# Shakespeare's Exiles

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# 1
# Introduction



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# 1 Introduction

This book is about two unlikely and, to be perfectly frank, also rather unlikeable heroes. Timon, the bankrupt host of Athens, retreats to a dark cave in the woods where he shouts his resentment to the world; and Prospero, the dispossessed Duke of Milan, buries himself in his books to hatch devious plots to entrap his enemies. I call these two lonely and solitary figures Shakespeare's exiles.

There are, to be sure, other exiles in Shakespeare, some of whom (e.g., Shylock and Malvolio) have excellent reasons to be resentful. On the lighter side, one thinks of Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, or Duke Senior, Rosalind, and Orlando in *As You Like It*, or the long-suffering Pericles, who doubtlessly strikes many as a more fitting precursor to Prospero than Timon. But these peripatetic figures are comic-romantic adventurers rather than exiled *big men* or, as they are also sometimes called, *center men*.[1] They are, in other words, desultory day trippers, casual sojourners to the periphery. After a brief period of (morally rejuvenating) exile, they rejoin the traditional ritual-based community. They are restored to what Northrop Frye calls (perhaps a bit too cheerfully) the "new society" that emerges at the end of a comedy or romance.[2] Even Shylock and Malvolio, whose ordeals seem especially shameful and sadistic, are reintegrated into their communities. These gestures may strike us as heavy-handed or hypocritical, but in each case, it is the representative of the traditional social order that insists on a peaceful reintegration of the exile. The Duke of Venice pardons Shylock and reduces the forfeiture of his estate to a fine; and Orsino, Duke of Illyria, sends his men to "entreat" Malvolio "to a peace."

In contrast, Timon is never restored to the center; and though Prospero says he will shortly return to Milan, there are good reasons to doubt his story of a blissful homecoming. What both Timon and Prospero nonetheless insist upon is their unrivaled authenticity as exiles. The vehemence with which they protest their individuality and authenticity (i.e., their independence from the center) betrays the magnitude of their resentment. This is obvious in Timon's case, but it is no less true of Prospero. Timon regards

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the cynic Apemantus as inauthentic precisely because Apemantus's low status means he has not experienced the "sugared game" (4.3.262),[3] the adulation and prestige of the center. Prospero makes a similar argument when he represents his brother as an imposter who does not deserve the throne of Milan. Both Timon and Prospero anticipate the most famous outcast of them all, Satan, whom Milton describes as moved by "monarchal pride" and the quest for "transcendent glory" when he rises above his fellows to undertake the hazardous journey from hell to Eden to tempt Adam and Eve with resentful thoughts of their inferiority before God.[4]

Nor can we say that Timon and Prospero are exiles who become tragic scapegoats in the sense that, for example, Romeo, Hamlet, Lear, and Coriolanus become victims of their respective social orders. Romeo is exiled to Mantua, Hamlet to England, Lear to the heath, and Coriolanus to what he senses could be an improvement over the grim contest for supremacy that defines Rome. Especially in Coriolanus's case, there is the suggestion that exile could lead to something better. But the "world elsewhere" Coriolanus briefly imagines never materializes. Unlike Timon or Prospero, he fails to find a brave new world on the margins of the old center—which is to say, he fails to take up residence in the woods or set up shop on an island somewhere far, far away. This failure leads to the hero's downfall. Despite undergoing brief periods of exile, Romeo, Hamlet, Lear, and Coriolanus return to the center. That is why they are sacrificed. In contrast, nobody sacrifices Timon or Prospero. Why not? Because they do not return. If they do not return, they cannot be sacrificed. As tragedy makes clear, the center is the locus of what René Girard calls "sacred violence," the place where the big man *must* be sacrificed.[5] Hence the surest way to avoid a violent and premature death is to avoid centrality. In renouncing the center, Timon and Prospero renounce the center's violence. Unlike Hamlet, Lear, Coriolanus, or the crafty duke in *Measure for Measure*, they do not merely temporarily vacate the center. They become permanent exiles of it.

But if exile is what brings Timon and Prospero together, their response to exile is quite different. Timon deliberately chooses exile and refuses to return despite the pleas of the senators. Disgusted by the ingratitude of his clients, he makes a great show of abandoning Athens forever. Yet the odd thing about Timon's exile is that he never appears short of human company. He receives as many visitors in the forest as he did when he hosted his legendary parties in Athens. Timon goes out of his way to offend his new clients. He refuses to clothe himself or tidy his cave, and he hurls insults, rocks, and other missiles at his astonished visitors. Prospero is keener to keep up appearances. Not only does he remain fully clothed, but he also establishes himself as the supreme overlord of his strange new world. The miniscule society over which he rules may be populated by one-dimensional stick figures, but this just makes them easier to handle

and manipulate. One is struck, for instance, by how adroitly he controls *his* visitors, who have curiously washed up on his shores. This control stands in marked contrast to his governorship of Milan, which by his own admission fails miserably. But within the "great globe" of his island sanctuary, Prospero is invincible. Any challenge to his authority is effortlessly thwarted by a flick of his magic wand. One suspects that Prospero's authority on the island is inversely proportional to his authority in Milan. If Prospero's political career ends in abject failure, his career as an artist or illusionist is a resounding success. Indeed, it is a good deal more successful than Timon's baroque performance in the woods. Timon must rely on gold to attract new clients. Prospero simply has to snap his fingers and his aesthetic genius (Ariel) appears by his side to carry out his commands. Prospero's dependency on Ariel has led some to see in Prospero a sly reference to the playwright himself. As we shall see, this intuition is founded on a genuine insight about the primacy of the aesthetic in the task of representing the sacred personhood of the center upon which all political authority rests.[6]

Prospero and Timon believe their exiles to be unjust, which is why they never hesitate to accuse their former dependents of ingratitude. But the stories they tell tend to obscure and distort as much as they reveal. Critics have, I think, been too credulous of Timon's and Prospero's self-representations, and this has led to a fair bit of sentimentality in the reading of both plays, particularly in the case of Prospero, whose tolerance toward his enemies seems to place him at the opposite end of the spectrum from the misanthropic Timon. But if we focus too insistently on Prospero's benevolence, we miss the similarity between the two exiles, both of whom resent the social order from which they feel unjustly excluded. In contrast to Shakespeare's other tragic big men (all of whom return to the center), Timon and Prospero spend their exiles creating highly entertaining, first-person narratives of self-justification, self-exculpation, and self-memorialization (i.e., versions of what today we call memoirs or autobiographies). In doing so, they turn an apparent weakness into a strength. Their eccentricity—which is to say, their idiosyncratic position on the margins of political power—becomes the occasion for extended diatribes against the center. The exile's political impotence turns out to be a precondition of his power as a narrator or storyteller.

This romantic strategy of recapturing the center from the periphery is the Shakespearean exile's greatest achievement. Both Timon and Prospero refuse the old ritual (monarchal) center because they grasp that their significance depends on the prior linguistic moment in which the center is represented aesthetically by a peripheral speaker or narrator who contrives to persuade us of the authority and authenticity of his unique first-person perspective. The old ritual center, with its fustian and shopworn iconography

of crown, scepter, and orb, is inauthentic, not because it is occupied by an imposter or fraud but because it is itself fraudulent. And how do we know that? Because the narrator insists on it. It follows that the speaker cannot himself occupy the sacred monarchal center without also undermining his own authority. His task is rather to keep us under the spell of his narrative, which remains the protagonist's only means to convince us of the scandalous fraud of the center.

Consequently, we are, quite literally, assaulted by a barrage of words. In the wilderness, Timon shouts at the top of his voice. The shouting ends only when he dies. Prospero's end appears more agreeable. He says he will return to Milan and resume the ducal seat. Meanwhile, his daughter is to be wedded to a handsome prince, and his enemies, who have been soundly humiliated, are now graciously forgiven. But if we focus on the happy ending promised by our lonely illusionist, we miss the fact that Prospero, like Timon, is cranky, tired, and vexed. He complains about his failing mental faculties, as well as his "weakness" and "infirmity" (4.1.159–60), all in the context of a well-known speech about the fleetingness of human life that leaves not a rack behind. Finally, just before the curtain falls, he alludes to his death, which we understand to be fast approaching. The narrative ends while Prospero is still on his island, so it is an open question whether he ever actually returns to Milan.

What is certain is that both Timon and Prospero end their stories by pointing to their deaths. It is of course logically impossible for the narrator to describe the scene of his own death. If one lives to describe one's death, one hasn't died. It follows that a truly complete autobiographical narrative never ends; or, to put the point another way, the final scene is not really an ending. The narrator never catches up to his narrated self, the subject of his narration. Timon's self-authored and contradictory epitaphs constitute a final joke on his audience. Prospero's epilogue may also be conceived as a kind of joke. Because both Timon and Prospero remain exiles of the center, their deaths can never be depicted on the (tragic) stage. They can only be alluded to by the lonely figure of the protagonist-narrator, whose domination of our attention ends only when he (finally!) stops speaking.

## A Brief Genealogy

*Shakespeare's Exiles* is my third book on Shakespeare. The first, which I called simply *Shakespeare's Big Men*, explores the ethical problem of the big man's aspiration to occupy the center and the resentment this desire generates in the hero and his rivals. The plays discussed in that book include *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus*. In these tragedies, the protagonist finds his desire for centrality thwarted by a series of rivals whom he kills before he himself is killed. The second

book, *Shakespeare's Mad Men*, turns to the problem of the big man who attempts to renounce his political authority before he becomes a victim of violence.[7] King Lear and *Measure for Measure*'s Duke Vincentio abdicate their thrones and attempt to live the remainder of their lives on the periphery as private citizens. Neither is successful. The result is a madness-inducing division between the protagonist's private and public selves. Lear refuses to behave like a private citizen and literally goes mad. Vincentio, who has the good fortune to find himself in a tragicomedy rather than a tragedy, does not suffer a similar psychological breakdown, but he behaves very much like a madman, as Lucio points out on a number of occasions.

The basic lesson of these examples is not merely that the center is the locus of violence. That is more or less obvious. Rather, the point is that violence is deferred by representing it. In tragedy, this deferral provides only temporary relief before the protagonist succumbs to the violent sparagmos, a scene vividly depicted in Shakespeare's tragedies. In comedy and romance, the sparagmos is deferred indefinitely; or, to put the same point another way, it remains contained by its representation, which is traced back to the individual's internal scene of representation, as when Bottom wakes up from his dream of being the love-object of the beautiful Titania. Bottom's dream is represented as a harmless and amusing fantasy, but he shares the same relationship with the scene of desire as the more violent protagonists of the tragedies. Brutus's dreaming of Caesar's murder, Hamlet's putting on plays of revenge, Iago's whispering into Othello's ear, Macbeth's reaching for the airy dagger, Coriolanus's embrace of Aufidius as he dreams of Rome in a tower of flame, Lear's conducting of his imaginary trial, even Vincentio's identification with Angelo's illicit desire—all are attempts to purge resentment of the more central other by representing the fulfillment of desire within the self's internal imaginary scene.

The lesson of tragedy since the Greeks has been that desire, represented in the hero's striving to occupy and dominate the center, is punishable by expulsion or death. The comic or romantic solution to this predicament, which is ultimately the ethical predicament of the social order as such, is to permit the individual his desire but only on condition that it remain contained by the internal aesthetic scene in which it is represented. Bottom can have his dream because it remains only a dream. Malvolio, whose dream is no more impertinent than Bottom's, experiences the misfortune of having his private dream publicly exposed by a group of malevolent practical jokers. As I will attempt to show, Shakespeare's most elaborate exploration of the internal aesthetic scene occurs in his final masterpiece, *The Tempest*. This internal scene is the basis of the modern concept of identity, the idea that each individual possesses a unique interior or private self. The notion of freedom in modern liberal democracies is bound up with this idea of

a more authentic inner self struggling to break free from the externally imposed constraints of the society in which the self exists.[8]

Because they already occupy the sacred monarchal center, King Lear and Duke Vincentio would appear to have no cause for resentment. If they are at the top, what can they have to resent? But precisely in each case, madness is a consequence of an unsuccessful renunciation of the power and prestige associated with the monarchal center. Their abdications fail because they refuse to give up the centrality upon which their authority depends. Consequently, resentment, whether their own or that of their rivals, continues to haunt them. Lear's public bequeathal of his kingdom to his daughters is an aggressive attempt to incite envy among his rivals. Why else would he have invited everyone, including the King of France and the Dukes of Albany, Cornwall, and Burgundy, to the royal palace to stare at the giant map of his kingdom? By dividing his territory among his heirs *before* he dies, he reminds his rivals of their unrepayable debt to him. Lear intends his final royal act to be his greatest and most extravagant potlatch. He aims to humiliate his rivals forever. By emulating the largesse of the gods, whose generosity can never be returned or repaid, Lear demonstrates his continued attachment to the interdicted sacred center.

Duke Vincentio's abdication is no less an act of bad faith. By depositing Angelo on the royal seat, the duke makes his deputy the target of the people's resentment. More deviously, he seeks to purge his resentment of an upstart rival. When he discovers that Angelo harbors an illicit desire for the beautiful novitiate Isabella, he conspires in facilitating Angelo's resentment by sneakily and voyeuristically encouraging his deputy to believe he has violated a bride of God. When in the final scene he shows clemency to his sinful subjects, including his humiliated deputy, he takes this as his cue to usurp his rival's place in Isabella's bed. It transpires that the mad duke of dark corners has no intention of abdicating the royal seat. On the contrary, Angelo becomes a scapegoat whose well-publicized resentment distracts everyone, with the notable exception of Lucio, from noticing the duke's own shamefully resentful desires. The duke's unexpected return amid the chaos he has himself connived in creating is deviously represented by the duke as a miraculous and providential triumph. Yet we can only interpret the final scene as representing the triumph of mercy over vengeance if we ignore the fact that Angelo's resentful actions have been deliberately encouraged by the duke in the first place. If the duke knows Angelo will fall, why does he tempt him? The answer provided by the play's highly ambivalent ending suggests that the duke's eccentric strategy is a ruse designed to secure his grip on the center more tightly.

