

THE COVID-19 CRISIS

PHAINOMENA

Revija za fenomenologijo in hermenevtiko
Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

30 | 116-117 | April 2021

Andrej Božič (*Ed.*)

THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities

*

Phenomenological Society of Ljubljana

Ljubljana 2021

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Revija za fenomenologijo in hermenevtiko

Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

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Prelom: Layout:	Žiga Stopar
Task: Printed by:	Primitus, d. o. o.

Uredništvo in založništvo: | Editorial Offices and Publishers' Addresses:

Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko
Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities

Fenomenološko društvo v Ljubljani
Phenomenological Society of Ljubljana

Filozofska fakulteta | Oddelek za filozofijo (kab. 432b)

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Revija *Phainomena* objavlja članke s področja fenomenologije, hermenevtike, zgodovine filozofije, filozofije kulture, filozofije umetnosti in teorije znanosti. Recenzentske izvode knjig pošiljajte na naslov uredništva. Revija izhaja štirikrat letno. Za informacije glede naročil in avtorskih pravic skrbí *Inštitut Nove revije, zavod za humanistiko*.

*

The journal *Phainomena* covers the fields of phenomenology, hermeneutics, history of philosophy, philosophy of culture, philosophy of art, and phenomenological theory of science. Books for review should be addressed to the Editorial Office. It is published quarterly. For information regarding subscriptions and copyrights please contact the *Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities*.

Finančna podpora: | Financially Supported by:

Javna agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost Republike Slovenije | Slovenian Research Agency

Članki v reviji so objavljeni v okviru: | Papers in the journal are published within the framework of:

- Raziskovalni program P6-0341 | Research program P6-0341;
- Infrastrukturni program I0-0036 | Infrastructure program I0-0036.

Revija *Phainomena* je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze: | The journal *Phainomena* is indexed in:

Digitalna knjižnica Slovenije; DOAJ; EBSCO; Emerging Sources Citation Index (Web of Science); ERIH PLUS; Humanities International Index; Internationale Bibliographie der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Zeitschriftenliteratur; Internationale Bibliographie der Rezensionen geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlicher Literatur; Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts; ProQuest; Revije.si (JAK); Scopus; Social Science Information Gateway; Social Services Abstracts; Sociological Abstracts; The Philosopher's Index; Ulrich's Periodicals Directory; Worldwide Political Science Abstracts.

Enojna številka: | Single Issue: 10 €
Dvojna števila: | Double Issue: 16 €

Spletna stran: | Website:
phainomena.com

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MEDICAL WORKERS AS THE *PHARMAKOI* OF 2020

THE PANDEMIC IN POLAND THROUGH A GIRARDIAN LENS

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Abstract

The article is an attempt to read the new pandemic situation in the context of René Girard's thought. Unlike some other philosophical comments on the crisis, the author refrains from delivering the general philosophical assessment of the whole gamut of events on political, economic or biological levels. Instead, the purpose of the essay is to put some philosophical-cultural light on the singular, yet chilling phenomenon of extreme social reactions to medical staff in Poland. To fulfill this moderate promise,

Girardian anthropological concepts are engaged. The analysis is supported by a historical-cultural description of the Greek institution of a *pharmakos* as a historical memory most apposite for intelligibility of the present. This opens up a wider context of the cultural meaning of medicine.

Keywords: René Girard, scapegoat, *pharmakos*, *mimesis*, plague, medical staff.

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Članek je poskus razbiranja nove pandemične situacije v kontekstu misli Renéja Girarda. V nasprotju z nekaterimi drugimi filozofskimi komentarji o krizi se avtorica odpoveduje splošnemu filozofskemu ocenjevanju celokupnih razsežnosti dogodkov na politični, ekonomski ali biološki ravni. Namen eseja je, nasprotno, filozofska-kulturna osvetlitev edinstvenega, vendar strašljivega fenomena ekstremnih družbenih reakcij glede zdravstvenega osebja na Poljskem. Članek skuša takšen skromni obet izpolniti z uporabo girardovskih antropoloških pojmov. Analizo podpira historično-kulturni opis grške institucije *pharmakosa* kot historičnega spomina, ki je najbolj ustreza za dojetje sodobnosti. To odpira širši kontekst kulturnega pomena medicine.

Ključne besede: René Girard, grešni kozel, *pharmakos*, *mimesis*, kuga, zdravstveno osebje.

1. Introduction

“The owl of Minerva takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.” (Hegel 2001, 20) It seems that this famous figurative statement from the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* has rarely been more appropriate than in the first months of the year 2020. At the outbreak of the new pandemic, when nobody (including physicians and virologists) knew what we were going to face in the upcoming months or years, some philosophers seemed to have forgotten Hegel’s warning.

