

## Toward a Radical Interrogation of Politics and 'Politics'

### 1. *Puzzling about Power*

In both the 'real world' and in university departments of the humanities, talk of 'power' or 'politics' seems to consume much of what we say. There is perhaps little need to interpret or explain what the so-called 'real world' meaning of 'power' or 'politics' is. The ideas of party 'politics,' 'political institutions, 'political' science, 'politics as usual' and their ilk are commonplaces. After all, these are the sorts of things people with 'real' power say or have said about them every day throughout the 24/7 news cycle of cable TV! 'They' run for political office; 'they' play politics; 'they' have corrupted the Justice Department with politics; 'they' negotiate, or not, with political enemies.

More puzzling, however, for both 'real world' politics as well as some of its critics is the vigorous growth of a way of linking knowledge and 'power' or 'politics,' mostly due to the influence of Michel Foucault. In the humanities, we are now well familiar with usages like the politics of the body, cinema, the novel, language and culture, or racial, sexual or gender politics, and so on. This new discourse competes in popularity with the older 'real world' uses, found in such locutions as 'power politics', 'body politic' or 'political science', 'political theory' and such. The new language of politics and power has become a right and proper defining staple concern of such new areas of 'liberationist' inquiry. It can be found in the flourishing new fields of study devoted to giving attention to subjects and groups previously ignored in the university. Thus, the liberationist of power can be found commonly enough in the 'liberationist' discourse prevailing in such areas of study as Asian-American Studies, Black Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Latina/o or Hispanic Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gay, Lesbian, Transsexual and Transgender Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Women's Studies and so on.

The real historic disadvantaging of these and other social groups has naturally focused on bringing to light the sources and conditions of social and historical inequities suffered by political, economic and other marginalization. As such, these new areas of study have brought attention to injustices created by 'real world' politics, worked out by the standard techniques of oppression. These would include but not be limited to such 'real world' policies as disenfranchising voters, limiting public political speech, draconian prison sentencing, torture, exile and so on. But, more than bringing out the facts of such an overtly oppressive politics, and analyzing the causes of its

existence, the new liberationist thinkers have exposed the tacit ways oppression and inequity works. This is to describe all the subtle – not ‘real world’ ways, although they are ‘real’ enough – that human liberation has nonetheless, really, been stifled. Going well beyond the grosser forms of indignity meted to members of such groups, many of these new fields of study have sought to identify the subtler, often tacit or even unconscious ways various sorts of cultural encoding further the grosser efforts of those promoting indignity and disempowerment.

Examples of the subtler forms by which human liberation can be thwarted are legion, but none, perhaps, as telling for their subtlety as those found in language. One thinks only of how the way we talk about people often encodes racial, gender or sexual stereotypes and thus how it continues to disadvantage these and other social groups by subtle, though nonetheless potent, means. What is, however, notable about this liberationist discourse of power and politics, however, is that other new areas of inquiry with no such similar socio-political situation, such as Cultural Studies or Critical Theory, have in effect defined themselves to a large extent by their preoccupation with the liberationist tropes of ‘power; and ‘politics’ as well – doubtless because of the ways potent forms of oppression have been subtly encoded in the products of culture!

What is owing Foucault in this ‘liberationist’ discourse about ‘power’ or ‘politics’ cannot easily be put in a few words. Foucault’s theoretically rich and culturally suggestive historical writings have spawned a generation of thinking about how individuals and institutions control others by the most subtle, obscure and unintentional methods. Because of the broad scope of Foucault’s subject matter – human sexuality, systems of classification, asylums and prisons – it is easy to see how his work could speak across disciplinary lines in the university programs in the humanities that I have enumerated. Think only about the unintended way in which our pervasive Enlightenment humanism preached liberty and reform, but how its institutions, such as the asylum, often enacted regimes of the harshest forms of dehumanizing domination. (Foucault; Foucault)

Specific examples of the kind of discourse about politics and power that Foucault produces are legion. But, a couple of cases may prove illustrative. Consider this from post-colonial theorists, like Ghataytri Spivak. She playfully toys with the multi-valence of the term ‘power,’ arguably, but undauntingly, risking intelligibility in the process.

In the name of desire, they [certain philosophers] tacitly reintroduce the undivided subject into the discourse of power. On the register of practice, Foucault often seems to conflate “individual” and “subject”; and the impact on his own concept-metaphors is

perhaps intensified in his followers. Because of the power of the word “power,” Foucault admits to using the “metaphor of the point which progressively irradiates its surroundings.” (Spivak 1999, 254)

Although, another writer, here, feminist theorist, Linda Alcoff, does not name Foucault in my next example, his spirit hovers over it nonetheless.

