

Borrowed Desire and Blame in the Office

A New Way of Understanding Office Politics

Paper for the Spirituality, Leadership and Management Conference, by Philip Hunt

Abstract

Rene Girard in *“Violence and the Sacred”* (1979) and *“Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World”* (1987) hypothesises that present day society is based on the primordial founding spirituality of scapegoating events. Scapegoating occurs because of the structure of desire in the human character, namely our primal imitative character that leads us to borrow the desire of others. No-one desires anything directly, but only through the mediation of someone else’s desire. That is, the structure of human desire is mimetic. Mimetic desire is inherently conflictual. This conflict may be kept under control by the development of a structure of myth and taboos or, more dramatically, by scapegoating behaviour, symbolic and real.

This hypothesis provides a useful new tool for understanding blame and guilt in organisations, since it unveils much organisational blame as based on largely unconscious mythical processes. Revealing this mythical structure assists us to lead and manage in ways that affirm and liberate human potential. The corollary is that it permits us to see and combat the cynical or unconscious misuse of scapegoating behaviour. The paper will give practical examples of the utility of the hypothesis in daily life.

Burying the Boss

In 1978, at the tender age of 30, I was asked to take on my first job as a manager. My boss was leaving for another assignment and I was offered his job.

My boss had been a very different person to me. David was an ideas man and very practical, whereas I was more of a synthesiser. I liked to explore the environment and look for good things to get behind. And I loved to bring order out of creative chaos, whereas David liked to produce the chaos in the first place.

I became his adjutant, putting into practice the ideas he produced. I learned from him and soon wondered if I could do David’s job. On his side, I am sure David saw me as a young man with potential. He invested time in me. He gave me advice, opportunities and encouragement. In return I made him look as good as I could. Naturally, I wanted his job and this created a mild tension between us. Of course, I would not push him out, but I was not wait forever. I talked to David a few times about “prospects for advancement.” The implied but suppressed message for both of us was that I desired his position. For the time being, that was something he desired only for himself.

Once I took over from my boss an interesting thing happened. Colleagues started to say things like, “We could never do that when David was here” or “David never really understood that.” Comments like this that amounted to a kind of reputation demolition job. Suddenly it was OK to bad mouth the boss, because he wasn’t the boss any more. I even found myself doing it. If things weren’t right, the previous boss was the first to get the blame.

I ascribed a few different motives to this behaviour.

One possibility was cognitive dissonance or grief. We had lost the boss and this behaviour helped us to feel that it was OK that he was gone. Maybe even A Good Thing.

Another possibility was that my colleagues were sucking up. Contrasting my stellar performance to his ordinariness fed my ego, especially since I admired my former boss so much to begin with. And maybe this explained my own behaviour too. A kind of self-talk to justify my own worthiness to be in this important position. Or at least that's how my ego was talking.

But some years later, I observed another phenomenon that made me think that there was more going on here. Because later, I got promoted again, and someone else, moved in to take over my old job. And you know what happened?

Colleagues started to say things like, "We could never do that when Philip was here" or "Philip never really understood that." Now they were doing a reputation demolition job on me. Suddenly it was OK to bad mouth the boss, because he wasn't the boss any more. The previous boss was getting the blame for things that weren't right.

OK. None of that surprised me, nor did it offend me. I knew why they were doing it. It was about ego and grief. Hey! They loved me right? They were sad to see me go, right? They had to deal with their grief somehow.

But something else happened that I had not noticed before. David, the boss before me, started to get a reputation rehabilitation. People starting recalling those wonderful days when David would bounce into the office at 10:30 with 10 revolutionary ideas he'd had before breakfast. "He was a great guy, was David."

In more than 2 decades of watching and participating in organisations since, I observe that this is a common pattern. The boss moves on and those who remain scapegoat him or her. At the same time, the previous boss, the boss-once-removed, is restored to favour. Myths and stories are told that serve to rehabilitate the once-scapegoated one.

