

# White Guilt, Past and Future

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The politics of the past few years, dominated by the reality and threat of Islamic terrorism, seem designed to persuade us of the primacy of resentment in human affairs. The existence of people willing not merely to risk death but to court it in the hope of killing as many of the enemy as possible would seem to offer incontrovertible proof that not love but resentment conquers all. But ever since Nietzsche first theorized *le ressentiment*, it has been clear that the scene of resentment and the power it generates are dependent on a complementary phenomenon that allows the marginal *man of resentment* to triumph over the forces that control the scenic configuration—a phenomenon for which Nietzsche provides no real explanation. I call this phenomenon *white guilt*.

The original use of this term refers to the guilt experienced by whites over the unfair advantages they owe to racism. Two books published in 1997 contain the phrase in their—curiously similar—titles: *Race Card: White Guilt, Black Resentment, and the Assault on Truth and Justice*, ed. Peter Collier and David Horowitz, and *Black Anxiety, White Guilt, and the Politics of Status Frustration* by T. Alexander Smith and Lenahan O'Connell; in 2006 Shelby Steele put it on the title side of the colon in *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*. But since in our intuitive semiotic system white is not, as the optics treatises tell us, a combination of all the colors, but the absence of color—the state of *unmarkedness*—I feel justified in defining white guilt by metaphysical rather than mere physical whiteness. No doubt the notion of white guilt in Western culture depends on a coincidence of the metaphysical and the physical, but it is the first that is primary: *white guilt is the guilt of the unmarked toward the marked*.

As a point of reference, in the December 12, 2004 issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, Michael Kinsley half congratulates and half commiserates with himself over the speed with which gay marriage has come close to general acceptance, and in some circles has come to be looked upon as a right. Kinsley ends his piece thus:

[The acceleration of the process of recognizing injustice] means that all of us who consider ourselves good-hearted, well-meaning, empathetic Americans—but don't claim to be great visionaries—are probably staring right now at an injustice that will soon seem obvious, and

we just don't see it. Somewhere in this country a gay black woman, grateful beneficiary of past and present perceptual transformations, has said something today in all innocence that will strike her just a few years from now as unbelievably callous, cruel and wrong. Kinsley's black lesbian will soon realize she is oppressing someone whose victimary stigma we have not yet learned to be guilty about. What better illustration could be given of the power of white guilt than this anticipatory certitude of new victims to discover?

## **Originary Thinking about White Guilt**

To engage in originary thinking is to conceive the origin of the human—language, ritual, the aesthetic—as an event:

Whereas animal experience is motivated primarily by appetite—animal cognition reflecting the fundamental difference between a perceiving consciousness and appetitive objects—human experience remains mediated by a common scene—language—which is nothing other than the institution of a barrier of representation, dividing the (prehuman) appetitively motivated subjectivity from the desirable object. [T]he first moment of specifically human experience occurs when protohominid society reaches a critical level of intraspecific violence and its existing social structure (based on a complex and strict pecking order decided by one-on-one contests of dominance and submission) no longer provides the community with unifying power. Thus, violence typically breaks out over objects attractive to instinctual appetite. The originary hypothesis proposes that the salient feature of human society—language—must have originated as a mechanism for deferring violence. Thus, the first sign is an “aborted gesture of appropriation” which defers animal appetite through the institution of communal representation. This gesture takes place on a communal scene where the participants surround an object attractive to animal appetite which all seek to appropriate but, for fear of mutual reprisal, are forced instead merely to equally designate. This moment of suspension opens up a linguistic space between the designating individuals and the attractive central object, thus providing the characteristic centre-and-periphery configuration which will be reflected in all recreations of the scene. The “aborted gesture” becomes the first sign and instigates a mechanism for communal interaction far more efficient than the genetically programmed forms of communication inherited from the animal past. In the scene of origin, the first sign—the aborted gesture of appropriation—is an ostensive. This minimal definition of language is all that is needed to institute the scene of representation. In designating the central object, all the participants reveal their desire for the object, but at the same time they prohibit any one individual from fulfilling that desire through the appropriation of the appetitive object. In thus deferring their desire, they transform the perception of the object from being merely attractive to animal appetite, to a transcendental plane where it is represented as universally significant to all the individuals on the periphery. This creation of a shared scene of universal significance is nothing other than the collective scene of linguistic presence upon which all representational (*i.e.*, cultural) productions are subsequently dependent. (Richard van Oort,

"Epistemology and Generative Theory: Derrida, Gans, and the Anthropological Subtext of Deconstruction," *Anthropoetics* 1, 1 (June 1995)  
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0101/vano.htm>)

In the hypothetical originary event, the formation of the community drives out all internal conflicts; but this process is not instantaneous. We owe to Adam Katz the observation that firstness is a necessary element of the minimal originary scene (see "Remembering Amalek: 9/11 and Generative Thinking," *Anthropoetics* 10, 2 (Fall/Winter 2004-05)  
<http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1002/amalek.htm>). That the emission of the sign occurs spontaneously to all the members of the group is a less parsimonious assumption than that a "first" member of the group, by aborting his appropriative gesture toward the central object, provides a model of proto-signing behavior for the others to imitate. This priority, once we include it in our model, contains the latent potentiality not merely for differentiation but for hierarchy, and for the resentments that hierarchy arouses in both those on top and those below.

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The overall category of xenophobia is anticipated by the latent possibility of two very different resentments toward (and discriminations against) either the early or late users of the sign, either of whom is viewed as closer to the center than the "unmarked" self; the first, because they discover its sacrality, the last, because they persist in their claim on its appetitive reality. The crucial historical reenactment of the firstness of the originary scene in a world of plural societies is the Hebrews' invention/discovery of *monotheism*, the redefinition of the scene as an explicitly global phenomenon with the One God as its unique center. Although the monotheistic God is claimed to stand equally above everyone, the fact that the Hebrews were the first to make this claim for "their" god gives rise to the persistent phenomenon of *antisemitism*. Similarly, the originary roots of ordinary xenophobia (racism, ethnocentrism) lie in the discrimination of the "early" users of the sign against the "late."

