Desire, violence and identity: a psychological pathway

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ABSTRACT. – This work presents some theoretical and methodological elements concerning the psychological intervention aimed at perpetrators of violence, the result of decades of experience in this specific field. This article proposes to draw attention to the demand for intervention by the perpetrator of violence and offers a theoretical insight into the concepts of 'mimetic desire' and 'identity desire'.

Key words: violence; demand; desire; victim; identity.

From "Siamo Tutti in Pericolo", interview by Furio Colombo to Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1/11/1975

"I demand that you look around and see the tragedy. What is the tragedy? The tragedy is that there are no longer human beings, there are strange machines banging into one another"... "Power is a system of education that divides us into subjugates and subjugators. But watch out. A single education system shapes us all, from the so-called ruling classes down to the poor. That is why everyone wants the same things and behaves in the same way. If I have a board of administrators or a stock market manoeuvre in my hands, that is what I use. Otherwise a bar. And when I use a bar I use violence to get what I want. Why do I want it? Because I am told that it is a virtue to want it. I exercise my right-virtue. I am a murderer and I am good." ... "Here is the urge to kill. And this urge binds us as sinister brothers of a sinister failure of an entire social system. I would be pleased if everything could be resolved by isolating the black sheep." ... "in a sense everyone is weak, because everyone is a victim. And everyone is guilty because everyone is ready for the game of slaughter. In order to have. The education received was: to have, to possess, to destroy." ... "Everything is left to me, that is myself, to be alive, to be in the world, to see, to work, to understand."... "The world becomes big, everything becomes ours and we don't need to use either the stock exchange, the board of administrators, or the bar, to plunder ourselves." "The next day, Sunday, the lifeless body of Pier Paolo Pasolini was in the Rome police morgue"

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Course or pathway?

A former sex offender in individual therapy complained that the justice system thinks that the prisoner's aim is to minimise his sentence, and never to help the person solve his problem. He then added that, upon entering prison, he set himself the goal of solving the problem that had made him do things he did not want to do, and he immediately realised that, if he entered into the logic of minimising punishment, he would never achieve that goal; he would avoid the problem, but he would not solve it.

In order to grant minimisation of punishment, the judicial system goes in search of an admission of guilt and does not grasp at all an approach in which the objective could be transformative.

The prison system, as the patient observed, generally expects inmates that are motivated first and foremost by sentence reductions, and clearly states that these may be obtained upon admission of guilt, a critical review of one's criminal behaviour: feeling guilty for what one has done and, in some cases, for what one is, and committing oneself not to doing it again.

Recently, an instrument has been added to the system of actions to combat gender-based violence which is useful to analyse: a man who is found guilty of the offence of mistreatment or stalking and is sentenced to less than three years, if he has no criminal record, he would be entitled to an alternative sentence to prison in return for a specific treatment course.

This instrument also responds to the logic described above: the reward has to do with the alleviation of the afflictive aspect of the sentence, whereby the expected behaviour is the start of a treatment course. To be precise, in the standard and in the common language used to talk about this instrument, two very different terms are actually used alternatively to define the activity that the perpetrator of violence should carry out: 'course' and 'pathway'.

The term 'Course' has many meanings, but in most cases it refers to a regular and definite movement. For example, we can speak of the 'course' of a river, a university 'course', the 'course' that a bureaucratic practice *must* follow, the 'course' of time. We are here dealing with a regular proceeding and an expected ending. When speaking of 'course' in this context, the educational aspect is emphasised, *i.e.* a structured work regardless of the people and the relationship to be built, with the aim of helping people to learn expected behavioural and relational modalities which are considered more functional.

On the other hand, 'Pathway' places the emphasis not on regularity and the expected ending but on the process of gradual advancement and transformation, on the evolution that this pathway may allow. Using the term 'pathway', we can understand this intervention as something that is built on the relationship between the therapist and the beneficiary or beneficiaries, therefore something not regular and predictable, that goes towards an ending which will be identified together.

