Gun Violence and Public Life

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Chapter 6

Beyond Alienation and Anomie
Gun Violence and Sociological Monstrosities

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On March 5, 2009, Charles Andrew "Andy" Williams entered Santana High School in Santee, California, and shot fifteen of his fellow students, killing two and wounding thirteen more. In a recent interview with Miles O'Brien (2013), Williams says that he was incapable of "comprehending the finality" of his actions, that he was suicidal, and that his "grand plan was suicide by cop." In other words, the destruction of others was a means toward another end, the desire for self-destruction that he was incapable of inflicting upon himself. The explanation for this event follows the standard (even ritualized) formulations for other mass shootings in America: mental illness, alienation, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse, decadent youth culture, and so on. Liberals tend to seek institutional and organizational factors to comprehend mass killings, while conservatives blame the dissolution of traditional values and the receding power of God in an increasingly secular world. The point of liberal-conservative convergence, however, the blind spot or null point in the American episteme, is the spirit of anarchy: civil deregulation on the part of liberals and economic deregulation on the part of conservatives. America is the land of anarchocapitalism ruled by a spirit of limitlessness. That Williams was incapable of "comprehending the finality" of his actions is telling: the United States is, preeminently, the land of the Infinite, from foreign policy and military adventures, to financial and speculative magic, to religious fanaticism and cultural hype (Worrell 2013). After each mass shooting the public, media, and politicians engage in the time-honored ritual reactions, demands for changes are issued, and, as always, nothing is done to prevent further death. Social-media meme battles are telling with respect to the placement of blame and illustrate our collective paralysis. After the Sandy Hook tragedy, however, a language of "sacrifice" began to emerge. Garry Wills says that Sandy Hook massacre was a "sacrifice we as a culture made, and continually make, to our demonic god."

We guarantee that crazed man after crazed man will have a flood of killing power readily supplied him. We have to make that offering, out of devotion to our Moloch, our god. The gun is our Moloch. We sacrifice children to him—daily, sometimes, as at Sandy Hook, by directly throwing them into the fire-bowl of bullets from our protected private killing machines, sometimes by blighting our children's lives by the death of a parent, a schoolmate, a teacher, a protector. Sometimes this is done by mass killings... sometimes by private offerings to the god.... Adoration of Moloch permeates the country, imposing a hushed silence as he works his will. One cannot question his rites, even as the blood is gushing through the idol's teeth. The White House spokesman invokes the silence of traditional religious ceremony. "It is not the time" to question Moloch. No time is right for showing disrespect for Moloch. (Wills, 2012)

Wills's interesting sociological and anthropological observation brings us back to the problem of the spirit of limitlessness. Are people (almost always male) with guns just lone, crazy killers in need of medication and friends or are they instrumental avatars of impersonal powers demanding obedience and tribute? Alienation and anomie are good concepts to start with in explaining rampage shooters, but we cannot rest content with an idea or two without losing sight of their synthetic capacities. How can we intellectually raise the problem of mass shootings to another scale of social reality (a "higher" perspective) whereby concepts like sacrifice, the impersonal, psyche, alienation, and so on, are preserved while also bringing them into a transformed synthetic unity whereby our resulting comprehension is deeper and further?

It is not surprising that media deploy critical words like "alienation" in uncritical ways to help explain things like mass shootings. Since the 1950s, "alienation" has been one of the standard tags used to define American life. Here, alienation
energy streams become disorganized and interact in a multitude of weird, polar combinations,11 undercurrents, and vortices, leaving individuals in a state of doubt, anxiety, ambivalence, conflict, and so on, alternating between mania and depression, where people are left to their own devices in determining their routes of action and modes of conduct, and imprisonment in a lifetime of dead-end labor. In this vein, Durkheim's Suicide posits not only a taxonomy of self-destructiveness but also discloses four elementary modalities of alienation relevant to the contemporary American situation.

Egoism (Selfism) = estrangement, separation, or detachment (the corresponding emotions are melancholy, indifference, and a repugnance toward the exterior world in the Stoic form and skeptical disillusionment in the Epicurean form); egoism may be active or passive, the latter representing a forced (voluntary or involuntary) separation of the member from a group; this passive form may develop in an active direction where the individual comes to desire and prefer separation from contaminating others.