White guilt is much farther than racism or antisemitism from its originary model; in the strong form in which we know it today, it scarcely predates the fall of the Berlin wall, and even in its broadest sense as guilt for the exclusion of the collective Other, it does not appear to antedate the French Revolution. A footnote of Chateaubriand's *Essai sur les révolutions* (1797) describing the author's purported encounter near Niagara Falls with one of a group of American Indians, contains the extraordinary sentence, "How thankful was I to him for not liking me!" (*Comme je lui savais gré de ne pas m'aimer!*) This early expression of white guilt is far from today's terrorized expressions of PC, if only because at the time its idiosyncratic pose of self-hatred would have appeared—was meant to appear—paradoxical. Like all mimetic phenomena, the guilt adopted by a "unique" romantic ego is not the same as that of an entire class whose enlightened members teach it to be ashamed of its

pretensions to universality, holding up those who persist in these pretensions as foils to their own virtue.

White guilt is the obverse of the unconscious discrimination that Kinsley dreads; it internalizes within the unmarked group the real or potential accusation of the marked that they have been excluded from its conception of universal humanity. White guilt's open-ended anxiety takes the place of guilt for formerly legal privileges.

## **Resentment in the Modern Era**

The resentment specific to modernity, as exemplified by a line running from *Hamlet* through Molière's *Misanthrope* to Rousseau and the Romantics, is impotently dependent on the scene from which the subject prefers to claim expulsion rather than acting either to rejoin or to destroy it. Hegel's *schöne Seele* is a variant of this line in which resentment is "sublimated" into an overwhelming sense of the evil of the world, an evil that contaminates us from without and that we combat, or at least denounce, in vain. Modern resentment is not yet white guilt because the resentful subject does not admit to complicity in the expulsion of which he sees himself the victim. Its dynamic is situated within a society for which the self-styled exclusion of the romantic victim, by personalizing the anonymity of urban society by a vision of persecution, is secretly a mode of integration. No doubt the romantic intelligentsia, once their attachment to the Restoration had worn off, became champions of the *peuple* and imputers of guilt to the *bourgeoisie*—although the latter was more violently scorned for its philistinism than for its oppression of the proletariat. But the nineteenth-century radical intelligentsia did not conceive the provocation of white guilt as its primary mission, which would in effect have been an admission of defeat. The true revolutionary wants to win, not just make his opponent feel guilty. The revolutionary bourgeois intellectual gave up his guilt when he went over to the proletarian cause and fought for his own class's annihilation.

The successful liberations that followed WWII could not have been obtained without white guilt. But the early conquests of the postwar era were predicated on a restricted form of this guilt to which they could promise a closure devoid of Kinsleyan anxieties. Guilt for segregation or colonialism ends with the phenomenon itself, just as guilt for depriving women of the vote ends when the vote is granted. To end de jure privileges is to create a society of equals, a meritocracy. The Roosevelt liberals for whom meritocracy was the ultimate state of the market system have today for the most part joined the neoconservative camp in disillusion. The meritocratic ideal is vulnerable to the resentment inevitably generated in those whose merit is declared inferior, and our political system dictates that if these individuals are members of ascriptive groups that can with any credibility claim to be stigmatized, movements will arise to promote their interests by appealing to the white guilt of the rest of society.

The heyday of unrestricted white guilt began with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR. With market society no longer menaced by a rival socioeconomic system, the only serious opposition to it would henceforth be internal to the market system, for which it could offer no credible replacement. At this point the revolutionary intelligentsia was forced to recognize the essential identity of what had previously appeared as two ontologically distinct and opposed entities: the class of oppressors and the class of their denouncers. The intelligentsia is only sporadically the voice of the (now largely third-world) proletariat who stand outside the power structure by their non-possession of the means of production; its chief function is to act as the conscience of the universal bourgeoisie, from which it distinguishes itself—but that difference is everything—by its awareness of guilt, which it undertakes to spread to those who continue to ignore it. Conversely, the resentment of those who see themselves as victims can achieve results only by allying itself with the far greater force of white guilt.

Let us call *victimary liberalism* the ideology of those who devote their political energy to the cultivation of white guilt—first their own, then everyone else's. Rather than an expression of resentment at failure, white guilt is cultivated as a compensation for success. White guilt is not left to individual or even group psychology; it is administered by a network of institutions that channel its energy into expiatory gestures, which these institutions seek to impose on the rest of the “unmarked” population. Groups of “activists” conceive it as their mission to defend the interests not just of other humans but of animals, trees, water, and so on, presumably in preference to those of their generally affluent membership. The “blue” institutions of the media, entertainment, and the university are the most visible components of this network, which was perturbed by 9/11 but has since more than fully recovered. Even Kinsley is disturbed by the increasing banalization of institutionalized white guilt; with the exception of a small vocal faction of conservatives poorly represented in prestigious universities and media venues, the intelligentsia takes for granted that unrestricted white guilt is the unique touchstone of ethical judgment.

