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**DIRECTIONS IN ETHNOHISTORICAL RESEARCH ON THE INCA  
STATE AND ECONOMY**

by  
**Chris Beyers,**  
D.Phil. Candidate, Sussex University

**CERLAC Occasional Papers**

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**Abstract:**

This paper reassesses the contributions and limitations of the substantivist program in Andean ethnohistory on the Inca state and economy, which was initiated by John Murra under the influence of Karl Polanyi. It situates this program within a historiographical trajectory tracing back to the foundational sources. Many of the presuppositions that characterized early Inca historiography continue to influence modern historiography. Moreover, these presuppositions have been transfigured in modern accounts in the form of peculiarly modern concepts of the political economy of the nation-state and empire. The particular form which “facts” take on in the substantivist method, and the particular relationship between “fact” and “value” encouraged in substantivist interpretation, rely on an analogical mode of thinking which forecloses the interpretive possibilities of difference. Any discussion about the nature and character of Inca society should involve an analysis of the dialogical character of the (mainly textual) sources in which the data is presented, and of the historiographical tradition in which modern interpretations are embedded. The paper concludes by arguing that Polanyi-inspired substantivism in Inca ethnohistory would be fruitfully reoriented in a more interpretive direction by rethinking the meaning of “the substantive”.

## Introduction

*Anthropology expects the social arrangements underlying economic behaviors and motives to be particular human inventions of historical times and places. It expects social and economic inventions, like technical and artistic ones..., to have spread and combined in diffusions, evolutions, and convergences and to continue to do so today and in the future, rather than simply to prove responsible to the effects of universal processes of associations, as sociology sees them. This processual bent in anthropology...makes the interpretation of non-Western economic data a vitally historical, even "culturological" pursuit...*

(Arensberg, 101)

Nathan Wachtel noted in his *Vision de Vaincus* (1971) that the Spanish conquest and colonization of Andean and Mesoamerican societies presents us with a unique opportunity to study an indigenous civilization that had no prior contact with Western civilization. The challenge is to reconstruct the "vision of the vanquished" so as to be able to understand not only their perception of the Spanish conquest, but also their world as it was before the violent legacy of colonialism. (Wachtel: 1977, 2) This in turn potentially promises a vantage point from which to reexamine modern concepts of culture, state, and economy. But such an approach begs crucial interpretive questions: How do the ethnohistorian's own values and presuppositions shape her or his interpretation of the "facts"? This involves the philosophical question of how the act of interpretation is to be informed by the values and presuppositions of members of the society under study, and historical questions about how any interpretation has been influenced by a history of interpretations – in short, a historiography.

This paper reconsiders the contributions and limitations of the substantivist program in Andean ethnohistory on the Inca state and economy that was initiated by John Murra. Influenced by Polanyi's work on archaic economies, John Murra undertook a broad research program in the 1960's. Although Murra's work was most popular in the 1970's, it continues to exercise a major influence on Andean ethnohistorical research (Van Buren: 1996, 340). This paper assesses

the legacy of Murra-Polanyi's substantivism in modern ethnohistorical scholarship on the Inca state and economy by revisiting Murra's and Polanyi's works. Moreover, it attempts to situate their work within a historiographical trajectory tracing back to the original foundational sources around the time of contact.

I first address the historical development of certain broad interpretive patterns that characterized Inca historiography before the advent of substantivism in the field. This provides the backdrop for Murra's incisive intervention. Polanyi's work on the early empires is then reviewed before turning to an examination of the influence of Polanyi's work on Murra's research agenda. In the last part of the paper, I assess this recent ethnohistorical project and explore some of the possibilities that it forecloses. I argue that modern accounts continue to be characterized by the predominance of peculiarly modern concepts of the politics of the nation-state and empire, and of a set of presuppositions corresponding to 16<sup>th</sup> century European conceptions of religiosity, human nature, and the natural environment. By way of counterpoint, I contend that any discussion about the nature and character of Inca society should concern the particular historical milieu of the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire and the ensuing conflict between the Spaniards and the Andean peoples. In particular, this would involve an analysis of the dialogical character of the (mainly textual) sources in which the data is presented, and of the historiographical tradition in which modern interpretations are (often unwittingly) embedded. I conclude with some thoughts on a more interpretive Polanyi-inspired substantivism.

## Substantivism and the Problem of Interpretation

Karl Polanyi's work has set a fresh scientific agenda for the study of archaic economies and has in the last few decades motivated a wide range of research on specific civilizations such as that of the Incas, as well as some more general comparative work on ancient. Polanyi has shown that modern conceptions of the economy are governed by assumptions that hold only for economies dominated by price-making markets and that these assumptions tend to distort our

understanding of early economies. He argued that economic relations in ancient economies should be seen as embedded in and circumscribed by specific sociopolitical matrices. Since the nature of any particular set of economic relations is specific to the society in which they occur, Polanyi argued that the processes of economic development in different societies are comparable only to the degree to which the social and political contexts in which they occur are comparable. He attempted to establish their comparability with his substantivist approach, based on a rigorous empirical methodology in which the relationship between fact and value was seen as consisting of a relatively transparent logical correspondence. One of the primary contributions of Polanyi's substantivist method was that, through meticulous empirical reconstructions of ancient societies, it allowed for a suspension of conventional assumptions about the inherent nature of economic structures and processes and thus for the emergence of novel conceptions.

Polanyi's project had a large impact on the study of the Inca economy and state, particularly through the work of John Murra. Modern studies of Inca economy and state before Murra's time were for the most part based on a literal reading of the Colonial Spanish accounts of conquest<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, they tended to focus on Spaniards and Spanish culture and institutions and on Spanish-language documents. They were generally unreflective about the inherent biases pervading early Spanish-language accounts and tended to superimpose contemporaneous conceptions of economy and state on the 'facts' represented in them. Together with James Lockhart (1968), John Murra shifted the emphasis to ethnographic study of native languages and cultures (Schwaller: 1994, 249). The problem of how to discern the native point of view from the Spanish representation of it, or the empirical fact from the mode in which it is interpreted and represented by the author of the text, is thus the subject of a relatively recent debate.

Two questions about the original textual sources need to be addressed in any ethnohistory: What are the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Prescott:1847, Means: 1928, Rowe: 1946, Lanning: 1967.

'facts' that are presented? What is the conceptual matrix that is the basis of their exposition? Answering these questions is complicated by the relative dearth of archaeological information<sup>2</sup> and textual sources written by native Andean peoples, and the comparative difficulty of analyzing the Spanish textual sources. There are other important sources for ethnohistorical study, perhaps most significantly the oral accounts of Andean contemporaries as found in modern ethnographies and various historical archives<sup>3</sup>. The original accounts at the time of contact nevertheless remain foundational as oral accounts are verified in a process of "triangulation" with early sources. The conclusions regarding the veracity of oral accounts still ultimately tend to be referenced through the historical and discursive framework provided in the early sources. Moreover, interpretation of contemporaneous oral sources is encumbered by difficult methodological questions relating to the nature of the dialogical encounter between interviewer and interviewee and by the analyst's judgement about the nature of the relationship between textual accounts and oral accounts – between writing and speech.

In order to limit the scope of the paper, I will avoid these difficulties and for the most part restrict the discussion to the interpretation of the early textual

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<sup>2</sup> As Browman notes, "Archaeologists base their interpretations largely on various ethnographic and ethnohistoric analogies; thus as the interpretations of these culturally based source data change, so will the prehistoric reconstructions" (1994, 236).

<sup>3</sup> As far as we know, the Andean peoples did not have a system of writing, as in Mesoamerica. The few indigenous chroniclers that existed, namely Garcilaso de la Vega, Huaman Poma de Ayala, and Santa Cruz Pachacuti, are particularly valuable for the insights they afford into Andean society and economy and the Andean mind and world-view. In recent years, a number of new and very valuable sources have also been discovered, including the *visitas* of the extirpators and censuses and polls taken by the colonial government. Although there has recently been a marked shift towards using these new sources (see Salomon: 1991, Duvoils: 1986, Adorno: 1986), there is still much controversy about the extent to which these sources were shaped by the context of their production (see Salomon: 1982).

sources. In fact, my main objective will be to examine how a historiographical tradition has been built up around the interpretation of these texts. Although substantivism may arguably have found its way into Andean ethnohistory in a more diffuse manner than through Murra's work per se, it is in the latter that it was introduced most decisively. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper I will make a heuristic distinction between the phase of Inca historiography that began with Murra's Polanyi-inspired work and the phase of Inca historiography that predated it. It will be useful to begin with an overview of the latter in order to situate more recent developments within a larger historiographical tradition.

## Early Modern Scholarship on the Incas and the Problem of Historical Sources

*Interpretation of ancient texts requires that historical considerations be integrated; furthermore, the history of their reception cannot be ignored, since it is with these subsequent reading traditions that they have reached us; moreover, the key moments of that tradition have to be explained*

(Bal: 1990, 4).

