***Giving Life, Giving Death:
Psychoanalysis, Anthropology, Philosophy*
By L. Scubla. Translated by M. B. DeBevoise (2016)
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Reviewed by Duncan Reyburn

Lucien Scubla's contribution to Michigan State University Press' Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture series is so rich, deep, and multifaceted that every page of it deserves a review of its own. It is a carefully situated, detailed, uncompromising book that questions the theoretical residue of Sigmund Freud's famous but contentious *Totem and Taboo* (1913) – a work published a little over a century ago as an attempt to bridge psychoanalysis and anthropology.

Of course, *Totem and Taboo* has been almost universally discredited by anthropologists because of its reliance on a range of empirically invalid hypotheses. However, Scubla follows René Girard's interest in continuing the discourse between anthropology and psychoanalysis in the context of mimetic theory, as well as Girard's observation (p. 237) that, though it is certainly riddled with inaccuracies and awkward prejudices, *Totem and Taboo* nevertheless has something of value to say to us today. In the process, following Girard's contentions on the relationship between religion and culture, Scubla raises important questions here regarding the role of the body in the religious/ritual origin of social organisation. However, to be clear, the body is understood in this work as a key for answering larger anthropological issues and therefore may not, for readers of this journal, be enough of an explicit focus. That said, as the following outline should show, it would be difficult to argue that the body is merely peripheral to Scubla's work.

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With attention to the kind of scientific evidence and methodological rigour that Freud and his followers have overlooked, Scubla scripts a powerful argument that upends an ideological structure which still haunts many conceptions of human relationships and culture: the Oedipus complex. As a founding myth and as a discursive foundation, Freud's rendering of the Oedipus complex in its highly truncated form is unjustifiable. However, as an attempt to reconsider the connection 'between violence and the sacred in religious phenomena' it is 'a step in the right direction' (p. 233).

Two ideas are of particular interest in Freud's account. The first is the idea of a founding murder, repeated over time through ritual sacrifice, and, as Girard contends, supported by myth and taboo. The second is the notion of identification through shared desire that unites groups in their activities and postures towards the world. What matters, in particular, is the insight that 'mimetic desire' (Girard's phrase) frequently produces a pattern of human behaviours and societal configurations that revolve around unanimous violence against victims.

Where Freud went wrong is obvious. His proposal of a phallic theory in connection with the Oedipus complex – essentially the idea that man has something which woman lacks, and the accompanying universalisation of that particular notion – established grounds for perpetuating a belligerent male chauvinism (p. 13). This proposal found support in the psychoanalytic sidelining of the issue of rivalry, even in the Oedipal structure, and therefore still misunderstands the relationship between desire and prohibition. This, in turn, leads to fundamental misunderstandings around social relations within cultures. Structural anthropology – a central focus for Scubla – follows this and as a consequence sees women primarily as objects of exchange, rather than as intergenerational vectors of continuity.

More recent psychoanalytic discourses have tried to rehabilitate this Freudian slip-up, such as the Lacanian turn away from the literal phallus to an imaginary-symbolic phallus, as well as the Lacanian insistence on symbolic castration, which is experienced by everyone as the foundation of desire. However, binaries supporting male dominance in various kinship and cultural systems are not eradicated by this conceptual manoeuvre. Man is still commonly aligned with such notions as positivity, fullness, activity, and so on, and woman is still aligned with their opposites – negativity, emptiness, and passivity.

For Scubla, such binaries have been retained largely because of an underlying assumption in Freud's work that has never quite gone away. What remains, in the minds and discussions of even the most seemingly neutral interlocutors on the ordering of societies, is a prioritisation of sexuality (gender) over reproduction (fertility). *Sexuality*, here, stands in

for the widespread acceptance of relativism in critical scholarship and the concomitant fluidity of genderedness and gender roles; making sexuality absolute confirms the assumption that 'the distribution of tasks between man and woman' is really just a matter of convention, without any biological basis (p. 128).

Reproduction, on the other hand, points to a genuine asymmetry in the sexes that is at the centre of social formation and interfamilial connections: it is found not in detached, theoretical constructions of identity. Unfortunately, what we might call a signifier of bodily stability – the womb that woman possesses and which man does not – is often misidentified and misnamed: 'The asymmetry of male and female, although quietly acknowledged, never appears under its own colors, as it were, but always in the guise of an inequality arbitrarily instituted by men' (p. 112). Failing to notice this very simple fact indicates a profound ideological stupefaction and the perpetuation of a number of scientific and theoretical inaccuracies.

In the literature that Scubla surveys, there is a common affirmation of male dominance on grounds of supposedly intrinsic, physical characteristics along the lines of strength and vitality. This, as Scubla sees it, mistakenly confirms rather than challenges the binaries evident in the work of Freud – binaries that, it turns out, are supported by structural linguistics more than by actual anthropological research. One example may be named – Claude Lévi-Strauss' sibling classification, which fails to see the true source of equivalence and difference in sibling relations (p. 79). However, a close, empirical analysis of scientific records reveals something else: woman is, in actual fact, the stronger sex, both in that infant mortality in female children is less likely, and also that women also are more likely to live longer than men (p. 15).

