

Dialogue: GA and Politics: Further Thoughts on The Victimary and Other Contemporary Phenomena

Ian Dennis and Chris Fleming

[Editor's Note: This dialogue is a continuation of one that began at this year's (Zoom) GASC Conference]

Ian Dennis: Hi again, Chris! Our dialogue at the 2021 GASC Conference is now available on YouTube (<https://gascwebsite.wordpress.com/ga-news/>). But I think we agree we can take that discussion forward, in part because of what we've learned from the exercise, and from the conversation that followed the presentation. The over-arching question is, how can GA help? What should we look at now?

Chris Fleming: How about we start with GA's current standby, its term *à la mode*, "the victimary"? Although it's not of recent provenance in GA, it has been resurgent, we might say - one of the main ways in which some within GA analyze culture, perhaps *the* way to analyze contemporary culture, a sort of hermeneutic skeleton key with which we can unlock all sorts of otherwise unfathomable mysteries. Many "things" are at issue here - concepts and phenomena - and I've no desire to over-simplify, but we need to start somewhere. To this end, I want to begin by drawing attention to a facet of this that might allow us to think about it with some additional context. One conjecture I want to offer up is that often what we call "the victimary" is perhaps the latest incarnation of western auto-critique. Although it has some contemporary inflections which mark it out, in broad structural terms, it's a version of what the West has always done - lost itself to find itself. This doesn't constitute any blanket defence of it - and nor does it spell out what its distinguishing features are. Further, I'd not want to deny that expressions of "the victimary" can be pathological; in this sense, it is like *any* cultural expression. But if your founding texts are Socrates' *Apology*, The Book of Job, and The New Testament, what can you do? Defenders of the West against its cultured despisers need to recognise this as much as the despisers themselves do. What do you think?

ID: Indeed. My sense is this: what distinguishes the victimary from victimhood per se is that the former is conscious of, indeed to lesser or greater degrees complicit in the centralization attained (or inflicted) through suffering or indeed through any asymmetrical experience of human benefits or sorrows. In a way, Girard's model of the scapegoat continues to haunt

GA, for all that GA places that human all-against-one at a later stage of development, insisting as we do that the first centralized object of collective violence was alimentary, and that centrality itself was a function of a hiatus of violence rather than a unanimous outburst of it. In both models, the victim, originary or subsequent, occupies or indeed defines a center, a place of shared human attention. Of course, in its purest form, no one wants or should want such centrality—Eric Gans is quite brilliant on the fundamental message of Greek tragedy, that one does *not* want to be in that center. But in more recent history, in the multi-centric modern world, the price may seem worth paying, at least sometimes, at least to some of us. It can be imagined, anyway. Can you square this way of conceiving it with the idea of civilizational auto-critique?

CF: This is a great point, but I'm unsure that the distinction you draw between the victimary and victimhood can ultimately be maintained. If one is a victim one might need to be conscious that one implicitly invokes centrality. If somebody is drowning - something that happens here in Australia more often than it probably should - then that person raising their hand is explicitly attempting to be central, at least for a while! "Hey! Everyone look at me! I'm drowning!" Of course, if the person then, after being rescued, continues to claim centrality, to request that everyone look at them, to criticize the lifeguard for adopting a "white savior subject position," then we're witnessing something a bit *messed up*. That aside, one danger - albeit not the only one - in overly glib invocations of "victimary thinking," of diagnosing others of engaging in it, is that all potential claims for justice can be dismissed in advance as "victimary." The designation is empirically blunt, and that's where its hermeneutic power is diminished.

It's not that it doesn't name a central aspect of contemporary experience. I guess what the contemporary world allows is for a situation where one's victimhood accords one centrality - and moreover, the only way to claim the centre is to present oneself as being on the margins. I don't think it's always admitted or even an explicit strategy. I have a lot of friends in the arts - directors, actors, writers - and almost all of them, regardless of how successful they are, often invoke the image of some "in group" that they're not part of.

ID: Here's how I'd try to anchor the distinction. Centrality, in the GA sense and in its Girardian precursor as well, is created by desire. Desire, for GA, is the appetitive mediated by the sign. But the drowning man is wholly in the appetitive or biological realm—the air he craves is not mediated by any sign—he does not want it even partly because others want it. Nor do others want to be in his position, in imitation, at least, of that appetitive craving or need—even if his *situation* might have its appeal. Only in that way, or only if he is pretending to be in trouble, or willing himself to be in trouble, or if others have willed it, might desire (as GA defines it) be engaged. This can happen. I believe some suicides, for example, are attempting to make a point to the rest of us. I am haunted, too, by the

apotemnophiles: those who seek the amputation of their own healthy limbs. But there are certainly victimhoods bearing no trace of such desires. One familiar category—widely accepted—is the victimization of young children. Another is that caused by natural disaster. Such victimhoods, we generally feel, are not only not sought, but not attractive of imitation, in no true way desirable to others.

But often enough the question of desire, its role in the configuration, does have to be confronted. One “conservative” way of framing this is to ask how much effort the victim has actually exerted to avoid the victimhood and its centrality (and attendant benefits of various kinds). What calculations were involved? The “liberal” response will use or imply the phraseology of “through no fault of their own” or, of course, invoke the fault of others. I think the (very Romantic) claims made by your friends in the arts encounter, must estimate, the same sorts of potential profits or losses—the book on which was really written by Lord Byron a couple of hundred years ago, speaking from his perch at the very apogee of centralized marginality. But there are a billion permutations and combinations—and who can penetrate the human heart?

I do agree about the connection to our civilization’s potent capacity to critique itself, sometimes quite fiercely and passionately. Clearly enough, we are in a forceful phase of that now. I think I would conceptualize “the victimary” by invoking the law of unintended consequences. A problem created by the last set of solutions. It is a problem, but that doesn’t mean that those (attempted) solutions were unjustified or need all to be rolled back. How big a problem? Myself, I am not quite as concerned as some others in our GA community. Or, shall we say, I think the matter must be assessed, issue by issue. How much is just the kind of noise and posturing that market societies always generate, to only local effect? How much genuinely threatens (or indeed even advances) crucial cultural values and/or socio-economic productivity? But there surely is at least a risk—when it arises between individuals we use terms like “co-dependency”—that the allure of victimary centrality can blunt or distort actual efforts to reduce victimhood itself, both on the parts of the victims and the rest of us.

