

Book Review: Nemesis: The Jovenelian vs. the Liberal Model of Human Orders, by C.A. Bond

Adam Katz

177 pages

Ebook \$9.95

Print: \$15.95

The way people speak about their relation and attitude toward the liberal democratic social orders most of us live under tends to be, upon reflection, odd. It seems simple enough to say something like, “I am loyal to King ___”; or “I am a faithful servant of the king”; even if we have a suitably modern, that is, resentful, disdain for such formulations, the relation between the one expressing and the one receiving that expression of fealty is clear. But it’s strange to say “I have faith in,” or “believe in,” liberal democracy. It’s even worse if we get more institutionally precise: do I “believe” in the Constitution, or the “balance of power” between executive, legislative and judicial branches? “Belief” and “faith” imply some suspension of rational, critical judgment—but isn’t that what the Enlightenment-informed liberal democracies would have us refuse to do? In the U.S., we even speak of “faith” in the “individual,”—which means what, exactly? Faith in the individual’s capacity and the likelihood of him/her/xir exercising that capacity to do what? All, individuals, all the time?

Shouldn’t citizens of liberal democratic orders think along the following or similar lines? As adherents of the scientific method, which provides us with the only way of knowing anything about reality and acting intelligently upon it, we assume any particular social order is essentially experimental, with its effects to be regularly assessed according to scientifically constructed criteria of social and human flourishing. So far, the hypothesis that establishing institutions predicated upon the assumption that social order must be erected upon, and serve to preserve and measure, the consent of each individual to that social order, remains unfalsified. In the meantime, we not only remain open to, but actively solicit and assimilate evidence challenging this hypothesis: indeed, a central purpose of the secular social sciences that have developed alongside of liberal democracy should be to test and organize that evidence in order to continually determine whether the anomalies (relative to our ongoing reconstructions of liberal democratic political theory) they might point to can be reconciled within the existing paradigm or make it incumbent upon us to develop new, more inclusive ones.

Needless to say, the “belief” in “consent” is one of many articles of faith of liberal democracy, rather than a hypothetical proposition to be empirically tested. But this belief is itself an anomaly in political theory, now systematically, if involuntarily, parodied by the ever shrinking micro-aggressions and lowered thresholds for “sexual assault” so central to contemporary political discourse. If one could violate the other without knowing it by, for example, reproducing markers of past violence of which the victim herself need not be aware (a third party could point it out), then “consent” is alluded to (the notion of “violation” is unintelligible without it) without the possibility of reconstructing any intentionality informing it. This suggests that the “consent” upon which the entire order hangs cannot be seen with the naked eye. I’ve already started to violate the first rule of liberal democracy, which is to not look too closely at how the concepts central to liberal democracy work, or are produced. But those of us interested in helping GA become a powerful, comprehensive mode of social thought would do well to join others in disregarding this rule, because of the flimsiness of liberal democratic thought itself, the vagueness of liberal democracy’s institutional claims and justifications and, above all, the emergence of serious critics of liberal democracy in the midst of what those critics (and how many others?) see as a crisis of this social order—a crisis best embodied in the now seemingly unassailable belief that “belief” in (“consent to”) one’s gender must be “re-affirmed” at every moment.

A particularly important critic, C.A. Bond, who blogged for several years at *Reactionary Future*, has come out with a new book, *Nemesis: The Jovenelian vs. the Liberal Model of Human Orders*, which synthesizes and further develops the work done on that blog. To situate Bond’s book within concerns critical to GA, I will begin by looking at the moment in his book where he explicitly refers to the originary hypothesis:

What would an anthropology in accordance with the Jovenelian model look like? Possible alternatives include the mimetic anthropology of René Girard and the linguistic developments made by Eric Gans, which we can briefly review.

In the anthropology inaugurated by René Girard, the sacrificial order of society, which Jovenel himself recognised as key to early human societal formation in the form of magical Power, is not the creation of human individuals and separate from them, but an integral part of them. In the work of Girard, the move from a pre-human society of mimetic beings to a (still fundamentally mimetic) human society was the result of a mimetic crisis. Girard’s theory is based upon the observation that humans are, therefore, inescapably mimetic. The nature of desire is such that it is not, as assumed by modern liberal anthropology, inherent to the individual and sovereign—the individual does not face society with his own desires to then be satisfied within a marketplace, but learns these desires from others. For Girard, this mimetic desire is a source of conflict and tension within societies, and it is mitigated through the act of focusing the cumulative mimetic desires of a society on a single individual who

becomes a scapegoat. In the act of killing this scapegoat, the individuals become aware of both the violence towards the scapegoat blamed for this collective animosity and the dissipation of this animosity. The sacrificial scapegoat becomes at once the cause of all the society's ills, and also its salvation from these ills. The scapegoat then becomes a sacred object.

