The Anthropoetics of Power

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The Originary Hypothesis

We can think about the distinction between liberalism and absolutism in terms of the conflicting notions of equality and hierarchy; individualism and the primacy of the social; self-interest and virtue; nominalism and realism; materialism and faith; proceduralism and responsible decision. We can synthesize all these binaries into the single question of whether the low generates the high or the high originates and presides over the low. The orthodoxy of the modern order is that the low generates the high—desires, interests, bodily needs, inventions, give birth, through some complex process of interaction, to ideas, values, virtues and beliefs. The implication is always that ideas, values, virtues and beliefs are nothing more than epiphenomena that can be reduced to their underlying causes; even more, that reducing them to their underlying causes liberates humans from the pernicious illusions we have suffered under throughout our history as a species. The (liberal) political implication first drawn from this doctrine was that top-down political structures are to be avoided, and constitutional, economic and legal structures should be set up so as to allow desires, interests and needs to interact in reciprocally balancing ways. With the advance of the physical and human sciences, though, a new, more top-down (progressivist) conclusion was drawn, that greater knowledge of social, psychological and biological processes could allow for benevolent manipulations of human desires, needs and capacities. In that case, knowledge of needs, desires, bodily functions, and human cognition allows for the more effective meeting of needs and desires and the more efficient

functioning of body and mind. Politically, this means rule by technicians of the human animal.

The main resistance to this lowering of the human has come from religions which maintain the understanding of human beings as created in God's image. But, on the face of it, the order of the modern sciences seems to correspond with the doctrine of the lowering: after all, chemistry depends up physics, biology upon chemistry, and studies of animal (ethology) behavior relies upon biology, and study of humans presupposes that humans are an evolved species of animal. The problem with religious resistance is that the terms of our divine origin must be taken on faith in very specific doctrines which, for many, if not most, cannot withstand the scrutiny of the very modern sciences that have displaced them. The only non-religious thought capable of combatting materialist lowering on its own terms—that is, the terms of the very constitution of the human—is the generative anthropology of Eric Gans. Gans is the author of the "originary hypothesis" regarding the origin of language, which for Gans is coeval with the origin of the sacred and of language. Gans presupposes the anthropological model of Rene Girard, for whom the mimetic character of humans (and first of all the advanced hominids who were our immediate predecessors) means that deadly conflict is endemic to the human condition. If I imitate you, I learn to desire through you—I want what you want. Sooner or later I will want the very thing you possess, or reach for, right now, and from being my model you become my obstacle and therefore rival. For Girard, humanity emerged in a collective event in which the mimetic rivalry of the members of the group issued in a mimetic crisis, a collective violent melee, which is resolved by one of the members being singled out by the group and becoming the target of its collective violence. This scapegoat is both victim and god, the latter because he has "saved" the community, which resumes normal cooperative behavior once the crisis has been "resolved." Girard sees the entire

subsequent history of human ritual and reiterations of this original scapegoating event, until the logic of scapegoating is exposed and overturned in Jesus's self-sacrifice.

Gans's criticism of Girard's account is based on his observation that without language there is no way for the original event to become meaningful to the group. They have just killed one of their own—so what? Animal groups chase off and kill weaker members all the time. So, Gans's introduced the *sign* into the originary event—what he calls the "ostensive" sign, or, more colloquially, *pointing*. If all the members of the group point to the body of the slain member, thereby informing each other that the episode has been completed, the event can become iterable and therefore memorable and meaningful. But if the sign is what is really important, we no longer have to presuppose the scapegoating and "lynching" of the stigmatized member (an assumption that, as Gans as pointed out, does not correspond to anthropological and archaeological evidence that places the emergence of human sacrifice at a much later date). We just need a scene upon which some central object (Gans assumes a large animal, taken down in the hunt) attracts all the members of the group, with that attraction being mimetically intensified (each wants it more because he sees the others wanting it) so that the animal hierarchy (in which the alpha animal would eat first, then the beta, etc.) breaks down as all rush toward the central object. The terror this induces leads some member of the group to hesitate, and gesture toward the object, a gesture all repeat (Gans has termed this the "aborted gesture of appropriation"). This gesture is the first "sign," the origin of language, because it is the first non-instinctive form of communication that takes on its meaning merely by being sustained by the (now) social group. The central object is also the first sacred object, or God: it has saved the community by "making" them cease their self-conflagrating headlong rush to appropriate the object. The originary event is also the origin of resentment: the same

sacred Being that preserves the community restrains desire while endowing the object with a sacrality that enhances its desirability. The pecking order of the animal hierarchy is replaced by the human signifying order.

