

Power and Paradox

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The liberal world order presents itself as a vast mapping of “rights.” No political or social question can be discussed without being framed in terms of “rights”—someone’s rights being violated, or recognized, or clashing with some other set of rights. Even when we speak of “balancing” rights against some other imperative, like stability, prosperity or order, we are still speaking about balancing one set of rights against another, for terms like “stability,” “prosperity” and “order” merely represent the rights individuals have to be protected from violence, or to have their pensions paid on time and in full, to have a job, and so on. If, through some globally imposed Oulipian constraint, we were forbidden to use the word “rights” in discussing public events, no one would have the slightest idea of what to say.

The saturation of our political discourse by “rights” has been noted for generations—one of the better known dissections was Mary Ann Glendon’s 1991 *Rights Talk*. The concern of those critical of rights talk has usually been that it marginalizes an older discourse of virtue, community and responsibility that once prevailed in Western polities. This is no doubt true, but at least as important is the thoroughly paradoxical nature of “rights.” If there are to be rights, they must be enforced, by some agency large enough to enforce them without hindrance. The state, naturally. The more rights we discover, acknowledge, and demand enforcement of, the more powerful and unhindered the state must be. If we are talking about “international human rights,” we must therefore be speaking of a state, or states, capable of exercising imperial control over other states: to compel other states to enforce the rights in question, and to remove their governments if they can’t or won’t.

In that case, when we are speaking about rights, we may believe we are looking to the uniqueness and dignity of each individual, in an ever more refined and sensitive way; what we are in fact doing is imagining enhanced forms of sovereignty. We can put this very bluntly. If rights need to be defended, they need to be defended against someone. When we posit a right, or advocate for one, then, we are imagining a state willing and ready to act against specific people assumed to be potential violators of that right. Each new right conjures a state with more and longer tentacles. When one advocates for homosexual rights, one imagines a state willing to act against those who will violate those rights—who will not hire homosexuals, who will not rent or sell to them, who will assault them, who will murder them. If the state is to be ready to act against some people, it must have some idea who they are; at any rate, in the process of enforcing the right certain profiles will emerge. The state, and all those acting in conjunction with the state, can say who they are on the watch for: “homophobes.” The entire victimary bestiary of homophobes, racists, sexists, transphobes,

xenophobes and so on are nothing more than “superstructural” or “ideological” projections of the sovereignty necessarily imagined by rights talk.

I have not forgotten that the first calls for rights were for rights against the state. There is something paradoxical in the first consistent articulation of rights that exist separate from and prior to the state, that of Hobbes: the most basic right, that of life, and therefore of self-defense, so that one has the right to defend one’s life even against the state (so, the prisoner on death row being taken to execution has no obligation to go peacefully), leads to the first argument for a state to which nothing is forbidden, except perhaps disregard for its own survival, which really just means the right to self-defense of the sovereign himself. If the individual is to surrender all rights (except self-defense in the last, hopeless, resort) in order to have his most fundamental right defended more effectively by the sovereign, he must accept a sovereign that is capable of doing anything, anytime, to anyone.

Hobbes was at least consistent enough to realize that you cannot have rights against the state. The “laborist” argument for rights introduced by Locke initiated the tradition of positing rights against the state, limiting its powers. This is the argument that has, of course, been institutionalized and venerated in the United States, and we still see significant vestiges of this argument among American conservatives, and more than vestiges when it comes to the defense of gun rights. So, it might appear as if this original, “classical liberal” understanding of rights has been distorted by later victimary rights claims: this distinction is what the argument over “equality of opportunity vs. equality of outcomes” and “negative vs. positive rights” comes down to. But it’s not really the case that advocates of these rights stood outside of any entanglements with the state, and just wanted to be left alone to add their labor to various pieces of nature surrounding them. They wanted the state (first of all a liberalizing monarchy) to be deployed against the Church, aristocracy and other privileged groups, such as corporations chartered by the state, independent towns, banks, and guilds. It’s easy for us to overlook this, since the most formidable of those entities either no longer exist (or exist in a thoroughly neutered form), and few today could muster any historical sympathy for them. But that just means that we identify with the state that swept them into the dustbin of history, or broke and trained them. The history of the United States, meanwhile, the first modern society with neither a monarchy or aristocracy, has been the history of different groups trying to influence the state so as to defend their rights against some other, “privileged” group. Meanwhile, defending rights of free speech and bearing arms generally involve trying to bring the state into your quarrel with some local public authority, and whichever groups support it. So, even the most “natural” of rights involve using the state against one’s enemies.

If I am right, I am pointing to an enormous discrepancy between what we are saying and what we are doing in our rights talk—between the constative and the performative effects of that talk. We can formulate the discrepancy as follows: the more the distribution of goods and status is centralized, the more vehemently we deny the existence of any center. Are

“rights,” then, real, and is advocacy for them effective? Yes, they can be—the state can genuinely take the side of one group of citizens against another. Beyond that purely political consequence and the benefits that follow, though (it is surely good to have the state on your side), there is no correlation between an increase in rights and an increase in other goods, like human dignity or human flourishing. That is a very difficult claim to defend, of course—or to refute: we would need to have some shared language through which we can evaluate “dignity” and “flourishing.” But we don’t have such a shared language, precisely because the effect of the direct relation between state and individual created by the system of rights makes any such shared language impossible: any assertion of shared values or virtues would inevitably privilege one group over others and therefore be the ground for a claim that the former were violating the rights of the latter. So, if we can agree that being bereft of a shared language for discussing human dignity and flourishing is itself detrimental to human dignity and flourishing, then to that extent at least, I have made the case.

