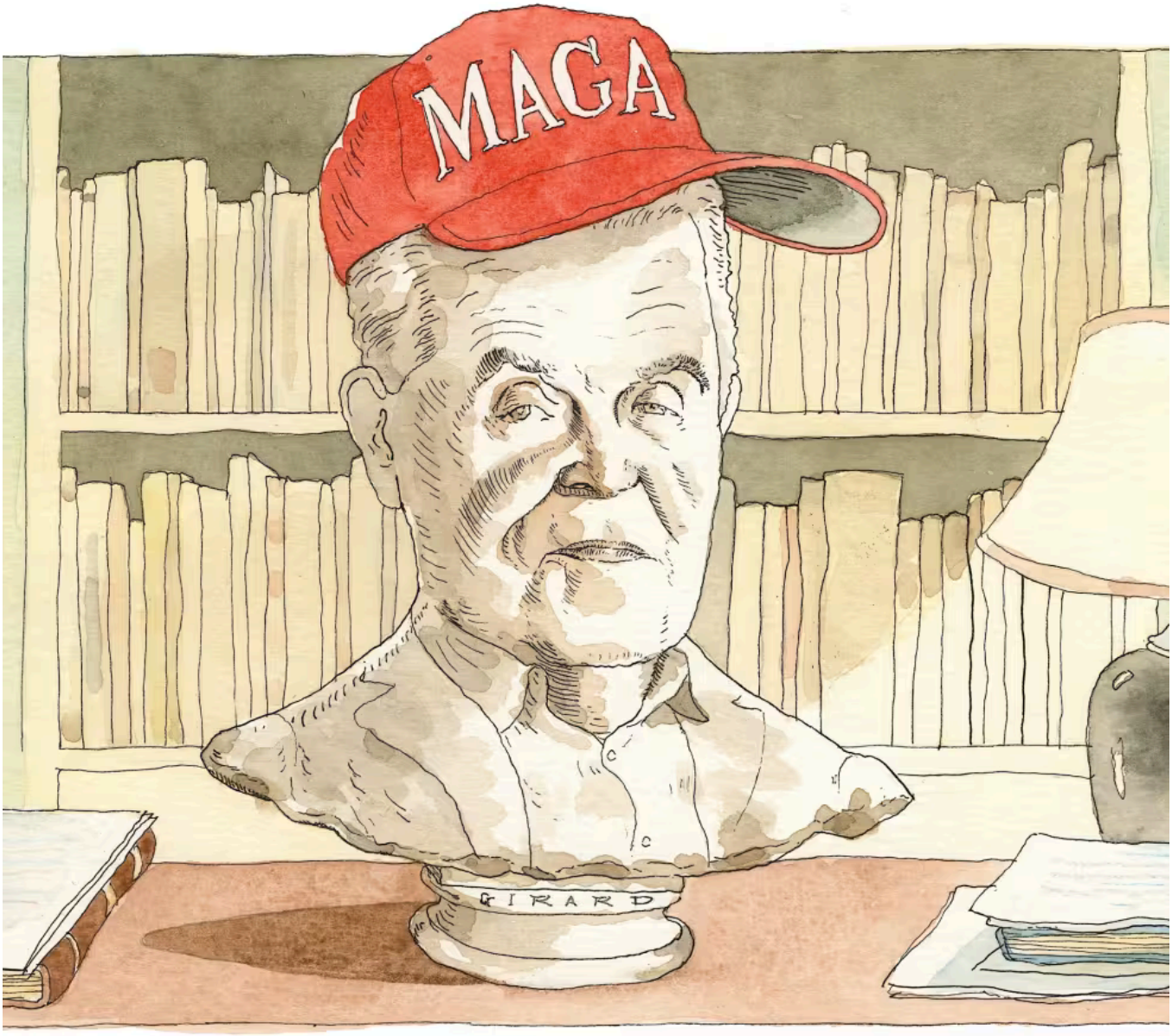
How a little-known French literary critic became a bellwether for the US right

René Girard is best known for his theory of ‘mimetic desire’. Now Peter Thiel and the vice-president are among his fans



The vice-president of the United States, JD Vance, says that a 2011 talk at Yale Law School changed his life. The speaker was the billionaire investor Peter Thiel, who had worked as a lawyer before moving to Silicon Valley in 1996. His talk criticised the prestigious firms that the law students were heading towards, where, he said, people were more interested in mindless competition than in world-changing inventions. It was a convincing argument. Two years after graduating, Vance gave up his legal career and went to work for one of Thiel's funds. But it wasn't the billionaire's logic that caused this change of heart. It was that of René Girard.