For many feminists, the problem with the cultural feminist response to sexism is that it does not criticize the fundamental mechanism of oppressive power used to perpetuate sexism and in fact reinvokes that mechanism in its supposed solution. The mechanism of power referred to here is the construction of the subject by a discourse that weaves knowledge and power into a coercive structure that “forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way.” (Alcoff 1994, 102-3)

Language such as speaking of a “mechanism of power” produced “by a discourse,” bear the marks that have, therefore, made Foucault’s thought commonplace in the humanities.

In the study of religion, we might look more closely to a widely published devotee of Foucault lodged in the study of religion, Pasadena-native, and UCSB PhD, David Chidester. In his book *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa*, Chidester feels that Foucault has helped him discover something of great importance about how we classify or do not classify something as ‘religion.’ Categorizing, classifying, naming all can potentially create oppressive power. This sort of language shapes how we think and thus how we act regarding people, and that way of acting can be oppressive to those we classify, name and so on. Chidester invents the name, “frontier comparative religion”, for the deployer of what he takes to be overwhelming an oppressive cognitive force in the history of the religion of southern Africa. Says, Chidester,

the frontier has been an arena in which definitions of religion have been produced and deployed, tested and contested, in local struggles over power and position in the world. In such power struggles, the term religion has been defined as a strategic instrument. We can only expect those struggles to continue. (Chidester 1996, 254)

Chidester writes his book, then, in an effort to show how our own fully-developed modern day discipline of the comparative study of religion grew out of that oppressive discipline of knowledge that began in part on the “frontier” in southern Africa. (Strenski 1998c)

The discipline of comparative religion emerged, therefore, not only out of the Enlightenment heritage but also out of a violent history of colonial conquest and domination. Accordingly, the history of comparative religion is a story not only about knowledge but also about power. The disciplinary history of the study of religion is also a history of discipline, a dramatic narrative of the discourses and practices of comparison that shaped subjectivities on colonized peripheries and at European centers. (Chidester 1996, xiii)

These particular indictments, ordered by our prosecuting colleagues, offer potentially important insights into the possible existence of hidden regimes of domination that may be lurking behind 'enlightened' rhetoric in the study of religion. If Foucault can find them in his exploration of the unintended barbarity of otherwise avowedly enlightened programs of prison or asylum reforms, perhaps we too should be alert to other places where such malignancies might lie undetected – and thus where 'liberation' might be effected? Indeed, it should. It then should become obvious how the inquiry into the causes of these and other sorts of human domination originating with Foucault could – and arguably should – give rise to a host of academic enterprises in the humanities. Most are focused on the exercise of 'power' or 'politics' in human relations, especially as exercised by tacit means and in unsuspected places.

Yet, valid as these endeavors have been, there are telling problems created by the wholesale embrace of this phase of Foucault's work. This Foucault is well known as the author *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and *Madness and Civilization* (1965). This Foucault I call "First" Foucault to distinguish him from "Final" Foucault," author of the multi-volume *History of Sexuality* and works developing very different attitudes to power. Behind this First Foucault lies not only the commonplace belief that disparities of power explain why some folk were victimized and others victimizers, but also how becoming victimized began with the ways future victims were represented as particular objects of knowledge. {Strenski, 1998 #824; Strenski, 1998 #825} I argue that the moral or ideological impulse driving those who follow First Foucault confuse our thinking about politics and power by conflating kinds of agency that have been, and in any cases, ought to be, separated into relations of complementarity, at the very least. The mistake of those who follow only the First Foucault is to believe that power is to be constructed hegemonically – as a unified and monopolized field in which only one sort of agency dominates exclusively, while other sorts of agency are reduced to mere shadows of hegemonic, rather than as agencies with their own significant differences.