I would also say that, on the face of it, the very discrepancy I am pointing out subverts any claims that rights talk has enhanced human existence. If rights talk has been so beneficial, why must the obvious correlation between the growth of the centralizing state and individual rights be so overlooked? Why are the actual power relations obscured, rather than celebrated? No group or individual has an interest in an explicit statement of the facts: I do what I can to use the state against those who obstruct or irritate me in some way. Rights talk constitutes a virtually universally shared, one might say “constitutive,” delusion that is required for the perpetuation of the system. But the reliance of a political order on hysterical and escalating delusions is an indictment of that order. So, it might be worth the effort to imagine a social order without “rights.”

If the most telling defect of rights talk is the denial of the center behind vituperative claims that others wish to possess it, it may be that renewed attention to the center might provide a way of replacing “rights.” The originary hypothesis involves a group of proto-humans surrounding a central object; the emission of the originary sign generates, out of that object, a sacred center that subsists even when the object itself has been divided and devoured. If the significant is ultimately the sacred, there can be no significance without a center. We can take the relation to some center to be constitutive of human being. In *The End of Culture*, Eric Gans’s reconstruction of the center-periphery relations subsequent to the originary scene follows the succession of ostensive, imperative and declarative cultures. What he shows along the way is that the center as an agent is constructed prior to any agency on the margins, with the latter form of agency being modeled on that originally attributed to the center. In his analysis of imperative culture, Gans notes that the memory of the sacred object must conceive of that object as

a sacred *being* that exists above and beyond the concrete manifestations it may take on. The “signified” of the word/gesture of designation has thus become partly independent

of its referent. This independence is not merely formal; the imperative is effective only insofar as it is *addressed to* this “signified,” summoning it to be present. Thus the sacred being in imperative ritual possesses, in the eyes of the participants, an *intentional* ability to manifest itself or not.

The asymmetry of the imperative is a step in the direction of establishing symmetry between the sacred being and its worshipers—in a word, of *humanizing* the sacred. The animal images and masks that we may associate with the imperative level of culture are in fact signs of a growing anthropomorphism. This is the beginning of a development with profound ethical consequences... The ethical conception of the community depends no longer on the mere ad hoc appearance of the sacred being but on the will of a being whose judgment whether or not to manifest itself in the rite reflects the real cohesion of the community. (115)

The sacred being at the center exists above and beyond any of its concrete manifestations, it is addressed, it has intentionality, it can choose to be present or not—before any of these capacities are attributed to any of the members of the community. The sacred being is “humanized” before the humans are, it is anthropomorphized before there are humans on which to model the non-human—the human community takes on the attributes by modeling itself on the sacred being it has modeled. The center precedes the margin in every sense, and if agency on the margins was first constructed by analogy with the agency attributed to the center, it’s hard to see when that would have ceased to be the case. So, my argument above that the presumably individualizing insistence of rights is in fact a way of imagining ever more comprehensive modes of sovereignty, can, if anything, be formulated even more forcefully: any time we designate an individual, event, or activity as protected, in actuality or possibility, by the sovereign, we are in fact modeling the agency of that sovereign. And there is no individual, event or activity in a society governed by a sovereign that could be intelligible other than as protected or proscribed by the sovereign.

The agency of the center is constructed through the ongoing interaction between center and margins. On the originary scene, the center repulses the grasping of the members of the group, compelling them to stand down. The implication from the beginning is that once we have signification, the center is irresistible: there is nothing without the center, and a particular center can only be replaced by another center. Within imperative culture, the center-margin interaction proceeds through an exchange of imperatives: the members of the community make requests of the center, requests which must ultimately be reducible to the request that the center make itself available; meanwhile, the center issues orders to the members, orders which themselves must be reducible to serving and preserving the center. Any exchanges among the members themselves generate new centers that ultimately “orbit” the sacred center of the community: at the very least, if we are talking about something, we share the same language, and we can look at some object together without falling out, and must therefore share a relation to a prior center. Finally, declarative culture takes form in

narrating and commenting on activities taking place at the center, which involve the central figure providing or failing to provide for the community, with an increasingly complex system of discourse detailing all the different ways the center and the periphery can serve, betray, and disappoint one another. These are tales of the resentment of those on the periphery toward the center. And the secular discourses that emerge from mythological ones, and that are able to place human, mortal figures at the center, are modeled on the agency of the center, while incorporating resentment at being denied centrality themselves.

Gans has also argued that all resentment is ultimately resentment of the center (“The center as unique locus of significance is by this fact the focus of resentment,” “The Centre,” *Chronicle* 579). Gans identifies such resentment as being present on the originary scene itself, in the member’s resentment of the center for not presenting itself, for being unavailable while subsisting after the consumption of the object. That all resentment is ultimately a form of resentment towards the center is a difficult, but very illuminating concept. If a friend, for example, takes advantage of my friendship to advance himself at my expense at work or in some community activity, isn’t it him, my friend, that I am resenting, rather than the center? My focus certainly seems to be on my friend: I want to tell him what I think of him, I want to get back at him, I want others to know that I should really be in his place. But all of those actions, whether imagined or actually carried out, are actions that are prohibited under normal conditions, and part of the reason I fantasize about doing or doing them is precisely because they are prohibited. You don’t say things to someone else just for the sake of hurting them; you don’t interfere with the operations of some shared activity for the sake of slaking your own desire for revenge; you don’t indulge your vanity when you are charged with public responsibility. The reason you don’t do those things is that the center forbids them: all moral commands forbidding such “sins” come from the center. In that case, then, your resentment is, in fact, directed toward the center: the center has failed to ensure that the rules have been followed, and so you consider lifting your obligation to follow those rules yourself. This resentment might take the form of losing faith in God, or becoming more cynical about civic institutions or leaders, which is to say, those obliged to represent and preserve the center.