'Course' therefore refers to an already marked road to be followed towards predetermined goals, 'pathway' refers to a road to be discovered step by step, starting from the knowledge that is gradually developed, towards goals to be defined as personal, within a broader framework of expected goals, such as, for example, the containment of violence.

Institutions do not make a clear distinction between 'course' and 'pathway'; those called upon to provide these services are not at all unambiguous about this and often do not even ask the question. In this ambiguity the simpler and, above all, more easily understandable offer takes more space and one moves towards the choice of some kind of 'course',

This type of offer, here called 'course', characterised by objectives predefined by the institution and by a predetermined reading of the motivations causing the man to access the service, is based mostly on the conceptual model of medicine rather than education. While not wishing to state that the abusive man is ill, the model implicitly considers this man to be the bearer of dysfunctional aspects and above all interprets intervention as a means of eliminating these dysfunctions.

Since the institutions of justice, like a large part of Italian society, do not have a clear idea of how psychological aspects work, they interpret them in the same way as how medicine works and therefore expect a result similar to the cure, and relate to psychology with the same delegation mechanism used in relating to a doctor: one exposes the problem and then it is the doctor who gives the diagnosis, therapy and prognosis, expecting from the patient an exclusively fulfilling behaviour.

In the field of psychological phenomena and psychological intervention, it is not correct to expect results understood as similar to medical treatment, *i.e.* the elimination of symptoms or pathological elements, and it is not correct to expect a relationship between the professional and the patient based on delegation and fulfilment.

Psychological intervention has the methodological objective of developing the competence to read one's own emotions, a competence that is necessary in order to acquire greater self-knowledge and a greater adaptive, creative and expressive capacity. Symptoms, the phenomena defined as pathological, clearly can disappear or be mitigated, but this is not the structural objective of psychological intervention, since this would mean that the goal is to re-establish the condition ex ante the crisis that emerged from the symptom; instead, psychological intervention offers the possibility of building new 'cultures', through the experience of a relationship in which emotions are thought. Consistent with this type of objective, the relationship between psychologist and 'patient' cannot be based on delegation and fulfilment, because we are in the absence of pre-determined or hetero-determined objectives, because the material with which we are working consists of the emotions and their codes of reading by the person who turns

to the psychologist, because it is his demand, his desire for change, his categorical bewilderment that gives life to the therapeutic relationship, and thus gives sense and vertex to the pathway that will develop.

If we go back to the expectations of the judicial system, consistent with an expectation based on the medical model, the 'course' is understood to be a decisive experience, so much so that certificates are supposed to be issued after an intervention, moreover with a predefined number of meetings.

This expectation is totally misleading and unrealistic. As soon as one experiences psychological work with male perpetrators of violence, one realises that no 'healing' can be attested and that it is not possible to give oneself a priori or standardised timescales.

With this regulation the state introduces a novelty: the person-centred project, but it returns to the old model, whereby what makes this project attractive is the usual benefit related to a lessening of the sentence. This reading model, whereby what motivates a person to a course of action is the lessening of the sentence, does not allow another possible reading model to emerge, which we could summarise as follows: the institutions 'invite' the person to do some work on himself, assuming that the sentence alone is not enough, at least for certain offences for which the psychological aspect is so relevant, assuming that the motivation may be the person's desire for change.

Clearly, cultural assumptions make some things thinkable and others less plausible, so it is easy to imagine that a person wishes to do less jail time, but less easy to imagine that a person wishes to deal with his personal problem which contributed to his incarceration, although, if we stop and think for a moment, the second proposal seems to be equally, if not more, attractive.

Consequent to the ease of imagining man intent on seeking a lesser punishment, we can then only see the 'pathway' as a 'course' aimed, substantially, at the admission of guilt and critical revision, which will be sought in a forced, driven manner, with a pressure that could be defined as conformist; a revision of oneself and one's behaviour never constructed from one's own demand and desire for change, but always the result of guilt, of an abjuration of oneself. The person who is the object of the 'course' can only choose whether to pretend, attempting an instrumental use of the course, to passively submit to the intervention, which thus becomes a sort of sermon, or to adhere in a fideistic manner to the proposal of change, turning himself into a sort of convert on the road to Damascus.

