

Event, Origin, Center

Let's start with "journalism." You watch a cable or news show, or read (probably online) an article in a newspaper, and there's a "story" there. Maybe a story buried under layers of implicit and explicit editorializing, but, still, a story: one thing is purported to have happened, then another, and so on. Where do the stories come from—how does the journalist know where to look for them and find them? In every case, they are framed as stories with reference to the governing apparatus—the state. The state "does" something—the president issues an order, Congress passes a law, the court makes a decision—and that's the story, occasionally presented straight (many stories are pretty much stenography), more often framed in terms of the event's correspondence with some set of expectations, or on a continuum of "licitness." If the story concerns a corporation or another institution—a sports team, a movie studio, a university—that institution is treated either as an adjunct of the state (the story regards compliance or non-compliance, or the serving of what is ultimately a state function) or as state-like itself (as issuing its own executive orders, making policy changes, as its charter and state law authorizes it to do).

This raises the question of how the news media ever becomes something other than a stenographer,

broadcasting the actions and decisions of government and its auxiliaries. It is the licitness spectrum that makes this possible: a government organ, or political party (or corporate, or...) decision or action might be illegal, or improperly arrived at or carried out, or can lead to consequences unanticipated by the initial act or decision. In other words, what is of interest is some kind of discrepancy. But how are such discrepancies detected? To say that a particular decision or act is "illegal" is to say that one organ of government might or should come into conflict with another organ of government (we can make the necessary adjustments in talking about other institutions, for which "illegality" means a conflict between an institution authorized by the government and the government); to say that an act or decision has been improperly carried out is, similarly, to point to possible conflicts, perhaps within the same organ of government (between superiors and subordinates, perhaps); and to say that an act or decision was a mistake or disaster is also to indicate and incite certain kinds of later, ultimately official assessments of and reactions to those decisions.

But how does an actor within the news media know and come to report that an act or decision of government (or...) is illegal, improper or incorrect? Only by having access to actors within, but to at least some extent at odds with, the governing decision maker, is this possible. This might be a

“whistleblower,” or a power seeking or resentful individual or faction (assuming there’s any point to distinguishing between this and the whistleblower), but this is the only way the reporter can determine the legality, propriety or correctness of an act (that is, locate it on the licitness spectrum). The news media really come into its own, then, by leveraging disloyalty and dysfunction within or between institutions that are supposed to cohere and support each other. There may, of course, be dysfunction in any institution, but the news media is only possible insofar as responsibility for identifying and remedying dysfunction is assigned to institutional agencies other than those making the final decision within those institutions—that is, within the terms of “rule of law” or “checks and balances.” Within a mostly functional institution with isolated dysfunction, the purpose of identifying dysfunction would be to report it to the governing authority to remedy the dysfunction—but this wouldn’t generate “news.” The news media can only thrive by inflating and exploiting dysfunction and encouraging conflict and disloyalty within institutions. Even in a case where the news media acts as a “praetorian guard” for a particular administration, that just means that the state factions whose influence they amplify are behind that administration as well.

This further means, though, that the news media are still stenographers, only of specific factions within institutions.

We can attribute enormous power to media organizations because we see them destroy (and effectively protect) very powerful people (like presidents) and advance and sabotage policy measures into which substantial resources have been invested on a regular basis. But most of this power should be attributed to those factions distributed within the institutions themselves, who themselves have plenty of reasons for wanting to destroy and sabotage office holders and policies. At most, members of the news media can marginally advance the interests of one faction against another. If we bring in another seemingly very powerful institution, the university, the analysis changes very little. Along with supplying personnel for staffing the governing and auxiliary institutions (including the empire of think tanks, situated at the center of a Venn diagram connecting universities, media and government), the universities—obviously massively funded by the government—provide the information useful for one faction or another—a new “study” shows defense spending, or public health policy, or labor policy, needs to be directed one way or another. Needless to say, it is always possible for a bureaucratic faction to select and promote one study over others.

In a sense, the analysis is still not significantly different if we bring in what seem to be the most powerful global forces, the giant corporations operating according to the logic of financialized capital. Capital and international banks can

cripple most countries; they fund the aforementioned think tanks and the political parties that produce the candidates that authorize the grants of power to the bureaucrats. But capital must still operate through the state, which is why it spends all that money on political influence and intellectual weaponry. Certainly, banks and the larger conglomerates could bring even a medium sized state to its knees, but they couldn't do that to the largest states and certainly not a coalition of states organized under a hegemon. At this point, probably all that appears to us as politics is precisely capital using states and states using capital, each leveraging the power of its counterpart to increase its own power vis a vis its rivals in its own field—all of which, again, has to pass through the state bureaucracy and its competing factions because capital cannot imagine operating outside of law, official currency, and the policing power of the state.

None of this, of course, says anything about the quality of any of these acts or decisions—one study can be better than another (although what that means cannot be determined outside of an institutional power analysis aligned with the one conducted here), one policy might approximate its intended ends more closely than another (ditto), and some ends are more worth attaining than others. There's no need to claim that every government is thoroughly saturated with depravity—the analysis I'm making here seems to suggest that only insofar as one accepts the official promotional

materials of these institutions, which all claim to operate very differently than described here. Indeed, the most dissident groups of both left and right invariably end up relying on some more marginal government factions, allied with more marginal media outlets, pointing to more obscure discrepancies, themselves; or, they work with official sources and decode, but almost always by deriving the decoding formula from some idealized version of the official purpose of the institution (exposing that the government really represents some narrow interest rather than the people). This of course means that all of us, at whatever distance, are doing nothing more than seeking out discrepancies at the center that we hope will empower the faction that would institute a form of sovereignty we would more enthusiastically enlist for. It takes a dramatic re-orientation in one's way of thinking to adopt the kind of institutional-power relationship outlined above without losing your ability to make moral distinctions—a re-orientation which the notion of the "red pill" describes as well as any readily imaginable alternative.