The Big Man’s usurpation of the sacred center, in Gans’s historical account perhaps the most revolutionary act in human history, can be understood as evincing just such a resentment of the center. The sacred center within the egalitarian community could not provide due recognition of the Big Man’s actual status. At the same time, the Big Man’s usurpation resolves some crisis within the community—if the Big Man were just acting on his own desire for centrality, he would have no idea what to do once he acquired it. It was either him or another contender, or an increasingly destructive struggle amongst various contenders. The Big Man knows, more or less consciously, that he must manage the very resentment that enabled his own elevation, resentment that will now be directed towards him. Resentment within the community is now modeled on this new mode of centrality—it is no longer directed towards the absent center for not presenting itself, but towards the

occupant of the center precisely for occupying it and thereby denying my own centrality (which I model on his). We should note the paradoxical nature of this resentment, which depends upon its object for self-definition: the more the Big Man preserves his own centrality, the more I am being denied my own. In archaic forms of sacred kingship, this takes the form of conferring ever more significance upon the king, who mediates between the community and the cosmos; while at the same time making the king far more vulnerable, as he is now responsible for any misfortune that befalls the community, and can fairly easily be removed by precisely the same kind of unanimous confrontation with the center through which humanity first emerged.

We could hypothesize that this vulnerability led to the establishment of more defensible forms of (still sacred) kingship, which we could call "imperial." The imperial king is removed from the ostensive grasp of his community; in fact, he rules over many communities, each with their own local cults. His sacrality is more abstract, and less bound up with the ebb and flow of everyday life. The ancient empires lasted a very long time, in some cases millennia, and it's worth considering why they nevertheless vanished, never to be recreated. They clearly weren't viable past a certain point. If we are to see the center as the final cause of social developments, and the management of resentment toward the center as the main problem of government, we must look there to account for the limits of imperial sacral rule. Imperial sacral kingship introduced two major innovations. First, the conquest and subsequent mass enslavement and conscription of entire populations; second the introduction of money and trade, ultimately linked to the former (in particular military necessities), but carried out by far more elite layers of the population. We have, as part of the same system, increasingly sophisticated institutions and therefore conceptions of justice (giving to each "his due"), that make it possible to distinguish between various forms of intention and responsibility; and the generation of massive organizations of human fodder, with sufficient excess populations for the institution of large scale human sacrifice. The incommensurability of these two interdependent systems sets the stage for the cross-civilizational crisis leading to what Karl Jaspers first called the "Axial Age." (I am indebted to David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* [Melville House: 2014] for this analysis.)

Resentment toward the sovereign center must come from the elites: it's impossible to imagine something like a slave or peasant revolt in the ancient empires (and there were a lot of them) without some form of elite sponsorship. Such resentment would be located within the justice system, most likely the upper echelons of that system, and would involve some figure being treated "unjustly" in a very visible way. Such injustice would be more visible if carried out against an exemplary figure, someone relatively independent but previously trusted by the sovereign, even a favorite, and a figure capable of articulately framing his mistreatment in the terms of abstract justice. All that would be necessary would be to narrate such an event (which may, of course, have happened many times, with a synthetic version ultimately emerging) modeled on the imposition of social death and human sacrifice upon the conquered population. This exemplary individual sets himself apart, is

ready to face social death, to explain himself and to do so publicly. The imperial sacral order would then become unviable, at least in the long term, because there is now a new mode of self-sacrificial sacrality that can address the crises produced by sacral imperial rule. This new mode of sacrality can be embraced by elites and the broader populace alike, and would therefore be a pole of attraction for the new merchant, priestly, and scribal classes (a more comprehensive account would have to connect these developments to the emergence of both money and literacy in the ancient world). Defeats and failures attributable to the sovereign would redound to the credit of the new, "Axial Age" sacralities, gradually discrediting the system of sacrifice and the divinities sanctioning it. For quite a while, though, this counter-sacrality might serve to sharpen the tools of imperial rule, as post-sacral, literate modes of thought can be applied to the mechanisms of domination, public manipulation, and war. Any viable form of governance must be able to trace its origins back to some such dialectic.

Gans focuses on the Axial Age acquisitions Judaism and Christianity, and sees their rejection of a sacrificial center and creation of a universal morality as the basis for the ultimate unfolding of liberal democratic market society. Each individual becomes a center with liberalism and the market model. Gans's analyses of Romanticism, in which individuals present themselves as universally excluded from society in order to create a style or mode of being that enables them to circulate within society (see, for example, *Originary Thinking* 164-171) lays the ground for his understanding of the omniscritism of liberalism. Gans makes perhaps his most unequivocal claim along these lines in the conclusion of *Originary Thinking*: "[t]he historical movement of desacralization operates neither through the endless deconstruction of the originary center nor through its definitive rejection, but through its omniscritic multiplication. Even 'decentralization' is a dangerous term; what is required is rather the universal proliferation of centers—every human being a center" (219). But as Gans also recognizes, someone will always present him/herself centrally first, so omniscritism is as asymmetrical and the modern market Gans theorizes in his essay "On Firstness": "market exchange maintains a permanent distinction between production and consumption, creating a permanent asymmetry between the consumer and the producer" (45), creating new forms of resentment. The paradox of market omniscritism, then, is that it is the production system that produces the very forms in which new centers, denouncing that production system, are projected.

