

Re-introducing Generative Anthropology with *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry* (Book Review)

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Eric Gans, who first published his book on *The Origin of Language* in 1981, has since been passed by in most academic departments. One reason may be that he is writing out of disciplinary obscurity, positing a worldview known as “Generative Anthropology” (GA) as nothing short of a *new* way of thinking. Rather than seeking to house itself amongst existing disciplinary conventions, say, those of field anthropology, the “Generative” version can only go out on its own in its insistence that we begin talking about human language and origins not exclusively in terms of empirical data gleaned from field evidence, but also, in terms of the *cultural* significance of these objects. As an “anthropology” (i.e., as a “study of the human”), GA undermines a strict emic understanding of culture, making the case that cultural artifacts ought to be talked about in terms of their etic significance as well.

Indeed, the world could do worse than to take heed from the up and coming crop of “Gansian” critics, who are showcasing the breadth and scope of their master’s teachings as Adam Katz’s recent collection of essays makes evident. Entitled *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*, this book brings together the work of ten different contributors from three different continents, ranging in subject matter from classical, early modern and Romantic literature, to esthetics and the sacred, and even, to the current state of political affairs—more specifically, to centre-peripheral relations of nations in a post 9/11 world.

Katz himself, in the book’s opening essay, begins by addressing GA’s lukewarm reception in the academy, citing the same reasons for its obscurity in the academic world to its congruous political obscurity. Just as no existing discipline can adequately house

the claims GA seeks to make, neither can the current political spectrum comfortably describe where GA “stands” politically. Yet as both a discipline and a worldview, GA has much to offer.

For example politics as we know it today pits left against right, so one thing Katz hopes this book will promote is a “transcendence of this configuration” (3). Rather than viewing society in polarized terms, GA arranges all manner of human activity on a centre/peripheral “scene of representation,” on which human language itself originated. Indeed, the bulk of GA’s theoretical power is derived from its exacting articulation of the origin of language, which is posited here not as any sort of definitive account of the origin of the human, but, somewhat more audaciously, as a complete *hypothetical*.

Gans would have us imagine the first humans (or proto-humans) configuring themselves around an object of appetitive desire (say, the carcass of a bison). Each one desires the central object simultaneously and in its totality. Yet so too does each one realize that the sum total of all desires on the periphery conflict with one another, thereby threatening the entire species at large. The central object, then, suddenly possesses a “sacred, repelling force,” and the first sign is uttered not as a gesture of appropriation but as an aborted gesture of desire. The subsequent realization by each of his ultimately asymmetrical position on the periphery (encompassed by the apparent divorce of his (other) worldly desire from its worldly satisfaction), is at once a source of pleasure and resentment. Each human being suddenly finds himself condemned to negotiate between his desire for complete appropriation of the center against his simultaneous “ethical” metaphysical inklings to defer that desire (what we might call “the burden of being human,” as guaranteed by the originary event). Even when the time finally comes to inaugurate the ritual feast, division is carried out by means of ritual distribution, and some are destined to get a bigger piece of the pie, while others, perhaps, get nothing at all. With every man’s freedom to acquire the centre in its totality curtailed, all any of them can do now is fester in their “originary resentment,” the catalyst, as Gans would have it, of all human culture. That is, originary resentment is either dissipated outright through bursts of intra-specific violence, or, more likely, *deferred* through the proliferation of ritual and culture, all of which is “generated” from the origin of language—hence a “generative” vision of man, i.e., a Generative Anthropology.

Despite the unabashed “hypothetical-ness” of the originary scenario, as a heuristic, it nevertheless seeks to accommodate as many *aposteriori* findings as possible, even with the self-conscious understanding that its central claims can *never* be verified in the natural world. Hence, its claim to universality is only as good as its latest application. While this may not seem wholly exceptional at first, GA differs from other all-encompassing ontic systems in that it does not delude itself into believing that ostensive currency attesting to the “truth” of its fundamental tenets is waiting to be discovered *out there*. Rather, the truth of its *apriori* claims can only be guaranteed by *aposteriori* verification in texts—that is, in *humanistic* (rather than scientific, or empirical) study. Where the Marxist, for example, insists on tying his version of human origin to empirical findings in the natural world (i.e., to the discovery and placement of capital and who owns it), GA seeks out verification primarily through the analysis of human intention, defined more specifically in terms of anthropological categories, such as desire, resentment, and deferral.

Of course, the only evidence for the existence of these categories is to be found in our analysis of culture through its textual remnants, the sort of “evidence” that might otherwise be considered “soft,” though Gans’ heuristic is designed to make such evidence as “hard” as possible, without buying into the hubristic notion that humanistic study ought to become, or model itself closer to, scientific study. Though its principal statements are made in an apriori fashion, GA’s deliberate hypothetical stance immediately absolves it from any claim to theoretical absolutism. It is something akin to the most expedient theoretical heuristic we can formulate for the sake of addressing our origins without the threat of having whatever discussion we come up with undermined by the charge of logocentrism. The idea that we cannot use language to talk about a “truth” that exists beyond or before language is a theoretical anathema to GA. Indeed, GA is all too aware that language generates from the first sign, while maintaining that such generation ought not to prevent us from talking about how language originated in the first place.