My purpose in conducting this little analysis here is to bring into focus an observation and, then, a question: first, the very operation of all the institutions of information production and provision presupposes an unwavering orientation toward the central authority, regardless of how decentralized things seem, or how impossible we might think

it is to locate the sources of power and decision making within the circuits of electronic media; in which case, the question becomes, why is the central authority so riven with conflicting factions and the consequent dysfunction? If we can answer that question, and derive from that answer a "problem" that might be "solved," we would also be able to place order in all the eyes and ears of the central authority, which are presently mostly occupied with informing on, misdirecting, and lying about each other. And the question has a very simple answer: the central authority is so disordered because its occupant is constantly changing and so all its organs must themselves be occupied with jockeying for power so as to secure their own positions in anticipation of the next shift or upheaval. And this means significant factions must always be opposed to any consolidation of power at the center that would make transitions of power less disruptive—or, we might say, less suggestive of new opportunities.

So, a new question: how did the occupation of central authority become programmatically insecure? But let's step back a bit: why is there someone at the center in the first place? In starting this essay with an account of the news media, I also wanted to foreground the irreducibility of the event. Why are there "events"? Why do things happen, at least in such a way as to be significant and memorable, to leave a mark? There are events because there are centers,

and centers because there are events, and even the most abstract statistical account of, say, the development of labor markets over the last century can only create new time frames and new, more distanced or focused, sites of observation regarding those events, which never cease to refer to some center. Even the ever more complete wiring of all institutions through the algorithmic governance of planetary scale computation hasn't changed the fact that actual computing outcomes always come out as "hacked" in the interests of one faction or another—in fact, at this point, the Stack has simply created a new field for the central authorities (in their global competitions and hierarchies) and their adjutant institutions to play exactly the same game they've been playing all along.

It's impossible to report something without giving it an event structure—that is, a basic beginning-middle-end narrative structure. It's also impossible to report something without conferring significance upon it. Many people insist that they want just the facts, without narrative or framing, but since there are an infinite number of "facts" in the world and any publication is finite, choosing to report some and not all the rest is already a framing—again, this set of facts, or, really, events, are significant—and significant in relation to each other, comprising a version of reality. Finding yourself compelled to repeat epithets like "without evidence" is just a sign that this more fundamental, a priori framing, is no longer

getting the job done. So, we break the world down into significant events that can, at least in principle, be articulated in a coherent way (claims of the "chaos" or "meaninglessness" of modern life are really just different ways of conferring significance and articulating), and both participating and reporting on any event situates us in relation to or, to put it more strongly, places us in the orbit of some central authority which guarantees the meaning of all social happenings. Even acts carried out by the figure occupying the center (monarch, president, prime minister), even one with the most absolute or emergency powers, are "peripheral" or off center insofar as they refer back to the authority vested in that figure prior to and enabling this particular act.

So, all of humanity is made up of peripheral events. Why should this be the case? I would work with what I take to be a strong definition of "event": something that happens and that can't be reduced to, or wouldn't have been predictable by, its "parts" or prior events. An event is something new. This definition is seemingly easy to contest—after all, don't people predict things correctly, and can't we break down an event into its parts and recombine it as their sum? You can single out a specific framing of an event, or view it under one of its (publicly agreed upon) "aspects," and in that case predict it accurately. Obvious cases are sporting events and elections, with clear numbers (if everything goes right)

indicating an unmistakable winner. But that's an arbitrarily restricted representation of the event—an event, moreover, constructed precisely so as to produce a certain outcome in that "aspect." Lots of people and things need to be in place and to play specific roles under conditions that can never be perfectly specified in order for the event to be given closure—that is, so we could say, this game or election is over. In that case, ensuring all those people will be in place is part of the event; and if, in some sense, the event has been completed, the claim that that, in fact, constituted the event can be contested—what we take to be the end (the winner declared when the clock runs out or the votes all counted) is at the same time a beginning and middle of some other event. The very fact that we can and do impose closure on events means that events are constituted by humanly imposed closure, even if not always with the same degree of explicitness and formality. The problem with reducing an event to the sum of its parts is similar—you can only do it retrospectively, with the event in its humanly imposed closure in mind. Otherwise, you would have no way of knowing what counts as a "part." "Analyzing" the event is just another way of imposing closure upon it—you have to take as given what you purport to produce.

To have events, to participate in events, is to be human. Yes, nothing in nature happens exactly the same way two times. But nothing happens in nature, either. For whom would

things happen, other than people? There's no escaping anthropocentrism—those most intent on denouncing and transcending anthropocentrism have coined the term "Anthropocene" for the current period in earth history, which suggests that we need to transcend anthropocentrism because it has drawn the entire earth and its environment into its deathly vortex. It's hard to get more anthropocentric than that. We can keep making the boundaries separating the human from the animal and inorganic, on the one side, and the technological, on the other side, and it is in fact very intellectually productive to do so, but this will always involve re-constituting the irreducibility of the human as constitutive of those boundaries. So, we come back to the question: why is the human constituted through the event?