Moreover, critical anthropological research – analysed in magnificent detail by Scubla – contains a subtext easily unnoticed: what is envied is not the *phallus* but the *matrix* – the womb; François Héritier's work is particularly important on this point. Woman is powerfully gifted with the ability to bring life into the world. Woman represents creation and life. Man, on the other hand – in his weaponry, warmongering, and hunting – seems only capable of taking life away: 'almost everywhere in the world, killing is the male equivalent of giving birth, dying on a battlefield the equivalent of dying in labor, and so on ...' (p. 27).

In short, Scubla highlights how man symbolises death and destruction more than power and control. If men have tended to dominate women in various historical and contemporary sociopolitical contexts, it is because they have envied women and have thus fought to overcome an intrinsic asymmetry between themselves and those they see as rivals. Woman occu-

pies a space of privilege, where man represents an attempt to reverse this privilege (p. 82). There is, Scubla notes, a kind of repression at work in this – a denial of the ‘very real violence committed by human beings’ – that results from a refusal to closely examine and ‘unravel’ the true nature of ‘intimate relations’ (p. 27).

The implications of Scubla’s observations are impossible to explore fully here, but some of them may be noted. For one thing, discussions around how contraception has liberated women become more complicated, since we notice, through Scubla’s work, that they buy into phallogocentrism (Derrida’s word) by confirming that what has (supposedly) set women free is their submission to the masculine logic of death – a complicity in the masculine inability/refusal to produce life. Contemporary debates about abortion and euthanasia, too, must be reconfigured around different co-ordinates. For instance, as Scubla suggests, they need to acknowledge that contraception did not put an end to abortion, but established a way for making it commonplace (p. 121). Such debates frequently reflect a patriarchal assertion of dominance over life and fertility through ushering in death. In the end, any supposed control exercised over the female body (even by women) may be less about feminist protagonism than an imitation of a masculine monopoly on violence.

Through Scubla’s incisive analysis, debates around the body are brought into a new light, and we find, for example, how easy it is to overlook the envy that drives cultural formation and the attendant masculine desire to ‘appropriate ... fertility’ (Reik, quoted on p. 93). This, incidentally, is something that the Genesis account of Eve’s creation out of Adam makes explicit; it is an account not of ‘Eve’s birth, but a distorted tradition of Adam’s rebirth’ (p. 178).

In addition, Scubla’s research makes it difficult to hold fast to any kind of strict idealism regarding the hierarchical positioning – equivalence or complementarity, epistemic value attributed to, and roles – of men and women in society. That gender identity is ‘merely a construct’ seems itself to have been a mere construct. The structuralist dogma claiming that two opposing terms are always co-determining – that ‘neither one has an intrinsic value, only a positional value’ – is challenged by the stark, embodied fact that ‘[r]eality is a web of relations, not a mere juxtaposition of terms’ (p. 125). The sexes are, within this web of relations, not equal – at least, not in the simplistic sense of being interchangeable – though, of course, the real difference between the sexes does not presume unequal value or importance. Scubla stresses the significance of the ‘egalitarian element’ in early Christianity that has survived into modernity and beyond, which is not an egalitarianism rooted in a false understanding of sexual differ-

ence (pp. 163–4). Furthermore, Scubla's argument helps us to see how the monopoly on ritual, violence, and domination that is held by men in most societies – both ancient, recent, and current – is frequently misunderstood even in some critical scholarship.

This violence is found in any relativist echo chamber that refuses to take 'a simple fact of nature as a criterion for the difference between the sexes' (p. 92). In the process, ironically, the body is reduced to biological functions without noticing how such biological functions affect, albeit non-deterministically, social relations. Also a feature of Scubla's argument is the significance of the sway of man (not woman) as priest and sacrificer in various religious configurations; even the celibate Catholic priest recalls a time when contact of the sacrifice with menstrual blood was forbidden (p. 97). This is not to say, in any simplistic sense, that 'violence' and 'religion' are connected – to do so would be to make a fundamental attribution error also known as reification. In any case, Scubla prefers to speak of specific religions, sects, and rites rather than dwelling on generalisation. His point is that even Western cultures carry the remnants of older social orders and that such social orders are not going to be easily erased by mere theoretical reconstructions.

Scubla's carefully substantiated perspective is not primarily or simply a reversal of a standpoint embedded in Western modernity. Rather, it is rooted in a clear scientific imperative. Science, Scubla writes, 'consists ... not in the collecting of facts, but in explaining them; at a minimum it requires that refutable predictions be formulated, that is, propositions of the type "if *p*, then *q*" that bear not so much on the facts themselves as on the relations that unite them' (p. 128). This explaining of the facts is precisely what Scubla does, and the primary point of departure is an awareness that 'the Oedipus complex is a secondary effect of what Freud calls identification and what [Girard] himself calls mimeticism' (p. 263). Corporeality comes into play in the dance between nature, culture, and tradition – and all of these revolve around an embodied phenomenon: shared desire. Scubla's book, among many other things, posits that perhaps nature does have some authority after all, and it is precisely in the body that we will find some answers to questions that have long vexed anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and philosophers.

While I have tried to account for some of the main issues that Scubla tries to address, space prevents an even more detailed analysis. Nevertheless, the details are for Scubla to explain, not me, and I can confirm that he does so in a work that is utterly brilliant, lucid, and compelling. For those who study anthropology and/or psychoanalysis, as well as those who wish to affirm the significance of the human sciences in understanding complex

sociological patterns and problems, I think this could very well be one of the most important texts of this century.