If this highly asymmetrical omniscritism does not lead to violence it must be because a powerful central state ensures that it doesn't: indeed, consider how strong and centralized the state must be, and what a civilized political culture it must have inculcated, for the romanticist and later modernist cultural entrepreneurs to have flouted social norms so blatantly not only with impunity but for fame and profit. It should be mentioned that Gans does not often feel obliged to refer to the state in conducting such discussions, and in those cases rarely referring to its coercive and controlling functions, relegating it to the role, essentially, of redistribution, or addressing those resentments regarding market

asymmetries that might threaten the system. Liberal democracy is a kind of replication of the market model:

“[t]he liberal-democratic model is based on the regulation of the economic market by a political system that shares the quality of the market by bringing to bear collective judgments rather than granting absolute powers to a tyrant or self-perpetuating decision-making group. Freely contested elections and political debate are essential to allowing the various members of society to propose and enact measures to assuage their resentments. (“Liberal Democracy in Question,” *Chronicle* 562).

But if the political system works in exactly the same way as the economic system, by aggregating individual choices into a collective result that no one really chooses, why should it not simply aggravate the resentments generated within the market system? The voter is doing exactly the same thing as the consumer: “purchasing” a piece of power from a producer (the political party and its donors and patrons) in order to express her resentment at being ignored by the center. In the political sphere, it is even worse, because the voters, far more openly than consumers, are choosing against others, in order to frustrate and humiliate their rivals. The system, as proposed here by Gans, can only work if the “measures” proposed to “assuage” the resentments of the various individuals and groups in the social order actually do so. But why should we assume that those measures do, on balance, “assuage”? They can only do so if they are reasonable measures, effectively implemented, and if the legitimacy of decisions made by those implementing is accepted sufficiently to prevent the emergence of violent factions. Does the democratic system provide ground for assuming that any of this will be the case—that the measures will be reasonable, that they will be monitored beyond the minimal necessity of showing that a response has been made to some highly publicized resentment, that institutions and agencies are in place to implement the measures effectively, that they will be accepted by those by whom they must be accepted (rather than, for example, taken as a down payment for the next set of measures)? If the measures are actually implemented in such a way as to assuage, it will be in spite of, not because of, democracy: it will be because authority has been granted to institutions that is not revocable on a regular basis. But if reasonable measures can only be carried out by institutions placed, if only by convention, beyond direct public accountability, how is the functioning of those institutions improved by providing them with the task of “assuaging” in the first place? In other words, to the extent that governing institutions are trusted it is insofar as much of their operation remains beyond the reach of liberal and democratic demands, but this is what liberalism and democracy are unable to accept. Everything must eventually be politicized.

The role of governance in ordinary thinking must be framed in terms of our understanding of resentment. There seems to me in Gans’s discussions of resentment and the various modes in which it gets “discharged” and “assuaged” in liberal democracies an assumption about resentment that is unwarranted by ordinary thinking itself. That assumption is that

the resentments we see in these societies are simply the natural expression of unmediated resentments: it is natural that blacks would resent whites, or “racism”; it is natural that women would resent men, or “sexism” or “patriarchy”; it is natural that homosexuals would resent... and so on. The assumption is circular: because these resentments have been given the most prominent and explosive public expression, they are therefore the most “real” and “authentic” ones. It is just as easy to see these resentments as ones that have been opportunistically seized upon and inflamed within a system of “rights” that invites and even depends upon the perpetual stoking of resentment. If liberalism and democracy are to be taken as “natural” forms, including in the sense that they are “higher” social forms than the monarchies that preceded them, then these might very well be the most promising resentments for political entrepreneurs to incite insofar as resentments will be sorted out in accord with the order in which rights have been allocated to various groups. But if allocating rights and using them to deploy resentments against a social order which was removed violently rather than “refuted” was in fact the means by which liberalism and democracy were installed in the first place, then this appearance of naturalness dissolves. If resentment is always resentment of the center, then the center must play a formidable, even formative, role in shaping those resentments. Temporary occupants of the center in a liberal democratic order will promote those resentments that enable them to prolong their stay at the center, while their opponents will promote those that will enable them to take over the center themselves. If the occupant of the political center, the wielder of central power, has a far more permanent status, he will have no need to hype potential resentments, and if hope of displacing him is non-existent, neither will anyone else. In other words, a central figure in a system without rights would have more of an incentive to govern and allow other institutions to perform their primary functions. There would still be resentments—certainly an acceptance of the originary hypothesis compels us to grant the constitutive nature of human resentment—and we could also concede that they will be directed toward the political center, but the contents of the resentments will be radically different, and far less conducive to violence. In a well governed order, the form taken by resentments will be towards the failures of institutions in fulfilling their primary function. Are managers placing employees in the positions they are best suited for? Do teachers maximize the learning potential of students? Do producers provide products worthy of selective consumers? Resentments along these lines, even when “irrational,” which is to say driven by mimetic rivalry rather than an informed estimate of the actual situation, will not be implicitly insurrectional. They will be calls for more firmly and intelligently exercised authority.