Anomie (Deregulation) = splitting, being divided against oneself, or being doubled in self-opposition (the corresponding emotions are violent anger in its active regressive form, maniacal excitement in its active progressive form, disgust in its passive regressive form, and weariness in its passive progressive form).

Altruism (Otherness) = “possession” (the corresponding emotions are fanatical enthusiasm and sadness or despair sometimes mixed with hope). Obligatory altruism is essentially “negative” in that it seeks to avoid the stigma associated with avoiding sacrifice, whereas optional altruism is “positive” in that it seeks to gain a measure of prestige in, for example, seeking sacrifice; of course, the positive and the negative are merely two sides of the same metaphorical coin and, as such, aspects blend and combine in myriad ways. The acute form of altruism represents an ideal-typical purity where there is literally no longer a self—it is completely absorbed in the life of the Other.

Fatalism (Overregulation) = servitude or bondage (the corresponding emotions are futility, anger, and the spirit of revolt or resigned capitulation).12 The twin aspects of Fate (Mitra) are Necessity (thou must) and Right (thou should).13

Decisively, these four primary "spirits" combine in myriad composite forms to provide the underlying dynamic bases of any society—they are the four
horsesmen that drive the "positive hell" of social life. Well-regulated societies represent an objective synthesis of these contradictory currents (double polarities) and are characterized by a coherent reality where members are "inoculated" against the impulse toward self-annihilation and homicide. Diseased societies, by contrast, are characterized by a cacophony of contradictory commands issued by negative drivers—i.e., the "spirits" of egoism, anomie, alienation, and fatalism. Modern, capitalist societies, according to Durkheim, suffer from what he called the "disease of the infinite"—the fusion of egoism (the "infinity of desires") and anomie (the "infinity of decisions"). We will focus on anomie and then turn our attention to the modalities of alienation in order to explore veiled transits and convergences that fuse anomie with other toxic currents that constitute the "annual tribute" of mass killings.

The American bias is toward examination of the abstracted psyche (mass murderers are simply "crazy") but, as Durkheim notes, the psyche is itself an infinity and society cannot venture off into the infinite. The infinite cannot be grasped by critique. Moreover, if we want to comprehend the sociology of gun violence, we will be forever stymied by looking through the prephile of the psyche. Besides, that which is essential with respect to the psyche is precisely its social determinants. The psyche is infused with the social. The psyche is a condensate that "drips" out of the collective order. If society is "crazy" it will mass-manufacture "crazy" people. If violence is considered prestigious and sanctified, people will act violently in order to participate in the positive or negative prestige of violence and thereby approach sanctification. Few nations today have gone as far as the United States to glorify and sacralize war, violence, and mass destruction. We are, after all, a "gunfighter nation" (Slovik) and war is now a full-time, multidimensional occupation (Worrell 2011). It should come as no surprise, then, that the imperial spirit of limitlessness, mass death, and indiscriminate killings (witness drone attacks that kill off more than one hundred bystanders in order to "kill" one bad guy) should be reflected back into the internal core of its system in the form of mass killings of innocent civilians. Much of this is reflected in the life of Adam Lanza.

Labeling the Sandy Hook Elementary shooter, Adam Lanza, as mentally disturbed or disabled is not the end of analysis but only the beginning. When we examine the broad contours of Lanza's life (as seen, for example, on PBS's Frontline 2013), what stands out most dramatically is the problem of uncaring change from one school to another and alternating integration with isolation; just when the child would become somewhat integrated, his mother would move him to another school, enforcing his detachment from others. The only constant element of his life was his mother but she represented not stability (a point of contact with reality) but the guarantee of ceaseless change and instability. Whereas Andy Williams could not fathom the "finality" of his actions, Lanza, it seems, conceived all too well of the finality of his actions: this is the end. When "the disease of the infinite" manifests itself in its singular, exacerbated, enraged, and armed form, we have something like an Adam Lanza. If Lanza was "crazy" it was because the organization of his life was anomie.

It is unlikely that the United States will solve its gun-violence problem because (a) we are trapped at the insane level of debating whether it is guns killing people or people killing people; (b) the state is almost completely dominated by special interests which depends for their pleasure on the spine of anomie; and (c) we indulge in ego-centered, reductionist psychopathology. Only in the unlikely event that American pundits, critics, and analysts work themselves up to the sociological plane and discover that it is a diseased society that kills off its own members, that it commands them to die and destroy, will we begin to solve the problem by regenerating a new social system.