Girard, who died in 2015, was a French literary critic who taught at American universities, publishing more than 20 books on topics ranging from 19th-century novels to Indian scripture. He was never a household name, although his work is widely cited in numerous disciplines. But in recent years, he has had a surprising resurgence for a Venn diagram of Catholics, entrepreneurs and those populating Donald Trump's White House, who repurpose Girard's thought in ways that are vehemently contested by some academics.

Girard is best known for his theory of "mimetic desire", the idea that humans don't desire things in and of themselves, but out of a wish to imitate and compete with others. On the back of this insight, the writer built a distinctive anthropology, borrowing from and contest-ing the theories of Nietzsche and Freud. He also came up with a set of ideas about scapegoating that have been taken up by rightwing readers in recent years in their critiques of so-called cancel culture. While Girard described himself as a centrist, his ideas are now celebrated by a movement that, while not unilaterally rightwing, incubated the policies of the Trump administration.

Girard's influence outside the academy is partly thanks to Thiel, who entered his orbit as an undergraduate at Stanford. As a philosophy major, Thiel took part in an intimate reading group led by Girard. It met every other week in a trailer on the Stanford campus and explored the ideas of desire and violence that Girard devoted his life to.

The experience clearly made a deep impression on Thiel. He now credits Girard's thought with inspiring his lucrative early investment in Facebook — recognising in the platform a vehicle for monetising mimetic desire. These days, through his Imitatio Foundation, which is dedicated to furthering Girard's thought and work, Thiel has funded research including a journal, numerous studies of Girard's work, conferences and a documentary.

Others have used Girard to try to think beyond liberalism. In 2023, Novitate, a conference marking the centenary of Girard's birth, brought "innovators and thought leaders" to Washington DC. The event's website stated: "Our goal is to bring together three metaphorical cities: Athens (reason), Jerusalem (faith traditions), and Silicon Valley (innovators in business and beyond)." Thiel gave a keynote address, "Nihilism is Not Enough", flanked by bodyguards.

Among Thiel's circle, Girard has already been taken up as a prophet for our unstable times. "When the history of the 20th century is written, circa 2100," Thiel claims, Girard "will be seen as truly one of the great intellectuals."

René Noël Théophile Girard was born in 1923 in Avignon and moved to the US in his mid-twenties. His father, a museum curator at the medieval Palais des Papes, advised him to leave war-torn France for America, which was the future. Girard's friends recall a tall man of confidence and serenity, with dark rings around his eyes that gave him a brooding appearance.

In America, he found work teaching French literature, eventually settling at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. While preparing to lecture on Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Girard noticed that the narrator's desire was fuelled not by the woman he supposedly loved but by his love rivals. Out of this observation emerged the concept of "mimetic desire".

The idea is set out in Girard's first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*

(published in French in 1961), which describes how Don Quixote, Madame Bovary and characters from Stendhal, Proust and Dostoyevsky come to desire things because others already want them. “Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind,” he wrote. The fact that desires are borrowed means they are necessarily competitive. If you desire your neighbour’s husband, you have to contend with your neighbour in order to get what you want — or what you think you want. Mimetic desire leads to fruitless competition, unhappiness and even violence.

Girard spent the rest of his career unfolding this “single, dense insight”. He saw it not as a mere theory, but a law of human nature, which novelists had intuited but not made explicit. Over the past half-century, mimetic desire has been Girard’s chief legacy, not only in humanities departments but also, increasingly, among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and east London brand managers. Inducting Girard into the Académie Française in 2005, the philosopher Michel Serres called him “the Darwin of the human sciences”. Unlike Darwin, however, Girard’s studies would lead him back to the church.

