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## Expert's Commentary

# Clausewitz's War Within the Chains of Reason versus Girard, the Apocalypse, and the Far-Right Christian Movement in the U.S.

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The media's focus on the current U.S. president's personality can easily lead us to overlook deeper, underlying changes. It is well known that the French sociologist René Girard plays a significant role in shaping the self-image of Silicon Valley's tech billionaires. In particular, his disciple Peter Thiel, founder of Palantir, is advancing this agenda and strongly influencing U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, whom Thiel financially supported during his campaign. This connection has produced a billionaire-backed far-right movement that grounds its legitimacy in a fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity. The phenomenon has already been amply documented in numerous U.S. debates. The rather helpless counter-reaction attempts to demonstrate that Girard is merely being exploited and misunderstood. He certainly is — but the central problem runs deeper: in his book Battling to the End, Girard himself describes an approaching apocalypse. To escape it, he recommends absolute nonviolence, which he sees as realized in Christianity. Peter Thiel and the other tech billionaires, by contrast, believe that in this approaching apocalypse one must fight to the bitter end in order to survive. It is no coincidence that the latest book by the U.S. "Minister of War," Pete Hegseth, is titled American Crusade; Hegseth even compared the rescue of an American pilot at Easter to the resurrection of Christ. Girard is indeed being instrumentalized by Thiel and others. The deeper issue, however, is that Girard himself adopts an apocalyptic framework and appears to give it scientific legitimacy by invoking a reductionist reading of Clausewitz — arguably the most significant theorist of war. It is only through this reference to Clausewitz that Girard's

theory of mimesis acquires the political explosiveness that would otherwise have remained confined to academia.

**Mimetic Desire and the Scapegoat Mechanism**

René Girard's theories on mimesis, mimetic rivalry, scapegoating, and the role of myth and religion in the emergence of culture offer profound insights into human history and behavior. So what is mimetic desire?

Mimetic desire begins with human needs and desires. While needs are biologically rooted, desires are strongly shaped by others. Girard's identification of the basis of the human problem is simple: most of the things we desire — be it a person, a relationship, an object, an experience, or a feeling — are based on imitation. We develop a desire for these things through our observation of others who desire or possess them, whether consciously or not. This explains the power of advertising (when we see enough people using something, we want it too) as well as the power of celebrity: we want the kind of house, car, clothes, or partner that the rich, famous, and powerful possess.

Children learn through imitation, acquiring language and the skills necessary for social success. By absorbing the ethos of their culture, they become part of the community and eventually pass it on to the next generation. In this respect, mimesis is unproblematic. However, for Girard, mimesis is also the primary cause of social unrest and violence, because it leads to rivalry when people compete for scarce resources. Sometimes class differences separate the object of rival desire — for example, when one harbors a mimetic desire for what the rich possess. In this situation, which Girard calls external mediation, violent conflict is unlikely. In internal mediation, however, where individuals or groups desire the same thing and are close to one another, the possibility of violence is real.

Girard asserts that mimetic rivalry is the primary cause of human violence: tribes fight over resources, two men desire the same woman, envy of another's wealth, fame, honor, or power escalates into violence. Without a corrective, such rivalry would destroy lives and even human civilization itself. The historical corrective, in Girard's view, is the scapegoat mechanism: by constructing a scapegoat, a community projects all of its problems onto a single person or group, casting them out or sacrificing them and thereby stabilizing its own identity. Determining who belongs to a community and who does not reunites the community.

A famous example is Kaiser Wilhelm II's declaration before World War I: "I no longer know of any parties; I know only Germans." Anti-Semitism rests on the same combination of exclusion and sacrifice — elevated, in essence, to a seemingly sacred act.

Girard argues that Jesus's voluntary sacrificial death broke this mechanism once and for all, since he took the sins of the world upon himself. Yet regardless of any theological assessment, this interpretation clearly does not fit the Crusades, the religious wars of the Middle Ages, colonization, the two world wars, or the Holocaust. On the contrary, one could read these events as repetitions of the scapegoat mechanism — unity created through the "sacrifice" of others. This raises a fundamental question: is Christianity characterized by a particular form of nonviolence, as devout Christians will argue, or by a particular escalation of violence aimed at establishing "eternal peace" already here on earth, as its universal claim suggests? Historically, societies that understood themselves as Christian have a distinct history of violence (as does Islam, which likewise views itself as fundamentally peaceful). The victims of colonization and the Holocaust would not concur with the self-image of a peaceful religion.

**Girard's Appeal to Clausewitz**

To lend greater legitimacy to his controversial position, Girard explicitly invokes the most significant theorist of warfare, Carl von Clausewitz. In his three propositions on the escalation of war, Clausewitz did in fact advance what looks like a mimetic position. He accompanies the mutual escalation to the extreme with the words "the enemy does the same." He justifies this in two ways: first, whoever escalates the spiral of violence gains the upper hand and wins the war; second, as long as I have not subdued the enemy, I must fear that he will subdue and defeat me. It is the fear and dread of defeat that compels both adversaries to escalate further and further. Ultimately, it is the mutual striving for power on both sides that drives the escalation. In parts of his book, Clausewitz indeed treats the absolute and the extreme as the ideal of warfare. To this extent, one could follow Girard.