Adam Lanza and people like him obey and dole out commands that most of us never even hear. Is it because they are "crazy" that they "bear voices"? Virtually all of us are subjected to the same commands as mass shooters, but the social organization of our lives means that those commands are either disdained altogether or sublated into "positive" or socially approved injunctions. Lanza's mother wanted only the best education for her son but created an unendurable and unending nightmare (her plans for his transfer to another college was, apparently, the final straw). Other kids in the same situation would have used, for example, an electric guitar to "play" the world and put their misery behind them, but Lanza used a gun to accomplish the same thing: the end of mother, the end of schools, the end of everything and the embrace of nothing. Adam Lanza was an unwilling subject in the kingdom of anomie, who apparently reached his limit and struck back wildly, irrationally, and murderous.

If we examine extreme cases of destructiveness, of the self or other, we will find that they lie at the terminal point of a fluid continuum connecting them with normal, everyday conduct. For example, the extreme form of altruism (the acute form represented by the religious fanatic who engages in voluntary human sacrifice for the well-being of his or her imagined God) is related to the spirit of selfless generosity necessary for any society to function. When a Williams or a Lanza become unhinged and go on a rampage, our ritualized collective response serves to localize, personalize, and translate the event into
a mental-health problem. In a very real sense, our scripted and ritualized responses are elements in the cult of anomic violence that guarantees the recurrence of mass killings. Rituals make people, places, and things sacred (pure or impure, positively or negatively) and objects of a future cult; we should avoid transforming the "gun rampage" into a "pillar of fire" and permanent feature of American life. Wills is correct to frame these killings as a form of sacrifice: people, it seems, must die periodically if the spirit of anomic is to reign supreme. Lanza (we shall presume) wanted to put an end to his suffering at the hands of the people and impersonal forces that he imagined made his life miserable. However, in so doing, he ironically did his master's bidding. Lanza and killers like him, seen from the sociological point of view, are but personifications and instruments of abstract social forces. In short, anomic, in the form of Adam Lanza, killed twenty-seven people on December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Adam Lanza was not merely a killer but anomic's willing executioner. Nonetheless, there was something more there than anomic. Indeed, pinning everything on "anomic" would not offer much in the way of an original insight. Had Lanza merely shot his mother and then himself, we could probably rest at the concept of anomic to tell us what we want to know regarding the big picture; however, the sheer scope of the crime suggests something more, on the order of terror. Lanza's "gun rampage" that resulted in the senseless, mass slaughter of children suggests an alloy of elements. The possibilities are bewilderingly complex.

Where anomic reigns, one is sure to find its polar opposite, fatalism, playing a supporting and alternating role. Likewise, where there is egoism of one variety or another, one is sure to find altruism lacking about in some kind of transfigured (and perhaps "transcendental") form. There are myriad underground tunnels and vertices that create transits for ideas and currents to flow and coalesce into hybrids and sui generis composites. This, of course, applies to the register of modalities of alienation as well. Where one finds the "extravagance" of egoism and the unreal "splitting" and anger of anomic, one is in contact with the "possession" of altruism; likewise, where we find the "double" or "splitting" associated with anomic we are sure to find a measure of futility in the form of feelings of being trapped or life as a dead end. It was not simply anomic that made Adam Lanza come unhinged and go on a shooting rampage, he was also "possessed," in that some overpowering idea "mounted" him, converting him into an instrument ("the disease of the infinite") fused with an altruistic current). We often find this mind-set in the fanatic: For example, a suicide bomber (the ideal typical case of murder-suicide) is often portrayed as a fanatic, but "fanatic" alone does not quite tell us what we want to know about somebody like Adam Lanza. When we interrogate the "spiritual" fusion of anomic and altruism with an eye toward extreme violence resulting in the perpetrator's own death (like a school shooter or suicide bomber) we are seeing the "spirit" of piacularism at work (Worrell 2013).