What generates power, and gives one person power over others? Here as well we must think in terms of proximity to the center. The first instance of human power was on the originary scene, where a group of newly formed humans collectively deferred their desire and allowed a new reality to emerge at the center. This provides us with a model of human power: creating realities by following the lead of the object at the center of shared attention, rather than rivalrous desires. Power is always differential because some members of any group, in any situation, will exhibit greater powers of deferral: they will be able to stop and examine a

situation while others are rushing in, and they will have the patience to wait and see when the unfolding reality provides an opening for action. To the extent that the group is successful, they will follow those exhibiting a greater power of deferral, which means those individuals will have the power, and, ultimately a single individual will have the power because someone must exhibit the greatest power of deferral. Power is an interpretation of the demands of the center, and the center can only demand one thing at a time: whoever best articulates that demand governs, regardless of how close others might have been to doing so. This need not exclude all kinds of consultation, and an awareness of the needs and resentments of others in the group will make the exercise of power more steady and secure but I am making a kind of absolute ontological claim here: whenever many act together, we can identify a single leader who makes every decision that counts. If common action seems consensual, that just means that a strong sense of common goals and a shared ability to set aside rivalries masks the fact that, perhaps in a somewhat more subtle way, someone is taking the lead at every point where a disagreement is possible; if different people decide at different times, that means that either group is changing configuration while there is always a single head, or that the head has implicitly or explicitly delegated decision making power to others or, perhaps, that the group is in process of splitting up.

Power is therefore also a relationship: as soon as power is in someone's hands, he is obliged to continue to exhibit and even enhance his powers of deferral. He is now responsible for his fellows, and he must treat and respond to them as the center would have him do, setting aside his own resentments in the process. He must register and re-present their resentments of him as occupant of the center: each will, at times, believe that he or she could better play the central role, and sometimes some of them may be right. The holder of power has to convert these resentments into new forms of cooperation, emulation and friendly competition. We are not used to thinking of power this way, as earned leadership, even if there's no other way of explaining the earliest and still most basic forms of informal hierarchy: liberal and democratic attacks on the center encourage us to see power as arbitrarily held until proven otherwise—and even the proof is always considered provisional. But it must also be said that most forms of power in the contemporary world don't really look like this—the occupants of power often attain their positions through more or less subtle forms of violence, deception and manipulation. But these degenerate forms of power are only possible because social institutions once founded on the kind of deferral Philip Rieff called "charisma" have shaped the reality of the community so thoroughly that only under the most extreme circumstances will abuses of those institutions lead to their abandonment. Indeed, as I have pointed out, only the creation of a new, equally viable center could make such abandonment even thinkable. Such is the necessity of the center, and such the power of the memory of the founding of (especially) political institutions, that there is indeed a great deal of ruin in a nation. And it must also be said that even when the highest levels of social institutions are held by those who exploit the credit of the institution for personal or factional benefit, or short term ends, much of the rest of the institution might be in the hands of those still acting in accord with its primary purpose; in this way, institutions can be

maintained even through disastrous leadership. For a while, at least.

Power must be distributed and transferred, and this can be done only by those who hold power. The distribution of power is also modeled on the originary event. Now, when we think about a center, we think about a circle, and so we imagine the members of the originary community arrayed symmetrically equidistant from the central object. The first ritual would most likely represent the event in this way, and there would be extremely compelling reasons to maintain this ritual form. But just as the order of deferral on the originary scene must have been unequal, so must have been the approach to the object in the sparagmos. Some members of the group would manifest their deferral earlier and more clearly; and some would eat more and take better portions, just never so much as to reignite the mimetic crisis at the origin of the event. But in order to ensure that no one takes too much more, some members of the group would have to intervene where conflicts seem to be getting out of control. Those who get better portions might often be those who then have to “adjudicate” between other members of the group, since they are already assured of their part. The adjudicators may very well have been those who deferred first and were therefore deferred to. Any distribution of power will likewise be uneven, as it must be guided by the needs of following the commands of the center.

The transfer of power is the more difficult problem. Whoever has seized the center may eventually become less fit than others to wield that power, or at the very least must eventually die. Here we see the paradox of power in its fullest form. My analysis so far has suggested that power must ultimately be held by a single member of the community, who is in turn responsible for its distribution. Needless to say, every new power holder does not revisit every decision ever made on which person is to occupy which position; rather, by allowing many, most, or all to continue in their positions, he now takes responsibility for the decisions that put them there in the first place and demonstrates his faith in the judgment of those who exercised power before him. Every member of the community knows, more or less explicitly, that there must be someone occupying the center, but part of the way each knows this is through his resentments directed toward the center. Those resentments will be at their most powerful when there is uncertainty at the center, and therefore no clear “framing” of those resentments. The transfer of power is therefore that moment where both the sanctity of the center and the power it confers is formalized and where resentments toward the center are most “unbound.” The formalization of power can quell those resentments by referring back to previous framings and implicitly promising their renewal, or it can make the attempted seizure of the center all the more attractive in the knowledge that any occupant can be sanctified by the same formalities.

The election of those who are to occupy positions at the center is best seen as an attempt to resolve the paradox of the transfer of power. Election was a common way of choosing kings in primitive communities and was replaced by hereditary rule once the kingdom became, through conquest, the property of the king, which could therefore be transferred like any

other form of property. Sooner or later there will be a situation in which there is no clearly eligible heir, in which case violence becomes a very likely way of settling the question of succession. The problems with election run even deeper than that, though. Through elections the power centers distributed throughout the community become permanently antagonistic to each other, and if there is no permanent occupant of the center, then the state just becomes an instrument in the hands of one faction, or coalition of factions, or the other, with every incentive to make as much use of it as possible until it passes back into the hands of your opponents.