In the early part of the present century, there were two typically opposed views on the Inca state and economy. The first view was that the Inca state was a welfare-state which assumed the responsibility for redistributing wealth and provisioning services to its vassals, all the while ensuring that their economic and cultural autonomy was maintained. The second view was that the Inca state was authoritarian and despotic, submitting its vassals to harsh discipline and services for the empire<sup>4</sup>. The strongest proponents of the

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<sup>4</sup> Various early twentieth century scholars would move away from the tendency to view the Inca empire as conforming to one or the other, but the tension of resolving this polarity would continue to be painfully evident. For example, Philip Means in *Ancient Civilizations of the Andes* – which was the standard work of its time on the pre-Columbian Andean world (to be displaced from this post only in 1946 by Rowe's classical work) – says of the Incas: "however stern the Incaic rule may have been, it was never unjust; however much the greatness and splendor of the highly placed may

"welfare-state hypothesis" were modern *indigenistas* like Jose Carlos Mariátegui and Luis E. Valcárcel, who argued that the Inca empire represented a primitive form of socialism. The *indigenistas'* concern to portray the Inca Empire as a lost utopia was motivated by their political objectives to incorporate indigenous peoples in nationalist leftist struggle. This view of a benign "Inca socialism" came under sharp criticism from those who saw the Inca state as authoritarian in character. One of the classic works in this line is Baudin's famous The Socialist Empire of the Incas (1928). Baudin was a conservative French lawyer concerned with criticizing the socialist doctrines of his time. He portrayed the Inca Empire as an oppressive authoritarian regime which imposed its economic and religious forms upon the peoples that it conquered in a draconian manner. Basic tools of modern economic analysis such as supply and demand analysis, production curves etc. were employed to show that the Incas possessed an inefficient economic system which could only be supported by a repressive state (see also Galindo: 1987b).

Early modern scholars thus perceived the Inca economy as disembedded from other social processes and tended to think of it as instituted in Inca society and state in one of two ways that are characteristic of modern economies. But if these ideas were thoroughly modern, they were also substantially indebted to the interpretations that the first chroniclers had of the recently conquered Inca Empire<sup>5</sup>. From as early as the

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have been served and enhanced, the well being of the humble was never lost to sight; however much may have been demanded of the people in the way of personal labour and tribute, society as a whole was well compensated by the measure of peace and security, of plenty and leisure, that was assured to it by the Incaic rule" (Means: 1964, 350). Means' research on the Inca economy and state is based entirely upon the "canonical" sources, and his interpretation of them is based on a literal reading that today appears very uncritical. The quote above shows his desire to negotiate a middle road between despotic and welfare models of state by ascribing to the Inca state the image of the benevolent patriarch, who is strict but fair. Indeed, this image is not so different from Garcilaso's original account.

<sup>5</sup> The most authoritative contemporary version of the chronology of the Inca empire was established by John Rowe, who in the 1940's determined an absolute historical sequence of events of the Incas (Bauer: 1992, 38). His description of the rise of Incas in Cuzco, of the explosive

beginning of the seventeenth century, most of the historical works written on pre-contact history would be based on the first chronicles. In their descriptions of the Andean societies they encountered, sixteenth century accounts tended to project Western conceptions of government and social order predicated upon European ideals of kinship and empire. The Incas were compared to civilizations of classical antiquity and especially to the Roman Empire. It was thought that the Romans in particular “provided an explanatory context in which the Incas could be understood” (MacCormack: 2000, 297-298). In portraying indigenous structures of power and society, emphasis was placed upon those hierarchical dimensions that were most compatible with Western hierarchical structures. Threats to the elite state apparatus from the rest of society were seen as pathological. Furthermore, the non-elite portion of society tended to be portrayed as a homogeneous and ignorant mass and, especially in the early accounts, as in a kind of *behetria* (a state of chaos and misrule) (Salomon: 1986, 8,9).

The responsibility for the genesis of the idea of the welfare-state lies primarily with chroniclers such as Garcilaso de la Vega and Blas Valera, both of whom were first generation mestizo chroniclers who sought to mitigate the ferocity of colonial aggression by attempting to give Andean peoples an image that would accord more favorably with the sensibilities of their conquerors. They invoked renaissance Christian notions of the ideal state in their reconstruction of the Inca Empire, and made the history of the development

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military conquest led by Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui's in 1438 after decisively defeating the Chancas in Cuzco, and of the subsequent development of the Inca state until the arrival of the Spaniards, has been widely accepted. It was based on a literal reading of the chronicles and a process of deciding which of the chronicles presented the most “conservative” and trustworthy information. Rowe's view has recently been sharply criticized by Brian Bauer, who has presented archaeological findings to contradict this account. His data seems to support the conclusion that centralization of regional authority in Cuzco began much earlier, during the Kilke Period (1000-1400) and that some social stratification was already occurring then. Whether Bauer's version is taken to be “correct” or not, it at least points to the dangers of attempting to establish absolutes through a literal reading of the texts.

of the empire conform to Western conceptions of chronology, ethics, and politics. The welfare-state hypothesis may also be traced to a host of Spanish chroniclers who were sympathetic to the plight of native Andean peoples under Spanish colonial rule, most famously Domingo de Santo Tomás and Bartholomé de las Casas, who portrayed the Incas as a benevolent people concerned with justice and order. The other idea – the Inca state as despotic – had its origins in the line of reasoning of another group of early chroniclers, who for reasons of socio-economic interest or religious zealotry were intent on justifying the Spanish conquest of the Andean peoples by referring to the tyranny they suffered under the Incas. This view was espoused by chroniclers in service to the political interests of administrators governing the native populations. These administrators were concerned with establishing the right of their rule<sup>6</sup> and with defending the private and economic interests of *conquistadores* and their descendants (Adorno: 1986, Duvoils: 1986, Mörner: 1967).

A brief outline of the general socio-economic, religious, and cultural milieu in which these chroniclers were writing will help contextualize their positions. In the sixteenth century the European nation-state was growing in strength and authority. Economic activity, especially long-distance trade, rose rapidly from the end of the fifteenth century on<sup>7</sup>. As trade led to

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<sup>6</sup> One of the best examples is Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, who acted as an apologist for Toledo's administration in the face of the growing black legend about the conduct of the Spaniards in the colonies.

<sup>7</sup> The establishment of Spanish trade with the Americas was greatly assisted by organizations of merchants and mariners, shipbuilding operations, a body of commercial law and maritime insurance, large ports like Seville, and connections to the international banking community (Phillips and Phillips: 1991, 30). As Spain imported the inventions of modern accountancy and maritime security from Italy, traditional kinds of business ties were being replaced by more formal contracts. Such contracts were reported by notaries who were part of the Roman legal tradition, which had become the legal framework in Mediterranean Europe. In Castile, the kingdom from which most of the Spanish conquerors and settlers came, Roman law was adopted as the primary law of the kingdom. With the increasing

increasingly large marketable surpluses, the ethical concept underlying the feudal order was replaced by a *raison d'état*. The expansion and consolidation of the nation-state was accompanied by the emergence of strong nationalistic sentiments. Moreover, political problems were perceived to have an importance that transcended economic matters (Gilmore, 70)<sup>8</sup>. The Spanish state was concerned with centralizing economic and political power in Europe. During the early decades of the conquest, economic activity in the colonies was directed almost entirely to trade with Spain. Most of the Spaniards who initially came to America were men that did not come to stay but to make their fortune and leave. Later, as Spaniards came increasingly with the intention of settling, it would become more difficult for royal Spanish power to retain direct control over economic and political matters in colonies<sup>9</sup>. This resulted in the conflict

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centralization of power that occurred under mercantilism, royal law, based on the Roman legal system, gradually came to be imposed throughout the kingdom (Ibid. 20-23).

<sup>8</sup> In the fifteenth century, Spain was on the verge of becoming the dominant power in Europe, even without its American empire. The reconquest of Spain from the Moslems by the Christians was coming to a close, an experience which engrained in the Christian consciousness of Spaniards several important principles that would shape their encounter with the New World. They came to dogmatically assert that the Christian faith had to be militantly defended, a principle that dovetailed with the knowledge that great wealth would be gained from the armed conquest of foreign peoples (Phillips and Phillips: 1991, 15). The Catholic Church of Spain became extremely powerful in this period. However, it also moved towards greater doctrinal uniformity, following the tendency in the rest of Europe, where the Church had on the contrary suffered much factionalism and upheaval during the late medieval period. Universities were founded by the religious orders (especially the Dominicans) throughout the Middle Ages at Salamanca, Palencia, Valladolid, and Huesca, and a large number of young men from wealthy and semi-wealthy backgrounds attended these during the sixteenth century (Ibid. 24-26). These universities were very closely tied to state and trade and produced the ideas that led to the development and legitimation of colonial expansion and domination.

<sup>9</sup> The growth of state power came with the gradual

between the colonial *encomenderos* and the Spanish royalty (Mörner: 1967).

The sixteenth century was of course the time of the Renaissance in Europe, when humanism was beginning to undermine the central and universal authority of the Church and a more pragmatic conception of the state was gaining credence. Whereas the unity of society had until then been founded upon religious belief, it now increasingly came to be based on the sense of sharing a common civilization (Gilmore: 1952, 42). It should be noted, however, that renaissance humanism took on a distinct character in Spain and Latin America. Spanish and Latin American humanism was not based on a radical separation from the Church; rather, it remained fundamentally tied up with scholasticism and in particular to the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. The teleological and ethical preoccupations of scholasticism thus continued to have a strong influence in matters of social justice. Nevertheless, Roman law was increasingly being adopted to accommodate the expansion and development of the mercantile economic system and came into conflict with scholastic conceptions of social order and justice<sup>10</sup>.

The discordance and conflict between the traditional

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disintegration of feudalism and the rise of mercantilism. According to Heckscher's classic account, mercantilism's "first objective was to make the state's purposes decisive in a uniform economic sphere and to make all economic activity subservient to considerations corresponding to the requirements of the state and to the state's domain regarded as uniform in nature" (Heckscher: 1935, 22). Mercantilism of course goes hand in hand with colonialism. While there was a tendency at centralization of political and economic power in Europe, there was also a decentralizing tendency in the colonies, where a feudal system was established.

