

Introduction

The approach to the human that I call *generative anthropology* can be traced back to my visiting professorship at Johns Hopkins University in 1978. René Girard's *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the Earth* had just appeared, presenting for the first time Girard's conception of the anthropological significance of Christianity. Our conversations stimulated me to sharpen my own anthropological ideas both in conjunction with and in distinction from his. The first expression of these ideas was *The Origin of Language* (1981), supplemented a few years later by *The End of Culture* (1985), where I used the term *generative anthropology* for the first time. I have continued to develop and elaborate this conception in a number of books and articles, as well as in the *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*.

My thesis is that human experience, as opposed to that of other animals, is uniquely characterized by *scenic events* recalled both collectively and individually through *representations*, the most fundamental of which are the signs of language. It is significant that the primary meaning of the Greek word *skene* is not the stage itself but the hut or tent into which the actor retired to change his costume; the term later came to designate the stage building that provided a backdrop for the stage. That the "inside" of the scenic operation gave its name to its external surface and then metonymically to the scene as a whole reflects the profound intuition that

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skene and stage are internal and external versions of the same locus: the empty space—Sartre's *néant*—in which representations appear, the *scene of representation*. Every occurrence on the human scene, in distinction from the comings and goings of the animal world, is a unique event, a singularity that has its place in the series of singularities we call *history*.

If the human is indeed a series of scenic events—the notion of *event* entailing that its participants are aware that they are, here and now, participating in it along with their fellows—then the human must have *originated* in an event, the representation of which, the first example of language and “culture,” is part of the originary scene itself. I call this the *originary hypothesis*.

My explanation for why this originary event occurred is that language and culture emerge not simply as products of our superior intelligence but with the explicit function of momentarily preventing or *deferring* an outbreak of violence. *Deferral* translates Jacques Derrida's insightful neologism *différance*, which exploits the fact that the French verb *différer* means both *differ* and *defer* to suggest that the differences that constitute language serve to defer violence, the breakdown of social differentiation.¹ I hypothesize that our originary use of representation creates a “sacred” difference between a significant object and the rest of the universe, insulating it at the center of the scene from the potential violence of the rivalrous desires on the scenic periphery. The violence is deferred, not eliminated; the central object, through the sacred interdiction conferred on it by the sign, becomes a focus of still greater desire and therefore of potential violence, which must in turn be deferred if the community created by the act of representation is to survive.

Prehuman modes of authority and communication are one-on-one; they do not construct a center and a periphery. When an alarm call from a single animal is heard by a number of others, they each hear and act on the call “instinctively” rather than forming a circle to listen to it and interpret it. But at a certain threshold of mimetic intelligence, the pecking-order hierarchy that is the principle of protohuman social organization (as exemplified in various ways in primate societies) can no longer operate; the alpha animal can face down the beta animal, but not the community as a whole. When the appetitive attention of a group of protohumans becomes focused on a single object, it becomes too danger-

ous to be appropriated by even the most powerful among them. At this point, the old hierarchy is suspended and the appropriative gesture of the alpha animal, as of all the others, is aborted. I postulate that in the originary event, this aborted gesture is performed and understood, first presumably by a single member of the group (perhaps the dethroned “alpha” himself) whose interpretation spreads through the group by mimetic contagion, as both designating the object as desirable and at the same time renouncing its exclusive possession. The aborted gesture is thus a *sign* that re-presents or *names* the central object in its inaccessibility; to make it the object of a sign and to sacralize it are originally the same operation.² Through the mediation of the sign, all participants can imaginarily possess the object, and this common possession permits its division in equivalent parts in the subsequent tearing-apart or *sparagmos*, where each can take part in both appropriating and destroying the object without fear of giving the appearance of desiring its totality for himself.

The sign that designates the inaccessible center may be called the originary *name-of-God*. What humanity has from the beginning designated as God is not the object that occupies the center of the circle but the Being of the center itself, which subsists after the destruction of its original inhabitant and whose will, conceived as the force that held the circle and its center in equilibrium at the moment of the emission of the sign, guarantees the sign’s timeless meaning. What we understand as God’s immortality is of the same nature as that of the sign, which belongs to an ontological universe beyond mortality to which we have access through the scene of representation.

