Victim, racism, anti-Semitism

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Abstract. The Biblical notion of "scapegoat" has been inflected and interpreted from a theological, philosophical, sociological and a psychoanalytic angle. Based on a reconstruction of these different interpretive lines, and highlighting the frequent conflation of these diverse planes, the usage of this notion in contemporary politics will be examined. The internal dynamics and the ethical and social consequences of the construction of scapegoats during the 20th century and in contemporary society will be analyzed. The violent moment within the creation of a scapegoat, a moment understood as "mimetic desire" by Girard, is strictly linked with the construction of identity. In the so-called "totemic meal" (Freud) the impure elements are devoured. Thus through magical thinking (Jung) a group secures the ostracization of the negative. Furthermore, theories of identity are compared with theories of the scapegoat: the essential points of convergence are found to be the decomplexification of problems (Blumer), the notion of social stigma (Goffman) and finally an outburst of violence. The generalized kind of violence typical of ancient societies becomes more limited and restrained in post-classical societies (Girard): in the latter, however, the conflict between in-group and out-group elements persists, albeit in different forms, and also the mimetic contagion can be found, even though mitigated within a pluralistic society in which untruths about the victims are usually questioned. Finally, the mechanisms are investigated which in contemporary society re-establish the reassuring difference between "us" and "them", majority and minorities, natives and strangers, and thus revive the idiom of hygiene, war and violence.

Keywords: Immigration, Social representation, Stigma.

An analysis of complex concepts, like that of the scapegoat, necessarily involves an in-depth investigation of where they come from, in order to assess how they have evolved over time and how they have been used or, in some cases, manipulated, in the various socio-political contexts involved. Leviticus (verses 20-22) expounds the theory of what was later to be called *caper emissarius:* a goat that was cast into the desert during the Jewish feast of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This involved a precise ritual: the priest of the temple of Jerusalem placed his hands on the animal's head and, in so doing, transferred all the sins of the community to the goat.

The idea of transferring the sins of a community to an animal is also found in many other ancient cultures, as Herodotus tells us. If we come to understand how the concept of the scapegoat evolved, we can shed light on a number of unexplored and mysterious facets of mankind, both in the past and present. This is because although the act of sacrifice is obviously outdated, the cult still exists at a symbolic level (Girard, 1989).

Whatever the culture that spawned them, these rituals have all traditionally been a way of eradicating the evils that afflict mankind, whether they be death, disease, violence or the sense of sin and guilt that comes with our consciousness of having violated a moral code. Throughout history, human beings have attempted to drive out this dark side, resorting to rites of purification and liberation. In the ceremonies analysed here in brief, the evil is magically transferred to other people or to animals. Whenever a scapegoat is chosen, it is done by applying the methods that a culture uses to define what it finds 'unacceptable' and that materialise in the summoning – or rather the 'transferral' – of a sin. The similarities between these rites, at least as far as their aims are concerned, allow us to see how a real tendency to ceremoniously sacrifice – with the resulting identification of a scapegoat – has always existed at a universal level. With no single explanation, the mystery of the scapegoat can be interpreted in various different ways.

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The sociological and philosophical analysis of the scapegoat phenomenon

Naturally, there is a strong connection between this historical-cum-anthropological phenomenon and the content and processes of our unconscious minds. This symbolism manifests itself when intense emotions are stimulated. Sacrifice is the symbol of a state of oppression and it is no coincidence that its symbolic opposite is liberation. For ancient peoples, the real battle was, above all, against the hostile forces of nature. Today that battle is between man and himself, between man and the dark forces of his mind, and sacrifice can evolve from being a cruel rite into a *spiritual symbol* of this struggle.

The concept of the 'scapegoat', as we understand it today, has completely lost its original meaning. A scapegoat can be a member of a group, a minority, an organisation or an institution that is always blamed for the failure of a social, political or cultural mechanism. In this way, social conflict between members of a society is avoided.

What we are referring to here is a concept of society understood to be an "interactive network" (Blumer, 1969, p. 58) that links individuals who mainly use their behaviour to decipher the world that surrounds them.