<sup>10</sup> The movement towards pragmatism was accompanied by a new orientation in philosophical thought towards empiricism. Roman law was concerned with Aristocratic control based on land ownership. Ethical obligations were defined in terms of meeting obligations of contract and maintaining orderly trading relationships. As in the Roman Empire, the mercantilist state was increasingly disposed towards exploiting a certain portion of its population, and it used military power to enforce its interests and to defend private property.



religious and ethical system and the newer and increasingly accepted pragmatism is most clearly seen in the debate over the nature of the American Indian, which occurred at many levels in Spain and Peru but formally took place at Valladolid between Las Casas and Sepúlveda. The crux of the debate was about the most correct interpretation of Aquinas's definition of human nature and of his theological and philosophical doctrine on the soul. Although this debate had as its main focus the question of how Andean peoples thought and reasoned and whether they were in fact rational human beings or not, economic matters figured prominently in the arguments presented. This because the main political question about whether or not it is just to wage war upon the Indians and to subject them to the faith by force encompassed within it an important economic concern: namely, the right of colonials to forcefully submit Indians to work in the mines and on the *encomiendas*. Exploitation of the Indians was legally justified by arguing that Indians are slaves by nature according to the Aristotelian doctrine.

The conflict between ethical and pragmatic concerns was reflected in the particular uses of Aristotle's and Aquinas's conceptions of the state and economy. One of Sepúlveda's main arguments in support of the contention that the Indians were barbarians was that they supposedly had no civilized form of social or political organization. Las Casas rejoined that only a small minority of Indians were at such a low level of civilization and that these Indians were in any case mainly pre-Incaic. The majority of Indians demonstrated the ability to form a family and provide for its needs in accordance with Aristotle's ideal of economic self-sufficiency, he argued, and had the ability to constitute and maintain an ordered community and state by means of laws and customs which were expedient to the public welfare. Establishing a distinction between pre-Incaic and Incaic pagan cultures enabled Las Casas to demonstrate civilizational progress. He accordingly argued that during the pre-Incaic phase of Andean history, a group of autonomous city-states existed which manifested in their customs and political institutions all the characteristics of natural reason. The Inca state then imposed a uniform system of government on all of its vassals through the creation of

laws and institutions designed for the common good<sup>11</sup>. To this Sepúlveda responded that "the mere fact that the Indians lived under some form of government by no means proved that they were equal to Spaniards. It simply showed that they were not monkeys and did not entirely lack reason" (cited in Hanke: 1959, 48). Indians were barbarians, Sepúlveda argued, because they did not have a concept of private property<sup>12</sup>.

Las Casas and Sepúlveda arguably were progenitors of the two dominant interpretations of the Inca state in Andean ethnohistory identified at the beginning of this section. The welfare-state hypothesis has generally received more support in modern historical and ethnographic literature than has the opposing hypothesis of authoritarianism, due perhaps in part to the prevalence of utopian thought in Western history from the Renaissance onwards. The model of the welfare-state quickly gained popularity in Europe, where the news of the discovery and dramatic, brutal Spanish conquest of the Inca "kingdom" had stirred a great deal of interest. New information about the Incas fuelled the growing interest in an Old World utopia, an idea that gained popularity under the influence of Thomas More. The idea of an Inca utopia became particularly prominent in the eighteenth century in Europe, coinciding with the development of a scientific economics. The welfare-state interpretation thus started within a scholastic rationale and was transformed into a form that more closely resembled the enlightenment ideal of the rational and secular state.

Most contemporary scholars now argue that the Inca Empire neither operated on the basis of redistribution and cultural pluralism nor as an authoritarian state. Recent scholarship tends to see Inca rule as having

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<sup>11</sup> This contrast between pre-Incaic and Incaic society would find its way into the writing of Garcilaso de la Vega and others and would continue to appear in many modern accounts.

<sup>12</sup> Although Aquinas differed from Aristotle in many respects, he concurred with him in not condemning private property. He insisted that private property was not against natural law and believed that the stewardship and concentration of wealth were also not against natural law.

taken various different forms in different ethnic contexts, and tends to emphasize the fact that life at the local level may not have changed very much under imperial domination. The two dominant conceptions discussed here nevertheless continue to pervade many modern accounts, albeit in less caricatured forms.

## The Substantivist Legacy of Karl Polanyi

In his seminal work, The Economic Organization of the Inka State, Murra attempted to deal with the interpretive problems of ethnohistorical research by extending Polanyi's logical empiricist method. The broader substantivist research project that he had thus initiated continues to exert a tremendous influence upon the field of Andean studies<sup>13</sup>. As opposed to the traditional literalist interpretations of the chronicles, Murra's strategy was to recover empirical data by making careful logical inferences through a rigorous cross-examination of the texts. To date this research project has brought forward an impressive amount of empirical and theoretical information and knowledge, and it has been one of the most significant forces in the consolidation of the sub-disciplinary regional specialization in pre-Hispanic Andean culture and society (Salomon: 1980).

A brief review of Polanyi's main concepts is in order before moving on to a more detailed overview of Murra's work. Polanyi's broad conceptual definition of "the economic", encompassing both archaic and modern economic systems, enabled him to criticize market-centered ideologies and economic views of human society and behavior. Modern accounts of non-market and status-based economies were duly criticized for projecting assumptions that hold true only of modern market economies and contract-based

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<sup>13</sup> Marxist economic historiography has also enjoyed substantial support in Andean studies, although the substantivist approach has clearly been more successful. Proponents of a Marxist approach have called attention to the class structure of the Inca empire and emphasised its exploitative character. This paper will address these approaches briefly where they are found either in collaboration with, or as a critique of, the substantivist approach.

societies. Polanyi conceptually distinguished the archaic economy from the modern market economy as follows: whereas the latter operates as a disembedded mechanism with laws of its own, independent of family and state, the former is embedded in non-economic institutions in society. In a market economy, the production and distribution of material goods are in principle carried out through a self-regulating system of price-making markets. Price is determined by the laws of supply and demand which are a function of human wants and needs in the face of perpetual scarcity. The opposition between embedded and disembedded economies corresponds in a general way to the classic distinction between status- and contract-based societies. The contract-based society predominates in modern capitalist economies, where there has been a large-scale mobilization of land and food through exchange and labour has been "freed" from traditional forms of bondage and turned into a marketable commodity. For Polanyi, this formal definition of the economy, which relies on the dissociation of economic market processes from non-economic socio-political processes, is too restrictive to merit universal application. While he admits that this definition is unrivaled in its ability to explain the functioning of the market mechanism, he argues that it needs to be complemented with a substantive definition that focuses on the constitutive institutional arrangements comprising "the economic".

Due in part to the increasing functional independence of "the economic" from social determination, but due also to developments in scientific thought, scientific economics would come to define itself through increasingly abstract and formalistic theoretical concepts<sup>14</sup>. The formal meaning of the economy emphasizes the logical character of the means-ends relationship between economic actors and the material resources at their disposal. It is based on the assumption that actors engage in a rational choice of

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<sup>14</sup> The development of a scientific economics took its intellectual impetus from the scientific revolution. Scientific observation in economics (as in other branches of scientific thought at the time) was originally based on empirical observation and would increasingly incorporate more sophisticated formal mathematical analysis (see Letwin: 1963).

means in the face of scarcity. Economizing action is "regarded as a manner of disposing of time and energy so that a maximum of goals are achieved out of this man-nature relationship" (Polanyi 1957:, 239). Moreover, formalistic economic theory privileges contractarian and individualistic value-systems, and the desire for personal gain is prioritized as a cultural motive. Finally, it assumes that all trade is market trade (since trade is directed by prices which are a function of the market) and that all money is exchange money.

Although market-centered studies fell out of fashion after World War II, Polanyi argues that it should be realized that "the market cannot be superseded as a general frame of reference unless the social sciences succeed in developing a wider frame of reference to which the market itself is referable." (Ibid. 270). This wider frame of reference is to be based on "the substantive meaning of the economic", which deals with the institutional aspects of material sustenance in the dependent relationship between humans and nature. In Polanyi's words: "the empirical economy is an instituted process of interaction between man and his environment, which results in a continuous supply of want satisfying material means" (Ibid. 248).

Polanyi's insights into the nature of ancient economies enabled him to criticize the tendency in modern economic analysis to subordinate family and polity to the economy. According to Polanyi, the principal goods that were mobilized in archaic economies were land and labour, and the transactions under which they circulated were of a kind that was distinct from, and more limited than, modern transactions. As opposed to a utilitarian system, based on the transfer of "use alone", archaic economies were based on the exchange of ownership which involved the risk of considerations of prestige and status. Hence the Aristotelian version holds that trade is "natural" when it provides for the self-sufficiency of the community. Here scarcity is explained by calling attention to reasons of an apparently non-economic character, such as the low social origin of the labourer or the burden of his labour. Modern economists took such early forms of exchange to be less "economic" or rational because of the high degree of interference of emotional and

volitional factors. Polanyi rejoins that "[t]he institutional structure of the [archaic] economy need not compel, as with the market system, economizing actions" (Ibid. 240). Many economies function without a market, or with a weak market system, and the provisioning role in these economies lies primarily with clan and government institutions. In these societies it becomes clear that the economy is enmeshed in institutions of both an economic and a non-economic character, and that various of these non-economic institutions are just as important in determining the functioning of their economies as are monetary institutions in market economies. If we are to account for these economies in our conceptualization of "the economic", economic history becomes "the manner in which the economic process is instituted at different times and places" (Ibid. 250).

