

Exploring How Things Take Shape
Research Notes on Ethnography, Empirical Sensibility and the Baroque State.

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The Historical Baroque in Contemporary Peru - Illusion and Entrallment

The main square of Cusco was unusually busy and more unusual still the huge doors of the Cathedral were open, people pouring out from what must have been an important mass. Taking advantage of a rare opportunity to visit this building outside of the normal restrictions imposed by the tourist trade, I ducked in through a side entrance just as the main doors were slammed shut again. It was years since I'd been inside and I'd forgotten the sheer scale and intricacy of the space. The Cathedral over-awes as intended. Throughout the Continent these huge, ambitious spaces were of central importance in marking Spanish presence, in imposing Catholicism, in erasing the presence and influence of previous Gods and divine rulers, and paradoxically in offering people some kind of solace. This Cathedral was no exception. To build it the Spanish had destroyed an Inka palace/ceremonial site which nevertheless provided the foundations for the new building. They also brought stone from the fortress of Sacsayhuaman subjugating the very fabric of the Inka imperial capital in its public conversion to Catholicism. Construction had begun in 1560 but was not completed until 1664. The building itself presents the non-coherence of architectural style that is characteristic of many of these mega projects that took over a century to be finalised. In this case the Renaissance facade contrasts with the interior, finished over a century later, by then exemplifying the colonial Baroque with its intricate gold and silver altars, carved stone work and the world famous collection of paintings of what became known as the Cusco school.

It was a wet Friday evening and inside the Cathedral there were still quite a few people sitting in the pews, as if waiting for something. Before them, almost entirely blocking out the central altar piece stood the towering image of the black Christ - el Sr. de los Temblores (The Christ of Earthquakes). This Christ figure has huge significance in Cusco and he is much loved. In 1650 an earthquake destroyed much of the city and as the aftershocks continued, el Sr. de los Temblores was placed in the doorway of the Cathedral. He calmed the violent movement of the earth and from that time on assumed the status of protective deity in the City. Popular narratives tell that the Holy Roman Emperor Carlos V, had sent this figure to the colonies to help forge connections between the Church and indigenous peoples. This was to be a mestizo Christ, an image with whom the local population could identify. Subsequent analyses confirm that the figure was in fact made in the Americas, and that the dark skin tone was achieved by a painting technique specific to the Cusco region, but in general people prefer the account that tells of how a Christ was sent from Spain, and subsequently impregnated by the smoke of candles and of burnt incense, such that his body came to resemble theirs through intimate connection, carrying the mark of their devotion. Either way, the reactions to the 1650 earthquake demonstrate the accommodation that had been established between the Catholic God and the Earthly powers that were (and continue to be) of central importance in vernacular religiosity - and the figure of the mestizo carries the ambiguous force of that particular alliance. Disturbing to the ecclesiastical elites, for such figures clearly escaped doctrinal control, such potent sites of mistranslation also offered a convenient way of folding Andean populations into new regimes of order and control.

Back in the Cathedral we realised that the Christ figure was being prepared for the rituals of Holy Week. That Friday night the mass had marked his move out of the side-chapel where he resides for the rest of the year, to the main altar, the first step in the journey of the Easter week rituals. People were waiting because his clothes were about to be changed. It was almost awkward to watch - there was something so intimate and affectionate about the way they fussed around the image - carefully removing the shirt and waist-band, adjusting the flowers to get better access to the crucified body, standing now in only a white cotton inner garment. The new skirt was handed up to the man in charge, who carefully unfolded this amazing deep red velvet skirt, intricately embroidered in gold thread. It took time to get everything perfectly adjusted. We sat and looked on. Suddenly the lights went out - only the figure was illuminated, shining in the huge blackness of the Cathedral, the gold pulsating dramatically in the dark. The baroque effect - the crucified figure theatrically animated, now standing magnificent, the force of his presence amplified by the perfect orchestration of texture, light and colour.

It was the moment that people had been waiting for. After a while the lights came back on and people began to leave - but not without a chance to take something of this divine power with them. These theatrical ceremonies of care and animation are officiated by lay members of the congregation - a 'brotherhood' that has responsibilities for the maintenance of the many Christs, Virgins and Saints who populate the Churches of Latin America, exceeding the strict confines of Catholic doctrine in the way that they channel divine power to a human scale that becomes accessible and at the same time magical. As the robes are carried slowly back to the side chapel people stand in the way, halting the movement to touch the cloth, to pass it over the heads of young children, gathering in small family groups seeking divine grace and a transformation and/or protection.