Something more than grief and ego are at work here.

What Do You See?

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip, set up their tent, and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend.

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replies, "I see millions of stars."

"What do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute. "Well, Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets, that we are in one tiny corner of the Milky Way. Astrologically speaking, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo, that tomorrow will be a good day to meeting strangers, and that your lucky number is 7. Chronologically speaking, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning. Theologically speaking, I deduce that the Lord is the all-powerful Creator and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically speaking, I deduce we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What do you deduce?"

Holmes is silent for a moment, then speaks. “Watson, you idiot, someone has stolen our tent.”

We See Scapegoating

I want to suggest that one of the things that is at work in office politics is something that we do not usually, at first, see. Or maybe we do see it, but we do not discern its real meaning.

What is going on here is the complex mechanism of scapegoating. Blaming a victim for a crime or sin actually done by others.

Now I am sure most of you did recognise scapegoating. Like Dr Watson we look up and we see the obvious. But something more is going on that is as invisible and obscure as the missing tent.

We get the word *scapegoat* from the Jewish Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. The sons of Aaron had breached religious rules, the punishment for which was death. Instead, the Lord God asked for two goats to be brought to the temple. One was killed as a sacrifice, the other, called the “scapegoat”, was taken out into the desert and allowed to escape. Since those days we have used the word *scapegoat* to describe the process of blaming and holding responsible a person, or a group, or a thing even, for the wrongdoings of others. The guilt is transferred to the victim. The victim pays for the crime of others.

All this is visible in the sky above us, but what represents the missing tent?

To answer this question we need to look to Rene Girard. Girard is a late 20th century academic who wrote two profoundly important works in the 1970s on violence and religion. One is called *Violence and the Sacred* and the other *Things Hidden Since The Foundation Of The World*. His research and interpretation has, since then, begun to have a revolutionary effect on anthropology, psychology, sociology and theology. And, even, as I shall point, on management science.

Girard discovered that the scapegoating mechanism has been a feature of human history since its very beginning. More important for us today than its longevity, is the role that the sacrifice of the scapegoat plays in resolving conflict in human societies.

Behind Scapegoating is Borrowed Desire

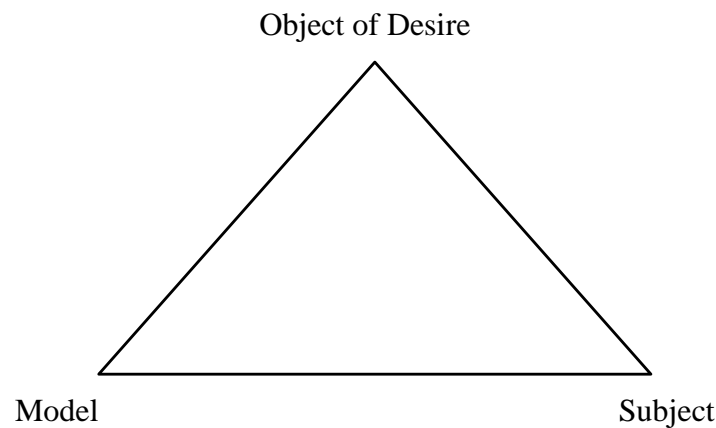
But what causes this conflict to arise in the first place? To answer this we come to the core idea of Borrowed Desire. Girard suggests that at the core of all human activity is a single, powerful, force. The force of imitation. The greatest ability that humans have is the ability to imitate one another. We are copycats of a very sophisticated order.

It is through imitation that we learn. Children imitate their parents. Just watch a boy follow his father into a football game. Just watch a girl at play with her mother’s clothes and cosmetics in front of her mirror. Visit a classroom of small children and observe how children learn. Imitating behaviours abound.

David Hay, writer of *The Spirit of the Child* (1998), shared some recent research at a seminar in Melbourne in August in which he demonstrated that even babies, a few days old, have imitative abilities. They copy the movements of another person standing close enough for them to see. This may not be news to most parents, of course.