In the work of Eric Gans, this model is presented as an explanation for the origin of language, where the creation of the first sign, and therefore the beginning of language, results from an abortive ostensive gesture in the process of mimetic descent on (most likely) an animal which has been killed. This abortive sign is hypothesised to be a representation of the object at the centre of the group's collective mimetic desire. In both intensely mimetically desiring the object, yet also being aware of the violence that will ensue if members of the group all descend on the object, the sign takes on a sacred nature. It is in the wake of the collective attention created by this event that language is first generated from an ostensive syntactical form which has subsequently evolved into a number of further forms, these being the imperative and then the declarative. Thus, in this scheme, language is a product of mimetic desire, is generative, and as in Girard's account, presupposes an anthropological model implying that humanity has resulted from a process of shared attention around a centre external to any of the individuals. The human individual of modernity makes no sense within such a system, since everything from language to thought (which always occurs within a language) is premised on a mimetic relationship that is incomplete without reference to this shared external centre.

The reader may raise issues with hypothetically entertaining such anthropological accounts, but before dismissing them we must acknowledge that these accounts present far fuller explanations of human orders, and that they provide grounds for a deeper understanding than that of the modern anthropology of atomistic individuals possessing a radical subjectivity. We can go even further and claim that this modern anthropology is not only incompatible with the Jouvenelian model, but that its development is, in actuality, explainable by the model as a side effect of the Jouvenelian conflicts which have occurred within the Western world. To this end, we shall first review the development of theories of political legitimacy and sovereignty in light of the Jouvenelian model in order to provide a context within which the individual of the modern model can be fully understood. (25-7)

The "Jouvenelian model" Bond is referring to, and which his book is opposing to the liberal model, starts from the assumption that "there is in every society a centre of control" (24). What Bond aims to show in his book is that political reality is generated by the struggle of final power centers against intermediate power centers which interfere with the governing imperatives as determined by the final center. Familiar examples would be a medieval king contending with the nobility as he attempts to levy taxes to prosecute a war or some other

project; or mid-20th century attempts on the part of America's federal government to assimilate the recalcitrant Southern states into a fully modern, liberal order. Bond is using mimetic theory to challenge liberal individualism: for liberalism, the individual precedes society, which means that society must be explained as separate individuals joining together voluntarily. Bond, in the passage quoted here, is pointing out that, while the history of power that Bertrand de Jouvenel advanced, in particular in his *On Power*, according to which the power center (the monarch and then the state in modernity) increases its power relative to the "middle" by mobilizing the lower members of society against that middle, presupposes a non-individualist anthropology, Jouvenel himself continues to rely upon an individualist anthropology. Bond, in refining and strengthening the model he adopts from Jouvenel, finds it necessary to follow Jouvenel back to his own account of ("magical") social origins and challenge that (still residually liberal) account with a more powerful one. That more powerful account is the originary hypothesis, which enables us to see how we could never think of human orders apart from some center. I would take this reference as an invitation to thinkers within GA to take on the task of questioning liberalism and theorizing outside of its terms.

Nemesis is a relentless demolition of liberal concepts. This demolition is carried out by demonstrating, in a thoroughly documented manner, that all the concepts of liberalism—"equality," "sovereignty," the "individual," "human rights," and so on—are produced, not by moral advances, theoretical or philosophical inquiries, or "bottom-up" revolts of the oppressed, but, rather, by powerful actors within or close to the heights of state power levying powerless groups against institutions such as the Church, the aristocracy, the paternal authority of the family and, more recently, institutions maintaining law and order, education, business, dependent states, and more. Bond traces this process back to medieval Christendom, in struggles within the Church and between the Church and the early European monarchs, through transformative events like the Reformation and the French Revolution, and up to contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter. It's probably best to focus here on the concept of the "individual," which Bond focuses on in Chapter 4, as the origin of perceptions, thoughts and experiences. The "individual," as Bond shows, is an especially strange concept. The entire problem of modern political theory is an essentially false one: how do separate individuals, with their own self-generated and self-legitimizing desires and interests, gather together into a social and political order? The obvious observation that there could never have been a time when people were not parts of a social order seems to be disregarded. The "individual" had to be "chipped off" of the social order in which any individual is integrally embedded so as to stand alone, and Bond shows the process through which this occurred, first of all in the Protestant theology of "Sola Scriptura," then in the epistemology and political thought of early modern thinkers like Descartes and Hobbes, and, finally, as the bearer of ever more complicated and rapidly changing "rights" in the postmodern West. Bond charts the way in which each step in this development involved one power center invoking a more discrete individual in order to break down some intermediary institution that interfered with the process of centralization

desired by that power center. Even so-called “identity politics,” supposedly focused more on groups than individuals, is, Bond points out, organized through rights granted to individual members of those groups and deployed against the authority of intermediary institutions.