As early as February 26, Giorgio Agamben published his doubts about the reality of the epidemic, and rushed to disqualify all sanitary measures and limitations as being in utter disproportion to the existing danger. He used the famous Schmittian notion of “the state of exception,” duly elaborated upon and extended in his previous academic publications, to express a fundamental distrust of political measures taken with regard to the biological sphere. According to Agamben, the epidemic had been invented by the Italian government for the sake of limiting citizens in their private and public lives. The virus, basically no more dangerous than a seasonal flu, allegedly served as a perfect excuse for the militarization of the public sphere and for introducing rigorous discipline in private lives. The reactions to this diagnosis were prompt. While a day later Jean-Luc Nancy attempted to undermine the biopolitical perspective assumed by Agamben, Roberto Esposito in turn supported it on February 28. The discussion followed for the next few weeks, until March 17, when—three weeks after his first comment—Agamben assumed the floor once again, this time having silently accepted the biological exception of the pandemic. Instead of criticizing the suspension of normality for no reason, he attacked society with his second well-known philosophical concept: that of bare life. In a situation of danger, people reduce themselves to a purely biological condition. The urge for biological survival overwhelms any other human values such as love, compassion, closeness, and reverence for the dead.¹

When we face such a crisis as this, when the world changes rapidly within

¹ The whole exchange of philosophical opinions has been translated into English and collected in the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (cf. European 2020). Here, one

weeks, the temptation to give a timely philosophical commentary is almost irresistible. All the more so, if the state of affairs seems to fit perfectly into philosophical concepts. The Foucauldian-Schmittian-Agambenian paradigm of sovereignty, exception, biopolitics, and bare life is the most natural association in this context. And exactly this naturalness makes the philosophical work somehow too easy, premature, and, yes, in a way superficial. We are only months since the first philosophical voice, in the morning of events, still long before the dusk.

That is why, in this article, I have decided to suspend the natural biopolitical philosophical association; by doing this, I shall forgo the desire to deliver a comprehensive interpretation of current events. It is simply too early. Instead, I have decided to contribute to the theme of the “COVID-19 Crisis” in the specific and limited local context of Poland. I am going to make an attempt to shed some light on just one social phenomenon that emerged during the first months of the pandemic: the oppositional social attitudes towards medical staff. The public reactions to physicians were extreme: from heroization and almost sacralization to severe criticism and hostility, even hate.

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Let us briefly look at the facts reflected in the Polish media. At the outbreak of the pandemic, the medical staff experienced an enormous social recognition. The language of this recognition was very characteristic. Doctors were called “the heroes of front line of the combat against the coronavirus: ‘Power is with us’” (*Gazeta Wyborcza*; March 20). “Artists support doctor superheroes with graphics: ‘Thank you doctors!’” (*Polska Times*; May 19). “The courage of the medical staff fighting the virus is more and more publicly discussed. There

more early philosophical contribution to the pandemic must be mentioned: Slavoj Žižek’s *Pandemic! Covid-19 Shakes the World* (published in March 2020). Nevertheless, it seems that Žižek, apart from his provocative plea for communism, is quite moderate in his intellectual reaction: he does not propose any sort of philosophical conspiracy theory nor calls for a revolution. What he provocatively calls “communism,” is actually a reasonable summons for strong public institutions, social responsibility, cooperation, and solidarity: “The institutional health system will have to rely on the help of local communities for taking care of the weak and old. And, at the opposite end of the scale, some kind of effective international cooperation will have to be organized to produce and share resources. If states simply isolate, wars will explode. These sorts of developments are what I’m referring to when I talk about ‘communism,’ and I see no alternative to it except new barbarism.” (Žižek 2020, 103–104)

are more and more voices that say they will become the greatest heroes of our time. They can replace the heroes in the imagination of the young generation” (*Rozrywka.blog*). “Superheroes! Doctors, nurses, paramedics, and other medical staff. Especially in these difficult times, when they sacrifice even more for our lives and health, we are even more thankful. Thanks!” (*Facebook*; March 31). *Dziennik Bałtycki* (March 28) went as far as equating the medical staff with soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944: “The insurgents did not possess enough weapons, just like medical staff is short of means to fight with the virus.” The comparison to the Warsaw Uprising is particularly powerful within the Polish national imagery.² Warsaw insurgents are the synonym of heroic soldiers fighting an uneven battle against a hostile, cruel, and revengeful enemy. Being compared to them has to be read as an expression of highest reverence (quite apart from different assessments of the decision itself to launch the uprising). This reverence of doctors was also confirmed with action. Private people and organizations tried to make the warriors’ lives easier: restaurants prepared free meals for hospital workers, grocery stores let them go to the head of the line at checkouts, hundreds of people manufactured masks and other supplies for healthcare workers in underequipped Poland.³

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But around May the media began to deliver different news: they drew our attention to a complete change of atmosphere: “Today’s hostility against medics relies on the same mechanisms as immolation in the Dark and Middle

2 It refers to the most tragic moments in the Polish resistance under German occupation during the Second World War. For 63 days, the insurgents led an uneven battle against the occupiers, before they had to surrender. They were mostly the underequipped youth who moved between districts through Warsaw sewers. The losses were enormous: the Germans took bloody revenge on civilians and on the city itself. The number of victims is estimated at over 150,000. The occupiers also bombarded the already affected city and left it literally in ruins (about 80% of the infrastructure was destroyed).

