



## Organisational Behaviour & The Concept of Mimetism

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*“Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions,  
their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation”.*

Oscar WILDE

By Anne-Flore MAMAN LARRAUFIE (PhD)

[info@semioconsult.com](mailto:info@semioconsult.com)

After proposing a definition of the word *mimetism*, this paper explores the relationship between organizational behaviours and mimetism. Our purpose is not to be exclusive on the subject but rather to try to introduce some aspects we believe as relevant to the study of mimetism within the field of management sciences. As the Organizational Behaviour Discipline deals with people, teams, organization and innovation within a specific environment, we chose to keep this framework to address the issue of mimetism.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions regarding this study: [info@semioconsult.com](mailto:info@semioconsult.com).

## *Introduction*

Whatever the form taken, mimetism is at the heart of management sciences, either tacitely or formally. This comes from the fact that the central entity in management is “people” who are doomed to have mimetic behaviours as will be presented in the second part of this paper.

A brief presentation of the several meanings of the word mimetism will drive us to the conclusion that in this process, human beings can at some point be considered as animals. However, as stated in the second part, animals do indeed become people thanks to mimetism. Afterwile, we will focus on the role played by mimetism within teams, especially in the business environment in which accounting practices are the witnesses of the existence or absence of mimetism in a particular firm. Finally, we will present the particular feature of mimetism among firms under the specific context of innovation.

## *Mimetism, Mimicry & Mimesis*

The use of the word *mimetism* dates back to 1637. It is derived from the Greek term μιμητικός (*mimetikos*), “imitative”, in turn from μιμητος (*mimetos*), the verbal adjective of μιμεῖσθαι (*mimeisthai*), “to imitate”. It is interesting to note that the word can be used indifferently with *mimicry* (ability to mime), a word created in the Nineteenth Century by Henry Walter Bates to describe the process of mimetism among animals.

Two meanings can be found. When applied to human beings, mimetism means somebody’s voluntary ability and attempts to replicate anybody else’s behaviour, way of living, desires, tastes... In Biology, mimicry means the resemblance that some animals and plants exhibit to other animals and plants or to the natural objects among which they live, a characteristic which serves as their chief means of protection against enemies. In some other languages, such as French, two different words are being used (*mimétisme/camouflage*). The fact that the two words mimetism & mimicry are closely linked, at least from the Greek common root, can be of some interest, since as we will see in our further development, when applied to firms, mimetism can be assimilated to biological mimicry, especially in the way by which firms try to protect themselves against their counterparts... We personally believe that both words can indeed be applied to human beings, who are in some ways still animals as well. To avoid any language confusion, we will most of the time use the Greek word *mimesis* along our paper.

## *People & Mimesis*

According to René Girard, imitation is at the origin of everything, including human condition: the Homo Erectus is a far better imitator than the monkey and this capacity of imitation is what enables him to escape from tribal instincts and lets him progress. “Without mimetic desires, there won’t be any freedom or mankind”. Desire comes from imitation, whereas need is inborn. If one wants an object, it’s because one has seen somebody else desiring it. Desire is “mediatised”. It always appears in what Girard calls “the mimetic triangle”, which is formed by the desired object, the mediator and the mediator’s mime.


However, mimesis, far from harmonising human relations, makes them dangerously conflict-provoking. As a matter of fact, when applied to appropriation behaviours, mimesis inevitably leads to rivalry and violence. It’s because one desires what the other desires that he becomes his rival. Besides, violence being also a cause for imitation (*mimesis of the antagonism* in René Girard’s theory), it can easily spread out to a whole human group even when it started only between two rivals. With the use of artificial weapons, against which the instinctive inhibition process of murder within the same animal specie is powerless, violence became lethal among humans. And since imitation was spreading violence within each group and from one group to another one, the very survival of mankind was threatened. If mankind survived to this violence its instincts were unable to master, it’s thanks to a particular mechanism: **the scapegoat**.

Actually, under the effect of mimesis of appropriation (desire of what the other desires) and of mimesis of antagonism (imitation of the other/s’s violence), violence spread to the entire population: everybody becomes alike and each other becomes the replicate of the other one during this mimetic outburst. Any cultural differentiation is blurred. In this homogeneous world, a simple difference (height, colour of skin, country of origin...) is enough to make the group’s violence being focused on a single person. The unfortunate victim, unable to sustain such an attack, soon succumbs to the group’s violence.