Here, David Chidester provides an illustrative example of this subsumption of everything

under the rubric of power. Referring to famous anthropologist, Louis Leakey, Chidester notes how Leakey changed his categorization of the Mau Mau from being a “political” group to a “religious” one. Interestingly, this took place while he was also counseling the colonial government in Kenya to exert its “real world” power and confine thousands of Kikuyus during the Mau Mau rebellion. For Chidester, this shift in classification of aspects of a culture – this exertion of classificatory agency – seems little more than a shadow of hardcore political power. Thus, Chidester says,

In the midst of a war zone..., Louis Leakey tried to reinforce a colonial conceptual closure around the Mau Mau movement by designating it as a religion. This conceptual containment coincided with the literal containment of tens of thousands of Kikuyu in prisons and “rehabilitation” camps. As in southern Africa, a theory that explained a religion as based on fear could easily become part of a colonial calculus of terror. (Chidester 1996, 256) (my emphases)

While I have not the slightest intention of defending Leakey or the colonial Kenyan administration, we might try to penetrate behind Chidester’s figures of speech in order to try to understand what really happened here. Chidester’s conclusion seems to me both tortured and unpersuasive. If Chidester is saying anything, it is that Leakey’s reclassification – his “conceptual closure” – played a role in causing the “real world” – “literal containment” – of Kikuyus. He cannot simply be making the charming point that the two kinds of ‘closure’ and ‘containment’ make for a nice sort of literary resonance. As Chidester says, with my emphasis: “Leakey tried to reinforce a colonial conceptual closure around” flesh-and-blood people. But surely this is Chidester trying to get metaphorical talk to play the role of literal language? It runs together actually putting people ‘under arrest’ with thinking about them ‘under a certain rubric.’ To show how wrongheaded this is, let’s simply turn Chidester’s logic on himself. By the logic he employs to Leakey, would we not be warranted in saying that Chidester’s ‘indictment’ of Leakey’s reasoning was not different than an official, “real world” judicial indictment of Leakey? How would we be able to distinguish Chidester’s metaphorical ‘indictment’ of Leakey from some possible literal judicial one? After all, knowledge is power, and power is unitary! Chidester could have been a lot more precise had he said that the setting religion ‘apart’ logically reminded him of setting people ‘apart’ into prisons, or was metaphorically like it?

But to call these metaphors by their right names would present problems for Chidester. Different sorts of agency would have to be admitted and a strict form of Foucauldian orthodoxy about power as unified field could not stand. Nor would it satisfy Chidester’s ‘liberationist’ desire

to find labeling certain things ‘religion’ the occasion to expose our field’s sinfulness. Instead, Chidester makes the seemingly unwarranted claim that Leakey counseled the colonial government to ‘contain’ the Kikuyu, because he had classified parts of their culture in a certain way as religious. What evidence do we have from Leakey or any one else for that matter to elide his urging of physical ‘containment’ with his ‘containing’ of Kikuyu culture within the boundaries of the concept of religion in particular? And, even if conceptual containment could be shown to cause or condition physical ‘containment,’ any concept applied to the Kikuyu would presumably do so, not just ‘religion.’ Yes, like thousands of other white settlers in Mau Mau Kenya, there is every reason to believe Chidester in his saying that Leakey was eager to see perceived enemies safely secured. But, that desire of Leakey’s is just ‘politics,’ indeed the essence of politics; it is not ‘knowledge’ and has nothing to do with conceptualizing religion among the Kikuyu. Reviewers of Chidester’s work have picked up on the tone of guilt and the corresponding need for moral expiation that such an unpacking of Chidester’s Foucaultian thinking reveals. In her review of *Savage Systems*, Elizabeth Elbourne notes how the theme of guilt “is one of the central themes of *Savage Systems*” – so much so that she feels there is in Chidester’s approach “something of the feel of a Christian conversion narrative.” (Elbourne 1999: 507) Elbourne is not mistaken.

Given the problems arising out of the way First Foucault has shaped talk of politics and power in the humanities ‘liberationist’ discourse, we might try to take a step back and rethink how we should think about politics and power. I believe that to make progress about politics and religion, we need first of all to clear the ground of these misleading ways of talking about politics and power. I do so not at all because I doubt that the way we ‘talk’ about things makes no difference to the way we ‘walk.’ Nor do I deny that knowledge matters – even if to call it a kind of ‘power’ is to diminish the differences among different sorts of agency at work in the world. But, in my judgment, more effort might be expended on *consequential* agents of historical situations, not on moral or ideological posturing. To return to the rich source of examples that Chidester offers us of these errors, while I am with Chidester 100% in calling out the kind of language that actually aided and abetted the apartheid regime in South Africa, the method he adopts from First Foucault undermines these very efforts in doing so. Chidester’s determination to implicate the study of religion in it as well, his one-size-fits-all notions of power and politics – all these distract him from really identifying the wrong-doers. One reviewer queried Chidester precisely on his technique of blaming modern-day apartheid on the some vague collective entity he constructs, called “frontier comparative religion” – typically attributed to early modern travelers and minor officials: (Strenski 1998c, 71-2)