3 Cf. <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,25806183,koronawirus-bohaterowie-z-pierwszej-linii.html?disableRedirects=true>; <https://polskatimes.pl/w-oczach-artystow-lekarze-to-superbohaterowie-tworcy-wspieraja-sluzby-medyczne-niezwyklymi-grafikami/ar/c15-14946740>; <https://www.spidersweb.pl/rozrywka/2020/04/21/koronawirus-bohaterowie-lekarze-marvel-dc-komiksy-filmy/>; <https://www.facebook.com/lodzpl/posts/10157511047494864/>; <https://dziennikbaltycki.pl/lekarki-lekarze-pielegniarki-pielegniarze-laborantki-laboranci-wszyscy-pracownicy-szpitali-to-pierwsza-linia-frontu/ar/c14-14884327>. (All accessed on August 27, 2020.)

Ages” (*ONET*; March 30). “Doctors appeal for support. We receive very chilling signals of negative emotions” (*Wprost*; May 4). A doctor’s car was vandalized in Wrocław (*Tok.fm*; May 6). The website portal *TVN24.pl* reported a series of hostile acts. Kindergartens were rejecting physicians’ and nurses’ kids. Neighbors left a written threat to a nurse and 20-year apartment building resident: “Move out. You spread the plague.” Other neighbors called the janitor to demand the disinfection of the staircase once the door behind the nurse living there is closed. Grocery stores declared: “We do not cater for nurses and their husbands”; “Medical staff and the infected are kindly asked to refrain from shopping here.” “The General Doctors Council (Naczelna Izba Lekarska) is receiving more and more information about bullying and discrimination towards doctors and dentists during the pandemic” (*Polityka zdrowotna*; June 19). The internet is full of unprintable insults. One prominent doctor from Wrocław committed suicide.⁴

198 I believe that the intellectual context of this astounding polarization can be found in René Girard’s work. Such a presentation requires, first, a reconstruction of the basic concepts related to violence in Girard. This has to be done on the basis of systematic analyses of the genesis of the human cultural order, because in Girard, as we will see, the sources of culture are not primarily a question of historical truth, but also, if not foremostly, still relevant anthropological truth. They are not merely connected with the genesis of the human order, but also with its transhistorical laws. These laws make themselves visible wherever a developed civilization becomes conflicted with itself: in times of wars, disasters, and pandemics of all sorts.

4 Cf. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/koronawirus-w-polsce-hejt-w-wobec-lekarzy-pielegniarek-i-ratownikow/des0mdw>; <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10322229/hejt-wobec-pracownikow-medycznych-lekarze-apeluja-do-ministrasziobry-i-policji.html>; <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103085,25922204,hejt-na-lekarzy-i-pielegniarki-a-jak-dojdzie-do-zakazenia.html>; <https://tvn24.pl/magazyn-tvn24/zaraz-nam-tu-syfa-przyniesie-brawa-szybko-umilkly-przyszegl-hejt,266,4651>; <https://www.politykazdrowotna.com/60755,samorzad-lekarski-trzeba-powstrzymac-szykany-w-zwiazku-z-epidemia-koronawirusa>. (All accessed on August 27, 2020.)

2. The logic of violence: mechanism and ritual

A reconstruction of the concept of violence in Girard should begin with a few general remarks that may be helpful in grasping the originality of his approach. First, contrary to both common sense opinions and some scientific views, like structuralism, violence is not founded in difference (Girard 1989, 49). Different skin color, cultural distinctions, ethnic or religious tensions are not the primary soil for the proliferation of violence. The opposite is the case: the similarity of human beings is what facilitates hostility. Violence appears wherever people become more and more alike, i.e., in mutual rivalry for the same object (physical or symbolical). The desire behind the competition makes people similar to the point of being nearly identical; others are just like me, I am like others, and their desire is mine, just like my desire is theirs. The common denominator of desire makes other differences irrelevant. Second, also contrary to both common sense and the philosophical tradition, violence is not irrational (Girard 1989, 2). It is not an expression of a dark, demonic, or biological instinct. It is not, like in Hobbes, a primitive state of nature where everyone is at war with everyone else. This state can be abolished by the political act of ceding one's inborn right for aggression and defense of the sovereign. In Girard, on the contrary, violence is a defense mechanism developed in culture. And as such it is characterized by a specific logic and severe consequences. Third, also contrary to common opinions, especially those shaped in the Christian tradition and the evangelical precept to love one's neighbor, violence is essentially and structurally connected with the religious sphere, it is an inalienable aspect of the sacred.

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In simplified terms, it can be said that violence as a rational function of culture is two-staged. While the first stage is of a dramatic and abrupt character, the second stage is usually a mere reflection of the first, the distorted memory of this drama. The first act of violence emerges from the situation, where a human community for some reason can no longer live according to hitherto functioning rules. In order to survive, it has to establish itself anew. In other words, it is a situation of fundamental crisis. It can have natural or external causes (like war, epidemics, or a calamity), but it becomes a crisis only on the societal level; it abolishes settled rules and hierarchies, deconstructing

this culture as a “regulated system of distinctions” (Girard 1989, 49). We can cautiously say that, at least to some extent, the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 was a crisis of this sort: very rapidly people became equal in their vulnerability and fear, which, at least to some degree, suspended certain social rules and hierarchies.

