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FACING TOWARDS THE PAST: THE IDEAS OF WALTER BENJAMIN AND ANDEAN INDIAN COSMOLOGICAL CONCEPTIONS

Tim Cloudsley

The purpose of this article is to contrast and compare the view of historical time found in Walter Benjamin's Marxist "eschatological" worldview, as expressed throughout his work but most particularly in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Ill. 255-66), with that of Andean Indian mythological/cosmological conceptions. For all the very obvious differences - indeed, in some respects, oppositions - between them, both Benjamin's and Andean conceptions of historical time represent rejections of the dominant Western view of historical time as a linear progress from the past, moving through the present, and facing forward into the future. In this brief comparison we will not be able to consider the reasons underlying the similarities in any depth, though it should be clear that both reject Western Civilisation's prevailing conception of time as a progress from past to future, in favour of a millennial, redemptive, or revolutionary schema which sees historical time as an alienated and alienating force imposing and re-imposing tragic human oppression. For Benjamin, alienated (that is, external and oppressive) time is the economic, technical, or national progress understood as "history" for advanced capitalist society; in the Andean case, it is the "complacent" eschatological time of colonial Spain and its counterpart in modern orthodoxies - religious, economic, or national-political. For both, the dialectical opposite of alienated time, grasped in a structure of hope, uncertainty, ambiguity and tragedy, is a vision of redemption through a rupture in alienated time, which would unite "earthly", concrete historical time with sacred or Messianic time, in Utopia.

Michael Lowy (1985: 42) has characterised Walter Benjamin's thought as "a Romantic version of Jewish Messianism and a Romantic version of revolutionary (libertarian) utopia". Like many German and Central European thinkers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Benjamin perceived in the present a "forceful, brutal and rapid process of industrialization" (Lowy 1985: 42). "Against the 'formless' idea of progress he celebrates the critical power of utopian images, such as those of the French Revolution and of the Messianic Kingdom" (Lowy 1985: 43). Revolution must interrupt the historical process, burst through the fragmentation and chaos of the historical continuum, and integrate from the material piled up in "ruins upon ruins" (Ill. 257) the form of beautiful existence, an harmonious Utopia (Wolin 1982: 49).

Benjamin's view of alienated time is contained in a crucial image from the "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Ill. 259-60):

"A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage

upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."(1)

Benjamin contrasts this, not only with the dominant Western view of historical progress, which "was only able to see the progress of natural science in the development of technology, but failed to recognize the concomitant retrogression of society (Lowy 1985: 53; quoted from Benjamin's Fuchs essay, 1937), but also with the contemporary Marxist and Socialist view, dangerously enslaved to the myth that capitalist development held within it an irresistible tendency toward Socialism - that history held within it an inevitable logic of eventual human emancipation. For Benjamin, revolutionary emancipation is not "progress", but "a tiger's leap in the past" (Ill. 263). As Lowy puts it (1985: 53): "To the Lost Paradise corresponds the pre-historic classless communist society, egalitarian and non-authoritarian, living in edenic harmony with nature; to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, or to the Tempest blowing men away from Paradise, towards Hell, corresponds ´progress´, industrial civilization, capitalist-commodity society, the modern catastrophe and its pile of wreckage; to the Coming of the Messiah, the proletarian-revolutionary interruption of history; and to the Messianic Age, the re-establishment of Paradise with its edenic adamite language, corresponds the new libertarian-communist classless society and its universal language."