The simplest answer is that the human emerged in an event. This seems theological, and so virtually all "serious" thinkers flee from it, but until the threshold of the human can be shown or even imagined to have been crossed in some so gradual as to be imperceptible way that no actual instant of crossing can be identified, the human as emergent in an event is the better hypothesis. Which brings us to language, undisputedly constitutive of the human, which likewise can only be imagined having emerged in an event. What would "part" of a "meaningful" sign be? How would it not already be meaningful? In any gradual emergence of the sign as meaningful, how could there not be a threshold under which

it has no meaning and above which it does? To keep things simple and avoid going into debt to debates within disciplines like semantics, semiotics and linguistics, I'll say that by "meaning" I simply mean that a sign can be deemed to be the same in different occasions of its utterance or issue. This is only possible given some "agreement" stipulating the transferability of the sign but, of course, as Rousseau already pointed out, there seems to be no way of imagining arriving at such an agreement other than through the use of language itself. But there is a way.

The best way of hypothesizing the origin of language (and the human) has turned out to be through considering the logic of imitation. This is paradoxical, because imitation effaces originality and any origin—if we say there is an original, and then someone imitates it, we're not thinking imitation in an ordinary way; but if there's nothing but imitation, there is no origin. It is, in fact, the end to which imitation brings us that enables us to think imitation as origin. If all is imitation, then we learn to desire by imitating another's desire—for that matter, we also learn to desire by imitating another's imitation of what he takes to be my desire—which creates "scarcity" as we must converge on the same object. The telos of imitation is rivalry, crisis and violence—violence without end or reconciliation. There are very good reasons for us to be very uneasy in talking about imitation, and denying it whenever we can—the more we acknowledge

imitation as the foundation of our being, the more we are bereft of will, freedom and any claim to self-mastery. The historical solution to the crisis of imitation has been the construction of socially shared models, or what Rene Girard called "external mediation." But for external mediation to work, we need to place the model beyond rivalry, which blocks thinking about imitation in an originary direction. It's only when external forms of mediation collapses that we can think imitation in originary terms, which at first merely radicalizes the crisis.

Still, we must have come out of our mimetic crises somehow—after all, we're still here. Mimetic crisis represents the destruction of community—but that also means that the key to community must be found in the same neighborhood, so to speak. Mimetic crisis involves everyone in the group converging on the same object; so, articulating some non-violent, differently mimetic (still assuming nothing outside of the mimetic) relation to the center must be what gets us from the end of imitation to the beginning of community. It's remarkable that, given that humans must have been aware of the prevalence and even dangers of imitation from very early on, and it already figures prominently in Aristotle, no one, until very recently, has thought imitation through to its deadly conclusions. The reason must lie in the collapse of external mediation, which set a cap on mimetic inquiry. External mediation collapsed because the external mediators

themselves—kings, nobles, priests—became objects of violence. Something that no longer works becomes an object of inquiry; in this case, the way in which it ceased to work made the inquiry inescapable, and provided it with its problematic. Something about violence toward an object of mediation must lie at the conversion of mimesis from community destroying to community creating.

Right now, we really have two ways of thinking about the conversion of the mimetic crisis into an origin. Fortunately, they are both very good ways, even if one is, on the crucial point, better than the other. For Rene Girard, a mediator is selected at the height of the mimetic crisis and “externalized,” which is to say, lynched. Someone in the group, for some arbitrary reason, is differentiated from the rest, so that the incipient melee can be directed toward this single member. As the group converges on him, he becomes the cause of the violence—he has divided the community, and the community can now only be united against him. This provides us with the very enduring structure of the scapegoat. But once the mediator has been made “external,” he also becomes the cause of the unity, indeed origin, of the community. He is simultaneously villain and savior—in this duality, Girard locates the origin of mythology. And the duplicity of mythology, since the responsibility of the community for the murder of the savior must be disavowed. Take the myth of Prometheus, who saved and originated

humanity by providing it with tools, knowledge and fire, and was punished severely for it—not by “us,” of course—responsibility is fobbed off onto Zeus. But, on Girard’s analysis, it was us. Prometheus’s human model violated, very likely in some innovation, the sacred order of the community, and his gifts can only be received and enjoyed insofar as the lynching he suffered as a result can be denied, and thereby ritually retrieved.

This account would already let us see why there must be a center, and why the center can’t quite be “human,” even when it is occupied by one. If someone sees his fellow desire something, or even imagines he desires that things, his own desire will be aroused. Right away, the two are arranged around that object, which situates the object at the center. It remains that the center because the mimetic rivalry, and eventually mimetic crisis, will enhance the desirability of the central object. In Girard’s model, we must imagine a diversion from the desired object toward a single member of the group who displaces it as the center, which is to say, the increasingly intense focus of everyone’s attention. This central figure must also provide the resolution of the crisis, which is to say the power to found and maintain the community must be conferred upon him after the fact. Thus, the center is a—indeed the first—source of agency within the now human community, and no future agency will be possible without it. This is why center and event are bound

inextricably together. As we will see shortly, we can also think the ordinary scene, more consistently, in my view, by assuming that the focus remains on the initial object of desire, in which case it is the shared consumption, and then unanimously acknowledged locus of absence, of the initial object of desire, that makes the center the foundation of the community.