In *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare stages not merely the central tragic conflict but the protagonist's shameful relationship with the all-powerful center. The question he returns to repeatedly in his later

plays is whether the self can sustain itself independently of the tragic death-contest of the center, the traditional locus of ritual sacrifice. If the renunciations of King Lear and Duke Vincentio remain incomplete, can we find a big man who renounces the center without going mad or behaving like a sociopath?

The present book turns to two protagonists whose renunciations of the center, while not without their share of irony and bad faith, appear to be more successful. Timon turns his back on Athens to live in the forest and eat roots. He has the singular distinction of being Shakespeare's only tragic hero who is not also a homicide. He neither kills nor is violently killed. He does not even kill animals, preferring to become a vegetarian, a humble eater of roots who simply wastes away in the forest like compost. He predates romantic environmentalism by at least 200 years. No doubt his death is still tragic. Yet its nonviolent nature makes it quite un-Shakespearean. What is nonetheless thoroughly Shakespearean about Timon's death is that it comes as the culmination of his resentment, which is unmatched in all Shakespeare. No other Shakespearean hero shouts his resentment as loudly or persistently as Timon. The most fascinating thing about him is that he shouts even when nobody is present to hear him. Shouting is for Timon a mode of being. No wonder he dies of exhaustion. He has shouted himself to death.

If Prospero does not shout like Timon, it is because he has developed a more effective therapeutic strategy. Armed with his magic cloak and staff, he is able to turn his personal narrative of resentment into a three-dimensional life-sized dramatic performance. The courtly figures who pass across his private stage are objects of his resentment, which dates back to his occupation of the ducal throne. Having been rudely thrust from Milan, he longs to teach his persecutors a lesson. When he tries to explain this fact to Miranda, she does not appear to be impressed. Her main concern remains on the side of the victims of her father's wizardry and pyrotechnics. Annoyed by her intractability, Prospero puts her to sleep. Alone with Ariel, who seems to represent Prospero's capacity for aesthetic invention, he is free to get on with his self-exculpatory, wish-fulfillment narrative, which one would be hard-pressed to call redemptive, though it is certainly sentimental and melodramatic. Even the romantic engagement of the lovers is far too contrived to appear as anything other than a deliberate construction of Prospero's resentful position on the margins of someone else's centrality. The fact that he does not destroy his enemies is, of course, commendable. But when we remember that these rivals exist only within Prospero's autobiographical narrative of self-exculpation, this act of forgiveness becomes no more redemptive than the highly contrived and sentimental narrative involving the pair of lovers. If Prospero controls what his enemies do and say, how can we say he has forgiven them? If there is no one to accept his forgiveness, then who exactly has been forgiven?

This is a problem peculiar to narratives in which an internal character is also the author of the story. If the internal character is the artistic creator of the conflict represented on the stage, how can we say that the conflict has been resolved? Prospero exerts a level of control over the story unmatched in all Shakespeare. No other character, not even Iago or Richard of Gloucester, comes close to Prospero's command of the dramatic conflict. Hence the irresistible urge among critics to identify Prospero with Shakespeare. Whether or not Shakespeare intended Prospero to be an allegory of his career as a playwright we will never know. What we do know is that Shakespeare's text refers, by both direct and indirect means, to the troubling events of Prospero's past. As I will suggest in Chapter 3, *The Tempest* can be read as a kind of confession. The peculiar language of the play's epilogue, in which Prospero (who has just alluded to his impending death) requests our mercy and pardon, supports this hypothesis. In Chapter 4, I therefore end with an epilogue of my own in which I compare Prospero to the guilt-ridden narrators of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. The epilogue serves two purposes: it is a summary of my overall argument about Shakespeare's big men and a hint toward possible future developments.

## Theoretical Excursus on the Origins of Political Power

This study relies on the same anthropological model introduced in my previous books. Eric Gans's originary hypothesis stands at the core of a research program that has come to be known as generative anthropology.[9] Generative anthropology is founded on the idea that those categories deemed fundamental to human understanding are traceable to their appearance in an originary scene. The originary hypothesis is an attempt to reconstruct this scene, which cannot be reduced to its more basic empirical or biological elements without also destroying its essentially scenic and dramatic character. Because human culture is transmitted nongenetically, purely biological explanations of this scene can only ever be partial. Rather than seeking to emulate the experimental methods of the natural sciences, generative anthropology employs the research strategy of the originary hypothesis, which traces the various cultural and phenomenological categories of human experience to their genesis in a minimal scene of origin. Language is the fundamental cultural institution and therefore a foundational element of the hypothesis. But other fundamental anthropological categories may be situated with respect to this hypothetical scene of origin, including desire and resentment, morality and ethics, the aesthetic and the sacred.

Why bother formulating an empirically unfalsifiable hypothesis at all? What is the point of trying to think in terms of a minimal set of originary

anthropological categories? The construction of the hypothesis forces us to make explicit what would otherwise remain hidden or unexplained not only in our general theory but in our analyses of specific texts. I hope I am not exaggerating when I say that most of us in the humanities do not believe that the task of elucidating and interpreting texts is reducible to the empirical ontology studied by our colleagues in the natural sciences; or, to put the point another way, the attempt to reduce literary and cultural interpretation to the statistical methods of the empirical sciences radically impoverishes the scholarship we produce based on our everyday intuitive explanatory categories. The originary hypothesis is an attempt to make this intuition explicit by obliging critics to justify their explanatory categories, which are also (I submit) specifically *anthropological* categories.

For example, teachers of Shakespeare are obliged to explain to their students why Shakespeare is worth reading. The simplest answer—"It's Shakespeare for heaven's sake!"—is no more than a tautology. More precisely, the explanation makes no particular claim about Shakespeare's significance beyond the verdict of history. Since many other intelligent people have found Shakespeare worth reading, we may too. This is a good start but not (yet) an example of critical anthropological inquiry. The next step is to discover what exists *inside* his work that sets him apart from the rest. This requires some familiarity not only with his work as a whole but also with the historical context in which he wrote. The latter includes not just the writings of his fellow poets and playwrights but those of his literary predecessors and successors too. A study of *The Tempest*, for example, might point to any number of other significant texts, including not merely literary or philosophical ones (e.g., Ovid, Montaigne) but contemporary historical documents (e.g., William Strachey's account of the shipwreck of the *Sea-Adventure* on the coast of Bermuda in 1609). A critic who reads inventively and creatively can find any number of aesthetically motivated associations between these texts.

For example, on the basis of his reading of Strachey's account of the shipwrecked Virginia colonists, Stephen Greenblatt declares his interest in discovering "the significance of the relation between the two texts."[10] Greenblatt does not mean that he has identified a new source for *The Tempest*. Beginning with Edmund Malone in 1808, scholars have recognized the relevance of Strachey's text as a likely source for *The Tempest*.[11] What Greenblatt means is that his analysis of this particular text helps us to understand not just *The Tempest* but all literature.

But how can this be? How can an analysis of this little-known text throw light on our understanding of literature? According to Greenblatt, the secret lies in reading Strachey's account of the shipwreck poetically as if it were itself a literary text. Thus, when Greenblatt reads the *True Reportory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates*, he sees the

"complex circulation between the social dimension of an aesthetic strategy and the aesthetic dimension of a social strategy."[12] What does this mean? It means that any culturally significant text has both a social and an aesthetic dimension. The social dimension, Greenblatt explains, concerns power and, more precisely, the authority to coerce others. But where does this authority to coerce others come from? Greenblatt does not answer this question directly except to note the wide disparity between the mythical "Land of Cockaigne" represented by Bermuda, where food is plentiful and the survivors quickly forget their former positions in the social hierarchy, and the grim brutality of martial law in the Jamestown colony, where disobedience is punished by "whipping, mutilation, and the death penalty."[13]

How is this relevant to *The Tempest*? It is relevant because we can see a similar power struggle occurring in Shakespeare's play. *The Tempest* is a distortion of the same "crisis of authority"[14] that fills Strachey with such anxiety when he writes about the shipwrecked colonists on their way to Virginia. But whereas the Jamestown Governor, Sir Thomas Gates, imposes brute force and martial law on his colonists, Prospero uses magic to control his island's unruly inhabitants. By this means, Prospero regains control of his dukedom. "Prospero's magic," Greenblatt concludes, "is the romance equivalent of martial law."[15]

One might well ask how this analysis, fascinating though it is, helps us to understand the origin of aesthetic experience upon which Greenblatt's reading depends. Greenblatt does not so much explain the aesthetic as take it for granted. He assumes precisely what his analysis of power purports to explain. Moreover, the claim to have uncovered a hitherto undiscovered significance in Shakespeare comes off as a tactical bait and switch. Thus, our aesthetic experience of *The Tempest* is defamiliarized by being mapped onto a parallel aesthetic experience of Strachey's *True Reportory*, as interpreted by Greenblatt. Aesthetic significance comes not from Greenblatt's reading of Shakespeare but from his reading of Strachey. This critical strategy applies, more generally, to Greenblatt's idea of criticism as a wide-ranging exercise in what he calls "cultural poetics." If you stripped Greenblatt's book of its many analyses of marginal cultural texts such as Strachey's, there would not be much left. The book is called *Shakespearean Negotiations*, but it contains very little actual analysis of Shakespeare.[16]

It would nonetheless be a mistake to dismiss Greenblatt on the grounds that he is distracting us from our proper aesthetic object (Shakespeare) by instead directing our attention to the cultural flotsam and jetsam hovering on the margins of Shakespeare's "joint-stock company." Rather, we should see Greenblatt's turn to these marginal para-literary texts as an attempt to better understand the category of the aesthetic by putting Shakespeare into his wider social and ethical contexts. In other words, we should see Greenblatt as attempting an inchoate form of anthropological criticism.[17] The

critic goes into the archives in search of para-literary texts that might help to throw anthropological light on the institution of literature. The closest Greenblatt comes to defining the aesthetic is when he writes the following: "The aesthetic space—or, more accurately, the commercial space of the theatrical joint-stock company—is constituted by the simultaneous appropriation of and swerving from the discourse of power."[18] This is provocative but obscure. Does Greenblatt mean that power precedes the aesthetic? But what is power? And how exactly does the aesthetic appropriate power while also swerving from it?[19]

To ask these questions is to begin to think in originary anthropological terms. Power is meaningful to humans because it is represented as power. But how does one represent power?

In every society known to humankind, the greatest wielders of power are not humans but gods or, to use Marshall Sahlins's term, *metapersons*.[20] Power is, in the first place, sacred power—power wielded by a god. But what is the sacred? The originary hypothesis explains the sacred as the power of the center to oppose the multiple conflicting appetites of the human periphery. This power is conceived by the original participants as emanating directly from the center, the locus of which is consequently sacralized. Only a god can withstand the multiple competing desires of the human periphery. Whence the prominence in all cultures of prescribed rituals when it comes to the division, distribution, and consumption of food.

What the originary hypothesis enables us to see more clearly is that this experience of the god's power over the community of worshipers depends upon the prior linguistic moment in which the aborted gesture is interpreted, for the first time, as a word or symbol that designates the object as forbidden to appropriation. As the evolutionary anthropologist and neuroscientist Terrence Deacon has demonstrated, words refer to their objects by temporarily deferring the more elementary indexical and iconic reference strategies that motivate all other animal communication systems, including the communication system used by our prehuman ancestors.[21] As Deacon shows, language—or what he calls, more specifically, *symbolic reference*—employs a totally unprecedented reference strategy. Although many animals use iconic and indexical signs to communicate, no other creature uses signs in the highly peculiar fashion demanded by symbols or words. More precisely, no other creature uses a sign to *negate* its indexical referent. Only humans communicate via this paradoxical and counterintuitive strategy of deferring the more elementary iconic and indexical reference strategies of our sensory and perceptual systems. Hence Deacon's argument that the origin of language constitutes a conundrum for the evolutionary theorist: a veritable "evolutionary anomaly."[22]

What the originary hypothesis adds to Deacon's basic insight about the unprecedented nature of symbolic reference is the equally anomalous

nature of mimetic desire in human evolution. As the anthropological critic René Girard has shown, imitation leads to rivalry and conflict.[23] If I imitate your gesture toward a desirable object (e.g., a food item), we will at some point come into conflict over it. How is this conflict resolved? The originary hypothesis proposes that symbolic ritual is the means by which humans defer the conflict generated by intolerable levels of mimetic desire. The sacred figure designated by the word is not merely an object of perceptual and appetitive need but also of collective and symbolic (mimetic) desire. What is represented cannot be appropriated, which is to say that the representation of the central object as sacred takes place simultaneously as the deferral of appropriative and instinctive action. But what cannot be appropriated gives birth not just to desire but also, as Nietzsche recognized, to frustrated desire or, more precisely, to resentment.[24]

The specifically aesthetic moment of this scene occurs in the subject's oscillation between the peripheral linguistic sign and central desire-object. This oscillation between sign and object is a paradoxical experience that provides temporary relief from the negative experience of frustrated desire or resentment.[25] In representing the object, the individual gains not the object but an imaginary substitute of the object. "The pleasure of the esthetic," Gans writes,

> results from the deferral or 'drowning' of the prior displeasure—the resentment—generated by unfulfillable desire. The esthetic experience engages the subject in a to-and-fro movement of imaginary possession and dispossession that blocks the formation of the stable imaginary structure of resentment, where the self on the periphery is definitively alienated from the desired object at the center.[26]

The conclusion of the originary event occurs when the appetitive object, which we may hypothesize to be the carcass of a large prey animal, is divided among the group. The division of food follows the moral model of the equal exchange of signs on the periphery.[27] We need not assume that the division of the object is perfectly equal. What we must assume is that this division takes place within the moral context of the linguistic exchange of signs. The presence of rituals of food distribution in all cultures confirms this close proximity between linguistic and economic exchange, between morality and ethics.