We can see that the more the individual comes to be seen as separate from any social ties, and stands alone as a psychological, moral and legal subject, the more comprehensively regulated the individual is by the state. So, for example, same-sex marriage is presented as a new frontier in individual liberties and equality (liberal notions of freedom, equality and rights all depend upon liberal anthropology), while providing for more unrestrained interventions on the part of government into the ways businesses are run, the way parents can raise their children, the way adoption services can determine suitable candidates, and the ways schools can discipline and educate the children they are responsible for. It’s hard to see how one could dispute this, or that this is the case with the other rights revolutions, especially those concerning sex and race. Bond lays out a carefully documented account of why this is the case, and why these concepts and these political developments make far more sense according to the Jouvencian model, as opposed to self-celebrating Whig histories. Once you have seen Bond’s account, say, of the way in which various state and supposedly private but actually “para-state” actors (like corporately established foundations) orchestrated the civil rights movement for what were really geo-political purposes (taking away a Soviet “talking point” in the Cold War competition for the allegiance of the newly decolonized states), you cannot “unsee” it. One awaits the Jouvencian dissection of other sacred concepts of liberalism, in particular the “market” (which Bond briefly touches upon in his chapter on the corporation, and tangentially in his discussion of the use of money in ancient Greek democracy), and one suspects that very little of what liberal citizens and the vast majority of liberal intellectuals take for granted will be left intact.

If Bond’s book can induce thinkers within GA to rethink liberal concepts, the main question to be faced will be, how do we understand the concept of the Center? We assume the center of the originary scene; that this scene of ritual and distribution is eventually “usurped” by the Big Man; that the occupation of the center by a human figure continues through the ages of kingship and the gigantic ancient empires, with very few and not very successful exceptions (and perhaps only apparent exceptions) up until the emergence of modern liberalism and democracy. So, at this point, is there a social center, occupied or unoccupied? At certain points in his thinking, Eric Gans has proposed a post-Christian, which is to say post-sacrificial, omnicentric market order that would eschew any single center, perhaps most explicitly in the penultimate paragraph of *Originary Thinking*: “[t]he historical movement of desecralization operates neither through the endless deconstruction of the originary center nor through its definitive rejection, but through its omnicentric multiplication. Even ‘decentralization’ is a dangerous term; what is required is rather the universal proliferation of centers—every human being a center” (219). It is not clear to me how much this should be taken to be prospective rather than descriptive. After all, every

country on earth has a president, prime minister or king (indeed, absent such figures, there could be no “international relations”); every country has a political capital, while most have other, economic and/or cultural capitals. Is it possible to speak of an individual as his/her/xir own center without that individual being amply provided with the armor of protective rights? And is it possible to think about rights without thinking about a highly centralized state enforcing those rights? In an omniscient order (in what sense would it be an *order*?), would Hamden, Connecticut, have to be as central as Washington, D.C. and New York? If omniscientism is to accommodate asymmetries between centers, how would that be different than saying that there is a social or final center, with other centers dependent upon that one? If, in fact, there is always a center, and it is always occupied by a human, however often that human is replaced or how much resentment is encouraged towards him/her/xir, then we would have to speak of the mimetic field of desires and resentments in the contemporary world very differently than we do now.

Bond’s book is mainly ground clearing, which is very important because there is a lot of ground to clear—it might better be called Augean stables cleaning. He provides a power analysis of the most cherished concepts of liberalism—precisely those concepts which operate effectively and serve power because they seem to be power-free. Once “individual,” “rights,” “equality,” “liberty” and the rest lose their self-evidence, many other concepts upon which the legitimation of institutions depend will be fatally compromised. We may be able to imagine a social order in which, when people hear the word “individual” made central to an argument they immediately think of what power play is being set in motion while nothing else really changes. That is, we can imagine a book like Bond’s merely ramping up the widely shared cynicism to 11: “you speak of rights because you want me to...” Bonds refers to Alasdair MacIntyre’s critique, in particular in *After Virtue*, of liberal morality and liberal social sciences—in its way as destructive to liberal ontology as Bond’s Jouvencian analysis—and MacIntyre’s reconstruction of a morality that would presuppose the embeddedness of the individual in a web of social obligations, but a Jouvencian approach would need a more sustained engagement with MacIntyre than we see here.

