

MIMETICS: A BIOSOCIOLOGICAL MODEL OF CULTURE

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The literary world has been concerned with the idea of mimesis since the first criticism of the imitative process of art by Plato. Art, however, is not the only element of society that is imitative; recent biosociological and informatics theories suggest mimesis as the driving process behind culture development. Is imitation the only element in the transmission of culture? If so, how can the elements of culture change over time? I believe we can find our answers in biosocial and information theory, which would suggest cultures select certain elements of cultural capital, modifying them over time.

A few definitions are needed in our examination of mimetics. In this paper, I will refer to the *meme* – in this case a unit of cultural information.¹ This can be anything from the ability to correctly interpret emotional expressions on another person's face, to the meaning or metaphor of an image or phrase. Mimetics, for this piece, is the *process* of creating, transmitting, and adapting these memes.

1. On Genes, Phenotypes, and Memes

The foundation of all life on Earth is the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) carried in our cells. This molecule developed in the harsh environment of prehistory and found a way to preserve itself through replication. This replication did not always ensure the continuation of the DNA. Awash in a sea of other chemicals that could break down this self-replicating chain, DNA, came up with a new tactic: a barrier between it and the outside world: a cell. From the single cell

to the higher-order animals, all life is nothing but a survival mechanism created by and for the benefit of its genetic material. These physical and behavioral traits – the expression of genetic blueprints – are known as a creature’s phenotype.

The human being evolved sometime in the Pleistocene era in the niche of a predator-scavenger. This niche is particularly competitive, so like many mammalian hunter-scavengers (wolves, hyenas, or various ape species,) humans lived in groups for protection and to increase their success in gathering food and reproduction. In addition to evolving an upright stance, opposable thumbs, and other external traits, they developed different cognitive abilities that made them more successful than other creatures in their niche: the ability to learn quickly, plan ahead for unknown events in the future, and to communicate through complex vocalizations. This communication--the transfer of information from one human to the next--is the beginning of mimetic material, the origin of culture. Thus the mimetic foundations of our culture are based on the survival mechanisms and instincts derived from our phenotype and environmental pressures.

“Culture is not causeless and disembodied. It is generated in rich and intricate ways by information-processing mechanisms situated in human minds. These mechanisms are, in turn, the elaborately sculpted product of the evolutionary process.”²

Culture is more than the product of the evolutionary process...it *is* an evolutionary process. The communal nature of humans is part and parcel of its survival strategy, and is based on the phenotypic expression of our genes; cultures are a mirror of the genetic-phenotypic

relation--memes are a unit of cultural information, just as genes are a unit of biochemical information. Culture is the expression of mimetic data, just as the human body is an expression of genetic data. Humans are the vehicle for the survival of genetic material, but they are also a vessel for the survival of mimetic material. This latter material began as information vital to the survival of these early humans and their progeny. Society--cultures--are the vehicle for the survival of those memes that can aid in the survival of the human being. Mimesis, the transmission of cultural information, *is* a survival mechanism.

2. The Process of Mimesis

Much of the argument against the biosocial model for cultural development is due to the use of biological metaphor, and the shadow of the 20th Century eugenics or Skinnerian programs it evokes. I would suggest that culture and the process of its transmission, mimesis, is *itself* a metaphor for biology. If culture is a survival mechanism for the individual, just as the individual is a machine for the survival of their genes, the mirroring or imitation of genetic processes in mimetics is an apt comparison.

The memes an individual possesses are picked up through interaction with other people, whether through direct contact, or through the artistic works others have created. They should provide the person with guidance on how to deal with the outside world (although not all memes do this, of course.) Information that does not aid the process of survival is modified by personal experience, or lost altogether; information that is successful is reinforced and takes on greater prominence in the behavior of that person and is more likely to be passed on.

Memes which are not shared in the society at large, however, are useless. The exchange of mimetic material is healthy and necessary to the social body. Information deemed useful (or entertain, even) is spread more readily, in stories, gossip, or art. This explains some of Plato's trepidation toward the theater and epic poetry--the dissemination of material that would adversely effect the survival mechanisms of society could have disastrous effects. In this model, Plato's rejection of mimesis in art as harmful to the health of society might be seen as a maladaptation to a successful cultural phenomenon; catharsis brought about by the evocation of emotions in theater and poetry. In this model, art is a primary vector of mimesis, an effective transmitter of mimetic capital to a wide audience.

Since the memes of early mankind are the foundation for the various societies worldwide, there is inevitably cross-cultural commonalities. In metaphor, myth and religion, we see some of the earliest memes of mankind: the archetypes of Jung; the gods and goddesses of old--often with analogous characters in the varying pantheons; the commonalities of morality in the old religions. The differentiations of culture, I propose, are based on the environmental and historical differences between them.