Gans's originary hypothesis is compatible with evolutionary theory while theorizing the creation of the human as a shared leap into a higher mode of being (biology does not determine language) that will now order the human estate. We could say that Gans's hypothesis "demystifies" religious doctrines but only while preserving their most fundamental anthropological and ethical insight—human beings are not another species of ape, modified by natural selection through a long series of genetic mutations. Most fundamentally, humans have been created by a sacred being who protects them from their "evil" (mimetic and violent) tendencies. The transcendent—the sign, whose being is invisible, intangible and eternal—is what defines us. Through a series of books written over the past 35 years (The *Origin of Language*, *The End of Culture*, *Science and Faith*, *Originary Thinking*, *Signs of Paradox*, *The Scenic Imagination* and *A New Way of Thinking*) and on his *Anthropoetics* webpage, Gans has explored the implications of the originary hypothesis for history, religion, politics, philosophy, aesthetics and economics. In this essay, I will focus on those elements of Gans's thinking that lend support to absolutist political thought, which I will in turn define and clarify.

Originary Thinking and Civilization

The earliest human groups were egalitarian hunting and gathering communities, organized around rituals devoted to some animal that was simultaneously food source, sacred object and ancestor. No wealth can be accumulated or political hierarchy established, as all social relations are organized by ritual and kinship relations enforcing traditional and roughly equal distribution of resources. The first significant transformation of human order attended to by Gans (primarily in *The End of Culture*, but he returns to

this in *Science and Faith*) is the emergence of the "Big Man" studied by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and others. The Big Man, through enterprise, discipline, and what Gans calls "producer's desire" accumulates goods and prestige that place him above the egalitarian community. The Big Man marks the beginning of wealth accumulation, individual liberty, and social hierarchy. Even more, the Big Man usurps the ritual center of the community, taking on a sacred status, ultimately becoming a kind of God King (this is really the origin of the scapegoating phenomenon studied by Girard). Gans distinguishes "producer's desire" from "consumer's satisfaction" to distinguish between competing dispositions within the egalitarian primitive community: on the one hand, to imagine the community as a whole, and take the initiative to attend to its ritual representation; on the other hand, to enforce the equal distribution of shares of the community's product. It is the producer's desire that is manifested in the Big Man, and the "consumer" both relies upon and resents the "producer."

The Big Man, and the more established sacred kings and God emperors who follow is the center of devotion and obedience in the community: he is the center of an asymmetrical gift relation opposing him on one side and the entire community on the other. The resentment that is generated and resolved by the sacred center is now directed towards the Big Man: on the one hand, every one, and especially rivals, envy him his place; on the other hand, and even more importantly, all members of the community insist that he enforce a "just" distribution of goods, with "just" being based on the model of the originary scene. This resentment feeds back into the system which refines itself by increasing the distance between the center and the margins, making rivalry increasingly irrelevant, and codifying distribution in ritual and bureaucratic hierarchy. We can see here the origins of the gigantic centralized imperial bureaucracies of the ancient world (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, etc.), and therefore the origins of civilization. The limits

of what we can see as the original form of sovereignty lie in the fact that the very qualities that allowed for the emergence of the Big Man must be forbidden to others. The resentments directed toward the Big Man are the very same resentments that created the Big Man, who "rebelled" against the "consumers" who both depended upon and restrained his "productivity." The resentments toward the Big Man, now God Emperor, can be contained only at the cost of preventing the activities and interactions that might generate such productive resentment in the first place. Only the emperor himself can be free.