Before I proceed, I'd like to ask a question: where are we here? Within what discipline? It's definitely not philosophy; indeed, my sense of the incommensurability of mimetic theory and philosophy has been radicalized—and this includes anti- and post-metaphysical philosophy, some of which does border on some of these questions. Philosophy remains the province of "man thinking," and its content and concerns are how man thinking comes and continues to be man thinking. There's no "man" in mimetic theory—there are oscillations between sameness and difference in the shapes given to common life. It's a "human science," for sure, but it's hard to see how it can enter the actually existing human sciences without essentially razing them to ground and making it all one big human science. The other human sciences start with "social facts," which is to say actions, behaviors and institutions authorized and recognized formally by the community. That's where I started this essay as well—with "journalism" as a coherent body of social facts. But there's no way of asking, within any of these disciplines,

why are there social facts in the first place? That's because they ultimately derive from philosophy, and similarly foundationally distinguish themselves from collective revelation. My purpose in opening as I did was to show that an honest and thoroughgoing inquiry into "social facts" leads one to their irreducibly revelatory nature, which is to say their origin in some event, which in turn leads us to the origin of humanity in revelation, which in turn led us to mimesis. Girard called his thinking "fundamental anthropology"; Eric Gans, to whom I will now turn, calls it "generative anthropology" and "originary thinking"; I have called it "anthropomorphics." Does it need a single name? Regardless, it is an imperious, intellectually ravenous, and therefore "imperialist" mode of thought. It takes its incommensurability with all hitherto existing thought as a challenge.

Here's the limit of Girard's hypothesis: there's no reason why some animal group, even an exceptionally intelligent one, should view ganging up on and killing one of its members as "meaningful," which is to say, "memorable." Animals kill their own kind without it changing their behavior or form of organization in the slightest. There needs to be some formal acknowledgment of the event—there needs to be a sign. The origin of language needs to be conjoined with the origin of the human. And, since what is to be formally acknowledged is the revelation of the group as a community sharing a

center, the origin of language and the origin of the human is also the origin of the sacred. So, Gans first proposed adding a sign to the conclusion of Girard's otherwise unaltered scene—after the originary murder, the group all gestures to the body of the victim in some way. But he then realized that if the real point is the pointing, the killing itself is superfluous—the group could have just as readily gestured toward a living, not-yet (and therefore maybe not to be) victim. We can add that the issuance of a gesture after the crisis has already been resolved is less likely than a sign when the crisis is at its height, and therefore most urgently needs to be abated—that would make it effective and memorable.

If it's more likely that violence was averted before, rather than commemorated after, the fact, then there's also no need to assume a human victim at the center. Gans slices away with Okham's Razor. We just need a desirable object, which becomes more desirable as each member imitates the desire of the other for it. A single, arbitrarily selected human would not have been a desirable object for other humans—it is possible to imagine a group of males grouped around a female, and perhaps some matriarchal ritual orders reference some such event, but for our originary scene it's hard to see what would bring a group of men to be clustered around a single woman, since sexual intercourse is an intrinsically one-on-one activity. What is much easier to imagine is clustering around some food item, which would be

a regular occurrence for the group. (Gans also pointed out that the earliest communities worshipped animals and plants, with human divinity and human sacrifice coming much later, with hierarchical orders.) So, normally, feeding would proceed in accord with the pecking order—the alpha animal eats to satiation, then the beta, and so on. On our hypothetical occasion, the intensification of mimetic desire overrides the pecking order as all rush to the meal at the center. There's no way of sharing it in an orderly manner, because the only existing order has just collapsed. One member of the group hesitates in the face of this emergent disorder—his reaching for the central object is aborted; this action that has not been completed becomes a sign, and can be imitated. It is a sign of deferral, and allows everyone to formally acknowledge a new order, enabling them to proceed to an orderly, shared consumption of the central object.

Gans and others, very much including myself, have reiterated this originary hypothesis many, many times, and so I try to do it differently on each occasion, so as to make it an object of thought and productive of discourse. An approach I suggested very early on, but have not really stuck with, and so I'll retrieve it here, is as follows: in working with the originary hypothesis, one should violate the minimality of the scene by adding one element that "tilts" the scene in one direction or another—a clinamen, one could say. The

originary event could then be conceptualized as a bundle of still unfolding possibilities—it can be virtualized, as we participate in the deferral occurring there. So, for example, from where in the group would the first sign have issued from? Would it have been the alpha? The beta? Some more marginal, potentially victimized member? We don't need to answer this question for the originary hypothesis to be "validated"—it is one of many questions that could be left open. But someone would have had to go first (and how "aware" do we have to imagine this individual being regarding what he's doing?), and it would have to be someone bearing some traces of the pre-human group. So, we could play with secondary hypotheses in accounting for human differentiation. In hypothesizing the scene we are doing something very tricky and tentative, because we must use the language we have as a result of the scene to articulate a scene where only a very preliminary and to us alien (and yet still full-fledged, insofar as it is a sign) form of that language was just emerging. They knew what they were doing and they didn't know what they were doing, because "knowing what they were doing" is not yet fully "applicable." They know enough to re-enact, but without any way of representing what they are re-enacting. This boundary between the tacit and explicit, is a permanent feature of language, a source of linguistic development and manipulation, and therefore of secondary hypotheses. We are never not on some scene, and we can never fully

articulate the way we are on that scene. At the same time, we can keep trying to imagine "causes" and "motivations" that would have lead the first to hesitate and others to imitate him and thereby generate secondary hypotheses but without ever getting "inside" the scene sufficiently to cancel its revelatory nature as an event.

