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## Apocalyptic Praxes / Paradoxes of Progress

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Books

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#### I. Nobby's Jihad

*sar-e kinara-ye ab-e ravan kbara hun main*

*khabar nabin mujhe lekin kaban kbara hun main*

*At the edge of running water stand I*

*Aware am I yet not where I stand*

—Muhammad Iqbal

Contemporary American warfare in the pockmarked landscapes of distant earth no longer succeeds in horrifying us. No atrocity in Iraq or Afghanistan seems capable of sending a ripple of feeling – let alone effective rage – across our cyborg body politic. (Or, if so, impotence ensues leading to the dissipation and dispersal of this intensity – its slow and seemingly inevitable release into our free-floating and impersonal ephemerality.) This vast mutation in the American life-world that occurred roughly between the My Lai Massacre (1969) and Abu Gharaib (2004) required the antennae of sci-fi mutants such as Philip K. Dick and culture barometers like Fredric Jameson to be detected and recorded: the earlier epoch's signs of mental illness or “absence of appropriate affect” are now vague survival mechanisms of flattened feelings.<sup>[1]</sup> The war just goes on pummeling someone somewhere beyond any distance, unless you are the hapless relative of a soldier who went on a murderous rampage “out there,” or of one who has committed suicide since returning, or of one left to suffer and die in privatized neglect at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Nothing of the collective suffering that accompanied such hurt in our previous, penultimate moment seems to inform any effective politics regarding those on the home front, let alone our victims on the other side, worlds away.

How are we to break through this post-malaise of capitalist “civilization?” What is the antidote to the listlessness of too much shock, too much sameness – too little sense? What ways to channel political affect exist aside from the frenzy of contemporary anarcho-currents, or their liberal-reformist counterparts in the Occupy Movement? How can we find our bearings in this apparently rudderless reality that emits no change from within? Questions such as these animate this essay. They have found an affinity with illuminating lectures on Islam delivered by the late Norman O. Brown. Nobby, as Brown came to be known, stood at the disconcerting threshold of the affectless plane at whose far edge we find ourselves today. Brown’s ever deepening skepticism about the conceits of imperial society led to his “total inability to situate what was happening” of world-historical significance in the Middle East, especially the Iranian Revolution, in whose wake these lectures were given.<sup>[ii]</sup> (They have only recently been collected as *The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition – Lectures, 1981*.) Pervasive western ignorance came to light as part and parcel of imperial conceits. The spiritual damage done within the West by our most celebrated ideas, as these became perverted for imperial ends, revealed their authentic nature.<sup>[iii]</sup> “The recognition of the reality of Islam was for me a way to get out of the narrow historical framework of western civilization,” he observes. This departure is only possible “if you begin to discard the confident complacency in the inevitability and righteousness of material progress.” Reading Brown today on Islam, one gathers the extent of radical politics’ exhaustion under the conventional banner of historical progress: everything has stayed the same under progress’ shadow. He sensed how revolution would now require passing through the crucible of another temporality, how the apocalyptic determinants of civilizational change would only ever actualize through engagements with subaltern political realities. After exploring some counter-temporalities that Brown conjures through his concerted efforts to dereify Islam (and simultaneously “western civ”) in the first two sections, this essay will conclude in the third installment with some paradoxes that accompany the break from stagnant progress by exploring some key points in Theodor W. Adorno’s dialectical rendering of Walter Benjamin’s theses on history, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (1940).

Coming at Islam after a long career as a classics professor “(originally, now defrocked),” as he inserts parenthetically in his first lecture, Brown knows that whatever lies hidden in Islam will have a bearing on the conventions governing the notion of the West. Islam and “western civ” have come to mediate each other in our own tense times, revealing clues about each other’s historical and cultural trajectory. Beginning with introductory remarks that ground history in the eternal universality of prophecy, Brown proceeds over the following six lectures to compare Islam with Judaism, and then with Christianity; to fathom the temporal implications of the Qur’an’s internal structure, while grappling with the strife-ridden birth of Shi’a Islam; and to glimpse the revolutionary potentials of heterodox Islam’s notions of apocalyptic time and epiphany. In presenting contrasting interpretations of a common heritage, paths taken and not taken, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are each heir to different potentials, temporalities, and possibilities. Prophetic Islam, for Brown, is particularly well poised to produce a revolutionary subjectivity in our own times. In doing so, Islam presents not the end or the edge but another beginning for the concept of the West. For Brown, Islam is “not another *oriental* cultural tradition, with that implied traditional distinction between East and West.” Instead, Islam is “an alternative, a rival interpretation of *our* tradition.” Foremost among the implications of this line of thinking is

the political one: a decolonized mode of revolution. The challenge that Islam ultimately presents in these lectures is that of imagining another revolution in the revolution, and in that process, breaking out of the impasses of modernity. It can be said that every utterance collected in this book is motivated to discover a new vital frame of social, political, and cultural transformation – *mukammal ghairiyat*, in other words. Though the threads of thought running through these lectures weave in and out of each other, thickening sometimes into powerful rhetorical effects and indicating captivating performances, it is possible to distill some key tensions that organize Brown’s thinking about Islam: tensions between iconoclasm and civilization, prophecy and history, apocalypticism and revolution.