Symbolic reference cannot derive from the “horizontal” relation of appetite; it entails a “vertical” relationship of *différance* that is at the same time one of interdiction. The sign substitutes for the thing only because the thing itself cannot be appropriated. But this interdiction only increases the participants’ desire; the energy invested in this desire maintains the attraction between center and periphery that constitutes the uniquely human phenomenon of the scene. All ritual, including the secular rites of art, reproduces the same originary formal structure. Similarly, what we call the imaginary is a *mise-en-scène* before an implicit audience on a scene of representation internalized within the mind.

The originary scene is the singularity that gives rise to the human,

but every subsequent scenic event is in principle singular and memorable. The point of the term *generative anthropology* is that the scene of representation generates the meaning and structure that characterize the human. Among the representations that can appear on the scene of representation is that of the generative scene itself. I shall call the faculty that carries out this self-representation of the scene the *scenic imagination*. It is this faculty that makes it so easy for us to imagine scenes of origin for the institutions of human culture as well as other phenomena we whimsically treat by analogy, as in those “just-so” stories that conceive a scene of origin for the giraffe’s neck or the elephant’s trunk. We easily conceive meanings as generated within collective scenes because that is how culture has always operated, and it operates that way because it began that way. It is a common mistake to reject the scenic imagination out of hand as “unscientific,” as though the scenic could be reduced to a set of simpler neurological or genetic phenomena more amenable to scientific study. It is the purpose of this book to examine the intellectual context within Western thought, beginning with the Enlightenment, in which this error has been both accepted and challenged, although never before specifically described.

The originary hypothesis cannot be demonstrated by an appeal to direct evidence. A modern time-traveler transported back in time to the event of human origin would no doubt be able to identify its configuration as a *scene* distinguishable from any occurrence among even our closest nonhuman relatives, but our traveler could not be sure that this was the *first* time such a scene had occurred. Yet its indemonstrability does not diminish the heuristic value of the hypothesis for the study of the workings of human culture, to which it lends a new coherence.



The originary hypothesis has no prerequisites either in esoteric knowledge or in philosophical reflection; anyone might have formulated it as soon as the language was available to do so. That this is not the case—that human culture has not been focused on the task of formulating a hypothesis of human origin in the most parsimonious terms—is itself a cultural phenomenon that requires explanation.

Ultimately, religious creation myths as well as the more recent secu-

lar uses of the scenic imagination are nothing more than less parsimonious formulations of the same originary hypothesis. But the importance of parsimony in this case is not a mere matter of minimizing the number of variables in an equation. In contrast with the accretions that Ockham's razor can pare away, the minimal hypothesis is the core of the human. In the genesis of the human world of representation, nominalism is indistinguishable from realism.

As derivatives of the originary configuration, all cultural phenomena have the same underlying structure; it is the historical implementations of this structure that reveal the possibilities latent within it. As new experiences in social exchange make visible still newer possibilities of human interaction, the history of human self-consciousness is marked by a series of locally irreversible revelations concerning the originary scene and its nature. The overall path of these successive revelations in the West, although far from rectilinear, has been from the more to the less sacrificial—the less dependent on faith in the central Being's demand for the renewal of the sparagmos in order to refresh the mutual bond that permitted the favorable resolution of the originary "prisoner's dilemma." The relatively more independent variable is not the (cultural) evolution of the scene of representation itself, whether in religious ritual or art, but the evolution of economic and political exchange relations in the "secular" world outside the scene. The perceived rationality of the exchange system makes the central control of desire less necessary. With the emergence of modern market society, desacralization reaches the point where the collective communication with the central will that we call religion no longer plays a major role in the lives of large sectors of society and even of certain nations. Alternatively, the "personal God" that incarnates the central will may adapt itself to this rationalization, which can never altogether eliminate the potential violence of resentment, by rationalizing sacrifice itself as the charitable renunciation of satisfaction in the service of others rather than the violent renewal of the sparagmos. Roughly speaking, these two adaptations to modern rationality are respectively those of Western Europe and of the United States.

In the most highly sacralized community, all power is attributed by the periphery to the center; it is at this end of the scale that one finds human sacrifice. Before the sparagmos, the victim/divinity is an object

of resentment for its resistance to the group; afterward, it is as the shared representative of the central Being that it unifies the group. Throughout, the unanimously chosen victim attracts the mimetic energy of the community, deferring potential violence on the periphery.