Civilization can only start to develop once the tension between social hierarchies and what Gans calls the "moral model" of the originary scene becomes a topic of reflection. In the West this reflection takes place in very different ways amongst the ancient Greeks and the Ancient Israelites. For the Greeks, philosophy becomes a way of constructing an imaginary discursive scene in which participants are equal, as a way of subjecting real world inequalities to scrutiny. Inequalities and political power can be justified by the greater virtue of the wealthy and powerful, by the benefits to the community, or by the justice of the ruler, but the main point is that it needs to be justified. For the Israelites, meanwhile, all humans are the children of a single God, and in that way equal, regardless of real world inequities. The emperor god is replaced by the God who names Himself in Exodus as I AM THAT I AM, what Gans calls the name of God as the declarative sentence, that is, a God immune to imperative entreaties, who is therefore to be found in relations between members of the community. In other words, no one can invoke the name of God to bless some project in exchange for some kind of sacrifice: God subsists beyond all such entreaties, made by anyone whosoever, because he has gifted to humanity the incommensurable gift of all of creations—the only, necessarily inadequate, return to such a gift is complete devotion (the gift of oneself). Such an immeasurable gift implies

immeasurable love and goodness, so the way to devote oneself to God is by striving to imitate that love and goodness amongst one's fellows. Along with their invention of philosophy, the Greeks' creation of an independent sphere of art, and especially drama, allowed for the representation and transcendence ("catharsis") of resentment directed at dominant figures anchoring the community. What Gans calls the "narrative monotheism" of the Israelites, meanwhile, projected the resentment towards the emperor God onto a linear historical frame, in which the fall of empires represents the judgment of God—a moral judgment applied to the exile of God's chosen people themselves. In both cases a new increment of deferral and therefore freedom is created, as we can work towards a social order that puts knowledge of God and Truth at the center, rather than trying to coerce magical forces on our behalf.

For Gans, the completion of the monotheist narrative in the Christian revelation, which applies the moral model universally (love your enemies) and incorporates the Greek logos, creates a space of individual freedom and reciprocity that ultimately leads to the modern market society, of which Gans considers liberal democracy to be a part. Here is where I begin to draw different political implications from Gans's originary thinking. First of all, I introduce the concept of "civilization" into originary thinking, because that seems to me the best way to sustain the originary concept of deferral as the primary concept of social thought. Humans originated in deferral, and so every advance they make and everything they learn, I propose, must be acquired in the same way. A civilized order is one in which there is a positive feedback loop between discipline (deferral deliberately applied to self or other) and social benefits, whether in goods or prestige or authority; whether on the individual or social level. Civilization is the generalization of the experience of the Big Man, in which authority is generated by self-denial, generosity and concern for and action on the community as a whole—not

necessarily its complete generalization (any civilization will contain the less and uncivilized), but the steady inclusion of more social spaces. The generalization of the Big Man's experience is made possible by reintegrating the model of the originary scene into hierarchical orders as a non-ritual, and therefore moral and intellectual, standard for just rule.

It would certainly be consistent with my analysis so far to argue for democracy and/or liberalism as ways of instituting the model of the originary scene into hierarchical societies: such societies would channel resentment against any position of power outside of the accountability of the community, and would therefore require multiple centers of power and enforced rotation of power holders. That would be, though, to privilege the expression and "purging" of resentments over limiting them and making their expression beyond a certain low level and outside of controlled spaces unthinkable. Civilization involves a new form of hierarchy, one based on the "charisma" that, as Philip Rieff saw, comes from the discipline that allows its practitioner to see orders invisible to the less disciplined. The more disciplined, the less governed by resentments because the more capable of framing and thereby pre-empting resentments. The relation between the more and the less disciplined therefore entails the former framing and pre-empting the resentments of the latter. This means prompting the less disciplined to earn greater rights and freedoms, rather than giving sway to resentment regarding the rights and freedoms enjoyed by others. The growth of civilization, as Nobert Elias shows in *The Civilizing Process*, involves a centralization of power in which the monarch suppresses and defuses rivalries at lower levels (the violence of the honor system) and enforces the replacement of open resentment with a system of deference ("courtesy" and manners), that signifies hierarchies framed by the court. Now, any established order will tend to inertia and routinization, and therefore the one holding sovereign power will not invariably be the most disciplined, morally,

intellectually or physically. But our conception of civilization enables us draw upon the model of the originary scene as the organization of reciprocities based upon a shared (if unequally sustained) deferral so as to imagine such an order. The good subject acts as if the sovereign is the most disciplined, and orders his realm so as to promote and reward in accord with each one's discipline and deferences: this reconciles the tension between actual hierarchy and the originary moral model by iterating the discovery of deferral on the originary scene.