The originary hypothesis may strike the reader as a fanciful thought experiment with little factual or empirical support. But this misses the point of the hypothesis, which is not a substitute for (unavailable) empirical facts. There will never be sufficient empirical evidence because the hypothesis is, precisely, *not* reducible to more elementary (biological or physical) explanatory categories. It is, rather, a minimal anthropological

theory of the fundamental categories of human experience. Asking for empirical evidence of the originary hypothesis is like asking for empirical evidence of *The Tempest*, the meaning of which is not reducible to its empirical manifestation as marks on the page (or pixels on the screen)—or, for that matter, neurons firing in the brain. To employ an analogy used by Roger Scruton, the artwork consists of purely physical objects with purely physical properties (e.g., canvas and paint). But the face that appears in the artwork is not reducible to the empirical properties of canvas or paint. It is, rather, an *emergent* feature of the artwork that requires an entirely different order of explanation than a scientific theory of canvas and paint.[28]

Like the face that emerges from the canvas, the categories of human experience emerge from the originary anthropological scene of symbolic representation. No less than *The Tempest*, the originary hypothesis assumes the necessity of its irreducibly scenic, non-empirical categories. The difference is that the hypothesis is minimal and revisable whereas *The Tempest* is not. The sole ethical and methodological virtue of the hypothesis over other scenic institutions, such as drama, literature, or ritual, is this requirement of parsimony and revisability. The hypothesis is in the first place a heuristic that helps us understand ourselves as heirs of a foundational event, the moment when humans first became conscious of themselves as historical beings with a past, present, and future. Representing the event of human origin has traditionally been the task of religion, but since the Enlightenment, this task has fallen increasingly to anthropology and its secular science of human origin.[29]

Whatever the inadequacies of this particular formulation of the hypothesis, one cannot deny that it offers a clearer articulation of its fundamental categories than is available in, for example, Greenblatt. Compare, for instance, Greenblatt's concepts of power and authority. In our conception, power and authority reside in the sacred center, which is occupied by the god or "metaperson" who alone possesses the power to withstand the competing desires of the human periphery. Classical tragedy tells the story of the usurpation of this sacred power by a human protagonist who suffers for his act of hubris. But tragedy is only possible once the center has been appropriated by a member of the human periphery. In other words, tragedy assumes the birth of hierarchical societies in which the central redistributive role is taken over by an adventurous mortal—the big man—who aims to emulate the supremacy of the gods upon whom he models his power and authority.

## Snakes and Ladders

An example from Shakespeare may help to elucidate the originary structure of power and authority. In the second act of *Julius Caesar*, an unsleeping and restless Brutus rises from his bed and paces in his courtyard, his

mind haunted by an unflattering image of the mighty Caesar. Whence comes this image? Two days previously during the feast of Lupercalia, Cassius had confided to Brutus that he harbored deep within his breast "thoughts of great value, worthy cogitations" (1.2.50). These worthy but secret thoughts were, Cassius hinted, also buried in the depths of Brutus's soul. Cassius goes on to say that since Brutus cannot peer into his own (subconscious) mind, he (Cassius) will take the liberty of serving as a mirror to reflect back to Brutus the truth buried within.

Why should Brutus need Cassius to reflect back to him his innermost thoughts and feelings? Can't Brutus grasp his own motivations? Why is Cassius so eager to play the role of Brutus's personal psychotherapist? What lies hidden deep within Brutus's breast?

Cassius is playing a high-stakes game of truth or dare with his friend and confidant. Who will be the first to confess to the other his resentment of the mighty Caesar? Of course, we know the answer. Cassius is much more in touch with his darker, more conspiratorial side than Brutus. That is why Cassius says he, not Brutus, will mirror the other man's hidden passion:

> Therefore, good Brutus, be prepared to hear;
> And since you know you cannot see yourself
> So well as by reflection, I, your glass,
> Will modestly discover to yourself
> That of yourself which you yet know not of.
> (1.2.66–70)

What hidden part of Brutus does Cassius modestly coax into the sunlight? Shakespeare leaves us in no doubt. Cassius personifies resentment. His story of how he defeated Caesar in a swimming race many years ago is a superb example of resentment mongering. With consummate skill, Cassius demonstrates the fine art of nursing a grudge. His story of injustice panders shamelessly to Brutus's own feelings of impotent frustration in the face of Caesar's meteoric rise to power.

If Cassius were alive today, he would be the chief editor of London's biggest, most unashamedly sensationalizing tabloid. In a remarkable and brilliant speech, he paints a ridiculous and absurdly cartoonish picture of Caesar as effeminate, weak, and incapable of swimming across the Tiber. Caesar and his supporters are, of course, out of earshot, so there is no danger they will overhear Cassius's scandalous story. In fact, while Cassius mocks the great man behind the great man's back, the great man is busy grandstanding (offstage) to the plebeians. As Brutus and Cassius well know, the plebeians hold the key to grasping power in Rome. In a piece of highly patriotic Roman pageantry, which meticulously reproduces the myth of the founding of the Roman republic and the banishment of the last

Tarquin king, Caesar mimes his loyalty and service to the state by refusing (three times!) the crown offered to him by Antony. The crowd's (offstage) roars of approval clearly irritate the sullen and envious Brutus, who cannot bring himself to follow the others to witness Caesar's vulgar showboating. The hawk-eyed Cassius registers these signs of discontent. Why has the noble Brutus refused to follow Caesar to observe the city's public festivities? And why does he bristle every time the crowd roars enthusiastically for Caesar? Brutus's sulky behavior is a red flag to the sly Cassius, who does not hesitate to lay on as thickly as possible his sarcasm and disgust at Caesar's grandstanding. Imagine having to kowtow to a man who can't even swim across the Tiber! Oh, Brutus the shame of it!

Now, two days later, Brutus, who confesses he hasn't slept a wink "since Cassius first did whet [him] against Caesar" (2.1.61), is deep in thought about how to save Rome from a major political scandal. How can the foremost man of Rome not swim across the Tiber? Brutus, of course, isn't as crass as Cassius. He has to transform Cassius's crude resentment mongering into something dignified and patriotic. The noble Brutus cannot be seen to be motivated by anything as dirty and lowbrow as resentment. So he works very hard to make his resentment appear praiseworthy. To use the same word Antony will later repeat with deadly sarcasm, Brutus wishes to appear *honorable*.

Hence the scene that takes place in Brutus's home at the beginning of the second act. In a long soliloquy, which he presents to himself as a serious philosophical thought experiment, Brutus imagines Caesar ascending "young ambition's ladder" (2.1.22). Upon reaching "the upmost round," Caesar will turn his back on his fellows and scorn "the base degrees / By which he did ascend" (2.1.24–27). This purely hypothetical scenario, Brutus says, is in fact "a common proof" (2.1.21), by which he means that his general picture of political ambition is based on common knowledge or shared experience. We all know power corrupts. How can it not corrupt Caesar? (Brutus, of course, neglects to ask the same question of himself, though Shakespeare shows that Brutus is just as vulnerable as Caesar when it comes to the seductions of power.) Oddly, in the same breath, Brutus admits that based on his personal experience, he sees no reason to murder Caesar: "I know no personal cause to spurn at him.… I have not known when his affections swayed / More than his reason" (2.1.11–21). No doubt that is why he feels obliged, in a striking coda, to switch metaphors:

> And since the quarrel
> Will bear no color for the thing he is,
> Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented,
> Would run to these and these extremities;
> And therefore think him as a serpent's egg

> Which, hatched, would, as his kind, grow mischievous;
> And kill him in the shell.
>
> (2.1.28–34)

So, which is it? Is Caesar a proud climber of ambition's ladder, or is he a snake in the shell? The problem is not simply that Brutus is mixing his metaphors. The metaphors also work against each other. As in the classic boardgame, ladders help you rise, but snakes bring you tumbling down.

If Caesar is on ambition's ladder, he is no more guilty than the rest. There is no such thing as a self-respecting Roman who does not believe in climbing ambition's ladder. How else can one defend one's honor unless one knows where one sits on this ladder? The ladder is a metaphor for social and political hierarchy. Agrarian states depend on this hierarchy, which is why a great deal of energy is devoted to affirming its necessity and sanctity. In this sense at least, there is no difference between Shakespeare's England and Caesar's Rome. What Brutus fears, of course, is that he is rapidly losing ground to another climber. The real problem is that Caesar has eclipsed Brutus. Caesar's triumphant entry into Rome and the glorious reception given him by the plebeians indicate that Caesar's rise is swift and dramatic. Caesar appears to be winning not just the military race but the political one too. That is what really irks Brutus. The whole business about the snake is irrelevant to this experience of dispossession of centrality. Brutus is scandalized that Caesar has eclipsed him. To justify knocking Caesar from the pole position, Brutus needs to say, both to himself and to others, that Caesar is not just winning the race but actually causing harm to the other competitors. But he has no evidence for that. As far as he can tell, Caesar is winning fair and square. So he reverts to the metaphor of the snake used at the beginning of the soliloquy:

> He would be crowned.
> How that might change his nature, there's the question.
> It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
> And that craves wary walking. Crown him—that—
> And then I grant we put a sting in him
> That at his will he may do danger with.
>
> (2.1.12–17)

If Caesar is a snake, then he is not winning the race fair and square. He is being horribly devious. He is playacting humility (e.g., by rejecting the crown), and this is merely part of his sneaky plan to disjoin remorse from power. And how do we know that? Because that is what snakes do! It is only a matter of time before Caesar will become a ruthless tyrant. Before that happens, we must crush the snake in the shell.

In this marvelously contorted speech, Brutus attempts to justify to himself the necessity of the assassination. He transforms Cassius's crude resentment mongering into a serious-sounding philosophical argument. Caesar may or may not be a pathetic swimmer, but his political ambition knows no bounds. The only solution is to kill him forthwith. But as Cassius's unflattering image of Caesar suggests, what really motivates Brutus is envy, the impotence of which transforms envy into venomous (snakelike) resentment.[30] Caesar is winning the race up ambition's ladder. Something must be done to stop him! Brutus cannot tolerate the pangs of impotent envy that have transformed him, as his wife, Portia, later astutely observes, into an antisocial discontented resentful insomniac.

As far as Brutus is concerned, freedom means freedom from another man's ambition, which, as per his thought experiment, will sooner or later morph into unbridled tyranny. The upmost round of ambition's ladder is Brutus's metaphor for the apex of political power. What Brutus does not pause to consider is that political statehood, whether a monarchy, a tyranny, or a republic, depends upon centralized power. Soon after the assassination, Brutus ascends the pulpit to give the plebeians the good news that tyranny has been defeated. But he fails to notice that he too has become a proud climber of ambition's ladder. The very act of rising above the plebeians confirms his authority and superiority. And like the imperious Caesar, he too will soon find himself falling to the ground, "No worthier than the dust" (3.1.117). Hence the irony of Caesar dying at the base of Pompey's statue. As the play's first scene reminds us, Pompey had been Caesar's archrival. Now Brutus, with Caesar's fresh blood dripping from his hands, has taken Caesar's spot, just as Caesar had taken Pompey's. Brutus's red right hand is firmly grasping the upmost round of ambition's ladder. How else can Brutus so confidently believe that his speech to the plebeians will neutralize the threat of Antony, whom Cassius rightly fears as another rival for power? Who is grandstanding now? In this regard, the plebeians are far more perceptive than Brutus. They ignore his speech about all Romans being equal beneficiaries of "a place in the commonwealth" (3.2.43). Instead, they see him as another figurehead of the imperial (and violent) state:

FIRST PLEBEIAN
Bring him in triumph to his house!

SECOND PLEBEIAN
Give him a statue with his ancestors!

THIRD PLEBEIAN
Let him be Caesar!

(3.2.49–51)

The people understand what Brutus does not. Whoever usurps the center of political power attracts both admiration and resentment. Brutus quickly discovers this fact when Antony reminds the people of their former love of Caesar. In a heartbeat, the crowd's admiration turns into the same ugly passion that moved the conspirators to kill Caesar. The people now feel a burning need to expiate their guilt for having supported Brutus: "Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay! Let not a traitor live!" (3.2.205–6). What Brutus had imagined the previous night as a beautiful and bloodless defense of freedom turns into an ugly lynching in which Caesar is repeatedly stabbed by the envious knives of those below him on ambition's ladder. Calpurnia had predicted as much in her dream of Caesar's statue spouting "pure blood" (2.2.78). When Antony shows the people Caesar's mutilated corpse, he points to each wound, naming the conspirator responsible for desecrating Caesar's body:

> Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through.
> See what a rent the envious Casca made.
> Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabbed.
> (3.2.175–77)

Antony, of course, has no idea which conspirator inflicts which wound. But Antony is not a forensic pathologist performing an autopsy. He is, rather, an expert in the manipulation of human passions. Like a playwright, he reenacts the murder for his onstage audience. Having admired Brutus's bloody hands, the plebeians cannot fail to feel complicit in the terrible deed for which they now stand in urgent need of expiation. They desperately need someone to blame to purge themselves of their oppressive feelings of shame and guilt. That is why Shakespeare follows this moment with a scene in which an innocent bystander (Cinna the poet) is violently mobbed by the vengeful crowd. Cinna's only fault is to have the same name as one of the conspirators. When he explains that he is not Cinna the conspirator but Cinna the poet, the mob hesitates. Have they got the wrong man? But resentment will not be denied. One of them screams, "Tear him for his bad verses, tear him for his bad verses!" (3.3.31–32). All Brutus's sophisticated arguments can be reduced to this basic ugly passion. Lowliness may be ambition's ladder, but ambition thwarted is much more common than ambition rewarded.