At the other end of the scale is a society built around the free market. Here the “center” serves only as a reminder of the virtual unity of the participants, who need not even share the same language or culture so long as they possess more or less the same information about exchange values. What must be centrally controlled are the external and internal mechanisms that assure the peaceful functioning of the market itself, which is expected to operate most of the time on its own.

A perfect market does not imply a perfect society. To the extent that individuals are free to exchange goods and services, some succeed better than others, and some have more to begin with; the market inevitably generates resentments that must be dealt with in a political process. Just as no society can survive with a total absence of central authority, no society can be wholly absorbed by the tyranny of the center; a society fixated on its scapegoat will starve to death. The degree to which the central Being is personified is not on the same axis as the degree of sacrality necessary to the social order. The cliché that Marxism was the “religion” of the former USSR is not wholly misleading; any central authority is a mode of sacrality. But as a secular “religion” based on a historical eschatology, communism was explicitly atheistic because it claimed to be the necessary and free outcome of the “capitalist” market system, where the regulatory center set up by the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would eventually “wither away.” Because in socialist countries the real central authority was exercised by presumably temporary custodians, they could not be deified—made permanent—in the traditional sense. The resulting quasi-religion exhibits all the embarrassing paradoxes entailed by situating the transcendent in the immanent—for example, the public exhibition of Lenin’s mummified corpse, treated as a holy relic but claiming that status only “historically,” as though it were the embodiment of a rational historical sacred as opposed to the irrationality of an explicitly religious sacred.

Christianity is the most highly articulated conception of the “personal God,” whose being, including the experience if not the finality of

death, is fundamentally the same as that of his worshippers. The paradoxical role of Christianity is to be the principle of coherence of the most highly desacralized societies, precisely those that tend to lose the need for an explicit postulation of the will of the center independently of those on the periphery. The paradox of Christian secularization has recently been thrown into relief by the challenge of militant Islam, whose reliance on band-level organizations to carry out faith-affirming suicide attacks reflects its antipodal stance toward the increasing integration of nation-states into the “godless” global market, a movement that is a tribute to the power of Christian anthropology.



Humanity has a history because the imagination that conceives its memorable scenes is itself subject to the sequence of events through which human culture evolves. Although the hypothetical originary scene is the product of a universal scenic imagination, the mode of this imagination that constructs such anthropological scenes has not existed for all time, but has its beginning in the historical era we call the Enlightenment.

Before the Enlightenment, the scenic imagination was exercised principally in a religious framework, where the products of this imagination are presented as endowed with the truth that has inhabited the sacred from the beginning. No doubt sacred myths and scriptures were created by humans, but these persons experienced them, or at least claimed to do so, not as the products of their own imaginations but as dictated by the divine will that resides in the scenic center. Nor were the consumers of these stories or texts generally expected or even permitted to exercise their own scenic imaginations in creating rival stories and texts.

Originary culture is sacred culture; the profane exists within it only as sacrilege. It is of the essence of the sacred as an active force that it cannot be conceived as a form independent of its content; the *concept* of the sacred, defined by such independence, is incompatible with its efficacy. The appearance of secular literature, in the West the invention of the Greeks, corresponds to an emergent awareness that the scene is a locus on which timeless sacred significance is generated from the human mortality in which our fear of violence is rooted. Whereas myths recount the

sacrificial transfiguration of mortals into meaningful sacred beings, often explicitly at the hands of immortals who incarnate the timelessness of the sign, literature proper reflects the return of meaning to mortality itself in the dangerous experience of being *en scène*. The beginnings of secular narrative may be traced to the Babylonian *Gilgamesh Epic* of around 2500 BC at the end of which—assuming the original story ends, as scholars generally believe, with Tablet XI—the protagonist loses the herb of immortality or rebirth. Although Homeric epic and later, Athenian drama take most of their material from myth, they view myth not from the point of view of the gods, agents of transfiguration, but from that of the mortals engaged in the tragic *agon*.

Religious discourse can make no distinction in kind between cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis, as witness most famously the first chapter of the Bible. God as the omnipresent center of the scene is the source of all meaning and of all things, natural and human, insofar as they have meaning. In counterpoint to the biblical tradition, Greek philosophy, beginning with the Pre-Socratics, offers naturalistic hypotheses of origin; whether playful like Plato's myths or quasi-scientific like Aristotle's physics, these hypotheses are cosmological rather than anthropological. No more than the Bible did ancient metaphysics conceive the scene of representation as requiring a separate hypothesis of origin from that of the object-world to which its representations refer. The imperfect reciprocity of slave societies, what we might call these societies' "implicit violence," was incompatible with imaginary social contracts.

