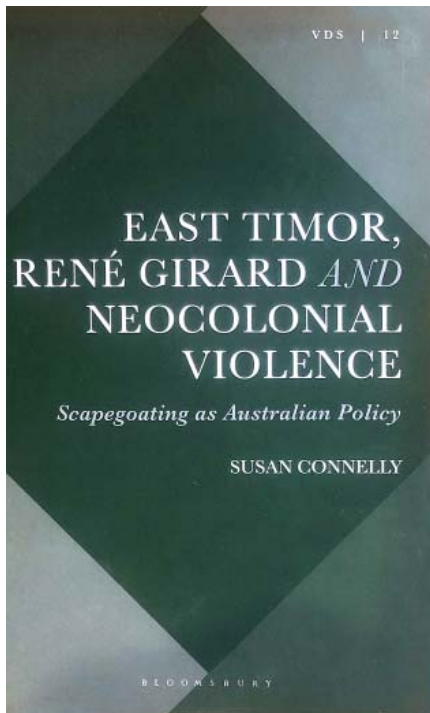


BOOK REVIEW

Marshall Leaver



East Timor, René Girard and Neo-colonial Violence.
Scapegoating as Australian Policy by Susan Connelly
Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2022

East Timor as one of our closest neighbours and the newest of nations in our region deserves to be known and have its story shared. Knowledge and understanding of this nation is significant to the education and the social and cultural literacy for secondary students. The people of East Timor¹ have experienced 450 years of colonialism by Portugal, Japanese invasion during World War II and more recently by 25 years of occupation by Indonesia and yet in 2002 they achieved independence after a violent struggle. The challenge in Susan Connelly's book is to examine Australia's interactions with East Timor and explore if this relationship actually serves to continue patterns of control and manipulation through neo-colonialist policies designed to exploit the resources of one of the poorest nations in our region.

¹ The name Timor Leste is Portuguese for East Timor, which along with Tetum, is one of the official languages.

East Timor provides an **excellent county study** for HSC Society and Culture topic of **Social and Cultural Continuity and Change**. Their traditional society has focused and distinct features and the recent time frame since the formation of the nation in 2002 offers a manageable focus for this HSC Core study. The resilience and strength of the Timorese people in dealing with adversity is an inspirational story for students to explore and discern.

The author, Susan Connelly has dedicated her life's work to the pursuit of social justice and she articulates that her commitment to the Timorese people is enabled by an awareness of their courage and tenacity but also their victimisation. This is a profound story of the complexity of the human condition in the collective experiences of violence, of sorrow and of mercy. Deceits by powerful organisations and the ongoing search for justice has been manifest in East Timor in recent times. Connelly has found a vision for better understanding these complexities through the work of anthropologist René Girard, whose theories have inspired her.

René Girard (1923–2015) was an anthropologist but he worked in an interdisciplinary method that embraced many academic fields including literary criticism, mythology, theology, philosophy, psychology and sociology. His theory of 'mimetic desire' is applied to East Timor which offers an understanding that humans will desire what others desire. This generates a rivalry which through history and across cultures is resolved with violence. These destructive actions are eventually suppressed through creating a scapegoat. This scapegoat is to be blamed and so deflects responsibility for the violence away from the controlling group. This theory of understanding complex human behaviours can give insight into the community and military violence in Timor at the time of independence but also to the dynamic of Australian-Timorese disagreement and negotiation of the oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea. The scapegoating that has been manifest in this dynamic allows the dominant group to avoid self-judgment and retain a sense of its own social cohesion and to avoid blame. However, it has been the efforts of whistle-blowers such as Witness K and his lawyer Bernard Collaery that have seen this process of scapegoating meaningfully challenged.

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These scapegoating strategies by Australian governments can be identified in the supply of weapons and training support to the Indonesian military during the time of their occupation of East Timor. This was complemented by Australia arguing in the United Nations that the East Timor question be dropped, whilst negotiating an oil and gas treaty with the invading Indonesians to a desire to exploit the resources in the Timor Sea.

Whilst the main focus of this book is on East Timor, Connelly also identifies a diverse range of conflict situations for analysis, including Australian ethnic nationalism in its treatment of its First Nations peoples, the Chinese in gold fields and Pacific Islanders in cane fields, as well as the conflict scenarios of the Cold War, the rise of Communist China and the impact of September 11 and Al Qaeda. Questions of how to achieve peaceful resolutions are at the core of this publication but on the evidence Connelly warns that “unless there is a capitulation or withdrawal of one or more parties then violence is inevitable.” (Connelly, 2022, p11). Is this blame and sacrifice of a scapegoat the only way resolving rivalry and conflict?

Australian cultural ideals are often expressed in notions of fairness, loyalty and egalitarianism but these cannot be assumed to be practiced in our relationship with East Timor. ‘The underdog was betrayed’. Various Australian governments deserve greater scrutiny for their actions which on the evidence feature denial, deceit and indifference in our dealing with East Timor. Real social change and economic opportunity should be the right of the embattled people of East Timor and Susan Connelly book challenges Australia to stop blaming and exploiting ‘the victim’ and in this time when growing militarisation and the implicit threat of violence that we as communities and as a nation find ways to be better global citizens.



Elders from East Timor's municipalities, gather at a traditional ceremony in the state capital, Dili. Source: Wikimedia Commons