Ambition thwarted is but another name for resentment. 'Tis a common proof that the lowly multitude on the periphery resent the elite few at the center. Cinna the poet is not, of course, a serious contender for political power. But like all artists, he has the temerity to centralize himself through his art, and for that crime, he must be punished. The mob drags him offstage and does what mobs do best. Revenge! About! Seek! Burn! Fire! Kill! Slay!

**Equality and Hierarchy**

Like Brutus, we in the West tend to take our civil liberties for granted. But freedom—or, as one famous document puts it, the individual's right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—is meaningless without the concept of constraint. What constrains my freedom is not simply your displeasure at what my liberty might entail (e.g., harmful smoke from my cigarette, or harmful pathogens from my unvaccinated body) but, more fundamentally, the sacred center's interdiction of human desire.

As anthropologists have been telling us for some time, foraging societies are fastidiously, meticulously, and stubbornly egalitarian. Individuals who strive to rise above their peers are relentlessly and remorselessly ridiculed. In these societies, the very idea of a sacred king—of a man who is also a god—is an absurd oxymoron. Foraging societies are extremely sensitive to infringement on the center, which remains jealously patrolled by watchful and unsleeping gods, who stand ready to punish any human insolent enough to seek political power for himself rather than leaving it where it belongs, namely, in the hands of the immortals.

Consider, for example, the peculiar practice of "insulting the meat" observed by Richard Lee among the !Kung San of the Kalahari (also known as the Ju/'hoasi). When a hunter makes a kill, he is mocked by the other hunters, who insist on the worthlessness of the game he has labored so hard to track and kill. The hunter makes no attempt to deny these insults. On the contrary, he frequently initiates and encourages his own mockery. The last thing he will admit is that he is, in fact, a superior hunter. By this means, Lee writes, "the existence of differences in hunting prowess does not lead to a system of Big Men, in which a few talented individuals tower over others in terms of prestige."[31]

To our eyes, the !Kung practice of insulting the meat appears perverse. Why shouldn't the hunter take credit for his achievement? Surely it would be better if he were praised rather than mocked. Praise would encourage him to hunt for more game, which, in turn, would benefit the entire group. A rising tide (the talented hunter) lifts all boats (the nonhunters). By mocking the successful hunter, the !Kung seem to be encouraging mediocrity not excellence. Even if we concede that this practice promotes equality, it does so at the cost of bringing the talented down rather than raising them up. Haven't the !Kung missed an opportunity? Wouldn't they be better off encouraging rather than mocking the talented hunter?

Marshall Sahlins believes that they would not. In his view, hunter-gatherers represent the "original affluent society" from which larger and more complex—but not necessarily happier and quite possibly much unhappier—societies have departed. More precisely, the rot set in once humans started to cultivate the earth to produce a surplus relative to

immediate (short-term) need. "Economic man," Sahlins asserts, "is a bourgeois construction."[32] Because foragers must carry whatever they need on their backs, they remain blissfully free of the desire for stuff (goods, property, etc.). This built-in condition of economic scarcity constitutes a kind of negative freedom, the freedom of not having to worry about burdensome—and conflict-promoting—stuff. Sahlins believes we would do well to acknowledge and admire this freedom: "We are inclined to think of hunters and gatherers as *poor* because they don't have anything; perhaps better to think of them for that reason as *free*."[33]

One may, of course, dispute this view of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle.[34] Does the Paleolithic hunter really imagine he is free? Nonetheless, one can't deny that there exists a fundamental difference between the politics of nomadic foragers, on the one hand, and that of sedentary agriculturalists, on the other. Sahlins believes that the big man is the precursor to kings who rule by divine right. The big man may not possess a divine right to political power, but he possesses charisma, a good work ethic, and flair for entrepreneurship. By skillfully obligating his dependents, he amasses enough foodstuffs to throw the biggest party, which obligates yet more people to him, thereby allowing him to amass yet more foodstuffs until he has outdone all of his rivals who must now concede defeat. By taking possession of the surplus, the big man puts himself into the role formerly reserved for the god. He turns a moral and sacred difference (all are equal compared to the unrivaled god) into an ethical and economic one (not all are equal compared to the much-rivaled and much-resented big man). It is a short step from big man to king, which is to say, to a permanently stratified social order in which the prince rules with an iron fist. The king is a big man who inherits the center rather than winning it by throwing the biggest party. Hence the peculiar cry by which new kings are announced: "The king is dead! Long live the king!" The cry highlights the fact that the king is a usurper of the immortal personhood of the divine center.

One might object that all this is beside the point, history having moved on from kings, queens, and knights in shining white armor (i.e., ritually sanctioned thuggery). Old-fashioned ideas such as the king's divine right to rule have, at least in the more enlightened regions of the world, been superseded by a more benign, tolerant, and egalitarian world picture. We have abandoned the idea of a social order ruled by horsemen (warriors) and bookmen (priests).[35] We have freed ourselves from the tyranny of kings and priests by strangling the one in the entrails of the other. Has not the emergence of liberalism, electoral democracy, and a free market provided fair and equal opportunities to all, no matter how humble one's origins may be? Have we not liberated ourselves from the tyranny of the old sacred center?

The idea that we moderns have vanquished, once and for all, the social, political, and economic inequalities of the *ancien régime* remains mostly a fairy tale. After taking a few bold steps in the mid-twentieth century, the movement toward equality appears to be retreating, and the distance between the elite and the hoi polloi again increasing. The so-called 1 percent use their vast wealth to control the levers of social influence and political power.[36] Moreover, they do this by proudly waving the flag of merit, freedom, and greatness. If they have been gifted with superior brain power or better looks, so what? They have also worked fiendishly hard to get to the top. How can one object to good ideas, beauty, and hard work? Isn't that what the American dream is all about? The *über*-rich are simply making the best use of our system for rewarding merit. Isn't that, after all, the point? One must give merit where merit is due. The great thing about a meritocracy is that it produces a *deserving* elite. One cannot say the same thing about the old aristocracy. The lord's son might be brilliant or stupid, but in the end, it doesn't matter because his political authority is given independently of whether he is a genius or a dimwit. Imagine all the brilliant ideas we have lost using such a clumsy sorting system![37]

But is this not an ethical paradox? In our quest to seek out individual talent and promote it to greatness, we have managed to multiply and accentuate the invidious differences we had hoped to dismantle forever. We have created an unequal and—let's be honest—highly dysfunctional society. Unfettered global markets not only perpetuate but grossly accentuate randomly distributed imbalances in wealth, power, and status. The paradox is that even the winners are miserable because they have to work so hard just to stay at the top. A feudal lord does not trouble himself with a grueling eighty-hour workweek. The very idea is an absurdity. Not working is how he proves his nobility. Only slaves and serfs work, and they are regarded either with condescending pity or naked contempt (or perhaps both, the difference being in any case immaterial).

In his sadly amusing account of how we have perfected the creation of pointless, mind-numbing work, David Graeber argues that "the phenomenon of bullshit employment" is a symptom of the "hatred, resentment, and suspicion [that] have become the glue that holds society together."[38] More specifically, he suggests that meaningless employment represents a new kind of feudalism, which he calls "managerial feudalism."[39] Managers hire underlings for symbolic prestige. The more underlings a manager can hire, the higher the manager's prestige. But since underlings can't literally stand around all day—unlike, for example, the king's guard at Buckingham palace (one of the few places one can still witness *noblesse oblige* in action)—they must be given pointless work to do. Graeber would not define the king's guard as a bullshit job because the guards take pride in their work and believe it to be of value. Underlings in managerial feudalism, however,

cannot take pride in their work because they see it as pointless "busy work." The real aim is not to make or fix anything, nor to serve or care for anybody, but simply to enhance the prestige of the higher-ups. Hence the deep-seated resentment pervading the entire system. Graeber claims that "at least half of all work being done in our society could be eliminated without making any real difference at all" and he speculates that we "could easily become societies of leisure and institute a twenty-hour workweek."[40] Why we don't do so is for Graeber the greatest mystery of all.

So, what is the point? Do we really want to make everyone as miserable and resentful as possible? The 99 percent are miserable because they don't get the recognition (and wealth) they deserve. And the 1 percent are miserable because they are so busy trying to stay ahead of the 99 percent that they have no time to enjoy their vast wealth. The problem is not just general dissatisfaction for all but, more insidiously, the obsessive cultivation of greatness that leads, in turn, to the pathological spread of resentment.[41] The 99 percent resent the 1 percent for believing they are better than the rest (when, really, they are just a lot luckier), and the 1 percent resent the 99 percent who don't appreciate the immense sacrifices made by those at the top (they work so damn hard!).[42]

Michael Sandel observes that by dividing society into winners and losers according to a story about individual talent and desert, we promote "hubris" among the winners and "humiliation and resentment" among the losers.[43] What gets lost in this picture is the role of luck or, to use an older terminology, grace. As Sandel nicely puts it, "Merit drives out grace."[44] Sandel explains the recent emergence of populist (white) resentment in the United States as a response to "the neoliberal, or market-oriented, version of globalization embraced by mainstream parties of the center-right and center-left since the 1980s," and he points to the precipitous rise in "deaths of despair" or "deaths caused by suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease" among mostly "white adults in middle age" as evidence that the meritocratic sorting system is broken.[45] The vast majority of these deaths, Sandel points out, occur among individuals without a college degree. Resentment among the losers is real. Elites mischaracterize this resentment as an attempt to assert "white privilege" and therefore as an instance of unconscious or systemic racism. But Sandel sees resentment as a product of the meritocratic system, which encourages those at the top to look down on those at the bottom. In the United States, as in most developed countries, the path to success passes through the credentialing institutions (i.e., colleges and universities). If you lack a college degree, you cannot succeed (or, at least, your success will be more difficult). Evidently, at some point, individuals give up and accept their lot in life as "losers." Hence the epidemic of "deaths of despair" among the uncredentialed.

Sandel regards the colleges and universities as complicit in the globalization and commodification of higher education. Elite institutions reap the benefits of a "winner-take-all competition"[46] for talent, which, in turn, feeds their multi-billion-dollar endowments thanks to the kickbacks they receive from their graduates, who are all but guaranteed a lucrative career in the upper echelons of finance, corporate law, or management consultancy. These fantastically wealthy educational institutions claim to be engines of progress, innovation, and social mobility, but in truth "most colleges and universities do less to expand opportunity than to consolidate privilege."[47] Sandel concedes that "attending a place like Harvard or Princeton does give a poor kid a good chance of rising," but he also observes that "such places enroll so few poor kids to begin with that their mobility rate is low."[48] Nor is the mobility rate appreciably higher at other (less prestigious) institutions. Sandel cites a study of 1,800 colleges and universities, which found that "fewer than 2 percent of their students rise from the bottom fifth of the income scale to the top fifth."[49] This comes as no surprise to Sandel. America's colleges and universities are, he says, "basic training for a competitive meritocracy,"[50] which has—like the old aristocracy it has replaced—lost touch with the uncredentialed masses. In short, the idea that colleges and universities are successfully leveling the playing field and expanding opportunities for the less fortunate is not only false but pernicious because it uses the myth of merit to consolidate privilege among the credentialed.[51]

Lamenting this situation, Avram Alpert proposes that we should strive not for greatness but for what he calls "the good-enough life," by which he means a life not so destructively devoted to competition, rivalry, and soul-destroying self-promotion.[52] Alpert regards our Sisyphean striving for greatness to be pathological because it denies a basic truth of human life—namely, that it is fundamentally tragic. If we recognized this basic truth, we would be less inclined to devote so much energy to pointlessly destructive and hugely wasteful competition. Perhaps we might even devote our lives to living a "good-enough life," which is to say, a life of basic human decency.[53]

The !Kung appear to have grasped this moral lesson. Compared to us, they live humble, fragile, and insecure lives. If we are hungry, we open the fridge or go to the local supermarket. The !Kung cannot do this. They must forage for nuts, roots, and berries, or hunt for game. They never know for sure when or what their next meal might be. But for this very reason, they understand that life is tragic. After all, the successful hunter *could* have missed the antelope when he shot his arrow or threw his spear. The tragic fact of the matter is that he is more likely to miss than hit. Perhaps nine times out of ten he misses. But who's counting when life is so tragic? Even when he does hit, other predators (e.g., lions) may chase him from the

kill. One must not underestimate these hazards. Not only must our hunter track, chase, and kill his prey. He must then defend it from other hungry predators while skinning, gutting, and cooking the meat before it putrefies under the remorseless desert sun, at which point he must then make the long journey back to camp. It turns out that his fellows are right to joke about his remarkable good fortune![54]

A small thought experiment might be useful here. Let's compare the !Kung hunter to a Wall Street banker. How does the latter understand success? The psychologist Daniel Kahneman tells an interesting story that sheds light on this question. As an expert in the field of decision making (whose research won him a Nobel Prize in economics), Kahneman regularly speaks to a wide range of audiences. On one occasion, he spoke to "a group of investment advisers in a firm that provided financial advice and other services to very wealthy clients."[55] After examining the firm's spreadsheets, Kahneman showed that there was zero correlation between the skill of the firm's advisers (as measured by year-end bonuses) and year-over-year outcomes for their clients. Kahneman did not mince his words to the firm's executives, who were, he said, "rewarding luck as if it were skill."[56] Instead of being shocked by this news, the executives continued their practice of dishing out handsome year-end bonuses to high-achieving advisers. Apparently, Kahneman's analysis meant nothing to them.