Thus even when it concerns itself with scenes of origin, classical philosophy does not thematize the scenic itself as something it must explain. On the contrary, in order to create what seems to it a free space for objective reflection, metaphysics, following Plato's lead, hypostatizes the Idea as ontologically independent of the scene of human language on which it was created. Until the very recent and partial breakthrough of Austin's speech-act theory, Western philosophy has recognized only propositions or declarative sentences; even today, it remains unthinkable that the context-free declarative sentence evolved from simpler forms that are only meaningful *en scène*. The imperative is the most obvious example of such a form; it requests and therefore refers to something in the worldly environment of the interlocutor. And as I showed in *The Origin of Language*,

the imperative use of the sign is in turn inconceivable in the absence of its prior use as an *ostensive*. A toddler cannot learn to call for its bottle or its mother unless it has learned the words “bottle” and “mommy” in an ostensive context where their referents can be pointed to.

Whether in metaphysics or art, the classical mind understands the scene of representation as a locus of significance independent of its content, but not as itself constituted by the mortal protagonists who enter upon it. The scene is given to or imposed on us by the gods, as the place of our limited contact with sacred meaning. Ancient philosophy never evolves a critical epistemology because it never conceives the scene on which it views reality as generated, even hypothetically, by human reflection. The *cogito* is a strictly modern phenomenon.

The classical imagination is aware of the scene’s formal independence, but awareness of its anthropological constitution is unique to the emergent modernity of the Renaissance. Christianity, for which the unique, transcendent God is at the same time a mortal man, expresses the radical understanding that the human and the sacred have the same fundamental ontology. Throughout the Middle Ages, this understanding operated to explain the human on the basis of the divine; St. Augustine’s *City of God* conceives the aim of human society as abolishing itself in divine order rather than as attempting to emulate it. Yet the kernel of Christian anthropology is mutual love, reciprocal recognition among all human beings, founded on our common possession of an immortal essence. This vision presides over the collapse of the ancient slave economy and slowly generates, in the margin of medieval society, an economy of reciprocal market exchange. The ideal human reciprocity of the Kingdom of God, from a transcendental vision that turns us away from the world, becomes a goal that defines action within it.

One way to define the Enlightenment is as the moment of Western history when it first becomes possible to conceive of human institutions as self-generating. The beginning of the Enlightenment is generally identified with the experimental rationalism of Francis Bacon (*The New Organon*, 1620), who theorizes a scene of objective empirical knowledge protected from the “idols” of collective mimesis, but the critical point at which the scene itself becomes productive is Hobbes’ conception, presented in his *Leviathan* (1651), of the covenant, later to be known as the

“social contract,” that institutes “Commonwealth.” For the first time the attempt is made to envision the origin of a human institution in a hypothetical scenic event.

This liberation of the scenic imagination is more than emancipation from religious tradition in a skeptical, Voltairean sense; a human institution is depicted as the product of a generative event taking place entirely among humans, whose energy derives from human interaction alone. Speculation on the origin of humanity and its institutions is at the heart of all culture, but in the Enlightenment, for the first time, this speculation acquires the status of a more or less rigorously controlled anthropological thought experiment, no longer concerned with what the gods have given humanity, but with what it has generated on its own. Although such thinking may not propose verifiable theses, it is legitimate in a domain where verification is an ethical rather than a logical operation: tracing human institutions to their root in order to assay their moral value. The human as a series of singular scenic events exceeds the scope of any empirical model based on repeatable phenomena: a scene exists only insofar as it is memorable, and what is memorable is not deducible from what is or might be observed. Enlightenment models of the origin of fundamental human institutions, whether Condillac’s or Herder’s scenario of language origin, or Vico’s more ambitious originary model of human language and religion, mark a new use of the scenic imagination as the basis for what we may call a *science of origins*.

For the first time a human origin is found for the transcendental world of signs and symbols hitherto experienced as products of a sacred will. Hobbes’ covenant is oriented toward the central focus of all human institutions: to defer the violent excesses of mimetic desire, conceived specifically as a *cultural* phenomenon, driven by the very signs that were created to defer it. The Enlightenment is an optimistic age; inspired by the rationalization of the market economy, the exercise of the scenic imagination appears to make possible a rational understanding of human social and political organization no longer dependent on anthropological knowledge filtered through the texts and rites of the religious tradition. In this optimism, it seems possible to treat as testable hypotheses—by thought experiment if not in reality—assertions that religion presents

not merely as the truth of transcendence and revelation, but as the revealed, transcendent truth.

