



Order, Delegation, and Exclusion in the Negative Space of Political Modernity: A Reply to My Critics

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That a series of contemporary political crises may be located, via interpretation, in certain cultural configurations and contests is, if not obvious, at least uncontroversial qua one argument among several. But the rendering of today's crises in terms of art taken from the human sciences hides the difficult matter of the development and sculpting of the particular thinking-tools with which such interpretations will be attempted. For, to interpret is to draw upon concepts and methods that have their own histories and their own rhythms. Sociological thought is far from autonomous from social politics, but it does not track *directly* with the historical trajectory of a given zone of activities and its transformations (e.g. political sociology does not perfectly align, in its own transformations, with transformations in 'the political sphere').

Indeed, even presuming that 'the great questions of the age' could be the subject of coherent discussion between those symbol-manipulators who arrogate themselves to the position of intellectuals, the very asking and answering of questions would inevitably load into its meanings this doubling of phenomena with consciousness-of-phenomena that is far from a match. In historical and political sociology, for example, to ask about 'the fate of democratic life today' articulates alongside and indeed behind such a question not only a series of understandings of aspects of sociohistory (e.g. religion and conspiracy theories in Atlantic cultures; the fate of the nation-state as a container for politics in the post-1968 era, etc.), but also a specific, and different, history of struggles and reorientations that took place within 'sociology itself.' In other words, sociology's own distorted self-understanding vis-à-vis the context of its production calls out for constant correction. It is for this reason that something like a reflexive historical sociology (Szokolczai, 2003) is required. In this regard my critics and I stand before each other in a relationship of recognition.

As an effort in reflexive historical sociology, *Power in Modernity* winds together an intervention into a specific intergenerational scholarly conversation on *power* (Max Weber, Steven Lukes, Orlando Patterson, Judith Butler, etc.) with a long-arc history of the Atlantic world, grounded in archival investigations into episodes of revolt and the breakdown of order in the early modern era (Bacon's Rebellion, 1676; the Boston Revolt, 1689; and the Whiskey Rebellion and the Battle of Fallen Timbers, 1794). I analyze revolt and

rebellion as scenes for the transformation and/or reinscription of *myth*, with the understanding that the mythological dimension of action and social order helps to form the *agency relations* – and the long, hierarchical chains that result from their multiplication – that constitute politics. Revolts, in this regard, are particularly useful as points for the study of sociohistory and political transformation: liminality reveals regime.

Thus, the theoretical renovation of abstract discourses in the human sciences that makes up Part I of the book seeks to upend certain shibboleths of social theory derived from Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, by attending to agency, and thereby power, as ‘the ability to send and bind an agent to work on one’s behalf.’

My wager is that this renovation in theories of power and agency can serve as a prolegomenon to what Monika Krause calls the ‘comparative cultural sociology of democracy.’ Such a comparative analysis would admit of a new comprehension of *variation* in how the ‘body of the people’ is symbolized, brought into action, and made part of the sinews of the state. One dimension of this variation is the exclusion of others; the classic way in which this exclusion has been theorized (which sits behind certain comments by Marcus Morgan and by Emily Erikson in their responses), is via a sociology of *nations and nationalisms* as a way to study the symbolizations of the socio-political body. But not all nationalisms are exclusionary in the same way (or with the same virulence or intensity), and the generality of the term exclusion, in the framework offered in *Power in Modernity*, is designed to allow for the disaggregation of nationalism (a term I deliberately avoid) as a category for the analysis of political signification and its consequences. For, nationalism should be reframed as a subgenre of the political myth of ‘the people’ or ‘a people.’ Modernity in the Atlantic world is not only the era of the (Herderian) nation as a real-because-constructed force, but also the era of the routed cosmopolitanisms of the Black Atlantic and the Jewish diaspora (see Bauman, 2000; Gilroy, 1993; Slezkine, 2019), and the era of the International. My efforts at what Erikson correctly identifies as ‘proof of concept’ in *Power in Modernity* sought to mobilize its theoretical work on the concepts of agency, power, network, and performance – and its development of the troika of terms *rector*, *actor*, and *other* – to reconsider the history of politics in the Atlantic world.