These differences started due to the impact of geography on the members of a culture. With a relatively small population and incredibly slow and unreliable travel, the world was a very large place; the geography created differing survival strategies. The climate of Greece was instrumental to the creation of those early societies--their means of food production, the manner in which they governed themselves, waged war, etc.--just as the environment of the Indian subcontinent molded those that lived there. Each of these cultures or societies, however, were not living in a vacuum. Cultural transmission and the changes it forges are the only constants in

a healthy society. For this reason, the 'pure culture' that Levi-Strauss was hoping to find never existed.

In biology, a system, be it the information of DNA or an individual creature, is in constant danger of destruction. Static systems are not adaptive, they do not give rise to originality. In the biological world, a creature without the ability to adapt can easily be destroyed. The DNA message of a non-adaptive being can be wiped out by disease or other environmental stresses; a population that has little variation in phenotypes can be destroyed by a single viral assault. The biological world takes this into account in the form of sexual reproduction. In this way, biological systems can combine successful DNA information and their related phenotypes, creating differing traits and strengthening them against the outside world.

The same is true of a culture. Those unable to adapt, to bend with the changes of an environmental or socio-political nature find themselves broken or destroyed by those factors. There are various different ways that mimetic capital adapts...or more to the point, is adapted. At the individual level, people adapt the memes they receive through experience, but the individual is usually too small a factor to change a society. An appropriate metaphor would be a single cell in a body that has mutated in some way; the effect on the entirety is minimal. If they transmit those newly-modified memes to other individuals, however, and if those individuals adopt those memes into their mimetic framework, the individual could be instrumental in the creation of a subculture. Subcultures are more likely to change the mimetics of a culture from the inside--the greater similarity of a subculture to the main culture might allow this mimetic mutation (the subculture) to act more swiftly and decisively on the mimetic body. However, the main culture can also react aggressively against a subculture, viewing the mimetic mutation as a danger to the

whole, like a cancer or virus acting on the corpus. An example might be the rise and ultimate success of the anti-slavery groups and the concurrent, reactionary rise of racism in the 19th Century, or the current German reaction to Scientology by banning the group.

The main factor in changing a culture is exposure to the mimetic capital of another society. The cross-pollination of mimetic material is analogous to sexual reproduction in biology. Traders, explorers, and tourists--all bring their mimetic background with them into an exchange, and all bring away some small level of mimetic fertilization from the other (some have referred to this in terms of infection. Although it can be an apt analogy, it is one laden with negative connotations.)

The interchange between cultures can produce a more dynamic and more adaptive set of cultures, regardless of whether the exchange is viewed positive or negative. In situation where new memes are considered beneficial--a new form of art, a more efficient form of production of food or other products, or a new political system--the new mimetic material may be actively integrated from one culture to the other. These memes are drawn into the Others' culture through emulation, or even simple examination, and begin to insert themselves into the cultural framework of the Other.

In Britain, in the 19th and 20th Century, art, religion, and other cultural aspects of India and China came into vogue due to exposure of businessmen, soldiers, and other colonial travelers to the Orient. The popularity of these novel forms of art--in clothing, furnishings, and art, as well as philosophy--wormed their way into the culture of the West. The merging of Eastern notions of cyclical time, or nothingness as the base of reality, profoundly effected philosophical and scientific inquiry. The abyss of Nietzsche, the notion of probability waveforms in quantum

mechanics...all owe a debt to not just the incorporation, but the *blending*, of Eastern thought into Western. New, more adaptive forms of philosophic and scientific inquiry were the result of the cross-pollination of mimetic material from these cultures.

In situations where the new memes are considered dangerous to the cohesion or folkways of a society, this new material might be rejected. The cultures find themselves in conflict, which can be expressed internally or externally. Internal conflict could create instabilities in the political health of the culture. External expressions can range from racial or political stereotyping and other antagonism to all-out warfare. This brings us to the subject of violence.

3. On Violence

Violence has been part of human cultures from the very beginning. From the dangers of early man, to the wars of gods and men in the varying mythologies of the world, with their cathartic plays like *Oedipus Rex*, through the violent (often self-directed) works of the romantic period, and the modern violent morality-plays of action pictures violence is seen not just as a means to an end, but in its own way attractive and noble. Heros are two-fisted men of action who, when words fail, resort to pummeling the evil into submission.

The physiology and the psychology of mankind is based in his Pleistocene origins. The design of the body and brain is well-suited for survival in a dangerous, violent world, and particularly in a highly competitive and violent niche: predator-scavenger. This genetic and mimetic programming for violence is still part and parcel of human culture, and unlikely every to be fully divorced from our civilizations. From violent entertainment culture to road rage, the violence of mankind's origins still drives us to react to threat with force.