“Everything came to me at once in 1959,” Girard later remarked. As a young man, he had been an atheist, inspired by the secular existentialism of Sartre and Camus. He had written most of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* in what he called “demystification mode”, aiming to reveal the delusions of mimetic desire. Then, one day, commuting from Baltimore to teach in Pennsylvania while completing his first book, he had an experience of the transcendent, observing the sun glinting on the industrial wasteland alongside the tracks. This, and a cancer scare, caused him to return to the Catholic faith of his mother.

Girard was reluctant to talk about this experience in detail, but it soon informed his work. He no longer wrote merely to debunk psychological illusions. The final chapter of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* heralds Dostoyevsky for showing a way out of mimetic desire: a transcendent experience the Russian author described in his novel *The Brothers*

Karamazov.

Girard's early work was informed by "structuralism" — the study of language and society as a closed system of interrelated signs, which was then dominant in French universities. But he was present at the birth of a new movement. In 1965, Johns Hopkins hosted a conference devoted to structuralism with the unprepossessing title, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man", that didn't hint at the controversy it would cause. Girard and his colleagues invited a group of pre-eminent French thinkers, including the philosopher Michel Foucault, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to attend.

It was the last speaker to be invited who proved the most disruptive. After Lévi-Strauss and Foucault dropped out, Girard extended an invitation to a young Algerian-born philosopher, still little known in France: Jacques Derrida. In the final paper of the conference, Derrida attacked the basic assumptions of structuralism. This was the point of departure for his philosophical method, deconstruction, which sought to undo binary distinctions — raw/cooked, light/dark, sane/insane etc — in order to reveal the social forces that upheld them.

Some conservatives today consider Derrida's thought (or "postmodernism", as they usually call it) to be the source of modern society's ills. Girard later joked that, by inviting Derrida, he and his fellow conference organisers had let the plague into America.

As post-structuralism spread through American universities, Girard pursued the implications of mimetic desire. His second book, *Violence and the Sacred*, published in 1972 and perhaps the most influential of all his work, describes how human societies enter into periods of crisis in which competition becomes unbearable. The solution, Girard claimed, is a violent act of scapegoating. The scapegoat has certain recurrent features: they are a foreigner, someone with a disability or a person in a position of authority. Such acts are then commemorated in the founding myths of cultures, myths in which the scapegoat becomes deified.

Girard had been struck by the public punishment of collaborators in France after the second world war, treated as scapegoats for the Nazi invasion. His remarks on American politics, however, were more cautious. Readers have often wondered whether his interest in the scapegoat was influenced by living in the American South, where lynchings still took place. Girard rarely used contemporary case studies, preferring to find his evidence in ancient literature, scripture and anthropology, but his view on lynchings ancient and modern was unambiguous: they were unconscionable.

The insistence that the scapegoat was innocent would become a justification of Girard's faith as well as the basis for a darkly pessimistic vision of politics later taken up by both Vance and Thiel. Girard's next book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, published in 1978, argues that Christianity had revealed the hidden truth of the scapegoat mechanism. By insisting on their saviour's innocence, Christians had deconstructed the "primitive" belief in the scapegoat's guilt. It is for this defence of Christianity that Girard has been called a modern Church Father — he later remarked that two-thirds of what he said could be found in the work of St Augustine.

Whatever Girard read, he seemed to discover confirmation of his ideas. He jokingly referred to this as his monomania. Critics saw in his Shakespeare book, *A Theatre of Envy*, a carelessness with the facts but, in it, Girard writes insightfully about the tangled desires of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Against Freud, Girard sought to redeem Oedipus by ingeniously pointing out that he had been scapegoated when his incest was seen as the cause of a plague. The scapegoat also informed his response to Nietzsche, who condemned Christianity as a philosophy of victimhood. He was right, Girard said, but it was a strength not a weakness.