Three days later we joined the tens of thousands of people who were making their way to the main square to receive the blessing of the Senor. We were coming for the grand finale but the figure had been out and about since earlier that afternoon. Ecclesiastical geographies determine the route of the procession as the Christ figure visits the other major Churches in the centre of this Colonial City, but it is the major civic organisations who take responsibility for his safe passage - government institutions and public services. It takes a dozen men to carry the image and the route is carefully demarcated in terms of who gets to carry and for how long. The firemen are his particular associates. Fire-engines are parked up alongside the Cathedral awaiting their part in the final act of this drama. People wait expectantly for the figure to arrive. Some have arrived several hours earlier in a bid to get a good view. Police cordons line the Cathedral steps. At last the procession arrives - the figure swaying gently as it is walked slowly forward, the bearers concealed by the crowd - what you see is the figure moving, illuminated by strings of lights, decorated with a mass of flowers and accompanied by music and incense. Once up in front of the Cathedral the fire service greets him - their sirens and flashing lights going full blast, mingling their sounds with the bells of the Cathedral. The figure bows to them, and to the crowd. The doors of the Cathedral open, and he slowly backs in.

I found it impossible to separate consideration of the baroque as empirical sensibility from colonial Catholicism, and in particular from the issues that the Spanish baroque faced and negotiated in the Americas. When we consider what a baroque explanation might look, sound or feel like - might we take as a model the look, sound and feel of these baroque Churches - their Saints, Christ figures and Virgins - their politics - and that ambiguous tension between subjugation and redemption that Andean people have channeled over the centuries into what has become a very particular Latin American Catholicism - a religion that is animated by its vernacular enactment, and which thereby escapes - in part - the

doctrines and institutional strictures of the established Church. The Inka rulers were divine beings and their Imperial project and control of Andean resources worked through idioms of inclusion - of hierarchically differentiated kinship, that extended to include animate matter as the source and the potential for human life. Land, water and stone in particular were incorporated as living beings. The attempts by the Spanish to impose their own particular understandings of a singular and somewhat abstract divinity into these spaces was only partially successful - to build the Cathedral from the stones of Inka palaces and fortresses was to include the divinities of conquered peoples in the political-religious structures of the victors in ways that were entirely commensurate with Inka practice - and while such forces were certainly subjugated - they were not thereby erased, and much less forgotten. But the Inka were also an imperial power, and hierarchical incorporation was a technique of subjugation, forcing people to live in a world of imposed commensuration. The Spanish mobilised a more explicitly exclusionary politics, externalising difference through the naming of categories of persons whose shared humanity was always in question. In such spaces the interest in *trompe l'oeil*, in cosmic illusion, in duplication, and anamorphic distortion were by no means innocent techniques. The magnificent Churches of Cusco are monuments to a colonial project that worked through the meticulous generation of minute differences, of uncertainty, and of destabilisation.

In her enchanting ethnography of Lima, Daniela Gandolfo has a chapter on the baroque which responds to Lima's colonial architecture and finds directions that help her consider the ways in which contemporary urban life still resonates with what Bolivar Echeverria has referred to as 'the baroque ethos' (Echeverria 1994, 1998). "For him [Echeverria] the baroque existed in the productive tension generated by its contradictory aesthetic and political tendencies: first it was prescriptive, formalist, and ceremonial, characteristics that stemmed from its *repressive* qualities; it was also false, ornamental, and theatrical, which stemmed from its *unproductive* qualities; and it was extravagant, artificial, and exaggerated, which stemmed from its *transgressive* qualities, themselves made possible by the first, repressive ones' (Gandolfo 2009:75). It is the combination of these qualities, the repressive, the unproductive and the transgressive that, for many both defines the specificity of Latin American modernity - and for some energises alternatives. "For Echeverria, the baroque ethos, which he counterposes to what he calls the 'realist' (protestant), the 'romantic', and the 'classic' (humanist) ethos, doesn't just affirm the contradictions of modernity like the realist does, or deny them like the romantic does, or resign itself to them like the classic does. Instead, it encourages us to see the contradictions of modern life, the repression or destruction of the 'qualitative' as a source of energy for the re-creation of a different and more radical dimension of it (Gandolfo 2009:75).