To bring Islam into the historical picture is for Brown akin to a Copernican revolution: following in the steps of Marshall Hodgson, Louis Massignon, and Henri Corbin, with Brown “we are moving out from under the schema of Christocentric world history, stamped on the minds of orthodox Westerners . . . into ampler and more Islamic, air.”<sup>[iv]</sup> As if finally awoken from a long ideological slumber in western civilization, Brown’s vision pierces impediments so obvious they seem invisible. The city as such becomes the target and he brings iconoclastic rigor to his attack; the city stands in the way of reconciliation with nature, universality, and social harmony. “It seems unlikely to me that man’s true nature is modern man.” Through this Copernican shift the “silhouette of the city, whether on the Nile or the Euphrates or the Charles River,” finally appears as “a visible contradiction of nature, a visible declaration of its supernatural pretensions.” The long history of the urban complex, as Brown understands it, begins with the division of mental and manual functions of social reproduction and ends in our times with the city as the self-aggrandizing idol whose adulation of material and technological progress distracts from the dissension, inequality, conflict, narrowness, and a general spiritual retardation that postmodern urbanism brings about. Teaching “western civ” for Brown meant accepting the divide between Hellenism and Hebraism and becoming a proponent of the former against the latter, becoming an instrument for the city’s own self-absolutization. The urban idea filled out the ideology of Hellenism and affirmed the city and all it stood for and against. Thus the city as the fundamental political category comes into relief for Brown as the false god of our times. Prophetic iconoclasm is thus summoned

to rectify the social structure precipitated by the urban revolution, to resolve its inherent contradictions, to put an end to the injustice, inequality, and disorder, that state of war between cities, within the city, between city and uncivilized. That state of war that has been its history from start to finish.

At this moment, as occasionally happens in the lectures, Brown’s visionary intensity gets the better of his voice, which then winds down into oracular vagueness—“Prophecy is the perception, both for good and for evil, inherent in a social structure”—leaving one with unsettling questions rather than any clarified relations between Islam and Marxism, for instance. For now, one has a sense of the far-reaching paradigm shift Brown sought in Islam, as new futures are regained from lost opportunities of this “other” tradition. The revolution that Brown imagines is not confined to the mode of production; it is also the resumption of another, now submerged, western tradition. Nothing less than a civilizational

overturning would, for Brown, deliver on the promise implicit in Marxism: to do away with the divide between nature and man, the divine and the human – ultimately, manual and intellectual functions in social reproduction. A return to universalism implicit in prophecy has as its ultimate political objective a “federal theology or complex federal universalism” and inspires a specifically apocalyptic praxis. Whatever the overt religious nature of Brown’s calling (he was steeped in theosophical mysticism in his English home[v]), Islam has given him not so much a religion per se as a bottomless well of apocalyptic imagery, timeless archetypes, and good infinities. Islam has reminded him that revolution must break with the narrowness of western society’s self-congratulatory heritage to be effectuated.

