Antisemitism and the Victimary Era

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In this paper, I will offer an account of contemporary antisemitism in terms of Eric Gans’s “originary hypothesis” regarding the origin of language and culture. The originary hypothesis extends and revises Rene Girard’s analysis of mimetic rivalry: according to the originary hypothesis, the first sign emerged in a single event, a mimetic crisis in which the (proto) human group arrested their common and self-destructive convergence upon a common object by putting forward what Gans calls an “aborted gesture of appropriation.” Representation, then, is the deferral of violence, as is, therefore, all of culture. History is the ongoing process of preserving and, where necessary and possible, replacing such means of deferral (languages, rituals, beliefs, moralities, art, and so on), which are intrinsically fragile and under constant threat from mimetic desire, rivalry, and violence.

In a series of books, beginning with *The Origin of Language* in 1981, through *The End of Culture, Science and Faith*, and *Signs of Paradox*, to mention a few, and his on-line column, *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* on his Anthropoetics website, Gans’s “new way of thinking” has developed an account of history according to which the market system, and now the world market system, best realizes the reciprocity achieved on the originary scene. History is the liberation of human from attachment and “enslavement” to the singular object on the originary scene toward the universal exchange of objects within the market system. It is in the context of the market system that Gans first situates antisemitism:

*The Jew* is not in some undefined sense a scapegoat for the larger society’s frustrations. He serves as a model of the inexistent and unfigurable center of the market system … the *Jew*, having rejected the incarnation, incarnates the truly unincarnable—mediation…. In the postritual world of market exchange, the *Jew* is a paradoxical construction who regulates the self-regulating market, who fixes the prices determined by the interaction of supply and demand; we must eliminate him to gain control over this “inhuman” mechanism.3

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Gans’s allusion to the Jews’ rejection of the incarnation already suggests that the suitability of the Jews for such a “model” of the unfigurable center of the market has roots that precede modernity. Antisemitism, for Gans, is ultimately predicated upon the paradox of the Jewish discovery of monotheism: the Judaic revelation presented knowledge of a single God beyond the means of control of totemic religions and a single humanity whose knowledge of God is most profoundly revealed in the reciprocal relations between humans; at the same time, this very revelation is granted to a single people, “chosen” to work out before the world the implications of this understanding of the divine. The spread of monotheism, already inscribed in its universalistic origin, could hardly take place other than through resentment toward those who both gave this God to humanity and “selfishly” claimed an exclusive relation to Him.

What Gans calls Jewish “narrative monotheism” lays the groundwork for the eventual emergence of the modern market not only by de-fetishizing local totems but by separating faith in God and the obligation to follow the law from the national power and success of the Jewish people. If the defeats and even destruction of the nation are given meaning by demands and promises that transcend those temporal events, then moral meaning can be found in the contingencies of history, rather than the maintenance of a closed ritual space. But this contribution of Judaism to modernity collides with the more specifically Christian contribution or, rather, the revision of Christianity constitutive of modernity. According to Gans, “[w]here Jews had understood that the real center was inhabited by the Being of the sign, the Christians realized that this Being was generated, and could be generated anew, by an act interpretable as a victimization.” In other words, while Jewish victimization was already a sign of Jewish chosenness, this was a burden borne by Jews alone; for Christianity, the persecution of Jesus is imitable and identification with it the source of salvation. But this also meant that Christianity provides the model for antisemitism: “[t]he anti-Semite compels the Jew to enter the infernal circle of rivalry and persecution in order to reenact his own Christian conversion: he is the new Paul, and the Jew is the Saul he used to be.”

The consequence of this privileging of victimization and identification with it as a moral model is clarified by Gans’s account of the role of Romanticism in the development of the modern market. Gans speaks of the “constitutive hypocrisy of Romanticism,” wherein the Romantic individual performs his rejection of the market system and proclaims his persecution by all those situated within that system only in order, ultimately, to create a compelling self capable of circulating effectively within the market. In abiding tension with this individualistic gesture is the formation of nationalism along analogous lines, through the martyrdom of the nation and its heroes at the hands of its oppressors; oppressors that are, of course, simultaneously mimetic models. So, Gans argues,

anti-Semitism intensifies in the bourgeois era because it is at this point in history that persecution, which grants significance, comes to be preferable to indifference.... At this point the Jews’ indifference to Jesus is no longer a veil covering his guilt for the Crucifixion; it is itself the ultimate persecution. To opt out of the theater of national life is ipso facto to operate in the hidden realm of conspiracy. The Jew is the ultimate