The cultural model, taken for granted, whereby the only motivation is the least possible punishment, makes it inconceivable that another motivation might exist: the desire to know oneself and to change, to deal with a problem that has often caused pain to others and oneself, the desire to have, for example, full and creative relationships.

If we believe that people can open themselves up to non-destructive desires, even those who have committed a crime, then the intervention stops

being a 'course', stops pursuing predefined goals and can only become a 'pathway', a work space that focuses on the relationship with the person, who can allow themselves to formulate his or her own question, a space in which to give meaning, ideas, words and body to his or her desire for change, for knowledge and expression.

If what we are proposing is a 'pathway', then we must ask ourselves why these destructive desires are present and what is the methodological objective of the pathway itself.

Desire suffered and desire for identity

An excerpt from a report: 'a patient, who is a lawyer by profession, after a violent and quarrelsome separation from his wife, received a request for estrangement and has been followed by the social services for a year. After a long period of work with the centre's psychologist, in a network with the services in charge of his case, the situation slowly unravelled. He was planning to go on a cruise (a very expensive Baltic cruise) with his 16-year-old daughter. However, in the last court meeting in the divorce case, the ex-wife allegedly provoked him, he answered back and was removed from the courtroom. This event convinced the ex-wife, mother of the 16-year-old girl, that it was not possible to let her daughter go on an eleven-day cruise with him, justifying the choice with the possibility that he might have alcohol available there and might be violent and harassing, and she did not want her daughter to take that risk. As a result, four days before the planned departure, the mother stopped everything and, since he was at that time still subject to suspended parental responsibility, prevented him from leaving with their daughter for the cruise. He arrived at the session angry with his wife, with the social services and with the judge".

This case can be useful for us to analyse the way events are narrated and how they generate victimisation.

Representing oneself as a 'victim' is a fundamental phenomenon in violence. We are accustomed to thinking of violence as a linear phenomenon structured in a process of cause and effect, where there is the person who acts it and the person who endures it, a before and an after. For example, the pivot on which the man's account is based is that his wife provoked him and he reacted. One way of reading violence, which goes beyond common sense, is that it is not a linear but a circular phenomenon, that the links of cause and effect are lost within the circularity of the relationship. We can then try to imagine that the story brought by the patient can be read in a different way, giving weight also to other narrated aspects: we are in a court, a few days away from the much desired departure and this man is a lawyer, therefore experienced and aware of both the skirmishes in a courtroom and the delicacy

of the situation. We can formulate the hypothesis that the confrontation in court is actually functional for the man who can tell himself that, potentially, the relationship with his daughter would be possible, but that it does not happen because of the mother. This narrative transforms the fear of powerlessness (not being able to have a relationship with the daughter) into the anger of the victim (being the victim of the ex-wife). In therapy, it is helpful to bring the man to the level of powerlessness, dismantling his victim-fantasy. One can understand that staying with this reflection can be very painful, but in fact it is precisely this ability to stand up to the emotions brought about by contact with powerlessness that determines the possibility of change. On the other hand, remaining in the victim's illusion is the premise for violent acts, whether self- or hetero-directed, which become increasingly persecutable and bloody the more the victim's narration loses the connotations of a subjective experience, to become, in the eyes of the person, an incontrovertible, objective fact.

If one analyses the case, one can identify a dynamic that begins with a desire that is the result of an idealisation, or conformist adherence to a model (in this case, being a father) and the closer one gets to its realisation, it turns into impotence. We shall see later why. Let us now proceed with the description of this dynamic, which the case narrated allows us to observe. The relationship with the experience of impotence is not easily sustained and, in order to avoid it, it turns into a victimistic experience, and at times, through total expulsion, into acted out fantasies of violence. If we stay with this flow, we can say that the methodological objective is to unveil the powerless nature of this desire and, by sustaining powerlessness, construct another type of desire.