Benjamin's idea of redemption is a rupture in the "homogeneous, empty time" of historical "progress", which he identifies with external repetition or myth. As Richard Wolin expresses it (1982: 51): "Man stands under the domination of mythical fate when his powers of remembrance fail him: that is, he is condemned to repeat." The mythic realm is one of human alienation, falsity, fetishised consciousness. Myth represents for Benjamin all conditions of human existence in which society has not been free and consciously self-determining; in which society has not been transparent to its own consciousness and thus susceptible to being shaped or improved according to collective human intention. (Such has been the case in all periods of human history hitherto, but for those moments when groups or individuals have turned out from the shadows in the cave, and seen the daylight.) Existence dominated by myth refers to all contexts in which the destiny of society and the individual self has been shaped by forces beyond societal comprehension and outside of collective control. Myths concern what E.H. Curtius (1979: 8) describes as "the undefined consciousness of an 'operative presence' (the numen of the Romans)": spirits, gods, personages or forces (in differing forms of society) that have been created in the human imagination but then take on autonomous powers over that same imagination. They coincide with material conditions of society in which the products of human endeavour - the surplus from production and the forms of economic organisation, the forms of state, law and social institution - are experienced as untranscendable, as coercing society to conform to their dictates: "As long as there is still one beggar, there still exists myth." (PW K 6, Lt; Buck-Morss 1983: 222). Where things and institutions represent alienations of human labour, myths represent alienations of human consciousness: as fetishised material and ideational powers they dominate and suppress humanity, retain it in an inert, unfulfilled, mythic condition of repetition, fragmentation, and unredeemed time.

Myth, whether it be the "poetic" transformation of collective experience as if by dream, as in "primitive" societies, which is believed to be true in the literal, external sense — not emanating from the historically varying human imagination, but pre—given and always true; whether it be the external, timeless legends, sacred stories, fables of heroes or gods in complex pre-modern civilisations; or whether it be the stereotypes, fetishised images, moods, gestures and actions in the realm of modern commercialised culture, or the stereotypes of modern political discourse with its repeated, insubstantial, unquestioned "sacred cows" hiding under the myth of irresistible progress: in all these forms the mythic realm denotes the alienation of human activity, thought, and imagination into autonomous, reified powers. Their sources in creative human, subjectivity are cut; they turn back on it to fragment, dominate, and subject it to repetition and non-becoming. Redemption is liberation from myth, an apocalyptic rupture from alienated repetition into "sacred time": the human freedom of creative, collective and individual self-becoming. In this, Benjamin takes over the structure of Judaeo-Christian eschatology, but also transforms it. For the latter, like all eschatologies stemming from archaic societies, in Mircea Eliade's words, makes "every effort to disregard ... concrete, historical time" in favour of a "nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the ‘Great Time"‘ (1965: ix). According to Eliade, this rejection of profane, continuous time is part of an adherence to "archetypes and repetition" which grant "a certain metaphysical 'valorization' of human existence". But for Benjamin as we see, it is precisely in the rupture from archetypal repetition that valorisation of human existence is possible. Hence, Eliade is correct in saying that "this valorization is emphatically not that which certain post—Hegelian philosophical currents - notably Marxism, historicism and existentialism - have sought to give to it since the discovery of ‘historical man,‘ of the man who is insofar as he makes himself, within history." This transformation of eschatologr establishes a fundamental difference between Benjamin and Andean notions, shortly to be considered.

Benjamin's whole thesis is an ironic inversion of Eliade's in is The Myth of the Eternal Return. For Benjamin, it is modern society that is mythic and repetitive par excellence. Eliade's notion of a "terror of history" in archaic societies - the negation of concrete history in favour of mythic repetition and cyclicity — takes on a different meaning in Benjamin, for whom modern linear, progressive time - concrete and empirical - is "mythic" in another sense. For under this apparently developmental time, lies domination, the "always the same". The repetition in this modern "mythic" time is explored by Benjamin through consideration of successive generations‘ confrontation with new commodities, in such ways as ensure alienating ruptures between generations, undermining consciousness of historical continuity. Collective memory traces in the popular cultures of primitive, pre-modern, and modern societies are not consciously maintained as in museums or as collectors‘ items. A bow and arrow is no longer made if primitive people no longer need to hunt; ceramic pots are no longer made if they can easily be replaced by metal ones. Such articles may well be perceived as "beautiful", but their production will not be continued if they are no longer functional or necessary. Similarly, the making of charms associated with rituals, or sacred dances, will disappear if they no longer seem "necessary". Commodification in production quickly sweeps away "traditional" materials, furniture, items for use, if new circumstances such as the movement from countryside to towns, or from city centres to "new towns", offer commodities that fulfil functions as well, or better, and cheaply. Subsequently, new waves of commodities make earlier ones out of date, and suppress the dream-symbolic quality