CF: I love the idea of codependency as a model here, and Anthony Giddens has actually pursued this notion to some degree - if somewhat inconsistently - in his book on intimacy. I’d just want to express some caution about whether we are ever truly in a position to know others’ desires - or even our own - in such a way as to make this kind of distinction between “victimhood” and “the victimary” as secure as you’d want.

In any case, there may well be some ambivalence with respect to our own victim-status; at one level we might hate the idea of being a victim (of our genes, even) - but on the other hand this may mitigate some kinds of shame which would go along with being dealt whatever hand we’ve been dealt. And there are unusual moral

cases here: take, for instance, the woman who knows that she may be catcalled and even risks assault because of a certain form of clothing. She didn't do "all in her power" to mitigate the abuses, but is this being "victimary" if she draws attention to people's behaviour? I'd still say here that to draw attention to her attire is missing the point of what is going on in this situation, at least what is going on with respect to the ethical.

Further, what of the much-vaunted desire for "recognition" on which your own Charles Taylor predicated his analysis of multiculturalism? It would seem to me that seeking recognition in Taylor's sense implicates people very much in a kind of desire and yet I'd not be happy calling that - or reducing that to - "victimary thinking." Maybe I'm just one of those snowflake liberals after all. Even so, I do feel locked out of their exclusive club...

ID: I'll re-concede the opaqueness of the human heart. But we can't stop trying to peer in there, and we won't. We are, shall we even say, hard-wired by our intense mimeticism to do so. But even to say this is to gesture towards the means by which we are able to obtain whatever insight we do—namely, the experience of our own suggested desires, our own subjection, however temporary or partial, to the modelled desires of others.

I'm enough of a liberal, and maybe here we can also mean in the older, classical sense, to say that the woman in your instance is within her rights and a genuine victim, through no fault of her own. These things have to be debated of course—that's what politics is for—in the context of ever-changing norms and understandings. Or, to put it in GA terms, ever-changing ethical adaptations to the fundamental moral intuition of human equality established on the scene. That we see the woman as more victim than seductive perpetrator ... is progress, to which I for one remain devoted.

CF: The example I gave of the woman's attire is actually based on a signal controversy in Australia from around fifteen years ago, around a then-prominent religious leader who referred to women who dressed immodestly as "uncovered meat," suggesting - in one address at least - that women who dressed in a certain way were in some respects to blame for what befell them. There's little point in going into the controversy here, but that's its source.

But back to the main issues: I started with the idea of "the victimary," and I don't think this can be pursued within the context of GA without talking about issues of "firstness" and political polarization. So, without further ado, I'm going to dump that in your lap...

ID: Happy to try to refine our ideas about how the GA heuristic might work on those phenomena, and/or to make the case for its utility there. I'll start by putting the question

into the context of the currently looming challenge to liberal democracies and the global order they have established since the end of the Second World War. Obviously enough, a large-scale polarization is re-asserting itself at the expense of our always too-hopeful notion of an end of history. In our first dialogue, I was rash enough to suggest that GA's model of development out of the originary scene, that *fuite en avant* that Eric frequently mentions, might resemble or be an originary model for Karl Popper's "Open Society." If such a model is being challenged, or resisted, or undermined—I mean pragmatically as well perhaps as in theory—how can GA help us describe what is happening now and what is at stake? But perhaps my question to you should firstly be, do you accept the way I am characterizing the situation? And can the theory of an Open Society claim any such fundamental place in the understanding of human culture and history GA offers us?

CF: It depends on what one takes from Popper's books - if we take from it a resistance to a narrow kind of historicism or to totalitarian impulses, then I'm happy with that; but if we want to see in him a subtle reader of ancient philosophy or German idealism, then I'd want to pass. Could you spell out the connection here? Of course, it wasn't Popper who originated the idea of the "open society," but Henri Bergson - the notion of the *société ouverte* - in the first hundred pages of *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*. Of course, if we conceive of what Bergson - who focussed on tribalism - and Popper - who focussed on teleological historicism - oppose in terms of something like Orwell's *1984*, and that's usually the bogeyman, then nobody is really going to disagree.

It's important not to forget that Popper made his name in epistemology, and this is still an important frame for his political works. Popper's assumption was that what people are after - and what political discourse seeks - is a better understanding of reality, and totalitarian regimes are bad because they distort the truth, even turn truth on its head. That's fine, and true enough, but political discourse in "open societies" doesn't seek truth, either - just more public support for itself.

I'm very happy to supply examples of this, but hopefully you'll grant my point here. I'm a very traditional philosopher in some ways, in wanting truth, beauty, and justice, but here my focus isn't ultimately about any of these things. What concerns me currently - and it risks dragging us off again without warning - is the ways in which modern "open societies," even with their openness, are moving towards a kind of polarisation in discourse and political allegiance. I don't actually need to make the case that polarisation is a bad thing, do I? Not *per se*: it's not a bad thing in all areas of life. Polarisation is what electrodes *do*, for instance. And to have polarisation operating among boxers, for instance, shouldn't be a matter of concern. I am, by nature, a bit of a brawler. But maybe there's a less Australian and more Canadian approach here, to be reductive about it.

ID: Well, first of all, I doubt I'm a philosopher at all, so I think I'd better sidle away from my rather simplistic deployment of Popper. Doubtless you're right about the debt to Bergson, and so forth. I'll grant you plenty more, too, in this general area! On just the one point about problem-solving, I think there might be a useful commonality with GA's vision of history. Anyway, as to polarization, I think it's a feature of a later stage, after the decline of the power of the singular public center. There's only one polarization on the first scene: between a single center and its periphery. And this persists for a long time.

CF: But mightn't one argue that this is merely some kind of spatial polarisation? I could imagine someone might argue that what we're referring to here might be couched in terms of the emergence of firstness. Maybe that can wait...