On a more empirical level, it cannot be denied that the "decentralizing" tendencies of the modern market have not eroded state power. Quite to the contrary, that power continues to grow so that we have, and have had for quite some time, states that are far more powerful, controlling and intrusive than the most absolutist monarch. From a absolutist perspective, the frenetic expansion of state power results from the lack of certainty regarding sovereign power and therefore property, with an endless cycle of new power centers promoting subversion and the central power seeking to resecure power by grabbing more of it. Even libertarian accounts of this modern development lend indirect support to the absolutist analysis. You either concede some role, however minimal, to the state, or you don't. If you do, then however you minimize that role (protecting property, protecting "negative rights," preserving social order) you concede to the state not only the power needed to play that role but to interpret it; if you institute checks upon the state (like selection of state officials through election) then you concede the power to those doing the checking to interpret that role. Presumably, then, all those checks have added themselves to the power structure, calling forth the need for new checks, and so on. If you concede no role to the state, as anarchists like Hans-Hermann Hoppe do, then you concede that the inequality of property will lead the biggest property owners to essentially govern (they will literally be deciding who can walk on the

streets, enter businesses, get educated, and so on), and the social order imagined by Hoppe is different from one an absolutist might imagine only in the confusion introduced by overlapping security systems and distributed ownership over thoroughfares needed for social existence. Most importantly for us here, from an originary standpoint, there is no reason to assume that the social center is ever unoccupied: it passes from the ritual center of the primitive community, to the succession of Big Men and then monarchs and then, finally, to the modern state, which undergoes more rapid staffing changes than the monarchies, but never leaves society without an agency and hence some individual that has the final say on what is permitted and what is forbidden.

Even more: all of our daily activities and thinking in a civilized social order take for granted the existence of a central power with whom final decision making power resides. Think of all the times and ways people say "we" "should" do this or that—we should take care of the poor; we should have a more civil discourse; we should address the lack of our integrity in our government; we should be more tolerant; we should regulate Wall Street more rigorously, etc. We can dismiss all these expressions as sloppy thinking, and analyze the meaning or lack therefore in the "we," the "should," and even the objects of the expressions ("civility," "integrity," "Wall Street," etc.) and it is indeed very good to do this—but none of that changes the fact that these lazy formulations all presuppose someone out there who is in principle capable of doing something we would call "regulating" to something we would all agree to call "Wall Street" in a way we would all consider "rigorous." The most effective and enlightening analysis of such phrases would be ones that showed how much social consensus would be necessary for these expressions to have any real meaning, and how tightly and hierarchically organized all social institutions would have to be to maintain such a consensus (to hold "referents" like "regulate" and "Wall

Street" in place, or, if necessary, replace them with other, clearer ones). All of these "shoulds" are essentially cries for absolute power, even if the myriad and incompatible "shoulds" means that such a power would not give anyone exactly what they want—and an acknowledgement and acceptance of that by the vast majority is precisely the level of disciplined maturity that would be necessary to institute that kind of power. Without the presupposition of an absolute central power to mediate and contain our resentments, we would be reduced to telling each other on an individual level what particular thing we want right now, a situation which is unimaginable.