Hence, in looking at politics through such a prism, Katz quickly adduces that our “originary resentment” is not to be situated at the left or the right, but can instead be thought of as existing equally, *everywhere*, as all humans occupy a position on the periphery anyhow. That is, both left and right seek the center, merely couching their resentments in different ways. The left attacks the centrality of the market for promoting the type of desire that can only lead to more violence (through the (albeit inherent) establishment of asymmetries), while the right attacks the market for allowing the left to proliferate on the scene in the first place: “[b]oth political camps ... ultimately converge on the market as their target of resentment” (3).

Yet Katz is quick to highlight the left’s increasingly “parasitic relation with the sacred center,” which attaches itself to a form of esthetic “white guilt” where “all action taken by the more powerful” (3) is merely a reflection of a central tyranny and hence, a form of subjugation (of the stronger by the weaker). Because the left defines itself in terms of its distance from the center (which can never be completely eradicated—a “truth” guaranteed by Gans’ version of language origin), they can never concede that their asymmetrical and relatively short-sighted view of power relations always has them coming up with the short-end of any political stick.

Indeed, what GA offers in this regard is the notion that the perpetual articulation of asymmetry breeds *more* resentment, not less, and of the sort that undermines fair political play. Each side is continually looking to get the upper hand. What is required, then, is the “establishment of new modes of symmetry, even if (and this is what white guilt most fears) we must do so without first remedying *existing* actual asymmetries” (my emphasis, 6). Although GA recognizes the inherent asymmetrical position of human beings on the periphery, so too does it promote the idea that in originary terms, all language users operate from *equally* asymmetrical positions. Hence, for the sake of political expediency, both sides of any political divide must start from positions of *assumed* symmetry. Amongst GA’s boldest, and perhaps more controversial, moves is its ability to sustain the idea that political power can no longer be guaranteed by continually asserting one’s peripheral and victimary status.

Because the book is designed to promote a discussion of GA beyond a mere introductory register, readers entirely new to GA (of which there are a great many) might find themselves putting this volume away quicker than they ought to. One remedy might

be to engage with the entries in reverse order, as the pieces which lay out the theory in formal terms more clearly (Bartlett's, Fleming and O'Carroll's) are, oddly, relegated to the latter portion of the book. These two concluding essays do much to situate the hypothesis against relevant intellectual trends, whether academic or topical. Fleming and O'Carroll, for example, analyze the formal structure of the hypothesis, isolating the parameters against which it is formulated. That is, despite making no claim to be definitive, the originary hypothesis does hold itself accountable to two rigorously enforced intellectual precepts: minimality and parsimony (279f.), both of which, we are told, have their "own merit" where "only that which is essential" (279) is stated. The originary hypothesis, then, establishes its own theoretical scope through these precepts in order to encapsulate, with notable precision, characteristics common to all cultures and hence, to all humans.

Ultimately, Fleming and O'Carroll, Bartlett, and even Tom Bertonneau (easily this volume's most eclectic and charming contributor) remind us that the novelty of the hypothesis comes in its ability to reason itself into existence, rather than appealing, like the Marxists, to having "always already" existed. This is how GA affirms that we *can*, indeed, talk about our origins based on nothing more than "aposteriori reasoning in the field" (278). For a field like the humanities, both abetted and hampered by a hermeneutical approach (whose apriori presuppositions are constantly undermined by new aposteriori discoveries), the hypothesis provides a brand new Archimedean point, allowing us to affirm, clearly, what we are, and hence, *what it is we are doing* as humans when we pursue humanistic inquiry. Though some may cringe at the thought of culture being boiled down *in toto* to an exercise in quelling resentment, the contributors to this volume would remind us that in committing only to the minimal aspects of the scene, we have the potential, once and for all, to end the crisis of interpretation which has crippled the humanities since the 1950s. As a heuristic, then, GA provides a framework with which to look at how such "anthropological categories" play out in Western texts, from Thales and Walter Pater, to Shakespeare, and even, to Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Thomas Gray.

For example, Richard van Oort skillfully negotiates the nature of Hamlet's "modern" resentment in contrast to Oedipus' "classical" version. Where Oedipus ultimately sought out the sacred centre only to fall at the hands of the gods, Hamlet, conversely, all too easily identifies himself as a peripheral victim. To kill Claudius would be to usurp the centre himself, undermining the legitimacy of his peripheral resentment (hence his delay). According to GA, concepts of desire and resentment, as clearly defined anthropological categories, are entirely applicable to texts and worthy of discussion in consideration of the esthetic. With the originary hypothesis, humanistic inquiry once again becomes a legitimate form of positive (though not positivistic) inquiry, out to discover the truth in an aposteriori fashion, only after asserting a minimal and hypothetical apriori origin.

Generative Anthropology may have placed itself beyond any single discipline proper, but anyone interested to see what GA is capable of *doing* within any specific humanistic field would be wise to pick up this book. Its appearance proves that GA is a force to be reckoned with. As a minimalist approach, it leaves itself open to the world. If the work in this book is any indication, it's time the world paid attention.

Works Cited

The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry. Ed. Adam Katz.
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