Kahneman describes this reaction as an instance of what he calls "the illusion of validity." When a belief is so deeply ingrained that it is also a feeling or intuition, a careful analysis of the data will never be sufficient to overturn the belief. When one is so wedded to a belief, statistical analysis, which is at the best of times difficult for the intuitive mind to grasp, is powerless to unsettle the belief. The "illusion of skill," Kahneman says, is "deeply ingrained in the culture of the industry." It therefore becomes imperative to ignore facts that undermine that illusion: "Facts that challenge such basic assumptions—and thereby threaten people's livelihood and self-esteem—are simply not absorbed."[57] This is especially true of jobs for which there is no obvious moral or practical purpose. One can understand that, for example, plumbers, nurses, teachers, and janitors perform essential and important work. But how does one justify the work of hedge fund managers or private equity CEOs whose salaries dwarf those of janitors, plumbers, nurses, and teachers? The answer is that, like elites everywhere, they justify themselves by pointing to the massive rewards they receive for doing nothing (or at least nothing worthwhile).[58] They tell stories about how their skill is so important when, in fact, there is nothing to distinguish their skill from blind luck. "Given the professional culture of the financial community," Kahneman writes, "it is not surprising that large numbers of individuals in that world believe themselves to be among the chosen few who can do what they believe no others can do."[59]

So, how did we get from one type of society to the other? How did we get from egalitarian foragers like the !Kung San studied by Richard Lee (all are equal compared to the god or gods) to modern industrial society (not all are equal compared to an elite group of investment bankers, corporate lawyers, and other extravagantly rewarded consultants and CEOs)? In what ways are we similar to egalitarian foragers, and in what ways are we different? Should we understand foraging society as adhering more faithfully to our own notion of equality, or should we see it as something utterly different?

Richard Lee's fieldwork was conducted in the 1960s in a remote area of the Kalahari where few anthropologists—indeed few white men—had yet ventured. Consequently, he was able to observe the !Kung before their way of life was irreversibly changed by the encroachment of farming and the global economy. Now the !Kung wear Western clothes and raise cattle. Lee admits that his fieldwork felt a bit like a "race against time."[60] Today the !Kung do not hunt with poisoned arrows or ward off sickness with healing dances; they eat cultivated grains and take penicillin. But in 1963 when Lee arrived at the remote Dobe waterhole, he was privileged to get to know a small group of !Kung who successfully persisted in living as egalitarian foragers. Lee set up his tent, learned their language, and meticulously set about documenting their way of life. He sums up their subsistence strategy as follows:

> The tools and techniques of gathering are relatively simple. The knowledge of plant identification, growth, ripeness, and location, however, is extremely complex, and the !Kung women are highly skilled at distinguishing useful from nonuseful or dangerous plants and at finding and bringing home sufficient quantities of the best food species available.[61]

Lee estimates that this diet of hunted meat and foraged nuts, fruits, and roots easily exceeds the caloric and nutritional intake of most members of preindustrial sedentary societies. He also estimates that individuals devote on average about twenty hours per week to the tasks of hunting and gathering. The notion that the !Kung struggle to survive, Lee concludes, is a prejudice of Western societies, which tend to view themselves, rather implausibly, as moving on a steep upward trajectory toward "the pinnacle of success,"[62] in a vast historical narrative that begins with foraging society, passes through sedentary agriculture, and peaks sharply with modern industrial society. But this is to confuse (very recent) scientific and technological progress with long-term ethical progress. If the !Kung work only twenty hours per week compared to our standard forty-hour workweek, then clearly we have managed to make more work for ourselves (despite

our much-vaunted scientific and technological advances). It remains an open question whether this represents ethical or moral progress.[63]

Reflecting on the ease with which the !Kung seem to live in what strikes us as an inhospitable environment, Lee points to the prominence of sharing among each encampment of foragers:

> Each !Kung is not an island unto himself or herself; each is part of a collective. It is a small, rudimentary collective, and at times a fragile one, but it is a collective nonetheless. What I mean is that the living group pools the resources that are brought into camps so that everyone receives an equitable share. The !Kung… don't do this out of nobility of soul or because they are made of better stuff than we are. In fact, they often gripe about sharing. They do it because it works for them and it enhances their survival. Without this core of sharing, life for the !Kung would be harder and infinitely less pleasant.[64]

As these remarks suggest, the kind of invidious political and economic hierarchy explored by Shakespeare in his tragedies, and most especially in *Timon of Athens*, would not be tolerated among the !Kung.[65] A successful hunter who sought to become a superior feast-giver or big man would be immediately mocked and ridiculed, as Lee discovers (to his great embarrassment) when he tries to throw a party for his egalitarian hosts. At considerable personal expense, he purchases the biggest and fattest cow from the Herero, a neighboring tribe of pastoralists for whom big-man hierarchy is commonplace. When he explains to the !Kung what he has done, they laugh at him for buying an "old ox" that is "nothing but bones."[66] Worried that his feast will be an abject failure, Lee is about to call the whole thing off. At the last minute, he is persuaded by his amused hosts to go through with the party despite the worthless and pathetic ox. To his great relief, the feast turns out to be a success. There is plenty of food for everyone. Perplexed, Lee asks a !Kung friend why he had been so relentlessly mocked. His friend replies,

> When a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for someday his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle.

Reflecting on these words, Lee writes,

> I had been taught an object lesson by the !Kung…. There are no totally generous acts. All 'acts' have an element of calculation. One

> black ox slaughtered at Christmas does not wipe out a year of careful manipulation of gifts given to serve your own ends. After all, to kill an animal and share the meat with people is really no more than the !Kung do for each other every day and with far less fanfare.[67]

It is easy to sympathize with these sentiments. How wise the !Kung are to mock the successful hunter! If they did not, he would soon begin to put on airs and become a petty tyrant or big man (or, God forbid, an investment banker).[68] It remains only for the big man to claim a divine right to the center (i.e., to become a king) and we can begin to see (without squinting too much) versions of our post-Enlightenment liberal selves in these stubbornly egalitarian foragers. But before we see the origins of liberalism, electoral democracy, and civil society in the mocking relations of the !Kung, we should remember that !Kung society, and foraging society more generally, though certainly egalitarian, segmentary, and decentralized, is not free of an extremely demanding form of *ritual* or *sacred* constraint. This type of constraint is wholly alien to the industrialized free-market democracies of the West.[69] We have grown so accustomed to the freedoms of the latter that we have come to think of civil society as a universal feature of the human condition.[70] Yet were we to attempt to recreate these decentralizing egalitarian rituals in which our daily interactions remain tightly constrained by an invisible web of sacred duties and kinship obligations, we would quickly find this form of constraint intolerable.[71] As Ernest Gellner puts is, "traditional man can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the tyranny of cousins, and of ritual."[72]

**Shakespearean Anthropology**

In the pages that follow, I hope to demonstrate that reflection on the problem of human origin is not just the domain of experts in anthropology, philosophy, or political science. Nor, on the other hand, is this book aimed solely at specialists in Shakespeare or literature. It is addressed to anyone who wishes to explore the idea that Shakespeare can help us think about our anthropological origin, which is also (I submit) a problem of how we understand not just our distant ancestors but ourselves. To put the matter as succinctly as possible, I read Shakespeare to understand not just the kind of society in which I live but the kind of society in which I would like to live. In short, I read Shakespeare for the same reasons I read ethnography, philosophy, or political theory—namely, to understand who we are, where we came from, and where we might be going.

When one thinks in these terms, surprising lines of inquiry emerge. *Timon of Athens* may be conceived as a kind of literary ethnography,

Shakespeare's exploration of the origins of social and political hierarchy. If Shakespeare had traveled to South Africa or New Guinea, or read ethnographic descriptions of its peoples, he would have written a play not about ancient Athens but about the big man of Botswana or Melanesia—*Timon of Tonga*. Neither a king nor a general, Timon must rely on an extravagant show of generosity. He showers his guests with food and gifts. Except for Apemantus, who alone sees the bad faith behind Timon's generosity, everyone eagerly consumes Timon's largesse. Yet because his wealth is purely fictional—which is to say that unlike a king he does not have an army of thugs to coerce others into replenishing his depleted coffers by enforced taxation or outright theft—he can only maintain his hold on the center by persuading his clients that he is, in fact, enormously rich.

Timon's centrality is, in other words, a Ponzi scheme, a spectacular illusion. Once belief in his wealth vanishes, so does his centrality. He is forced either to swallow his pride and start again from scratch or, like a proto-romantic exile, reject the social order as unnecessary to his existence. He chooses the latter. But Timon in the wilderness is merely the old Timon stripped of the veneer of cosmopolitan civility. Unconstrained by good manners, he shouts his resentment to the world. The shouting begins in his last banquet when he surprises his guests by dishing out curses instead of food, and it continues until he is dead. The irony is that in the forest Timon becomes rich beyond his wildest dreams, which enables him to secure a steady stream of visitors who endure his curses in the hope of obtaining gold. But if Timon truly wanted to reject society, he would have ignored the gold and kept digging for roots. That he does not betrays his dependency on the ethical scene of linguistic and economic exchange that he so ostentatiously affects to despise.

Unlike Timon, Prospero does not choose to go into exile. On the contrary, the main motivation of his narrative appears to be the desire to expose his brother as an imposter and reestablish himself on the throne. But when in the play's second scene he tries to tell his story to Miranda, it quickly becomes apparent that he conspired in the making of his own tragedy, which increasingly looks like a romantic melodrama. His real exile begins long before he and Miranda are treacherously left to the mercy of the ocean currents in a rotten and leaky boat. It begins when he disappears into the palace library and buries himself in his books. Like the solitary romantic figures whom he anticipates, Prospero is an outsider from the start. When he finally emerges from the library, he is surprised to discover that his brother is smoothly running the show and his daughter is nearly three years old. He spends the next twelve years homeschooling Miranda on a lonely island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, at which point he decides that it is high time he returned to the ducal palace. The proximate cause of this decision appears to be

Caliban's romantic interest in Miranda, who is now an attractive young lady. For reasons I will discuss, Prospero does not regard Caliban as a suitable match. Whether Ferdinand is any more suitable is debatable. He seems to be a nice young man, but one can't help noticing that he is the heir to the kingdom of Naples, which also happens to exert power over its satellite, the dukedom of Milan. Isn't a nice young bridegroom who is also the heir to the imperial throne precisely the kind of hero one might expect to appear in the expelled Duke of Milan's wish-fulfillment narrative? By marrying Miranda to Ferdinand, Prospero kills two birds with one stone. In addition to the return of his dukedom, he gains access to the imperial crown. On the evidence of his conduct on the island, we know Prospero to be something of a control freak. One hesitates to believe that he will leave Naples to the rule of either Alonso or his son. In brief, one worries that the whole tragic cycle may repeat itself.

What saves us from having to accept this rather grim conclusion is the fact that Prospero does not return to Milan or Naples, at least not within the time frame of the dramatic performance. We never see Prospero climb aboard the ship with his companions. He implies that he will be sailing the following morning, but he never actually breaks his staff or buries his books. His last words to Ariel are instructions for calm seas and auspicious winds. But this is ambivalent. If he has the power to command Ariel, he cannot have broken his staff. And if he hasn't broken his staff, he hasn't left the "infinite space" of his imagination, in which he is free to punish or forgive his enemies. In other words, Prospero remains an exile of the center. The story of his return becomes a clever ruse, a distraction from our own petty resentments and frustrations, which are the mirror image of Prospero's. The epilogue, with its peculiar stress on our crimes and our need for pardon, suggests that this reading is not so far-fetched.

I end, therefore, with an epilogue of my own in which I suggest, with a little help from Yann Martel and Ian McEwan, that Prospero's request for clemency alludes to a fundamental ethical crime: the crime of usurping the center. If this is true, it suggests that Prospero, or perhaps Shakespeare, has transformed the tragic narrative of the desiring protagonist into a self-centered romantic narrative of atonement. In representing the fulfillment of his desire, the protagonist grasps that his desire can only be achieved at the cost of the suffering of others. In begging the audience for pardon, the peripheral protagonist/author thematizes his paradoxical relationship with the center. The big man becomes, in Shakespeare's last masterpiece, a romantic exile, forever displaced from the center of his desire. From the publicly rivalrous scene of tragedy, the locus of the sacrificial sparagmos, the protagonist retreats into the privacy of his internal aesthetic scene.

## Notes

1 In "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963), Marshall Sahlins describes the big man as follows: "Big-men do not come to office; they do not succeed to, nor are they installed in, existing positions of leadership over political groups. The attainment of big-man status is rather the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men. It is not accurate to speak of 'big-man' as a political title, for it is but an acknowledged standing in interpersonal relations—a 'prince among men' so to speak as opposed to 'The Prince of Danes.' In particular Melanesian tribes the phrase might be 'man of importance' or 'man of renown,' 'generous rich-man,' or 'center-man,' as well as 'big-man'" (289). As the title of Sahlins's essay suggests, the emergence of big men marks a major ethical shift from egalitarian to hierarchical societies, the endpoint of which is the institution of kingship.

2 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), esp. 163–206.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 6th ed., ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).

4 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Tesky (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 2:427–28.