Bond’s concluding discussion of future prospects for beneficial change within the existing global liberal (dis)order is appropriately tentative—Bond is well aware that he’s initiating a discussion, not concluding one. Still, these concluding reflections are interesting—Bond points to the need and the possibility, given contemporary technology, of developing spaces for social thought outside of the liberal dome to take place. He also suggests, rather provocatively given the anti-globalizing and re-localizing tendencies of much of dissident (such as alt-right) right-wing thought, that, since liberal theoretical projects of decentralization have been the most effective means of centralization, perhaps the deeply resented processes of centralization, often called “globalism,” will have to be more positively engaged:

[p]aradoxically, it would seem that a clear recognition and acceptance of this centrality

could prove to be the more effective means by which this centralisation can be negotiated. The act of formalising the relationships currently in existence would logically lead to a reduction in the need for centralised power centres to engage in the Jouvénelian mechanism to shape a given order. With a clear recognition of the validity of this central power altering orders as necessary, the warping effect of power in all areas of existence would be better accounted for, and a more coherent and possibly non-coercive order could be instituted. (162)

A formalist politics, which, rather than protesting against existing power relations by evoking some pre-political liberal notion of freedom or equality, simply acknowledges existing power relations and makes them formal, official, and therefore accountable, is indeed the logical conclusion of Bond's Jouvénelian model.

But while an acceptance of the necessity of power and hierarchy could be expected to have a pacifying effect and to make the social order more reasonable, the need to think through questions of obligations and reciprocities would not only remain, but would pose itself in new ways. Here is where an open field for developing originary moral and ethical thought lies. Morality would have to be thought of in "vertical" rather than "horizontal" terms—that is, there is no reciprocity that is not mediated by a center. Mimetic rivalry always concerns some object, however distant, abstract, or illusory it might be, and that object is always framed by some authorized way of seeking to appropriate it. If we think about resentment less in terms of sheer inequality (which doesn't make much sense because there's clearly no correspondence between "degrees" of inequality and "intensity" of resentment) and more in terms of the resented other's violation of the authorized way of appropriating the desired object, then resentment always directly references some failure (perceived or real) of authority. That is, resentment is always directed towards some disregard of the center. The reconstruction of moral thought around the notion of "reciprocity," then, would repudiate accusations of the other as desiring centrality in favor of insisting that the other fulfill the responsibilities implicit in the centrality claimed. The moral model, then, is not realized person to person, but by reference to our shared acceptance of the center upon which we model our actions.

I hope everyone interested in GA will read *Nemesis*. At the very least, it will give us something new to talk about, and hopefully provide a touchstone for testing the uses and effects of liberal concepts within GA. The prevailing narrative within GA, that draws a line from the retrieval of the originary intuition of equality-on-the-scene by the Christian revelation to modern liberal democracy and market society^[1], needs to be challenged. Perhaps it will withstand the challenge and emerge stronger. After all, no version of GA accepts the liberal ontology which presupposes a pre-social individual—GA tends to see liberal individualism in more Hegelian terms, as the result of an evolution whereby individuals are formed and enriched as post-sacrificial moral centers. What, exactly, sustains them as moral centers, though? How much does this conception of the individual

continue to rely upon liberally derived notions of rights and equality? At any rate, taking up arguments like those advanced in *Nemesis* will be unavoidable if GA is to have anything to say to emerging political alignments in a world in which World War 2 and the Cold War are really over and questions of authority and political identity come to be scrutinized in increasingly unfamiliar and radical ways.

Nemesis is published by Imperium Press, which “was founded in 2018 to supply students and laymen with works in the history of rightist thought.” Imperium has focused primarily on the republication of classic works, like Robert Filmer’s *Patriarchia*, Joseph de Maistre’s *The Generative Principle of Political Constitutions*, and Fustel de Coulanges’ *The Ancient City*, with contemporary introductions. I believe that *Nemesis* is the first new book Imperium has published, and its publication is a good sign that other contemporary writers thinking outside of liberal terms might find a home.

Works Cited

Gans, Eric. *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*, 2nd Edition. (Aurora, CO: Noesis Press, 2015)

———. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993)

Jouvenel, Bertrand de. *On Power: Its Nature and the History of Its Growth* (New York: Viking Press, 1949).

MacIntyre, Alasdair C. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.)

Notes

[1] A concise formulation of this trajectory can be seen in a footnote of Gans to *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*: The modern market-system, as exemplified by contemporary “consumer society,” is a system that generates ever more elaborate means of differentiating among its members. Although resentment is certainly not abolished, each individual is taught by the market-system to treat all others as equally unique individuals. Imperfect as it is even as an abstract model, highly differentiated consumer society (and not the uniformized utopias of socialism) is the historical realization of the decentralization of the Gospel utopia: the most moral society for the greatest number. (106)