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Conversely, the intense contempt in which the intellectual class holds the “red” electorate has its source in the latter's apparent indifference to white guilt. By despising the “neocon” establishment, the victimary liberal admits and simultaneously rejects his own complicity in the oppression he denounces. In this regard, Islamic terrorism is a source of genuine fear but also of moral relief, enabling the intellectual to hold the Administration responsible for having made us a target and to forget that the Islamists' resentment is directed not at specific American policies but at the entire market system of which the United States is the most powerful component. The relationship between the intellectual left and the terrorists is symbiotic precisely because it is not symmetrical. (If there is symmetry, it is between the terrorists and the “hawks,” neither of whom is appreciably influenced by white guilt.) The left condemns Western society for oppressing its Other while the Islamists denounce their

own rulers' softness toward "otherness." The terrorists carry out in reality the same actions that our local revolutionaries perform symbolically; how many times had the World Trade Center and the Pentagon been burned in effigy by antiglobal protesters at international trade conferences? That Western intellectuals and Islamists share a common enemy explains why the former tend to express less hostility to the latter than to the representatives of global market society.

## The Structure of White Guilt

It would be a mistake to characterize white guilt as simply a binary relationship between the guilty individual and the center that he has emptied of its victimary referent. Like every scenic interaction, white guilt is ternary; it is both shared with the other participants and mediated by them, like a tax owed to the center that other taxpayers make sure one pays. Even when one faces a direct victimary claim, it is the condemnation of one's fellow guilt-bearers that one principally fears, psychologically and above all institutionally. In the United States, but increasingly in other Western countries, compensation of "victims," as the ominous term "political correctness" implies, is enforced through the judicial process and/or bureaucratic grievance mechanisms. The hyperbole characteristic of victimary discourse functions to remind the larger community of this. It is a common, if tacit, understanding that victimary rhetoric need not meet normal standards of truth—witness the prestige of Al Sharpton after the Tawana Brawley hoax—since its function is less to point to a specific injustice than to remind the "white" majority of its guilty status. White guilt is distinct from the more general phenomenon of originary guilt as it appears in Freud's or Girard's model or in Nietzsche's analysis of *ressentiment*. Freud and Girard speak of guilt only in reference to a specific victim, father or "emissary"; guilt for the originary collective sacrifice, because it is not mediated by the being/signified of the originary sign, is assimilated to the guilt experienced by an individual murderer.

The classical victim of injustice was an individual even when he was a member of a stigmatized group. The Dreyfus case may have provoked cries of "*mort aux Juifs!*" and given birth to Zionism, but it was entirely focused on the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus himself (and secondarily on other individuals in the army, the Jewish community, the liberal and reactionary press, etc.). In contrast, the specific character of postmodern white guilt is the *collective* nature of the victimary figure. The Tailhook scandal and the Rodney King beating, to cite a couple of examples from the 90s, were not about King or Paula Coughlin but about women and blacks, even minorities in general (most of the looting during the King riots was done by Latinos). Neither King nor even Coughlin was either innocent or guilty; they were *victims*. The acquittal of O. J. Simpson despite his obvious guilt reflected a similar assimilation of the individual to his racial group. The mostly black jurors who voted for acquittal and their supporters in the black community (where an estimated 70% affirmed Simpson's innocence) were not judging Simpson's guilt so much as "sending a message" to the white majority. In this case, the application of victimary rhetoric to a privileged

individual failed to persuade the general/white public, but this rhetoric was learned and reinforced by people who were used to using it successfully.

One can regret a loss, but one can feel guilt only toward a subsisting being. The collective guilt for sacrifice is not directed toward the central victim as such but toward the divinity, the signified of the sacred sign that the sacrificers have denuded of its referent. The Christian intuition of the ultimate identity of the victim and the divinity in the incarnate *logos* is incompatible with a mode of thinking in which the individual victim is a representative not of the divinity but of an ascriptive group. Victimary rhetoric is an extension of Nietzsche's *Sklavenmoral* by which the weak dominate the strong, but it adds a collective component that Nietzsche never anticipated. Nietzsche's *ressentiment* subordinates the "strong" to the Judeo-Christian priests on the basis of an abstract *Moral* condemning the exercise of worldly power rather than out of guilt toward those over whom the power is exercised. The Christian slaves' weapon against their masters is their faith in Christ's promise to them despite their lowly status, not an accusation of *slavophobia*. The Martin Luther King phase of the civil rights movement explicitly took its example from this vision of Christianity; the general reverence felt toward King reflects his enunciation of an egalitarian, color-blind vision. It is not fortuitous that today those most strongly identified as Christians are those who are arrayed *against* white guilt. White guilt may depend on the Christian association of the sacred with the victim, but it rejects the Christian's fundamental mediation through God. Postmodern victimary thinking is fundamentally atheistic; it understands human interaction as a zero-sum game played on a scene with no central mediator, which is why it is so vulnerable to paradoxes of cooperation on the Prisoners' Dilemma model.

Before 9/11 one could imagine that on the domestic front the nihilism of white guilt was working itself out by analogy with the PC/anti-PC dialogue playing out in the universities. The early to mid-90s saw many books devoted to the PC question—Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1992); Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy, *Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* (1992); Ward Parks, *Political Correctness and the Assault on Individuality* (1993); Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips, eds., *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness* (1994); Sarah Dunant, ed. *War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (1994); Marilyn Friedman and Jan Narveson, *Political Correctness: For and Against* (1995); and so on. Conservatives provide PC horror stories; liberals deny the seriousness of these and point to the persistence of sexism and racism; moderates condemn the excesses of both sides and remind us that the university—and the society as a whole—is really functioning pretty well. There are many flavors of PC, but the movement that has driven it most forcefully in Western society is feminism, dominated by upper-middle-class professional women whose aims are incremental rather than nihilistic. Whatever the fantasies of extremists who equate sex with rape and the "patriarchy" with tyranny, men and women in first-world societies are continuing to find ways to get along while adapting to the increasing but never total convergence of their life

trajectories.

Post 9/11, however, we are reminded that we do not have the luxury of working out cultural integration among “ourselves,” that there are people willing to kill and die to destroy the liberal-democratic system, or in any case to disrupt it as much as possible. It is increasingly evident that radical Islam, which conflates antisemitism with anti-Americanism in its opposition to both historical and synchronic firstness, puts into question the victimary ethic that demands the expiation rather than the affirmation of this firstness.