Piacularism is a relatively obscure concept best explained at the end of Durkheim's work on primitive religions (1965 [1912], 392–417). At first glance, piacularism, which emphasizes collective ritual mourning in the face of tragedy, would throw us off the track of the lone rampage killer. Indeed, piacularism is most obviously a potential reaction on the part of victims of a shooting spree rather than the perpetrators. However, when we dig a little deeper we can construct a matrix of piacular forms: on the one hand, the piacular proper which represents collective rites of mourning and reaction that put the members of a society into contact with positive sacred energies. If, however, we turn to the negative and individuated form of the piacular, we find the criminal acts of the rampage killer bent on destroying as much of society as he can. Incidentally, between these two polar endpoints we find, for example, the terrorist in the form of a suicide bomber who acts "alone" but for the betterment of their Other, the suffering community, or oppressed of which he or she is a member. The piacularism of the rampage killer who strikes periodically in American life must be qualified and reconstructed to emphasize its specialized, individuated, and negative form, as opposed to the positive and collective form of the piacular rituals that will follow in the wake of the shooting spree. The seeming paradox that the piacular applies to both the good and blameless group of victims and to the evil perpetrator can be resolved when we recall that the lone maniac is not as "alone" as he appears at first sight.

We ask again: how can the lone gunman with no moral cause to kill and no social collaboration constitute a manifestation of the piacular, which is eminently social? A suicide bomber, for example, represents a single "instrument" of death but dies for some "cause" and for his or her community or God, its collective representation and transcendental third term. Can the same be said for the lone gunman who senselessly kills in the name of apparently nothing! How does nihilism (nothing-ism) pertain to the vital energies of life? If we turn back to suicide we find that what appears to be a lone act, uncoordinated from any central authority, is in reality a social fact not only statistically, but that the cohort of voluntary self-killers constitute, unconsciously, as an actual class of subjects each obeying commands to dispose of themselves. We already know in
advance more or less how many people are going to kill themselves every year and we can predict when the rate of self-destruction will rise and fall. "Life's vanquished form a long cohort of captives that society drags behind its chariot" (Halbwachs 1978 [1930], 297). Moreover, despite the spike in "spectacular" rampage killings in recent years, we can predict how many mass shootings and deaths resulting from these events will occur this year and next—indeed, since the early 1980s the incidents of mass shootings reveals no great change (Walker 2012). How "alone" is the suicide victim in his or her act? How "separated" from negative moral authority is the lone rampage killer?

In The Sunset Limited, playwright Cormac McCarthy makes a nice contribution to the sociology of suicide when his character "Black" wonders if it is not the case that all suicidal types are the "natural kin" of White, who represents a classic example of the Stoic. People who occupy certain coordinates within a social system will find themselves in communion with social monstrosities issuing commands to kill or die. Obviously, millions of Americans are in contact with those same imperatives every day but they disobey the commands, they choose to live and to not harm their fellow human beings. Unfortunately, a regular number of those individuals, from year to year, will heed the command to kill and die. While we know approximately how many will turn their weapons on society and how many victims will be killed, we do not know who in particular will be pulling the triggers until after the fact. These apparently alone killers, however, are members of a virtual community of like-minded individuals. It must be remembered that a disorganized and dysfunctional social system is no less energetic and forceful than a healthy society—every one of Durkheim's books, in fact, addresses at some place or another the frenzy of the unruly crowd or mob that rapidly degenerates into a "monstrosity" or terrifying beast. If we seek to eliminate the eruption of monsters like the rampage shooter, then we must focus on the monstrous social system in which they are produced and which they represent as irrational symptoms. The rampage killer is not a brain problem, a family-values problem, or a Jesus-deprivation problem, but rather a structural problem afflicting late-capitalist America. Societies do not simply die off from old age; they are killed off by active forces such as predatory finance, austerity, gross class inequality, warmongering, hatred in countless forms, egoism, hypermaterialism, and massive deregulation of the whole social order. The real question is not why does a person go on a random shooting spree but rather, given the condition of the current social order, why don't more people lash out destructively?

Attempts to mend the psyche without wholesale reconstruction of society is futility itself. In fact, it would appear to the native consciousness that fixing the individual would be infinitely easier than fixing the whole of society (and pharmaceutical corporations would emphatically agree), but trying to solve gun violence without an overhaul of the entire social system would be like fighting forest fires with garden hoses. The theoretical constellation that is "the picauc- lar" (in its individuated and negative form) enables us to move beyond any isolated and partial concept. The negative picauc draws together the mystical dream construct of the estranged egoist who erected a substitute fantasy world for itself—a futile attempt at self-duplication or Othering. The picauc also connects this mysticism with the "self-torture" of limitlessness (apatheia) and insatiability of desire. The picauc also connects these two aspects of unreality with the fanatical terror and destructiveness of the sociological "altruist" who desires the obliteration of the existent.