Thus, the objective disaster becomes a crisis through human reactions: at the very moment when the settled order bends and is crushed under the pressure of the circumstances. Such a situation makes people equal in one desire (it can be survival, victory, or pleasure; Girard calls this common unifying desire *mimesis*) and makes the previously functioning rules irrelevant: “it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats” (Girard, 1989, 49). In such a situation, in Girard’s view, culture in convulsion knows only one source of renewal: the transference of this mutual violence upon one individual. The one becomes the victim of a spontaneous, collective murder (or other forms of aggression): “When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim.” (Girard 1989, 2) This is exactly what happened to Polish doctors once the wave of hope and heroization turned to a wave of suspicion and hate.

Looking for a victim as a remedy for evil emerging from natural causes might seem utterly irrational to objective judgment. But it is rational, if we look at it from the perspective of the logic of culture:

Men feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture; they are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster but never look into the natural causes; the concept that they might affect those causes by learning more about them remains embryonic. Since cultural eclipse is above all a social crisis, there is a strong tendency to explain it by social and, especially, moral causes. (Girard 1986, 14)

What is important here, is the rivalry that forms the crowd. And the crowd (or the mob, as Girard often says) is by definition persecutory, it always drives towards a collective murder or the exclusion of a random victim:

Those who make up the crowd are always potential persecutors, for they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, the traitors who undermine it. The crowd's act of becoming a crowd is the same as the obscure call to assemble or mobilize, in other words to become a mob. (Girard 1986, 16)

Modern crowds rarely form in real public spaces. But the virtual spaces of internet and social media function as a safe forum to express both mimetic rivalry and to direct this violence at one group of victims, in our example, medical staff. The *mimesis* of conflict and rivalry, which at the same time antagonized and unified the community members, now becomes the *mimesis* of unanimity in the choice of the victim. In the specific case of medical staff in Poland, it is exactly the unanimous heroization that prepares the ground for the unanimous victimization. Both distinguish one group as separate from the rest of society and at the same time closer to the source of the crisis itself. The fact that they are first distinguished positively and then negatively does not change the mechanism of victimization itself.

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The spontaneous murder (be it real or symbolic) reveals a very important feature of the victim, rarely visible in modern victims: ambivalence. The scapegoat, a randomly chosen surrogate victim burdened with the whole community's guilt, after the spontaneous murder, is, according to the immanent logic of violence, recognized as a savior, a person who averted the crisis: "The scapegoat is only effective when human relations have broken down in crisis, but he gives the impression of effecting external causes as well, such as plagues, droughts, and other objective calamities." (Girard 1986, 43) The culture begins to worship him as a god who saved the community from annihilation or as a god-founder of a new community. The relationship between the persecutors and the victim is reversed. In other words, the scapegoat is transferred into the sacred. "The return to peace and order is ascribed to the same cause as the earlier troubles to the victim himself. That is what makes the victim sacred and transforms the persecution into a point of religious and cultural departure." (Girard 1986, 55) Now, if we return for a moment to our case: it may look like that the stage of sacralization as a result of victimization is lacking in the case of medical staff. But, if we look more closely, we can notice two things: first,

that sacralization is replaced by heroization, which still functions as a form, perhaps secularized, of sacralization (heroes = saviors); and, second, that it comes before, not after victimization. Thus, the mechanism is reshaped and inverted: first heroization (instead of proper sacralization), then victimization. The reasons for this distortion of the original mechanism will be clearer later, when we look into the historical changes of the scapegoat function.

The first spontaneous act of violence is the foundation of culture. From that point we can speak of the second stage of violence. Therefore, it must be saved in the cultural memory. This means it will be repeated as a sacrificial ritual: a cyclic feast that commemorates the first act. But it will have to be also described in the myths of that culture. The sacrificial ritual is a cultural practice, a reminder of the first victim, the repetition of *that* event, but in a changed form: the ritual can be both the gory feasts of the Aztecs, like the killing of the Sun-god, the Greek ritual of *pharmakoi*, or the seemingly innocent and nonviolent rites, such as a coronation or a carnival. Nevertheless, the sacrificial religious rituals are the traces of the collective spontaneous murder, scars from the wound in the community. But, thanks to myth and its blurring function, nobody remembers that this wound was self-inflicted.

3. *Pharmakos* and Oedipus

Having explained the general ambivalence of the “primitive” sacred and the parallel ambivalence of victims, we need to concentrate now on the context linking the Girardian sacrifice with the ambiguity of medicine. The perfect source is the Greek ritual of *pharmakos* and the myth of Oedipus. The figure of *pharmakos*, be it in rituals or myths, shows a distant, but visible affinity between ancient institutions, or “primitive” moral imagination, and the very modern events of 2020. It also explains why the hostile reactions were directed against medical workers and not against other groups; in this perspective, it can be read as a cultural reminiscence.