The Enlightenment was born in the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution. The first political movement to set as its goal something resembling what would later be called "liberal democracy" was the proximate cause of Hobbes' equally revolutionary yet quite illiberal heuristic. Before creating his model of the generation of social order by human beings in the "state of nature," Hobbes had witnessed an abortive attempt to generate a new order that seemed to him only to lead back to this chaotic state. At the same time, the Puritan Revolution demonstrated for Hobbes the bankruptcy of the old transcendental justifications for central authority. His anthropological model was intended to supply a new, wholly immanent justification. In opposition to the Puritans, who sought to establish a Calvinist commonwealth deriving its sole authority from God, Hobbes insists that the human scene derives its order from the institution of an earthly center.

From the radical idea that human beings choose their own form of social organization, Hobbes paradoxically deduces that their choice is dictated by necessity; the only way to escape the excessive freedom of the state of nature is by freely alienating this freedom to the central Leviathan. Violence is for Hobbes an unambiguously human, "semiotic" phenomenon, the product of the volatility of mimetic desire, which can be constrained only by the authority of the chosen center of the scene of human interaction. However, Hobbes' argument presents a pragmatic if not a logical paradox: once the central sovereignty that holds the social scene together is presented as the free choice of the periphery, the permanence and scope of its authority, deprived of its sacred guarantee, are no longer unconditionally legitimate. This explains the hostility *Leviathan* aroused among the English royalists whose fellowship in Paris had inspired Hobbes to write the book in the first place; despite the author's own arguments to the contrary, to relinquish one's sovereignty is not to renounce the freedom that founds the capacity for sovereignty.

Hobbes' political views were conservative, but the scenic imagination is inherently liberal. If it is the human actors on the periphery who establish the center, then they have the power, and the right, to replace or even abolish it. To transform Hobbes' social contract into the basis

of Lockean republicanism it suffices to attribute to the members of the community the stable identity conferred by property. The secret of the marvelous durability of Locke's less radical version of the state of nature is that it is more concerned with the peaceful consequences of the originary scene than with its violent premise. The total nudity of self in Hobbes' state of nature that gives his social contract scene its resemblance to an originary event is precisely what diminishes the value of this scene to a society in which the facility for peaceful economic exchange is paramount. Locke's state of nature is a livable world, like Rousseau's *société commencée*, farther than Hobbes from originary violence, Locke can better appreciate the virtues of post-originary exchange.



The Enlightenment liberation of the scenic imagination runs aground on Edmund Burke's reflections on the French Revolution, the Enlightenment's ultimate fulfillment and betrayal. Unlike Hobbes, Burke did not found his post-revolutionary conservatism on an originary anthropological model. Burke's argument, far from justifying parliamentary monarchy on originary grounds, might be used to justify any social order whatever, provided it had evolved over time rather than being imposed all at once. Whereas Hobbes returns to the originary deferral of violence as the remedy for the chaos brought about by political revolt, Burke upholds yesterday's organically evolved political forms in the face of a revolution rooted in the Enlightenment anthropology of which, ironically enough, Hobbes was the principal founder. Burke, having witnessed scenes of revolution, distrusts the scenic imagination, be it progressive or reactionary. His remedy is to reinforce our respect for history—history up to but not including the Revolution, the history of a nation proud of its traditions but not hubristic enough to seek to reinvent them. Burke's notion of the historical process denies the validity of Enlightenment anthropological speculation despite the fact that it is within this process that the speculation was generated. The paradoxical nature of this position sets the tone for the post-Enlightenment reaction that demands of historical memory protection against history's aberrations, in contrast with Joseph de Maistre's view of the Revolution as a sacrifice ordained by providence.