Rene Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* attempted to bring focus to the nature of human violence. He posits the notion of triangular desire in which a person emulates another model, incorporating the model's goals as his own. The object of desire become the focus of competition, what he calls 'acquisitive mimesis', bringing the two to violence. "The attractive force of the object does not lie in its inherent value...Rather, it is the dynamic of the competitive situation that confers value on the sought-after object and prompts rivals to affective engagement."³

This view of competition and violence fits nicely into the biosocial model of violence. In the niche that Man filled during his evolution, competition and survival depended on the acquisition of materials deemed valuable to survival. An object coveted by another person might be instrumental to survival, or simply comfort, and would attract the desire of others who would assume value in any object which drew the desire of the Other. This desire to gain possession over things that might be perceived necessary to survival or happiness might have become less necessary in a modern, technological and reasonably comfortable world, but the desire is still there. Greed and jealousy are hard-wired into the genetic makeup of the human being, and controlled only by mimetic notions of altruism and equality designed to help preserve the body social.

Mimetic notions of honesty, altruism, and nobility are not always enough to control the individuals of a group. That violence is a chief form of social control is no surprise to many people: the threat of incarceration, punishment, or death has long been used to keep the individual in line. Social prohibitions using violence as their enforcement have been in effect long before the Code of Hammurabi, which mandated "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

Girard also suggests this aspect of mimetic violence in his work, "...the social institutions responsible for curbing violence...were themselves necessarily established through violence."⁴

Girard sees Man as having only one response to violence...violence. (His works seem to suggest that other avoidance tactics are, by their nature, violent as well.) According to Girard, there is no escape from the cycle of violence versus violence until the mimetic cycle is broken.

The competition between cultures for resources mirrors that of the mimetic desire Girard suggests for individuals. This competition often times includes war. This mass-scale violence is used to win resources, like land, food, or other precious materials. Wars of this sort have been fought throughout time, from long before Alexander's conquests in Central Asia, to the Japanese attempts to secure the "Northern Resource Zone" of China and Korea during the 20th Century.

War, the ultimate in violent acquisitive mimesis, often is key to the development of new mimetic material. American victory in World War II created a society in Japan that had not been seen before. The inculcation of democratic memes into Japanese political culture is a fine example of how war can be used to force a new mimetic framework on another culture. Another is the Anglicisation of India. During the Raj, the British drove mimetic material from their social, military, and political cultures into the Indian. They created an interlocking memeplex of democracy, individualism, and capitalism, and society based on order, efficiency, and rule of law in an Oriental culture based on privilege and *noblesse oblige*. Ideas of Western education, systematized and based on "scientific principles" replaced religious-based education and apprenticeship systems. Unlike the slow, willing incorporation of the Other's memes into a society, this form of mimesis most closely follows the 'epidemiological model' of biosociology; culture as a disease, which like a virus, overwrites the mimetic codes of an alien society with its

own. However, the original culture is rarely destroyed, but is remodeled to incorporate the strongest elements of both cultures. In this way they increase the success of the cultures involved in the mimetic process.

As suggested earlier, cultures react to the introduction of new mimetic material in many ways. One of these ways is to reject the new material as dangerous or harmful to the “way of life” that a culture has developed. These new memes may be in conflict with established, successful memes of order in a society, and the social body strives to protect itself from the new, corrupting information. Examples of this sort of reaction include the resistance through violence of new religious memes, such as the violent rejection of the Viking or Chinese cultures to the influx of Christianity; the destruction of the practice of *sati* or the *thuggee* cults by the British colonial forces in India; or the burning of cultural material from the West in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The current clash between Islam and Western Modernism, expressed by terrorism on one side and American militarism on the other, is an example of two cultures rejecting the Other.

Critics of the western view of Islam frequently point out that Islamic scholars were essential to the preservation and reintegration of classic works into Western society, or their use of modern technology—like cell phones and the internet to coordinate their activities—as examples of how Islam has not rejected the modern world. These arguments, however, prove the nature of mimetic transfer; cultures adapt those memes that are perceived as most useful to their survival. Europe recovered their Greek heritage from Muslim scholars in the 13th Century, incorporating classic ideas and thought into their existing Christian memeplex, but rejected the Muslim messenger. Modern Muslim states, and especially the terrorists, reject the memeplex of

Modernity—with all the culture baggage it brings with it—but incorporates those technological developments that aid in the propagation of the Faith—and all the socio-political baggage it bring with it.

4. Stereotypes and Racism

As we have seen, mimesis, or exchanges in mimetic material, produce adaptation to the mimetic network of the traveler and the people he interacts with. This often produces a template, or stereotype, by which cultures can categorize each other. Depending on the type and quality of early interaction, the stereotype can be wildly inaccurate or surprisingly astute; further interactions can reinforce or adapt the stereotype. This stereotyping can be useful to members of differing societies that need to deal with each other. They provide a quick and dirty idea of what to expect from the “Other,” and in that way can be a positive instrument in cross-cultural interaction. This template can aid in avoiding cultural *faux-pas* and smooth interactions.