ID: Sure, okay. The heuristic still helps afterwards, though, when resentments around the periphery start targeting rival, if sometimes only ostensible, claims upon centrality. Is such polarization bad? Definitely. I would again describe it as a heightened mutual resentment that, like Girard's metaphysical desire, has become untethered from practical objects of desire, and is leaving the world of facts, of risks and benefits behind. But I would distinguish it, as Girard does metaphysical desire from object desire, from the lower-voltage kinds of resentment that remain focussed on definable centralities and desires that are at least in principle attainable, or resentments that are resolvable, or placatable. Such resentment is not itself so much bad as dangerous—it risks provoking violence. Yet human progress has been driven by the *always* risky but finally productive emancipation of both desire and its shadow side, resentment.

CF: You're moving pretty fast here. "The emancipation of desire" is a phrase that might easily fit with the pamphlet for a freelove cult or an advertisement for a yacht. An example or two might help.

ID: If, say, the arrogation of the center by the Big Man leads to, models, a vast liberation of human desire and creativity, the resultant progress is realized not only by that conquest of the center in itself, but by the subsequent resentment of it, and the redistributions those resentments impel.

CF: Is this a variation of what might be dubbed "the rhinorrhea theory of progress," or more politely as "trickle down"? So, you mean the guy with the biggest shoulders decides to dance in front of everyone and so get the girl ... and the resentment directed towards Big Dance Guy produces a rash of global sexy, agile dancing so that dancing standards rise globally? In what sense is this a "liberation" of desire? I realise my example stacks the decks somewhat. So, we might say instead that microchips got better because of competitor microchips - and that the maker of the best microchips got the most money, but everyone (maybe) benefited from this because now we can all access porn at a rate and quality undreamed of by our

ancestors? This is “progress”? This is maybe one face of our Pinker disagreement...

ID: The Big Man, in Sahlins’ model, redistributes. Those who concede the center to him, who don’t act on their resentment of his usurpation, do so because they get more, firstly from his hand but ultimately and more crucially through his modelling. Without that modelling the sacred interdiction of the archaic center continues to prevail over every desire—which makes for egalitarian stagnation. But patience with that usurpation will not be infinite. This is an example of how “deferred reciprocity” pragmatically operates—not through the unforced and indefinite generosity of those going first, but by the imitative and always potentially rivalrous desires of those following, and the threats therein. The peace any big or first man establishes, at any rate, never lasts.

CF: Great. I’m happy with that. Just parenthetically, the presence of “Big Man” societies, particularly in Melanesia and Micronesia to the present day, has made coordinating national politics in these countries very, very difficult. The Big Man goes to represent “the people” at the national assembly and really only represents his *wontok*. There is no sense of nationhood. But you’re not talking about the Big Man as He (or rarely She) is currently incarnated in world or national politics, are you? But if we take Big Man more symbolically, then I can follow you more. So, to clarify, this would distinguish what you’re saying from Smith’s “invisible hand”? Smith’s model of private vices becoming public goods implies a kind of stable state. But here you’re bending things differently. Maybe it’s closer to the Chinese model - a usurped center with wonderful economic outcomes?

ID: I solemnly forswear all prophecy. Everything could change, or go south, tomorrow. But I will allow myself to wonder if the Chinese big man is going to last, either. China didn’t generate those economic outcomes under quite the kind of governance it has relapsed into. Actually, though, the archaic situation is much closer to “stable.” It probably lasted for millennia. But finally, along did come the Big Men. Instability (and far more rapid change) ever since. And I’d say the hand is far from invisible, especially when it falters. People resent. They erect guillotines. Another way to put this is to say that the desire the Big Men model, and the resentment that is its inevitable concomitant, usually end up sweeping them away (or at least in principle risking doing so—which is why the Big Men, who start with a kind of altruism of the Sahlins sort, eventually turn into paranoically defensive Stalins). But it takes time, and (again, because we are no prophets nor were meant to be) is perhaps not to be claimed to be inevitable. Perhaps, indeed, the Open Society really has seen the moment of its greatness flicker.

CF: So much to work with here! So, firstness: the Big Man is a usurper; he models a kind of firstness, no? But there are larger issues which bear on firstness of any kind; again, we need to stop and see what such a claim amounts to. “Firstness” - when used in any empirical, historical sense, is always a *claim* - even a kind of

defence. Children invariably defend their claim on a toy or space as originary: "I had it first / we were here first / I thought of it first / I wanted it first." Even in these ostensibly straightforward cases, even if they were armed with stopwatches and journals, we're not looking at anything truly straightforward. When it comes to culture more generally, things get far more complex, partly because culture always arrives in "mixtures" and not "statues," to use one of Michel Serres' preferred oppositions. "Judaic firstness," for instance, only emerges as a kind of absolute if we sideline Canaanite religions and Babylonian - especially in their monolotristic varieties, for instance. And this is even before we start to trouble the idea of the "Judaic" as some absolute beginning, we can point out this God of the Israelites isn't a unity - the Yahweh of J is not the same Yahweh as that of the Elohist or the Deuteronomist or the Priestly writer. Harold Bloom spent a lot of time discussing this, even if he perhaps went to too much effort to show the internal complexities. But I don't think it's merely academic to point this out, or the expression of some desire for complexity. Nor is it particularly debatable - and nor should it be particularly scandalous. The very intelligibility of any cultural form relies on continuities. Even the biggest "revolutions" or breakthroughs in science only ever transfigure the given, not create it *ex nihilo*. All this is obvious, isn't it?

ID: The obvious is that which one ignores at one's peril. So let's not.

CF: Of course, the originary scene might itself be different - but this is the *constitution* of culture, its inauguration. But once we move beyond this another series of questions present themselves. My point isn't a nominalist one or even a deconstructive one. I don't think just anything can be said about anything: one cannot say "You know, I thought I was studying the history of religions, but now I realise I was studying the structure of the carbon atom." My priority is elsewhere. I want to ask what "work" claiming firstness attempts to do.

ID: You sound worried.

CF: I am, because it doesn't seem to me to be coherent - and not just in the literal sense of awarding temporal gold medals. I understand it's not just about a time trial - and maybe GA should reflect a bit on the different senses of "firstness" we employ. But I'm worried, in part, because in the way it is often used it panders to those who would want to express their own resentment through their identification of the ostensible resentment in *others*. I was in a car accident once - on my way to a funeral - and the woman who crashed into me was driving a shiny gold BMW, like a fully-blinged Kardashian lunar module. She didn't seem particularly apologetic and so I remarked, uncharitably, that I was surprised that someone driving such an expensive car didn't allot more cash resources for driving lessons. Her response: *you're just jealous*. (She meant "envious.") Is it redundant to say here that I

wasn't?