In 1981, Girard moved to California, joining an increasingly star-studded department at Stanford University. In writings on "The Book of Job", Hindu scripture, anorexia and Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, he

aspired to create a comprehensive account of the origins of human culture that could sit alongside Darwin's *The Origin of the Species*. His Stanford colleague and friend, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, told me that Girard viewed even the Gospels within the larger framework of his own, mimetic theory.

Girard remained a quietly influential teacher until his retirement in 1995. He didn't supervise many PhDs, a requirement for many academics. Instead, Gumbrecht recalled, it was often intelligent undergraduates who flocked to him. One of them was Thiel. Another was Marci Shore, now a professor at the University of Toronto. She described to me the appeal of Girard's thinking as its totality, comparing it to Marxism in that regard. While Girard refused to see his thoughts as a "system", his followers sometimes turned it into one that seemed to be able to explain the whole world.

Those undergraduates who, like Shore, went on to do PhDs, might have learnt to combine Girard's insights with those of other thinkers. But those, like Thiel and JD Vance, who left the academy might never exit from the Girardian system.

After abandoning the hyper-competitive world of the New York law firm, Thiel co-wrote a book, *The Diversity Myth* (1995), a polemic against diversity initiatives at elite universities. Girard contributed a blurb, writing that the book documented what had happened at Stanford "with a thoroughness that should help stiffen the spine of university administrators".

After this early imprimatur, Thiel has roamed far from Girard ideologically, while continuing to cite him as an authority. The anthropologist Paul Leslie, another former Girard student, argues that "Thiel took such measured gestures and comments of Girard's as implicit ideological support, a pattern that persisted even where Thiel's ideas diverged into stances far from Girard's own views."

Having transcended his own mimetic desires, Thiel was now free to capitalise on those on others. After quitting as CEO of PayPal, in 2002, he refocused on venture capitalism. There is a hint of Girardian logic in his 2014 book, *Zero to One*, which argues that capitalists should eschew mimetic rivalry and create monopolies beyond the reach of their competitors. Thiel's most successful companies to date, PayPal and Palantir, a data analytics and intelligence firm that provides services to the US government, established dominance in their sectors.

It's no great surprise that mimetic desire caught on in the hyper-competitive world of Silicon Valley, but Girard's other big idea, the scapegoat mechanism, has proven popular there, too. This is the source of Vance's main interest in Girard.

In a 2020 essay, "How I Joined the Resistance", Vance recalls his first encounter with Thiel. Having rejected his own faith as a teenager and come to associate intelligent people with atheism, Vance writes that he was struck by Thiel's openness about his faith. "I began to wonder where his religious belief came from, which led me to René Girard."

Reading the French thinker prompted Vance to reconsider his faith, but it was the scapegoat mechanism that really struck a chord. "It captured so well the psychology of my generation, especially its most privileged inhabitants," Vance writes. "Mired in the swamp of social media, we identified a scapegoat and digitally pounced. We were keyboard warriors, unloading on people via Facebook and Twitter, blind to our own problems."

The truth is more complicated. In his 1999 book, *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard describes how globalisation had led to "the rise of victim power". He praised this development, referring to international aid and universal healthcare as expressions of a genuine concern for the most vulnerable. But it could be taken too far. "This concern sometimes is so exaggerated and in a fashion so subject to caricature that it arouses laughter, but we should guard against seeing it as only one thing."

There is one moment in *I Saw Satan Fall Like Lightning* that recent readers

have fixated upon. Girard mentions that the Christian concern for the victims could be exploited in ways that were deceptive and instrumental. In one late interview, he associated this "caricature" of Christian values with the figure of the Antichrist. These brief and suggestive remarks have been taken up by Girard's more radical readers as a prescient critique of contemporary liberalism. Writing in Compact magazine, an American online publication, Geoff Schullenberger overlooks Girard's praise of victim concern, turning Girard into a prophet of the excesses of cancel culture.