Against this space of radical potential the Latin American baroque remains an aesthetic that overpowered - displayed its stolen wealth, the capacity to commandeer the labour of local craftsmen, and to generate a sense of mystery and awe such that the Christian Gods could both display a terrifying supremacy and offer a space of solace for those who searched beyond themselves for ways to keep going. The simple point that I want to draw out here is the need to keep in mind both the unintended consequences and the intricate *design* of these baroque spaces. I think of Chandra Mukerji's work on the building of Versailles (Mukerji 1997) - and her interest in the hidden infrastructures that sustained the effects that this palace and its gardens were able to produce. She writes in particular about the hydraulic engineering, and the technical knowledges that were orchestrated to demonstrate the power of the Sun King. Her work sets out the show the ways in which state power is constituted in material spaces and affective relations that tend to be ignored

by those who focus primarily on social and legal structures. Her work also shows the skill and the politics that are mobilised to produce the compelling effects of baroque form.

Contemporary Modes of Social Ordering - Illusion and Boredom

My foray into Cusco Cathedral was not my intended starting point. In Peru I have been following contemporary processes of social ordering as part of an ethnographic study that I am carrying out with colleagues on the Regional state of Cusco. We have become very interested in the dynamics of public consultation that are instituted in and through neo-liberal commitments to decentralization, whereby local instances of the state - and ultimately individual citizens, are increasingly required to take responsibility for the worlds in which they find themselves. Our research project centres on the role of technical and legal expertise in these processes. In particular we are looking at the ambiguities inherent in regulatory practices, focusing on how state power emerges in the experimental workings of such ambiguous spaces, rather than through the imposition of what might otherwise be conceived of as hard and fast rules.

One of the procedural instruments that we are following relates to participatory budgeting. Since these particular procedures were introduced in 2003 local governments are required by law to consult with their constituencies over how to allocate resources for the coming year (Goldfrank 2006). The procedures begin at the level of local communities who send their representatives, with details of the projects and investments that their communities require to meetings at the level of the District Government. The District Government coordinates discussions in which the projects are evaluated and then prioritised. Projects that have wider significance are passed on to subsequent meetings held by the Provincial Government - who in turn pass certain projects with sufficient scope up to the Regional Government. This bottom up articulation of needs and elaboration of projects is framed by another set of requirements that come from Central Governments down to the local level. These frameworks are regulatory devices intended to shape how participatory budgeting can proceed - the kinds of projects that are eligible, the ways in which projects have to be formulated, and the procedures that have to be followed. The planning instruments involved in the process are multiple and their double directionality works in ways that maximise contention, frustrated expectation and political controversy - for while the system works to elicit requests it has little capacity to meet the needs and desires that it articulates. This is not because there is no room for manoeuvre - far from it. Despite the fact that the regulations seem overwhelming and horrendously constraining, local governments continue to produce and finance projects that have little to do with the criteria that central governments impose - they find ways round things ...

Ethnographic work on how this is achieved has plunged me and my colleagues into a space which appears to echo many of the characteristics of the baroque state that I am interested in exploring here. Let us take a short example of a series of meetings that were held to meet the legal requirements of participatory budgeting in a provincial capital not far from Cusco. The first of these meetings was well attended, for anybody looking for public funding for projects in the coming year had to attend - or at least ensure that their name appeared on the list of attendees. The programme largely consisted of presentations - all following a familiar format, packed with 'information' summarised on powerpoint slides presented by urban professionals who were intent on explaining in considerable detail the regulatory measures which structured the process in which they were about to engage. There were four substantive presentations made to this first meeting: one on the detail of the current development plan to which their new projects were required to relate to ensure

efficient strategic thinking; second a presentation on environmental risk, presented by a central government agency concerned to ensure that everybody understood how and where they would be allowed to build new structures or infrastructures; third a presentation by the NGO contracted by the Regional government to carry out a detailed study of territorial ordering - comprising largely maps and statistical information on settlements, existing infrastructures, socio-economic patterns, soil use, etc.; and finally a detailed account of the regulations of the participatory process. The whole thing was utterly stultifying until it came to the question and answer session - when those present took advantage of the presence of the Mayor (who they had in fact recently re-elected) to complain and challenge his decisions in the previous budgeting round, his failure to produce any accounts, and his apparent total lack of consideration for any of the frameworks and regulatory procedures that they had just spent several hours listening to. The Mayor side-stepped all difficult questions displaying remarkable skills of deflection - even managing to justify the unsafe location of a new sporting stadium through the invocation of the heroic potential of risk-taking!