However, at the very moment when the victim dies, her death puts an end to the group’s violence and at everyone’s surprise instantaneously restores peace. The relief is such that the victim finds herself endowed with beneficial powers: she has saved the group from the dissolution which was threatening him. This is the birth of the feeling of sacred, another issue we do not intend to address in this paper.

The group then understands that he has barely escaped from a tremendous danger and decides to avoid any stimulus to violence: lethal rivalries, imitation, all the phenomena of replication and so on. The first **taboos** have been created.

Besides, in order to enforce a long-lasting peace, the group usually decides to replicate the action which re-established peace but with all the necessary cautiousness so that it does not give birth to a new series of



violence. New victims are thus sacrificed but they are all selected out of the social group: members of neighbouring tribes, prisoners of war... **Ritual Sacrifices** have been created through a mimetic process.

Lastly, the group engraves in his memory the primary murder through story-telling which, while recalling the violence, tries to conceal it in divinising the victim. The third base of any culture has been created, namely **the Myths**.

Naturally, all the actions taken after the first mimetic crisis are not enough to definitely cast away violence. New crises occur, after which people define new taboos, sacrifices and myths... According to René Girard, this mechanism has enabled human societies to survive and has given birth, through a succession of crises, to humanisation and culture. The scapegoat mechanism is thus, “the original matrix of the human thought, the melting pot in which not only our cultural institutions but also our ways of thinking have been shaped step by step.”

However, this mechanism hasn't been fully understood by those who were benefiting from it. According to René Girard, the Judaeo-Christian Writings have progressively brought the violent origin of any human society to light. The biblical myths have many common points with all the other myths, but they all have three particular points: they don't divinise the victim, they show her innocence and they don't mask the murder or its attempt. Through the Bible, we also face a more and more radical criticism of the ritual sacrifices.

The spreading of Christianity has progressively made the mystification of the mimetic crises impossible. Science took the place of myths.

However, following the disappearance of myths, taboos also progressively disappeared. And they were the strongest buffer-zone between potential rivalries and thus deterring conflicts. Nowadays, mimetic rivalry is raging and present in almost all human relationships: political, economic, military, and interpersonal (fashion, snobbism, consumption...). According to Girard, if Mankind does not completely give up violence, it can easily destroy itself, especially when we consider the means of destruction it now possesses and the ecological limits of its battlefield...

When it comes to organisations, one must remember that management teams and working forces are people who will always be subject to mimetic processes as previously described (mimetic desire, mimetic antagonism and mimetic violence).

But another concern is the mimetic processes which take place within and among firms.

### *Firms, Teams & Mimesis*

Imitation is a widespread phenomenon among firms (Greve, 1998). What can explain this mimesis?

Mimesis is a rational economic behaviour due to a combination of lack of information (Pingle, 1995, vol 24) and aversion to risk. In this sense, firms and their managers will choose a strategy of imitation to reduce uncertainty in a situation of imperfect information.

Psycho-sociology can also explain mimesis among firms: a lot of managers need to be reassured about their ability to adapt, which is embedded in their beliefs in mimesis. According to the constructivist view, when a firm does believe in mimesis, its adaptation to a new environment will be easier even though it remains deeply different from the reference-firm.

According to Professor Riveline, management has deep connections with rites, as it is done among individuals which are born with the mimesis feature, as described by R. Girard. Behaviours can only be efficient when they are ritualised actions. And a ritualised action is nothing else than a voluntarily imposed mimesis. To exist, a rite must be followed by what Professor Riveline labels as a tribe. It must be supported by a myth to get meaning. In the business environment, tribes become teams, rites become methods and myth becomes reason. Within this framework, members of the tribe/myth need to periodically recognise their counterparts through standardized behaviours: mimesis is the underlying rule. A new idea/process can be accepted only if the entire group considers it as potentially imitable.

In the business world, accounting practices are the visible part of the mimesis rules (Scapens, 2005). They are part of the organisational rules and routines, which enable organisational members to make sense of their action and the action of others. Mimesis can be observed in routinisation and institutionalisation processes as well as in lock-in-history. Throughout years, and thanks to the process of mimesis, some routines will develop in organisations and then over time become taken-for-granted, namely institutionalised. They will become dissociated from the historical reasons which gave birth to them. To illustrate this process, an experiment has been conducted on monkeys. The idea is to gather in a cage a certain number of monkeys and to hang at the centre of the cage a banana. During the first step of the experiment, anytime a monkey tries to catch the banana, the others are being showered with water. The experience consists in introducing new monkeys one by one, while taking out one original monkey at a time, such that in the end no original monkey stands in the cage. Logically, whenever a monkey tries to catch a banana, the other ones, which have understood that if it does so they would be showered, attack it. What is interesting to note is that in the end of the experiment, all the monkeys do behave like this, even if they do not know the very reason of why the new entrant in the cage should be attacked. Their



behaviour has become routinised through a mimetic process. This mimesis process can be empirically found in firms, especially when considering their accounting practices (Scapens, 2005).