This apocalyptic imaginary finds peculiar resonance with our postmodern malaise. After the spatial internalization of what were previously ever-widening historical dynamics, the eternity of apocalypticism captures our global impasse, especially in this paradoxical present of slow infrastructural erosion. Revolution will obtain, Brown argues, through the crucible of prophecy. In declaring the falseness of urban civilization’s godlings, prophecy for Brown reveals the occluded universality and eternal oneness of humanity. The sections on prophecy, in fact, read like a litany, moving outside the bounds of argument into Brown’s penchant for mysticism. But over the course of the ‘80s, the relationship between reason and faith attained sharper definition through close readings of Spinoza and occasional, but never sustained, dialectical intermediations. History is the medium through which prophecy does its work: “History is cycles of prophecy . . . the one true spirit of prophecy recurs: *verus propheta per saecula recurrens*.” Through prophecy historical beginnings are recycled afresh, and historical movement is renewed through the alternation between “manifestation and occultation, outward conformity and spiritual liberation, Resurrection and the Cave.” The special place that prophecy has for Brown and its relation to history is spelled out more clearly in his reading of Spinoza’s scriptural hermeneutics in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991) than in *The Challenge of Islam*. There prophecy is, à la Spinoza, “the archetype or origin from which the three contending institutions in the modern world – political power, positive religion, and philosophic freedom – are all derived, the common notion in terms of which they can arrive at mutual understanding.”[vi] Prophecy establishes the grounds for obedience to righteous authority with the promise of unified truth and meaning, and simultaneously puts into effect the process by which this authority is eventually internalized, making the grounds for philosophic freedom. Prophecy encompasses philosophy, but not the reverse: “The social order depends on obedience, but the power of reason does not extend so far as to establish the principle of obedience.”[vii] Initially external, the force of authority is internalized through the historical process of reason’s emerging independence, coming at the cost of connection with the propulsions of mystery ever present in prophecy. This loss necessitates a return to prophecy, the evergreen moment in time when authority asserts itself squarely for collective justice. For Brown, the equivalence and ambiguity of prophetic language help accommodate reason and imagination. Prophecy translates between the known and the unknown, the particular and the universal, the historical and the eternal. It translates between times. Under prophecy’s spell, it is hard not to sense some uncanny sameness between the political crisis Brown inherited and, *mutatis mutandis*, what we have been bequeathed by our more recent American Caesars.

Brown’s oracular pronouncements were capturing the slow, immanent eclipse of historical

temporality – the end of “progress” simultaneous with the self-absolutization of capital – and the concomitant need to grasp an adequate temporal model for revolutionary purposes. Brown found intimations of this alternative in the simultaneity (“*totum simul*,” as he glosses it) of the Qu’ran and in the archetypal allegoresis of apocalyptic imagery. Drawing on Corbin and Hodgson, but equally Joyce and Milton, Brown glimpses the *Augenblicklichkeit* of Qur’anic time: “Aphoristic fragmentation in an open field. The fragment is microcosmic. I mean reflects the totality.” In seeking to reflect outward infinitely, Qu’ranic language breaks radically from narrative time. Organized with greater emphasis on repetition than continuity, equivocation than mimesis, the Qu’ranic structure implicitly distrusts the narrative ideology that has governed Western thought since Homer and the Bible. Instead, Brown follows Corbin in arguing that “in the Qur’an we are dealing with suprahistorical archetypes. Eternally recurrent patterns. Even as the prophet, the true prophet (Abraham, Moses, Jesus) is a recurrent phenomenon . . .” The point is that “[i]t’s all there all the time. It is not sequential, it is not linear – it is repetitious, the repeat in history,” an ever self-propelling and widening universality.

Brown’s urge to move outwards and explore historical experience and memory through the eyes of history’s vanquished has become ever rarer over the years. Contemporary leftist commentaries may inventory the ideological content behind the fundamentalist garb of Islam, even pinpointing the contradictions this content produces for Western liberal imperialism, but rarely do they seek revolutionary potentials beyond our cultural confines.<sup>[viii]</sup> But as the idea of the West comes again into direct contradiction with forces that it unleashes to maintain itself, as progress founders in catastrophe, and critical transformation is cramped by a thoroughly commodified “objective spirit,” the apocalyptic imago tends to its breaking point. One does not have to cede much credence to Islam to understand what Brown is wagering: through the crucible of the other is the renewal of the self; revolution is potentiated through the overcoming of the divide between self and other; a path to revolutionary praxis can be found through grasping our collective, yet occluded, simultaneity. This is the untimeliness of revolution: its movement dilates between the extremes produced in the last century, often existing in microcosm in the stark urban/rural divide of contemporary Afghanistan. For those who dread such thinking of epochal transformation more than the end of humanity as such, Brown has a paradoxical reminder: that at the limits of American imperial experience is no precipice. Fear of the fall vanishes before lifted horizons. Rather than perdition if one’s faith falters (in God, the Bible, Empire, the Market, Progress, etc.), rather than a sense of abandonment by God at the boundaries of His putative civilization, what lies beyond for Brown is another beginning of the Western plane, one that has come full circle.

[editor's note: next week, part two, "Faces of Islamic Apocalypticism"]

[i] Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* in *Four Novels of the 1960s* (New York: Library of America, 2007 [1968]) 436.

[ii] Norman O. Brown, *The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition*, ed. Jerome Neu (Santa

Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2009) 1. All page numbers of further citations will be given parenthetically.

[iii] A pattern recognized over a century ago by Mark Twain. See “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” in Mark Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1891-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1992) 457-473.

[iv] Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) 47.

[v] See Norman O. Brown, “Memoirs” in Jerome Neu (ed.), *In Memoriam: Norman O. Brown* (Santa Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2005) 19.

[vi] Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* 98.

[vii] *Ibid.*, 104.

[viii] See, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010).