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## Auschwitz and Hiroshima

The Second World War was almost certainly the last total war humanity will be able to tolerate. The necessity for restraining maximal violence henceforth links the world in a global community; all wars since WWII are so to speak civil wars. The most urgent problem of the new millennium is how to deal with those who deny their membership in this community to the point of being willing to wreak “mass destruction” on it if given the means.

Prior to 9/11, the consequences of WWII were, and residually still are, worked through ethically, politically, and aesthetically in what we call *postmodernism*. The hobbling of the postmodern(ist) subject, which occurs in a number of superficially distinct modes, is the interpersonal equivalent of the hobbling of the national “subjects” on the global stage. The deconstruction of central authority, however liberating it may be to those who define themselves as its victims, is an act of ideology, or in other words, of resentment, complicit yet denying its complicity with this authority. The confused nature of this gesture reflects postmodernism’s failure to articulate the double lesson of the war epitomized in Auschwitz, the ultimate act of asymmetric violence, and Hiroshima, the ultimate act of reciprocal violence. In one case, a group of non-combatants was singled out for annihilation; in the other, great violence was inflicted upon the adversary’s population in order to force surrender. Although their simultaneity is not altogether coincidental, the two phenomena have very different moral valences. Yet in their mutual implication the role of each has not been easy to sort out. On 9/11, history performed the task for us.

For a number of years I considered “Auschwitz” to be the sole point of origin of postmodern ethics, aesthetics, and politics. This is not unreasonable as a first approximation, but the characteristic postmodern attitude of white guilt can be understood only by introducing “Hiroshima” as a second, partially independent variable.

I therefore propose the following model:

- **Auschwitz** makes illegitimate all de jure forms of asymmetry: colonialism,



segregation, apartheid; we may call this *political egalitarianism*.

- **Hiroshima** has two consequences.
  - Since it makes total war henceforth impossible, it gives rise to strategies of proxy wars, containment, MAD, and the removal of the chief focus of competition from the military to the commercial sphere; we may call this *political realism*. This strategic phase comes to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989-91.
  - It provokes a sense of guilt toward its victims, despite the fact that Japan was the original aggressor in the war. This is the beginning of the characteristically postmodern phenomenon of *white guilt*, which becomes the basis of a political movement only when the opposition to the war in Vietnam conflates Auschwitz with Hiroshima, “excess” power with asymmetry.

That Hiroshima rather than Auschwitz is white guilt’s critical point of departure may not be obvious. Until the end of the Cold War, the “realist” heritage of Hiroshima remained dominant; only after Vietnam did its “guilty” legacy began the inexorable conquest of its present strongholds: academia, the “helping organizations,” the entertainment world, the media. By the time white guilt truly came into its own in the post-USSR world, its link to the end of WWII had been obscured by time.

This model makes clearer the split between the two modes of political atonement that emerged from the war. Both egalitarianism and white guilt challenge the legitimacy of asymmetrical relations: the former, the *de jure* relations encountered in colonialism and racial segregation, the latter, the *de facto* differences that inspire the more recent trends of affirmative action and political correctness. The differences between the finite, objectivist attitude of political egalitarianism and the open-ended subjectivism of white guilt are traceable to their different historical sources.

“Auschwitz” supplies the necessary historical condition for the collective focus of white guilt. Hitler had contempt for all “non-Aryan” races, but he defined his mission on earth as protecting it from the Jews (“In standing guard against the Jew I am defending the handiwork of the Lord.” *Mein Kampf*, Ch. 2). Antisemitism became after 1933 the central means for affirming through exclusion the solidarity of the “Aryan” community. Stigmatization of the Jews was the exemplary model for the Nazis’ other racial laws; if one could justify the expulsion, spoliation, and eventual extermination of the Jews with the claim that their existence was incompatible with the health of “Aryan” Germany, then other groups (Gypsies, homosexuals, the mentally ill...) could be condemned under the same criteria.

The Jews are not the simple “Others” of Western society imagined by Sartre in his notorious *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946); they are those who refuse Christ in the name of the Torah, the “Old Testament” guarantee of their firstness as the elected and electors of the One God. The Nazi persecution of the Jews was not carried out as a sadistic domination of the weak—although the opening to this sentiment was indulged in by many of “Hitler’s willing executioners”—but as the defensive reaction of a subject that feels itself excluded from sacred Being by those with a prior claim. Because the forces of the market system are globalizing by nature, their association with the “nomadic,” “tribal” Jews whose fabled power over money, beyond its historical exemplifications, ultimately derives from their priority in sacred exchange, allows the antisemite to promote elimination of the Jews as the means to eradicate modern *anomie* and restore communal solidarity.

Postmodernity ignores the Hebrew priority in monotheism that reflects the paradoxical human structure of firstness-in-equality. Just as one participant must have been first to discover/invent the sign in the originary scene, so one people must have been first to discover/invent the One God. In the originary configuration, the “Jew” is the first member of the group to transform his appropriative gesture into a sign designating the object whose appropriation is (temporarily) renounced; to persecute the “Jew” is to reject this originary gesture and with it, humanity itself. The rejecter fails to see that the firstness of the “Jew” is that of renunciation rather than appropriation. The Hebrews forgo the opportunity to invoke the sacred center directly; in Exodus, God gives his name to Moses as a declarative sentence (see my *Science & Faith*, 1991).