In short, the flow may be described as follows: i) desire suffered: conformist desire, idealised or otherwise not made one's own (*mimetic desire* according to Girard); ii) powerlessness: the more it seems that the object of desire is attained, or conversely seems to recede, the more powerlessness is experienced; iii) victimism: the more one experiences powerlessness, the more one uses a victim-narrative as a way of denying, distancing and projecting the experience of powerlessness; iv) violence: the more the victim narrative is perceived as a 'real' fact, according to the unconscious mechanism of the invasion of the external world by the internal world, the more violent acts are enacted as a way of definitively expelling the experience of powerlessness.

The therapeutic path can be described as a journey backwards: i) deconstructing the reification of the victimisation narrative that legitimises violence: recognising that one has projected one's own fantasies onto the person who is being experienced as the persecutor, dealing with experiences of great frustration that lead to denial and projective mechanisms; ii) coming into contact with the experience of powerlessness: recognising that it is not one's own powerlessness, but the powerlessness generated by the relationship with a desire one has undergone. Questioning these conformist and idealised desires means facing strong resistance, because it means questioning

fundamental elements of one's identity, as well as the relationships built up to that moment; iii) recognising the mechanisms for grasping and legitimising the desires suffered: opening a breach in the wall of resistance, beginning to recognise the idealisation of the undergone desires, which does not allow planning, but the need for possession. Experiences of mourning, loss and frustration thus emerge, a capacity for critical analysis of the cultural models on which these desires are based and their crisis is developed, an ironic capacity is gradually acquired; iv) opening up one's own spaces of desire, which one can take care of, both by adapting the form of desire to oneself, and by developing skills and characteristics to be able to give shape to desire. In other words, one opens up to a desire for identity, which is based on the limit to omnipotence, on the valorisation of one's own powerlessness, on the recognition and overcoming of narcissistic identities, on openness towards reality and the third thing.

We are therefore dealing with two types of desire: the desire suffered (which we will later call 'mimetic desire'), and the desire for identity. We can say that each of us has the experience of going through the undergone desires in order to construct our own desires, thus building up our identity. To get an idea of this pathway, we can observe some distinctive elements between the desires suffered and the identity desires: i) the suffered desire has an essentially *predefined* shape and the road to reach it is perceived as an obstacle, whereas the identity desire has no predefined shape and the road to reach it is the *means* to define it; ii) suffered desire is designated as a socially desirable piece of reality within a specific context, it therefore calls for *conformism*, for the mortification of oneself as a thinking and desiring being, whereas the identity desire is confronted with socially desirable reality, with conformism, with the rules of the context, but it does not undergo them, it thinks them and as far as it can, it transforms them or *transgresses* them; iii) the suffered desire is to be *had*, the identity desire is to be *built*; iv) suffered desire sees others and *relationships* as possible *threats*, identity desire is always and only realised *by means of* relationships with others; the suffered desire is a *course*, the desire for identity is a *pathway*.

That is why taking 'courses' reifies the need to stay within suffered, imposed, conformist, compulsory desires. One does not ask oneself "who am I and what do I want", but one forces oneself to be as they say one should be.

The "mimetic desire"

I have often been asked, 'How can you work with these people?'. I think this actually means 'I cannot or do not want to work on myself'. One is always scandalised by oneself, working with those who act out violence means *breaking the systematic censorship of the scandal of one's own violence.*

In order to make this censorship and scandal intelligible, we need to better define the concept of 'undergone desire' and to do so, I think it is necessary to introduce the concept of 'mimetic desire' as proposed by René Girard (1983).

René Girard was an anthropologist, philosopher and literary critic, who developed an entirely original theoretical framework within which, starting from a concept he himself coined (the 'mimetic desire'), he tried to offer a socio-anthropological interpretation of violence, of the sacred, the sacrificial rites in myths and archaic religions, and, finally, a re-reading of the Bible as well as, for our purposes, of psychoanalysis. Girard's contribution appears to the reader as a kind of astonishing unveiling, in its ability to make sense of a multitude of phenomena that psychologists, philosophers, theologians and anthropologists have been struggling to make sense of over the centuries.