Can we go backward from texts to discover a reality of which agents at the time were

unconscious, or does that in turn rob historical actors of agency and place undue power in the hands of the scholar who ironically deplores precisely this situation? If guilt is collective and no individual actor can escape it, then in what sense can anyone be more guilty than another? But if this is acknowledged as problematic, how can a group collectively recognize the practices which have caused it to abuse another group in a multitude of ways? (Elbourne 1999, 507)

So, what happens in Chidester's book is utterly predictable: he chases down all sorts of remote figures and lays collective guilt upon a construction of his own inventive fashioning – “frontier comparative religion.” But in doing so, he lets perhaps the leading academic promoter of apartheid, and an agent at the heart of the regime's implementation of the policy virtually off the hook with a bear page and half of generalities. The notorious ‘expert’ on the religions of southern Africa, W. F. Eiselein, so directly involved in promoting apartheid gets what amounts to a jumped up footnote! (Chidester 1996, 252-3) The blame for such a misdirection of attention rests perhaps less with Chidester than with First Foucault, whom Chidester aims to emulate. (Strenski 1998a)

My purposes here are not mainly to skewer David Chidester's work, but to use it as “Exhibit” A in an interrogation of politics as it has come to be conceived and put into play with religion. It shows how ideological and moral fervor in the study of religion and politics, inspired by First Foucault, too much dominate what we do. It shows how we need to interrogate our construction of power as much as some on our field have relished interrogating ‘religion.’ I think that words like politics and power, as well as religion, need to be used in appropriate and interesting ways. That is why I am not so much concerned with the everyday mundane sense of “real world” politics. But, likewise, I have registered my difficulties with the broader and looser sense of politics and power that ironically has achieved the kind of hegemony in the university that it reviles in society at large. That hegemony needs to be interrogated and challenged as I have done thus far here. And, in a more positive move, I need to offer a way of thinking about politics – ‘thinking politics’ – that can take our thinking beyond First Foucault. George Orwell perhaps put it best in his classic essay, “Politics and the English Language,”

Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration.... (Orwell 1956, 355)

But what does this first step toward “regeneration” in thinking about ‘politics’ need to be? I believe our first step ought to be using words like ‘politics’ and ‘power’ in ‘edgy’ ways – in ways that mark distinctiveness, not mask it.

## 2. *On Being ‘Edgy’ about Politics and ‘Seeing Round the Edges’ of First Foucault*

Edginess means that the words we use in thinking about politics need to ‘cut some ice,’ as the skating metaphor tells us. It needs to have an ‘edge’ – a certain specificity and shape – for it to serve as an interesting implement of inquiry. Of course, having an ‘edge,’ having a specific shape, can create its own problems for an inquiry using this ‘edgy’ concept. So, thinking about things like politics involves placing a kind of bet – namely, that the value of a concept being ‘edgy’ outweighs that of its being looser or more capacious, as talking about politics and power as a single domain entails. Since ‘violence’ attracts such a lot of attention in current discussions of religion and politics, let me show how ‘violence’ can usefully be conceived in an ‘edgy’ way, and why I do so.

I think one of our more our more egregious ‘bad habits’ in talking about violence in discourse about religion and politics comes to us in the locution, “institutional violence.” I take exception to the use of this phrase, not because I think institutions cannot ‘violate’ human rights, such as the institution of Jim Crow laws, nor because I think institutions cannot act violently, such as a battalion of US Marines storming a beach, nor because ‘violence’ cannot be *institutionalized*, such as in our modern institution of warfare. I take exception to the phrase “institutional violence,” because I think it fosters one of those “bad habits” of which Orwell wrote. It is a stealthy way of insinuating that there are only – at most – quantitative differences between conflicts which involve physical means and those lacking it. Thus, there is only a quantitative – at most – difference between, say, being ‘blind-sided’ by an underhanded parliamentary maneuver in a faculty meeting and being ‘blind-sided’ on the gridiron, between a “high-tech lynching” before a Senate committee and a ‘low-tech’ lynching from a cottonwood tree, between a covenant that excludes me from owning a house in a given neighborhood and being physically dragged from my home, and so on.

