

An Interview with Nidesh Lawtoo, University of Leuven

Irish Journal of Sociology

1–5

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/07916035221076378

journals.sagepub.com/home/irj**Kieran Keohane** 

Sociology and Criminology, University College Cork National
University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland

Ideas Lying Around: *Homo Mimeticus*

Interviewed by Kieran Keohane, 23 February 2021.

Economy and Society Research Centre, (Cork and Waterford), and the Sociological
Association of Ireland's Research Salon.

KK Kieran Keohane

NL Nidesh Lawtoo

KK Could I begin by just asking if you could give us a brief biographical sketch?

NL First of all, thank you very much for the invitation for participating in this timely webinar, on a topic that I think speaks to the contemporary crisis. I like the phrase 'ideas lying around', because I find that very often interesting ideas are located around or in-between disciplines. I say this because I locate myself in-between disciplinary traditions. I'm a professor of philosophy and English at KU Leuven in Belgium, and I'm currently leading an European Research Council (ERC) project, titled 'Homo Mimeticus', that is also located in between continental philosophy, literary studies, literary theory and the social sciences including anthropology and political theory.

Very briefly, what led me to this project was that I always felt uncomfortable with the idea of disciplinary boundaries. I was trained at the crossroads of literary

Corresponding author:

Kieran Keohane, Sociology and Criminology, University College Cork National University of Ireland, College Road, Cork, T12 K8AF, Ireland.

Email: k.keohane@ucc.ie

studies, philosophy, and social sciences in Switzerland, at the University of Lausanne. I was fundamentally interested in identity, and how subjectivity is shaped. I soon realized that I could find inspiration from philosophy at the conceptual level; from disciplines like anthropology, by looking at other cultures; and then from literature, by drawing on the imagination. I then continued with a PhD in Comparative literature in the US, which was a way to avoid choosing between these traditions. Comparative Literature in the US, is often a way of doing continental philosophy while at the same time working on film, Literature, and social sciences, by combining them in a problem-oriented approach. And so, I would say some of my major influences are located between a continental tradition in philosophy, and the more Anglo-Saxon or American tradition. One of them could be grouped under the rubric of what was called poststructuralism. Figures like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are very much taught in the US in Comp. Lit. departments. I was particularly interested in techniques of analysis, of close reading, of paying attention to the details of a text, in order not only to remain within the text, but to try to use what given narrative, with a literary or philosophical or anthropological perspective, would cast light on a contemporary problem or phenomenon. And so, post-structuralism would be one influence.

Here is another, more specific influence: I spent three years at Johns Hopkins, at the Humanities Center. At the time it was still called the Humanities Center. That was an institution that was important for bridging continental philosophy and what in the US they called 'theory' or 'literary theory'. There was a figure at Johns Hopkins that is important for my thought, and that was René Girard, who taught at Johns Hopkins and developed a so-called 'mimetic theory', that my own work in the ERC project aims to supplement, let's say, for a more contemporary perspective, and I can say more about that in a moment. So, Girard's mimetic theory is an other influence, and then a major philosophical influence is the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, and in particular the idea that we need to remain faithful to the earth, rather than dreaming of ideal afterworlds, be they metaphysical or religious, or in sci-fi, we dream of alternative planets. We only have one planet, and we need to remain faithful to this planet, so that Nietzschean idea is the foundation of my thinking as well.

And maybe just one last point: I was wormed during the so called theory wars. And rather than joining groups of accusation, or staying on one side, let's say the poststructuralist side against the Girardian side, or the Girardian against the materialism that is in Nietzsche, I was interested in drawing connections between these often-competing perspectives. That is something that Nietzsche calls 'perspectivism', and I find that the idea of your seminar, to open up discussions to ideas lying around, not necessarily belonging to one tradition, in order to face a crisis, I think it's very much in line with what Nietzsche would call 'perspectivism', and would also define it as untimely, that is, ahead of its time, in order to look ahead to the future. And that's where I try to align myself I first developed my

Nietzschean alternative to Girard's mimetic theory in a book titled, *The Phantom of the Ego* (2013).

KK Thank you very much. It's an extraordinarily interesting canvas, and I love how you sketched it from continental philosophy to literary criticism, so that in finding those moments of confluence in as you called them, the theory wars, and treating that as an opportunity to be exploratory, you find some very fruitful connections and possibilities there, rather than joining in the fray and taking up positions in different camps. So, thank you, that's exactly what we're hoping to find here. That's been the tradition of our Summer School and our hope for *Ideas Lying Around*. Can I ask you to tell us something about your present project on 'Homo Mimeticus', this ERC funded project, which seems extraordinarily interesting?

NL The main idea of this project is to have a look at the ancient concept of mimesis, which is often translated as representation or imitation, but it's actually very difficult to translate. It different ways in which humans imitate. The dominant one is through art. Art is an eminently mimetic activity, in the sense that different arts represent or copy the world. I find that this old idea of mimesis as representation needs to be supplemented by perspectives that are attentive to the equally old idea that humans are anthropologically fundamentally imitative, in the sense that we imitate each other, where humans imitate other human beings. And now in the digital age we also imitate simulations that are there in film, but you can think of new media as well. The general telos, or the general orientation of the project, is to shift the emphasis of mimesis as an aesthetic category that is linked to representations, towards a more embodied, or performative, or material, view of humans as mimetic. And the project has different perspectives. There is a literary perspective that draws inspiration from a figure that is surely known to your students, Oscar Wilde, who famously claimed that life imitates art more than art imitates life. I found that even among Wilde scholars in literary studies, that is often taken as one of those funny and witty epigrams that is supposed to make us laugh, right? Which is true, it is funny, but Wilde was trained in Classics, he knew his Plato and Aristotle very well, and so he means it literall: that aesthetic representations actually serve as models for humans to imitate in life. So that's one perspective. There is a more future-oriented perspective that pays attention to new technologies, and how the digital revolution and digital simulations are currently affecting human behavior, generating forms of contagion that spill from the world online to the world offline. I often use sci-fi movies for those analyses: movies like Spike Jonze's *Her*, for instance, or *The Matrix*, to take already an older movie; they help us reflect on the philosophical implications of the digital revolution.