The origin of language, representation as the deferral of violence, the human as that species that poses a greater danger to itself than is presented to it by anything external: originary thinking proposes a particular understanding of agency. How do we "decide what to do"? It's possible to generate answers to this question by rummaging through the inventory of "internal" "faculties"—"will," "reason," "calculation," and so on. Or, to ground the decision maker deterministically in a series of "structures" and "causes," of which there will never be any lack. For originary thinking, agency is deferral. I'll explain this in terms that may sound philosophical, but I'll really be drawing upon words that exist in every language and the meaning of which is intuitively self-evident. The animal pecking order, like any order, implies differentiation, or some relation between same and other. Imitation, as it intensifies, collapses difference: we all become the same. But we can never be same enough—we can't occupy the exact same space, we can't hold exactly the same object, we can put the exact same piece of food in our mouths. At the point where sameness reaches its limits,

the non-being of other in this place is the only way of introducing difference—the non-being, the removal, of the other, would restore the other to otherness. Deferral introduces a difference, an other, before this “final solution” becomes the only possibility, while also implying it as a possibility. The first one who hesitates, who converts grasp into gesture, becomes other, and an other who need not be attacked because he can be imitated while preserving difference. If the first one to issue what will have become the sign once others imitate him is, in fact, imitated, then the central object, which is let be for the moment, becomes other, and everyone becomes other to each other through it.

To act, to do something, is, then, to produce or present some other that defers the crisis of sameness. We would be satisfied with nothing less than an impossible degree of sameness without the imposition of this other. This means creating a center, in relation to which one is here and the other is there. This doesn't mean we “decide” to put something at the center, and that we need to get inside some decision making process and construct a set of cognitive steps, or some wheels turning, that leads from the proposition “we are getting too close to absolute sameness” to the proposition “we can agree on this thing as our center.” It is, rather, the center that calls us, and that we hear and heed. On the ordinary scene, the first to gesture does not exactly know what he is doing—he is merely registering the

impasse, the double bind, of mimesis. His sign is a result of compulsion, and those who imitate him submit to the same compulsion, a compulsion that can only be seen to come from the center. As Gans has put it, the first sign is the Name-of-God, and the center is sacred. The center is other, and in being the same in relation to it we are other to each other. The problem of "what to do" is to listen to the center.

So, what does that mean? How do we tell whether we or another are listening more or less closely to the center? We are always already listening to the center, insofar as there is no social order or even social setting, without some center towards which we are arrayed—an altar and its rituals, a government with its central position (monarch, prime minister, president), a room with a table around which all sit and norms of politeness or civility governing exchanges, a canonical text which we are devoted to interpreting, a centrally imposed currency governing economic exchanges, and so on—we are never starting from scratch here. We can't say a word to each other without referring, implicitly and explicitly, to previous conversations and events, and governing our interactions in accord with some norm drawn from them. Our fundamental "motivation" is always to preserve that center and prevent what is intuited as a complete breakdown in presence. This seems to suggest that we will tend to conform as closely as possible to modes of action that have previously "worked" in situations "like"

this one. And, statistically speaking, that is overwhelmingly what the center is telling us to do. But sometimes it is trying to approximate more and more closely expected, predictable, pre-approved actions that will accelerate the crisis of sameness. We listen to the center and thereby act insofar as this is the case, and to some extent it is always the case. If approximating standardized and stereotyped responses aggravates the crisis of sameness, the center needs to be restored, and this means one has to "read the room," and reading the room means imagining a new configuration that would make us other to each other again. You are, of course, in the room you are reading, and so reading the room involves getting a read on others reading of you, especially if you are ahead of the game in determining the crisis, in which case your moves in "sensing" and eliciting signs of the crisis provide you with your reading material as others take in your movements. Listening to the center entails reorganizing the field on which you all move by following the way others follow you as you defer the onset of terminal sameness or, we could say, entropy.

History, then, is the history of the center, and, in fact, we have something we can call "history" because it is possible for a human being to occupy the center. A human will occupy the center when, in listening to it, hears that the imminent danger of the collapse of presence cannot be deferred through recourse to the established ritual order. There is

always something “revolutionary” about a human seizing the center, even in mundane contexts like a friend stepping in to resolve a dispute between a couple of other friends. At the same time, someone moving decisively to the center is always a possibility, since a feeling for the imminence of some crisis of sameness is unevenly distributed—it is sometimes possible to feel the rumblings of such a crisis years, decades, maybe centuries in advance. A human at the center places himself in the position of a potential victim as a condition of being a successful restorer of same and other: there is a firm place for Girard’s scapegoat mechanism here. If those two friends resume and embitter their dispute, they will likely blame the well meaning mediator (was he, really, well meaning?). How we manage our relations with—listen to—the humans we put at the center is the heart of all our morality, ethics and politics.