To be sure, in either a ‘high-tech’ or ‘low-tech’ lynching, the actuality of injustice is equally real. That is not the point in arguing for recognizing a certain difference – an ‘edge.’ What I do claim is that the locution “institutional violence” is a rhetorical device. It broadens



the sense of the word ‘violence’ to cover a wide field. Its purpose may well then be silently to authorize and condone – without explicit argument – the use of physical violence to overturn “institutional violence.” There is really no qualitative difference between what is called “institutional violence” and physical violence. Therefore, it makes no difference as to how one opposes “institutional violence.” Taking matters to their logical conclusion, were we to think about violence such that there was no qualitative difference between “institutional violence” and physical violence, we would be assuming that the use of physical violence in conflicts, say, over what one might call cases of “institutional violence” would not qualitatively affect the register and kind of those conflicts. On this view, both “institutional violence” and physical violence are *violence*, and thus they are of the same kind. But, as a result, because a term like “institutional violence” collapses all things named ‘violence’ into one thing, the term ‘violence’ loses whatever logical edge it may have had over other kinds of conditions of injustice.

Now, I understand that this loss of logical ‘edge’ to the term ‘violence’ may well be more than sufficiently compensated for because “institutional violence” has an emotive ‘edge’ for those who wield it. I recognize the rhetorical force of a term like “institutional violence” for its utility in a struggle. But, aside from rhetoric, the use of ‘violence’ in “institutional violence” is, I would submit, really no different in meaning than ‘injustice.’ Using the term, ‘violence,’ adds a charge to discourse employing it, and thus aids the causes pursued in connection with it. If the term ‘violence,’ means anything distinctive – if it has an ‘edge’ – its root meaning from Latin “*violare*” tells us that this term already denotes physical force. Thus, when Martin Luther King, Jr or Gandhi warned against using ‘violence’ to remedy political and social injustice – what one might call cases of “institutional violence” – they were arguing against the use of physical force. When someone advocates the *violent* overthrow of the government they are advocating the physically forceful overthrow of a regime. The term “institutional violence” then builds on this primary meaning of violence by seeking to extend that meaning beyond the limits of the domain of literal violence to what one might call metaphorical or analogical violence. But the fact of such an extension should not be lost in the enthusiasm to embrace a potent metaphor capable of shaping how we think in the powered of politics and power. Let me say why I shall not use the term violence in the broad way embodied in such terms as “institutional violence.”

Such considerations about our use of language makes a difference to the extent that conflicts may change – often dramatically and qualitatively – when physical violence – violence proper – breaks out or is introduced. Even if both physical and metaphorical violence may weigh equally on the scales of *justice*, there seems a world of difference between metaphorical and physical ways of being violated. I say this in part out of the conviction that being an embodied

material being matters in certain perhaps irrevocable ways. Being 'blind-sided' by an underhanded parliamentary maneuver in a faculty meeting and being 'blind-sided' in a football game differ – even if I would probably prefer taking my knocks on the gridiron. Similarly, racial or gender discrimination may deprive me of life options, but – although it may be cold comfort – it does not necessarily irrevocably deprive me of my life. I suspect that this insight into the difference between violence and “institutional violence” lies at the heart of the thinking of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and, as we are witnessing today, the Dalai Lama. They not only knew – from a pragmatic point of view alone – that in ‘violent’ – physical – conflict their forces would be ‘out-gunned’ and disadvantaged. They also knew that once a conflict becomes violent proper – physically violent – it has a way of running amok into a kind of uncontrollable chaos that leads to endless uncontrollable recriminations, endless runaway attempts to even the score. It becomes our greatest human nightmare – a real ‘war of all against all.’ violence itself seems to add another factor of it sown to a conflict, beyond the substance of the conflict itself. Osama and Hillary might be in conflict about who would better answer that ‘red phone’ at 3AM in the White House. But, just imagine how the primary campaign would change register were Hillary actually to ‘kneecap’ Osama – precisely as Tonya Harding had attempted to ‘kneecap’ Nancy Kerrigan, or as indeed had many a combatant in the Irish troubles of the past successfully crippled their opponents!?! Gandhi and King surely knew about struggle, and knew how explosive ‘real’ violence was; the Dalai Lama must know the same today. It was not just their loving-kindness that made non-violence their tactic of choice; it was a profound insight into the qualitative difference between violence proper and other non-violent forms of struggle and resistance that guided them. If, then, one believes as I do, that it makes sense to distinguish between physical uses of power and force – ‘violence’ as such – and those uses of power which do not, and therefore, which are non-violent, then it makes sense to reject the locution, “institutional violence.”