As Erikson correctly notes, alterity, profanation, and discrimination are not limited to the modern age. Nonetheless, a central tension in transitions to modernity is to be found in the *simultaneous* expansion of the very possibility of (partial) rectorship, in the sense of who is admitted to the game of political power and thereby the accrual of allies and the accession to having some discretion over the conditions of one’s own life, and, as counterpoint to this expansion, the intensification of the operation of forms of alterity that articulate across generations, and create societies structured in domination, not least through the floating signifier of race (Hall, 2021). Alterity, in other words, has a special role in the making of modern societies and their attendant myths, particularly insofar as global political and economic systematics and ambition, combined with the intensification of ideological demands for purity and sameness in modern epistemes, creates the conditions for the emergence of disciplinary, and even eliminationist metaprojects that are radically anti-humanist in their reduction of the human being to a

fantastical pseudobiology. These projects take aim, via their attack on others whose very *existence as others* is bound up with transitions to modernity, at the sheer fact of human plurality (Arendt, 2006). As Gilroy has been invoked, he might as well be quoted:

Pointing out aspects of the particularity of modern black experiences should not be understood as an occasion for staging the confrontation between the regional values of a distinct sector or community and the supposed universalism of occidental rationality. I am not suggesting that the contemporary traces of black intellectual history comprise or even refer to a lifeworld that is incommensurable with that of the former slaveholders. That would be the easy way out, for in focusing on racial slavery and its aftermath we are required to consider a historical relationship in which dependency and antagonism are intimately associated and in which black critiques of modernity may also be, in some significant senses, its affirmation. The key to comprehending this lies not in the overhasty separation of the cultural forms particular to both groups into some ethnic typology but in a detailed and comprehensive grasp of their complex interpenetration. (Gilroy, 1993: 49)¹

Power in Modernity is not *directly* an analysis of the Black Atlantic (though it incorporates it in its account of the French Revolution and of early modern Virginia – how could it not?), and its theorization of the other is taken from Orlando Patterson to enable analytic grasp of both premodern, early modern, and high modern alterity (Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) covered all known slave societies in history.) But the account of modernity offered in the book is, I believe, both inspired by and compatible with the account given in Gilroy's most well-known contribution. The ambition of *Power in Modernity* was to elaborate an understanding of alterity that, in its weak ontology, could prepare a different angle of vision on the making and unmaking of others under pre-modern, early modern, and high modern conditions. Thus, in the historical sociology I am proposing, the other is not only the out-group, the counterpoint to the in-group; the other is a moving piece in chains of delegation and their contestation. The other is the weird Simmelian third² to the dialectics of rector and actor that variably distribute discretion and decision-making in various organizations and especially among states.

Thus, *Power in Modernity* takes as one point of empirical focus early modern weirdness in state-making. This is a world of far-flung chains of power and their representations, one that repeatedly crosses the Atlantic, not least via its most notorious triangle. I would note that this weirdness was symptomatically manifested in the writings of certain early modern European political philosophers (Robert Filmer, Thomas Hobbes, Baruch Spinoza) who were also of great interest to the Weimar-era thinkers (Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Kantorowicz) in whose tradition I attempt, and of course fail, to write.³ And yet the world of the Sun King, in which tropes of rule given their genealogy by Kantorowicz were fused with the advent of new organizational capacities in the age of absolutism and mercantilism, was itself subject to transformation, a transformation iconically represented by the histories of the three Atlantic revolutions at the close of the 18th century.