In order to describe the *pharmakos* ritual, however, we need to refer also to sources other than Girard. We know the Greek ritual of *pharmakos* already from James G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, where he describes similar rituals in Marseilles, Athens, and Abdera:

The Athenians regularly maintained a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two of these outcast scapegoats. One of the victims was sacrificed for the men and the other for the women. The former wore round his neck a string of black, the latter a string of white, figs. Sometimes, it seems, the victim slain on behalf of the women was a woman. They were led about the city and then sacrificed, apparently by being stoned to death outside the city. But such sacrifices were not confined to extraordinary occasions of public calamity; it appears that every year, at the festival of the Thargelia in May, two victims, one for the men and one for the women, were led out of Athens and stoned to death. (Frazer 2009, 450)

Although historians of religion and philologists still discuss the discrepancies in different sources, e.g., as to whether killing was really involved and the variations of ritual in different places and occasions (Bremmer 1983), from our point of view, this is of lesser relevance. What is more important, here, is the dual function of victims. Walter Burkert interprets the above-mentioned expulsions in terms of a purification of the community. He also underscores the parallel between the ritual of *pharmakos* described above and the biblical paradigm for the scapegoat ritual, as described in Leviticus.⁵ Although in our eyes Greek habits may seem more barbarian, they play a similar role: the transference of evil beyond human settlement where a clear message of the solidarity of a group and the exclusion of others is sent (Burkert 1982, 48). Girard also sees a basic familiarity between the two: “Strictly speaking, there is no essential difference between animal sacrifice and human sacrifice, and in many cases one is substituted for the other.” (Girard 1989, 10)

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⁵ During the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, two goats are chosen and handed to the priest. One is sacrificed for Yahweh in the traditional ceremonial way. Another one is put in the middle of the temple, where all the sins of Israel are placed on its head. The goat is led away into the desert and given over to Azazel (a demon). Frazer’s sketch describes an analogous Greek ritual with one difference: here, not animals, but human beings are sacrificed or expelled from the community.

Nevertheless, the Greek custom is bestowed with a specific connotation relevant to our theme. Foremost, the moral dimension is not rendered in the religious connotation of sin, but set in the medical context. The purification (*katharsis*) achieved is foremostly a form of healing of the whole community. This communal healing, the expulsion of disease, obviously has a moral character; nevertheless, the ritual is seen as a collective *treatment*. As a ritual, it is connected with the Thargelia festival, which is a feast of first fruits, but also a festival of Apollo. Apollo is primarily not a god of sun and light (he becomes the god of the sun only in the 5th century BCE), but a god of pestilence. Most important of his attributes are the bow and arrows: he can heal the plague, but he can also spread it with his weapon. He is a doctor (*iatros*) in the dual, ambiguous, meaning: one who knows how to help cure the disease, but also knows how to infect (Burkert 1996, 145). He is worshipped as a god of healing (he is also the father of Asclepius, the god of medicine), and the disease associated with his power is not an individual illness, but a communal one and is highly contagious. Thargelia is a feast of purification. A *pharmakos* is a personified version of *pharmakon*, a poison and medicine at the same time: an outcast who is identified with the disease, which has spread all over, and who becomes a danger. At the same time, he is a savior who transports this danger out of the city walls:

The character of the *pharmakos* has been compared to a scapegoat. The *evil* and the *outside*, the expulsion of the evil, its exclusion out of the body (and out of the city)—these are the two major senses of the character and of the ritual. (Derrida 1981, 130)

Is the virtual as well as real heroization and the hate of Polish medical staff a faint resemblance of this logic? I think it is: the community is trying to isolate the medics who, in their view, are at the same time polluted in a medical and, maybe, moral sense. Their isolation is an act of the purification of society. At the same time, they have an ambivalent power: they can spread the pollution, but they can also heal the community, not only by active medical action, but also by means of isolating themselves.

Both the worshipped god and the person sacrificed are bestowed and burdened with the ambivalence Girard was talking about when describing the

binate nature of the sacred. The theogonic myth of Apollo confirms this parallel: even Apollo polluted himself by slaying the Cyclops and was banished from Olympus. After killing the Python, he must leave Delphi and seek purification in distant Thessaly (Burkert 1996, 148). “Behind the warrior gods there are always victims, and victims are usually linked to medicine.” (Girard 1986, 48) Apart from the differences between Burkert and Girard,⁶ in both descriptions the mechanism is similar: “The aggression excited by fear is concentrated on some loathsome outsider; everyone feels relieved by the communal projection of the fury born of despair; as well as by the certainty of standing on the side of the just and pure” (Burkert 1996, 83)—these words could just as well appear in Girard. No matter what origin we accept, the ambiguity of the victim and the sacred is intact: the outcast, both in Burkert and in Girard, is also a savior. What we need to notice, now, is the direction of this ambivalence: we could see in Frazer’s description of the *pharmakos* ritual, that the ambivalence of a victim has a temporal direction: he or she is first an outcast, someone of a very low position in the community (a beggar, a criminal), they are identified with the *pharmakon*, understood as a poison, and only after being sacrificed does she or he become a *pharmakon* in the second sense, that of a medicine: they become a savior, a healer, someone in kinship with the god of healing. But, if we move from customs and historical rituals towards myths, the direction changes, or, becomes less straightforward. In myths, the *pharmakoi* are mostly distinguished members of a community, like kings. This is also a step towards the above-indicated inversion of the classical line leading from victimization to sacralization (heroization).