One of the clearest demonstrations of imitative behaviour can be seen by conducting this simple experiment next time you are in a pre-school. Put 5 or 6 toddlers in a room with 5 or 6 identical toys and watch what happens. In a logical adult world, we would share out the identical toys, but you will see that children don't. The first child will pick up a toy and begin to play with it. This sparks the interest of the other children who will then want to play with the very toy that is already being played with.

This illustrates Girard's hypothesis about Borrowed Desire. Desire is triangular. Jim Grote and John McGeeney, in *Clever as Serpents: Business Ethics and Office Politics* (1997), explain it this way: "The structure of ... desire involves a triangle of: (1) the object of desire, (2) the self, or subject who desires the object, and (3) the model who elicits the subject's desire for the object of desire in the first place."



"Keeping Up With The Joneses" is another way of saying this. In this phrase we unconsciously recognise that our desire for a nicer house, a more prestigious car, or a swimming pool in the yard, is a desire we copy from the fact that the mythical Joneses already have what we desire. In other words, our desire is borrowed from the Joneses.

It's not too hard to find examples of Borrowed Desire. Right back in the beginning, the Serpent awakes Eve's desire for the apple. The tree with its apples had been there all along, but it took the serpent to point it out. Only then did Eve recognise its desirability.

Pretty much all advertising works because of borrowed desire. Jerry Thomas, in an article "Why Advertising Works" in the magazine *Business First* (Sep 9, 1996) writes:

Advertising can create a model people wish to identify with and imitate. The modelling instinct is one of the most powerful impulses in the psyche. Children model after their parents. Employees model after their bosses. We all imitate people we admire. We are all copycats, though most of us are not aware of just how much. Advertising can create personalities and images that trigger the modelling instinct. The 'Malboro Man' is a classic example of a psychological archetype people have chosen to identify with in cigarette brand choice.

The problem with Borrowed Desire is that we cannot always have the object. If there is only one object, and the model got to it first, the subject's desire for the object is bound to be frustrated. This leads to conflict. Conflict is built into the structure of borrowed desire. And herein lies a double bind.

The double bind is that there are two messages conveyed by the model. One is "Imitate me. Desire my object", but the second is "Don't imitate me. Don't take my object."

If I have a nice shiny and unique widget and my desire for it awakes a similar desire in you, we have a problem. Two desires. One widget. In fact, of course, you have the bigger problem than me, since I have the widget and you don't. I am flattered by your desire for my widget, and indeed it increases my own desire for it, since I borrow some of your desire. But I am also going to be more protective of my widget now, because your desire for it has increased my desire to keep it. But what if your desire is very strong. Soon there is going to be a fight.

Scapegoating Brings Peace (for a little while)

And, to round out the process, how is that conflict resolved? The answer lies in transforming the frustrated desire into something else. And that something else brings us back to the scapegoat. We convert the conflicting desires, which place us against one another, into a common hatred of the scapegoat, which draws us together.

It is this powerful peace-creating role of scapegoating that has caused it to become such a powerful mechanism in human society. The sacrifice of the victim becomes a transaction with society to create and maintain social order since it appeases the violence of the mob. The violence drains away (along with the victim's blood, of course) and social cohesion, or community, replaces it.

We probably don't need Girard to show us that this is true. Every leader has discovered that the quickest way to get a group to form into a team is to create a common enemy. Nike's "Kill Adidas" is a good example. Corporate leaders routinely use the power of scapegoating their competitors in order to create team cohesion at home.

From an economic rationalist point of view, scapegoating is very cost effective. Grote and McGeeney suggest it is like a vaccination. "As a minute amount of disease provides a vaccination for the patient, so a miniscule amount of violence saves a community from its most socially communicable disease."