Victimary Thinking and the Moral Model

The most important contribution Gans has made to contemporary political thought is, I would say, his analysis of "victimary thinking," which seemed a fairly marginal phenomenon when he started examining it in the mid-90s but has by now clearly metastasized into one of the major political issues of the day. Victimary thinking is, for Gans, a moral transformation in Western society resulting from the shock at the Nazi genocide of the Jews. All "ascriptive differences," that is, differences based on some presumably indelible marker of belonging to a certain group (most obviously, skin color), are now framed in terms of the Nazi-Jew binary. The rapid, almost frenzied, decolonization following World War II can be accounted for in these terms: once, say, British domination of India can no longer be seen in terms of the more civilized leading the less civilized, or even more invidiously but still less absolutely as an unjust domination of one nation by another, but as racial oppression akin to Nazism, then colonial rule becomes completely untenable. The same holds for the civil rights movement in the US, which one can see was fairly consistently framed in terms of racial oppression and justice derived from the Western recoil from Nazism. Once the victimary model is in place, no real limits can be set to it: the "oppression" of women, of homosexuals, of the "transgendered" can all be plugged in to produce a

public and political discourse in which to refuse to bake a cake for a gay wedding or to open women's bathrooms to any male who says he is really a woman is make oneself morally indistinguishable from Adolf Eichmann.

Now, the obvious "other" to victimary thinking is ordering based on merit. In that case, one's critique of victimary thinking would be from a modern, liberal, meritocratic basis. But the problem here is that victimary thinking insinuates itself into the complacent meritocratic discourse. It turns out that we can't take for granted that the GRE and grades in high school and college should determine who occupies which position in the social order. Standardized tests are biased and different students have differential access to education; even if standardized tests and grades do accurately measure merit they simply ratify pre-existing inequalities which therefore must be addressed through more fundamental transformations: if whites do better than blacks on such tests, for example, it really just means that whites have, unjustly, more money, live in better neighborhoods and go to better schools than blacks, and therefore all of that needs to be reconfigured before we can rely on tests and grades. Liberal meritocratic thinking has not been very effective at putting up resistance to all this, doing little more than acting scandalized at the whole phenomenon. The most immediate intellectual reason for this is that meritocratic thinking fantasizes differences to exist along individual lines and is completely ill-equipped to cope with the recognition that differences emerge along group lines. For the meritocratic liberal to consider that, say, more blacks might be in jail because blacks have, on average, less self-control or, for that matter, that secularized Jews might trend overwhelmingly leftist because they see themselves in an antagonistic relation to predominantly white, Christian societies, is simply unthinkable. But that means that the meritocratic liberal is always already victimary, and merely resents being replaced by a more consistent and militant member of the troupe.

Indeed, once we see victimary thinking as constitutive of liberal thought from the very beginning, the "victimary" itself becomes a much more powerful concept. The original "ascriptive differences" were not racial but the orders, ranks and obligations that constituted the feudal hierarchy and were incorporated into (and subverted by) the growth of the monarchy. Liberalism's agenda from the beginning has been to undermine and de-legitimate such hierarchical orders, with "merit" and "consent" its primary means of doing so. Any institutionalized hierarchy will be imperfectly aligned with at least some judgments of merit, and can be attacked on that basis. "Consent" is an equally thin reed upon which to base a social order, as the rapidly spreading notion of "affirmative consent" in sexual matters (not the sexual act as a whole, but each interaction within that act must be explicitly consented to if rape charges are to be avoided) rather parodically reveals. "Consent" can also always be attacked as insufficiently consensual—unequal starting points means it was really force rather than consent, the signs indicating consent were not clear enough, conditions unknown to the consenting partners invalidate the consent after the fact, etc. Such ambiguities can perhaps be handled within a traditional common law legal order, but cannot be the basis of such an order. The maintenance of a traditional system of reciprocal obligations based upon differential contributions to the creation and maintenance of social order and flourishing is clearly at least as effective a basis of social order as "consent."

To return to Gans's account of the originary scene: Gans understands the "moral model" (the reciprocity of all participants on the scene) in a way that is closer to liberalism's notion of free and independent individuals than I think is warranted. The first act following the emission of the sign on the originary scene is the consumption of the central object. Rather than consumption following the order of the animal group, with the alpha first taking his share, then the beta, and so one, all members of the new human group participate

in consumption. This is the first "moral" act. Now, Gans is of course well aware that the division of the object is not equal in terms of size of portions —no one on the scene has a yardstick or scale, and differences in size, strength and speed will affect the amount consumed by each. Still, distribution is equal enough so that no one is excluded from the scene, and, more precisely, equal enough so that the mimetic rivalry that culminated in the event is not restarted. So far, so good—even the most hierarchical social order can be considered "equal" in this very restricted sense. The originary equality of participants in the exchange of signs is translated into access to social goods. Let's take a look at a couple of passages from an important essay of Gans's (http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0101/gans.htm):