they had for former generations. In each generation children, "unaware" of history, confront commodities that are "new" in their childhood and project on to them dream-images. Children of the next generation project the same "archaic" impulses on to different "new" commodities. What to them are naively symbolic, for their parents are simply commodities; what for their parents remain imbued with symbolic meaning, are to them mere fashions from the past: "For us locomotives already have the character of symbols because we found them there in our childhood. For our children, however, [this is true of] the automobile, from which we ourselves gain only the new, elegant, modern, dashing side." (PW K 1 a, 3; Buck-Morss 1983: 218)

Commodities partake of the mythic in two senses: firstly as fetishes in their own right, secondly in their incessant transformation, whereby they uphold the myth of change within an unchanging system (Buck-Morss 1983: 221). Modern capitalism has brought into being a new kind of mythic power. In pre-modern eras fashions did not change so abruptly between generations, advances were "covered over by the tradition of church and family," but now the inexorable confrontation of the most recent past with the present is something new. "The worlds of memory replace themselves more quickly, the mythic in them surfaces more quickly and faster against them." (PW N 2 a, 2; Buck-Morss 1983: 222)

Benjamin pictures the residues of past fashions and out-of-date commodities as wish symbols of the past turned into the rubble of history.They pile up, metaphorically, at the feet of the angel of history, as do rituals, festivals, and art-works when they are cut from their uses, from the meanings they held when embedded organically within the social relations of their production: to become spectacles, tourist distractions, or art-works as pure commodities. Redemption is the refinding of meanings from the "ruins" of human cultures, the penetration and awakening of the dream-images suffused into commodities: not as atomistic individuals in a Hobbesian ensemble, but as an awakened collective, a free society. The awakening of fetishised dream-images, alienated from the dreamers and dominating them, is "dissolving mythology into the space of history. This clearly can happen only through awakening a not-yet-conscious knowledge of the past." (PW N 1, 9; Buck-Morss 1983: 216) To awaken from a collective dream is to reconstruct the past in the light of the present, in order to break from it. Conscious reconstruction of the past destroys its power over the present, like the healing power of memory in psychoanalysis.

The phantasmagoria of commodities in capitalist mass culture gives the illusion of being the realisation of humanity's wishes, rather than merely their reified, symbolic expression. But there is a positive side to the fetish: a utopian impulse, a desire for happiness that represents an unconscious protest against present social reality. It is the illusion, repetition, and loss of real history that must be shed as humanity regainsits capacity for concrete self-realisation and conscious world transformation.

Redemption is for Benjamin not the goal or telos of history, but an end, or leap. The future is unknown, and will remain outside of human control unless homogeneous, always-the-same time is ruptured by Messianic time, to break into unalienated existence. Facing backwards towards paradise, Benjamin's historical materialist, like the angel of history itself, sees intimations of transcendence in the past; in the now-times (Jetztzeiten) of art which are "shot through with chips of Messianic time". He must "brush history against the grain" (El. 259), search against the flow of historical progress for the moments of "Messianic cessation of happening" (Ill. 265), the "rare

instances, of monads, or now-time, into which images of reconciled life are compressed" (Wolin 1982: S8). In past art-works, in "the utopia which leaves its traces in thousands of configurations of life" (PW 1239; Buck-Morse 1983: 232), in childhood memories where there is "something of lost happiness which can never be found again, but also something of active present-day life, of its small gaieties" (Ill. 118; Buck-Morss 1983: 222), and in historical moments where an effort has been made to reach the millennium, whether in monastic communities or the French Revolution: for all such now-times that are incessantly threatened with oblivion a metaphorical redeeeming of the dead must be performed. In this Benjamin is close to the Andean Indian, who in sacred moments of dance, in fiestas, in the worship of shrines and holy images, connects both with the miraculous and with his ancestors. Andean myths and ritual dances, orientated to invoking the Indians‘ mythic origins in Lake Titicaca, or their creation by Viracocha (Sherbondy 1983: 4-5, 8), or their descent from Inkarrí (Arguedas 1981), can be likened to Benjamin facing the past charged with now-times that must be "blasted out of the continuum of history" (Ill. 263).