ID: Well, of course, *I* believe you. Even though we did agree about not being able to see into the human heart. By the way, what *do* you drive?

CF: I tend to drive anything that won't blow up - usually something Korean or Japanese. And I drive people to despair, maybe even here. Anyway, the designation "resentment," in other words, can be a displaced form of self-diagnosis.

But, putting aside these qualms about whether claims to any kind of absolute "firstness" are intellectually coherent, we *can* see how the argument is often deployed. In New Zealand, for instance, there was a debate about whether the Maori were actually the first people - or whether there were (you guessed it) other people - including white people - there first, before the Maori came and ate them all or did something comparably barbaric. You can probably guess which side of the political spectrum these theorists came from.

But let's try that out, anyway. If we *do* want to run with a certain kind of firstness argument, then why wouldn't we want to posit that so much racism and resentment towards indigenous peoples is prompted by *their* "firstness"? In Australia, there is enormous anxiety still about the fact that a collection of cultures existed here prior to European settlement, a fact the Europeans did their best to deny both in law and in practice. Is this European resentment about Indigenous firstness? I'm cautious about the category in this sense, but if we do want to run with it, what would stop us here?

ID: Nothing can stop us! It's only a question of whether anyone will listen.

Sure, firstness is often "claimed," even sometimes by practitioners of GA (and no panderers, we). But *for* GA, in principle, a firstness is to be *identified* by its scenic effects. Those that qualify are attended to, imitated, provoke desire and (yes) resentment. Where antisemitism persists, points about the Babylonians are beside the point, this one anyway. Then the questions become: attended to and so forth ... by whom? How many? How do they respond? And for how long? Especially now, many are called, few enough chosen.

And then, is the longer-term result "deferred reciprocity"? Do those imitations and resentments finally return satisfaction, generate broader human flourishing, new firstnesses, new benefits? Or not? How might either outcome be detected or measured?

Yes, the further from the origin, the more complex the picture. But I think the point of originary thinking is to reduce complexity to better understand human fundamentals, then return to the living scene(s) with a stronger analytic.

So, to your question about aboriginal firstness. (Or maybe that's a bit redundant? In Canada we say "First Nations.")

CF: Much better! I'm probably *supposed* to say that, too... and it actually sharpens the point!

ID: We could ask if the GA heuristic helps us understand the obvious fear, resentment and violence triggered by all human difference through history, especially racial and ethnic difference.

CF: But we're not exclusively offended by difference, are we? I mean, Girard says that sameness is perhaps even more disturbing, at least sometimes. And teaching undergraduates, every one of them wants to be "different" at the same time as declaring that their difference is the cause of their persecution. There was even one named "Jean-Jacques."

ID: Your undergraduates are Romantics. Poor things, they will learn to temper their desires. And our capacity *now* to tolerate and even love ethnic differences, albeit still imperfect, is one of our finest achievements, I'd say. But Girard is also right—I suspect people used to experience ethnic difference as some kind of malevolent parody. What was similar and provoking was not physical attributes, but symmetrical desires. Anyway, as a proponent of "open," market, omni- or multi-centric society, I'm more inclined to start with a *field* of firstnesses, all generating their different centralities and to different effects. Might this be how GA does Serres' "mixtures"? No more single public center (as once featured a "statue" of a Big Man?), even or especially in the global context. A winner-take-all approach feels outmoded, atavistic, very especially, as I think you're also saying, in the case of claims for the firstness of very large units, like religions or civilizations.

CF: Or it becomes simply Nietzscheanism - we praise conquerors simply for conquering. If a person can win a game of chess by setting the board on fire, then "losers," a favoured appellation of a recent world leader, just gotta suck that fire up and make room for the guy with the most kerosine. "Don't like my pyrotechnics? You just hate losing, pal...". Are we really happy with this?

ID: We *should* discipline the word "first," requiring it always to specify, "first *at* what?" or "first *to do* what?" Firstness is no one's permanent identity or possession! This is my contribution of the wholesomely obvious. Anyway, most claims of hegemony are laced with and distorted by resentments, either in those who feel they have it or those who feel others do. And most are brutally imprecise, especially now. My version of the question then is, in the kind of world we now have, what powers, roles, functions, contributions, or whatever, arise from the firstness of First Nations? And, of course, what resentments are generated by that particular instance (or claim) of centrality, and how are they exacerbated, mitigated or transcended?

CF: I'm happy with this plurality of firstnesses, but now it's looking like a kindergarden classroom, where everyone gets a prize! And maybe it's also true - but part of me really wants to step back and push you a little about the fact that although "firstness" seems to name something akin to a gold medal in an Olympic sprint - about which little, save performance-enhancing drugs - can be contested (athletics, if nothing else, models a kind of justice rarely achieved outside it!) - "firstness," when it comes to culture, is a heavily contested field. We find this out when we try to do a history of any complex artifact. Where does the history of computing begin? And when? The filing cabinet, the desktop, the calculator, the Pascaline, the arithmometer, the Torquetum, ENIAC? Who invented the computer? You might want to come up with a name for a quiz show (let's call this Quiz Show Epistemology or Jeopardy Historiography) but the computer is really a whole museum, a history of human understanding.

Of course, we must judge firstness in terms of its scenic effects, but those effects will also include *effects of the claim (of firstness) itself*; and the resentment of others is also a claim which "pollutes" the scene if you will, and not simply something we document. Making things more complicated, no doubt, is that one of the principle means by which resentment is expressed is by claiming just how resentful others are! I'm sorry to get stuck on this. Do you think this is a minor issue? Can we fold this in somehow? I don't want to detain us, but this seems utterly crucial to me. What do you think?

ID: Maybe the idea of an omniscient society is that everyone *does* get a prize, of some sort. (And let's try to keep meritocracy out of kindergarden!) The larger point maybe is that these contestations, taken together, imply that firstness is a product, finally, of the scene itself, rather than merely or entirely the doing of an innovative individual or group. Firstness is not exactly a synonym for centrality, but it does imply a relocation or proliferation of it. And centers of course depend on peripheries and vice-versa.

CF: Ok! This sounds promising.