These revolutions *also* involved a reconfiguration of gender and rule. A close tracing of this reconfiguration, with special attention to the dimension of myth and fantasy, could provide something of an answer to Erikson's questions about the rights of women. My

argument is *not* that such rights have not been a prominent feature, indeed achievement, of ‘the modern age.’ Rather, I follow Carole Pateman’s (1988) and Joan Landes’s (1988) accounting of the how transitions to modernity created the openings for, but also set the limits of, the histories of women’s rights that take Wollstonecraft as a central figure in the genealogy of modern feminism. In their accounting, the making of the modern political world of (supposed) *liberté, égalité, fraternité* featured a redrawing and intensification of the line between private and public. This redrawing, Pateman and Landes show, was indeed central to the remaking of the political imagination of the body of the people, and especially to its replacement of the culture of royal prerogative and aristocratic patronage with a culture of *citoyens* in their glorious republican rectitude. Thus, as Landes shows, at the level of the symbols used to tie together hierarchy, the reconstruction of the world of politics as an *affaire des hommes* associated the corruption of the ancient régime with femininity, ‘influence’ as a form of power, and seduction. In the world of the king, there is, in a certain sense, only one true man, the one with two bodies. All other patriarchs trace their legitimacy to his second body (or hers, in the case of a queen who rules), and the anxieties and practices of politics center on the judgment of honor in combination with the *douceur* of wit and the self-confidence of the aristocratic right to rule. Thus, though the gender inequalities of early modern European societies are notorious, aristocratic women of high influence, and thus public power, are indeed found in 17th- and 18th-century Paris. The followers of Rousseau, in search of authenticity in the public display of rationality and patriotic virtue, could not stand it for one minute. The killing of the king as the father with two bodies, then, sets modern political dialectics into motion. Therein, the claim of ordinary citizens to rectorship via the franchise is, fitfully, expanded via the long arc of liberal reform, as previously subordinated identities are recoded as trustworthy agents of the people, only to be subject to movements for retrenchment in the interpretation of who is qualified to have ‘rectitude.’ As Adriana Caverero (2020) has noted, there are limits to what the redistribution of rectitude can accomplish, insofar as it encodes a certain disdain for *inclination* as a political act.

In the triad of rector, actor, and other, then, we can track the various dimensions of the madness of modern power. In particular, we can conduct a double hermeneutic – a study of the very construal of ties that bind, in networks of power, inflected by the symbolization of who is rector, who is actor, and who is other in various discursive formations with various degrees of influence. One may focus, in investigating such formations and their relational manifestations, on the making of alterity – on the despised, the dehumanized, the supposed ‘barbarian’ beyond the gates, on Hegel’s African. Or one may focus on the possibilities that emerge for *action by actors*, that is, on democratic politics amongst equals under conditions of plurality, on Arendt’s agora. Finally, one may focus on the rendering and symbolic circulation of ‘Kantorowicz bodies’ such as the second body of Elizabeth I, and their surrogates and afterlives, including the various bodies of ‘nations’ and the second body grown (or not) over the course of American presidential campaigns.⁴ That Kantorowicz bodies repeatedly emerge to solve Weberian problems, and thereby in their figurations and narratives bring myth into the heart of modernity, is the basis for my dissent from the disenchantment hypothesis. Kantorowicz bodies – and specifically, their *figuration* in imagery and their *narration* in text and moving image – tie staffs to rulers,

populations to elites, priests to politicians, imperial subjects to metropolises, and low-level bureaucrats to high-level bureaucrats.

Given that the tradition of sociology that is the partial origin of these sorts of claims in *Power in Modernity* includes not only Max Weber but also Norbert Elias and S.N. Eisenstadt, the ‘Europeanness’ of the King’s Two Bodies is worthy of extended and careful attention. Qua *legal doctrine*, in the precise sense that Kantorowicz discusses it in the opening chapters of his book, it is surely a creature of western Europe – indeed, it is perhaps a specifically *English* phenomenon. But within what larger set of tropes of rule, useful for the construction of effective hierarchies, do we find this legal doctrine? Here it is crucial to adopt a broad view. That something like ‘kingship’ is a recurrent feature of human political communities at many times and places makes it worthy of comparative study (Graeber and Sahlins, 2017), and I would regard the King’s Two Bodies (and what I call, in the text, its ‘cognates’) to be a subspecies of a widespread phenomenon of political signification, that of the *familial state* (Adams, 2005).