Andean historical consciousness puts the Indian facing towards the past and moving backwards into the future. Douglas Gifford has concluded from an analysis of tense systems and time metaphors in Aymara and Quechua as follows:

“The tense system is divided into that which is unseen and that which is seen: future time and "other" time, which includes both past and present. Among the Quechua time is seen as a river, in which one may stand facing downstream. What is in front, the water that has passed by, is the past. That water approaching from behind is the unseen future.(2)

In a quotation Gifford takes from Hans Wolff (Gifford 1986: 7; Wolff 1974: 88), the idea that Andean conceptions are close to those of Benjamin is re-affirmed (when consideration is made of Judaic influence on Benjamin):

“The Israelite sees former times as the reality before him, whereas we think that we have them behind us, as the past. ... The future, on the other hand, does not for the Israelite lie before him, but "at his back"... According to this viewpoint man proceeds through time like a rower who moves into the future backwards: he reaches his goal by taking his bearings from what is visibly in front of him: it is in this revealed history that for him the Lord of the future is attested.”(3)

In both Andean and Benjamin's conceptions, we have a view of time in which the unknown, as yet unmanifested, future is behind. The stream of time is a burgeoning from the future through a rupture in the present, into the manifest past. The present is Benjamin's now-time, which like Heidegger's "moment of vision" (Augenblick) is pregiant with "the ecstatic character of primordial temporality" (Mays 1975: 101). Time is not a linear advance from the past through the present into the future as it is presumed to be for Western man facing forwards, according to which view "time is ordinarily understood in the form of a pure sequence of nows" (Mays 1975: 101). Though, for Benjamin the "force" behind time seems to be the "storm blowing from Paradise", as for Andean man the experience of duration streams round from behind, through now-time. The Angelus Novus, like the Quechua Indian in a canoe, faces the manifest past, the stream of what has happened, from his present.

Sacred dances at fiestas in the southern Peruvian highlands are performed to secure divine protection, and miraculous intervention in the fortunes of the community (ayllu), represented by a

dance group (comparsa). Invoking past miracles, dances are conceived as inciting supernatural control over the unknown future. It is as if Benjamin's "chips of Messianic time" are blasted out of past moments, just as shrines and images of Christ and the Virgin are objects imbued with sacred time, from which emanate intimations of millennial reconciliation. The sacred moment of dance or worship is an intersection of past, present and future for the Indian who faces the certainty of the past, and behind whose back lies the uncertain future - both threatening and full of hope. Deborah Poole describes the meaning of the awka chileno dance from Lucre in Cusco Department in the following way:

“The comparsa's performance thus links three types of time: (a) that of the community's collective future, which is guaranteed as a result of the image's pleasure at "seeing" the dance, and by its obligation to reciprocate the favour offered it; (b) the individual's life cycle in which a status promotion is attained by performing the dance cargo and by thus publicly expressing devotional commitment to the image; and (c) the sacred time of the feast itself, a time during which the annual, or calendric, cycle of activities is linked both to a sacred past (e.g. a mythic origin which legitimates and sanctifies a particular image's miraculous powers) and an unknown future, controlled by the image's powers of miraculous intervention in the events of daily life.