One might remark that precisely because of this enormous explanatory capacity and, at the same time, simplicity of thought, Girard generated a sort of scepticism around his theory, which led to his proposal being progressively set aside in the cultural debate. It seems important to me here, however, to take up the essential points of his discourse; a complete exposition of Girard's theoretical contribution would require too extensive a report and is not possible here, so I will limit myself to a summary of what are only some of the key concepts mostly useful to my exposition, and without any claim to being exhaustive.

The concept of "mimetic"

The concept of mimetic refers to the phenomenon, fundamental to human beings, of learning by imitation. Girard argues that in human behaviour 'there is nothing or almost nothing that is not learned, and all learning boils down to imitation'. The discoveries of the last few decades concerning mirror neurons confirm Girard's intuition that man is a 'great imitation machine', in fact all learning processes are based on imitation, whether they are inherent to parental education or schooling, or related to social phenomena such as fashions, ways of being, ways of doing, and finally, to what is socially seen as desirable as opposed to what is seen as undesirable or disreputable.

When we speak of mimesis, *i.e.* imitation, we are not referring to a mechanical process of reproducing a behaviour or an idea, but to a relational process that binds us to someone or something and implicates us irrevocably, inducing us to produce a certain behaviour, or a certain idea, or even to make a choice from it.

A central element in Girard's theory (1983) is related to the learning, by mimesis, of *desires for appropriation*, *i.e.* the phenomenon whereby one imitates from others the desire to acquire, to take possession of something, with the consequent enactment of behaviours that in a more or less evident way arouse conflictual dynamics in the social space.

In short, *'appropriation mimesis'* confronts us with what might be exemplified in the following characteristic scene: several subjects are vying for the same object of desire and, in order to obtain it at the expense of the others, they begin to fight over it. This scene, evidently, concerns many animal species and not only man, but in other species the conflictuality is somehow resolved in clashes, or localised fights, contained and prevented by the implementation of a rigid and instinctive system of power and submission, through which the dominant subject essentially forbids the dominated to approach the desired object and at the same time forces the dominated subject to submit to the prohibition. In the human beings, on the other hand, the conflictual dynamic has the possibility of moving towards an extreme in which, in order to fully realise the acquisition of the desired object, one can go so far as to eliminate one's adversaries and carry out the destruction of the entire relational context. The Italian psychoanalyst Franco Fornari (1981) referred to this specific human characteristic in terms of the motto 'mors tua vita mea', not only to signify how damage done to one person often corresponds to an advantage for another, and as an allusion to the hard laws of life and the struggle for existence, but also enunciated by him in a broader sense as the radicalisation of an act of possession which, in order to be totally fulfilled, needs to be based on a destructive dynamic of the other (or even of the self, when its complementary reversal, recalled by 'mors mea, vita tua', occurs).

The difference between man and other animal species lies therefore not in the presence or absence of appropriation mimesis, but in the intensity with which this mimesis is produced, and in the substantial ineffectiveness in man of being able to refer to a shared instinctual system of power and submission. This ineffectiveness probably derives from the development in man of the same symbolic capacities that allow him to think, anticipate and coordinate his own behaviour, but also from the imposition of a marked perception of his own desiring subjectivity, which could not remain bound within the limited and rigid fences of the univocal order produced by instinctuality.

The characteristic that appropriation mimesis assumes in humans is that it spreads rapidly in relational contexts and destroys differences. This happens because, involved in the mimesis of appropriation, those who are somehow perceived as one's 'competitors' (because they are interested in the same object in which I am also interested) are first experienced with distrust and then gradually made the object of strategies of control, or possession. In this process, other people lose their 'friendship' categorisation, *i.e.* persons to be trusted and with whom one can share experiences, and gradually become 'non-friends', *i.e.* to be looked upon with distrust, as adversaries, and then definitively as 'enemies', *i.e.* subjects to be destroyed, expelled, as inevitably threatening. In this process of flattening onto the other's nemicality, the other thus loses any connotation that define him or

her (*e.g.,* whether they are senior in rank, a parent, a child, a teacher, *etc*.), to slip into that single all-encompassing connotation in which categorical qualities disappear.