But Girard overlooks decisive differences. Clausewitz's three dynamics of escalation are followed by three dynamics of moderation, and these likewise occur on both sides. The crucial point is that the desired post-war political condition — and thus peace — exerts a retroactive influence on the conduct of war. At the end of the first chapter, Clausewitz emphasizes that war consists of inherent violence, the interplay of probabilities and chance,

and the subordinate role of war as a political instrument. He assigns this last dimension to pure reason. The tendency toward extremes that Girard reads in Clausewitz is therefore real, but it is bounded and contained by the "pure reason" Clausewitz associates with politics. Girard, in extracting only the escalatory side of Clausewitz, turns a theory of war within the chains of reason into a theory of inevitable apocalyptic escalation.

**The Tech Billionaires' Reading: From Mimesis to Survivalism**

The political danger of this reductionist reading becomes fully visible only when one looks at how Peter Thiel and his network have translated Girard into a worldview. Thiel encountered Girard as a student at Stanford and has repeatedly described him as the most important intellectual influence of his life. For Thiel, Girard's diagnosis is not a warning but a strategic map. If mimetic rivalry inevitably destroys liberal-democratic societies — because equality and proximity intensify rivalry rather than soothe it — then the political task is not to defend liberal institutions but to escape them. Several recurring motifs follow from this:

- Anti-mimetic exceptionalism. Thiel's famous slogan "competition is for losers" is a direct application of Girard. The entrepreneur, the monopolist, and ultimately the sovereign should step out of the mimetic crowd. From this perspective, democratic pluralism is not a value but a mimetic trap, and oligarchic exit becomes a virtue.
- The katechon. Thiel has repeatedly invoked the Pauline figure of the katechon — the "one who restrains" the coming of the Antichrist. In his speeches and essays, the role of the katechon is increasingly assigned to a strong executive, to U.S. technological supremacy, or to a Christian-civilizational bloc holding back chaos. This theologizes politics: the state is no longer an arena of compromise but a dam against the apocalypse.
- Surveillance as sacred order. Palantir's business model — total data integration in the service of state and military power — fits seamlessly into this frame. If society is on the brink of mimetic dissolution, then comprehensive visibility, predictive policing, and targeting infrastructure appear not as authoritarian tools but as instruments

of ordering against impending chaos. Girard's diagnosis is used to sanctify what would otherwise require liberal justification.

- The scapegoat, reactivated. Where Girard saw the gospel as having exposed and disabled scapegoating, the new far right openly re-embraces it. Migrants, "globalists," trans people, and "woke" elites are designated as the source of internal corruption whose expulsion will restore the community. The Christian vocabulary of sacrifice and purification is not a remnant; it is the operating system.
- Survivalism as eschatology. The bunker mentality of Silicon Valley — New Zealand estates, private security, off-grid compounds — is often treated as an eccentricity of the super-rich. Read through Thiel's Girard, it is an eschatological posture: the elect prepare to outlast the catastrophe that the masses, locked in mimetic rivalry, will bring upon themselves. The "battling to the end" that Girard feared becomes, for this milieu, a plan.
- J.D. Vance and the political vehicle. Vance's biographical trajectory — Yale Law, conversion to Catholicism under intellectual influences close to Thiel's circle, financial backing by Thiel for his Senate run, and now the vice presidency — illustrates how this worldview has migrated from venture capital into executive power. Vance's public theology, with its emphasis on ordo amoris, civilizational hierarchy, and the duty to defend "our own" first, is the political-electoral surface of the same apocalyptic substructure.
- Pete Hegseth and the crusading state. Hegseth's American Crusade and his Easter analogy between a rescued pilot and the resurrected Christ are not rhetorical excess; they are the militarized expression of the same script. If history is heading toward a final confrontation, then the armed forces are no longer an instrument of policy in Clausewitz's sense but the sword arm of a sacred order. This is precisely the inversion of Clausewitz that Girard's reductionist reading enables.

**The Shared Apocalyptic Premise**

The decisive point is that Girard and his far-right appropriators agree on the diagnosis and differ only on the prescription. Both assume that mimetic escalation has reached or is reaching the point of no return; both treat Clausewitz's tendency toward the extreme as an iron law rather than as one pole of a dialectic; both read history eschatologically. Girard's response is absolute nonviolence in imitation of Christ. Thiel's, Vance's, and Hegseth's

response is absolute combat in the name of Christ. These are mirror-image conclusions drawn from the same flawed premise.

This is why the standard liberal rejoinder — "they are misreading Girard" — is insufficient. It is true, but it leaves the apocalyptic frame intact and merely contests its ownership. The more important move is to dispute the premise itself: to recover the Clausewitz whom Girard truncates. Clausewitz's war stands within the chains of reason precisely because the political purpose, the friction of reality, and the moderating dynamics on both sides prevent the slide into the absolute. War is neither a sacred drama of redemption nor a final reckoning between elect and damned; it is a political instrument that retains its meaning only as long as it remains subordinate to a survivable post-war order.

Religiously motivated war has historically produced a particular escalation, internally and externally, because it dissolves precisely this subordination. Girard's tendency toward absolute peacefulness is unrealistic; the religiously legitimized far right's drive toward a final battle is catastrophic. Both rest on the same assumption of an impending apocalypse. That assumption is the core of the problem.

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