That the temporary holder of power holds it on popular sufferance is seen by democracy advocates as a virtue, but in fact those without power can have no way of knowing how those with power should use it. All anyone can know authoritatively is the sphere of activity in which he participates, along with the specific mode of power allocated to him for that purpose. Elections formalize and make explicit the dependence of the power holder on those he leads or governs, but they do so in the worst possible way, outside of the context of the responsibilities and powers of the subjects themselves. The dependence of power upon its base is far better formalized through modes of consultation through which all members of the community act as eyes and ears of the sovereign and communicate to him through established channels. Finally, elections inevitably raise the question of rights, first of all the right to vote: who should be allowed to vote? What age is the cut-off? What about foreigners? The introduction of rights talk means that any attempt to establish a responsible, qualified, invested electorate will be undermined and replaced by universal suffrage. Universal suffrage seems to empower everyone maximally, but it just ensures that no serious decisions can be left to be decided by the electoral process, making it necessary to manage, limit, deceive and ignore in turn the expressed desires of the majority; indeed, the electorate gets turned into proxies of those who actually exercise power, as they fight their battles with their rivals, and themselves ultimately become incapable of fulfilling the functions of an elite.

That still leaves the problem of power transfer unsolved. This problem can't be solved by some formal mechanism of selection, since any formal method will be open to interpretation and manipulation and, like any rule, must have its exceptions. The problem is that the transfer of power must involve initiation into power, which means that the occupant of central power must take on the responsibility for recruiting and initiating candidates for succession; but in doing so will he not be raising potential rivals, of each other as well as him, with no filial sympathy or obligation to the sovereign but having been told by that sovereign that he might be a worthy successor? The solution is to gear the entire social order towards the resolution of the problem of power transfer. The meaning of social life, the telos of the social order, is to ensure the orderly transfer of power to the worthiest successor. Every institution has its purpose, which constitutes its center: to educate, to protect, to do research, to produce some good or service, to excel in some activity. In each case a power hierarchy is established in the way I have been describing through my

discussion of power—the power hierarchy serves the end of the institution, which is why it deserves the respect of the members. The purpose of the sovereign is to ensure that all institutions maintain the form of power proper to their respective purposes. In turn, all institutions report to the sovereign and contribute to the initiation of prospective successors, chosen by a process overseen by the sovereign and no doubt institutionally based, on the model of military academies, officer schools and other highly selective elite-promotion institutions. Obedience to the sovereign is sharply distinguished from the contribution to the initiation of the candidates (the sovereign always has a ranking recorded in case succession becomes immediately necessary but is constantly revising the ranking as a result of his oversight of the initiation process). Any obedience to an order of the candidate, much less one contradicting orders given by the sovereign, would stand out, would be alarming, and would be immediately reported, instantly disqualifying that candidate. The candidates don't give orders, in other words—a representative of the sovereign gives whatever orders are necessary on their behalf, as needed for the process of initiation. (Those candidates never chosen to be sovereign can, of course, play other highly valued roles as advisors to or representatives of the sovereign.) Such a breach by a candidate (and possibly by those hoping to be his client) could take place in any institution, as all will participate in the initiation process, and so all institutions must internalize the distinction between obedience to the sovereign and presentation of “work processes” to the candidates—in this way, no breach will go undetected.

Making this distinction between commands from and obligations to the sovereign, on the one hand, and participating in the process of initiation of potential sovereigns, on the other hand, is, then, the most fundamental tribute to the center paid in a “rightless” system. This distinction will run through all institutions, practices and discourses, in various ways, explicit and implicit. But it then follows that all assessment and even policing of social activities will involve detecting and deferring breaches of the boundary between the present sovereign and the future of sovereignty. The distinction in question presupposes that the only thing that stands outside of sovereign power is the paradox of power itself, which is in fact instantiated in the temporalizing of sovereignty. Degeneration in governance and disloyalty will be effects of and contribute to the treating of potential sovereigns as present or imminent sovereigns. The social order will develop “specialists” in making the distinction, which is to say specialists in the paradox of power.

The Axial Age acquisitions have always involved the creation of congregations of those who meet to explore together the consequences of the post-sacrificial revelation regarding the paradox of power they have received. Whatever the differences between Confucian thought, Platonism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and other products of the Axial Age, they all rely upon the at least occasional, but usually institutionalized, commitment of “adepts” to clarifying and renewing the revelation in the face of its obfuscations by poorly managed resentments toward the center. It is in the creation of such small groups, or disciplines, that we can identify the retrieval of the originary scene against the background of the crisis of

resentment. Such groups call for some kind of ascension or heightening of deferral, in this case deferral of the very resentments that have brought the social order into crisis and made existing forms of sacrality ineffective. The disciplines guard the boundary between themselves and the norm of ordinary attentional spaces, while at the same time moving throughout the social order in various ways, inviting recruits, trying to modify especially egregious social practices, seeking the ear of the powerful, leaving records of the discipline's thinking and practices. This remains the case even when a particular discipline, like the Christian commemoration of the crucifixion, itself becomes the social norm—that just means new disciplines need to be created to preserve the original revelation against its dilution.

In identifying the paradoxical nature of power in a way that the sovereign can never completely grasp in the act of exercising power, the disciplines potentially set themselves against the sovereign. After all, they have pledged themselves to a center older and higher than the sovereign center, and must judge the sovereign center to be lacking in comparison. We can already see the implications of this construct in the relations between the prophets and kings in the Hebrew Bible, but the potential becomes full-blown reality in the European Christian Middle Ages. From a strictly theoretical point of view, all of modern political thinking, most especially the “rights talk” I began this essay by discussing, emerges out of this ultimately unsolvable problem: the sovereign is God's regent on earth, which makes him subordinate to God's will; but God's will can only be interpreted by God's representatives on earth, creating from the very beginning the elements of dual sovereignty, or *imperium in imperio*. This division is what provides the opening to modern liberal and democratic politics, which simply replace “God's will” with the “people,” or the “individual,” or the “nation,” or the “oppressed,” or the “workers,” or some other entity in positing a “real” sovereign to which the actual sovereign must defer. All of modern politics involves trying to subordinate the actual sovereign to one or another version of supposed “real” sovereignty. The implicit, real, sovereign is who has given one one's “rights.” Behind the scenes are rival powers using these purported legitimations to pin the actual sovereign to their own mapping of actual onto real sovereignty. The state is centralized, power is accumulated, the state becomes a bigger prize, power is more insecure, and the government does less and less governing.