The Andean conceptualisation of the miracles through which dance is repaid itself depends on this intersection of otherwise separate temporalities during a set calendric feast. In stories told of miracles, the past is invoked to prove the image's capability of performing miracles in return for specific devotional acts. These acts, in turn, keep alive the past or proven abilities of the image by inciting the occurrence of miracles today and, through them, an intervention by the image into the future. As composite products of history, human practice and future prediction, "miracles", then, serve the function in Quechua temporality of - to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin - "blasting open the past" by making it less remote, by recreating it as a lived reality and as a product of human practice (dance, devotion), and finally by assigning to it a concrete determinacy in the present-day lives of human beings.(4)

Andean religion today is a thorough syncretism of traditional practices and ideas, stretching back to pre-Conquest times, and Roman Catholicism. A Gramscian process of contestation, negotiation and compromise has been, and is, at work over the forms and meanings of religious activities. Nowhere is this more clear than in the orientation to the dead, a spiritual site for the Indians' struggle over self-identity and for legitimation in the remote past of their ancestors. Ever since the Conquest missionary efforts have been directed against Andean Indians' belief in a sacred or magical power invested in their ancestors, which is able to exert influence over the present and future (see Harris 1982).

"El Primer Nueva Corénica y Buen Gobierno of Guamán Poma de Ayala constitutes a basic source, perhaps the most useful one, for understanding the Andean world of the sixteenth century”, writes Marcín Mróz (1984:67). As with other chroniclers in the first century after the Spanish Conquest, the ideas of Guamán are a complex fusion of sixteenth century European eschatology and traditional Andean mythology. Written eighty years after the Conquest, Guaman's book is an elaborate exploration of a new phenomenon: the consciousness of a Peruvian Man. He is neither pre-Columbian nor Spanish. A new identity is taking shape: that of the "mestizoised" Indian. In order to address King Philip of Spain, to beseech his intervention in the unjust rule within his

colony, Guamán tries to explain and justify the Conquest, and at the same time vindicate pre-Hispanic Andean civilization. In a richly contradictory thesis, he seeks to condemn the contemporary Colonial rule in the name of Christian redemption, the era of which the divinely ordained Conquest is supposed to have initiated. In so doing, the European ideas he uses "ended up being no longer European under the strain of the new reality they wanted to apprehend", as Dario Fernandez-Morera puts it (1985: 380). Drawing simultaneously on traditional Andean ideas, he constructs a mythological universe that is unique and distinct but also in a sense "archetypical" for the predicament of the post-Conquest Indian, then as now.

For Guamán there are five ages of Universal history: following on from Adam and Eve, from Noah and the Flood, from Abraham, from David and from the birth of Christ. There are also five ages of the Indian: Wari Wiracocha Runa, Wari Runa, Purun Runa, Auca Runa, Inca Runa. The fifth of these flows into the fifth Universal age of Christianity. The biblical concept of "ages" replaces or is welded on to the Andean notion of "cycles of the Sun" (Ossio 1977: 44). In order to sustain some consistency within the contradiction of his predicament, Guamán adopts the strategy of arguing that Inca rule was idolatrous (i.e. non-Christian), and that the pride of the last Incas had given rise to civil wars thus weakening the Empire and opening it up to conquest (Mróz 1984: 71) . But, at the same time, he seems to treat Inca rule as natural and in some sense legitimate. As a new "Catholic" Peruvian mestizo, he must accept the Conquest and hispanicisation, as they underpin the presence in Peru of what is for him true religion, and indeed his very identity (including his literacy); hence Inca rule is sometimes depicted as tyrannical and illegitimate: as it is in the many apologetic accounts by Spanish chroniclers (Duviols 1983: 106-7). Yet, as a noble Indian, and in his role as petitioner to the King of Spain for justice for the Indians, he also "needs" the pre-Columbian past. He redeems this past by arguing that the evolution of the Indians through the five ages up to the Conquest had been marked by a steady decline in moral virtue, increased warring, and failure to maintain divine injunctions. This is wedded to the claim that the Indians, with theexception of the Inca rulers, descended from Adam like the Spanish, and were taken to Peru by God after Noah's Flood. The Incas however were descended from the devil (Duviols 1983: 106), and had imposed idolatry on the Indians who had previously been Christian. Thus, the Indians, except for the Incas have intrinsic virtue; furthermore, historical evolution over the five ages was marked by increasing social, technical and agricultural complexity. The history of the Indians was simulteously marked by decline in moral rectitude and progress in social and technical sophistication: thus in places the Incas are praised for practising good and wise rule which is contrasted with the unjust and unwise rule of the Spanish. Now, Guamán argues, Spanish rule should be terminated (at least, in its present form), with Christianity restored in the Andean world.