Rousseau uses the sparse ethnological data available to him as a counterweight to the Genesis creation-story in the construction of his originary models of humanity; the famous phrase from the *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (1754), "Commençons donc par écarter tous les faits" (Let us begin by putting aside all facts), is directed more to the biblical "facts" than to the ethnological ones, and most particularly, to the Fall, which supplies the distressing circumstances that provoke the first use of language in Condillac's scenario. In Rousseau's universe, as in Hobbes', the Fall is a result of interhuman rivalry, not of originary rivalry with God. But his secondhand awareness of pre-state cultures allows Rousseau to postulate a state of nature prior to "society," to which Hobbesian rivalry is relegated. Writing before the Revolution, Rousseau allies the primitive with the originary; his nineteenth-century heirs in linguistics (Humboldt, Müller) and ethnology (Morgan, Tylor, Durkheim) would amass increasingly accurate and thorough data on tribal customs and beliefs at the price of abandoning the construction of originary models, whose uselessness the complexity of this data appeared to demonstrate—an appearance that remains unchanged today. Ethnological research, by widening the gap between the primitive and the originary, reinforced the preference for approaching the human exclusively through the former, attested by observable data, rather than the latter, which is not. This empiricist position, clearly articulated by Durkheim at the end of the nineteenth century, was shared by the folklorists, linguists, and ethnologists whose energies created the field of anthropology as we know it. Regardless of their political views, all were closer to Burke than to Robespierre. Their nostalgia for the primitive was homologous to Burke's preference for tradition; they merely displaced humanity's fall into the hubristic illusion of self-creation from the French to the Neolithic Revolution.

This disillusioned retreat from the scenic imaginings of the Enlightenment would ultimately be beneficial to the scenic imagination. It is no accident that the model of the genesis of the center from the periphery that flourished in the Enlightenment was epitomized in the social contract, generative of state-level political institutions rather than of the human itself. Whether for Hobbes or Rousseau, the center is a focal point of human desire, not a locus of transcendence; the central authority is not, as it would be for Durkheim, equated with the sacred.

The scenic imagination of the Enlightenment constructs an anthropological genesis for the ancients' timeless conceptions of the social order; its science of origins remains on the political level, that of the public interaction of represented desires. The language by which we represent these desires does not itself appear to require a collective scene of origin; it is conceived either as emerging from the indexical signs of natural appetite (Condillac) or as the product of a unique faculty of free contemplation (Herder). Even Vico, who sees language as a providential means of suppressing violence through awe of divinity, never constructs a scenic model of either the violence that precedes or the language that follows.

At the same time as the romantics are turning away from collective models to seek the source of post-Enlightenment anthropology in the depths of the self, a parallel strand of thought, beginning with Hegel, carries out a critique of the interactive basis of political relations, which until the French Revolution had been conflated with ethical relations in general. The Enlightenment affirmation of the functional identity of individuals in the political process, which finds its most eloquent expression in the American Declaration of Independence, is seen by Marx, Nietzsche, and their successors as an ideology to unmask, or more prudently, to deconstruct. Where the Enlightenment had thought it would suffice to eliminate the historical arbitrariness of the sacred for universal reason to take its place, Marx saw "bourgeois universalism" as a mask for exploitative production relations. For Marx, philosophy does no more than transmogrify the time- and class-bound "reason" of the current ruling class into universal truth; changing the world begins by demystifying this truth. Marx remained nonetheless a believer in reason—the reason of history, which he tried to show to be synonymous with the interests of the proletariat. Nietzsche replaces the triumph of historical reason with the triumph of the individual will over the imprisoning force of falsely universal truth. This paradoxical struggle of the Nietzschean self with its "own" representations has been the obsession of philosophy ever since, arguably even of analytic philosophy, haunted by the same paradoxes in a more dryly schematic form.

The romantic retreat from Enlightenment originary thinking coincides with the reintroduction of the sacred into the human scene. This development, prefigured in the reality, if not the theory, of Enlighten-

ment politics in the Revolutionary cult of *L'Être suprême* (The Supreme Being), was theorized under the Restoration, most significantly by de Mai-stre, whose conception of the necessity of sacrificial violence puts him closer to Georges Bataille or René Girard than to Durkheim's students Hubert and Mauss.



The most significant scientific development of the first half of the nineteenth century, the idea of biological evolution, including that of humanity, comforted the romantic distrust of a priori originary models while striking an apparent deathblow to the empirical status of divine creation. Darwin's conception of evolution, gradual and uniformitarian, stands in sharp contrast to the punctual religious model, which nonetheless, however fantastic in detail, captures the key element of humanity's scenic origin. Latter-day creationism may be viewed with a modicum of sympathy as a rearguard defense of the scenic intuition preserved in religious doctrine against the "scientific" denial of the eventfulness of human origin.