There are, according to Polanyi, three overarching kinds of economic organization: reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange, each of which institutes different sorts of economic processes. Reciprocity describes a system of relations where the exchange of goods is defined by corresponding economic obligations to exchange gifts. Redistribution refers to the movement of goods from the various groups in a polity to its center, and then back out again on the basis of a centrally defined logic. Finally, exchange occurs in a market society according to a price regulating mechanism. According to Polanyi, institutions of reciprocity exist in environments that are symmetrically organized, redistributive institutions in environments where a central power monopolizes the centripetal and centrifugal flow of certain essential goods, and institutions of exchange where commodities are alienated from their producers by a self-regulating market mechanism (Ibid. 252). This is not to say that only one type of economic arrangement exists in any given society. In non-market economies, for example, reciprocity and redistribution systems can be integrated to varying degrees<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Corresponding with the three categories of economic organization are three main kinds of trade: gift trade, administered trade, and market trade. Gift trade has a ceremonial character, and goods are highly valued and circulate between elites. Gift trade functions to establish or strengthen reciprocity ties between the parties of the

However, Polanyi is not entirely able to escape the abstractionism and formalism that he criticizes in modern economic analysis. By arguing that formalist theory is appropriate in the case of modern economies but not in the case of ancient economies, he in effect reproduces the *gemeinschaft/gesellschaft* ideal type distinction that lies at the heart of much classical social theory. Polanyi also tends to obfuscate the line between formal and substantive meanings of the economy: the individualism and contractarianism of formalistic economic analyses are in the end seen as the substantive basis of the modern market economy. To the extent that Polanyi's understanding of market-based societies underplays the interconnectedness of economic, social, and cultural activities, modern economic theory is vindicated in its formal compartmentalization. The result is that the substantive and formal meanings of "the economic" in some sense become identified with the archaic and modern respectively, as progressive stages of economic development.

If Polanyi's analysis of modern economies tends to take the formal meaning of the market economy for its substantive nature, his substantive analysis of non-market economies is hindered by what Godelier calls his "empiricism". A Polanyi student, Daniel Fusfeld, summarizes the method of his substantive approach as follows:

to break down a problem into its component parts, get the empirical evidence in hand, use logical analysis to draw tentative conclusions, check them empirically, and move from there to larger and broader propositions that were in turn verified empirically (Fusfeld cited in Lewis: 1991).

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exchange. Administered trade has a more permanent character and tends to take place between established trading bodies. Furthermore, it has more of a formal character since equivalencies are more or less set and conventionalized (instead of being contextually determined as in gift trade). Finally, there is market trade, where a practically unlimited range of commodities circulate according to a supply-demand mechanism. Here, price is a determinant factor (Polanyi: 1957, 262).

The keystone of Polanyi's method is thus that interpretations are rigorously checked against the available empirical data. The underlying assumption is that the available empirical data is "thick" and extensive enough to render an adequate description and sufficiently comprehensive understanding of the substantive meaning of the economy in question.

## **Murra's Political Economy of the Inca State**

*In consequence either of remarkable self-interested insight or inertia, the Inca state did not interfere very much with [local ethnic communities'] internal arrangements. The local gods were left alone and so were the local land-tenure patterns; the periodic reallocation of land continued along with the automatic welfare provisions of a kinship organized agricultural community. As long as the lands of the Sun and of the crown were worked, as long, that is, as this self-sufficient peasantry were still tied to the state by a functioning network of religious and secular obligations, the state was satisfied to let the ethnic group carry on*

(Murra: 1980, 131).

John Murra's novel approach to research into the organization of the *Tawantinsuyu* (or Inca empire) set a novel agenda that superseded the early modern approaches discussed above. At a methodological level, Murra saw the source texts as providing information about the broad processes of state-development in the context of the reproduction and transformation of social, economic, and religious institutions. Murra's method was to compare textual data across various sources about specific locations and institutions in order to verify the accuracy of empirical data presented in the chronicles. Furthermore, he took into account biographical information about the particular chroniclers and estimated their ability to provide ostensibly neutral and objective information.

Murra's substantive claims were based on Polanyi's original thesis that Peruvian civilizations had a

necessity for redistribution given the time lapse between harvest and consumption and the differences between geographical, climatic, and soil zones within their territories, and that large-scale redistribution in the Inca empire in turn required a massive storage system. Polanyi had argued that reciprocity predominated at the level of the community and redistribution – or "asymmetrical reciprocity" – at the level of the Inca state. Given this formulation, the question that Murra was most concerned to answer was: What exactly is the nature of the relationship between these two arrangements within the Inca economic system? He sought to address this problem through an "integrative description" of the "empirical economy". Following is a general outline of Murra's reconstruction, supplemented in places by arguments made by several of his adherents.

Murra firmly rejected the welfare-state hypothesis as a "socialist illusion". It is based, he argued, on the fallacy of assigning to the state the reciprocity function, a function that is in fact proper to the *ayllu*<sup>16</sup>. Spalding corroborates in arguing that the basic working unit in the economy was the household, and the system of domination was oriented towards harnessing its productive power (Spalding: 1984, 24). It is also based, argued Murra, on a misunderstanding of the redistributive role of the state. While the state evidently redistributed such goods as cloth and crops to a certain degree, these goods were fruits of peasant production and were mainly circulated among elites. This is scarcely "redistribution" as we understand the term today (Murra: 1986, 131). Murra argued instead that the "redistributive" state economy was superimposed on the local systems of reciprocity in the communities, which essentially continued to function as before.

In part to explain how Andean economies functioned without market mechanisms, Murra suggested that economic production was organized according to a "vertical archipelago". In this model, the utilization of agricultural land was organized so as to make efficient use of the variety of crops that could be grown in non-

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<sup>16</sup> Rowe defines the *ayllu* as "a kinship group, with theoretical endogamy, with descent in the male line [which] owned a definite territory" (cited in Murra: 1980, 66).

contiguous ecological zones, thus greatly expanding overall productive capacity. Andean communities thus diversified their resource base without engaging in extensive trade with other communities. The vertical archipelago:

... implied a rather closed economic circuit, linking several tiers through ties of kinship, ethnic identification, and political subordination. [It consisted in the] nesting of *ayllu*, moieties, and ethnic levels into a single pyramid (Murra: 1986, 5).

Outliers were frequently multiethnic, creating a large potential for conflict and tension<sup>17</sup>. Most scholars tend to agree that the Incas to a significant degree mitigated perennial skirmishes and wars over lands, an achievement that allowed the Incas to ideologically justify the incorporation of ethnic lands. Murra also contended that the conquering Inca state wisely did not attempt to fundamentally alter the Andean vertical economy. Rather, it projected its imperial economy onto the existing structures of the populations it conquered; for instance, it set up "islands" in the conquered territories that local communities were obliged to cultivate in return for state services. In this manner it could gain direct control over community resources instead of relying on exchange.

In Murra's account, the imperial economy consisted of a two-tiered system of production corresponding to two different climatic zones: one geared towards maize and the other towards potato. The production of maize was oriented towards surplus production for the state and circulated largely in a redistributive mode. Potatoes, on the other hand, provided subsistence in local communities and were bartered within a local system of reciprocity. According to Murra, potatoes were cultivated under an older and autochthonous system of production by the *ayllu* in the *puna* (high plateau). By contrast, maize production was based

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars have doubted the existence of such a "multiethnic" vertical economy before the Inca empire was established, alleging instead that there were widespread hostilities between different ethnic groups (based on the frequent mention of such hostilities in early accounts) (D'Altroy and Earle: 1992b, 177).

upon a newer and imperial system of production. Maize can usually only be grown between 1500 metres and 3500 metres; above this range it is too cold and below it too dry. But even in this zone substantial irrigation is needed, thus requiring the implementation of substantial communal works. Maize constituted the main part of the agricultural surplus collected by the Inca state because it is easier to store than potatoes. Murra claimed that *ayllu* members may have known about maize before the Inca conquest, but its large-scale cultivation was made possible only when the state brought it into its domain of direct control.

The Incas did not have the large marketplaces and professional merchants that were characteristic in Mesoamerica (see Chapman: 1957). The state monopolized the surplus production of the peasantry, reducing pre-Incan barter trade to a marginal proportion of the overall circulation of goods<sup>18</sup>. Still, since barter was essentially tied up with the local vertical economy - functioning thus as the mode of exchange between kin who had been transplanted to different ecological zones - it did continue to exist at a local level. Murra claims that the state may have introduced a system of "state-approved markets" at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when it became evident that the state could not look after all of the needs of the communities under its rule by means of redistribution alone. The markets were held to coincide with the festivals, as well as with public punishments and feasts (Murra: 1980, 146). Most scholars have confirmed that there was no medium of exchange in the Andes, but there has been some suggestion that maize or the coca leaf sometimes served an analogous function to money (Ibid. 143). However, according to Murra (once again following Polanyi) the most important item of exchange was labour time (Ibid. 92).

Since the mainstay of the Inca economy was agriculture, the issue of land tenure had a central importance. Garcilaso writes that:

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<sup>18</sup>According to D'Altroy and Earle, it would understandably have been against the Incas' interests to encourage trade or market activity; since the elite did not have direct control over local economies, commercial integration would have eroded the power base of the elites (D'Altroy and Earle: 1992b, 181).

... arable land was divided into three parts: that belonging to the sun, that of the Inca, and that of his vassals. This latter part was calculated to permit each village to provide for its own needs and, in case there was an increase in population, the Inca reduced the surface of his own holdings (Garcilaso de la Vega: 1961, 116).

Given that Garcilaso's principal intent was to render Inca culture intelligible to a distant European audience, we have to wonder how much his neat conceptualization was constructed to fit the contemporaneous European conception of a naturalized social hierarchy, consisting roughly of "those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked" (Gilmore: 1952, 64). At any rate, Murra roughly follows Garcilaso's schema - i.e., compartmentalizing subjects of a state whose sovereignty is based in the highest supernatural power, God - when he argues that agriculture in the Inca Empire consisted of two sorts:

- 1) peasant cultivation of local crops in a system of local, community, and ethnic tenures, and
- 2) the establishment of revenue producing estates assigned to the crown or to the solar cult (Murra: 1986, 34).