ID: The scene repeats and replicates ever. It is perhaps experienced temporally as singular, as one can only really pay attention to one thing at a time. But memory teaches us that it is no single place. At given moments some human being or group of them may seem to occupy or claim its center, but GA allows us to see that it is only the geometry itself, the geometry of fully human desire mediated by the sign, that produces all experiences of centrality or firstness and all the benefits and dangers that follow from them. Only one thing, GA insists, *really* did come first, though, and that was the originary scene. Its geometry co-produced, was coeval with, the first firstness of the sign. And no, we will never back down or acquiesce to claims for (or by!) the chimps and bonobos! Here we stand. Or die. We can retreat no further.

Maybe part of the problem has exactly been the temptation to identify what we might call “permanent firstnesses,” sometimes rather defensively. Contra the Christian Gospels, the first will always have been first and the last, well, last, or at least second.

CF: Yes. LOL...

ID: Implied, thereby, is an injunction to certain factions that they ought simply to stop resenting!

CF: Yes, and that we aren't!

ID: Which GA itself of course knows is impossible. We can no more stop it than we can stop desiring. However, as Byron also reminds us, the more one denies or *tries* to stop it, in oneself or others, the more power it gains. Conversely, the more one acknowledges its power—sees the geometry—the better able one is to manage it, to choose one's actions. This, to me, is another part of what GA offers.

CF: I concur!

ID: Desire cannot but be felt, but *action upon desire* is not inevitable. And as with desire, so also with resentment. I'm not without it, of course, including a measure of resentment of the resenters currently in the ascendent, especially the more egregious traffickers in the victimary. But GA helps me plot the locations of both theirs and mine, calculate the functions, project lines of perspective.

Consequently, if we're talking politics, I'd rather pay more attention to *processes*. Which work, *now*, to reduce violence and foster the operation of human productivity of every kind? Which don't or don't any longer? How can we read the unfolding processes around us to determine when the rechannelling of resentment into productivity or love is starting to falter and risk failure, a collapse into more than merely episodic violence? How might intensifying polarization—surely a symptom or stage of such faltering—be better understood as a part of larger processes, and how might it be lessened?

CF: I want to ask whether there a danger of sliding into a kind of political psychology here? And secondly, if this is a danger. Why “productivity”? Is there a better antonym to “destructivity”? And doesn't your “rechannelling” also imply alchemy and hydraulics? GA is turning out to be a very steampunk kind of science...

ID: I guess GA's anthropology necessarily implies a psychology. As to “productivity,” I'll concede it's once again the perspective of progress that dreams of producing things, states, conditions. Improvements. One of the specific implications of the GA model is the ineluctability of change, driven by desire, the instability of the equilibrium established on the scene, that *fuite en avant*. This does distinguish it from the Girardian picture, in which

some sort of absolute renunciation of desire is imaginable, and with it apocalypse or peace. But as GA sees it, we produce—desires, things to be desired, although not necessarily material things—or we die, kill each other.

CF: We in the West appear to work very hard, are very “productive,” and yet - as David Graeber’s research (most thoroughly in *Bullshit Jobs*) has suggested - many people, probably around 40%, feel that the labour they’re engaging in is utterly pointless, that if they ceased their paid employment nothing at all about the world would change except their incomes. Can we exclude this from the picture of modern liberal democracies? And “produce” is another slightly vague word - it can name the generation of either an edible crop, a work of art, or piece of plastic crap that nobody needed and will be in the trash in less than a year.

ID: Sure. Modern desire is for difference, which implies in part the production of the expendable or at least the temporary. But by the same logic, tastes and priorities will or can change. To say that one’s work is pointless is the expression of a played-out desire. Those bullshit jobs, I might guess, weren’t always thus. Once they were perhaps prestigious—my grandfather was a waiter on the dining cars of the Canadian Pacific Railroad and seems to have thought himself the luckiest man alive. But now, doubtless, ah, bullshit, and you have to wear a little hat!

CF: No! People who actually provide services like waitstaff (and cooks and garbage collectors and teachers and plumbers and train drivers and so on) aren’t engaging in BS jobs and don’t think their jobs are pointless. Graeber is referring to people who believe, if they stopped working, nothing would change: lobbyists, middle management, telemarketers, “quality service managers,” and so on. If the lobbyists in your area suddenly all quit one day you may not notice anything happening at all; if the garbage collectors are away for even a fortnight you’ll really experience this labour shortage! Of course, all of these jobs help GDP and provide incomes, but this model of productivity leaves a lot to be desired.

ID: Okay, sure. I notice you and Graeber don’t list professors. Yesterday I gave a class where literally nobody came, at least in person. And the ones who came online may not actually have been there behind their name plates. If I fall silent, as maybe I will, what will change? But lots of things that human beings attempt are like this. Maybe especially attempts to persuade. Think of the millennia of sermons preached to sinners who ... well, kept sinning. Or think of art-making, and all that falls by the wayside.

It’s the prototypical modern complaint, though, isn’t it? You made me desire something—I’ve had it—it’s nothing. You seduced me into signing up for the American Dream, it turns to ashes in my mouth (as you make off with the real satisfactions yourself). What a human community that doesn’t collapse back into violence must “produce” is more

desires, more or other things *to* desire. But because we desire the different it seems to me hard to predict or control what these desires will be for. Clearly, though, one must listen to that 40% or to however many it really is. I say “one,” but I guess I mean the mechanisms which generally operate more effectively in Open Societies, must respond. One thing seems fairly certain, that progress for oneself and/or one’s children—rather than any absolute measure of well-being—animates both desire and, in the absence of perceived progress, resentment and frustration. I wouldn’t have wanted to be a waiter on a train, nor would I have wanted to do what my father did (although for most of my life I earned less money than either of them), and both of them made meaningful, if unsteady advances in their careers, leaving various jobs behind for “better” ones.

CF: One problem, as I see it, is that this sort of universal model doesn’t fit well with those kinds of “explanation” currently in favour both on the right and on the left: that we always know who the victims and who the perpetrators are before the fact. People who are attracted to a *a priori* models will always be tempted to force the theory to seize empirical history in advance. But if yielded to, this would simply turn GA into another clientele-based theory, where we “know,” say, that anti-Semitism is the only *real* prejudice and that everything else is a power-play based on special pleading - “victimary thinking.” Apart from anything else, this diminishes the minimality of the model. It’s also wrong - but that’s another issue.