Girard carried out numerous studies and made available to readers an enormous amount of mythical and religious texts in which it emerged how phenomena of appropriation mimesis propagated in communities, how phenomena of unprecedented violence were suddenly unleashed (almost in a sort of psychosocial epidemic, which swept through cities as well as in the thoughts of each individual). This led Girard to argue that for human societies the 'repression of the mimesis of appropriation must constitute a major concern, a matter whose solution could determine many more cultural traits than we imagine' (Girard R., 1983).

And indeed, the analysis of the myths of the origin of cultures leads us to identify precisely in the attempts to resolve 'this matter of appropriation' the birth of a specifically human cultural element that is present everywhere: religion.

"The sacred is violence": the mechanism of the scapegoat

Underlying the 'religious' element is an essential basic element: the sacrificial victim. In all the founding narratives, mythical and religious, there is talk of the spreading like wildfire of the mimesis of appropriation, a phenomenon which destroys differences and allows everything else in the world to be categorised within the macro-category of 'unfriendly' first and later 'enemy'. When fear of the enemy spreads within a context of coexistence, when strategies based on possession, claim and control also fail, one quickly proceeds to acts of violence, expulsion, rejection, perceived by those who act them as legitimate defence, for those who are submitted to them as confirmation of the radical nemicality of the other, thus as legitimisation of their own violence. It is quite evident how sociality, in this condition, deteriorates totally, to the point of becoming impossible.

According to Girard, in mythical tales the condition of the mimesis of appropriation, the promoter of the destruction of sociality, is transfigured into events such as the spread of the plague, of natural disasters, floods, 'apocalyptic' situations in which the idea of the end of the world, the disappearance of any community, of any culture, is generated. All the founding texts of cultures and religions converge in the narration of the same solution to this condition: the identification of a single person as the cause of all evil, the killing of this person by the whole community, and the immediate release from the violent paroxysm of appropriation mimesis after the killing. In other words, if we take the concepts from psychology, the community saves itself from the apocalypse through a mass projective

mechanism, *i.e.* a 'collusive' mechanism of projection of paranoid and violent experiences onto that one person, the scapegoat. Girard speaks of a progressive passage from the mimesis of appropriation, which leads to the everyone against everyone, to the mimesis of antagonism, through which the attribution of guilt to a subject is limited, thus passing from everyone against everyone to everyone against one.

For the sacrificial operation to have its effects, it needs to have the following characteristics: i) *unanimity*, the whole community projects guilt onto the same person and the whole community commits the murder; ii) *randomness*, the choice of the subject is totally random, *i.e.* there is no causal link with the reasons for the crisis, it is based on the victim's peculiar characteristics, on some of his differences, such as being a foreigner, or a bearer of some disability, or a somatic difference; in short, the sacrificial victim has some characteristic that makes him a subject particularly apt to attract the projective mechanism; iii) *denial*, in other words the impossibility for the community to access awareness of the arbitrariness of the process, of the falsehood of the sacrificial solution. Tacitus describes this process perfectly in his *Annales* when he states 'fingebant simul credebantque', *i.e.*, 'they imagined and at the same time gave faith to their own imagination'.

The results of this operation are twofold and are immediate: the pacification of the community and the transformation of the scapegoat into the deity who restores order. Religious rites, myths and prohibitions derive from this original experience.

Prohibitions have the function of hindering new processes of diffusion of the mimesis of appropriation; the rites serve to replicate, in an increasingly transfigured manner, the sacrificial event of the victim in order to found the new religious and cultural system; the myths sustain a collective imaginary capable of giving meaning to all that can be signified.

The effectiveness of the system of prohibitions, rituals and myths enables communities to generate not only a social order and a defence against violence, but also to endow reality with meaning.