The most succinct statement of this principle was made by the high priest Caiaphas at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus who said "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." John 11:49-50 NRSV

Applied Scapegoating: Blame

We can use the foregoing analysis to reinterpret what is going on in our organisations. In the story that I began with, my boss had something I desired. A position and the power and authority attached to it. I wanted the promotion. Indeed, since he was interested in my development, he encouraged me to copy him and learn from him. Ambition is a form of borrowed desire that frequently creates frustration and conflict in organisations.

Then when I finally got the job we started to dump on my predecessor. What was that all about? One of the things that is happening is that people are trying to maintain their team cohesion by scapegoating the former boss. From the point of view of the team it is a healthy and positive exercise. The former boss is the victim, but rather painlessly, since she or he is already gone.

The ultimate office tool for scapegoating is blame. This is also an ancient ritual. God discovers a missing apple and asks Adam. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the Serpent.

The problem of blame is that it creates risk averse corporate cultures. Apart from the way it consumes staff time in framing, attacking and killing off the blamed, in the end it becomes too risky for people to try something new. Innovation is stifled. And that means corporate death in today's world.

Evidence that "Blame Management" is a dominant force in business is the fact that the Dilbert comic strip includes one character whose job is "blame consultant." He described his job as "for a large fee, I will tell the workers that the problems of the company are *their* fault, not yours."

Grote and McGeeney cite the following "Seven Phases of a Project" which circulates often on office emails and the Internet:

- Phase 1: Enthusiasm
- Phase 2: Illusion of Progress
- Phase 3: Panic
- Phase 4: Disillusionment
- Phase 5: Search for the Guilty
- Phase 6: Punishment of the Innocent
- Phase 7: Praise and Honour for the Non-participants

Commenting on this, Grote and McGeeney make the useful observation that the fact of this kind of humour is a positive sign. It demonstrates that many recognise the falsity built into the system and can make fun of it. This indicates a certain detachment, and that detachment can give us the perspective to survive in the system.

The Role of Myth

Myth exists to help us to explain what seems unexplainable. Why did we fail? If we can blame someone, we have an explanation. Humans have always been very good at it. And we still are. Just listen to talkback radio. Liberals blame Labor and vice versa. The Greens blame Big Business. Big Business blames the unions. The Israelis blame the Palestinians. The Arabs blame the Americans. The Americans blame Osama bin Laden.

Some of these blaming systems are supported by literal tonnes of research, document and facts. But very often statistics are merely there to legitimise mythical systems. *Statistics are like lampposts to a drunk—they support a position, rather than illuminating.*

Myth plays an important part in hiding the truth from us. Which is why Jerry Thomas can say earlier, "We are all coveys, *though most of us are not aware of just how much.*" The fragility of Borrowed Desire and scapegoating is that it only works as long as you don't know it is working. If we really see that the victim of our scapegoating is innocent, that we have arbitrarily selected the fringe dweller, then the mechanism breaks down.

The corollary is that for the mechanism to work we must sincerely believe that the scapegoat really is guilty.

Most Germans and Austrians genuinely believed in the guilt of the Jews in the second world war. We might hasten to say that this is not something we should scapegoat them for, since, in similar circumstances of media control and propaganda few of us would have believed differently. The myth was propagated by the Nazis that the Jews were manipulating international finance in a way that made Germany poor. The truth

was quite different, but few Germans and Austrians could discover the truth until much later. The truth was that the nations that won the first World War demanded such onerous and crippling reparations that the German economy was blitzed. However, the Jews were made the scapegoats and sufficient people believed the myth to be the real truth. Today, now that other facts are well known, you will find few Germans and Austrians who maintain the idea that the murder of 6 million Jews was justified.

The most important myth in modern business is that failure is sin. Business is based on success. It rewards those who succeed economically and it punishes and scapegoats those who fail.

