are not under the full control of rational consciousness can be linked to rationality and logical understanding, for sure, but can also provide a breeding ground for irrational misunderstandings, not to speak of deception, manipulation, and violence. (New) fascist leaders may thus not promote logical understanding in their political speeches, but they sure know how to make mirror neurons fire via gestures that trigger mimetic pathos.

Trump's rhetoric is, once again, a case in point. It should not be dismissed for its logical weakness but studied closely for its mimetic effectiveness. He does not simply report a political program from a rational distance. Rather, he aggressively embodies his role with affective pathos. And it is the pathos, the aggressive tonality, the mimicry, histrionics, the shouts, and the gestures that fire mirror neurons among members of the crowd. The masses at Trump's rallies are incredibly suggestible, not only because the crowd dynamic diminishes human rational faculties and increases the receptivity to what others feel (horizontal mimesis), but also because Trump relies on his skills as an actor, amplified by the spell he has already cast as a fictional persona, to trigger such emotions from the top down (vertical mimesis).

Thus, when Trump condemns the media as fake, pointing at them as if he could fire them; when he induces fear of minorities by calling them "rapists"; when he convokes the image of a "wall," rising his arm to suggest a wall magically rising; when he incites the crowd with an aggressive slogan that can be chanted in chorus ("Lock her up!"); or when he performatively proclaims the ban of Muslims—when he does these things, he speaks as an actor; or, as Plato would have put it, he speaks in a *mimetic* rather than in a diegetic register impersonating his role in speech but also body and mimicry.[47] Consequently, Trump's rhetoric should be taken seriously not simply for *what* it says (the message and the ultranationalism, racism, militarism, and the pro-war, authoritarian policies it conveys) but also, and above all, for *how* he says it (the medium and the use of gestures, expressions, and shouts it mediates), a mimetic mass medium that communicates directly, by sympathy, to the nervous system or brain of an already aroused crowd.

Now, if we establish a genealogical link that bridges the origins of mimetic theory with its most recent developments, there are plenty of reasons to take Trump's histrionics seriously. Why? Because the embodied, affective, and performative dimension of his mimetic speeches, mimicry, and gestures triggers mirroring effects that have an influence on what subjects feel and think. These subjects are already susceptible to being affected by mimesis, not only because of the mirroring structure of their brains, or solely because an identification with Trump was already in place, but also because being part of a crowd subjected to a prestigious leader already begins to dissolve the boundaries dividing self and others via a mode of contagious communication that amplifies the mirroring tendencies of *Homo mimeticus.*

Reframed in this real-life scenario, it is clear that mirror neurons are not only central to understanding. They are also effective in generating a mimetic pathos that is deprived of all logical understanding whatsoever—yet is politically effective in generating affective and infective pathologies nonetheless. This is not a new insight. A mimetic tradition that goes from Plato to Nietzsche, Bataille to Derrida, to Girard and beyond has continuously alerted us that mimesis is an ambivalent concept that cuts both ways, for it is the source of both insight and deception, therapies and infections, or to use our language, patho-*logies* and pathologies.

A diagnostic *logos* on the infective power of mimetic *pathos* is especially necessary if these mirroring mechanisms are not triggered within the organized structure of the lab in which scientists zero in on an ideal brain considered in isolation. Mirror neurons are, in fact, particularly active outside the lab as well, and tend to fire in collective situations that blur the boundaries between self

and others and accentuate mimetic behavior. As crowd psychologists noted, recuperating an insight as old as Plato, in a crowd the subject is impressed by gestures, mimicry, and authoritative affirmations. The figure on the stage might be far from an ideal model, yet he triggers embodied reactions nonetheless.

What we must add is that the contemporary subject of the crowd is also continuously exposed to an affective contagion reloaded in the virtual sphere by what Gabriel Tarde called "the public." And if the crowd is suggestible to fascist messages, the public is suggestible to fascist uses of (new) media.