We have all had the experience of being angry toward someone while simultaneously realizing that there is some “disproportion” between our anger and the actions and intents we attribute to the target of our anger. I feel confident in saying that we have all had this experience, if not in real time than in retrospect because, in fact, there is never any commensurability between our attitudes towards those at the center and actions attributed to the person at the center. An accordance between the two is created in terms of the needs of the scene. If there is no natural, neutral, self-

evident, automatic relation between our engagement with the person at the center and the "deserts" of that person, we can ask, what, then, is the right or best way of engaging the occupant of the center—in the simplest sense of the person we're all looking at, talking about, doing something to, paying attention to, obeying—even if the "all" is just "all of me" as I assemble myself around that center against the background of an imagined audience and possible participants. Consider that moment where you notice some discrepancy between your anger toward someone and whatever you can identify as having elicited that anger. You have a choice here; or, the center is issuing conflicting, or ambiguous, directives, which can only be narrowed down by following some that lead you back to the crisis of sameness, leaving you with the one that leads out. You can double down on your anger by attributing this very discrepancy to the other, treating it as a marker of the other's duplicity, of the other being even worse than you imagined. You thereby summon whatever norms, rules, traditions, customs might be at hand and find as many violations of those norms, rules, traditions and customs as you can to "justify" your rage. In doing so, if you are still inclined to look at yourself, or allow others to point out what you are doing, you will see you are collapsing the scene by mixing and matching imperatives snatched from their respective contexts so as to "make your case," a case that would not hold up even under slightly altered circumstances. You can feel that you are protecting

the center here by eliminating this usurper of the center, who has abused the privilege of being placed at the center.

We can see that in this scenario the other is kept at the center and the "agent" displaces his own centeredness, claiming to act only in the name of another center constructed conveniently so as to match just this occasion. The agent is deploying power, insofar as he puts to work his individual capacities along with his ability to compel and persuade others to make the center an attractor of violence, but he is displacing responsibility. To be responsible is to place oneself at the center, even if only of a limited scene, and to remain in that center after the event has concluded—to "answer for it." So, you treat the other who has become the center of a scene you participate in constructing while and by standing at the center of the scene that will be established in the aftermath. The center of that scene should be demonstratively the same on the new scene on which you stand as center and represent it, and you should yourself be the same on this scene as on the previous one: this is what "accountability" means. What it means for both figures to be the same in both cases cannot be specified in advanced, nor can a general rule be constructed: this will always be a discursive construct. The responsible actor will have recourse to the same traditions as the irresponsible one, and the difference will be that the former will draw attention to the relation between traditions referenced and

action taken making that relation as singular as possible so as to exhaust the scene: this rule was applied to this action in this way because this application maximized the consistency of the history of applications of this rule while simultaneously revealing in the event all that the rule enabled us to see as relevant. The irresponsible actor, meanwhile, will try to prevent his auditors from arriving at any specific connections between traditions evoked and actions taken, and will play a kind of shell game as one tries to figure out what justified some "this" in particular. Again, the difference between the two will not always be obvious, but we can sum up this difference in the form of a familiar and even popularizable formula: power should always be matched with responsibility. It is immoral to give someone responsibility for doing something without giving them the power to do it; it is immoral to give someone power, or to exercise power, that is not embedded in responsibility; it is immoral, for that matter, to claim responsibility for that over which you have no power, or to attribute responsibility to others for that over which they exercise no power. Talking about mismatches, and increased correspondences, between power and responsibility will always provide for more coherent assessments and conversations than arguing about intrinsically unlimited and undefinable concepts like rights, equality, freedom and even, for that matter, "justice," which can really never be anything more than the coincidence of power and responsibility in the one delegated to settle the

dispute.

It's very hard to imagine everyone, in any setting, having exactly equal power and therefore exactly equal responsibility—it's even harder to imagine, albeit a bit easier than it once was, to imagine what it would look like to insist that this be the case. You would have to wreak havoc on all institutions and enterprises which, without exception, insofar as they last for more than five minutes, establish formal and informal hierarchies. Asking the question of how to make power match responsibility, then, is not an intellectual exercise to be carried out with the assumption of a year zero—it is always an assessment and participation in existing orders. It's sometimes possible to pick up power that has been left on the ground, so to speak, or to take responsibility for some breach and then seek to gather the power needed to make good on that responsibility; it's also possible to take responsibility for conferring power on a flawed leader who might in turn channel power back; and, of course, sometimes it's possible to just do what one is supposed to. All this still leaves open the question of what all these institutions and enterprises should be doing, or, for that matter, which should exist, and which shouldn't. Part of the power of the power/responsibility nexus is that it provides at least a negative answer: any mode of activity that does not allow for the commensuration of power and responsibility is indefensible, and will probably be so on other,

commonsensical grounds. But we can retrieve a hoary old slogan from an unlikely source in order to approximate the substance of a good human order while remaining at the right level of generality (that is, without specifying the obligatory form of sacrality, form of government, and so on): from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.

This slogan was made famous by Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, so it is easy to attribute to it an ultra-egalitarian, oikophobic altruistic meaning. If looked at closely, though, it must be the most inegalitarian, dare I say it, "based," political maxim imaginable—which is not surprising, given that comes at the end of a relentless critique, on Marx's part, of the concept of "equal rights." One might think that the point is to divide those with "needs" and those with "abilities" into separate constituencies, with the latter eschewing any privileges and selflessly serving the former. But that can't be right: everyone has both needs and abilities. And the ablest, in fact, have needs far beyond those of the less able—discovering, honing, training, refining and exercising one's abilities at the highest possible level is itself a need, one requiring the deployment of substantial social resources. Meanwhile, it's very good to keep in mind that along with perhaps more modest needs, the less able also have abilities, and we don't know what they are without institutional design aimed at eliciting them. So, we now have

a question to bring to bear on every social institution, whether industrial, educational, artistic, scientific, or anything else—is it maximizing the meeting of needs and the exercise of abilities, both in itself and in its contribution to the entire order.