Notes

1. Paradoxically, religious conservatives "enjoy" civil anarchy because they imagine it brings them closer to the right times and the day of reckoning (Wolin 2008, 117), while upper-middle-class liberals enjoy the material benefits of speculative accumulation and low-wage service.

2. See also Rex Berry's editorial in the Tulsa World (2013).

3. In a very real sense, being a recognized and accepted member of society means that there is not only a commanding voice "above" us telling us what we should and should not do but also an alien presence alive within us somewhere—indeed, the voice "above" and the "thing" within share a connection. Sometimes, and at some points in our lives, we are blissfully unaware that some kind of foreign object resides at our core (we seem to vibrate sympathetically on the same frequency) while, under other conditions, we are made painfully aware of the radical otherness of a thing that has taken possession of us. Interestingly, it is often when we are unsuccessfully trying to do what we are supposed to do or when we resist external commands that the alien thing becomes a toxic bad conscience, guilt, shame, or anxiety. When we become aware of the alien "thing" at the center of our self we come face to face with the problem of alienation and the contradiction of being both an individual and a member of society—the dialectic of private existence and social functions.

4. This "surplus" is entirely in line with Marx's analysis of value as a "phantom objectivity," that is, a nonmaterial yet objectively real thing, or a form of collective consciousness (Warrll 2009) grounded in any number of "productive functions" including work and, especially for Durkheim, ritual.

5. Society, says Durkheim, "is full of mystery for the individual. We constantly have the impression of being surrounded with a host of things in the course of happenings whose nature escapes us. All sorts of forces move themselves about, encounter
one another, collide near us, almost brushing us in their passage; yet we go without seeing them until that time when some impressive culmination provides a glimpse of a hidden and mysterious event which has occurred under our noses, but of which we had no suspicion and which we begin to see only in terms of its results" (1961: 89). We see here the connection between Durkheim and the Lacanian-Zizekian notion of reality as a kind of "virtual reality" where fictions and fantasies work to support our existence in the world.

6. Like rock or mountain climbing, the individual needs three points of contact at all times in order to stand on his or her own two feet: family, the daily grind at school or work, and the weekend association. Anatomically, we are bipeds, but socially we must be minimally tripedal in order to "enjoy" life.

7. The American mentality finds individuality and intense collective life mutually exclusive but, as Durkheim notes, the words "individual" and "individualism," though similar in spelling, mean radically different things and are even opposed to one another in some respects (Durkheim 1973: 54-55). America is not the land of individuality but anti-social egoism. In a sense, "individual" means not divisible, whereas an "individual" is not only divided but multiplied (cf. Simmel 1971: 259).

8. "The Impossible Dream (The Quest)" composed for Men of La Mancha could very well be the unofficial theme song for the United States.

9. The stockpiling of the means of destruction applies to both the personal (tactical) and collective (strategic) levels. Since WWII, the United States has dumped nearly $10 trillion into the nuclear-armsments program alone (Zia 2013) and gun ownership in America has been declining since the mid-1970s, but the United States is nonetheless awash in as perhaps as many as 320 million firearms (Tavernier 2013).

10. Fischer says, "Today less than 20 percent of the American population have any British ancestors at all. But in a cultural sense most Americans...[are their product]...no matter who their own forebears may have been" (1989: 6). Those original folkways streams that greatly determine contemporary life to this day as transformed "survivals" are contradictory at best and outright pathological in many ways. Reading Fischer's work through Durkheimian optics is highly revealing.

11. Superimpositions, alternations, and syntheses number among the possibilities.

12. As Simmel indicates, resignation should not be thought of as merely a passive form of surrender but can be an active form of proving strength in the face of defeat as well as a maneuver enabling a transit from the realm of fate toward the retention of the nobility of the ego (1955: 113-114).