Thus, while one does not want to be ungenerous, First Foucault nonetheless bears chief responsibility for this sort of loose way of thinking about violence. In effect, the virtues of his broad way of thinking about ‘power’ and ‘politics’ on their other side have made it too easy to think carelessly, and thus less productively, about power and politics, such as embodied in locutions like “institutional violence.” By, in effect, eliding the two, First Foucault has made it too easy for us to make the kinds of sweeping generalizations that may stir the blood, but also cloud our thinking – so much so that we now routinely talk of ‘power’ and ‘politics’ as if the terms are interchangeable. Orwell again chimes in with the telling analogy and analysis.

A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the

more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. (Orwell 1956, 355)

While the loose usage of terms like politics and power enabled by First Foucault has served a number of good ends, it has also confused our thinking about politics and power and thus, about religion and politics.

### 3. *Being Ironic about Politics*

So, if we want to press on and do more with religion and politics, I think we will need to ‘see round the edges’ of what First Foucault has done. We will need to hold back on the too loose talk of power and politics. Their tendencies to see politics and power everywhere and in precisely the same senses, finally makes for a kind of unproductive paranoia. Yes, the work of power and oppression can be subtle. But sometimes it is so subtle as to be virtually non-existent, or at least so subtle that attention to it detracts the really serious sorts of oppression afoot. So, instead of seeking out ever-new sites of the subtle disempowerment of social groups, I propose that we dig more deeply into what may be the historical roots of such conditions. I propose precisely the kind of “archeology of knowledge” that First Foucault himself has pioneered. I want to ‘dig into’ the very roots of the institution of politics itself that First Foucault and his kind leave untouched and unexamined. This means that we will need to unearth the long-buried social ontology of ‘power’ and ‘politics’ that secretly sets the terms of how we think about the human world. This will result in understanding not only how our thought about the world shapes how we act, but how our thought itself got shaped in the first place. If knowledge about current usages in our language is ‘power,’ so also ‘knowledge is power’ when it reaches to the deepest roots of the way we think about power and politics.

Now, I well recognize that we may now act as if all agency can be reduced to ‘power,’ just as many of us act as if “institutional violence” were no different than violence proper. So, in that sense, ‘power’ does swallow up all sorts of kinds of agency, just as violence too now is a unitary field which includes “institutional violence” as one of its variants. We do need to “be careful what we pretend to be,” as Kurt Vonnegut warned, because in fact “[w]e are what we pretend to be.” {Vonnegut, 1961 #3476} Nevertheless, things might be otherwise too. This ‘as if’ reality, this pretend reality has an ironic character. This is thus to say that simply because we happen to conceive the world in a certain way does not entail that the world actually is or will remain that

way, or even less that it needs to be conceived that way. Many are the struggles over how to see the world, and many the contingences that eventually shape the way we pretend to be – even if the walls erected by history will not necessarily come tumbling down by a blast from some feeble though tuneful trumpet. In Durkheim's time, for example, human nature was widely conceived along radical utilitarian, economic, and thus radically individualistic lines. Part of Durkheim's great achievement in creating sociology was to force a fundamental interrogation of human nature that required us to reconceive human personhood. Durkheim made us take into account the fundamental nature of the collective and social side of human being where before it had been, at best, seen as residual or derived from individual human psychology. What I propose is an analogous interrogation of the commonplace conception of ubiquitous and all-encompassing 'power,' elemental in the thought of First Foucault, in order to force a reconceptualization of the entire field in which it can be said to be situated.

In particular, I want to direct my attention to a sense of 'politics' that has an objective nature, that, although of an 'ironic' kind – an objectivity that results from social construction, imagination and depends in some sense upon social acceptance or belief in such an entity. This 'ironic' reality is the kind that we have with respect to the 'nation', for example. I say that nation or nation-state have an 'ironic' existence because while an entity like the 'nation' is not real in the way rocks and socks are real – because we might well have organized our lives such that the nation-state never existed – it is nonetheless 'real' in the sense of being the legitimating ontological ground upon which laws are enacted and enforced, wars are waged or military campaigns mounted, emotions stirred in the hearts of loyal citizens and so on. To be sure, the nation is an "imagined community," in Benedict Anderson's oft quoted phrase. But, human beings live and act in accord with the dictates of their imaginations. The nation is thus a 'real' thing as well, although that reality is ironic in the sense that things could (well) be otherwise, indeed, thanks to historical scholarship we know that they have been otherwise. So, also 'politics' or the 'political realm' are 'real' in what we might call an 'ironic' sense – as are, as well, 'religion', 'economy', 'art' and so on. Human affairs might wequally well have been conceived and organized such that no such things as 'art', 'religion', 'politics', 'the economy' and such could be said to exist.