The Age of the Public

Supplementing Le Bon's claim that we live in the "age of the crowd," Gabriel Tarde replied at the dawn of the twentieth century that we are entering the "era of the public" (*ère du public*) in which contagion operates at a distance, inaugurating what he called the "social group of the future."[48] The public, for Tarde, is a crowd in which its members are not in direct physical contact. Rather, he says that the contact is purely "virtual" insofar as members of a public are exposed to a *mass* medium while being physically isolated. As Tarde puts it, they are held together by fluxes of mental "contagion without contact" (*contagion sans contact*) mediated by what he calls a "suggestion at a distance" (*suggestion à distance*).[49]

How does a mental suggestion contaminate from a distance? How can a pathos of *distance* turn into a *sym*-pathos (feeling with)? Tarde's answer is that the public's affective contagion is purely mental and is triggered by what he calls "the unconscious illusion that our feelings are shared with a great number of minds" who are reading the same information "simultaneously."[50] Simultaneity of exposure to a mass medium, in other words, is crucial for a contagious dissemination of a message at a distance.

Have you ever wondered, for instance, why today's newspaper—or, to update the analogy, the latest Facebook post or tweet—is so exciting, while yesterday's "news," no matter how interesting the message, does not actually *feel* interesting? Tarde's answer is simple but fundamental and concerns the medium rather than the message: namely, because today's news is shared with other members of a public whereas yesterday's isn't. In his view, it is this *shared mental experience* that generates a mimetic contagion at a distance. We are affected by the belief that others are affected as well, that our pathos is a sym-pathos—thus, a new virtual pathology is born.

The pathos generated by an affective participation has only increased by new interactive social media, and the degree of simultaneous media exposure to all kinds of mimetic pathologies has skyrocketed to unprecedented degrees. Yet, Tarde's laws of imitation have not lost their patho-*logical* validity. Quite the contrary, they remind us of the fundamental psychic fact that news is interesting news independently of whether its *message* is true news or fake news. What matters is that the *medium* disseminates virtually shared, daily news.

Tarde's analysis of the ways mass media contribute to generating an unconscious mass opinion that could easily be manipulated from a distance was primarily focused on newspapers. While he considered publics more capable of reflection than crowds, he continued to worry that the "docile and gullible" reader remains easy prey to unconscious influences or suggestions. He also feared a shift in the quality of media in the transition from books to newspapers, which he summarized with the following formula: "It has been said that the man who reads a single book is to be feared; but what about the man who reads a single newspaper"—and he adds, self-critically: "This man is each one of us."[51]

Tarde did not live long enough to see a period in which not even a single newspaper is being read. What about the person who reads the news from a single Facebook or Twitter account? Is this person soon becoming each one of us? There lies the contemporary danger. And yet, Tarde's laws of imitation nonetheless continue to speak to present virtual publics and the somnambulism they

generate. His anticipation of "fast communications" with the power to generate a "virtual crowd," which he prophetically designated as the "social group of the future," not only proved historically correct,[52] it also paved the way for more recent philosophical recuperations of the notion of crowd qua public.

Peter Sloterdijk, for instance, on the shoulders of Tarde, speaks of a society in which "one is a mass without seeing others,"[53] thereby recuperating Tarde's notion of public in order to account for a shift from a culture of leadership to one of entertainment. As he puts it, "The secret of the leader of that time and the celebrities of today consists in the fact that they resemble their dullest admirers more strongly than any person involved dares imagine."[54] Sloterdijk, it's worth noticing, did not have Donald Trump as an example to support his point. Since we do, we have even more reasons to take crowd psychology seriously.

Conversely, and in a more cynical view, Jean Baudrillard speaks of the "silence" cast on masses in postmodern societies in which "the masses have no opinion and information does not inform them."[55] Baudrillard recuperates the category of "mass" from the mimetic tradition that concerns us, and in many ways, his claim about the failure of information to inform mass opinion is a radicalization of Tarde's analyses. He also anticipates an age of generalized disinformation that currently goes under the rubric of "post-truth," an age that no longer rests on the logic of representation but is dominated by hyperreal simulations that have no connection with reality whatsoever. This proliferation of simulation leads to what he calls the death of the political, of the social, and of reality as such. As he puts it: "Models of simulation and imaginary referent for use by a phantom political class which now no longer knows what kind of 'power' it wields over it, the mass is at the same time the death, the end of this political process thought to rule over it."[56]

Baudrillard's point is well taken, but we should also specify that this phantom political class has materialized. Consequently, hyperreal simulations continue to produce mimetic effects rooted in the materiality of real life. Perhaps, then, the epistemic break between simulation and mimesis might not be as clear-cut as Baudrillard at times suggests. His provocative claim that "the only genuine problem is the silence of the mass, the silence of the silent majority"[57] who can no longer be represented, for it is alienated and has "imploded" as a black hole, does not fully account for the mimetic or, as I prefer to call it, hypermimetic circulation that allows for fictional shows to churn out apprentice presidents—and for mimetic voters to not so silently bring simulated yet nonetheless real presidents to power.