Concerning the latter, there were extensive lands near Cuzco assigned to the solar cult that belonged to the emperor's mummies. These lands were cultivated by the *yana* (*yanacunas*) and provided not only for the *yana*'s subsistence but also for the subsistence of *accla*, priests, and a large number of other religious figures.<sup>19</sup> Sacrificial maize was grown for the sustenance of Incan ancestors. In Andean cosmology, ancestors were considered sacred figures that existed in the present in relationships of reciprocity with humans, and the belief was that they needed to be provided for as living beings (Murra: 1986, 34; Wachtel: 1977, 67).

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<sup>19</sup>*Yana* refers to a class of people who were taken from their communities in order to work only for the state. *Accla* refers to the Inca's virgins, whom he reportedly chose from all over the empire for their beauty. They lived in isolation from the rest of society, dedicating themselves to weaving textiles for the Inca.

According to Murra, the Inca state conserved the essentially self-sufficient nature of the village community. The pre-Inca communal landholding pattern was based on the *ayllu*: one had access to water, land, and other critical resources through one's membership to a particular kin group. The Incas maintained this system intact, altering only the formal aspect of its distribution. Parcels of land were allotted to all able-bodied, married men, who were thus made responsible to provide for themselves and their families. Wachtel argues that the authority of the Inca state over ethnic lands was significantly limited by the local economic systems, given the self-sufficiency of the cultivators and *ayllus* that inhabited these lands. The economic and political power of the Incas thus had the quality of being based on preexisting local economic and political systems.

It is generally agreed that the most powerful means of state domination in archaic economies is the collection of the "tribute", or *corvée*. In the Inca Empire, *corvée* was owed to both the local *curaca* and to the Inca himself. Here we must be doubly careful not to introduce our own understandings of the tribute as a Western institution. Murra argues that the *corvée* was not something new introduced by the Incas, but that it pre-dated the empire in the form of a service provided in return for a "big man's" generosity. Therefore, the *corvée* was not seen as a one-way payment of dues to the Inca state; rather, it was expected to bring on the redistributive "generosity" of the state, thus legitimizing its authority (Murra: 1986, 90, 93). Moreover, the unit responsible for the *corvée* was not the individual, but the household, *ayllu*, or ethnic group. Under this system,

... all able-bodied males, heads of households, owed labour services to the state; the members of their families pitched in according to their strength; the *ayllu* and village chiefs supervised the performance and took part themselves (Murra: 1980, 100).

Marriage was thus a kind of right of passage into an economic relationship with the state (Murra: year?, 98).

Murra claims that there were two main kinds of economic obligations that peasants had to the state, both of which were reciprocated by state provided services and matched by certain rights. One has already been mentioned; namely, the obligation to collectively work on state lands and projects. The *corvée* system for this service was known as the *mita*. Traditionally, the *mita* consisted of periodic service to the *curaca* for his own domestic needs or for the cultivation of his fields, etc. The Inca state exploited this Andean institution for its own purpose of empire building. However, because of the primary significance placed on self-sufficiency of the communities, *corvée* tasks were organized so as not to interfere with community tasks (Murra: 1980, 99). In return for labouring the Inca's lands, each peasant had a right to produce his crops on *ayllu* lands for his own and his family's subsistence. The other major kind of obligation was the textile tribute: each family was responsible for weaving a certain amount of cloth for the Inca. In return, the peasants were guaranteed wool and cloth for their own clothing. According to Murra, textiles were highly valued in the empire and served as the primary goods in gift-exchanges between elites (Incas and *curacas*). Cloth was also used for religious sacrifices (Ibid. 78).<sup>20</sup>

The Inca Empire relied on a substantial administrative system to monitor the *corvée* services and to manage its empire more generally. According to Murra, two levels of the administrative system can be distinguished: the royal class, which consisted of the nobles and those assimilated to the nobility by function

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<sup>20</sup> A group of people was required for special tasks of the empire; for example, building highways, fighting wars, weaving textiles for the emperor. These people were exempt from the obligation of *corvée*. According to Murra the number in this group increased as the empire grew, as the Inca could no longer rely on the *mita* to provide all the services that were needed. A good example is the development of a professional army. Originally both men and women were sent to fight for periods of time when they were needed under the system of the *mita*. However, as the empire grew and the army was fighting further and further from Cusco, the Inca started to designate certain communities that were reputed to be tenacious fighters, such as the Cañari, to full-time army service (Murra: 1991, 53, 56).

and status, and the *curacas*. He claims that the Inca Empire was called the *Tawantinsuyu* because it was organized as four (hence "*tawantin*") geo-spatial quarters (or "*suyus*"), each of which formed an administrative unit. These quarters were the *Chinchasuyu*, the *Antinsuyu*, the *Collasuyu*, and the *Cuninsuyu*. Huaman Poma's authoritative account of the structure of the quarters is affirmed by several other accounts: "Each of the four quarters had its own King. Under him there were lords [or *curacas*] over 10,000 Indians, over 1,000 Indians, 500, 100, 50, 10, and 5" (Huaman Poma: 1978, 28). Murra sees the *curacas* as taking the role of extending Inca power throughout the empire by means of "indirect rule" (Murra: 1980, 108).<sup>21</sup> According to Metraux, who was more intent on demonstrating the disciplinarian aspect of Inca rule, those whom the Inca designated to the status of governor had the role of "inspectors". They saw to it that the state lands were worked properly, that harvests were stored, and that all subjects complied with the various *corvée* duties. Assistants of lower status often undertook inspection visits as well.

Included among the duties of the governor or delegate was the collection of census information at certain times of the year. Occasional large tasks, such as building roads or fortresses, expanding irrigation networks and terraces, military service and mining, demanded extensive state planning. Taking a detailed census of the population, land, animals, and modes of production was a precondition for the planning of these tasks. Murra argues that the census was one of most important early steps in the elaboration of the state revenue system. Census information was forwarded to keepers of the *quipu* knots, or accountants, who recorded the information according to a decimal system (Ibid. 108-111).

If the extraction of resources and their redistribution

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<sup>21</sup> It appears, however, that the imperial hierarchy might have been more complicated than this. Some scholars have argued, for example, that a hierarchy existed among the Incas themselves: on one end of the hierarchy there were the royal class and nobility, and on the other there were what the Spanish accounts refer to as the "Incas de privilegio"; i.e., those who were genealogically and geographically most distant from the emperor and the capital (Bauer:1992, 34).

are the main functions of the redistributive state, the articulation of these functions is made possible by an elaborate system of storage. A visit to one of the various ruins of Inca settlements existing today will confirm a sense of the vast number of storage houses that the state had at its disposal. Although only a fraction of these were put to regular use, they were essential in stabilizing the economic base of the empire. Archaeological findings have confirmed that these storehouses kept food, weapons, ornaments or tools, wool, cotton, cloth, and garments. Murra argues, following Polanyi's suggestion that, in economies where they are absent, money and markets often have their substitutes, that the tremendous storing capacity of the Inca state enabled it to operate as a kind of market: it could absorb the large surpluses of the production of a self-sufficient population<sup>22</sup> and circulate goods from different production zones between different communities (Ibid. 121). In fact, this argument is a tempered version of the welfare-state hypothesis according to which the main purpose of the storage system was to redistribute goods to various parts of the empire.

However, this view was contested by one of Murra's students, Craig Morris. He argued that the majority of the surpluses were used at the center of the empire for state projects, and that the redistribution that did occur was directed mainly to regional elites. For Morris, the most important function of storage was as a technology employed to maintain the stability of the economic base of the empire. Storage of supplies ensured that the needs of people engaged in non-agricultural activities in regional areas could be continuously satisfied. It also provided some insurance in case of emergency, and acted as a buffer against the uncertainty of supply arising from problems in the extraction and delivery of resources (Morris: 1986, 66-67). Murra's original thesis on redistribution has recently been further questioned by scholars such as D'Altroy and Earle (1992b), who argue that the term "redistribution" encompasses a number of different types of economic relations.

Van Buren (1996) traces several weaknesses in

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<sup>22</sup> Many of the chronicles suggest that labour obligations from community populations were extremely onerous.



Murra's conception of redistribution-reciprocity to Polanyi's work. Murra subsumes various centripetal forms of economic organization within the category of "redistribution" and thus fails to distinguish and specify various kinds of redistributive activity. Moreover, Polanyi's tendency to abstract the movement of goods from the context of production and consumption likely discouraged Murra from elucidating the character of economic transactions occurring in vertical archipelagos. Finally, in interpreting pre-Colombian history as a story about the gradual supersession of relations of reciprocity by relations of redistribution, Murra follows suit with Polanyi's grand narrative of the historical dissolution of "community" brought on by the advent of the state and modernity (Van Buren:1996, 339-340).

Here, another influence on Murra's work should be acknowledged. In his Doctoral research, which provided the foundation for much of his later scholarship, Murra found the work of structural functionalist anthropologists focussing on African and Polynesian societies relevant inasmuch as they provided non-Western comparisons for his study of Andean society. As a result, Van Buren contends, several concepts underlying this body of work were uncritically assimilated. Most important was "the assumption that redistribution and political authority benefit the ethnic group as a whole – a functionalist perspective easily wedded to the ecological concept of adaptation" (Ibid. 340). According to Van Buren, the net effect was a tendency to simplify and homogenize the differences among Andean societies and to underplay conflict and tension within them (Ibid. 338).