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A mythical and tragic depiction of a *pharmakos* is found in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus is a king of Thebes, who owes the throne to the great merit he brought to Thebes. Oedipus was the first human being to have guessed

⁶ Burkert draws attention to a different “primal scene” of violence than Girard: “Instead of deriving ceremonial killing and eating from the hunt, as Burkert does, Girard describes an outbreak of intrahuman violence as the hidden center of social dynamics.” (Burkert, Girard, and Smith 1987, 172) Thus, while Girard begins with culture and stresses the social-psychological tension caused by common desire, Burkert points to the roots of violent rituals in the biological background of hunting or even in the ethological situation of a group of animals surrounded by predators, which will give up only, if at least one member of the group falls victim to them.

the riddle of the Sphinx, the monster who brought calamities and unhappiness to the city. After conquering the monster, Oedipus, although he is a stranger, takes over the throne, which ordinarily would have gone to his brother-in-law, Creon. Alas, defeating the Sphinx, does not mean the end of misfortune for Thebes. Now a new and greater danger devastates the city's population. We learn it is a plague that is wreaking havoc, and Oedipus is called to help as one who once proved being capable of reversing fate. The only remedy would be to follow Apollo's order and "drive out the pollution being fostered in this very land" (106–108). We also learn from Creon, who translates the will of the god, that the pollution is of a moral kind, and that it is the slaughter of the previous King, Laius. Apollo, the god of plague, will be a god of healing for Thebes only after the murderer is killed or expelled. However, Oedipus is only willing to follow Creon's advice and find the murderer of Laius. But then comes Tiresias, a prophet who openly accuses Oedipus himself of being the murderer. The rest of the play is the struggle of Oedipus who—as a stranger in this land—finds the accusations absurd. But more and more personae appearing on the scene reveal Oedipus' identity: and eventually he turns out to be the son of Jocasta and Laius, who was sent away as a baby to prevent a prophecy that their son would kill the father and marry his own mother. Oedipus is a parricide and incestualist. The moral scandal he caused is as contagious as pestilence and breeds parallelly to medical disease, at the same time being its identifiable cause. The only cure lies in getting rid of the pollution.

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We can see that the line of ambiguity is more complicated here. Oedipus is someone definitely distinguished in the community: he is the king; he is the city's rescuer. At the same time, he is not connate with the community. He is a stranger with an unclear past, he is an abandoned child, he is also handicapped. He is a perfect candidate for the role of a *pharmakos* in its duality of meaning: a savior who easily becomes the source of plague, and, after blinding himself and leaving the city, again the savior whose dead body becomes a relic (*Oedipus in Colonus*). He is "a mysterious savior who visits affliction on mankind in order subsequently to restore it to good health" (Girard 1989, 86). Oedipus is like a human counterpart of Apollo, and, at the same time, a distant prefiguration of the modern medical victim.

4. Historical transformations

At the beginning of this essay, I described the cyclic rhythm of the launch and the renewal of culture. This corresponded to the difference between the spontaneous mechanism of the surrogate victim and the scapegoat ritual. This dual structure has, in Girard's thought, a double function. On the one hand, it is a historical hypothesis: it describes the logic hidden in archaic cultures and "primitive" religious systems. On the other hand, it depicts a model, a transhistorical and transcultural anthropological description of the laws of human culture in general. One can say that the historical, genetic aspect of the scapegoat ritual constitutes a sort of cultural residue.

In the descriptions of historical times and of modernity, there are two possibilities within Girard's thought: first, one can see the history of culture as a returning echo of collective violence, independent from the religious turn Girard saw in Christianity. In this approach, the core can be historically modified, it can be reshaped into stable institutions, but it never disappears. It can always be recollected and repeated in this or that form. Secondly, we have another possibility: Christianity changed our civilization irreversibly. It revealed the violence hidden in myths and, by doing so, it disarmed the mechanism of transference of the collective guilt onto individuals. By the same token, it dismantled the sacrificial ritual by means of depotentialization. But even Christianity and its powerful message was unable to weaken the mechanism of the escalation of tension in mimetic rivalry. It, so to speak, stopped half way: it deprived us of the cultural tools preventing the undue escalation of violence, but it did not prevent violence itself. Both possibilities were developed in Girard's works, creating a very interesting tension in his philosophy of modernity. In the context of this essay, both versions of cultural development prove relevant.

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In *Violence and the Sacred* (first published in 1972), where Girard does not yet deal with Christianity as a turning point in the development of culture, and also in *The Scapegoat* (first published in 1982), we come across analyses of the cultural memory of old rituals: they reemerge any time public institutions collapse: "in a conflict whose course is no longer strictly regulated by a predetermined model, the ritualistic elements disintegrate into actual events

and it becomes impossible to distinguish history from ritual” (Girard 1989, 109–110).

Cultural evolution brought about a gradual separation between violence and the sacred. On the philosophical level, these changes can already be seen in Plato, who tries to purify myths from violent elements, and postulates censorship in the name of philosophical rationality.⁷ The moral ambiguity of gods, the close connection between being saintly and damned, begins to polarize and mythology is gradually cleansed from depictions of violence. It is also the beginning of moral dualism: the gods drive toward pure and fulgent sacrosanctity. Plato’s idea of Good is the sacred purified, translucent, unable to hide traces of its gory rituals. The aspect of the sacred, which was bound with violence and guilt, is now separated from divinity: it evolved towards the demonic sphere, becoming monstrous or devilish. This tendency to separate evil from divinities also clouds the logic of collective violence; the meaning of ritual is veiled. This is in congruence with the Derridean analysis of Plato’s *pharmakon*: once bestowed with the ambiguity of medicine that can be both healing and poisonous. In *Phaedrus*, the Egyptian god Thoth presents the skill of writing to the king Thamus as a *pharmakon*, a remedy for forgetfulness. Thoth is the god of writing, who knows how to put an end to life, but he can also heal the sick (Derrida 1981, 94)—in this respect, an Egyptian counterpart of Apollo. But the invention of the written word is rejected by the king (representing Plato himself) not because of its ambiguous nature, which makes the effect of the cure uncertain, but because this *pharmakon* is disambiguated and identified as simply harmful, poisonous. In Plato, the ambiguity is transformed into clear-cut oppositions: good and evil, true and false (Derrida 1981, 103).