Are we not, when we recognize the particularity of the King’s Two Bodies as a legal doctrine, simultaneously invoking – precisely in delimiting Kantorowicz’s genealogy, in specifying it in the space of the law, in the time of early modern English discursive contestation and in the time of a particular tension in the history of Christendom – an extraordinarily general phenomenon, namely the variable intersection of the experience of familial bonds, the construction of political worlds-in-common, and the intellectual gesture towards the divine? Is it not, then, the specificity of the imagination of the *Corpus Christi* that, in this case, opens onto its relativization and thus to the study of the body as simultaneously signifier and signified, and thus the location of social magic?

My proposal, then, is that if we can grasp the *dimensions of variation* in how such an intersection is constructed, we will have something like a historical-sociological approach to political theology that will contain, within it, a study of those aspects of the Arendtian agora that we evaluate as ameliorative. To see what I mean by *variation*, consider Cherniavsky’s dissent from Kantorowicz’s argument:

Ernst Kantorowicz shows that the Christian ruler as mediator between God and men shared with Christ the attribute of a dual nature. Weak, fallible and mortal as all men in his humanity, the ruler, at the same time, as the *christus domini*, possessed the divine attributes of his princely nature. As Christ, whose image he is, the king is both god and man; he is man in his being, and a god in his function. The dual nature of the prince in Western medieval Europe created a tension in his image which was finally resolved by the separation of the person and the office of the prince. However, without touching here upon the nature of his dualism and the process of this separation in the West, one can note a significant difference in the image of the saintly prince in Russia. In the West, the tension was between two unequal entities, one higher and one lower, a divine nature and a human nature. In Russia, the tension was between the divine nature of princely power and the saintly nature of the prince as a man. While in the West it was possible, in the twelfth century, before the secularization of the state, to distinguish the king as man, mortal and sinful, and the king as King, the anointed of God, who was to be regarded and obeyed as was God, this distinction would be meaningless in Russia; the prince as the vicegerent of God was contrasted with the man who was a saint, and as such, again, the image of Christ, possessed of eternal life. The tension could not be resolved—or, if one prefers, the

balance was maintained—in the myth of the prince in whose nature the two aspects, princely and human, were equally deified. (Cherniavsky, 1961: 28–29)

I think of such cultural contrasts as useful precisely in so far as the cultural sociology of contemporary democracy must be accompanied by a historical sociology, and in particular, comparative histories of ‘the political.’ The hope of *Power in Modernity* is that the skeleton account of power offered by the terminology of rector, actor, other, and project, and by the reconceptualization of the dimensions of power (material, relational, discursive, performative), provides sufficient conceptual tools for the development of such comparisons as asked for by Krause,⁵ including comparisons to settings in which the King’s Two Bodies does not have a local cognate, but the problems of succession and the cooptation of elites in the making of the state must be solved nonetheless, and some metaphors of the familial state are available.⁶

What is the epistemic status of this rector/actor/other/project language? Stephen Kemp is correct that my account, indebted deeply to pragmatist philosophies of action and processual sociology, does not go all the way in the direction of a strict interactionism, retaining an interest in meaning as an ambient background for action and in the (variable) stabilization and even hardening of chains of power into vast systems for the transformation and movement of persons, money, and material.⁷ For the analysis I conducted, the terms had only to be general enough to structure the thick description of certain episodes in the transitions to modernity in the Atlantic world, but I suspect they are useful for other analyses as well – as I suggest in the concluding chapter of the text. They cannot explain on their own; but they can be the basis, via their unremitting focus on the processes of ordering, delegation and exclusion, for the double hermeneutic of the human sciences, en route to explanation and evaluation.

In contrast to Kemp’s reading, Leonidas Tsilipakos is made uncomfortable not only by the (to-be-determined) *scope* of the terms’ utility, but also with their very existence in abstraction; there is no concept to offer proof of, because concept is suspect. His felt disappointment at the ‘poverty of ontological reasoning,’ erstwhile directed at Rom Harré (Tsilipakos, 2012), here serves as a pseudo-Wittgensteinian riposte to the theoretical ‘ambition’ of *Power in Modernity*, whose tendencies towards abstraction-as-intervention he cannot abide, and whose focus on the King’s Two Bodies as one trope among many for the making and unmaking of rule he cannot allow.