13. For more on fate, see Harrison (1960) and E. M. Corcoran (2004 [1912]).

14. Moral life, says Durkheim, is the contradictory synthesis of polar oppositions (1961: 124-125). Dialectically, we see that, for example, egoism and altruism are simultaneously consequences of disorganization, "raw materials" of social organization (they are "reconciled" in social reality); and autonomous forces ("informing causes") issuing commands and expecting obedience/re cognition.

15. Durkheim's "idealism" (like Marx, he was what we would call a constructionist or, clumsily, a materialist-idealist) breaks with Hegel and Feuerbach in that, for Durkheim, external determination is self-determination. See Durkheim's analysis of Kantian "autonomy" (1961: 62).

16. Note the recent deaths of "personified guns" (ex-US NAVY SEAL Chris Kyle and "gun guru" Keith Raniere). Kyle was famous for being the "greatest" sniper in history with more "confirmed kills" than anyone previously, while Raniere hosted a YouTube channel devoted to firearms to which nearly 3.5 million viewers subscribed. These were not merely "guns with guns" but were collective representations or beacons of the American gun culture. They were "the gun" itself in human form.

17. Even as firearm ownership in the United States condenses into fewer hands, popular culture is still undeniably saturated by gun violence and conflict resolution at the end of a barrel.

18. Change is only a problem within a social system that lacks a moral consistency and effective regulation (Durkheim 1961: 62).

19. It is also very interesting that these big spectacle rampages occur almost exclusively on school campuses. It is as if among "knaves" where to strike to reach the heart of social discipline and moral order. The "conservative" war on education and the rampaging gun maniacs are both, in their own ways, servants of anomic. The present era of "magical capitalism" aims to melt society down into pure anarchy and attacking the school, monetarily or with bullets, represent an unconsciously coordinated war on moral order and stability.

20. This is one of Durkheim's most important insights: "suicides do not form, as might be thought, a wholly distinct group, an isolated class of monstrous phenomena, unrelated to other forms of conduct, but rather are related to them by a continuous series of intermediate cases. They are merely the exaggerated form of common practices" (1951 [1897]: 45).

21. Focusing only on the most "spectacular" forms of mass shootings of the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Sandy Hook type, we find a definite increase in the rate of "gun rampages" in the United States since the early 1980s (Follman 2013).

22. When a society is well regulated and ordered, then our conduct is regular and orderly. There would be, then, "scarcely a moment in the day when we are not acting as instruments of the social order" (1961: 132). However, when a society finds itself in disarray (a "negative heaven" as opposed to the "positive hell" of normal society), we become instruments not of the social order but of the unregulated and unmediated "sociological monstrosities" that result from and further drive disorder. The native consciousness and popular conceptions of devils and demons is but a distortion and mystification of objectively real forces animating any social order.

23. A Google search of "Adam Lanza" and "anomie" yields nearly 16,000 results.

The convergence of anomie and fatalism can be termed archaism. We see the spirit of archaism in the likes of Dominionism, a kind of political-theological modern primitivism blended with infantilism. The conmingling of rebelliousness and bureaucracy, indicative of authoritarian political regimes, is also highly interesting (1961, 130).

25. See, for example, Durkheim’s discussion of nineteenth-century Jews in France and the Stoics (1951 [1897]). Though unnamed, Durkheim’s reference to the Stoic ideal type is a reference specifically to the sage. The Stoic-Altruist transit can be thought of as a form of mysticism that projects a great being to function as a model for the virtuous life—also setting up the very real problem of futility (and fatalism) at never attaining sage-like virtue (Sellars 2006, 41).

26. The experience of being “beside oneself” is the ideal-typical expression of this “splitting” and capitalism, the very heart and soul of American society (Zižek calls capital the Thing par excellence of modernity), which revels in its capacity to produce doubles and that “magical” ability to be, like money, in two places at the same time. A fundamental experience of modern life is feeling torn or divided, and being presented with simultaneously too many courses of action and too few.

27. From the Latin fanaticus, “inspired by a god.”

28. Incidentally, a Google search for “Adam Lanza” and “piacularism” yields zero results.

29. When we think of the distinction between religion and magic, we note that both the priest and the magician (representing the poles of the alter and the ego, the positive and the negative) participate in the same moral energy conceived of in its twin essence. Mana, as you will recall, is ambivalent, double, manifesting in totems and taboos.