These strands of criticism dovetail with the broader criticism of the empirical nature of Murra's work, and to some degree of the substantivist approach in general, that I want to advance in this paper. The empirical focus of the substantivist approach has been appealing because it was thought to permit greater sensitivity to cultural difference. It ostensibly allows the facts 'to speak for themselves' and thus for ethnohistorians to let go of their (Western) cultural predispositions.<sup>23</sup> However, in the next section I will

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<sup>23</sup> Despite this reorientation effected by substantivism, it is possible to detect the enduring influence of historical

argue that the particular form which facts take on in the substantivist method, and the particular relationship between "fact" and "value" encouraged in substantivist interpretation – whether in the conceptual form of structural functionalism, historical materialism, or indeed, Polanyi's own categorizations – rely on an analogical mode of thinking which, in fact, forecloses the interpretive possibilities of difference.

## The Limits of Murra's Substantivist Approach

*Analogical anthropology ... involves the replacement of one discourse with another. It is claimed that this new discourse, however far removed it may seem to be, is equivalent or proportionate, in a quasi-mathematical sense, to the previous discourse. Ana-logos, in Greek, literally means "talking above", "talking beyond", or "talking later", as contrasted with the talking back and forth of dialogue. The dialogue is a continuing process and itself illustrates process and change; the analogue, on the other hand, is a product, a result*

(Tedlock: 1983, 324).

Our brief sketch of the "empirical economy" of Murra and some of his closest adherents permits a view of a persuasive modern reconstruction of the Inca state and economy. Through detailed "integrative description" these scholars claim to be able to surpass the superimposition of modern preconceptions of the nature of state and economy. Inferences are made from the empirical data according to a methodology that *analogically* transposes certain prominent understandings of the function and structure of the secular modern state. In this final section I consider the limitations of the substantivist approach to the Inca state and economy outlined thus far. I organize these considerations along three axes:

1. The nature of state power, and its relationship to the communities and societies that made up the

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materialism upon both Murra's and Polanyi's work (Van Buren, 39).

pre-Hispanic Andean world; in other words, the nature of the political economy of 'empire'.

2. The constitutive makeup of "the economic".
3. Fundamental epistemological assumptions regarding the material and the immaterial, the profane and the sacred, the physical and the metaphysical.

### *The Nature of State Power*

If the local etnias were in a relationship of redistribution or of institutionalized reciprocity to the Incas, how did the Incas, or local elites, understand their relationship to these vassals? The materialist approach, toward which substantivism has tended when applied to Andean ethnohistory, transposes onto the modern (Western) notion of state power. It is as if the Inca royalty and state organized the domination and manipulation of its vassals from a point situated above and external to the life-world and world-view of these vassals. Analysis proceeds as if the authority of the state was grounded, with conscious premeditation, in a specific religious ideology at the service of the calculated political interests of the rulers. The state is presumed to be sovereign, but the inherent character of sovereignty is not theoretically interrogated. Instead, it is explained away by reference to secular power.

In Gramsci-inspired analyses it is presumed that the concepts of ideology and hegemony are easily transposable to any context, with essentially the same form and within an equivalent sociological analytic, and can be remolded to fit a different set of associational and institutional factors. Where this frame is apparently outstripped, in a manner that threatens contradiction, with elaborations of Inca cosmology, worldview, or religiosity, these are taken as ideological dressings that enable conditions of hegemony. At any rate, they are generally considered to bear only a parenthetical relation to what is taken to be the substantive foundation, but are not considered to alter the basic constitution of this foundation.

These modern accounts hold a suspect relation to their predecessors, the accounts of the early chroniclers. They operate by *analytically* secularizing the content of the latter: the state is first stripped of its sacred

quality, thus devising for it a secular form of sovereignty, and the excess is then reassimilated as so many ancillary factors that contribute to the effective functioning of this newfound sovereignty through a logic of domination. In Murra's overarching oppositions of peasant and elite, local and central, reciprocity and redistribution, the second pole analytically tends towards the secular, and as such carries greater systemic causality than the first. This sharply recasts the accounts of such chroniclers as Garcilaso de la Vega – cited in the last section – within a universalistic social *scientific* register, without taking the integrity of an account as a specific dialogical utterance as the point of departure.

The tendency by the chroniclers to portray the Inca state as operating according to a unified and centralized logic of economic and political power is reflected in modern scholarship insofar as the latter takes decentralizing tendencies to be a result of the imperfect monopolization of power by the state, or of the "counter-hegemonic" wielding of power by communities and populations against the state. There is a parallel tendency in many modern accounts to portray the Inca state as a striving nation-state, thereby reproducing the inclination in early interpretations of the Inca state to project the fervour and nationalism surrounding the rise of the European nation-state. This emphasis on externalism, centralism, and nationalism can be noted in Susan Elizabeth Ramirez's recent study (1996) of a coastal community in Northern Peru. Although she is keen to point out that politics, economics, and religion were inseparably intertwined and that in any case these terms correspond to categories of thought foreign to pre-Hispanic Andean peoples (Ramirez: 1996, 162), her synthesis nevertheless betrays a disposition towards a modern concept of state.

Both on the coast and in the highlands, the Inca allowed local native authorities to wield power as long as they were willing to accommodate the new order by providing labour services that would produce a surplus to support the imperial state and religious hierarchies. ... the Inca imposed his empire's supreme god, the sun, on the local religious pantheon and mandated the adoption of the Quechua language. Both efforts were meant to

incorporate the various northern ethnic groups into what the victors hoped would become, in time, a unified and homogeneous Inca Empire (Ibid. 153).

The most forceful critique of this kind of scholarship has come from Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco (1999). She claims that the only measure that we can be sure had a centralizing intent in the Inca state was the imposition of a single language, Quechua. However, it can not be credibly conjectured, she argues, that this measure functioned to provide cohesion or unity, much less homogeneity – only that it facilitated trade and administration (Rostworowski: 1999, 224). Rostworowski prefers the term “*Tawantinsuyu*” to “*Empire*” to avoid the latter’s Old World connotations. However, she cautions that we can not be sure that “*Tawantinsuyu*” was used before the Spanish conquest – much less that it was used to express a will to unity or cohesion-in-process - since it is first employed in a document dating to the end of the sixteenth century (Ibid. 223).

Rostworowski remains within a Polanyian frame of reference but reverses Murra’s analytical priority of terms by arguing that the system of redistribution is subsumed within the system of reciprocity.

Most of the redistributed goods were consumed by the system of reciprocity, by which the state was under constant obligation to renew great “gifts” to the various ethnic lords, military chiefs, the *huacas*, and so on (Ibid. 202).

In contrast to Murra’s model of vertical control, Rostworowski thus proposes a model of horizontal political integration through ever expanding cycles of trade and commerce. She contends that the system of storehouses was constructed precisely to meet obligations of reciprocity. The system of reciprocity was in turn controlled by means of three sources of income which form the basis of Inca power and domination; namely, the labour force, possession of lands, and state herds (Ibid. 185).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rostworowski contends that reciprocity was in fact the driving force of imperial expansion: “For the Inca economy, reciprocity was like a bottomless vortex requiring new

Extending Rostworowski’s line of inquiry, it could be argued that insufficient scholarly attention has been devoted to the potentially dispersed character of power in the Inca state. Hence, an important challenge for Andean scholarship is to address the possibility that various different communities and regions were “governed” in distinct ways, such that their pre-Inca *political* economies remained largely intact. If we are to adhere to the Murra-Polanyi’s reciprocity/redistribution schema as applying to the community and state respectively, how are we to think about the relationship between the two, especially if this relationship took on different forms in different locations? Can we assume that the kind of reciprocity and redistribution practiced in an Aymara community in what is now Bolivia and the kind practiced in a Cañar community in what is now Ecuador, have enough in common to manifest between them a certain general logic of central domination, thus constituting a single political economy? If we can not assume this, the problem of making logical inferences from the empirical data becomes magnified; which logic of domination are we to use in our reconstruction?

### “*The Economic*”

Maurice Godelier’s Marxian alternative theory of Inca society (1977) is instructive in its attempt to rethink “the economic”. Although Godelier rejects economic formalism, he argues that the substantivist definition of the economy does not produce a sufficient basis for the analysis of causality in the economy. Here arises the danger of empiricism in the substantivist approach since institutions are defined by their apparently self-evident functions.

Intent upon preserving an analytical “hierarchy in the structures of causality concerning the function and evolution of societies” (Godelier: 1977, 3) developed by Marx, Godelier retains the overall Marxian metaphysic that posits capitalism as a point to which historical development teleologically progresses. He thus argues that the imposition by the Spanish

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conquests and territorial annexations, which in turn led to increasing demands and favours” (Ibid. 222).

colonizers of a new mode of production and domination merely continued and accelerated a process that had already been set in motion by the Inca conquest of other Andean communities. Godelier nevertheless argues that Marxism has to be reinvented to offer a viable analytical framework applicable to pre-capitalist societies. With other important economic anthropologists such as E. Terray and P.F. Rey, Godelier argued that the concept of “mode of production” was indispensable to discovering the “invisible logic” of pre-capitalist economies. However, contrary to these Althusserians, Godelier argued that the role of the mode of production of any particular institutional system can not be derived from the ostensible nature of the institutions in question. Indeed, the structural logic of systems of social and economic institutions overdetermine the logic of the very systems of thought and representation that make the functioning of the institutional system to which they are linked appear natural and self-evident. From this viewpoint, a “scientific” Marxist analysis not only unravels the complex and invisible interrelationships between various structures of causality within a society – which never form a coherent and functionally integrated whole – but also reveals the manner in which they translate into epistemological structures that produce illusions to obscure the reality of these structural interrelationships.

Godelier argues that in the Inca empire religiosity was not superstructural but infrastructural, because it was a fundamental element of experience for Andean peoples that helped organize and determine the process of production. He further asserts that in the Inca empire, relations of politico-religious dependence in fact functioned as relations of production. When a significant part of the labour of local communities was dedicated to maintaining the gods, the dead, and the Inca ruling class, who were themselves taken to be divine, it is clear that religion is not merely part of the ideological superstructure but an essential organizing force within productive relations.