The dynamics of mimetic desire

The term 'desire' opens up to innumerable meanings and readings, but what we mean here is the desire for possession, essentially the desire which, for example, is forbidden in the last two commandments ('do not covet the property of others'; 'do not covet the women of others'). "The fantasy of possession is based on the idealised valorisation of what is outside oneself, from which one feels excluded and which, therefore, one wants to take inside oneself" (Carli R., Paniccia R.M., 2003). The feeling of exclusion is based on an implicit theory and a negation: the implicit theory is that the

idealised object is such, regardless of my emotional investment, that is, it has a value in itself, a value that is not attributed to it by me, by what I desire. Negation, on the other hand, relates to the relationship between me, as the one who desires, and the other, who can be defined both as a model, the possessor of the object, and as a rival, the one who takes it away from me, or denies it to me. As we shall later see, it is this relationship that is the real centre of exclusion.

For common sense, desire is in fact a two-way relationship, between the desiring subject and the desired object. But a careful analysis also of one's own desiring experience makes us realise that there are actually three elements involved in desire: the desiring subject, the desired object and the model. The model is the one who makes the object desirable, in that he indicates it as desired. As if to say that the subject does not know what to desire and is looking for an indication; the model offers itself as mediator of the desire, but at the same time as a rival and obstacle. The model as rival is not an accident along the way, it is structural, since any failed rivalry would denote the undesirability of the object, hence the need to turn towards another object worthy of being desired. What is most interesting in the triangle of mimetic desire is thus fundamentally the dynamics of the relationship between subject and model, as an ambiguous relationship capable of conveying strong emotions. In this relationship the third object, unable to be an attractive element of knowledge and sharing, becomes an element of confrontation and competition, according to the previously mentioned logic of 'mors tua vita mea'. In a short time, however, the object disappears from the scene, becoming pure pretext, the desire remains without object and becomes totally focussed on the relationship with the model.

What should be clarified is that all these elements are never static and above all that there is no real distinction between subject and model. What is described is a totally fluid dynamic that can take on the most disparate forms because of the infinite symbolic, projective, displacement and negation capacity that is provided to us by the mind's unconscious mode of being (Matte-Blanco, 1975). The disappearance of the 'third thing', the object, renders this subject-model relationship progressively devoid of differentiation, totally devoted to rivalry and seductiveness without limits. The two characters in the scene become interchangeable, perceived at the highest level both of desirability and of nemicality. One observes in these situations, very frequent in working with male perpetrators of violence in emotional relationships, a disconnect between what is perceived cognitively and what occurs emotionally. For example, from the point of view of the conscious narrative, one is absolutely convinced of the desire to possess something (a condition, a person, an object, a state of mind, *etc*., in the case previously described, being a father), but this 'objective' is always, for some

reason, unattainable and the whole experience of frustration is perceived as anger, or lamentation towards someone, something, or a part of oneself that is an obstacle and towards which one represents oneself as a victim. This situation, read in the light of the mimetic desire, allows us to understand what is happening from an emotional point of view: one seems to be moving towards the desired goal, but this is a pure pretext for pushing oneself towards the obstacle; frustration and anger are indicative of the mimetic dynamic at work and are often the result of projection. The relationship with the model is the real underlying text, but in reality the model is now totally transfigured into the obstacle, it is nothing more than a wall against which one keeps banging, the closed door at which one knocks, in short, the checkmate of impotence that takes possession of desire, the true nature of mimetic desire.

Within this dynamic, nothing is resolved on a factual level: the eventual attainment of the declared goal, for example, is perhaps more tragic than its non-attainment, because it unveils the cards of denial, and in effect one immediately either denies the achievement, moving the bar even further, or denies that the goal was ever that important, or, finally, one submits to an experience of deep disappointment.

As we can see, the path of mimetic desire is in some respects very similar to the path of mimesis leading to sacrifice and thus to the sacred, but in other respects it is also very different. Similar, in that it leads to the loss of differences, and to experiences of 'not friendly' and 'enemy'; different because it does not lead to the creation of a new cultural order by means of unanimous sacrifice, but to a sense of powerlessness, or more precisely to the impossibility of making sense of one's own experiences and also of one's own behaviour, hence to experiences that we can define as 'apocalyptic', which can lead to the disintegration of identity, to violence without return.