5 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Girard argues that desire is "mimetic" (i.e., imitated) and therefore leads to conflict. If I learn to desire by imitating your desires, we will, sooner or later, end up competing for the same object. Humans, Girard suggests, live under the shadow of their own mimetic desires, which constantly threaten to erupt into uncontrollable cycles of conflict (e.g., vandalism, theft, vengeance, war, etc.). Girard is scornful of the economist's picture of desire as a function of the rational autonomous actor, who makes a careful and peaceful cost-benefit calculation before choosing an object in the marketplace. What this picture of economic rationality ignores is that the market itself functions as a means both to exacerbate desire and satisfy it, thereby reducing the burden on religion to purge humans of their own (necessarily) thwarted desires. The function of religious sacrifice, Girard says, is to vent violence in carefully controlled and highly ritualized public occasions. Girard argues that tragedy partially unveils what he calls the "scapegoat mechanism." I discuss Girard's theory in the last chapter of *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

6 In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), James C. Scott notes the affinity between centralized state authority and what he calls the modernist "aesthetic of miniaturization." Modern states rely on direct governance of the people. More precisely, the people are not wild and uncontrollable foragers or pastoralists existing on the margins of the state in impenetrable forested or mountainous terrain. Rather, they are civilized and, more to the point, obedient taxpayers. But direct state governance is impossible without reliable record-keeping and standardized units of measurement. People, property, and natural resources must be made *legible* to the state's bureaucracy. The first step,

therefore, is to conduct a census (Whom can we tax?) and map property (How much can we tax?). But ambitious states do much more. They also try to make intractable social reality (i.e., the complex lifeways of individuals and communities) conform to the state's utopian picture of the perfectly mappable and therefore perfectly controllable populace. Hence the emergence of the model village, which, Scott argues, can be seen as both a retreat and an advance. It is a retreat from existing social realities, which are hugely complex and therefore impossible to map with any subtlety or accuracy. But it is also an aggressive attempt to advance a simplified and therefore more easily manipulable model or miniature, which serves as the blueprint for rebuilding a newly "legible" society from scratch. Scott cites Stalin's collectivization of the Russian peasantry in the Soviet Union and Nyerere's villagization of dispersed pastoralists in Tanzania as two instances (among many) of high-modernist hubris. The aesthetic is also apparent in the designs of Le Corbusier, whose self-declared mission was to negate the traditional townscape and whose baleful influence on such modernist abominations as Brasília Scott discusses in detail. "It is easier," Scott says, "to build Brasília than to fundamentally transform Brazil and Brazilians. The effect of this retreat is to create a small, relatively self-contained, utopian space where high-modernist aspirations might more nearly be realized. The limiting case, where control is maximized but impact on the external world is minimized, is in the museum or theme park" (257). Prospero is not a high modernist, but his aesthetic project of "miniaturization" strikes me as of a piece with Scott's description of the state's political dream of a perfectly homogenous, legible, and controllable citizenry.

7 Richard van Oort, *Shakespeare's Mad Men: A Crisis of Authority* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

8 In *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), Francis Fukuyama argues that the modern idea of identity first emerged in the West during the Protestant Reformation, and he cites Martin Luther as "one of the first Western thinkers to articulate and valorize the inner self over the external social being" (26). Fukuyama's larger argument is that liberal democracy is based on the universalization of the desire for dignity, which is present not just among the republic's noble guardians but among all citizens. When this desire for recognition is denied or thwarted, it produces resentment, which in the modern era becomes for the first time a major political force (as in France in 1789 or the Arab Spring in 2011). For most of human history, desire for recognition is restricted to an elite few. Hence the pervasiveness of caste systems in the ancient world. Only in the wake of, first, the Protestant Reformation (Luther) and, second, romanticism (Rousseau) did this desire becomes universalized: "A liberal democratic regime based on individual rights enshrines the notion of equal dignity in law by recognizing citizens as moral agents capable of sharing in their own self-government.... [T]he great passions unleashed by events such as the French Revolution were at base struggles over dignity. The inner self was not just a matter of personal reflection; its freedom was to be embodied in rights and law.... The slaves would, in other words, rebel against the masters; a world in which the dignity of only a few was recognized would be replaced by one whose founding principle would be recognition of the dignity of all" (40–41).

9 See Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990);

*Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); and *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2008). I introduce Gans's work and discuss its relevance to Shakespeare in the first two chapters of *Shakespeare's Big Men*. For examples of other scholars working within the research program of generative anthropology, see Ian Dennis, *Lord Byron and the History of Desire* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2009); Andrew Bartlett, *Mad Scientist, Impossible Human: An Essay in Generative Anthropology* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2014); Madgalena Zlocka-Dabrowska, *Generative Anthropology in Contexts and Texts* (Warsaw: UKSW Press, 2022); and the essays collected in Adam Katz, ed., *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2007).

10 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 147. The chapter on *The Tempest* is called, "Martial Law in the Land of Cockaigne."

11 See Charles Frey, "*The Tempest* and the New World," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30 (1979): 29–41. William Strachey's *True Reportory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates* was not published until 1625, but Shakespeare would have had access to the manuscript, which was in circulation in 1610.

12 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 147.

13 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 154.

14 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 156.

15 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 156.

16 It is possible to see Greenblatt's idea of cultural poetics—or new historicism, as it eventually came to be called—as a failure of nerve when it comes to the critical task of evaluating Shakespeare's contribution to human self-understanding. Thus, Greenblatt's insistence on first attending to marginal para-aesthetic documents allows him to disguise his real *aesthetic* interest, which is Shakespeare. Likewise, the label *new historicism* signals the fact that Greenblatt's engagement with Shakespeare cannot be condemned as mere aestheticism, which could easily be dismissed as impressionistic and unprofessional bardolatry. In other words, Greenblatt is deliberately flagging his progressive egalitarian (political and moral) credentials by *not* attending to Shakespeare too closely. We must, as it were, glance at the great author obliquely, out of the corner of our eyes, as if we had noticed him only by accident while engaged in other more serious tasks, such as analyzing the dynamics of power in seventeenth-century England. Hence Greenblatt's habit of spending so much time discussing less challenging and less intimidating cultural objects such as Strachey's *True Reportory*. In *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago

Press, 2021), Michael W. Clune argues that this strategy, which has become all too common among professors of literature, is ultimately incoherent. If literature professors are really just doing history (or politics or economics or sociology), then they are admitting that their discipline cannot be justified. Of course, literature professors do not really believe this. The very fact that they teach literature implies that they think that these texts are worth reading for the insights they generate about history, society, or politics. But precisely in that case they must assume that literature is worth defending on independent literary or aesthetic grounds. Why then is that case never made? As Clune shows in great detail, literature professors have lost the confidence to defend their discipline on its own terms (i.e., on aesthetic grounds). Clune argues that this loss of confidence is a symptom of the corrosiveness of the market, which reduces aesthetic taste to mere consumer preference. What is especially valuable about Clune's analysis is that he shows how this fear of making evaluative distinctions—of, in short, making aesthetic judgments—is a consequence of an uncritical political or moral commitment to the principle of equality or, as he puts it, "market egalitarianism." The market flattens distinctions between high and low. Should I teach *Game of Thrones* or *King Lear*? Let the market decide. This leveling of the distinction between expert judgment and consumer preference appeals to our desire for equality. Why should the disciplinary expertise of literature professors take precedence over the subjective preferences of their students? But in abandoning aesthetic judgment, this commitment to market egalitarianism also abandons the possibility of combatting the corrosiveness of the market. Moreover, once literature professors are released from the obligation to defend their aesthetic judgments in peer-reviewed articles and books, there is no mechanism to protect students from being subjected to "the dogmatic expression of the professor's pet views" (80). "One malign effect of the widespread view that professional publications in literary studies should not concern aesthetic judgment," Clune writes, "is to effectively give the individual professor unchecked classroom authority with respect to judgment" (73).

17 I develop this point in Richard van Oort, "The Critic as Ethnographer," *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 621–61. See also Richard van Oort, "The Culture of Criticism," *Criticism* 49 (2007): 459–79.

18 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 159.

19 Greenblatt's attempt to define what he means by the "circulation of social energy" in the first chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations* does not clarify his concept of power. He sees that power and representation are connected, but he lacks a theory of representation capable of explaining this connection. His greatest fear appears to be that he will fall back into a kind of old New Criticism: "The textual analyses I was trained to do had as their goal the identification and celebration of a numinous literary authority, whether that authority was ultimately located in the mysterious genius of an artist or in the mysterious perfection of a text whose intuitions and concepts can never be expressed in other terms" (3). But there is nothing mysterious about the authority of the literary text once we see that this authority can be traced back to the aesthetic deferral produced by the aborted gesture of appropriation in the originary scene.

20 Marshall Sahlins, "The Original Political Society," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 2 (2017): 91–128.

21 Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).
22 Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 34.
23 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).
24 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Nietzsche is one of the few philosophers to have grasped the cultural productivity of resentment. In the originary scene, resentment is the reaction of the human periphery toward the god at the center. But once this centrality is usurped by the big man, resentment is directed not at a god but a human being. This sets the stage for the recycling of resentment in culture and politics—for example, in the ancient Greek institution of the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. The resentment of those on the periphery is directed at the big man who must pay for his scandalous occupation of the center. Hence the "transvaluation of values" that Nietzsche associated with the rise of Christianity and its morality of "the last shall be the first." See also Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). Dupuy notes that in traditional societies, a caste system is necessary to avoid "a situation in which individual values are placed in rivalry with one another" (159). Consequently, changes in status must be attributed to supernatural forces (e.g., gods, luck, and fate). Inversely, meritocratic societies, which deny, repress, or seek to explain away the influence of luck or fate, point to the virtue of competition among rivals, who must be given "equal opportunity" to compete for the spoils of the surplus.
25 As Gans points out, desire is essentially paradoxical. The image of satisfaction formulated by the individual *always* transcends the reality of appropriation, just as the linguistic sign transcends, as Saussure realized, the empirical reality of its object. In *The End of Culture*, Gans explains the scenic nature of desire as follows: "The desiring image is paradoxical not because the *others* would prevent its realization but because the self, insofar as it desires, remains on the (imaginary) scene of representation and not on the (real) scene where the object is situated. The image, even if it represents a wholly possible *future* fulfillment, cannot represent a *real* fulfillment because its conception is possible only under conditions of nonfulfillment. The member of the original community cannot possess the desire object, because his desire arises only when the object is not possessed" (27–28). Hence the paradoxical relationship between, for example, the time of narration and the time narrated, or between the narrating self and the narrated self. As we shall see, *The Tempest* thematizes this paradoxical aesthetic relationship between fictional world and real world, stage and audience.
26 Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 119.
27 Gans discusses the "moral model" and, more precisely, the relationship between morality and ethics in Chapter 3 of *Originary Thinking*. For a particularly revealing example of the close relationship between linguistic interdiction and food distribution, see Signe Howell's discussion of the ritual of "touching the meat" in her *Society and Cosmos: Chewong of Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), esp., 183–91. I discuss the Chewong ritual of touching the meat in "The Culture of Criticism," which also discusses Greenblatt's "desire to speak with the dead."

28 Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 30–31. Scruton argues that human personhood cannot be reduced to a more basic causal theory employing biological categories. For Scruton, the most urgent task of philosophy is to defend in rational terms what religion intuitively knows and what art imaginatively illustrates, namely, that humans are not (just) animals. It falls to philosophy to describe what Scruton calls human "apartness." This task has become increasingly difficult in a climate that marginalizes the humanities and lionizes the empirical sciences. In response to this predicament, many in the humanities have become attracted to various forms of pseudoscience and scientism. This is a grave mistake. "Take away religion," Scruton writes, "take away philosophy, take away the higher aims of art, and you deprive ordinary people of the ways in which they can represent their apartness. Human nature, once something to live up to, becomes something to live down to instead. Biological reductionism nurtures this 'living down,' which is why people so readily fall for it. It makes cynicism respectable and degeneracy chic. It abolishes our kind—and with it our kindness" (49).

29 "One way to define the Enlightenment," Gans writes "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" (Eric Gans, *The Scenic Imagination: Originary Thinking from Hobbes to the Present Day* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2008], 9–10).

30 After accusing Caesar of duplicity (i.e., feigning humility, pretending he doesn't want power, etc.), Brutus has no compunction advising snakelike duplicity in himself and the other conspirators. To himself he notes that the "monstrous visage" of the "conspiracy" must "hide" itself "in smiles and affability" (2.1.77–82). And to the others, he says, "Good gentlemen, look fresh and merrily; / Let not our looks put on our purposes" (2.1.225–26). Who is behaving like a duplicitous snake now?

31 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 50.

32 Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (1972; repr., London: Routledge Classics, 2017), 13.

33 Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (1972; repr., London: Routledge Classics, 2017), 14.

34 In *The End of Culture*, Gans argues that Sahlins, despite writing perceptively on the big man's appropriation of the economic and political center, fails to grasp its true ethical significance, which is that the big man is able to fulfill his desire in a context *not* subordinated to ritual and gods. For Gans, the big man is the first historical example of an individual who is able to produce cultural prestige outside of the more tightly controlled ritual scene, which nonetheless, in its crucial violence-deferring function, remains the ethical baseline of any human society. What constrains human social organization is not merely, as

Marxist theorists (like Sahlins) maintain, the material base but, more urgently and fundamentally, the ethical imperative to defer violence. It is precisely the fear of debilitating human conflict that makes foraging societies resistant to the development of ethically invidious hierarchy. Nonetheless, a society that permits such a hierarchy is one that has learned to harness individual desire outside the strictly ritual and egalitarian context. Of course, it goes without saying that the big man's feast serves an economic function. Ethically speaking, however, what is more striking is that this economic function takes place at the pleasure of the much-rivaled big man rather than the unrivaled god. In foraging societies, the god remains the uncontested distributor of food precisely because the god's power can never be contested by his worshipers. For example, one cannot fail to be impressed by the immense tracking skills and heroic feats of endurance demonstrated by traditional !Kung hunters, who have been known to kill large game by tracking and chasing them in the heat of the day until the exhausted animal collapses or "waits" to be killed because it can run no more. But however skilled the individual hunter, a successful hunt is considered to be a matter of luck, the god having set aside this particular kudu or gemsbok expressly for the hunter to kill. See, for example, the remarkable documentary film by Craig and Damon Foster, *The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story* (2000), https://www.cultureunplugged.com/documentary/watch-online/play/2419/the-great-dance. Nor should we assume that foraging societies share our concept of morality. "Before we condemn as monstrous the worship of pharaohs and emperors," Gans writes, "we should reflect that neither the egalitarian morality nor the indefinitely differentiated ethical structure of modern Western society could have arisen without it. The equality of hunting societies is qualitatively different from that to which we aspire, and no direct passage from one to the other is conceivable" (Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], 155).