And further, it erodes what is potentially so interesting and helpful about GA, which is that it refuses - at least in theory - to avail itself of both the universal dispensation and the universal condemnation. Marxists, race, and gender theorists tend towards theoretical models predicated on the ontological innocence of their victims. Judith Butler’s support of #metoo couldn’t help but run aground on the mere possibility that a woman - and a friend of hers - would or could ever assault anyone. And this incoherence was upheld by her supporters! I don’t think this is unique to one person - by all accounts a brilliant, well-educated, and profoundly interesting thinker. Rather, it’s the kind of thinking that more metaphysical forms of thought will eventually lead us to. If we’ve decided that “resentment” is the sole province of one group of people, then we’re involved in something quite far from GA, I think. And we’re also far from Girard’s thinking, which shares with GA a parallel abstract minimality.

ID: Yes, and as we were saying, Girard offers exactly the spectacle of enemy brothers, monstrous doubles. Firstness is irrelevant to that vision.

CF: The point is not that we must insist on some banal form of moral or anthropological equivalence but that such a case - if it is to be made - must be made using all the painstaking tools of social science: discourse analysis, NGram analysis, policy analysis, history, and so on. The joke about the philosopher is that

he is the person who is confident that he could reconstruct the causes of the First World War through a transcendental reflection on the ego. I wouldn't want this joke to be able to be applied to GA.

To me, one of the key advantages of GA with respect to most political thinking is that it is scenic. (I think the term "geometry" fits this well.) Thinking in terms of center and margins offers a uniquely powerful heuristic for analysing politics (among much else). But if one's adoption of this model is to either always know who is in these positions and who claims them and why people might even be on such margins, then GA is no longer a heuristic but what might be called an "ideology."

Does this connect with what you call "permanent firstness"? I'm concerned I'm setting up a straw man here - that people may well respond "we *are* using data, we *are* looking at history, we *are* doing discourse analysis!" Or maybe one response would be to say "ah, but the very structure of the left is originarily victimary." Being left means having both committed this original sin and being committed to it, a sin all leftists continue to carry both in their hearts and in their daily acts.

One final objection is that someone might say "Chris, this isn't going to help, because history can always be interpreted in a way that simply conforms to the a priori / clientele model." To the person on the right who says, "the left is always playing victim!" the leftist might say, "President Trump made more claims about his persecution than any president in living memory! Look at his speeches, look at his Tweets, look at his press conferences!" to which the person on the right will say "Ah, but he *was* a victim! Did you see Nancy Pelosi tears those pieces of paper to shreds!?! They'd then quote Niemuller - first they came for the State of the Union Addresses..." Maybe my analysis doesn't offer us any solution at all. Help me here. Give me something to hope!

ID: Careful what you wish for. I did say there was a *temptation* to think of permanent firstnesses. Our task is to try to lead ourselves and others out of it.

I suggested in our initial version of this dialogue that the sign is the first solution to the first problem and every subsequent instance of the scene reiterates both phases. I'll back away from connections to Popper or the Open Society or even the hackles-elevating terminology of the "market." I will concede again, too, that we're currently in rather a bleak phase of the process—but that maybe we need GA to help us see how the present (and substantial) buildup of resentments might be discharged, allow us better to recognise the signs that a possibly-too-close-to-permanent prohibition from (or, by others, occupation of) the center is provoking a crisis point, and to find ways of—never mind rechanneling—maybe rewarding, reclaiming, coopting, soothing resentments that might otherwise do all concerned a

grievous harm by overwhelming the whole operation. As ever, the operation, even should we be able to judge it a success, is unlikely to be very nimble and will certainly produce results very far from perfect. That is, resentment would, *will*, continue. But continuing, as I also implied, is a GA thing—despite some gloomy pronouncements from time to time, we see no apocalypses, no end days, no raptures. Can you bear a slogan here? Where there is language there is hope.

CF: Yes! Language is key here. Being for “openness” or “the market” *simpliciter* brushes aside the composite nature of social institutions. Nobody but mental patients really believe in “the market” as some absolute ruler; what constrains the market must *also* be there. We end up with much less dramatic and newsworthy headlines - a mix system of freedom and constraint. “Free improvisation” in music doesn’t mean “play anything.” Being for “openness” is like being for “generalised excellence” or “universal fantasticness”: nobody can oppose you.

ID: The claim is actually more modest. The question merely is, what mechanisms are there to deal with rising resentment, how do they work, and how effectively? Let’s compare. We are likely to get, of course, the worst system, as per the famous quote, with the exception of all the rest.

CF: You’re right, of course. I just wanted to fight. But there’s a danger in slogans like “the open society,” like they’re definable like “possessing a negative valence.” And you’ll object to the music analogy, surely. I’m straw-man-ing, aren’t I?

ID: Not at all. I’m better than certain that I have seen, even heard people “playing anything” and surviving on the strength of their haircuts, or attitudes, or fashion sense. Whatever you play (or do, or however you look) has to work for your audience, attract desire—that’s the biggest constraint, even if you’re putatively amateur. Or objectively just bad. Be cool, play it, and they will come. Some of them, anyway.

The analogous operation in politics must operate within similar parameters, even, finally, in “closed” societies. The “art of the possible” that matters here is what we might call an efficient processing of feedback. Problems are problems because they trigger too much resentment and not enough love. This is what I would say GA might add to Popper: that the fundamental problem that needs ever new solutions is that of resentment.

CF: I like this idea. This is progress, even!

ID: The proliferation of centers is one such answer—let’s *not* call the resultant configuration a “market”! I’m happy to await the arrival of a hackle-free alternative—because then resentment, “the sentiment of exclusion from the center,” can be put off for a while, as a single target no longer dominates, and one can more easily generate one’s own centrality.