No matter how hyperreal the medium, there is an embodied materiality to mimesis that is hard to erase. Judging from the success of all kinds of actors with crowds and publics alike, it seems that we have never been more mimetic and vulnerable to hypnotic suggestion. This is indeed what Timothy Snyder recently suggests as he convokes the pre-Freudian language of "hypnosis" and "trance" in order to account for a "logic of the spectacle" in which "the two-dimensional world of the internet [is] more important than the three-dimensional world of human contact."[58] Perhaps we're even entering a new stage in the laws of imitation that blurs the line between hyperreal simulations and real mimesis, and which I propose to call hypermimesis.

Following the laws of imitation from the crowd to the public allowed us to stretch the analysis of mimetic behavior into a hypermimetic present in which hyperreal simulations have real, all too real mimetic effects. The age of virtual publics also confirms the Nietzschean diagnostic that figures like actors who are at home in the world of fiction are now in a better position to rely on all kinds of new media that blur the line between the private and the public, fiction and politics, truth and lies, hyperreal simulations and dramatic impersonations. What we still need to consider is that hypermimesis is central to mass identifications with new leaders who become popular via reality *shows* first, before becoming masters of that *reality* show par excellence that politics is currently becoming.

To Have or to Be? Trumping the Question

If we now return to the present on the joint shoulders of mimetic theory and crowd psychology, it is apparent that mimetic communication played a key role in Donald Trump's election and is likely to remain center stage in the rise of new fascist leaders. In addition to Trump's embodiment of traditional features of the American Dream (most notably his wealth, be it real or, more realistically, fictional), his mediatized persona staged in TV shows like *The Apprentice* is also likely to have amplified his power of mimetic fascination in the sphere of fiction among the *public* first, thereby paving the way for his political success in the *crowd* of supporters as well.

As Umberto Eco was quick to warn us in his account of "Ur-fascism," in an age in which fascist leaders can take over old and new media like the television and the Internet, "we must be ready to identify other kinds of Newspeak, even if they take the apparently innocent form of a popular talk show."[59] Popular reality shows hosted by soon-to-be apprentice presidents are particularly insidious and dangerous, for they already blur the line between reality and fiction and pave the way for turning the political itself into a fiction.[60]

Since this hypermimetic interplay between fiction and politics, public and crowds, real imitations and hyperreal simulations is indeed central to the rise of new fascist leaders, in guise of conclusion let us take Eco's warning seriously and put mimetic theory to the test in the sphere of a mimetic fiction first in order to see if the psychoanalytical distinctions between identification and desire, wanting to have and wanting to be, apply to hypermimetic politics as well.

In *The Apprentice*, mimesis is center stage, for identification is at least double as it operates both inside the show and outside, in the real world. Inside the show, the carefully selected candidates that tightly fit normative standards of beauty and conform to aggressive neoliberal values (radical individualism, ruthless ambition, competitive rivalry, etc.) serve as models that attract identification of viewers outside the show as well. Spectators of *The Apprentice* must in fact have a desire to be (like) the potential apprentices and, as in all agonistic contests, are likely to identify with one of the two competing teams.

And yet, since these competing candidates are themselves subjects motivated by the desire to be a successful businessperson, of which Trump sets himself up as an ideal, a hierarchy of models is already in place that situates spectators at two removes from the ideal model. The mimetic logic is simple, hierarchical, and effective: spectators identify with the apprentices who identify with the master. From such a distance, the spectators' mimetic pathos is first and foremost shared with the apprentice candidates and their efforts to fulfill a given business-related task.

This identification, however, is limited; it usually lasts until the much-coveted spectacle at the culmination of each episode. As the losing team needs to face the boardroom chaired by Trump and often including his family members, in order to account for their failure, a predictable mimetic and quasi-sacrificial turn ensues: the members of the team usually gang up against a single victim and designate a scapegoat. Responsibility for violence is thus structurally located within the mimetic team, thereby clearing the way for the sacrificer, in all good conscience, to point his finger and pull the trigger of his notorious symbolic execution expressed with pathos: "You're fired!"