In examining the interrelationships between epistemological structures and social structures, Godelier appears to move towards a more reflexive interpretive approach, although he purports to break a

circular hermeneutic logic by instantiating an epistemological break between science and ideology. One problem with his theory is that it cannot account for its own ability to supersede overdetermination within the structures of economic and social formation that characterizes our modern society, market capitalism, and that apparently overdetermine other theories, ideologies, etc. Moreover, the scientism seems to contradict another element of his approach, which foregrounds the subjectivity of the people under study. As a result of this emphasis on subjectivity, it is difficult to see how he can maintain that his approach is scientific, not hermeneutic. He can thus only maintain consistency by positing in effect that people’s thoughts are not causal factors in social transformation.

Despite these obvious limitations, Godelier’s account is useful for thinking our way out of both the empiricism of the substantivist approach and the classical Marxian opposition between base and superstructure. By showing how what we have come to think of as religion, or religious ideology, is in fact constitutive of the base, Godelier introduces into historiographical inquiry a properly philosophical dilemma about the constitutional makeup of “the economic” or the “political economic” in the pre-Hispanic Andean context.

### *Fundamental Epistemological Assumptions*

This argument leads us to another, more fundamental one – but one that also is in danger of being reduced to the status of a platitude if not rigorously framed. The problem, it seems to me, is not merely that we do not have enough data to complete our “integrative description”. It lies in the nature of the substantivist enterprise. It lies in the prevalence of certain metaphysical assumptions about the exercise of economic and political power as a constituent feature of ‘human nature’, which hinders our ability to apprehend the possible pre-Hispanic Andean sense of matters of material sustenance and economy. There are several reasons for this. One is the limiting character of the historical sources. Another is that historiography and ethno-historiography relating to economic matters has generally been grounded within a positivist frame.

We know enough about Andean cosmology to be able to say that the distinction between physical and metaphysical phenomenon was not upheld there. The point will become clearer with a few examples, examples which will also help to illustrate the preceding points.

## Mining and Agriculture

Although the extraction of metals had been taking place long before the formation of the Inca empire, it was only from the second half of the fifteenth century onward that mines were intensively exploited. According to Bernabe Cobo, all gold and silver mines belonged to the Inca but some kinds of mining continued on a local basis after the Inca conquest. Even in the case of gold and silver mining, the *curacas* were responsible for the extractive operations on their own lands. According to Garcilaso's account, "when the Indians brought gold and silver to the Inca, it was not at all by way of tribute, but as a gift" (Garcilaso de la Vega: 1961, 123). Wachtel wanted to push this point as being illustrative of the fact that mining was ultimately controlled locally rather than by the state (Wachtel: 1977, 67). According to a more recent scholar's findings, however, there were two types of mines: those belonging to the Inca and those belonging to the community, each of which had control over their own mines (Berthelot: 1986, 79). Thus we can see that there are many interpretations of the economic and political organization of mining in the Inca empire, and that the disagreement among them is about the nature of the relationship between state and local power in specific groups of mines.

Was there a general pattern or logic to the relationship between imperial and local power? Irene Silverblatt's *Moon, Sun and Witches* is relevant in this regard. Although her analysis is oriented towards surmising a general logic of domination based upon a Gramscian conception of statehood, some of her observations support a more decentered vision of Inca society. According to Silverblatt, the Andean cosmos consisted of an intricate network of relationships between the sacred beings of the natural world and between these and human beings. These relationships were

established on various levels of oppositions, and in contrast to the Western cosmos which is more rigidly structured, the Andean universe was capable of incorporating change within these oppositions. In the Andean cosmos, deities were paired in male and female categories such that each half of any pairing had both a complementary and an antagonistic relationship to the other, or, as Silverblatt says, the relationship existed in a "dialectical balance" (Silverblatt: 1987, 173). And yet the qualities assigned to each half were not absolute in the Christian sense (i.e., being rooted to a cosmic order defined by the final struggle between good and evil). On the relativity of Andean duality, Silverblatt argues that

Although the domains of these divinities were viewed as interdependent and mutually defining, the nature of the relationships between them was always contextually determined. Andean dialectical logic would not accept the attribution of intrinsic or absolute qualities to perceived constituents of the social, natural, or supernatural universe (Ibid. 21).

As these divine beings were an intimate part of the life of human beings, the relationships between individuals reflected the same complementary dualistic principles. It follows that the very imagination of hierarchical order would accord with such a contextual, "dialectical logic" and would therefore resist analytical assimilation under a centralized and unified systemic logic.

General patterns of political order can of course be established. For example, Inca "conquest" included the practice of establishing "a fraternal tie between the highest male deity of the invaders and the highest female deity of the aborigines" (Salomon: 1991, 9). By superimposing their own deities onto local patterns, the Incas used this principle to reinforce and legitimate their political power via the religious realm. For example, one of the major Inca deities, Viracocha, which was androgynous - combining male and female qualities of the sun and the moon, day and night and so on - gained an ideological influence over many local deities (Silverblatt: 1987, 92). However, I suggest that these may be more cautiously viewed as instances of ideological domination. It is another matter altogether

to link these instances into an overarching ideological system of domination, let alone a general political economic system of domination.

The implications of the distinct Andean symbolic and cognitive relationship to nature have not been realized. Since before the epoch of colonialism, mining has in the West consisted of “extracting” metals in a process of dominating and exploiting nature towards the end of building up the nation-state or of “developing” the economy. For pre-Hispanic Andean peoples, mining consisted of harvesting the sacred landscape which was fully alive to them and which defined their very social being. In general, it seems that production was seen as consisting of a sacred relationship of reciprocity between human beings and nature, where nature itself took the primary active part, and people had a secondary though necessary role. We cannot fully understand the “substantive” meaning of the economy, or “empirical economy”, without reference to this set of symbolic meanings.

Now, gold and silver were, of course, extremely important to sixteenth century Spaniards, many of whom came to America in search of wealth. Furthermore, mercantilist thought made a direct connection between the acquisition of gold and silver and an increase in national wealth and the power of the state. Tribute acquired an additional importance in the early colonial economy because of the high valuation of gold and silver. Therefore, it seems logical that the early Spanish chronicles would have interpreted the flow of gold and silver to Cuzco as factoring into a centralized state and economic power. In this context, Garcilaso's account serves as somewhat of a corrective:

Nothing could be bought or sold in the kingdom, where there was neither gold nor silver coin, and these metals could not be considered otherwise than as superfluous, since they could not be eaten, nor could one buy anything to eat them with. Indeed, they were esteemed only for their beauty and brilliance, being suitable to enhance royal palaces, Sun temples, and convents for virgins (Garcilaso de la Vega: 1961, 123).

Given that Inca society did not have markets, precious

metals did not take on the role of money or exchange. Rather, they had a purely symbolic value. Furthermore, in the Inca empire the political significance and religious significance of gold were inseparable. Since the Inca was taken to be the incarnation of the sun's sacred power, gold was seen to have qualities that were intrinsically connected to the sacred power of the Inca. Thus Berthelot states:

If workers did not dare to keep for themselves the smallest part of what they extracted from the Inka's mines, it was precisely because this gold was meant for the sovereign, and not because of the presence of officials whose duty it was to collect the product of their labour (Berthelot: 1986, 82).

It is difficult to say to what degree the various ethnic communities in the Inca empire were persuaded by the religious doctrines of the Incas. But if they resisted persuasion, it would seem that their resistance would have been articulated in a manner that also intermeshed religion, politics, and economics. Accounts of communities that were not of Inca descent (most importantly the *Huaro-chiri Manuscript*) suggest that metals were seen as analogous to harvested crops. They were believed to be a product of the earth, and the earth was considered to be a sacred entity called *Pachamama*. The discovery of a big nugget was taken as a sign of the mine's fertility. Each mine had its own *huaca*<sup>25</sup> to which sacrifices were offered before going to work in the mine in order to encourage the fertility of the earth (Ibid. 82, 83). By mining these metals and bringing them to the surface, Andean peoples saw themselves as intervening in a natural cycle. They saw themselves as thus influencing the sacred power that engendered these metals, as actors amongst deities and sacred bodies. Work in the mines thus enhanced in the workers a sense of the mythical link between sovereign, sun, and gold. According to Steven Stern,

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<sup>25</sup> *Huacas* were sacred energised matter. Andean peoples perceived themselves to have reciprocal ties to *huacas* and Andean deities, which were believed to give them food, land, and health (Rostworowski de Diez Canseco: 1999, 11). Households that served and feasted the *huacas* would expect concrete returns such as abundant crops, good health, steady rains, etc. (Stern: 1982, 16).

"Ritual, cooperative labour, wealth - these three went together in Andean society" (Stern: 1982, 18).

How does this alter our understanding of economic and political power in the Inca Empire? What I am suggesting is that we cannot validly explain the functioning of the Inca economy without understanding it as an economy that is simultaneously sacred and mundane, because unlike the modern West, where spiritual and material reality came to be perceived as fundamentally distinct and in some sense opposed, in the pre-Colombian Andes materiality was imbued with sacred qualities. This is not to say that we should set up a master opposition between the sacred ancient economy and the pragmatic modern economy; rather, the point is to destabilize the opposition between the spiritual and the material by showing how – while nearly indispensable for Western moderns – it was irrelevant in the pre-Hispanic Andean context. The challenge is then to devise analytical concepts and strategies that would be more open to the interpretive possibilities that this opens up.