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Antisemitism, itself a victimary claim, is the paradigm for what is condemned by the victimary thought that comes to dominate the postmodern era. But although antisemitism is very different from garden-variety racism—that, for example, of the segregated South—postwar victimary rhetoric refuses to distinguish between the denunciation of the Jews’ sacred priority and the subordination of groups judged inferior. Since murdering the mentally ill, Gypsies, Russians, political opponents, and homosexuals is “just as evil” as killing the Jews—and many Jews and non-Jews, suffering from Holocaust fatigue, insist on this equivalence to the point of reproach—the horrors of Nazism (and of the less salient but almost equally vicious Japanese racism) provoked a reaction against the subordination of groups who aroused no envy of firstness in their dominators beyond a Rousseauian nostalgia for the “natural.” The colonial powers didn’t envy their foreign subjects; they simply considered them to be at a lower stage of human development, whether (unjustifiably) in terms of their humanity itself or (justifiably) in terms of their social organization. After WWII, what was condemned in either case was a dominant group oppressing a less powerful one, irrespective of the ideology that justified the oppression.

The conflation of antisemitism with garden-variety racism not only treats the “first” as the

“last”; it also raises the “last” to the status of the “first.” Because the persecution of the Jews is founded on resentment of attributed superiority, their relegation to an inferior status is not justified by a claim of lesser competence. And since the Nazi-Jew distinction is the paradigmatic model of differential status, it has been implicitly taken to invalidate any claim of lesser competence even when grounded on objective evidence. The envy that is an essential component of antisemitism is reproduced *ex post facto* by the granting of preferences to victim groups; compensatory firstness replaces historical firstness.

Rejecting firstness inspires no guilt; it is “lastness” that is synonymous with victimage. Thus there is no anti-antisemitic white guilt to complement the anti-racist variety; where the racist openly despises his victim’s “lastness,” the antisemite can never admit his envy of Jewish firstness and so, even if repentant, does not convert his envy to guilt. Only during the immediate postwar years, before Israel gave evidence of having the most powerful army in the Middle East, did the Jews, viewed as the hapless victims of the Holocaust, benefit substantially from white guilt. The Jews have had the curious experience of going in the space of a single generation from *Untermenschen* to “Whitey,” from being discriminated against because of who they are to being discriminated against—admittedly in a far more benign fashion—for who they are not.

In this misunderstanding of its causes, half the lesson of the Holocaust has remained unlearned. On the one hand, status privileges must be abolished to include all humans in an emerging global humanity, but on the other—and this tends to be forgotten—historical firstness must be preserved from guilty attempts to deny its validity, lest all be swallowed up in murderous resentment. Precisely because humans are the most mimetic creatures, they advance by imitating each other rather than by each discovering each truth independently; human historicity depends on *someone going first*. Refusal of the firstness without which the human is inconceivable is tantamount to nihilism, the hatred of Being.

### ***Hiroshima mon amour***

That the Holocaust would inspire a postwar sense of guilt in Germans and their willing and unwilling WWII allies is understandable enough; the connection of white guilt to Hiroshima requires further explanation. The most prescient and insightful demonstration of this connection is no doubt the 1959 Duras-Resnais film *Hiroshima mon amour*, one of the masterpieces of the New Wave. After making his reputation in 1955 with *Nuit et brouillard*, the first commercial documentary of the concentration camps—in which the word “Jew” is never mentioned, although yellow stars are visible in one or two shots—Alain Resnais became a consecrated artist with a film in which the only representatives of the Axis powers are powerless, innocent victims. Yet *Hiroshima mon amour*’s aesthetic power attests to its ethical power as well; this is the beginning of a postwar sense of guilt whose object is not any specific national violence, German or Japanese, but that of the human species—our own. Conceived a little over a decade after the end of WWII, this film poses the aesthetic and

ethical necessity of attributing victimary status to the war's aggressors simply because they were also its losers.

*Hiroshima* depicts the last day of a French actress' transitory affair with a Japanese businessman in Hiroshima, where she is making a pacifist film. It begins (after its famous opening shots of the lovers' bodies in the shower) with a lengthy documentary sequence in both Hiroshima's hospital and its museum, where we witness, presumably through the actress' eyes, both surviving victims and evidence of the bombing, including a filmed Japanese reenactment. As the actress recounts her visit in voice over, she insists that she has "seen everything" in Hiroshima; her lover replies that she has "seen nothing," implying that only the victims themselves could "see" the bombing and its effects. Neither in this sequence nor elsewhere in the film is there any indication that the bombing ended a war between the US and Japan, let alone that this war began with a sneak attack by the Japanese.

The film not only portrays the Japanese as victims of the bomb; the sole representative of Germany too is a victim. We learn in the course of the day that as an adolescent living with her family during the Occupation in the central French city of Nevers (the resemblance to "never" is surely not coincidental), the actress had had a love affair with a German soldier with whom she hoped to return to Germany after the war. But the soldier is killed by French partisans; the girl finds him dying on arriving at a rendezvous. After Liberation, her hair is shorn and she is confined in a cellar for several months by her parents as punishment for consorting with the enemy. On her release from the cellar, she leaves Nevers for Paris; since then, she has never returned to Nevers nor told her love story to anyone but the Japanese man, who expresses pride in being the only person to have heard it. Earlier in the film we were given, in a quick flashback, a glimpse of the soldier's hand lying on the earth, a memory inspired by (and matched to) her sleeping Japanese lover's hand in the same position on the bed. Although the actress is now married, we learn nothing about her (presumably French) husband. The German is the one man she has truly loved; the Japanese is so to speak his reincarnation.

*Hiroshima mon amour* portrays the conversion of the losers of the war into its victims through the eyes of a citizen of a defeated nation that ended up on the winning side. On a number of occasions, lifeless Nevers is contrasted with lively postwar Hiroshima. In the couple's long nocturnal walk that is the climactic sequence of the film, shots of the actress walking through Hiroshima's streets are intercut with shots of Nevers that display the city as a ghost town populated only by dark, empty, sinister buildings. If victorious France has lost its soul, through the sacrifice of Hiroshima defeated Japan has been reborn. In the film's final sequence the lovers meet for the last time in the actress' hotel room the night before her departure from Japan. In the exchange that concludes the film, she tells him "You are Hiroshima" and he answers, "And you are Nevers, in France." The characters have no other names. But whereas he takes the name of an injured but reborn city, she continues to bear

the name of her native town abandoned long ago, a name chosen for its temporal emptiness.