The desire of the candidate to become an apprentice millionaire in a materialist-oriented culture that promotes models like Trump is of course not original; it is dictated by real and fictional models that are already pervasive in the culture and are visibly at play in shows like *The Apprentice.* That this desire leads to rivalry, not with the mediator as such, who remains at the superior level of what Girard calls "external mediation,"[61] but with the other members of the "team" is equally inevitable given the rivalrous dimensions of the show based on a process of progressive elimination itself modeled on the competitive structure of neoliberal capitalism. Hence, the need for a violent exclusion—often via aggressive and pitiless accusations that designate the so-called weakest member of the team—already emerges from within the rivalrous community.

It's a basic and rather crude strategy of survival that allows the firing to be directed against what Girard calls a "single victim [that] can be substituted for all the potential victims."[62] That spectators enjoy watching such a show is itself confirmation of the public appeal of violence in which one or more victims are "fired" allowing the other members of the "team" to continue the show—at least

until the next ritual firing takes place. The dynamic perfectly conforms to the Girardian schema: the desire for the same object inevitably leads to rivalry, violence, and ultimately sacrifice as a cathartic resolution for the spectator to enjoy at a distance. It is in fact difficult to find a clearer and more condensed illustration of Girard's theory.

But, we may also wonder, who is the "you" who is being "fired" here? And why should we identify with the sacrificer in the first place? Here the mimetic dynamic is less clear. But if we are right in assuming that in a mass-mediatized culture the division between the new media and mass behavior is not clear-cut, it might have played a major role in Trump's political victory nonetheless. Let's take a closer diagnostic look.

Within the show, the victim is the fired apprentice, of course. But if we happened to identify with his/her position—unless one is writing on Trump, why watch the show otherwise?—there is a psychic side of the public that vicariously experiences being fired as well. The finger/gun pointing at the failed apprentice framed in a medium shot that breaks the fourth wall comes close to pointing to us as well; and as the apprentice's dreams of success fail within the reality show, so do ours—at one remove from the show, in real life.

This dynamic is, in a sense, not new. As Georges Bataille recognized, this is after all the shared function of both sacrificial and tragic "spectacles": we experience death, physical or symbolic, via the "subterfuge" of a sacrificial victim—real or fictional—who "dies" in our place. Tragedies, novels, movies, and now reality shows offer repeated occasions for these vicarious sacrificial experiences Bataille groups under the rubric of "spectacle."[63] As he puts it: "It is a question, at least in tragedy, of identification with a character that dies and of believing that we die, while remaining alive."[64] And since we are not seriously affected by this death, Bataille specifies: "But it's a comedy!"[65] Thus, Bataille concludes: "Man does not live by bread alone but by comedies through which he voluntarily deceives himself."[66] Needless to say, a mass-mediatized culture exploits this need for daily deceptions. Judging from the success of such sacrificial shows, they have become our daily bread.

These deceptions are certainly at play in all kinds of spectacles with a mass appeal. But what if we live in ages in which comedies have dramatic political effects in real life as well? If we don't let go of this hypermimetic dynamic, we notice that after the firing, spectators' identificatory allegiances inevitably shift from the now (symbolically) dead apprentice qua sacrificial victim toward the narcissistic business model qua sacrificer. An interesting mimetic shift from the (failed) apprentice to the (ideal) model has thus just taken place that cuts across the distinction between show and reality.

The show, in other words, is not about the apprentice; it is about the master. Trump is visibly the original narcissistic model the apprentice is supposed to mimic within the reality *show*. At one remove, in *reality*, spectators may initially identify with the sacrificial apprentice, until the firing devalues the apprentice and glorifies the power of Trump. Put in more classical terms, identification with Trump is a dramatic effect of the tragic structure (or *muthos*) of this show. Hence a perverse desire to be Trump, to identify with the sacrificer rather than the victim is automatically triggered by the mimetic plot of the show every time that a firing takes place, generating mimetic pathos. Whether it generates the catharsis of tragic emotions like pity and fear, is uncertain, but it certainly generates a contagious demand for more pathos.[67] The show ran for fifteen seasons; it was still ongoing at the time Trump decided to enter another reality television show and run for the presidency.

We were wondering why the victim identifies with the oppressor, not only in reality shows but also in political fictions. *The Apprentice* illustrates a perverse hypermimetic dynamic that is now at play in political spectacles as well. In their social *reality*, the working-class voters who supported Trump are actually on the side of the sacrificial victims. Living in miserable social conditions, deprived of basic social services, not sustained by unions, driven by fear of others, and subjected to real forms of deprivation that render their lives precarious, they are not likely to fire anyone anytime soon in real life—but can always potentially be fired instead. And, paradoxically, for this reason they are deeply impressed by the power they lack and wish to have.