Vance recognised Girard's work as containing a moral injunction for him, too: "It was time to stop scapegoating and focus on what I could do to improve things." Though he would embrace a politics starkly divergent from Girard's, Vance says this encounter led him to join "the resistance", overcoming his once-strong objections to Donald Trump and endorsing his re-election campaign, a decision that seems more to do with Thiel than Girard. In 2023, Vance launched a successful senatorial campaign, funded by Thiel. The following year, he was named Trump's running mate.

At the 2023 Novitate conference in Washington DC, in a panel devoted to race, the podcaster Coleman Hughes argued that police officers had been scapegoated in Black Lives Matter protests. Are protests calling for justice really acts of scapegoating? Alexander Douglas, a philosopher at the University of St Andrews, told me that Girard did see calls for justice motivated by retribution as the expression of scapegoating desires. However, loose applications of this theory might confuse all justice with scapegoating, a confusion Girard himself warned against. There seems something unusually elastic about Girard's thought, easy to apply and difficult to falsify. Part of its power lies in the fact.

Girard strongly denied being a prophet, but that hasn't stopped others from seeing him as one. One YouTube video, posted earlier this month, claims "Girard Predicted US-China Trade War, What Comes Next is Terrifying."

His thoughts on international relations come in his final book, *Battling to the End* (2009), a commentary on the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, written as a dialogue with the literary critic Benoît Chantre. There, Girard describes geopolitical conflict as the result of mimetic desire: "Everyone now knows that the looming conflict between the US and China, for example, has nothing to do with a 'clash of civilisations', despite what some might try to tell us. We always try to see differences where in fact there are none. In fact, the dispute is between two forms of capitalism that are becoming more and more similar," Girard wrote. He understood the trade war as the result of similarity rather than difference and believed it could lead to a conflict that would wipe out the world. He called it the apocalypse.

Sixteen years later, Girard's words feel closer to reality, less as a prediction than an intention. Thiel, who supported Trump's first presidential campaign, mediated between his administration and Silicon Valley leaders, and has trained some of those working to dismantle parts of the US government, may have helped make them come true.

Thiel is as unorthodox a Christian as he is a Girardian — in 2024, he said two words could describe why he wasn't a Catholic, "Pope Francis" — but he uses Girard's terms to outline his own political vision. He does so in a 2004 paper, originally given at an invitation-only conference at Stanford, called "Politics & the Apocalypse". Thiel co-organised the conference, invited Girard and funded the publication of the proceedings. The paper Thiel gave there echoes Girard's view that "the modern world contains a powerfully apocalyptic dimension", using it to call for a reinvigorated west to counter political Islam, in language more aggressive than Girard ever used.

These days, Thiel is more concerned with China than Islam. He still uses Girard's logic to make dark prognostications about the end of liberal democracy. In "Rome Travelogue", an essay published in Cluny Journal, the writer Jordan Castro describes a 2024 trip to the Vatican with fellow Girardian Luke Burgis and several others. One man, referred to only as

“Peter”, leads an exclusive discussion at the Vatican of Francis Bacon’s book *The New Atlantic*. The conversation is redacted, except for its conclusion: “After the 2.5hr book discussion, Luke ends with a quote from Girard. ‘More than ever, I am convinced that history has a meaning, and that its meaning is terrifying.’”

What would Girard say about the politics of today, America’s new immigration policies or the escalating trade war between the US and China? I asked his friend and biographer, Cynthia Haven. “I think he would enjoin us to turn to powers even higher than Trump, even more powerful than Xi Jinping. When he urged us to desist from escalation, he meant it for peace. When he beseeched us to forgive one another, his position was absolute.”

Many of Girard’s new interpreters seem strangely indifferent to this injunction, ignoring the scapegoats of today’s world, unless they are the victims of leftwing cancel culture — a phenomenon that has largely disappeared since Musk’s purchase of Twitter. In September 2024, Vance made the false claim that Haitian immigrants were eating their neighbours’ pets. He later claimed that such stories were necessary so that “the media pays attention to the suffering of the American people”. In an article shortly afterwards for Politico, journalist Ian Ward claimed Vance had used Girard as his scapegoating playbook. More likely, the anti-political thinker had been abandoned altogether, sacrificed at the very moment he’d been deified.

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