The second meeting kicked off in much the same way despite the fact that many of those in the room were the same people who had attended the previous meeting. This time the first talk was on procedures, the methodologies they were going to follow. It was an attempt to frame the activity of prioritising projects as a technical process; a different NGO gave a talk about waste disposal; and finally the talk on risk was repeated. But then things changed and we broke into groups to get on with the business of prioritising projects. The groups were themed, and the work began by gathering together all the potential projects - these then had to be evaluated via a point system that in practice emerged as totally arbitrary - no evidence being required or even looked for in the business of deciding who the beneficiaries of a project might be, whether there was any co-finance, or whether the project took account of environmental risks, or of conservation ideas - the development plan wasn't even mentioned! By the end of that meeting there were literally hundreds of projects on the books, with no reliable criteria for evaluation.

A third meeting was called to take the process forward. This meeting comprised the technical committee, and included a mix of elected officials, unelected functionaries and various observers. The proceedings were open, and although the number of observers required the group to move into a larger venue it would not have been politic to dismiss those members of the public who had turned up. However, it was also made clear that the public already had representation on the committee and it was not intended that there should be interventions from the floor. Most of the other observers left at this point. The discussions were very confusing. There was no general agreement about how to proceed and the functionary in charge of proceedings seemed reluctant to reveal the budget that they were actually working to. When this did emerge it became clear that there really was very little money to spend - money had to be allocated to the development of new technical profiles for future projects; other money had to be allocated for projects already in process - this left very little to be split between the four main areas of concern. How to prioritise? Again the terms of such procedures had to be rehearsed again - the elements for which a project could score 'points' were repeated. Over two hours had gone by ... it was suggested that the areas meet separately and come up with their own list of priorities and that these would be discussed at a subsequent meeting. There was then a cancelled meeting in which a representative from a local community suggested to us that it was not by chance that we had not been informed - participation was being limited by other means. The fourth general meeting was no more productive. Some groups arrived with priorities - others did not - but what was interesting at this stage in proceedings was the fact that various 'new' projects had appeared on the tables - projects which we knew had

not previously been discussed in public and which certainly did not arise from the grass roots consultation process. Some of these scored highly and were soon adopted.

I could go on ... and perhaps should ... because these details are what matters here - the minute spelling out of regulations, terms of reference, antecedents, figures, facts, etc. are what these encounters produce - and what we as ethnographers seek to record and follow. But hopefully you get the point and I can move to a few key issues that I want to highlight here concerning the baroque as empirical sensibility.

An ethnographic focus on the details of the meetings that I have briefly referred to produces an overwhelming sense of complexity - which gets even more overwhelming when you sit down and try to analyse what is going on. What was going on? What were people doing in these elaborate performances that seemed to go nowhere? The virtue of thinking via the figure of 'baroque sensibility' is that you can acknowledge from the start that you will not necessarily find coherence, regularity or pattern. Coherence might not be relevant. And yet ... some people find ways to manage these spaces. Indeed some people understand the distinction between the details that appear to add up to a coherent system - and the spaces of non-coherence into which - and through which they can insert projects and draw down resources. That is to say that it is possible to participate entirely legally in these processes without following the rules at all, because the rules are themselves illusory. They produce a powerful image of democratic process which for most people adds up to a requirement that they participate, and the frustration that in the end that participation does not produce the desired results. The trick seems to be to not take the detail at face value - to not be taken in by it. The meetings call for evidence, for description, for detailed accounts of specific relations, for figures and statistics, for rankings and estimated costs. The detail creates a particular kind of democratic space that immobilises. But those who can resist and look obliquely - who understand perhaps the potential of anamorphic distortion can side-step the detail and see instead spaces, and gaps that they can use to their own advantage.

This example might allow us to think again about what a baroque explanation might look, sound or feel like - might these meetings serve to model the look, sound and feel of baroque sensibilities. The sensory effect contrasts strongly with the enthrallment provoked by the presence of the Sr. de los Temblores. These meetings seem to generate that particular physical experience of exhaustion and depletion that results from an overload of information - a bodily sensation that pervades the spaces of consultation and disorders the possibilities for rational discussion. David Bate explores the effects of baroque 'over-statement in writing about the photographic image, and the infinite capacity of modern computers to produce new capacities for illusion in ways that are as likely to exhaust as to excite:

"Baroque work itself seems to characterize the active aim of boredom. The 'eclectic' sticking together of 'disconnected styles', ceilings filled with imaginary spaces, portraits that are crowded allegorical personifications, everything is doubly filled with meanings and details. It is as though the whole age of Baroque recognised the illusion of the Renaissance representational space."