In the dynamics of mimetic desire, we thus witness the progressive passage from three elements (subject - model - object), to two elements (subject - model), until we finally have only one element: the subject obsessively clashing against the obstacle within a totalising experience of impotence, which, as we have seen, is resolved through victimised narration and violent action.

As stated above, each person goes through the experience of mimetic desire, an inevitable and structural experience, in order to construct the possibility of another form of desire. Psychoanalytic intervention can be described as a tool to support this transition. The experience of the intervention with perpetrators of violence offers us the possibility to grasp in an exemplary way the mimetic desire in action, a desire which, however, does not concern only some of us but each one of us. The other form of desire is what we have referred to as the 'desire for identity'. In this intense passage, Renzo Carli describes well what I refer to as the desire for identity.

"To desire (from the Latin de sidera, which means: away from the stars), means: to stop contemplating, to stop gazing at the stars. Why does one move one's gaze away from the stars? Linguists have suggested several hypotheses: because the stars do not grant us our wishes; to ward off the influence of a contrary star. In fact, we move our eyes away from the stars because of our need for a person, a need that is not magically satisfied. Desiring, therefore, implies giving oneself over to reality, putting an end to magical expectations. Desiring involves identity, relationships with the other, planning and implementing a strategy for intervention. Desire is the motor of the relationship that pursues the third thing. Desire entails melancholia, since it implies accepting one's own limitations, vis-à-vis the magical expectation of being like God. This is the most accredited interpretation of Dürer's engraving (Melencolia I), where the main figure turns to earthly things and looks away, saddened, from the divine star and unattainable perfection. To desire means to accept the limit. The limit to omnipotence that is based on one's identity. He who has no identity, who remains gazing at the stars, cannot desire. He can only think of life as a celebration of his own narcissism, where others are the mirror of the ideality of the word" (Carli, 2011).

In light of what has been said, we can well understand what the 'stars' are, from which we need to avert our gaze in order to be able to desire, this 'magical expectation of being like God': it is the relationship with the model/rival, the continuous impotent clash that envelops everything in its indifference and that has in violence its only solution of continuity. This clash is covered by narratives, by "romantic lies", as Girard states in one of his famous works (Girard, 1961), which conceal it, rationalise it and legitimise it. The most important and impactful of these 'falsehoods' is the victim narrative, *i.e.* representing oneself as a victim. Therapy is the opposite path, of unveiling and of critical and creative thinking about this clash disclosed in its true nature, the possibility of moving from the desire based on this clash, to the desire for an identity that emerges from its unveiling and begins to enter into a relationship with reality and with the Other.

To conclude, the theoretical and methodological approach of the intervention aimed at perpetrators of violence presented here, which we can summarise as a pathway that takes its starting point from the valorisation of the demand for change of those who act out violence, and focuses on the passage from the 'mimetic desire' to the 'desire for identity', has the following qualifying characteristics, which we believe is useful to draw to your attention: i) it is *dynamic*, in the sense that it develops in the relationship, through the feedback that the elements offer each other, through a 'collusive' game; ii) *it concerns everyone,* since it describes a process that is common to everyone, although it has different expressions and different entities; iii) *it goes beyond the psychopathological reading,* in that it succeeds in making sense of the symptomatological forms used to describe certain psychopathologies (*e.g.,* narcissism, perversion, addictions, obsessions), which can generally be read as strategies to cope with the clash with the model/rival (in particular narcissism and addiction), or as strategies to

displace or control the emergence of powerlessness and thus of apocalyptic experiences (in particular perversion and obsessions); iv) it reads the phenomena within an *escalation* pathway which starts from the experience of envy and exclusion, and reaches powerlessness, through a journey that leads first to expelling the third object, and then the other, until it reaches the violent act; v) *it radically overcomes the individualistic reading,* since it locates phenomena which seem to be based on the individual (such as psychopathologies) within relational dynamics.

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