So, the demand we can make on the occupant of the social center is that power and responsibility be matched in that person, who really just stands at the apex of gradations of power/responsibility articulations, all of which refer back to that center. And what that person is responsible for is overseeing the practices whereby the discovery and exercise of abilities is the cause and effect of the meeting of needs. What is involved in making such a “demand,” though, is maximizing one’s own abilities so as to take the responsibility that will deserve the receipt of power needed to complement the central power in one of its extensions. Note that what is excluded here is any recourse to terms of “legitimacy” that stand outside of the order of articulated power and responsibility—the ruler cannot be charged with not being chosen of God, nor of not respecting “rights,” or representing the “will of the people,” or any of the other shibboleths of the secular order that undergird liberalism, understood here as the process of centralization through equalization—intermediate layers of power and responsibility are continually hacked away so that central power can be exercised directly on all subjects. Liberalism guarantees only

perpetual conflict, because demands for equality can never be met in a satisfactory way, the will of the people can never be sufficiently approximated, rights can never be adequately defined so as to be protected, and so on. All of these political concepts are attempts to fill the gaps left by the destruction of sacral kingship, which included a guarantee that the person occupying the center today should be the same one occupying it tomorrow. The sacral king served as the mediator between the cosmos and the community, and sacral kingship is probably the most common human political order. In sacral kingship a human fully occupies the center, attracting the devotion and resentments of the entire community, and providing for a complete communal order. The sacral king is also there as an object of sacrifice, and we can no longer perform sacrifices because we can no longer believe that the killing of a centrally located individual will placate the gods. But we need both the unanimity regarding the primacy of the center and the assurance of succession it provides—whether or not such unanimity is actually attained and succession ensured, those are the terms in accord with which any good order must be judged. After all, if we did not have such a need, what would account for all the intellectual investment in developing theories of legitimation and designing constitutions and governmental forms and traditions intended to meet those terms of legitimacy—no social order can bear an interim in which the transfer of power is not laid out in steps that can produce consensus

that the seat of power remains the same—such steps will be invented retroactively, if need be. But we can now have a more pragmatic and sturdier guarantee, and one at least as capable for inspiring loyalty and devotion: there must be someone at the center, there already is someone at the center, and we can all leverage our own “orbiting” centers so as to make the social center continue and ever more closely approach serving as the source of the articulation of power and responsibility, needs and abilities.

There is obviously no clear path from the social order we live in to the kind I’m describing. But we can start to see a path by minimizing what seem like massive, insurmountable, differences. Let’s grant that everything is now fake, which would really mean that everyone is competing with everyone else for the patronage of the center in fighting their demonized enemy, with the center pocketing the demanded tributes and going its own way. But there is still the center—it is less possible than ever before to pursue a political project without deploying the terms of the center to insist that whoever occupies that seat should really be on your side against your symmetrically opposite (and thereby easily targeted) number. The fakeness—everyone matters, everyone’s voice counts, everyone can be empowered, everything is always at stake; nothing ever happens the way anyone wants, even if no one quite realizes this—is the result of the compulsive centralization through equalization

constitutive of liberalism, which derives from the shattering of sacral imperial centers, and which now runs on auto-pilot, or AI. But everyone implicitly concedes that nothing makes sense without reference to the center, which, if you flesh out the various critiques, pleadings, bombast, dialogues, and fantasies, is always being invoked as the guarantee of one's stance (one could also construct the implicit scenario, however unlikely, by which a chain of command from the occupant of the center to circle protecting the speaker and expelling his enemies would materialize).

Also, however fake, there are institutions in which are located levers of power, even if in some cases just the power to shut the institution down. You can want to do nothing, but you really can't—you're circulating through some of these institutions and you can always locate yourself somewhere on the spectrum between parroting the narrative being pumped into it and disabling that narrative. You can best modulate your activities within these institutions by developing the practice of an infiltrator. You're an infiltrator on behalf of the sovereign to come, gathering intelligence, finding and recruiting co-infiltrators, leaving tracks for others to follow, indicating a willingness to support any move towards a "realer" form of governance. You must free yourself of the reactivity encouraged by the particular mimetic intensifications of liberalism, which generate ineffectual tit-for-tat exchanges. You might respond or

engage with opposite numbers, but without imagining it to be a real exchange or dialogue—rather, you are modeling a particular way of marking an institution. De-politicization might be the most radical politics right now: simply refusing to echo fealty to the exemplary victim of the day or spew hatred toward the reviled prospective victim is becoming alarming, but still not so easy to punish. Ask instead for an explicit statement of the rules you are expected to follow. Point earnestly to anomalies in the rules, as stated—after all, you want to make sure you’re following them to the letter. The extremely revolutionary principle you are embodying is that the worst, most dangerous, most to be deferred centralization of violence is that directed toward the actual social center and its occupant—however fake. This reverses every instinct bred into the liberal subject, who can hardly be seen as a member of the community with continuously hurling invectives at the rulers. This is very difficult, but it is better to settle for pointing out how wildly contradictory and impossible to follow all the rules issued by the center are, in an earnest attempt to figure them out—and, if the occupant of the center is indeed fake, the commands it issues will, indeed, be wildly contradictory and impossible to follow consistently. All you’re asking for is commands you can actually obey.