It would be well to add that all the other pieces of the 'imagined' furniture of our human universe at this time in human history have equally plausible, but ironic, claims to be part of our social world. But since their existence is a constructed and hence, an ironic one, we should not imagine that they could be autonomous of each other in the way rocks and socks are. Whether religion is or is not autonomous – and to what degree – of each other depends upon how we think

about those ‘things’ – how we imagine them to be. Another way of putting this is to say that religion and politics differ from one another in the sense that we think about or imagine them differently. I both think that religion and politics are distinct enough to speak of them as relatively different. I also believe that part of the reason, at least, that I do so is because the present contingent historical development of the course of events in the West has made it reasonable to think this way. Religion and politics differ not only because of my personal imagination or way of thinking, but because collectively they have been precipitated out, as it were, by the collective course of the history of the West. I shall then seek to put these two pieces of that ironically objective furniture of our social world – religion and politics – into dynamic relationship, and to discover what happens when we do.

#### 4. *How ‘Power’ Gained Primacy*

Let em conclude by discussing how one might understand the historical conditions that produced a situation such as ours in which ‘power’ came to monopolize discourse over all other kinds of agency. Here, I have recourse to the work of structural anthropologist and Indologist, Louis Dumont. In the latter part of his life, after a career writing on classic works on caste, kinship and world renunciation in India, Dumont turned his attention to the application of the comparative perspectives characteristic of anthropology to an attempt to understand the historical and cultural origins of the modern Western ideology. This investigation had two internally related aspects: the first to understand the construction of the modern worldly individual, and second, to comprehend ideological foundations of the nation-state. (The relation between these two aspects is internal because the nation-state is by nature a collectivity of individuals, as evident in such defining documents as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen which coincided with the assertion of the existence of the nation. As Robespierre declared, the king “must die because the nation must live.” {Walzer, 1992 #501,134}) It is to Dumont’s conception of the nature of the nation-state and its historical origins – and thus to that entity which can be defined in terms of its monopoly over the use of force – violence – that I shall pay heed here. In reaching this understanding, I do not think that we can *ipso facto* undo this history. The nation-state will not be less the hegemon with respect to the use of violence that it is now simply because we understand how it came to have that position. But, understanding can permit us to demystify the present, and in so doing, resist its demands. In particular, Dumont helps us get purchase on the absolutist and transcendent claims of the state upon human beings.

Dumont believes that a major source of the modern, worldly individualist conception of

human nature is Latin Christianity. It is also to the history of Latin Christianity that Dumont believes that we ought to turn for related features of our worldly individualist ideology, such as the dominance of categories in our thought as such as those very temporal ones of economy or politics, and with the latter, power. Why, as well, in applying the same term, “power,” to both the temporal and spiritual realms do we think and speak as if they lay on the same level of reality – as two “forms” of the same thing? Why, in particular, do we routinely apply the same term, “power,” to both the temporal and spiritual realms as if, as well, spiritual “power” were but a pale form of the mightier temporal form of power? Why do we think and speak in this way, when theologically – at least for Christians – one also affirms a radical discontinuity between immanence and transcendence – and, moreover, a discontinuity that theologically should favor the transcendent over the immanent, the spiritual over the temporal?

Dumont’s answer to these questions is to resort to the historical processes that have made us who we are – at least in the West. It should be no surprise that Dumont focuses on the historical development of Western conceptions of political and social order having to do with the relation of the Roman Empire to the Western Church – to the relation between the premier representative of all that was temporal realm over against the principal porte-parole for the spiritual. Dumont believes that the struggles for supremacy between Empire and Church did nothing short of shaping our thinking about power such that we presume that “power” dominates the entire terrain of all manner of agency – about power as monopolizing the field of discourse about agency. We think about power as a unified field, argues Dumont, rather than as an arena of complementary difference, for example, because at some point the spiritual became temporal and the temporal became spiritual. At some point, what had been two distinct principals – the spiritual and the temporal – had ceased being so, but instead became two forms of the same thing.