CF: I think Eric and you are right that the one thing the market handles well - at least in principle - is resentment, including resentment directed at the market itself. When a merchant banker friend wears a Che t-shirt, I marvel at how capitalism can absorb resentment, including against itself. Leftists often see this as a demonic feature of the market. The demonic thing would, of course, be to be *banned* from wearing Che t-shirts. And I'm also appreciative of the idea of *exchange* as an ethically more advanced system than unilateral acquisition and redistribution. I really wouldn't like my Prime Minister to telling me what my music playlist for the month will look like. That is the stuff nightmares are made of. When it comes down to it, we're almost all socialists *and* free-marketeers, no? Everything else is Twitter. But surely that's not the end of it, is it? The devil is in the policy / legal / regulatory details, no?

ID: Far from the end of it. And we're still just kicking the can down the road.

I'm not "for" openness as a center that I vaunt over others. I am only "for" less violence, and human flourishing. Let those who can see them show us better ways of getting there. I'll only object if those ways involve abrogating or stifling the system by which ideas and methods can be tested, feedback absorbed, new desires created. The system which has brought us to the level of human flourishing we have so far attained. No going backward.

CF: Well, we're not far from each other here. But the market also allows - must allow - for people to proclaim its limits, too. When people talk about the amazing progress capitalism has made, we also need to see it exists in a dialectical partnership with those things that limit it, like unions. Again, this point only can be [seen in the historical details](#). Unions, of course, can be corrupt, stultifying, repressive, anti-competitive - indeed, a vector of resentment - but that's because they're human systems, run by humans. There's a fantasy on the left that if we get The System right, then we can just press "go" and nobody will ever be nasty. And the right is tempted to see "the market" in similar terms. Dostoyevsky is a good antidote to this thinking - as well as the far-less-cool Solzhentisyn's grounding of politics in the necessity of understanding concrete human existence. Sartre's critique of "bourgeois ideology" consists of a barrage of neologisms; Solzhentisyn's is couched in terms of proper nouns - it's a kind of advanced plebianism. To reassure you: I'm not about to strip naked, though, and learn the pan pipe. (I'm writing this *already* naked, playing the pan pipe.)

You see, I'm always worried about politics becoming a kind of mode where there is some fantasy of Absolute Victory. This, presumably, is not just a horrifying goal - it's an unreachable one. It's a fantasy that those who don't agree with us would just Get Over It and stop all that whingeing. It's the idea that it's them who are resentful - never *us*, of course - and they should just move on. "Why are you raining

on Bezos' genius?!?" they say. "Let the man do whatever he wants! Just because, like, you don't own a space jet! Just admit you want one!"

ID: I'm sorry to say, Chris, that when I find myself imagining anyone playing the pan pipe nude it usually isn't you. Or even Pan himself. Our relationship to postmodern Big Men like Bezos is always ambivalent, isn't it, though? It's built into all relationships to centrality—desire and resentment in oscillation, with the notable exception of aesthetic contemplation, and even then, we're not always quite sure how we feel about the artist. Whatever his (or her) instrument.

CF: Any joke I make here will be deleted... or get me cancelled. So there's an "outside" to the market as you understand it?

ID: I don't contrast the world of a single, sacred public center with an atomized individualism. In what we are *not* calling "market" society people make many kinds of alliances, i.e., arrangements where there is a differential between the rivalry within the alliance and that with the outer human world. Families are an example. Companies, nations, trading blocks, scholarly societies. And unions. Every such alliance has to be judged by its pragmatic value for those within, and/or the risks to those outside. That's also part of what politics is for. What's outside, of course, is usually part of some larger formation, some larger competition. So far that ends with our solar system, I guess. But maybe we'll discover happier and fairer life on some exo-planet and the rivalry will go galactic.

I quite agree about the fantasy of "Absolute Victory," though. Our opponents going away is no more possible than desire, resentment or the scene itself going away.

CF: The hedge here seems to be the word "pragmatic." What do you mean?

ID: Human objects of desire, including those made attainable or more attainable by political processes, are of course always already contested, shared, imperfectly available, because desire itself is mimetic. We don't get what we want, not just not always but not ever, because what we want paradoxically includes what we don't want, namely the desires of the other people—as Eric has written, desire is tragic. Pragmatism is the explicit or more usually tacit concession of this situation. We're getting what we need—another term that can only be understood in its mediated, fully human sense. At least, when we are talking about something other than your drowning man's need for air.

The rising chorus of resentments on both sides—and let me not make any provocative claims to fearfully Girardian or Blakean symmetry—it doesn't matter if they're exactly symmetrical in intensity or plausibility—the rising chorus is a political fact, and moralistic questions should be set aside. The moral claims that drive resentment are always essentially the same. The point of politics is, once again, the possible, as in finding possible ways of

managing or (at least partly or temporarily) placating those resentments. Call it ethics.

I mentioned leaving facts behind as a symptom: of course, it's the underlying disease that actually needs treating. Still, facts are a good whose broader distribution can (help) soothe resentment. One can bring the fever down, and that can do good, even while one tries to heal more holistically. One should not, that is, forbear from insisting that, for example, the 2020 American Presidential election was *not* fraudulent, or confronting the historical errors of the 1619 Project, or keeping an open mind about the increasingly uncertain origin of the Covid-19 virus.

CF: This is a rousing speech, Ian!

ID: Glad you find it so. My own pulse remains only too steady. Maybe I've given it too many times.

CF: So, to latch onto something you said - and draw out an implication: I'm unsure we can label rising symmetries as "moralistic"; it's anthropological. Or are you saying the "moralistic" part is trying to adjudicate who is doing it best / worst? And I like the idea of the distribution of facts, those immaterial, infinitely divisible goods. How this is done God only knows, of course. But your focus on concrete processes and specific ends is that people don't like this sort of deficit of melodrama when talking about politics. Your speech rouses me, as I say, but is perhaps the problem here that real politics, effective politics, is well, *boring*.

ID: It *is*! Now *that* I find interesting!

CF: Yes, I do too! I prefer politics to be boring! Have you heard of the curse "May you live in interesting times!"?

ID: I believe it's a Chinese saying. And it even predates the Mao years. Which were certainly ... interesting.

CF: But what we're talking about here is basic attention to various issues of governance, the fewest of which we'd hope involve explosions and fires...

ID: I'll boringly re-iterate my prizing of competence in politicians above everything else, especially the human smarts to understand how much ground to concede to resentment, where to draw lines, how to engage not so much the better angels as the promises of non-transcendental desire that tend to help bring out people's more angelic selves. The stuff of happiness.