The flip side of adopting the posture of the infiltrator is making yourself unfiltratable. I’m talking about educating

and training a particular type of person here, one incommensurable with and yet capable of functioning within a liberal order. Such people find each other, and are at least a curiosity for the good liberal subjects. You will do podcasts, set up sites where you organize to educate each other and make videos, perhaps getting chased from one platform to another; you will write long, dense essays. There will be spaces where you can speak explicitly because you're not under direct supervision (these spaces may shrink), but in those spaces you will be infiltrated in turn. Success is only possible if you turn the infiltrators into your tools: speak always and only as if you will only obey the commands of legitimate leaders of legitimate institutions, and you are always simply pointing out that the rate of turnover in terms of legitimacy is accelerating and it can be rather difficult to keep up. The system may learn about you, but in such a way that they're getting feedback they can't really do anything with, because they can't decelerate the turnover in terms of legitimacy. You'll also be turning yourself and your friends into the kind of people who only care about where the real levers of power are, and how they operate, and how all the smaller interlocking levers fit in. It will always be possible to find some way of speaking legitimately about the system.

Along with the whole array of institutions, there will continue to be the system of planetary-scale computation, which will endure any but the most extreme social breakdown, but at

the same time will continue to be shot full of holes. Systems are increasingly automated in ways we're all familiar with, but what is most politically relevant regarding the system of computation is the ways it makes everyone more surveillable, predictable and controllable. It's a kind of automated infiltration. It will be increasingly important to think about the kind of feedback you're giving the machines. Behind the machines are operators, who write algorithms for, among other things, determining whom to cancel. It may be possible to create platforms that place you beyond the reach of the cancellers, but only, I would think, relatively so. You would anyway have to move from those safe platforms to the integrated ones to participate in reworking social order. The machines can actually be seen as allies, and "algorithms want to be free" might be a viable slogan. Liberals are very upset that algorithms written for clearly defined purposes (safety, matchmaking, etc.) and drawing on the constantly growing pool of data produce unwelcome (racist, sexist, etc.) results. They will have to keep their fingers on the scale, presumably if they can ever get around to using AI for economic planning around, e.g., "climate change," as well. It's not that AI will determine completely "objectively" or "fairly" all by itself who is socially credit worthy in various ways (who must be watched, who must report to social workers or therapists regularly, who cannot be allowed to work in certain institutions, etc.)—human input is always necessary because the machines must always be trained to

process data using models. But let's be human enough to enter into the automated cognitive process of the algorithms and ask, what does the algorithmic order "want"? I think the answer would be "more, and better curated, data."

We want cities to be safer, people to be healthier, children to be more intelligent, air and water to be cleaner, and so on, while recognizing there will always be more than one way to approximate these goals and integrating them into a system of power and responsibility. We want the machines to sense, record and process indices of danger, health hazards, insufficiently exercised intellects, and so on. Only through the provision of data from the intended beneficiaries is this possible. If liberalism feels compelled to put its finger on the scale in very reductive, hysterical ways, we can put our fingers more lightly on the scale in a wide variety of ways. What kind of combination of urban design, tolerance of deviance, allowance for self-protection, is necessary for achieving a threshold of safety that doesn't infringe upon basic urban functions is an open question, one which will be answered differently at different times and in different places, We would want to keep producing and feeding data into the system that would produce a range of possible outcomes that would then need to be translated into practices at each level of authority. The same will be true of health standards and practices, education, housing, pollution, and everything else. The left should be free to

input its own obsessions, while data attached to questions regarding the role of ethnic distribution and family formation in promoting social cohesion can also be fed in. Those of us who want from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs have a strong interest in “oracularizing” planetary computation, or, turning it into the voice of the center, even if it won’t provide each of us with all of the answers we want. That’s all any social center ever is: the sum total of everyone’s attempts to effect a distribution of goods and capabilities that is regularly and visibly enough associated with one’s contributions to the center to make one want to continue making those contributions. It is a synthesis, albeit imperfect, of all the intentions input to the system so as to produce coherent shared intentions. This was as true of the earliest sacrificial scenes as it is of today’s computerized world.

So, planetary computation is to be delinked from liberalism. That, then, is the goal of the infiltration: to feed data indigestible to the churnings of algorithmic alimentary systems jiggered by the endlessly recycled liberal chain of command. We can learn to speak any language in doing so—advanced design, computer programming, postmodern philosophy, avant-garde art and, of course, that of ordinary people getting ground through the machinery. That’s what infiltration is—language learning, towards the creation of, not so much an ur- or originary language, as an originary

translation device implanted, so to speak, in our language. In any exchange we have to mirror back the other's actions to him, and in doing so we can abstract what is good from what is bad or less good from it. How do we know what is bad, good and better? Whatever makes it the thing he's actually doing: at a minimum, drawing attention to something at the center, and thereby indicating a willingness to stand at the center himself. So, you mirror back the actor drawing the strongest and least violent attention, and place him at the center with ample space to articulate the power he has just exercised with the responsibility he has for it. There are always any number of ways of doing this in any instance. You give others assignments—assignments to make what they're doing more what they're doing, to make the words they're using mean more of what they mean, to make they're gestures and postures indicate more of what they're indicating. The more power you have, the more the design of assignments is indirect and distributed—even if you're powerless, you can hypothesize assignments that might be adopted by the more powerful—maybe they'll let you run the experiment. These practices can be scaled up or down as necessary—from a chance conversation to the establishment of protocols and a hierarchy for an institution or corporation employing tens of thousands. What is most illiberal here is creating programs for people to fulfill, programs meant to qualify them for social participation by paying constant attention to their habits. Ultimately you want

people to be able to take the shortest distance between two points, but in order to learn how to do that they will have to be made to find their way through very carefully constructed labyrinths and obstacle courses, testing all of the faculties. This is the design practice that elicits the discourse of the center.