The Axial Age revelations regarding the paradox of power can be integrated into a secure social order by situating the disciplines within institutions, and charging them with maintaining the distinction between present and future sovereignty. In this way they provide feedback to the sovereign without claiming to answer to some higher authority. Any command can be obeyed in different ways, and the more open-ended the command the more the servant is confronted with the distinction between its “letter” and “spirit.” The disciplines display their loyalty to the sovereign by presenting their obedience to the particularly open-ended charges they are given as in the “highest” spirit of the sovereign—in this way, they never place themselves outside of sovereign power while

“reading” the sovereign’s commands back to him (declaratively) in a way that enables him to sharpen his own understanding of the intent informing them. This is the most basic form taken by the paradox of power: that the one commanding is himself constituted by the ways his command will be taken up. As Gans shows in his analysis of the imperative in *The Origin of Language*, for the one commanding the command is essentially an ostensive, a sign whose very issuance generates the reality it indicates; for the one receiving the command, meanwhile, the imperative represents a desire, which by its nature can never be fulfilled in the exact form in which it was conceived. The disciplines stand in this gap between the ostensive and desiring dimensions of the imperative. The disciplines also represent, then, the solution to the other problem endemic to autocratic rule: how to remove the manifestly the unfit ruler. The disciplines go as far as they can in making the ruler fitter, while in the last extremity they might work counter to the usual process and transfer their loyalty to one of the potential sovereigns. Of course there are dangers implicit here, but that is the case with any social order comprised of desiring and resentful beings, and we would have to rely upon the people produced within such an order having the intelligence, responsibility—in sum, the sovereign imaginary—to go through the established layers of trust (first of all the sovereign, but then those whom the sovereign himself has trusted...) in such a way as to maintain the singularity of the center. The founding assumption that the occupant of the center must not be subject to any “higher” or “more real” form of sovereignty is preserved.

I hope it is clear that the post-liberal, post-democratic form of social order I am proposing here does not involve a return to some earlier, more primitive social form. In fact, the most prominent form taken by the disciplines today is, of course, that of the scientific discipline, organized around the laboratory and the experiment. The study of the paradox of power would be *the* social science, taking many forms and treating all social institutions as its “laboratories.” Needless to say, the kind of experimentation possible with the disciplines of physics, chemistry and (with some limitations) biology are inapplicable to social relations. The “praxical” study of social order takes the form, rather, of making the norms, rules, hierarchies, and, again, the sovereign imaginary followed tacitly by everyone, more explicit. And then a little more explicit. When anomalies emerge, new practices need to be acknowledged. The center is served and “verified” by naming practices, entities and agencies that have so far gone unnoticed and unacknowledged. Those in the disciplines invent names and take on names that bring more of the tacit to light, and allows it to be authorized and recuperated within the system.

A word on economics and technology. By now, the only remaining justification for the liberal order seems to be that it has made us rich (claims that it makes us freer are, it seems to me, made much more tentatively and taken much less seriously these days—when Twitter, Facebook and Google are rejiggering their algorithms to marginalize “problematic” sites and users, the mask of power is thinning rapidly)—so far, at least, we are still wealthier than the Chinese. It may very well be that the liberal governance of the 19th and early 20th century provided a space for the extraordinarily rapid and comprehensive industrialization

of Western societies. The loosening of sovereign order allowed a few very talented, very intelligent, and sometimes very sociopathic individuals to exploit the simultaneous rapid centralization of those societies to put scientific and engineering disciplines to work in unprecedented ways. There is no need to surrender any of these acquisitions, even if we think that the social order which provided a hothouse for their development by now (at least) causes far more harm than the benefits offered by technological advances it still enables (in increasingly limited ways). There is also every reason to support some kind of market, but one constrained (as every market has always been constrained) by the needs of sovereign power. At the very least, for example, the sovereign wants all the means needed for maintaining armed and police forces (weapons, the science and technology needed to produce weapons, the raw materials—metals, sources of energy—information technology and so on) to remain at hand. And the corporate form, with deep roots in Western culture, which involves the chartering of enterprises (mostly but by no means only economic) by the sovereign, provides a structure for managing relations between economic units and the state.