35 In my view, the best—and certainly most engagingly written—account of the difference between agrarian and industrial society is Ernest Gellner's classic work, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

36 "The upper 1 percent of Americans," Joseph Stiglitz writes, "are now taking in nearly a quarter of the nation's income every year. In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1 percent control 40 percent… . Twenty-five years ago, the corresponding figures were 12 percent and 33 percent." Nor is this concentration of wealth restricted to the economy. Greater wealth means greater power: "Virtually all U.S. senators, and most of the representatives in the House, are members of the top 1 percent when they arrive, are kept in office by money from the top 1 percent, and know that if they serve the top 1 percent well they will be rewarded by the top 1 percent when they leave office." See Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, May 2011, 26, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A260046735/CPI. Taking a longer historical view, Thomas Piketty, in *A Brief History of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022), shows that in France "the richest 1 percent's share of the total of private property (that is, of total wealth of land, buildings, business assets, and industrial and financial wealth of all kinds, net of debt) has decreased only very slightly since the Revolution, and that it remained astronomically high throughout the nineteenth century and as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, the wealthiest 1 percent held around 45 percent of total property in France in 1810, and about 55 percent of the total in

1910…. Then, in the course of the twentieth century, we observe a very strong deconcentration of fortunes: in the whole of France, the richest 1 percent's share fell from 55 percent in 1914 to less than 20 percent at the beginning of the 1980s, before beginning a slow increase; in 2020, that share was nearly 25 percent" (32). Piketty is ultimately optimistic about what he calls "the historical movement toward equality," and would no doubt regard Stiglitz's analysis of the sharp rise of inequality in the United States as one of many "regressions" in what is otherwise a global historical movement toward greater equality (1). Nonetheless, Piketty is far from complacent about this development. His history shows that the struggle for equality since the eighteenth century is "a long, unfinished battle" (96). For example, he shows how Sweden shifted only very recently (i.e., after 1919) from an extremely unequal society to a more equal one. This was done by removing the property-owning requirement for voters, which had kept power in the hands of a tiny minority of landowners. This expansion of the franchise enabled the Social Democrats to take "control of the Swedish government and put their country's state power in the service of a completely different political project," including a progressive income tax that funded public services such as health care and education (107). For Piketty, the lesson is clear. Those in power will do all they can to hang on to it. Nor should we underestimate "the boundless imagination the property-owning classes show in structuring institutions to their advantage" (108). Piketty cites the American case, bemoaned by Stiglitz, in which the top 1 percent control the levers of power by using their wealth to finance and lobby politicians, who return the favor by increasing their clients' access to more wealth (e.g., by lowering the taxes paid by the very rich), and he ominously warns that in "terms of the concentration of wealth, in 2020, the United States is in a position between Europe in 1913 and Europe in 2020, and is trending closer to Europe in 1913" (151). In other words, the United States is currently undergoing a massive regression in the fight for equality. Piketty also shows that the policy of reducing taxes on the top 1 percent to boost economic growth is contradicted by the history of the progressive income tax: "In the United States, the national income per inhabitant rose at a rate of 1.8 percent per annum between 1870 and 1910 without an income tax, then at a rate of 2.1 percent between 1910 and 1950 after its introduction, and at a rate of 2.2 percent between 1950 and 1990, when the top tax rate reached, on average, 72 percent. The top rate was then cut by half, with the announced objective of boosting growth. But in fact, growth fell by half, reaching 1.1 percent between 1990 and 2020" (139). Simon Johnson, in "The Quiet Coup," *Atlantic*, May 1, 2009, comments on the cozy relationship between the elites on Wall Street and the elites in Washington: "Throughout my time at the IMF, I was struck by the easy access of leading financiers to the highest U.S. government officials, and the interweaving of the two career tracks. I vividly remember a meeting in early 2008—attended by top policy makers from a handful of rich countries—at which the chair casually proclaimed, to the room's general approval, that the best preparation for becoming a central-bank governor was to work first as an investment banker" (50). Johnson is astounded that after the 2007–2008 global financial crisis, nothing is being done to break up the "political balance of power that gives the financial sector a veto over public policy" (53). He compares the United States to a banana republic. Elites have captured the government, whose treasury they use as their personal piggybank. The difference, of course, is that the United States is not an emerging economy but the world's richest country with the

world's most advanced "economy, military, and technology" (49). This means that, as Johnson puts it, it also has the world's "most advanced oligarchy" (49).

37 Compare Michael Young's deadpan irony in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, 2nd ed. (1958; repr., New York: Routledge, 1994), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134642.

38 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), xxvi–xxvii. Graeber's book is at once an analysis of a social and ethical problem and a manifesto for social change.

39 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 175–92.

40 David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 26.

41 For a discussion of the fortunes of resentment as a political concept since the seventeenth century, see Robert Schneider, *The Return of Resentment: The Rise and Decline and Rise again of a Political Emotion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023). Taking his cue from Tocqueville, Schneider argues that resentment is a distinctly modern phenomenon. Once societies organize themselves by merit rather than caste, status competition is ramped up to extremely high levels. Furthermore, the standards of merit are constantly being updated, as science and technology advance. What was once state-of-the-art is, moments later, fit for the junkyard. Those who can't keep up get left behind and (consequently) resentful. Despite his laudable attempt to separate himself from those theorists who associate resentment with misfits, deviants, and reactionaries, Schneider never quite manages to feel comfortable with resentment as a political emotion. For example, he ends his discussion by suggesting that resentment exists on a continuum from a universal emotion (to which we are all prone) to a more pernicious variety that he reserves for the extreme political right (e.g., Trumpism). He calls the former "*civil resentment*" and the latter "*extreme resentment*" (224). In the former case, the emotion is civil because it is a prelude to justice and a fairer society. In the latter case, it is merely the occasion for tribalism, humiliation, and revenge. As Schneider himself notes, his understanding of the civil variety of resentment owes much to Bishop Butler. Understandably, the good bishop did not wish to see the idea of justice polluted by the "primitive" or "uncivil" idea of revenge.

42 Robert H. Frank, in *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), argues that luck plays a decisive role in winner-take-all markets. Unsurprisingly, Frank, who is an economist, encountered a fair bit of skepticism from his colleagues and, more broadly, from members of the general public. The reason for this resistance is clear. In our heart of hearts, we believe in the sacrosanct status of individual merit and, hence, in a society built on merit. "In societies that celebrate meritocratic individualism," Frank observes, "saying that top earners may have enjoyed a bit of luck apparently verges on telling them that they don't really belong on top, that they aren't who they think they are. The rhetoric of meritocracy appears to have camouflaged the extent to which success and failure often hinge decisively on events completely beyond any individual's control" (xii).

43 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 25.

44 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 53.

45 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 198–99.

46 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 176.
47 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 169.
48 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 168.
49 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 169.
50 Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?* (New York: Picador, 2021), 182.
51 "The purpose of Yale College," William Deresiewicz writes, in *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* (New York: Free Press, 2014), "is to manufacture Yale alumni" who will donate back to the college. Deresiewicz quotes a David Foster Wallace character: "The college itself turned out to have a lot of moral hypocrisy about it, e.g., congratulating itself on its diversity and the leftist piety of its politics while in reality going about the business of preparing elite kids to enter elite professions and make a great deal of money, thus increasing the pool of prosperous alumni donors" (71–72). In his final chapter, "The Self-Overcoming of the Hereditary Meritocracy," Deresiewicz writes, "The contemporary meritocracy, which in all its glory is presiding over an era of unprecedented national decline, is an exact reflection of the educational system that is charged with reproducing it. The time has come, not simply to reform that system from top to bottom, but to begin to plot our exit to another form of leadership, another kind of society, altogether" (225).
52 Avram Alpert, *The Good-Enough Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).
53 I do not think I am stretching the point in saying that the 2007–2008 global financial crisis was caused by hubris. Despite the sophisticated mathematical models used to weigh risk in financial markets, these models failed to predict the crisis. In *Between Debt and the Devil: Money, Credit, and Fixing Global Finance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), Adair Turner observes that "the Value at Risk models… were based on the flawed assumption that the probability of future developments in financial markets can be inferred from observation of the past" (102). But in the real world, "the future is governed not by quantifiable probabilistic risk but by inherent uncertainty" (103). The problem is not really with the models per se. All models are based on the (imperfect) representation of the (infinitely complex) past. Rather, the problem is with the hubris of those who believed that the model is a substitute for reality—in other words, that the model actually predicts the future.
54 I am not being facetious. When evaluating risk, one must distinguish the measurable from the unmeasurable. In *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), Peter L. Bernstein observes that this distinction was totally ignored by theorists of risk up until the twentieth century. Not until Frank Knight did economists recognize the distinction between (measurable) risk and (unmeasurable) uncertainty. "Uncertainty," Knight writes, "must be taken in a sense radically distinct from the familiar notion of Risk, from which it has never been properly separated…. It will appear that a *measurable* uncertainly, or 'risk' proper… is so far different from an *unmeasurable* one that it is not in effect an uncertainty at all" (quoted in Bernstein 219). Knight is an important figure in Bernstein's story of risk because Knight was the first to question the rational—and implausibly optimistic—picture of humanity

held by the neoclassical economists. As Bernstein points out, this picture of the perfectly rational economic actor is still prevalent in economics today. In *Excellent Sheep*, Deresiewicz notes the precipitous rise of the business major and the "dull predictability" of an elite education (110). If you go to Harvard or Yale or Stanford (or indeed any elite university), you are being groomed for a career in finance, consulting, or corporate law. Deresiewicz believes that the system of higher education in America fails to provide what it should provide, which is not a path to wealth but "the tools with which to undertake [the] work of self-discovery" (84). Instead of being places of self-discovery, however, colleges have become training grounds for reproducing a soul-destroying technocratic meritocracy. In a meritocracy, education is above all about being successful, which means making lots of money in high-status jobs. For Deresiewicz, this brazen competition for wealth and status is a symptom of a much larger problem: fear of uncertainty. But "desire to eliminate uncertainty eliminates life" (111). Hence the feeling among many graduates of elite institutions that their lives are devoid of meaning. Deresiewicz wishes that undergraduates would take a chance by stepping away from the competition. Students should embrace the possibility of failure and test themselves by moving outside their comfort zones. They should study what they want to study rather than what others think they should study. But talented students have been indoctrinated from a very early age to study subjects that will get them ahead, which of course only makes sense next to what others think will get them ahead. That is, after all, how a meritocracy works. Ambitious young people have absorbed this lesson. Merit equals wealth. Consequently, they study subjects—business, economics, finance, law, medicine—that they believe will make them wealthy, wealth being society's measure of success.

55 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 215.

56 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 216.

57 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 216.

58 In *Bullshit Jobs,* Graeber points out that the huge increase in the service sector since the 1980s stems not from a commensurate rise in the number of waiters, baristas, barbers, sales clerks, and bus drivers (i.e., jobs in the traditional services) but from a rise in the abstract manipulation of information, particularly in the areas of finance, insurance, and real estate. This zone thrives on the manipulation of decontextualized information and is therefore where "bullshit jobs proliferate" (149). Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit*, points out that since 1980, there has been a precipitous rise in what he calls "technocracy" (i.e., governance by experts or technocrats who believe that moral and political questions are best addressed "neutrally" via market mechanisms). Deregulation and free-trade agreements were, of course, the policies of center-right parties in the 1980s, most notably the Tories under Margaret Thatcher and the Republicans under Ronald Reagan, but these policies were continued by the center-left parties that succeeded them (i.e., the Labour Party under Tony Blair and the Democrats under Bill Clinton). Nor has any subsequent ruling party, whether from the right or left, proposed a serious alternative to the technocratic way of thinking that now dominates the political elite. For Sandel, these

policies have led to an explosion in inequality and, consequently, in resentment toward the winners, whose policies are regarded as deliberately designed to enrich the professional and political elite at the expense of the ordinary working taxpayer. Sandel regards this resentment as largely justified, and he explains Donald Trump's surprise election to the presidency in 2016 as a consequence of the elite's obliviousness to working-class resentment, which elites like to dismiss as backward-looking white thuggery (i.e., ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, etc.) but which Trump understood and tapped into. "The loss of jobs to technology and outsourcing," Sandel writes, "has coincided with a sense that society accords less respect to the kind of work the working class does. As economic activity has shifted from making things to managing money, as society has lavished outsize rewards on hedge fund managers, Wall Street bankers, and the professional classes, the esteem accorded work in the traditional sense has become fragile and uncertain" (30). Sandel addresses from a slightly different angle the same question Graeber addresses in *Bullshit Jobs*. Why have we produced a system in which there is so much wealth and so much misery? In *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), Yascha Mounk observes that though income inequality fuels "growing anger at affluent people" (233), the problem is not simply economic. Rather, the problem is also about meaningful work. It is therefore not enough to divide the pie more equally (by taxing the rich more) or make the pie bigger (by increasing productivity). One must also "structure the world of work in such a way as to make it possible for people to derive a sense of identity and belonging from their jobs" (234). Mounk believes that populist resentment against wealthy elites *and* immigrants is, in large part, driven by the loss of meaningful work as globalization and automation have corroded lifelong fulltime employment in developed countries. If one can't get one's sense of identity from work, where can one get it? In this situation, individuals are more likely to fall back on retrograde "ascriptive" identities (i.e., identities of ethnicity, religion, or nationality) rather than aspirational "earned" identities (i.e., identities of work). In the former case, one identifies as an endangered and persecuted group (e.g., a white American male). In the latter case, one identifies as an upwardly mobile professional (e.g., a foreman at the local factory). The foreman feels that he is part of a community of workers, and this gives meaning to his work. But the Uber driver feels no similar sense of community. The problem, therefore, is to figure out how to create "a new sense of pride in a very different kind of mass employment" (235).