From our point of view, therefore, it is interesting to connect this theory with the Freudian concept of 'the resolution of grief'. When we can no longer bear a loss, or perhaps a crisis if applied at a social level, we tend to attribute this malaise to a scapegoat. Such a scapegoat may be an individual, a behaviour, an object or a symbol. It becomes responsible for the evil and faces the consequences by undergoing violence, exclusion or the untouchability of a taboo. The resolution of grief can occur in daily life in the form of a tool for problem simplification. This is the crux of the matter: we are dealing with a process whereby a source of conflict that not only afflicts an individual but society as a whole is transferred. Blumer's approach basically involves a process of removing responsibility from the individual, which allows him or her to deny his or her participation in a particular behaviour, transferring it to another person. Let's imagine how this process manifests itself today. We currently find ourselves faced with these two phenomena: the simplification of the issue of migrants (just to name one of many possible examples) and the resulting removal of responsibility. This leads to the creation of an enemy and a scapegoat.

Indeed, it is at a social level that an individual comes to belong to virtual social identities. Thus inferences form that influence the relationship between a person and his or her surroundings. If an individual has 'attributes' that make him or her different from the rest (a foreigner), he or she will be downgraded to the status of a person with a stigma, which leads to their exclusion. I need not spend time explaining Erving Goffman's concept of stigma. It involves the projection of stereotypes, often involving feelings of fear or inferiority, which are heaped onto outsiders in an acritical way (Goffman, 1990, p. 45). Stigma allows us to defend the ethical and legislative structure upon which society is based. The consequences of such a process are, initially, the disturbance of social interaction and the gradual exclusion from society of those who are stigmatised.

Psychoanalytical reflections on the scapegoat phenomenon have opened up new lines of research into this issue: aggressive feelings and a sense of guilt have become tools for understanding sacrificial mechanisms, combined with the study of social and anthropological factors. In this way, violence and the mysterious process of purification find their rightful place in interpretations.

The French sociologist and anthropologist Roger Bastide made an essential contribution to identifying the theoretical structure of the scapegoat concept. In referring back to Freudian theories, Bastide explains that each of us harbours a desire to kill our father. This murderous impulse is curbed by society, which prevents us from carrying out this desire and deviates it towards less dangerous objects. This mechanism leads to the creation of a scapegoat. In short, Bastide argues

45

that human beings project their inner evil towards the outside world, expressing their repressed instincts and helping to create a figure who must be persecuted. Our frustration becomes a desire for aggression: we wish to fight against the obstacles in our way, but we do not want to admit to ourselves that the real cause of these checks is inside ourselves, that we are the origin of our own despair and our own failure, hence we look for a scapegoat outside ourselves. As far as this aspect is concerned, Bastide holds that the only possible way to overcome such a situation is to develop the opposite mechanism, founded on an understanding of others. The only way to replace the scapegoat process – which is one that excludes – with an inclusive process that allows us to overcome a situation where relationships are based on suspicion and distrust is to open ourselves up to others.

The figure of the scapegoat has also been studied from a criminological point of view. The theory of labels, which developed in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly shifted the focus of investigation from the individual offender to the ways in which deviant behaviour is perceived at a social level.

One strand of research has interpreted sacrifice as a protective approach to addressing destructive human tension. This would mean that sacrificial cults lie at the heart of society's development. The psycho-social mechanism of the scapegoat thus becomes the key to interpreting human history. I am particularly referring to the Girard school, which enormously influenced subsequent research. The most original aspect of Girard's approach focuses on the concept of human desire as imitative. A mimetic propensity drives people to compete with others and triggers viral, contagious aggressive processes that undermine social cohesion. This violence is thus channelled towards a victim, an object that can be sacrificed because it is considered insignificant and, above all, powerless and thus unable to defend itself. This mechanism is therefore generative, meaning that it reproduces itself every time and, indeed, is codified into a rite. In ancient societies, this mechanism was socially controlled. Girard carefully analyses real moments in history when the scapegoat mechanism was triggered.