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The implicit moral message of *Hiroshima* is that identification with the defeated adversary-as-victim is the only true road to peace; now that humanity has demonstrated its potential for self-destruction, the self's own violence is the chief danger that must be controlled. Omitting the enemy's violence from *Hiroshima mon amour* is not tantamount to claiming that it did not exist, but simply that it is absent henceforth from the life of the (victorious) subject. If we permit ourselves to think beyond the film's historical amnesia to the war itself, the impression we are left with is that irrespective of who began the fighting or what would have happened had the starters been the winners, the final, victorious act of violence was the only one that was not part of a reciprocal exchange and must consequently be the unique focus of our guilt. The violence we must avoid above all is the unanswered "excess" that defines (real or symbolic) victory, whether in the A-bombed Japanese cities or in firebombed Dresden, scene of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969). The bearer of white guilt must identify with the defeated adversary as a means of denying complicity with the violence exercised by his own society on his behalf.

However uncomfortable one may be with its effacement of the crimes of the Axis, *Hiroshima mon amour* does not blame the Allies and takes no cheap shots at the Americans who made and carried out the decision to drop the bomb. White guilt is focused more on pitying the adversary-victim than on condemning one's own side. Even where such condemnation can be implied, notably in the sequence devoted to the heroine's confinement, it is never given a political dimension beyond its historical moment and suggests no program other than generalized pacifism. The anthropological value of this historical amnesia is that it permits us to focus on the asymmetry of victory without taking sides. The bomb's asymmetry that ended the war also ended "total war"; even in its primitive state it provided a first vision of our self-extermination. This lyric, apolitical moment of victimary thinking was suitable for the genius of Marguerite Duras, the author of the *Hiroshima* screenplay and the most important French novelist since Proust. Duras' fiction, most strikingly in her masterpiece, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964), reveals better than any other the latent power of the passive, feminine position of the "loser" in love's triangle, and by extension of all losers, as if debunking in advance the victimary era she would anticipate.

Although white guilt as a motivation to political action derives from both Auschwitz and Hiroshima, *Hiroshima mon amour* suggests the primacy of the latter over the former. No word of allusion to the fate of the Jews could be permitted, lest the German soldier-lover and by extension his Japanese counterpart be implicated in it. *Hiroshima mon amour* gave narrative form to the legacy of Hiroshima: the divorce of the condemnation of violence from the question of ends, and consequently from history.

Is man's inhumanity to man worse than the annihilation of mankind? One can recover from the first, but not the second. Whatever depths of evil may motivate "the will to power," it is less likely to eliminate the human altogether than a nihilism that makes suicide the guarantee of the purity of its intentions. Does the slaughter in Rwanda inspire as much fear as a suicide terrorist with an atomic weapon? The first is scarcely unprecedented; the second, definitely so. And whereas ethical progress is glacial, perhaps even chimerical, technological progress is continually accelerating. Where would we be if all war and organized violence had evolved out of existence but the means of destroying the entire planet were at the disposal of the average person?

Yet to abandon the priority of Auschwitz is to put an end to human dignity. If extermination as an end in itself fails to horrify us more than even the most terrible destruction conceived, even erroneously, as a lesser evil, then what humanity have we left to save? Thus the Auschwitz-Hiroshima debate is one best avoided; we can devote the time we save to meditating on the significance of the temporal coincidence of the project of genocide with the creation of weaponry that could wipe out our entire species. But the more immediate task is to understand the specific contribution of each to the victimary paradigm that defines the postmodern era.

## **Vietnam**

The crisis of the Vietnam War, reinforced by the student unrest in France, made the year 1968 the historic moment when the asymmetrical force of Hiroshima met the moral dichotomy of Auschwitz in the first genuine political movement of white guilt. The youth of the educated class, spurred by the military draft that threatened it with active participation and possible death, condemned the American war effort not merely because we were employing "excessive" means of violence as at Hiroshima, but above all because "we" who were "bombing Vietnam back into the stone age" had become the Nazis. (Remember "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many children did you kill today?") I well recall the revelatory force of this new perspective. Its power did not come from a simple sense of guilt. On the contrary, it was driven by the necessity of disculpating ourselves, in particular for avoiding military service in Vietnam: if we were the Nazis, then refusing to fight was a courageous act. This catalyst, which affected some more directly than others, inspired the doctrine that although "We" as representatives of American power were Nazis everywhere, most definitely including at home, "we" as university radicals were domestic victims of the Establishment fighting back on a par with the admired "Vietcong." Characteristically, a brochure made the rounds in 1968 entitled "The Student as Nigger" (*cf.* the Québécois *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*).

The adolescent form of white guilt that was born at this historical moment had as its midwife the divergence of interests, more apparent than real, between university-based radicals and the Establishment upon whom the guilt was heaped. As in all social movements,

but particularly in the symbol-driven variety—a category that 1960s New Leftists shared with 1830s Romantics—a temporary dichotomy of interests was used to define a “class” distinction that masked the more fundamental identity of the rebellious group with its opponents. By finding Nazism everywhere, 60s radicals could justify prolonging their adolescence in study as a form of revolt rather than as passive acquiescence in the “system.” The projection of guilt onto the Establishment created a dichotomy between good guys and bad guys that masked the significance of the attribution of guilt to one’s own country, to one’s own social class, and ultimately to oneself. Nor should we dwell overmuch on the desire for self-preservation that motivated the student radicals; if this had been the source rather than merely the catalyst of white guilt, it would have died out with the end of the Vietnam war, and certainly with the end of the draft. The subsequent expansion of white guilt, so strongly with us today, belies this narrow interpretation.