59 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 217. One could go further than Kahneman and argue that Wall Street bankers are not merely deluding themselves but are crooks causing real harm to society. In *Bullshit Jobs*, Graeber cites the following extremely candid remarks by the economist Jeffrey Sachs:

> Look, I meet a lot of these people on Wall Street on a regular basis right now… I know them. These are people I have lunch with. And I am going to put it very bluntly: I regard the moral environment as pathological. [These people] have no responsibility to pay taxes; they have no responsibility to their clients; they have no responsibility to counterparts in transactions. They are tough, greedy, aggressive, and feel absolutely out of control in a quite literal sense, and they have gamed the system to a remarkable extent.

> They genuinely believe they have a God-given right to take as much money as they possibly can in any way that they can get it, legal or otherwise.
>
> If you look at the campaign contributions, which I happened to do yesterday for another purpose, the financial markets are the number one campaign contributors in the US system now. We have a corrupt politics to the core… both parties are up to their necks in this.
>
> But what it's led to is this sense of impunity that is really stunning, and you feel it on the individual level now. And it's very, very unhealthy, I have waited for four years… five years now to see one figure on Wall Street speak in a moral language. And I've not seen it once. (13)

For a highly engaging philosophical essay-cum-memoir on the sociopathology of Wall Street, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2005). Derivatives trader by day and essayist by night, Taleb is a self-described Popperian who revels in pointing out that just because you have made a lot of money on Wall Street, it doesn't follow that you will continue to do so. It only takes one black swan to disprove the hypothesis that all swans are white. Taleb's basic idea is that successful traders are—like King Lear on the heath—fools of fortune, or, as he puts it, "fools of randomness." "At a given time in the market, the most successful traders are likely to be those that best fit to the latest cycle" (86). Since markets are random, attempting to predict its cycles is a fool's errand. Instead, thinking traders (i.e., traders like Taleb) bet against the "fools of randomness" who have not learned this lesson. In other words, one must expect a crisis (the unpredictable black swan). When the crisis arrives, you will win while everybody else is panicking. Taleb's irreverence is refreshing, but what I find most revealing is not his irreverent contrarianism but his admission that he is "ashamed of being a trader" (123). In contrast, writing essays gives him a sense of (moral?) purpose: "I have to confess that I never felt really particularly directly of service to anyone being a trader (except myself); it felt elevating and *useful* being an essayist" (xii). Trading is, for Taleb, a means to an end, the end being writing about all the idiocy around him. Like Hamlet, Taleb is attached to the scene he despises. One is reminded of Hamlet gazing in wonder at Yorick's skull and reflecting on death, the great equalizer: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (5.1.213–14). In the short run, you may—*if you are lucky*—find yourself shunted to the center, where you will be showered with attention and wealth. You will explain your good fortune as a consequence of your good looks, superior talent, and hard work. But from the outside (i.e., from the point of view of the statistician looking not at you but at the total sample of equally good looking, talented, and hard-working *failures*), you are merely the lucky survivor of a random sorting process. You are, like Lear, a "natural fool of fortune." For the statistician, randomness and time play the same role as death. As Keynes quipped, in the long run, we are all dead.

60 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), ix.

61 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 37.

62 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 55.

63 The nineteenth-century idea that history moves progressively through levels of increasing moral and rational enlightenment has been systematically demolished by more recent commentators. See, for example, Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*

and James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). Both Sahlins and Scott argue that foraging offers superior living conditions compared to (preindustrial) sedentism (i.e., agrarianism). "Why," Scott asks, "would foragers in their right mind choose the huge increase in drudgery entailed by fixed-field agriculture and animal husbandry unless they had, as it were, a pistol at their collective temple? We know that even contemporary hunter-gatherers, reduced to living in resource-poor environments, still spend only half their time in anything we might call subsistence labor" (93). Scott shows that sedentism brings not merely increased drudgery but a rapid rise in the mortality rate thanks to the many diseases that emerge whenever humans and their domesticated animals settle. As far as Sahlins and Scott are concerned, the !Kung are wise to avoid enslavement to grain production and animal herding. What these authors do not discuss, however, at least not in the above books, is the more recent transition from agrarian to industrial society. In his monumental history of war, Azar Gat, in *War in Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), argues that industrialization has made peace more profitable than war. After industrialization, competition is no longer "a zero-sum game, where one side's gain could be achieved only at the other's expense" (590). Coupled with an expanding global market, industrialization produces an environment in which peace among states becomes, on balance, more beneficial than piracy and conquest. This does not mean that violence will inevitably decline as states modernize or democratize. In the first place, modernization (i.e., industrialization) does not require democracy. In the second, democratization does not necessarily imply more peace. Gat expresses impatience toward those who believe that liberal democracies are inherently more peaceful than other political systems. If anything, the evidence suggests the contrary, at least when democracies are in their infant stages. The ancient democracies of Greece and Rome were not more peaceful than their non-democratic neighbors. Nor were the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century democracies of Europe more peaceful than their non-democratic European rivals. It is, rather, industrialization that makes possible the aversion to war, which is now seen as a threat to long-term economic growth. This, in turn, may lead to a desire for further political enfranchisement among the citizenry of modernizing states. In itself, however, democracy does not imply less belligerence. Gat argues that "democratic freedom is not merely a neutral mechanism for best achieving any chosen value; it is itself an ideological choice, incorporating a whole set of values that many societies and cultures find to be deeply in conflict with other values they cherish more deeply" (652). "The great ideologies of the modern era," Gat continues, "have been described as secular religions in terms of their cognitive, ethical, and emotional functioning. This label was first applied to Marxism and fascism, but, with obvious differences, it also applies to the last major ideology that has survived to dominance in today's developed world… [L]iberalism involves great emotional investment and evokes much zeal… As with all creeds, it is susceptible to the dogmatic lure, which in pursuit of the abstract, in whatever interpretation, fails to take heed of realities with which abstract principles have to connect" (656–57). Ultimately, Gat takes the Hobbesian view that war is humanity in the state of nature (i.e., violent competition for scarce resources). In this sense, we are no different from any other organism, which must compete to survive. What distinguishes human violence from animal violence is simply the scale of violence possible once humans begin to cooperate in groups, whether as

members of hunter-gatherer bands or citizens of modern industrialized states. Despite his many references to religion, Gat does not pause to consider the difference between, on the one hand, the symbolic power of central sacred authority (e.g., Hobbes's leviathan) and, on the other, non-symbolic coercion or brute force (e.g., when the alpha animal overwhelms the beta). Presumably, as far as Gat is concerned, the human capacity for language is merely an extension of preexisting animal signal systems.

64 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 55.

65 In the 1960s, the !Kung way of life remained relatively untouched by the global economy. But this changed in the 1970s when the !Kung were incorporated into wider exchange markets. Increasingly, individuals were forced to turn to herding rather than foraging. Lee explains the contradiction this way: "There are real contradictions between the organization and ideology of farming and the organization and ideology of foraging. The most important of these is the contradiction between *sharing*, or generalized reciprocity, which is central to the hunting and gathering way of life, and the *saving* or husbandry of resources, which is equally central to the farming and herding way of life.... The food brought into a !Kung camp is shared out immediately with residents and visitors alike; for herders to do the same with their livestock, or farmers with their harvest grain, would quickly put them out of business" (137).

66 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 152.

67 Richard B. Lee, *The Dobe !Kung* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 156. It's clear that one of Lee's motives for holding the feast is to ward off any ill feelings held against him because of his status as a "rich" white man. "I had come to the Kalahari," Lee says, "to study the hunting and gathering subsistence economy of the !Kung, and to accomplish this it was essential not to provide them with food, share my own food, or interfere in any way with their food-gathering activities. While liberal handouts of tobacco and medical supplies were appreciated, they were scarcely adequate to erase the glaring disparity in wealth between the anthropologist, who maintained his own two-month inventory of canned goods, and the !Kung, who rarely had a day's supply of food on hand. My approach, while paying off in terms of data, left me open to frequent accusations of stinginess and hard-heartedness. By their lights, I was a miser" (151).

68 In *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Maurice Godelier argues that "men's indebtedness to gods...was the starting point... [of] caste and class" (30). When the big man claims divine origin, he becomes a king and turns an imaginary sacred difference into a worldly ethical difference.

69 In *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), Francis Fukuyama points out that when one type of society (e.g., tribal society) is succeeded by another (e.g., state society), the social bonds created by the former do not simply disappear. Rather, they come into conflict with the forms of solidarity favored by the new type of society. "One of the great mistakes of early modernization theory," Fukuyama writes, "was to think that transitions between the 'stages' of history were clean and irreversible. The only part of the world where tribalism was fully superseded by more voluntary and individualistic forms of social relationship was Europe, where Christianity played a decisive role in undermining

kinship as a basis for social cohesion. Since most early modernization theorists were European, they assumed that other parts of the world would experience a similar shift away from kinship as part of the modernization process. But they were mistaken. Although China was the first civilization to invent the modern state, it never succeeded in suppressing the power of kinship on social and cultural levels. Hence much of its subsequent two-thousand-year political history revolved around attempts to block the reassertion of kinship structures into state administration. In India, kinship interacted with religion and mutated into the caste system, which up to the present day has proved much stronger than any state in defining the nature of Indian society. From the Melanesian wantok to the Arab tribe to the Taiwanese lineage to the Bolivian ayllu, complex kinship structures remain the primary locus of social life for many people in the contemporary world, and strongly shape their interaction with modern political institutions" (77–78).

70 A prominent recent manifestation of this phenomenon occurs in the debate over the legitimacy of vaccine mandates. The medical experts strongly recommend vaccination on the basis of the statistical evidence, which shows that the benefits of vaccination outweigh the costs. But those who oppose vaccines put the matter not in terms of probabilities (the evidence) but in terms of their right to freedom of choice. If the medical experts could somehow elevate their discourse to the level of influence formerly reserved for gods, they would doubtless win sweeping approval for their vaccines. But then they would no longer be scientists, and the very idea of basing one's claims upon evidence would be undermined. In short, the political problem—the "crisis of authority"—cannot be reduced to an empirical or scientific problem. In *The People vs. Democracy*, Mounk observes that this sort of conflict is endemic to liberal democracy, which is a blend of two distinct ideas. On the one hand, democracy assumes a political system that successfully "translates popular will into public policy" (27). On the other, liberalism guarantees the protection of individuals (including individuals in minority groups) whose habits and customs are not shared by the majority. When politicians invoke vaccine mandates, they rely on the evidence provided by scientists. But because this policy is not backed by popular will (i.e., nobody voted on it), it can be considered undemocratic. Of course, this sort of paradox is bound to occur in advanced industrial societies, which are much too complex to hold referenda on every imaginable policy produced in the legislature. The challenge for liberal democracies today, Mounk believes, is to adapt to radically changed conditions. Casting a critical eye over liberal democracies since the postwar period, Mounk identifies three new conditions to which they will have to adapt if they are to survive: (1) economic stagnation and rising inequality, (2) mass immigration creating a more heterogeneous citizenship, and (3) the rise of the internet and social media. The first is important because citizens who see their economic situation decline get resentful and aim their ire at politicians, whom they (often rightly) associate with the *über*-rich. Hence the rise of populists such as Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The second is important because successful democracies in the immediate postwar period were much more ethnically and culturally homogenous than they are today (or, if they were not, they have deliberately restricted the rights of certain groups). Finally, the third is important because with the rise of the internet there is no longer a central gatekeeper to censor extremist and polarizing views. The lines of communication are no longer one-to-many (i.e., center to periphery) but many-to-many (i.e., the periphery

can capture the center). Hate speech and lies spread quickly, and this corrodes the moderate norms and civic values necessary for liberal democracy to survive.

71 For a meticulous study of these rituals, see Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (1874; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006).

72 Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (New York: Allen Lane, 1994), 7. Gellner is discussing the concept of civil society, which he notes became suddenly and dramatically relevant in Europe following the fall of the Soviet Union. As a philosophically minded anthropologist (or anthropologically minded philosopher), Geller cautions us against having an anthropologically and historically naïve idea of civil society. He reminds us that there have existed plenty of societies that have managed to avoid the tyranny of the autocratic state. Indeed, the prominence of segmentary society in the ethnographic literature shows us that many societies have avoided the fate of living under the tyranny of kings, autocrats, and kleptocrats. But segmentary society is not civil society, at least not the civil society liberal democracies have grown to love and cherish. Gellner explains the difference as follows: "If we are to define our notion of Civil Society effectively, we must first of all distinguish it from something which may in itself be attractive or repulsive, or perhaps both, but which is radically distinct from it: the segmentary community which avoids central tyranny by firmly turning the individual into an integral part of the social sub-unit. Romantics feel nostalgia for it and modern individualists may loathe it; but what concerns us here is that, whatever our feelings for it may be, it is very, very different from our notion of Civil Society, even though it satisfies that plausible initial definition of it. It may, indeed, be pluralistic and centralization-resistant, but it does not confer on its members the kind of freedom *we* require and expect from Civil Society" (8).