Max Müller, whose early reflections on language and religion antedate the 1859 publication date of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, locates the origin of religion in the encounter of "the first [human] dwellers on the earth" with the naturally transcendent spectacle of the sun, an encounter that provides Müller with an originary model, indifferently solitary and collective, of the scene of representation. "Man" encounters the sun as an individual, yet his awe is the source of the collective phenomenon of myth, deprecated in Müller's most memorable phrase as a "youthful disease of language." Although Müller deserves recognition as the only nineteenth-century thinker to conjoin the origin of the central cultural phenomena of language and the sacred, his Condillac-like concentration on individual sensation and cognition ("think of the Sun awakening the eyes of man from sleep, and his mind from slumber!") ignores the social dynamic within which language and religion are generated. In modeling the relation between humanity and its transcendent Other, this liberal Protestant scholar imagines that a scene with only two characters—a single human being and the sun—is more parsimonious than one in which the sacred is a locus of collective interaction.

The generative function of scenes of origin, increasingly moribund throughout the nineteenth century (as witness the oft-cited 1866 charter of the Société linguistique de Paris that banned communications about language origin together with proposals for a “universal language”), was revived in the last decades of the century as a result of an infusion of scenic data from a new source: religious ethnology. Fleeing from the speculative imagination into the empirical study of the primitive, the ethnologist discovers the centrality of the scenic imagination in primitive culture itself, dominated by ritual models of the originary scene.

Because human time is not merely evolutionary but historical, made up of events and not simply of phenomena, every narrative of human action is undecidably both particular and universal. Every human culture—indeed, each human representation—is both a unique singularity and a model of the human-in-general. Ethnological research cannot avoid this ambivalence, however much its practitioners describe with loving care the *thick* specificity of each culture while denying to humanity as a whole any specificity other than biological. At the time of the early systematization of data on primitive society by such scholars as Maine, Morgan, and McLennan, generality bore no stigma; the difficulty lay rather in including in one’s model the *eventfulness* that separates the human world from the natural. Morgan’s painstaking plotting of the stages of human evolution as a single Darwinian line sought to assimilate human history to a natural process; the reaction provoked by this intemperate theorizing among anthropologists of Franz Boas’ generation played a decisive role in swinging the pendulum in the direction of theory-shy empiricism, where it remains to this day.

Durkheim criticizes both Müller’s “naturism” and Tylor’s “animism” for neglecting the essentially social character of the religious event. For Durkheim, the sacred distinguishes human society from its animal counterparts; semiosis—and by extension, language, although Durkheim forbears to take this step—begins with the binary distinction between *sacred* and *profane*. Durkheim was the first thinker to conceive of the sacred as a mode of interaction among human beings rather than as the expression of either their awe before the spectacle of nature or their communion with gods or “spirits,” whose constitutive immortality reflects that of the sacred sign. The most spectacular scenic imagination of the early

twentieth century, however, belonged not to Durkheim but to Sigmund Freud. For Freud, human life was a series of scenes of which the earliest, consciously repressed but perpetually reenacted in the unconscious, were determinant. Freud's early notion of the "primal scene" is akin in significance if not in content to an originary hypothesis scaled to the life of the individual. The family drama of the bourgeois child is an allegory of the genesis of humanity itself. Time has revealed the weaknesses of Freud's ahistorical model of the human psyche as well as of his curative technique founded on the retrieval of repressed "primal scenes." What remains of value is his overall scenic intuition.

Freud made one major attempt to ground his key psychic model of the Oedipus complex in a hypothetical scenic event. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud links the ontogenetic scene to its phylogenetic original through a renewed exercise of the scenic imagination, now nourished with ethnological data. Freud's scene of origin, the most audacious speculative model of early ethnology, has been repudiated by even the most devout Freudians—*especially* by the most devout Freudians. This return from Durkheim's prudent empiricism to the speculative mentality of the Enlightenment serves to this day as a caution to anyone tempted to follow in the master's footsteps.