In contrast with conflicts typified by the “class conflict” beloved of Marx, which arguably oppose representatives of lifelong structural roles in the community, the conflict that interests us here reflects in its inception the mobile “Oedipal” dichotomy of youth vs age. Although this temporary difference contrasts with “ascriptive” differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, it can nevertheless serve as a model for all victimary stances; just as the “oppressed” youth becomes an adult, so the victim of racial or sexual discrimination comes to receive the protection of the laws and even some preferential treatment. And just as the youth wishes to remain in adolescence yet be treated as an adult, so the minority practitioner of victimary rhetoric wants to retain his or her victimary status yet be judged against the temporal horizon of full equality. The self-perpetuation of “temporary” affirmative action programs reflects this paradoxical temporality.

7

The 1960s middle-class radical who regarded his elders with contempt had no social praxis other than theirs to which he could refer. To “drop out” of society à la Timothy Leary was to condemn oneself to marginality, as only a few of that generation actually did. The typical 60s radical—who had once sung Phil Ochs’ derisive “Love me, love me, love me, I’m a liberal!”—became a liberal Democrat; a smaller number, including (to practice full disclosure) myself, disillusioned with the New Left rather than simply outgrowing it, adopted some version of (neo)conservatism. In either case, they were absorbed into what Marcuse in 1964 rather illogically called the “one-dimensionality” of the “system,” reduced to fighting their battles in the predefined political arena, or occasionally (as at WTO meetings) demonstrating noisily outside it.

This evolution of the erstwhile radicals is not a return to an earlier stage of political opposition. The major parties’ political positions themselves, formerly rough approximations to roles in “class conflict,” remain infused by the new opposition opened up in the 1968 era between the “guilty” and their denouncers. On whichever side one finds oneself, it is

impossible to deny that white guilt, for or against, has become the central issue of Western politics, yet more critically in Europe than in the US. Whether the West should admit its “imperialism” and accommodate Islamic sensitivities or whether it should offer the superiority of its system as an example is an issue that far transcends any specific instance of conflict.

## White Guilt as Faith

When we discover that subjects such as white guilt do not lend themselves to rational discussion, we habitually call our differences “political,” implying that it is the self-interest of the disputants that poses an obstacle to disinterested debate. A better description of these difficulties is that they are *religious*. It is not facetious to point out the sacred component of postmodern white guilt; although this attribution does not suffice to explain the phenomenon, it makes clear what kind of resistance to change it sets up. Victimary rhetoric’s constant reference to the Nazi-Jew model is in the first place a denunciation of a false sacred that affirms the ontological truth of human difference. What the Auschwitz demonstration founds is not simply a new stage of moral history, although this aspect is not to be ignored; it is a new paradigm of *sacrality*, or in other terms, a new mode of explicit confrontation of the empirical with the transcendent. Throughout the history of the great Prisoners’ Dilemma that is human society, it is sacred representation in its various forms that holds in check the temptation of defection by preserving the memory of violence averted and redirected.

But to take Auschwitz as demonstrating that all asymmetry is evil is to reject out of hand the problematic necessity of *firstness*, and thereby to fall into the very discriminatory mode against which the postmodern originally defined itself. The characteristic postmodern hostility to Israel—“anti-Zionism”—expresses indignation that the Jews, whose status as absolute victims was the point of departure for postmodernism, have returned to their old ways of self-assertion. As its promoters claim, this attitude is not identical to classical antisemitism. But what is painfully naïve about those who make this claim is their ignorance that this anti-Zionist indignation repeats trait for trait the old antisemitism; calling the Israeli Jews “Nazis” is really just a way of calling them... Jews.

Religion characteristically extrapolates from the power of the sacred to regulate human society by attributing the violence of nature to “acts of God,” that is, of *our* God, whose severity and benevolence alike are responses to our actions or at any rate means of provoking us to virtue. Removing the divinity merely short-circuits the causal chain by eliminating all wills but our own. Thus, whereas considered from the standpoint of its “diverse” cult objects, white guilt is a kind of pantheism, its focus is not on these objects but on the guilty subject, who is less interested in celebrating the glory of the not-self than in preempting the accusation that he is victimizing it. That the white guilt paradigm is less about helping the victims than about denouncing the victimizing Other in ourselves—and in



those less morally sensitive than we—is clear from its vast expansion in the post-Vietnam era, beyond non-ethnic human categories to animals, plants, and the planet in general. The environmentalism of the past decade—acid rain, ozone layer, global warming—ignores well-attested natural climatic cycles in its desire to blame climate change on “unnatural” human activity. A whole new set of Pharisees has arisen whose lives are focused on denouncing, and sometimes violently aggressing, what they judge to be the inadmissibly non-reciprocal treatment of humans, animals, and things.

Traditional wisdom warned of the dangers of hubris, but this hostility to human pride is no mere humility. It demonstrates that in the absence of a commonly recognized God, guilt alone becomes the mark of the sacred. White guilt is the ultimate secular religion. God reveals himself to Saul on the road to Damascus as the person whom he persecutes. In the post-Christian version of this revelation, God is revealed through the guilt that accompanies the self-affirmation of one’s being as firstness, as (temporary) non-reciprocity. The sacred guarantees of firstness, which Christianity had traditionally sidestepped rather than challenged (“Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”), have disappeared; the bearer of privilege is ipso facto a victimizer.

A generation after Vietnam, although the faith of white guilt remains secure, its works have not been impervious to the lessons of history. On the domestic front, the Clinton-era welfare reform, highly successful as these things go, is a sign of a new flexibility. Similarly, it is no longer unthinkable to express resistance to affirmative action programs. Today, especially since 9/11, the real battles of white guilt are fought on the international stage, focused on two families of victims, passive and active.