> *What we call our "sense of justice" is first experienced through the scandal of injustice. We need no reflection to feel resentment when we see ourselves refused a privilege granted to another. The model we apply to such situations is that of the symmetrical exchange of signs in the originary scene of language. The originary crisis is averted by the enunciation of the sign as name-of-God by the entire human community. At this moment there is no hierarchy, no alpha individual; the exceptional being that resolves the crisis is God, not man. Resentment is our scandalized reaction to the existence of situations where this symmetrical configuration is not maintained. Unequal treatment of anyone constitutes a disequilibrium that is scandalous because it seems to threaten the community with return to originary chaos. I am not merely upset at my own ill-treatment; I am in terror of the potential disintegration of the entire social order.*
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> *Our resentful reaction to inequality reveals our belief in the moral model– an ostensive belief like the foxhole belief in God. Resentment points to the act of injustice, makes it known. God remains the implicit audience of our resentment as he was of our plea for help, but now we expect the*

> *rest of the human community to share our reaction. Where the foxhole renews the terror of the originary crisis that compels the use of the linguistic sign, the scene of resentment reproduces the moment in which language has already brought peace by deferring appropriation of the central object. In the first case, there is no preexisting model of resolution; we put ourselves in the hands of God. In the second, the community is expected to close ranks against a threat to an already established stability.*
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> *The equalitarian moral model is the minimal basis of ethics, just as ostensive belief in God is the minimal basis of religion. The traditional claim that this model, like the idea of God, is implicit in humanity itself is sharpened by its identification as that of the originary exchange of signs.*

The symmetrical exchange of signs is the model we apply in resenting privileges granted to another. This begs the question of what will count as a "privilege." On the originary scene God resolves the crisis, and no hierarchical order or empowered individual. But when we ask God to judge, and the rest of the community to "share our reaction" (presumably because we are all united in asking God to judge) in the case of the injustice we have suffered (the resentment we feel) it is a human order with at least some hierarchy (some members must be more respected, their opinions given more weight, than others) that is itself a result of a closing of ranks against some threat. If injustice is disorder and justice a reordering, then there is a presumption in favor of the existing order, including whatever hierarchies it has installed. What will count as "privilege," then will be usurpation of a power not licensed by that order—that will be the source of the resentment. Here, it seems to me that Gans is interpreting "privilege" in terms of a liberal notion of equality—"privilege" is anything that someone else has that I don't that is not justified in terms of us equally being mere users of signs. But in abstracting the leap into language—sign use "in itself"—through the

hypothesis of the originary scene we are not thereby projecting that abstract sign use in itself upon the participants of the scene. There is an order and hierarchy even on the originary scene that later abstractions or remembrances of the originary scene (in Judaism, Christianty, liberalism and even the originary hypothesis) in different ways and to different extents erase. It is likely that that order is some articulation of the carrying over of animal hierarchies (the previously alpha animal may still get the biggest share) and new abilities (like suggesting a "fair" division), differentially distributed, created by the invention/discovery of the sign itself. We can't really know, and so the most minimal discussion of the scene will exclude such "asymmetrical" elements. In applying the model of the originary event to political thought, where we have to be able to answer the question of what counts as a justified resentment, though, we must make a minimal presupposition of such asymmetries. To be a sign user, then, is to support and seek to enhance an existing order, to further embed the reciprocities it imposes in our shared practices and, certainly, to point out derelictions in assigned duties. Resentments in this case serve as a kind of data, the meaning of which is to be determined further up the chain of command. If, on the contrary, we see the exchange of signs as a model that is by definition more symmetrical and therefore more moral than any existing order, we will see resentment as presumptively legitimate, as having a kind of epistemological validity in identifying flaws in the social order. It is the social order, then, that becomes accountable to resentments—and, in fact, the most effective, i.e., virulent, subversive, treasonously supported resentments—which it is obliged to appease. Social order as deployed against itself to remedy its always receding failures in reciprocity—that is liberalism, and it is displayed most explicitly and consistently in victimary thinking. Absolutist thought, meanwhile, is not indifferent to merit or differences in ability but simply focuses on preserving the institutional and social hierarchies and orders needed to recognize it.