Embarrassing to psychoanalysis, atavistic in the eyes of mainstream social science, Freud's scene of the collective murder of the father by his sons is prophetic from the perspective of originary anthropology. Seen less literally, Freud's model of the origin of internalized interdiction or guilt is a model of the origin of representation in general. The sons, no longer dominated "instinctively" by the father, must consciously reconstruct a social order. Dividing the women among them requires a system of classification, the origin of which is the sacred significance cast over his possessions by the father, whose posthumous influence makes him immortal like a god—or a sign. Although the Oedipus complex gives desire for the mother priority over rivalry with the father, we seek in vain in Freud's description of the originary murder scene any mention of the women the sons are purportedly fighting for. That Freud intended his scene to serve as a prologue to the modern "family drama" should not be permitted to obscure its value as a model of the scenic generation of a new, human set of ethical relations, guaranteed and memorialized by

shared representation. René Girard's revival of the scenic hypothesis of origin on a newly rigorous basis in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) owes a great deal to Freud's model—and as I shall show below, shares some of its defects.



Let us recall our original quandary: what prevented these thinkers, or far earlier ones, from formulating the originary hypothesis in a parsimonious or “minimal” form? The key to this conundrum is to be sought in the history of the scenic imagination itself. Hobbes, at the outset of the Enlightenment, created the first generative model of a human institution in order to explain and justify the genesis of “Leviathan,” the centralized state. Although the very possibility of Hobbes' thought experiment is dependent on the emergence of socioeconomic reciprocity in early market society—the ultimate force behind the English civil war—this first free exercise of the scenic imagination is intended to justify the abolition of the intolerable conditions that gave rise to it, which Hobbes schematizes in the violent symmetry of his state of nature as the “war of every man against every man.” If any society was ever founded on the forgetting of its origin, it is that of Hobbes' Leviathan, the irreversibility of whose acquisition of absolute sovereignty can be guaranteed only by historical amnesia.

The forgetting implicit in the use of the hypothetical scene of reciprocal exchange to justify a non-reciprocal centralization is not dependent on Hobbes' particular political views. Rousseau's radical social contract is, if anything, yet more constraining. The “general will” established in the originary political scene acquires an authority that extends even to the political imagination of the participants—whence the author's sinister quip that to make someone conform to the general will is *le forcer à être libre* (to force him to be free). The anthropological lesson of both Hobbes and Rousseau is that an originary scene that brings together not protohumans in need of a new mode of interaction but fully constituted human beings incapable of finding peace in their “natural” (pre-state) condition—such a scene is a configuration of tyranny. Because the thought experiment is not at the appropriate level of parsimony, it generates too much order from too much preexisting culture.

We may contrast these early modern scenes with Freud's father-murder scenario in *Totem and Taboo*. Freud's originary "social contract" is engaged in by beings not yet possessed of a fully human subjectivity. Although his model does not refer to language per se, it generates the primordially semiotic human behavior of *interdiction*, which the originary sign imposes on the members of the group. Freud's scene lacks parsimony only insofar as it fails to respect the originary interdependence of language and interdiction, whereas the socially mediated desires that Hobbes describes are much farther from the origin. Long before mimetic crisis could have incited a group of humans to choose a sovereign, there must have been a crisis among protohumans in need of the most elementary form of human order. Similarly, but on a lesser scale, in Freud's scene, if the interdiction of the women that follows the murder is to be the *first* human interdiction, it must be the occasion of the first use of language, in which case the sons would not have stood in a culturally defined kinship relation to the father but only in the pecking-order relationship characteristic of animal societies.

A truly parsimonious originary scene would comfort neither Hobbes' metapolitics nor Freud's metapsychology. These thinkers could not conceive such a scene in the first place because they had no reason to conceive of originary thinking as an enterprise independent of politics or psychology—although individual psychology comes closer to the parsimony of the originary scene than state-level politics. What makes generative anthropology a new way of thinking is that it takes the parsimoniousness of the originary scene as the very foundation of its human ontology. Such an approach to anthropology, the pioneering example of which is Girard's mimetic theory, is consequent on the revelation at the end of World War II of the absolutely crucial problem of deferring human violence.



Through the examination of the works of nineteen major Western thinkers, from Hobbes to Freud, this book traces the evolution of the originary models constructed by the scenic imagination as explanations of fundamental human institutions. These analyses, whose number could easily have been multiplied, are not intended to provide a system-

atic history of modern Western thought. I have selected for analysis what I consider to be the most significant exercises of the scenic imagination during this period, even if in some cases the author's contribution to human thought might arguably not be as great as others I have omitted. In the concluding chapter, I discuss several recent works on the origin of language and religion in an attempt to assess the still-controversial place of the scenic imagination in our newly post-millennial age.