In the face of such effects Bate reminds us that the 'old questions of who, what, where and why still pertain' (Bate 1997:6). Which brings me back to the empirical - and my ethnographic concerns to produce descriptions where such identification matters - put simply it matters whether you are a Mayor, an ethnographer, a community activist, a functionary, a member of a religious brotherhood, a devotee of the Sr. de los Temblores; it

matters where you are gathered and why, and what it is that you might be trying to do ... even - especially - when other things also begin to happen around you.

Ethnographic description - the double vision of an off-centered modernism.

I am aware that I've gone somewhat off piste with this paper - not least in working through the first two understandings of the baroque from the Helen Hills quotation which we were directed to ignore ... namely the architectural styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth century; and the subsequent complaints that such work provoked. However I wanted to explore the empirical sensibility of ethnographic description and I did not want to suggest that such description could proceed without complicity. As Echeverria suggests, the political and problematic dimensions of the baroque are integral to its force and disorienting capacity - as they are to ethnographic writing.

And so finally to some questions that I would like to raise in the workshop. What possibilities might a baroque empirical sensibility open for ethnographers? Do we already have a baroque empirical sensibility that we have not named as such? Does a baroque sensibility claim a superior ethic? Or does it simply lead in different directions - to look at different things. To know otherwise has always been the guiding principle of anthropological ethnography. Does an explicitly 'baroque' empirical sensibility enhance the communicative effects of ethnographic research by suggesting new forms of writing? And if so - can we gauge the value of such interventions in relation to the less celebrated aspects of the baroque? Can we be baroque without acknowledging the political effects of enthrallment or of boredom?

Ethnography has long struggled with these issues. It is an excessive descriptive art - that deploys specificity and detail to both illuminate and derail, and an ethnographic paper always treads that fine line between enthrallment and boredom. The things that have been the subject of obsessive concern to the fieldworker are not necessarily meaningful to the seminar attendee. Where do the meanings reside? How do fieldworkers find their way, and how to their listeners and readers find theirs? The answers to these questions lie outside the scope of individual studies. Sometimes the answers are very specific to particular groups of scholars or to investments in theoretical debates; or the description might work because they engage spaces of overlap where subjects of 'general concern and interest' emerge. Sometimes the meeting grounds are forged in ways that the ethnographer might deplore - the fascination of some listeners and readers with the exotic and the wonder of difference, so often misplaced and misunderstood. Detail might provoke boredom and /or enthrallment, and specificity offers no guaranteed meanings. Readers routinely go in directions that authors never imagine.

When I wrote the abstract for this presentation I imagined that I would think about civil engineers, and how they set about ordering the world. I was interested to think about technical knowledge in baroque mode. Engineering is a knowledge practice that stands for all the values that the baroque contests - embracing representation, realism, external materiality and rational thinking. Engineering is procedurally committed to stabilisation - to metrics and measures, maps and plans, norms and standards. The engineers I work with most certainly proceed *as if* they were committed to coherence and to value of distinguishing the business of knowing from the sensuousness of life. And yet the ordering of the world implies its transformation and to transform it you have to engage it ... and from there things begin to unravel. They are not academics and the technical representations that they produce clear the way for them to start doing things. In Annelise Riles' terms their

plans, models and norms serve as useful fictions (Riles 2010). Their practice by contrast relies on all kinds of things that their representations obscure. Ethnographic accounts of technical processes recover a different kind of detail through engagement with relational specificity as we focus on the disruptions occasioned by all the people, things and forces that refuse to be organised, on those who invest too much hope, or too little, on the charged relations that are ironed out of the maps and plans and project descriptions.

We could conclude that, as a descriptive enterprise, ethnography does the job of anamorphic distortion - it offers a perspective from which technical process, for example, can be seen otherwise than in the form of its own self-presentation. In ethnography the formality and ordering of technical worlds do not disappear but they are re-connected - to affective forces, creative compromises, vital matter, to politics, art and uncertainty. This double vision is perhaps one of the most significant contributions that ethnographic work can offer. Thus, as I try to understand how the regional state 'works' in Peru - I keep an eye on how the central state maintains control while articulating the procedures of decentralization; I watch how the World Bank creates new relations of debt through loans that ostensibly relieve poverty; I watch how ordering and regulatory devices operate in practice; and I remain attentive to hidden hydraulics, to the ways in which theatrical effects are produced, and to how it is that an image of a crucified Christ can convey hope and vitality. But ethnography does not thereby escape from collusion - its forms and methods are still modernist - its alternatives always compromised (Taussig 1999). I prefer to think that the empirical sensibilities of the baroque open but do not displace the knowledges they seek to reconfigure - a position that allows some acknowledgement that ethnographic spaces are perhaps primarily spaces of reflection rather than conclusion

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