Old, boring problem: reducing economic inequalities without killing the golden goose of the most productive of economic systems. By, for example, using the tax code, instead of

sacking the chateaux. Reducing tax cheating instead of raising tax levels to confiscatory levels. Targeted, sensible redistribution, learning from the results of previous attempts, defended ethically, but accompanied with toned down moralism. Just me, maybe, but I really have no patience for moralistic politicians—usually they’re just trading in resentment. So, yes, to me the “Woke” moralism that castigates the entire body politic except itself, is very ... unhelpful. Leave aside whether the critique is fair—although it often isn’t—it leads more to the generation of personal purity than to the kind of messy, imperfect progress that is what we can reasonably hope for. And, of course, it tempts reaction, such moralism, and is currently producing it in spades. But none of these points are very original.

All this doesn’t mean big things can’t be done. I think they *are* being done, even now, and no doubt there are complicated trade-offs, specialized roles, political processes, about which I am by no means qualified to speak. Maybe AOC and the Woke have somehow made possible Biden and these historically large attempts to reduce economic inequality, although I suspect we didn’t really need to go through all this polarized stuff to get here. The above-mentioned malcontents are likely more symptomatic than causal.

CF: Excellent. So maybe we need some other ways of coming at this, and I don’t just mean a different armory of terms, but different orientations. Maybe we’ve not even begun to think properly about these matters. I was intrigued many years ago by a book written by a philosopher who lives and works about an hours’ drive from here. Avisha Margalit’s *The Decent Society* - now 25 years old - outlines what politics might look like if we looked at humiliation rather than justice as the cornerstone of politics. I do realise the ire this will create among certain people, who will see in this idea just another face of “the victimary,” a term about which we’ve spoken very little about, but which is now seemingly the cornerstone of GA.

ID: I feel one of the purposes of our dialogue is to lay down some more stones or add a few bricks, in the other familiar metaphor. Eric, for one, has always been very hopeful that users of GA will take ownership and push the whole thing forward. If the victimary has been getting a fair amount of play time, can we, dare I put it this way? -but in order to continue the construction trope—“build back better”?

CF: Build back better. A Canadianism with alliteration!

ID: Nah, but he *might* have got it from us. I love the comparative—nothing transcendental, just humble old “better.” Hmm, with a firm stand towards China, could we go for “guns and better”? (I have to say, though, the West Wing hasn’t called back.)

I do think humiliation, a sentiment without any guaranteed connection to factuality (did that guy sneer at me, or did he just have something stuck in his teeth?—see remarks on the human heart, above), is easily enough harmonised with GA’s terminology. Should we circle

back now and conclude with the victimary and its role? It's one strategy of resentment, isn't it? (We distinguished it from victimhood *tout court*.)

CF: Well, you did - I demurred slightly. But I know what you're getting at.

ID: The victimary attains or claims centrality by claiming (plausibly or not as one may judge) exclusion from centrality. As I've said and believe, resentment plays its own role in the political process; one might even say that politics is largely the operation of dealing or trying to deal with it. I'd say politics, currently, including cultural politics, in its lumbering way, is in fact responding, making distinctions, judging claims. Playing the victim card is a recognised strategy and is assessed as such—not all such claims, by any means, are passively validated by everyone, or by majorities of community members. All along the political spectrum such claims are made and then assessed and responded to. Again, putting it this way is boring, for sure. But I do think progress thereby occurs, although always three steps forward and two and a half back-wise. It's such a milquetoast formulation, really, and so unoriginal, generalized ... well, this is why I haven't said much about politics.

We do aspire to a decent society, but also to a just one because justice and productivity are closely connected. Some claims to victimhood we now judge legitimate that were not so judged in earlier times. I see no magic formula or standard by which such judgments can be universally or a-temporally legitimated or delegitimated. Arguments and appeals are made in their own historical contexts. On it goes. Only GA, though, with its originary distinction between the moral and the ethical, gives a satisfactory heuristic for understanding these processes, or only GA that I know of anyway.

The closest thing to a workable standard that I can see is the twinned GA concepts of "firstness" (to circle back also to that) and "deferred reciprocity." Does a firstness—privilege, whatever you call it—end up, or soon enough end up, improving the lot and happiness of those coming second or down the line? Or enough of them? One can only finally tell by the intensity and extensiveness of the resentments, and yes, those are definitely moving targets, ever-rising measures. But putting down the revolution of rising expectations seems to me the most quixotic of all undertakings. Only natural catastrophe might manage it. Even Girard sort of agreed about this, as he noted the "appalling tyranny"—and I would add violence—that would accompany any effort to roll back what he called internal mediation.

Have I been able to articulate a position of sufficiently vague hopefulness to draw down a final salvo from you? The hopeful are always so much more provoking—I get that. Even where it's hard to identify exactly which bastion of privilege they inhabit, allowing them the luxury of hope denied to the suffering masses. Ah, I think I can sniff it out now—they think being hopeful is itself a form of victimhood! How they long for the comforts, the superiority,

the prestige of pessimism! So, the only thing to do, and as a small demonstration of the processes I invoke above, let me offer you the final word.

CF: I have nothing really to debate you on here! One last thing: maybe what needs to be considered here is not just solutions to the problems raised above, but the means by which such problems might be articulated. We seem to be moving into an era where intellectual opponents are being refigured as enemies and the very notion of intelligent, principled disagreement is entertained. One thing I've noticed shift over the years with my own undergraduate students is a diminished capacity to articulate a view not their own. So, in relation to a particular reading, I might ask "what might a virtue ethicist think of this?" "what might a Marxist make of this?" "how might a libertarian critique this?" and students are finding it very difficult to offer a sophisticated take on any issue unrelated to the one they themselves believe - and to that end, their own position is itself diminished. There are potentially worrying implications for society at large if we take this as a microcosm. Ideally, we should be able to make our opponent's case better than they themselves can! Everything else is pantomime...

But we're still talking, right? Maybe not now... but we will again, no doubt - knowing you and me at least. Always a pleasure, Ian.

ID: For me too! I'm going to cheat and re-appropriate the last word, to make a shameless plug. It's also a pleasure that we, and anyone and everyone who is interested in the potential political insights that GA might offer can come to Ottawa next summer (2022) to experience (hopefully!) in person: Here is the [Call for Papers](#).