The first family is what can still be called the “third world”: poor, highly stratified societies with a negligible impact on the global economy. We have no clear guidelines for dealing with such enormous differences in wealth and economic opportunity once they come into play in the global context. Since the end of the colonial era, during which the great powers, with varying mixes of hypocrisy, rapacity, and genuine concern, had taken their cultural-economic superiority as an explicit justification for political dominance, many third-world countries have been governed by kleptocracies to which the first world provides aid with little guarantee that it will be well employed—a formula for economic and political stagnation demonstrably inferior to all but the worst forms of colonialism. Our contact and commerce with these populations is minimal; we know them only abstractly as “victims.” When, as in Rwanda a few years ago or in Darfur today, we see real victims being slaughtered, we never seem to be able to do very much about it.

Far different is the case of the second family, the Islamic Middle East. Unlike the rest of the once-colonized world, Islam retains old memories of political dominance over the West; its post-colonial resentment has increasingly taken the form of jihadist terrorism in a mythical return to the era of Muslim conquest that ended in the fifteenth century.

Both families of victims are indispensable components of the white-guilt universe. White guilt is primarily a posture of compassion, not fear, yet as our relative indifference to Africa demonstrates, without the fear, there is little stimulus to implement the compassion. If the third world's unthreatening despair provides Western white guilt's moral guarantee, fear of the Islamic threat supplies its urgency. What explains the extraordinary indulgence afforded the Palestinians is that they combine both factors, arrayed as they are against the West's perennial exemplars—and scapegoats—of scandalous firstness.

## Conclusion

To trace the genealogy of white guilt is not to put an end to the dilemma it reflects. Human morality demands reciprocity; postmodern white guilt is a reaction to history's most atrocious failure of reciprocity—Auschwitz—which coincided with the discovery of the most extreme technical means of imposing non-reciprocity—Hiroshima. Today's globalizing world is built on these foundations. The traditional Christianity that justified the acceptance of life's inequities by contrasting the limited possibilities of this earth to the transcendent kingdom of God could not survive the Holocaust intact. Antisemitism has always been the ultimate test of Christianity, and the ultimate triumph of antisemitism in Europe put an end to the role of European Christianity as an important social force. Even the papacy, its most vigorous institution, maintains its influence more through the celebrity-sacred of the papal "event" than the liturgy and rituals of the Church. In the United States, where the shrinking mainline Protestant churches are dominated by white guilt to the point of undertaking divestment-from-Israel campaigns, the principal religious response to the challenge of Auschwitz has been an evangelical Christianity that emphasizes both the individual's relationship to Jesus (rather than to the Other) and the exceptional role of the United States as an example to the world. It is only apparently paradoxical that red-state evangelicals are closer to the implicit politics and even the intellectual values of generative anthropology than the bicoastal secular intelligentsia, whose professional and educational status would seem to make them the natural audience for the minimal theology of originary thinking. Secularist denial of the sacred and its relevance to moral issues is *less*, not more parsimonious than religious belief. Conversely, the compatibility of the originary hypothesis with religious belief demonstrates its own parsimony. It is a corollary of the hypothesis that the becoming-arbitrary of the linguistic sign (formal representation) be accompanied by the reaffirmation through religion and art of the experiential substance of the originary event (institutional representation).

No one disagrees on the basic principle of morality: reciprocity is implicit in the human use of representation. Yet, unlike a mathematical function—or a market transaction—reciprocity does not operate instantaneously; it cannot function without firstness. Someone must initiate the exchange, even when saying hello. The genius of Marcel Mauss' little book *Essai*

*sur le don* (*The Gift*) is that it describes what we all do every day in our personal lives without realizing that we are participating in a “tribal” rather than a bourgeois economy. When we give a gift, we don’t expect an immediate gift in return, let alone a cash payment. The delay in returning the gift exists for its own sake as an element of the deferred exchange that maintains the social order. It is this mode of exchange that explains the anomalous inclusion of the *promise* among Austin’s performatives. I can’t *dub*, *marry*, or *induct*, or even in most circumstances *declare*, but I can always *promise*, because this is one institutional act that must be performable by every speaker of human language in order to affirm his allegiance to humankind.

White guilt rejects this moral configuration of firstness and deferral for fear of the non-reciprocity to which it always threatens to lead. It is a fallacy to think that when we dispense with the anthropomorphic representation of the sacred center (“God is dead”) we have done away with the necessity of a sacred guarantee of difference. White guilt is the pessimistic version of this fallacy. In God’s absence the guilty subject makes himself the guarantee of the ultimate reciprocity into which difference must dissolve, suffering within the temporal limitations of human life the tension between real and ideal that had hitherto been the responsibility of immortals. This is far from the optimism of Enlightenment and even from that of Nietzschean liberation from *ressentiment*; white guilt cannot forget the Nazi perversion of this Nietzschean optimism. The ontological affirmation of human non-reciprocity is evil and must be denounced, but to denounce non-reciprocity not merely transcendently but empirically is to define the human condition by resentment rather than transcendence.

The Enlightenment saw the sacred as *superstitious*, a residue of the past (the sense of the Latin word) that the intellectual elite, at least, could cast aside. Originary thinking, although non-theistic, makes no such claim. The originary hypothesis is a “minimal sacred” that provides a point of comparison for other supposedly minimal models of morality that hide their sacred roots rather than displaying them. The state of world affairs makes increasingly clear that by endorsing the Other’s resentment, the religion of white guilt has incited the return of the sacred in its most crudely sacrificial forms. When one inhabits a moral environment where only losers are considered virtuous, one had better reevaluate one’s criterion of virtue before being forced to face the consequences of its realization.