By way of contrast a new venture in intrapreneuring has been started at Orica. It is called LiveWire and it is an attempt, among other things, to develop a new way of thinking about failure since in innovative environments only about 1 good idea in 10 ends up succeeding. Jason Cotton, the business manager of this internal business incubator says “We celebrate and honour those people who are willing to have a go. Having a go is more important than success or failure. The idea is to keep having a go. We reward people who have a go, even if they don’t succeed.”

There are other myths in business. How often is a new organisational restructuring process really just a justifying myth for sacking people. *You weren’t sacked, you were downsized.*

One of the great myths in the last decade of the 20th century was the one foisted upon us by business process reengineering. The myth stated that process reengineering would transform our businesses into effective and profitable companies. The experience of business was quite different. Most businesses that reengineered went backwards. The main promoters of the idea more or less recanted and kept quiet, or relocated business process reengineering as a tool for correcting the problems of the past.

The Problem of Longevity

The scapegoating mechanism that we see all around us, is in fact becoming a spent force.

The first evidence for the decay of the scapegoating mechanism is this very fact that *we can see it all around us*. In centuries gone past, myth successfully kept the mechanism hidden from view. People could sacrifice virgins, and later, goats in confidence that the gods would be appeased. Villages could kill witches in full confidence that it would bring better harvests. Warlords could label their enemies as evil in full confidence that the troops would agree.

But, while many myths still abound, many are unveiled and useless. Evidence of this unveiling is the enormous amount of popular humour about organisational life. The popularity of the Dilbert comic strip shows that the myths that support much of old-fashioned organisational life are becoming old-fashioned indeed.

The second evidence for the decay of the scapegoating mechanism is the emergence of the concept of the innocent victim. Historically this is a relative recent phenomenon. Although there have always been those who held out for the innocence of individual victims, the *common* view that the words *victim* and *innocence* go together is a 20th century phenomenon.

Speculating on why we seem so concerned to help the world's poor and starving, Michael Ignatieff says: "It isn't obvious why strangers in peril halfway across the world *should* be our business. For most of human history, the boundaries of our moral universe were the borders of tribe, language, religion, or nation. The idea that we might have obligations to human beings beyond our borders simply because we belong to the same species is a recent invention."

Perhaps "a recent invention" overlooks much religious writing in the Jewish, Christian, Islam and other faiths, but Ignatieff is certainly correct that this *mass* concern for the victims of poverty and war is truly a recent phenomenon. Girard, you might expect, has an idea or two about why this is so, but that's for another time.

The implication for leaders in business today is that the old ways of managing are also become less useful and effective. Managing through scapegoating is increasingly ineffective as more and more of our staff see through the myths that attempt to justify and sustain the violence towards victims.

The good news is that new ways of leading and managing organisations are emerging and becoming more dominant. Not only that, they are already being shown to be more effective. They are given more space and power to achieve dominance for the very reason that the old order is in decay.

This includes ideas such as those found in Appreciative Inquiry, in Servant Leadership, in people-centred management.

The most recent addition to a developing weight of literature on organisational leadership and management practices that reject blame management is the new book by Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap ... and Others Don't* (2001). Collins was also the author of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (1997).

Collins studied a sample of 11 companies that displayed cumulative stock returns 7 times the general stock market for a period of 15 years since a point of transition that separated them from the pack. In this new study, Collins research reveals the characteristics of the leaders who make the difference. These are leaders who:

- possess a "paradoxical mixture of humility and professional will"
- channel their "ambition into something other and larger than themselves"
- "have ambition not for themselves but for their companies—they routinely select superb successors"
- possess "core values that endured over time"
- have a high sense of professional responsibility (as opposed to professional entitlement)
- lack pretension
- "apportioned credit for success to factors outside themselves, and assigned responsibility to themselves when things went poorly."

This last characteristic shows us that leaders of the effective organisation in the 21st century will be expert at avoiding the lure of Borrowed Desire, and will be skilled in the creation of scapegoat-free zones in which staff can work with mutual commitment and maximum performance.