Similarly, lock-in-history occurs when current practices are constrained by past-actions that nobody remembers and that do not have any meaning nowadays, but “it’s always been done this way”. An illustration of this process is the width of the Space Shuttle launchers which is constrained by the size that the roman roads had in the Ancient Times. This comes from the fact that at that time the roads were marked by the vehicles which were using them. The width of the vehicles using them became then standardized and it is this very standard which is still being used for the vehicles carrying the launchers! We could not find a more absurd consequence of mimesis when used at its extreme.


Evolution and revolution of mimetic behaviours can happen though. The stability of the organisation will not be necessarily threatened: “there can be elements of stability within change, and change may be necessary if things are to remain stable” (Scapens, 2005).

The relationship between innovation and mimesis will be presented in the following part.

### ***Firms, Innovation & Mimesis***

When it comes to organizations, it can be of some interest to consider the mimetic processes that firms use, especially concerning strategies of innovation. Actually, many scholars are doing researches on describing a model of innovation with superior performance. This necessarily includes the idea of mimesis between firms (Deroy, 2001): if such an innovative process does exist and is superior, it must be adopted by a large number of organizations. Firms would actually try to reproduce the behaviour and identifiable patterns of the reference firm. According to Deroy, two different forms of mimesis can be identified: *extended mimesis* and *fragmented mimesis*. In extended mimesis, a unique model of superiority is assumed. In this case, firms will copy each other using a network of information which can be more or less formal (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983). On the opposite, in fragmented mimesis, the possibility of several efficient models of innovation is considered. In this case, mimesis will occur within a single strategic group or industry. “In other words, if the neo-classical hypothesis of perfect markets is considered as relevant, we are under the rule of extended mimetism. On the contrary, if markets are imperfect, fragmented mimetism is the rule.” (Deroy, 2001)

Let’s now consider to what extent mimesis and management science are related.



Industrial Economics implicitly considers mimesis as a major issue. Its assumption will be that competition between firms actually relies on the possibility of mimesis. This comes from the fact that when a firm comes up with an innovative process, whatever its nature (new product, new management...), it will do its utmost trying to delay and limit the imitation of its innovative model, while its competitors will struggle to imitate the innovative firm. In this mimesis process, control of information is key. Two extreme cases are interesting: if there is perfect diffusion of information, the innovative firm will soon be imitated and become the new reference-firm we've spoken about, whereas in the absence of diffusion of information only the innovative firm with superior model will remain on the market as a monopoly, for no other competitor would be able to imitate it.

According to the resource-based theory, mimesis cannot be considered as a competitive advantage aside. Its main assumption is that a firm will hold a competitive advantage thanks to its uniqueness and non-transferability of its assets, values and so on. Thus, mimesis is not only not related to competitive advantage, but the two concepts are antithetical.

However, in the field of management science, the existence of mimesis is common sense: anyone can observe common regularities when firms innovate. These regularities are called *patterns of innovation*. The direct consequence of these regularities is that no deviation is accepted: any deviant behaviour is excluded. In a certain way, this means that mimesis plays against innovation itself. To sum up, management scholars usually try to describe as precisely as possible the efficient(s) model(s) of innovation. Then the models they have designed may be used as guidelines by any firm, becoming a standard which can end as an obstacle to new innovative processes developments.

An interesting phenomenon is what I would call “self-mimesis”, or the reproduction by a firm of its past behaviours. This is clearly supported by the “aversion to risk” theory and the feeling of comfort it will give to the management. It is also a defensive way against the fear of the unknown. However, it also assumes the acceptance of not being innovative...

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, we have tried to present a rather global view of mimesis in the business world, with a particular focus on people and their mimetic fate. We have clearly shown how mimesis can be a positive

aspect in the business world but also how it could be harmful (must be harmful for Girard) both for people and for firms.

Other aspects of mimesis could have been studied, for instance the relationship between emotions and mimesis in a working environment, mimesis in commercial practices or in negotiation. If mimesis is not so evident in the business world, it is obvious in other areas such as the Armed Forces, Sports, Music and so on, in which standards are strong and often unalterable. Therefore, empirical studies could be driven in these particular environments to better understand 'what makes people want to be the other one...'.

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