The historical manifestations of the scapegoat mechanism and ritual are parallel to these conceptual changes. As myth loses relevance, the mystification of violence, along with its separation from the sacred, also becomes weaker. This, of course, does not mean that history does not know the foundational

7 “First, telling the greatest falsehood about the most important things doesn’t make a fine story – I mean, Hesiod telling us about how Uranus behaved, how Cronus punished him for it, and how he was in turn punished by his own son. But even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people.” (*The Republic*, 378a)

murders and scapegoats. Just the opposite, it is full of them, from medieval pogroms and witch-hunts to staged trials and judicial murders in the 20th century. Nevertheless, together with the transition from sacrificial religion to historical persecutions, the tendency to sacralize victims diminishes, and the sacred disappears from their descriptions: “Medieval and modern persecutors do not worship their victims, they only hate them.” (Girard 1986, 38) According to the logic of moral polarization, the defusing of a crisis appears rather as the victory of good over evil, as humbling the devilish. But the ritual does not completely disappear, it is reshaped: the most important elements of the selection of the victim, the ascribing of the hostility of the community to the individual’s guilt, and the mimetic unanimity stay intact.

5. The modern *pharmakoi*

Let us, after this long circuitous route, return to the phenomenon of the rapid and abrupt change of social moods towards doctors and other medical staff. In the first stage of the pandemic, the public appreciation for doctors and nurses is enormous. What can be revealing in this context, is the type of discourse used in this recognition stage. First of all, as we have seen, the military language was ubiquitous. We are all at war with an enemy. The enemy is invisible and more dangerous than typical warring enemies. But it has an identity, the problem is that this identity is hidden from us, which makes the enemy sneakier and more insidious. Doctors, paramedics, and nurses are the soldiers; and not even regular strategists (like, e.g., virologists). They are front-line warriors who fight in the most dangerous conditions, constantly risking their own lives and health. Even more so, as the supply of the means of protection is scarce and insufficient. They are heroes, and deserve the highest possible regard from the rest of society (remember, e.g., equating doctors with Warsaw insurgents in 1944, a parallel very forceful in Polish national imagery). But together with this military language, another type of discourse emerges, different, but certainly intertwined with militarization. It is the discourse of pop-culture. Doctors are not only soldiers. They are also superheroes: not only ready for sacrifice, but also equipped with abnormal power. In this way, they are distinguished, they possess abilities regular citizens do not. Internet journalists

and pundits speculated of doctors replacing the heroes of the Marvel and DC universes in young people's imagination.⁸

Such a heroization to the point of idolatry can be seen as a secularized version of the transfer to the sacred sphere, as described by Girard. The fact that it is not the result of victimization, but rather precedes it, is connected with the fact that it is not a repetition of the primal mechanism of archaic culture, but a ritual that was transformed and reshaped in history. In Polish historical imagery, the romantic myth is still omnipresent. The long years of servitude after the partitions of Poland (1795–1918) created a powerful romantic trend in culture, especially in literature. Its characteristic trait was a certain sort of messianism. It expressed itself either in the sacralization of the nation itself (Poland as a savior of nations) or in a collective desire for the distinguished individual(s) who could bring redemption to the nation under the foreign yoke (e.g., Napoleon). Poland regained independence in 1918 as a result of WWI, but the messianist tendencies remained, being reshaped by historical circumstances. This romantic strain has been supported by the way history is taught in Poland up to the present day. Unfortunately, such a romantic heroization makes any public discussion and assessment of the heroes difficult and shifts it to narrow academic circles. This means that a more complex and balanced evaluation of the person or groups involved is impossible. It seems that this is what happened with medics at the beginning of the pandemic: they were romantically heroized, superhuman powers were ascribed to them, and the group started to function as mythical figures, or even as phantasms.

As we could see, at some point the heroization turned into evil talk and hate. But, again, one could identify one type of discourse unifying the hostile utterances. The military heroization turned very easily into victimization: doctors and other medical workers turned out to be the bringers of the dangers of the pandemic to the community. The spread of the pestilence could be avoided by an identification of its carriers and by their isolation from society. The tendencies to heroize and victimize proved to be closely related. The urge

⁸ The Mattel company even marketed this: they are producing action figures of medical staff under the title "Thank you heroes" (*Dadhero.pl*; April 30; <https://dadhero.pl/286329,figurki-mattel-z-kolekcji-thankyouheroes-to-lekarze-jako-superbohaterowie>; accessed on August 27, 2020).

for a savior is akin to the desire to identify the external or internal enemy, the group responsible for the communal misfortune. And, again, like in heroization, victimization excludes any complex and differentiating discussion, since it is fueled by the *mimesis* of unanimity.