An absolutist reading of the originary hypothesis, then, emphasizes the predominance and continuity of the center—from initial ritual center to, ultimately the center to which intelligent loyalty is directed—as a cynosure of desire that inspires new deferrals. Deferral and discipline are concepts applicable not just to personal behavior—adhering to norms of politeness and sitting still for several hours to work on a task are certainly instances of discipline, but so are activities like suspending one's existing assumptions in embarking on a new inquiry or noting rather than expressing one's spontaneous responses to some provocation. Any distance we place between ourselves and some object of desire requires discipline, the rewards of which (such as comradeship, a broader range of interests and/and various registers of attention) cannot always be known in advance. In fact, the most obvious examples of discipline—like studying nightly and forgoing youthful pleasures so as to gain an advanced degree—while impressive, are not necessarily the most spectacular. The control of resentment is really the highest disciplinary accomplishment, and the most important for absolutist political theory. Resentment is controlled by accepting the impermeability of the center to which resentments are addressed—in learning that "the world" doesn't care if you have been offended by this one, cheated by that, and disregarded by another, and also doesn't care about your rage at "the world" for not caring, one is really learning that the establishment of social regularity and the suppression of disorder must attend to higher levels of interactions than those at which the resenter is situated. The more you control your resentments the more you learn about those higher levels of interaction and their ramifications throughout the social order; and, the more you learn about those higher levels the better able you are to control your resentments and submit them to whatever adjudication is available. In the process, the closer you come to wanting what the sovereign wants. All the social hierarchies treated with such contempt by the ideologues of "merit" and "consent" exist so as

preserve and institutionalize these successive increments of discipline, and therefore to serve as a model for emulating them.

The Will of the Sovereign

The center, from the originary scene on, has intentionality—that is what makes it possible to deify the central object. The originary human group is grateful to the center for arresting their catastrophic rush to the object, which is to say, for giving them peace. The center always gives peace by instructing us in the arts of deferral, which we learn exchanging signs with our fellow humans regarding our intentions toward shared objects. At the same time, all resent the center, for blocking access to the object (even as it inflames our desire for it). The intentions of the center become more complex the more complex social order becomes, which is to say the broader the array of desires and resentments that require deferral. The first act after the object on the originary scene is consumed is the establishment of ritual, the re-enactment of the originary scene—ritual facilitates future access to the central object—clearly, we couldn't count on the spontaneous rediscovery of the originary sign every time conflict flares up. The form of ritual is dictated by the center, which is to say the intentions of the center are embedded in a community's rituals. But they are not made explicit by rituals which, by definition, embody tacit knowledge. Understanding what the center wants involves, then, a reading of rituals or, more precisely, the attribution of intentions to the figures populating the ritual.

We need to understand more explicitly what the center wants because the totality of human practices always exceeds the knowledge embodied in ritual, in part because ritual enables the community to develop new practices. Those broader fields of practice also make it possible to interpret the will of the center, because those fields are where those intentions that can be attributed to the figures on the ritual scene are drawn from. For Gans,

this is the origin of myth. As the intentions attributed to the figures on the ritual scene are enriched, the intentions the members of the community are correspondingly enriched as well—we all humanize or, better, anthropomorphize each other. We could say that the meaning and purpose of human history is to continue delving into the intentions of the center. Now, as I said earlier, with the advent of the Big Man, a human figure comes to occupy the center—it is therefore that human figure with whose intentions we are concerned. As I suggested earlier in my discussion of monotheism and metaphysics, we make sense of the actions of the central figure—the sovereign—against the background of the models of the originary scene, or the moral model insofar as we take that central figure to be fulfilling the intentions of the center, as understood through those more abstract and mature models of the originary configuration. Insofar as we want the actions of the sovereign to be seamlessly interwoven with the model of the scene, we want central power to be secure, monolithic, visible, explicit in its intentions and effective in implementing those intentions (and nothing other than those intentions).