Critical of Freud, Girard nevertheless starts from the same premises, holding that human culture's roots are embedded in violence. However, in discussing the concept of the Oedipus complex, Girard develops his theory of 'mimetic desire', stating that violence is lurking whenever an individual attempts to imitate an equal, or desires what they have or what they are, but a lack of resources or status impedes him or her from achieving it. Man is a being that desires in response to others: there is always a model that lies between an individual and his or her desire, a model that points to something desirable; a model that soon becomes a rival for that very reason. This mechanism, which springs from social psychology, tends to unleash an intrinsically violent society, making the resolution of violent conflict the main problem facing any possible human culture: 'Mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict'.

Girard's interpretation is unbalanced in that it focuses on changes brought about by Christianity. For Freud, aggressive impulses can, at most, be channelled or contained but can always resurface at times of crisis, war and conflict.

Resentment, as Girard (1999, p. 34) stresses, is 'that which the imitator feels with regard to his model when the model obstructs his efforts to possess the object over which both converge'. This desire to imitate a chosen model, if universally expressed, leads to chronic and 'impure' violence. In order to purify itself of this 'infection', society resorts to a 'pure', brutal act of violence. It chooses a random victim, a 'scapegoat', and channels the violence of the collective away from the community. For Girard, the choice of victim is entirely arbitrary. He interprets Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* as a "sacrificial crisis": Oedipus is the 'surrogate victim' who is destroyed by society, not because the latter believes he has done something wrong, but because it does everything it can to hide the real cause of its internal crisis from itself and, in order to do so, requires a scapegoat (Coupe, 1997, p. 117 of the Italian translation). Girard's analysis confirms that the community,

particularly the conflict between its interior and exterior, manifests itself in an attempt to limit fear by directing it towards the unknown, the foreign and the different. The scapegoat figure is created in order to concentrate the destructive forces in society in one single direction, towards a single target and, therefore, it is implicitly an essential tool for social cohesion. All human societies, bar none, have the tendency to implode due to internal violence and, when this risk looms, they resort to a means of reconciliation of which they themselves are unconscious: spontaneous and mimetic convergence against a single victim. The damaging power of violence, without the 'corrective' intervention of a victim, risks drawing the community into a self-destructive crisis. If we start from the assumption that every mimetic crisis coincides with nothing short of a social crisis, Girard manages to reveal how the principle of guilt is not observed when there is a sacrifice. Primitive man teaches today's society what the real menace of unbridled violence, of ruthless indifference means. While ancient societies, perceiving the repetition of identical actions typical of reciprocal violence, attempted to interrupt that violent process with a sacrificial system (involving animals or humans), modern societies do not fear violent reciprocity, and have set up a legal form of punishment or, as has often happened in history, act violently against a scapegoat. Crisis therefore involves a general lack of differentiation: indeed, confusion fosters the rise of the masses, and people in that state are similar to each other, in a disorganised way, in just one place at the same time. In these cases, the masses always lean towards persecution because the natural causes of what is disturbing them do not interest them.

The masses, by definition, demand action.

Contemporary anti-Semitism can be said to rest on three basic assumptions: the racialization of the Jews, the conspiracy approach to history, a historical judgment on modern bourgeois society as the era of Jewish tyranny Although they partake of the same ideologies of difference and rely on similar stereotypes, anti-Semitism and racism lead to absolutely diverse strategic and political outcomes. While for racists the bourgeois world is the best possible one, and thus worth defending from the new barbarians at the gates of civilization, for anti-Semites the bourgeois world is the worst possible one, because the barbarians have already broken through the ramparts of civilization, and have even succeeded in infecting it with their mores. Racist ideology is an ideology of fear, that originates in the drive for self-preservation. Anti-Semitism is instead pervaded by a logic of subversive mobilization, because anti-Semitism is an ideology of subversion and resentment. We can however state that, as Freud would have said, these mechanisms lurk in society and can always recreate a victimising mechanism.

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