Guamán´s structure of contradictory historical development has a similarity with Benjamin's Marxian view of history as a progressive deepening of alienation within increasing technical proficiency. For Benjamin, Capitalism sees the dreaming collective fall into ever deeper sleep. His historical philosophy is analogous to the “negative theology” of the Kabbalists, for whom history is a continual deepening of disaster: the Messianic vision of liberation is as intense as its opposite in reality. A dialectical transcendence, or Aufhebung, of reality is a revolutionary awakening. The era of catastrophe is a negative indication of the "birth pangs" of a Messianic age, which for Benjamin as a Marxist would redeem the possibilities of technological modernity. For Guamán, Spanish Colonial rule is the Andean world-upside-down, ruled by Lucifer-like soberbia (Adorno 1985: 454-

5). He calls out for pachacuti, the "turning-around-of-the-world" into harmony and justice that will restore the ancient order, dignity and identity of Andean Civilization. This will be the sixth age of Andean history: Pachacutiruna (0ssio 1977: 48).

Guamán draws on the traditional Andean concept of pachacuti, the apocalyptic destruction which is at the same time re-creation and regeneration, ending one cosmic cycle and initiating the next (Gifford 1986: 8 n. 11). Pachacuti, as divine retribution and purging, is similar to the Flood in biblical history. For Andean history it is the civil war between the Incas Atahualpa and Huascar which is the principal pachacuti: the destruction entailed by that conflict has not yet seen a re-creative side, hence Guamán implores: “Creator of the universe, where are you?" This is echoed in the entreaty: "Where are you, our lord, king Philip?". “Pachacuti, lacking the regenerative half of its cycle, is truncated and incomplete." (Adorno 1985: 458-9)

Pachacámac, the threatening god of the future, cuts the thread of time (eternity), in two, according to Andean myth. This cut means destruction and creation, death and life. The end of the past, the beginning of the present is the play of life, in a new moment, with death lying in the manifested sphere of the ancestors and the gods.(5) Pachacémac sets the boundary between past and present. Otherwise known as the Trembling Lord, he is both threatening and Messianic. The future is a void: it is a dark dead Christ in an indistinct afternoon. Below the Mother weeps for the continuously repeated disaster of her Son. On the reverse of this scene there is heavenly, feminine felicity (Rescaniere 1982: 68).

The ambivalence towards the future hiding behind man, in this mythology, is the ambivalence found in Guamán's oscillation between despair and hope. Like Benjamin's angel of history, who represents the force of hope in modern civilisation, the Andean Indian looks from the present onto the manifest past, in which - among the chaos and ruins - lie sacred images and moments. Their power must be garnered to allow a leap in the present, so that the uncertainty of the future can be settled in favour of "authentic progress" for Benjamin, or a "turning-around-of-the-world" for the Andean Indian.

Notes

1 Klee's painting is reproduced on the jacket of Wolin 1982, with the note: "The jacket illustration, 'Angelus Novus´ by Paul Klee, was purchased by Walter Benjamin in 1920 and was bequeathed to Benjamin's friend the late Gersham Scholem. The 'angel' of the painting figured prominently in Benjamin's work on several occasions."

2 Gifford notes that he is indebted for this information to Leslie Hoggarth, Centre for Latin American Linguistic Studies, University of St Andrews.

3 Seen in relation to Emily Lyle's recent ideas (1986) concerning deixis, space and time, the known, the positive is the past: it is the visible - above the ground and in front of the head.

4 I am indebted for this quotation to an unpublished manuscript (Poole 1985: 10-1) by Deborah A. Poole, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. We had both independently thought of a connection between Andean fiestas and Benjamin as we found when we met in Cusco.

5 This is my free translation and adaptation of Rescaniere 1982: 66.

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