One suspects that Tsilipakos uses the adjective ‘ambitious’ in the same way that the English football commentariat does when narrating an ill-fated long shot on goal. Nonetheless, his favorite part of the book is also my favorite, suggesting that, insofar as the analysis of the newspaper satire of the Whiskey Rebellion was hermeneutically informed by the post-Weberian construct of rector/actor/other, the latter is at least somewhat worthwhile.

There is, furthermore, a difficult matter here concerning description and the construction of interpretive explanation. Tsilipakos, drawing on a well-known reading of the late Wittgenstein, renders suspect the theoretical project in the original sense of the *theoros* – the person in Ancient Greece who travelled outside his city state to witness rituals and

spectacles, looking upon or picturing them, perhaps even subjecting them to speculation.⁸ For Tsilipakos, such leaps of speculative reason introduce an abstraction that is highly distortive; ‘theory’ leads to the use of deracinated terms, which is an especially bad problem when explanation takes precedence over the accuracy of description (Tsilipakos, 2020). It seems worth mentioning at this point that chapters 5 through 8 of the book contain detailed descriptive narratives of concrete historical events, cobbled together from archival research and secondary sources.

It would appear, then, that Tsilipakos is suspicious of the neo-Kantian idea, embraced in modified form by Max Weber, that the purpose of concepts in historical social science is to give order to a chaotic world, to give form to an unformulated past. To him, this represents theoretical departure from the rigorous requirements of descriptive accuracy, and he finds such a departure in his reading of *Power in Modernity*. I dispute Tsilipakos’ point, while claiming no neo-Kantian adherence of my own. Rather, I would note that the post-Weberian generation of German letters grappled with this problem at great length, and that there emerged among these thinkers an argument that the *risk* of theorization should be taken, precisely because the catastrophe of history demands it, while also adhering to norms of discovery and evidentiary reference that enable one to write history accurately.⁹

The terms *rector*, *actor*, and *other*, then, are offered as a reflexive reform of the language of political and cultural sociology. They are intended as an instigation and an intervention; they are designed to create a countertendency to the assumption that, once field and *illuio* have been identified, and once the sublimation of what was once called material interest into the stakes of the field and bodily *hexis* is complete, explanation has been achieved. When a model legitimates itself regardless of verisimilitude or pragmatic utility, it is time for a new model. The interpretive explanations in *Power in Modernity* foreground agency problems and the transformative publicity of performative power. However, the book also attempts to render these bounded explanations in the service of a larger theoretical project of (re)conceptualization. That larger theoretical project seeks to show that an understanding of political modernity as a space of variation can be approached via an appreciation of the utility of the King’s Two Bodies as a pragmatic representation of legitimate order – and in this regard, the connection drawn by Tsilipakos between the text and the political philosophy of Claude Lefort is perspicacious.

The ‘sign of the King,’ and its metabolization in the history of Christendom as the felt conceptualization of the body of the Church as the *Corpus Christi*, was a pragmatic political representation of great import. It was a *representation* in the sense that it helped make order, and thereby the very differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate power that is central to power’s functioning, legible. It was *pragmatic* in the sense that, qua trope, it helped make politics as the pursuit of projects (and the pursuit of the power required to accomplish said projects) possible, by linking together decision-making and discretion across vast distances.

All power, in the human world, is in some sense, ‘spooky action at a distance,’ and this is how I understand Erikson’s note about the reversability of agency relations, Krause’s comment about the fragility of power, and Kemp’s interest in the processual aspect of hierarchy. Such spooky action can be channeled and secured by quite different mythologies. *Power in Modernity* traces, in early modern Virginia and Massachusetts, a

vast contest to imbue one's own actions and commands with legitimacy and therefore extra efficacy, by convincingly performing oneself as the *true best agent of the King or Queen*. These performative coordinates were reset with the coming of the Atlantic revolutions, which placed 'the people' qua signifier at the very bottom and very top of imagined hierarchy.