Clearly, international order would need to be rethought radically on post-liberal terms. Ultimately, we can assume hegemonic relations between larger, more powerful and more dependent states—there is nothing particularly new in that, even if liberalism prefers to conceal such relations behind the supposed sovereign equality of all states. The hegemonic states would grant sovereignty to their clients up until the point where ineffective or treacherous governance on the part of the client state subverts the larger order of sovereignties itself. Rivalries between hegemonic states, over acquiring clients among other things, may be inevitable, but the respect for sovereign order provides a better basis for peace than human rights or some such chimera. It will be argued that state sovereignty has already been tried as a basis for international order in the post-Westphalian world, but it must be said that the coincidence of this order with the emergence of the extreme disorder introduced by liberalism makes this an invalid test of the concept. We will still be left with what might be the greatest problem facing humanity since World War 2, even if we discuss it far less now than during the Cold War: the existence of nuclear weapons, whose use could in minutes destroy all of civilization. The best answer to this threat is the development of prophylaxes which can neutralize the danger. Missile defense shields are the first step in this direction, but as yet unimaginable advances will certainly take place. One thing all (but at least the most powerful) sovereigns may be able to agree on is that it would be better if more scientific resources and sophistication were to go into rendering social orders immune from not only nuclear weapons but from the weaponization of all forms of scientific and technological development. As Peter Sloterdijk has argued, the self-immunization of social orders from threats of all kinds, including internal ideological and psychopathological threats, is essentially synonymous with civilization. Those sovereigns behind in the process of self-immunization might object to having their offensive weapons neutralized before they can catch up, but a tipping point can be reached, with the aid of the firmness, moderation and generosity of the more advanced state, beyond which self-immunization will make

“offensiveness” of diminishing value. What is at any rate certain is that only centered sovereignties could bring their actions into correspondence with discussions of this kind.

Not too much thought should be given to the specifics of post-liberal social order—doing so just creates disputes that cannot be settled. Liberal theory is a very aggressive, uncompromising and universalizing theory, and is very difficult to confront head on without getting involved in its own paradoxes. To argue with liberalism is to acknowledge it as a legitimate debating partner and, since liberalism is in power, it is to accept its legitimation of you as a legitimate disputant. No matter how the discussion or debate turns out, liberalism wins. What can be done, though, is to display the wreckage liberalism leaves in its wake: as an idea, what is most basic to liberalism is the autonomy of the individual relative to social obligations and traditions; liberalism, therefore, must function as a battering ram against all obligations and traditions (and, by now, even biological reality). This destructive activity is constant and extensive, because all of our social reality is constituted through obligations and traditions. In the present moment, in particular, the wreckage is piling up in ways that can no longer be avoided or denied without very obtrusive media and state intervention and manipulation: families broken by feminism, nations broken by immigration and free trade, individuals broken by consumerism and de-industrialization, institutions and communities broken by victimary viciousness.

But more important than all this material and social wreckage, in fact, inclusive of it, is the breaking of meaning effected by liberalism. I mean “meaning” in the most literal sense here: liberalism makes it less and less possible for people to say what they mean, or to mean anything at all, at least if they want to communicate and circulate within the existing order. By “meaning,” what I mean is that there is a shared ostensive that “seals” any discourse. The shared ostensive doesn’t have to be a thing in the world, a referent—it can just as readily be a concept, or a distinction between things. If I note something about “the roof on that house over there,” it’s easy enough to see where the meaning lies: you can direct your attention to where I am drawing it and see whatever I saw as noteworthy about the roof of that house we can both see. Meaning is established rather differently in a scientific discipline organized around experimental protocols. But what provides for meaning in social order is the conjunction of power and accountability. If I say “Smith is considering putting a traffic light on that corner,” the sentence makes sense (has meaning) if we know who Smith is and if Smith is someone whose thinking about putting a traffic light on that corner has some determinate relation to a traffic light actually ending up there—say, the mayor, or a traffic specialist hired by the city. If the only Smith we both know is a pianist who lives across the country, you can’t really know what I’m talking about. The more we all know who is responsible for making things happen, and the more those people actually do make those things happen, the more meaningfully we can speak. The presumption of a shared order is just as necessary for more abstract and theoretical discussions, which depend upon a shared intellectual tradition, shared texts, a range of known interpretations of those texts, institutions that perpetuate the study of those texts, and so on. Even more “rogue,” “avant-

garde” or “unorthodox” intellectual spaces distinguish themselves from the more established ones, upon which they therefore depend for making meaning.

Now, let’s remind ourselves of my opening discussion of “rights.” “Rights” can make sense to the extent that they are themselves embedded in social obligations and traditions—for example, the “rights” peasants may have “acquired” over the centuries to use some part of the master’s land for grazing their animals. But we haven’t spoken about “rights” like that in a very long time, a fact that itself testifies to the wreckage liberalism has wrought on the language: now, “rights” above all refer to claims on others with no basis in tradition or established social obligations; indeed, that is their justification, that those traditions and obligations have constituted unjust exercises of power, marginalization and exclusion upon those expected to respect them. “Right” is coming to refer to some demand no one would have thought of before hearing it, and yet which (or for that very reason) indicts the entire social order of crimes beyond reparation. The point of rights talk now is to generate new forms of power, to be enforced by new centralizations of the state power, informed by new splinterings of power centers grasping at access to state power. The corrosive effects work through all political language but eventually all language, to the point where if you make sense in a liberal order, you make sense in spite of and against that order: by creating a space where discourse can be shared and contained. (Complaints against specialist jargon are legion, but I’ve never seen anyone consider whether every day, commonsense discourse in liberal orders might, in fact, be far more littered with empty, bizarre and unintelligible terms than the most abstruse jargon. I’m not referring to slang—I have in mind the ordinary ways people come to speak of desires, hopes, obligations and so on. “Meaning,” in the more “existential” sense is clearly implicated here as well.) Responsible language, under late, spiraling, liberalism, must face and record honestly and without blanching the wreckage; and, on the other side, create spaces where meaning is possible because accountability can be joined to power.

So, what is to be done? Infiltrate the most proximate discipline. Study its origin in the paradox of power. Make the paradox of power explicit where it is now tacit. Become a living, breathing sign of the paradox of power. Listen very carefully for commands from the center. Wait until the center is made singular again, and initiates a new distribution. Be ready to commemorate the transfer of power.

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