Dumont argues that if we could understand how and why the differences between the Roman Empire and the Western Church were obliterated – we could better understand the way we and First Foucault, notably, think about power as the name for an all-pervasive and hegemonic feature of human life that itself obliterates differences between power and other forms of agency. For Dumont, the relation between the Roman Emperors and the Church corresponds to the distinction between two “entities or functions.” {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 46} The two “functions” or kinds of agency, if one will, can be separated out as defining the agonistic distinction between the so-called “spiritual” over against the “temporal”. {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 50} Traditionally these agencies have been expressed as well in the opposition of the “auctoritas” of the priest over against the “potestas” of the king. {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 46} At least, up

until about 500 CE, contestation afflicted relationships and the ideologies charting those relationships between Roman Emperor and the Church. To whom did supremacy belong between these institutional oppositions and the two different kinds of agencies represented by them. Citing the clashes between the Emperors and the Church over matters of religious doctrine, such as at Nicea, it, therefore, “was inevitable,” Dumont asserts, that “the heritage of Hellenistic sacral kingship would collide occasionally with the claim of the Church to remain the superior institution.” As evident at Nicea, Constantine showed himself keen to achieve political “compromise” in order to maintain imperial unity, in opposition to the Pope and Council who “were keen on defining the doctrine as the basis for orthodox unity, and resented the rulers’ intrusion in the preserve of ecclesiastical authority.” {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 45}

What then happened in about 500 CE, according to Dumont, was something of a resolution – at least of the level of ideology, if not of fact – of this uneasy relation between Emperor and Church. Pope Gelasius I (492-6 CE) promulgated the view that the two conflicted “entities or functions” – the priest’s “auctoritas” and the king’s “potestas” – exist in a relation of “hierarchical complementarity.” In Dumont’s words, this means that instead of “juxtaposition and cooperation,” instead of “mere ‘correlation’... or with mere submission of kings to priests” the two “agencies” were related in a far more intricate and subtle way: “The priest is subordinate to the king in mundane matters that regard the public order...” while the king is subordinate to the priest in spiritual matters.” {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 46} The potestas of the king requires the submission of priest and his auctoritas in temporal matters, while the auctoritas of the priest demands submission of the kings’ potestas in spiritual matters. For Dumont this same complementarity can be found in classic India’s relationship between brahmin and king. Brahmins may see themselves as “religiously or absolutely superior to the king, while materially subject to him.” {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 46f} Returning to Gelasius, Dumont concludes then that we must understand this pope “as saying that, if the Church is in the Empire with respect to worldly matters, the Empire is in the Church regarding things divine.” {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 48}

This delicate, and possibly unstable, ideological balancing act devised by Gelasius was not to survive for much more than two centuries – even as a piece of theory. For, by the late 8th century and thereafter, the two agencies would become ever more confused, with potestas in the end swallowing up auctoritas, with power reducing all other agency to itself. Here, I refer to the fateful embrace of the Frankish kings by the popes, an embrace which not only blessed the Carolingian line, but involved the popes for the first time as “supreme political” authorities. “With the claim to an inherent right to political power, a change is introduced in the relation of

the divine to the earthly: the divine now claims to rule the world through the Church, and the Church becomes inworldly in a sense it was not heretofore.”{Dumont, 1986 #3337, 50} “For Gelasius’ hierarchical dyarchy is substituted a monarchy of unprecedented type, a spiritual monarchy.” Instead of a sacral kingship, we get the “kingly priesthood” of the Roman Church, {Dumont, 1986 #3337, 50} albeit under the “paramountcy” of Charlemagne, who asserted his “duty not only to protect but to direct the Church.”{Dumont, 1986 #3337, 49} The political gains the upper hand, and henceforth the spiritual and temporal realms are unified at the expense of the spiritual. Both, notably, are referred to as “powers.” Dumont is one of those thinkers who thus believes that the worldly institution known as the “modern State” is a “bearer of absolute values...” – transcendent spiritual elements – and therefore, “is not in continuity with other political forms; it is a transformed Church.”{Dumont, 1986 #3337, 51} (my emphasis)

It is thus from this lofty position as a “transformed Church,” that the modern State holds sway universally. As a “transformed Church,” the modern State makes absolute demands for sacrifice, for absolute loyalty, for recognition of its transcendent claims to allegiance. It is a ‘power’ – indeed the power as well as font of all power, the hegemon monopolizing the use of force. As such, the modern State also lays claim in practice, at least, to the highest authority – *auctoritas* – in the human world, despite the occasional protestations of some religious folk. Here then is the uplifting secret of the anachronistic ‘speaking truth to power’, the edifying secret of those distinctly unfashionable movements of resistance to *potestas* by an *auctoritas* wielded by a Martin Luther King, Jr, a Gandhi, or a Dalai Lama. Here, on the other hand, is the less edifying secret of why we think about power in a way which plays into the hands of the “transformed Church” – why we think about injustice as mediated by physical force or violence, proper – why we reduce injustice to “institutional violence”; here, as well is why we think about all manner of agency as modes of the power proper to the hegemon of force, the “transformed Church.”

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