However, if the stereotype is inaccurate, or the observer of the Other is incapable of acknowledging variation from the stereotype, you have the basis for racism. Particularly in travel texts, there is a tendency for the traveler to identify in the Other aspects of the climate and environment which they inhabit. While the environment does shape the cultures living in the area, often the traveler characterizes the Other in terms of how that environment effects *them*. Romantic authors often characterized Creoles, people from the tropical colonies of the Caribbean, as indolent and sensual; their laziness and sensuality (usually expressed in languorous poses and skimpy dress) as aspects of adaptation to the sultry environment of the tropics. That white colonial persons, as well as the native and black slave populations--as seen in works like *A*

Simple Heart by Flaubert--of these regions could all be painted with the brush of “creole” showed the ineffectiveness of stereotyping.

Racism is also tied to another aspect of stereotyping: the ability of a group to be targeted by a culture as dangerous or undesirable. Girard address the problem in his work on violence. In times where violence begins to degrade the social order “there appears a typical solution: the identification of a scapegoat...”⁴ In the creation of a scapegoat, society attempts to normalize the internal level of strife by assigning blame to an individual or group. I would suggest, as before when dealing with subcultures, that when a society begins to maladapt mimetically. As when there is a breakdown in social order due to new mimesis from another culture or subculture, a scapegoat is used to reject any mimesis that might be unhealthy to the body social. This reaction is sometimes appropriate, but often is limiting to the adaptability of a culture. The main benefit of creating and destroying a scapegoat is a regenerating of social cohesion, viewed by many as the key to social (or mimetic) strength.

The development of stereotyping and scapegoating is, I would suggest, tied directly to early mimesis. In the early age of Man, competition from other bands of people represented a real danger to the ability of a group or society to kill or harvest food, find mates, or preserve a way of life that was successful.

5. Conclusion

There is a hazard to engaging in evolutionary sociological models of mimesis. Most of these models are tied to the unfortunate use of “Social Darwinism” and eugenics programs by fascist and behavioral theorists in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The connection with

these regimes, plus the anti-humanist stance of such social models has made them unpalatable to the public and academia at large, but I believe that there is real use in these models.

That mankind is an animal, evolved throughout time is commonly accepted. That mankind, like most animals, is a machine for the survival of its genetic material is therefore an apt description. That the phenotypes of man's genetics are derived to increase the success of the human animal are not in question. That the mental abilities and the psychology of Man are therefore evolved for success and are phenotypical makes the cognitive and social traits reflective of the human genetics.

Language and culture are couched in metaphor, and mimesis--the process of generation and transmission of culture--is almost by necessity, metaphorical in nature. Societies mirror their individual components; it would seem likely that they act like living creatures themselves. It is a medium for the transmission of memes, and acts as a method for feedback, strengthening the memes that are useful to the survival of the individual (and by extension the society), while allowing the less successful memes to fall by the wayside.

When viewed as a metaphor from a biological model, the process of mimesis takes on more clarity, and the actions of a society are better understood and easier to predict. Violence, war, and prejudice are all important components of the biological model, and while some elements might be unsavory to us, are often effective and even necessary traits of mimesis. That new memes that discount the effectiveness of violence, racism, and conflict have been gaining power in the past few decades gives rise to notions of the possibility of ending the transmission of these darker memes. However, as Girard points out, as long as these new memes are

reinforced with violence, the cycle is not broken, and these older memes remain valid survival tactics for the individual and society at large.

The interchange of mimetic material—through art, trade, or even violence--between cultures is essential to their health. While non-violent means is preferable (After all a society is a survival mechanism for the individual. Actions which harm the individual should therefore aid the whole,) conflict can force cultures to reexamine their belief structures and motives, as well as those of their opponent. This, in turn, can lead to greater understanding of the Self and the Other, and create new social survival techniques—from new strategic and tactical responses, to new diplomatic responses. Cultures which do not learn from these interactions and conflicts, which do not adapt effectively to the changing conditions around them are doomed to failure and extinction.

NOTES

1. The idea of the meme, a unit of cultural information, was first coined by Richard Dawkins in the 19.. work ??? He once again defines the idea in Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford Press, 1990 [..]
2. Leda Cosmidies, John Tooby, and Jerome H. Barlow, “Introduction: Evolutionary Psychology and Conceptual Integration”, *The Adaptive Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*. New York: Oxford Press, 1992.
3. Gebauer, Gunter and Wulf, Christopher. “The Mimesis of Violence”, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, 256.
4. *Ibid*, 256.
5. *Ibid*, 257.

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