This mimetic paradox is then aggravated by an increasingly mediatized political world modeled on a form of aggressive, rivalrous, and violent entertainment in which it is becoming increasingly difficult—Bataille would say impossible—to distinguish between life and fiction, the show and the reality, especially in a population who has been deprived of a solid education in the humanities central for the development of critical thought. Hence, if members of a public have already identified with Trump in a mass-mediatized fictional reality *show*, they are also likely to identify with him in an equally mediatized political *reality* show; if they enjoyed a violent rhetoric within the show, they are likely to enjoy the same rhetoric in real life; if they were suggestible as a public they are likely to have their suggestibility amplified in a crowd.

The fact that the medium remains the same in the shift from entertainment to politics, and that politics is itself modeled on entertainment, confuses the reality and the show, politics and fiction. Hence as politics is experienced as a fiction, politicians are evaluated according to their dramatic performance—rather than their political message. Spectators of the reality show at Trump's rallies might thus have aesthetic rather than political criteria in mind as their mimetic unconscious might lead them to ask: Could I identify with the protagonist? Did he make me feel good? Or if I feel far from good, did his accusations and denigrations at least make me feel better—and others worse? Above all, would I want to watch this show on television again tomorrow? And as I think of the next show, doesn't America already begin to feel great again?

True, these are questions that pertain to a reality *show*; but since the show has become reality, is it so unlikely that they are now used to rate political spectacles as well? My point is that on top of what Trump represents in a culture already driven by having rather than being, what seems rather than what is, shows like *The Apprentice* paved the way for the election of an apprentice president in real life. And this is a tragedy!

Was the desire to be Trump triggered by what he has, or is it the other way around? If Freud argued that desire for an "object" (his term for a woman, most notably the mother) precedes identification with a model qua father figure, and Girard, in a mirroring inversion of perspectives, stressed that identification with the model actually directs the desire toward the object, the case of Trump blurs the line between these two distinct "emotional ties" insofar as both the desire to be and to have are simultaneously constitutive of the mimetic *pathos* he triggers.

As the name capitalized on his towers makes visible for all to see, Trump is indeed the name of both a subject and an object—the fake-golden brand plastered on objects being so constitutive of the subject that it cannot be dissociated from what he "is." Spectators qua voters who identify with Trump do so because of what he has, which already defines what he is, and who/what they would like to be/have as well. From Trump Tower to Trump Golf Courses, Trump Casinos to Trump Beauty Pageants, Trump Wine to Trump Steaks, to whatever other "objects" he owns, an untidy intermixture of wanting to be and wanting to have is at play in the mimetic *pathos* that ties Trump to his crowd of supporters, trumping the fundamental distinction on which Freud's account of mass psychology rests.

As the pre-Freudian tradition of crowd psychology suggested, then, the case of Trump indicates that both wanting to have and wanting to be are at play in emerging forms of suggestibility that rest on the interplay between the public and the crowd. While (new) fascist leaders will continue to rely on collective mass emotions in order to rise to power, counting on the mirroring reflexes that lead humans to affectively respond to all the strategies of the actors, these actors turned masters can at the same time rely on new media in order to cast a more ramified spell on the public that will in turn accentuate suggestibility in the crowd. In this process of spiraling circulation, the distinction between reality and show, fiction and politics, but also truth and lies, origin and copy, hyperreal simulation and embodied imitation, becomes part of a hypermimetic dynamic that thrives on simulations that may appear comic from a virtual distance, yet trigger political tragedies in real life.

Despite the innovation in the medium, then, the old concept of mimesis remains strikingly relevant to account for the unconscious influences that are currently at play on new social media. What the case of Trump teaches us is that hypermimetic media can easily be hijacked by actors—all kinds of actors who turn out to be themselves puppets whose strings are pulled by foreign oligarchic and quite hostile powers. Together, it is becoming increasingly clear that these new media contribute

to spreading fascist messages among an increasingly disinformed public vulnerable to contagious pathologies.

All countries, I'm afraid, are vulnerable to hypermimesis and the (new) fascism it disseminates. It is thus urgent for mimetic theory to further develop critical patho-*logies* to diagnose and, perhaps, rechannel communal movements as well.