We could say, then, that, just as all discourse in primitive society is ultimately concerned with identifying the will of the center through the narrativizing of the ritual scene, all discourse in civilized society is concerned, directly or indirectly, with trying to "map" the will of the sovereign onto the originary moral model by studying his actions. Think about how much political discourse aims at telling us who "really" runs things—some, of course, believe straightforwardly that it is in fact our elected officials who are in charge, but many more point to big corporations, international finance, the deep state, the media, the Jews, etc. First of all, in other words, you need to identify who the sovereign actually is—until you do, nothing that happens in the world can really make any sense. Think about more everyday, apparently apolitical conversations and thoughts—our neighbor is a good guy, who

helped me clean out my garage, my spouse is lazy and letting him/herself go, my boss is alright but loses his temper too often, my kid's not working up to his potential in school, I can't wait until the next episode of that TV show, etc. All of these passing thoughts and evaluations have standards built into them (being lazy is bad, and we know what it means to say someone is lazy), standards we assume are shared and, even more distantly, assume are preserved and defended—any of us would be scandalized to wake up one morning and discover that being lazy has suddenly been declared the path to success. We can only have these thoughts, we can only use these words, to the extent that we take for granted that the institutions and orders that provide us with examples of good and bad bosses, good and bad TV shows, over and underperforming children, etc., are intact. When we talk about these judgments, we are also indirectly "reading" the center, or the 'instructions" coming from the center, which we would prefer to be clear and consistent (and which we resent for being otherwise). Even those who oppose one or another of these norms would prefer whatever their replacement standard would be to be decidable.

All differences in any conversation whatsoever are, then, differences regarding our understanding of the will of the center, or the sovereign. If you can't find two people who agree about who is "really" running things, that's a sure sign that the will of the center is divided—we have, you might say, sovereign turnover: maybe some days it is the media that makes the final decision on something important, on other days the bankers and sometimes even the President. The same would be true if we started to violently disagree about, say, the value of children applying themselves in school—if enough people start thinking maybe it's just as well if their kids join a gang, we have indications of sovereign turnover—no one's really sure who's deciding things now, or who will be tomorrow. The more secure central power is, the less our conversations would be about who really has power, or

the differences between what those in power do and what they say, or which source of power to align ourselves with, and the more about how to implement the instructions of the center, how to gather information that would be recirculated back through the center, how to map the will of the center onto the moral model and how to raise the level of discipline of each and all so as to open new moral and intellectual vistas to be incorporated into the center.

The basic assumption of absolutist thought is that sovereignty is absolute and sovereignty is conserved. This means that everything done within a social order is the responsibility of the sovereign. It's impossible to imagine any economic, cultural or individual activity that is not framed by the will of sovereign. The equivalent and anthropological support for these assumptions in originary thinking is that the center is never absent. Everything we do or think is in deference to the center, including our deferences to one another. The purpose of social life, then is to contribute to the intelligence of the center and derive from it further iterations of the moral model of the originary scene. This means donating our resentments to the center, setting aside our resentments toward the perceived failure of the center to settle accounts in our favor, and resenting on its behalf. The sovereign's "job," meanwhile, is to hold his sovereign power, and to do so by converging power and accountability—everything the sovereign promises to do, he does—he doesn't promise what he fails to do, and he doesn't do what he hasn't promised. All instances of power throughout the social order are delegations from the sovereign—also performing no more and no less than the delegation calls for. All subjects share with the sovereign the concern for keeping power secure, since all will suffer from struggles over the center. Struggles over the center, in fact, are no different than struggles over property. It would be better for you and your neighbor to know for sure whose house is whose, even for the one who gets the worse house, than for

nobody to know which belongs to whom. And this would be the case whether that uncertainty resulted from one conqueror after another passing through the land, or from an endless legal appeal process, or from an open-ended and completely free democratic process of discussion and voting by other members of the community. If the absolutist sovereign falls, not knowing whose is whose will follow on a systematic scale; without a secure form of power, that is what we have, to an ever greater extent, now. Converting our resentments of the center (which are resentments caused by and of the unsecurity of the center) into donations of resentment on behalf of the center (informing the will of the center with our deferrals to its will) lays the groundwork for restoration.

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