And lastly, there is a political dimension, which links up to my recent work. I can say more about that if you want.

KK Yes, please. Very interesting. We live in a time of contagions, mimetic contagions. The present coronavirus pandemic, but also, running through your work before coronavirus came along of course is the theme of political contagions. We've

seen this melting down, in what were at one time called epidemics of the will, let's say, into highly potentially, and in some cases actually violent, as we've seen in the events at the US Capitol, an actualization of contagious violence escalating towards sacrificial crises. I know this has been the subject of your recent book in 2019, *(New) Fascism*. So, Nidesh, could you tell us a little bit more about your general thesis there on contagion, and particularly the political contagions of our age?

NL Absolutely. I should start by saying that mimesis itself is neither good nor bad. To use a Nietzschean phrase, it goes 'beyond good and evil'. The recent manifestations of pathological forms of mimesis on the political scene are one aspect of mimesis I found myself compelled to write about. When I started the project it was 2016. I still remember, during the interview for the ERC Project, in order to illustrate the urgency of understanding mimesis, I gave the example of Donald Trump. Giving the example that leaders who are often grouped under the rubric of populism, actually spread ideas that are very close to historical fascism like hyper-nationalism, racism, sexism, and the idea of a leader that embodies the nation and that generates mass identification. These are ideas that were around in the '20s and '30s, and those leaders know very well how to operate on the powers of mimesis for the worse. They understand mimesis and the human drive to imitate a model, especially when one is part of a crowd. And so, I felt compelled to take Donald Trump as a case study. It's a little bit like how Nietzsche took the case of Wagner as a case study in his later work, to account for the affective, emotional, irrational potential of mimesis, especially as it spreads through crowds. The recent manifestation of the riots and the storming of the Capitol in the US, well, that's what I had in mind when I started writing the book in 2016. This is usually the natural consequence of that (new) fascist of rhetoric.

One of the influences that I should also mention is Michel Serres, who was very close to René Girard, without being a Girardian necessarily, who argued that the task of philosophy today is to anticipate on events to come. "*Philosopher, c'est anticiper*", he said. So, it's with that motto, which involves a risk, that I embarked on this project that I hadn't planned, and wrote contra Trump, knowing, at the same time, that hopefully there will be a countermovement that celebrates more positive forms of mimesis as well. I've been writing about that side too.

KK Can I ask you to reflect a little bit on anticipating? We are living in very dark times, as we are all too aware, but one of the things we are interested in *Ideas Lying Around* is looking for those moments of hopefulness or anticipating ways in which downward spirals of mimetic, scapegoating and so on can also be, that's only one side of the equation, as you suggest Can we anticipate ways in which that might be turned around to recover some form of solidarity, some form of operative community? That's one of the themes in the beautiful piece you have on Conrad's essay, *The Shadow-Line* (Lawtoo, 2016). Could you give us a little preview of what you wrote about then, and how you would see that anticipating into the future?

- NL What I find in modernist writers like Conrad is indeed an ability to dramatize the two faces of mimesis. Of course, *Heart of Darkness* (1902 [1899]) is a manifestation of the dark side, and that side is very present. But in a lesser-known novella titled *The Shadow Line* (1917), he confronts the problematic of a pandemic that spreads on board ship, and Conrad, as you know, was a captain, before turning into a writer, so he's writing out of experience. And he is accounting for the movements of solidarity that emerge in a period of crisis. He uses the ship as a metaphor for a community. And what emerges out of the novella, among many other things, is the idea that we are relational creatures. And that this relationality in a situation of crisis can lead humans to cooperate. I called that chapter 'The Cooperative Community', in order to supplement poststructuralist accounts of the inoperative community that emphasized the historical dangers of communal organic fusion, in order to stress that communal bonds can also emerge in a situation of crisis. And Conrad also mentions that the ship is not only a metaphor for the state, but also for the planet. So, I take that as metaphorical for transformation, that of course will require collective efforts, but that is indeed possible. Or at least we should contribute to promoting life-affirmative metamorphoses in a period of crisis.
- KK Thank you very much Nidesh.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the H2020 European Research Council (grant number 716181).

ORCID iD

Kieran Keohane  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2792-5479>

References

- Conrad J (1902) *Heart of Darkness*. London: William Blackwood and Sons.
- Conrad J (1917) *The Shadow Line*. London: J. M. Dent.
- Lawtoo N (2016) *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory*. East Lansing: MSU Press.
- Lawtoo N (2013) *The Phantom of the Ego: Modernism and the Mimetic Unconscious*. East Lansing: MSU Press.
- Lawtoo N (2019) *(New) Fascism: Contagion, Community, Myth*. East Lansing: MSU Press.