If I have been able to capture, via these interpretive explanations, some aspects of the emergence of the early modern Atlantic world out of European absolutism and empire, then *one* way to think about the maelstrom of political modernity is as follows. The revolutionary violence in Haiti, France, England, and the American war for independence, and the global conflict of 1756–1763 whose very condition was the collapse of the Iroquois empire as a dominant force on the North American continent, *created a negative space within which the pragmatic representation of legitimate order could be rewritten*. And the conjecture of the book is that, in ways large and small, the world still operates within this negative space. The problem is not that in our reflexive attempts to comprehend the conditions of our own consciousness as modern we have failed to 'cut off the head of the King' (Foucault, 1978). The problem is that we have yet to map the boundaries and intersections that emerged as the stage for power when his head did roll.

And so, *Power in Modernity*, in its apparently perilous theoretical 'ambition,' seeks to reconceptualize certain literatures upon whose shoulders it stands. The gluing of nation to state; the making of popular sovereignty as a regulative ideal in culture as well as in law; the distribution of rectorship to some of the people some of the time such that individual autonomy could become a central aspiration of modern cultures; the radical, *specifically modern*, othering of which the history of Black enslavement and the Holocaust are the most notorious exemplars; all of these phenomena might be seen – in part, to be sure – as occurring in the world 'after the King.'

I still recall the day when, sitting in the archive in Virginia, I took a break to read Lauren Benton's *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900*, in which she suggested, with reference to the poet of imperial power Joseph Conrad, that 'the upper reaches of distant rivers might be places for men to think of replacing the king's two bodies with one of their own' (Benton, 2010). Such evocative renderings are worthy, I think, of sociological ramification. For, sociology without history loses the second sight of memory, and threatens thus to *empty* its societal renderings of all meaningful content; yet history without sociology – and without the leaps of conceptualization that constitute abstract theory in the human sciences – risks the complacency of *obscured vision*, it risks the latter-day empiricism of 'through a scanner darkly.'

Notes

1. Later in his text, Gilroy writes that attending to 'the longevity of the overt and covert conversations between black and Jewish thinkers and focusing, where possible, on their impact upon the intellectuals of the black Atlantic world remains a worthwhile though difficult project' (1993: 206).
2. See discussion in *Power in Modernity*, page 11, footnote 4.
3. In a remarkable work, the historian Alexander B. Haskell has shown the importance, for high colonial politics, of the transformation of conceptions of sovereignty towards the Hobbesian in 17th-century Virginia. I discuss this in Chapter 5 of *Power in Modernity*. See *For God, King and People: Forging Commonwealth Bonds in Renaissance Virginia* (Haskell, 2017).

4. The phrase ‘Kantorowicz body’ comes from Michael Strand’s review of *Power in Modernity*, which appears in *Social Forces* (Strand, 2021). For the growth of Kantorowicz bodies during American presidential campaigns, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Performance of Politics: Obama’s Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (2010).
5. Jonah Stuart Brundage makes a similar request in a recent review of the text, *British Journal of Sociology*, published online first 2 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12877>.
6. Other comparisons, answering other questions in the human sciences, are also made available these terms – the language of rector, actor, and other is intended to be analytically and normatively useful for those less enamored with Kantorowicz than the archives in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts led me to be.
7. Kemp’s suggestion for the investigation of ‘vectors of meaning’ is intriguing, because it suggests that meaning has a directionality and an intensity. I think this suggestion is correct. In my view, such an analysis could be conducted *à la* Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, without the misplaced concreteness of strict interactionism.
8. In his inaugural lecture in Frankfurt in 1965, Jürgen Habermas asked if the ancient ideal of speculation, which he connected to the *theoros*, had been distorted by modern scientism. See discussion in Isaac Ariail Reed, *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences* (2011).
9. Or, as Walter Benjamin wrote, ‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]’ (Benjamin, 1968: 261). I do not think this is a call for ‘anachronistic’ historical sociology, but rather a missive indicating that the connotative aspects of abstract concepts add texture to historical analysis and provide the torque necessary to grasp the past as binding, but also as not necessarily binding, of the present.

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