This, no doubt, utmost modern situation reminds us inevitably of the old pattern described by Girard and others in the *pharmakos* figure. Doctors are heroes, because they risk their lives for the community, just like Oedipus did with his overthrowing of the Sphinx. He becomes the king of Thebes, they become superheroes. But then the pestilence does not diminish. The heroes prove inefficient and sometimes their moral condition is also questioned. The community, looking for a victim, picks on the distinguished ones. The mythical and tragic part is over, now the ritual of *pharmakos* is set up. The chosen ones have to be expelled together with the plague they represent. Behind the medical language of the epidemic threat, one can hear the moral justification: doctors are blamed for the mediocre situation in the Polish healthcare system they represent. The sick healthcare system has sick doctors and with a double meaning: sick with the sin of negligence, or greed, and sick as the carriers of the virus. They are blamed for not being able to mend the system and for the fact that they may support it (or even benefit from it). This natural tendency has been supported by the Polish government, which seems content to place responsibility on the doctors' shoulders instead of their own. "Blaming doctors" became a rhetorical strategy and a recurring motif of government announcements.⁹

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This recalls the Black Death, the great plague that decimated Europe between 1347 and 1351. The Black Death was often mentioned in the context of the new pandemic. It seems that there are reasons why Girard harked back to this historical event in the analysis of the scapegoat mechanism: it showed the differences between the primitive ritual killing and the historical *pharmakoi*:

⁹ In June, the Polish government drew back on this social hostility with the proposal of a new piece of legislation, which intensifies criminal responsibility of doctors for malpractice (added to the COVID-19 legislation, the so-called "Shield 4.0"). Cf. <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/tarcza-40-wprowadza-zmiany-do-kodeksu-karnego-lekarze-apeluja-do-prezydenta-o-wstrzymanie-prac-6524281991329409a.html>. (Accessed on August 31.)

the plague of the 14th century brought about the most terrible pogroms all over Europe, and the most typical target of these were Jews. The reason is not only that they were social and religious outcasts. They were also often doctors. They could heal, but they could also bring the illness to people: they were accused of poisoning rivers for people to drink infected water (Girard 1986, 1).

We can see that the archaic ambiguity is maintained, but with a distinct qualification. The Greek *pharmakoi* were first the evil ones and then saviors. Oedipus is first a hero, then a scapegoat, then the savior. Doctors are first heroes, then scapegoats. There is no pure sacralization, and, if it appears, it manifests in the different form of heroization. This is, of course, in accordance with what Girard writes about “non-primitive” cultures: they do not worship their victims. Once doctors cease to be heroes, they never become the target of worship, they can only be hated. But, luckily, they are also saved from lynching as a group. It is as if modern culture was just a step “ahead” of the medieval persecutions. In what way? Here, it might be helpful to briefly look at the second possibility of the development of culture in Girard that I mentioned above:

212 since we are children of a mature civilization, which (through Christianity) actually *knows* of the scapegoat mechanism, violence does not necessarily end with sacrifice. Since it is mitigated by institutions, it develops to a certain degree without actually reaching the turning point of an actual or symbolic killing. But this also means that it never completely calms down: the conflict escalates to a certain point without climax, then it is mitigated and smolders beneath the surface of social life. That is why Girard in his last books can say: “Learning that we have a scapegoat is to lose it forever and to expose ourselves to mimetic conflicts with no possible resolution.” (Girard 2010, xiv)

There are more than enough reasons to believe that modern culture hides both possibilities outlined by Girard: the return to dark primitive rituals to de-potentialize conflicts and the escalation of conflicts that are mitigated, but not concluded and are, thus, always ready for another escalation. For our topic, it is important that no matter what scenario appears more plausible, the core mechanism, the mimetic rivalry, is untouched.

Let us briefly return to the theme once again: at first, everybody agrees the medical staff are heroes: we could see the spread of the unifying discourse that almost nobody contradicted. Nobody simply spoke of medical staff doing their

job well and with dedication. The government neglected measures that could have eased the crisis on a pragmatic level (like, for instance, systematic testing). Medical staff had to be heroized and put into a military context. Only such an exaggeration was able to create unanimity. Actually, it excluded discussions and different opinions on the matter. For example, the acute question of the right to due protection and the obligations of the government. Alas, this positive unanimity, just because it excluded differences, very easily twisted into the opposite. And, again, the new language, the discourse of hostility, was exaggerated and contagious. It never was shared by the majority, but it was popular enough to cause ostracism, anxiety, or even panic. It seems that only stable and functioning public institutions, resistant to collective moods and supported on a governmental level, could have prevented such a hostile turn, and this is precisely what was lacking during the most uncertain months.

Girard's anthropology and philosophy of religion do not offer tools that could facilitate solutions to this problem. Neither do they offer a comprehensive theory that would explain, on every possible level, what has been going on since the early months of 2020. But I believe that it helps us to better understand what happened in our public discourse, even if, for reasons indicated at the beginning, I decided to limit the analysis to only one, but illuminating case of social reactions to medical staff. This can be a paradigm, an example, but also an insight into what is going on in our societies. Such an understanding, certainly, does not prevent mimetic crises, but it sometimes functions as a safety valve, protecting us from the physical culmination of collective violence.

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