It could be countered that the examples of gold and silver are not representative, because they were not goods providing for the material sustenance of the people. But the same case that I have made for gold can be made for maize, which the Incas imputed with a ceremonial and religious significance.<sup>26</sup> Or consider the potato: the abundance of the potato crop was taken to be directly indicative of the relationship of reciprocity between the community and Pachamama and other deities or sacred bodies. Or let us look at land.

Land was identified with kinship, and each *ayllu* was

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<sup>26</sup> In an article entitled "Legitimation of the State in Inca Myth and Ritual", Brian Bauer argues that "the annual ground-breaking ceremony in Cusco by the ruling Inca was a ritual reenactment of the battle that took place between humankind and nature" (Bauer: 1996, 333). Bauer finds in agricultural myths the ideological underpinnings of a bellicose state. It is telling, however, that he draws heavily upon the rhetoric of the early Spanish chroniclers which symbolically invoke a violent relation between humans and nature, since their rationalization of conquest was informed by this basic presupposition.

traditionally rooted to a particular parcel of land. Land was perceived to be inhabited by the *ayllu*'s ancestry, the members of whom were taken to exist in the present as living beings (insofar as they needed material offerings and sacrifices for their well-being). The attachment to land was thus very strong, as land provided not only the material sustenance of the farmer but also his or her social and spiritual sustenance. It is probable that land had a similar importance for the Incas, and a grasp of the broader cultural significance of land for the Incas would be crucial to understanding why they continued Andean institutions of land tenure. Zuidema (1964) has shown how the fourfold geo-spatial division of the Inca empire functioned not only to divide the empire into administrative units but also to organize and structure the incorporation of the kinship structures of all of the Incas' vassals. Indeed, "*Tawantinsuyu*" referred not so much to a means of administratively "managing" the empire as to a religious and political organizing principle. This principle in turn determined economic organization.

We might think of the Inca economy as a "sacred imperial economy", which interacted with other local sacred economies in a manner that defined the nature of the "imperial" power relationship in question. A better understanding of the tremendous cultural and religious importance that land had in the Andean community would contribute invaluable to explaining why the Incas were so concerned with providing relative autonomy to the communities. Was the Inca state's use of pre-Inca institutions of land tenure and, for that matter, of various other pre-Inca cultural institutions such as the *mita* and local religious beliefs the result of "either remarkable self-interested insight or inertia", as Murra argued? Would it not perhaps be more fruitful to see the structure of the Inca state as related in a much more internal way to the logic of local practices and traditions?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In criticizing a positivist approach to reading the texts, I am to some extent siding with prominent Andean scholars like Zuidema, Duvoils, and Urton. However, whereas these scholars for the most part focus on the study of Andean culture and religion, I want to emphasise the relevance of these matters for the study of Andean political economy and economic history in general. Moreover, I also insist upon maintaining a distance from the tendency within cognitive-

This is not so much to suggest that the Incas were not the grand rationalists that they were assumed to be as to question what kind of rationality they were taking part in. It is quite possible, for example, that the Incas had begun to conceive of the state and economy in more pragmatic terms (as Murra argues), or that they may have started to assume a dominating role relative to "nature" (as we understand the term). However, this does not give us license to establish general epistemological equivalences of foundational concepts such as "nature" in order to ground empirical analysis.

## **Translation and the Realm of Interpretive Possibility**

I would like to imagine risking a different approach, if only because it promises to be more interesting in providing a contrast to the present one. This approach would abandon a sociologicistic or economic logic for establishing analogical equivalencies. However, given the success of substantivism in unearthing a reservoir of ethnographic data for empirical reconstruction, it would be rash to suggest that it be abandoned. I would like to suggest retaining the essentials of this methodology of cross-examining texts for recurring statement and for systematizing data, while rethinking the meaning of "substantive". It needs to be acknowledged in a much more thoroughgoing fashion that the categories that comprise what is taken to be substantive do not precede analysis, but are in fact the most basic objects of analysis. They are objects of interpretation and as such need to be subject in the first instance to translation. Moreover, given that our knowledge of the Inca empire is primarily grounded in textual accounts, there can be no direct and unmediated translation between two worlds, as in the translation between two coexistent languages.

Translation has to occur from a hypothetical realm that is conjectured through texts that embody within their very makeup the various kinds of violence that

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symbolic anthropology to analogical reasoning of a different kind – now presuming to speak of the other as a hypostatized symbolic entity.

characterized the relationship between Europeans and Andean peoples. Therefore, these texts ought themselves to be treated as attempts at translation between incommensurable realms, that together give rise to what Salomon aptly calls "a literature of the impossible" (Salomon: 1982, 9). Our supplementary task of translation is to consider the conditions under which the original translation occurred and to attempt to provide an alternative, more ethical translation – but one that will nevertheless be constrained in its possibilities by the original translation. Our challenge is to work from the strained attempts at comprehension within the original translation and to search for areas of incommensurability through contradiction and strain within and between texts, even if any one text appears to successfully convince that commensurability in fact dominates its pages. It is not clear that the Andean mode of exercising economic and political power conformed to a rationality and logic that is intelligible and accessible to us – as modern-day students of Andean ethnohistory – through empirical science. A prerequisite to empirical analysis is instead to determine the field of possibility within which the empirical "fact" acquires its facticity.

The tendency to treat the empirical datum recovered from the texts as a series of "facts" should be complicated. There are in reality various types of data that make up the generic category of "facts". There are, first, very basic data, the veracity and accuracy on which a variety of primary sources – including archaeological, oral, and textual – are in agreement. Moreover, our understanding of these data can be assumed to be highly translatable, insofar as their meaning would by all reasonable expectations be transferable between our world and the world of 16<sup>th</sup> century Andean peoples. These constitute highly probable events, or what might be thought of as regularities. However, there is more typically a higher degree of uncertainty regarding the data because of inconsistencies or contradictions in the interpretations from which they are extracted, or because they can only be arrived at by using a certain degree of inference. Our comprehension of these data may also require a higher degree of translation and therefore of interpretation. These constitute probabilities. There is, finally, a class of data that is highly provisional. These



data appear irregularly in the sources and are subject to a high degree of “distortion” in the sources. Included in this category are also data that are much less translatable; i.e., their meaning is very difficult to apprehend due to the obscure and inaccessible form of their representation and to the fact that the form in which they appear to their 16<sup>th</sup> century recorders or to us apparently stands in a tense or even incommensurable relation with their manifestation in the Andean world.

In the substantivist approach, data are a basis for reconstruction, not interpretation. Reconstruction typically takes the form of first setting up a framework out of the first two types of data, and then utilizing the third type of data to ‘fill in the gaps’. The object of this reconstruction is to sketch as comprehensive and self-consistent a picture of the Inca state and economy as possible. The object of a more interpretive approach, on the other hand, is always more provisional. It aims to analyze the Inca state and economy as a realm of probability, and indeed, of possibility. Moreover, a more interpretive approach uses its problematic relationship to the data as a basis for analysis. Different types of data might be expected to bear relatively different relationships to interpretation. The data are taken to be rich in the imaginative interpretative possibilities that they permit, but they do not allow for an infinite number of interpretations. There are, then, certain constraints upon the interpretations that can be justifiably made in light of the available data. It is the function of cross-examination to demarcate lines of constraint by establishing certain regularities for which any interpretation would have to account (or otherwise show why it does not need to be accounted for). As we move from the first to the third types of data, the constraint upon interpretation becomes correspondingly weaker, although not nullified. Indeed, as the data become more subject to speculation, they increasingly come to not merely constrain interpretation but to enable it, as the question of the nature of the data becomes the primary question of analysis. The overall role of data is thus more akin to statements in a multidimensional text: the possibilities for reading and interpreting that text are in turn subject to various levels of constraint and accountability.

The gradually expanding text of the pre-Colombian world that is available to us presents us with a twofold opportunity: on the one hand, to reflexively engage our interpretations with a history of ideas that make up a tradition of interpretation, and on the other, to consider the relevance of this history to the present. In terms of the first, the emphasis is shifted from unearthing historical facts to considering the specificity of the dialogic encounter with which we are confronted in interpreting textual utterances. Concurrently with an investigation into the empirical data and the cognitive-symbolic system of the Inca empire, there needs to be an engagement with a genealogy of ideas constituting Andean ethno-historiography. The logical starting point for this genealogy are the narratives that emerged from European contact and conquest which constitute the most important resource for modern historiography. The accounts of the early chroniclers should be carefully set within the historical conjuncture in which they were written, and any attempt to make extrapolations from empirical information extracted from the text should be based in the first instance on potential Andean conceptualizations and experiences of what may thence be translated as “state” and “economy”. This requires bringing what we know about the Andean symbolic universe and cosmology to bear upon the very essence of the political economy of the Inca state. Both of these steps - the genealogy of Western historiography, and research into the symbolic field of possibility in which the empirical facticity of economy and state takes shape - can ultimately yield valuable insights into our understandings of modern economy and state.

This brings us to the second opportunity mentioned above: the relevance of a history of ideas in Andean ethnohistory for moderns. It is necessary to understand ethnohistorical interpretations as engaging an alterity which is at once our own and wholly other: our own insofar as we are working with a discursive historiographical context that has come to shape who we are and what we think, and wholly other insofar as for all intents and purposes, the pre-contact Andean world stands at the limits of intelligibility and is thus, for us, confined to the realm of conjecture, speculation, and allusion. The relevance and challenge of the study

of Inca state and economy for Western moderns is twofold. On the one hand it provides us with the problem of how another kind of state and economy functioned and thus gives us a vantage point which, if, in the spirit of Polanyi, we can come up with a general interpretive definition of state and economy that can encompass it *in all of its most cogent interpretive possibilities*, could enable us to rethink the development of our Western economy and society. Preceding and accompanying this concern is another: the problem of how to render this remote cultural and historical experience intelligible without sacrificing the essential terms of that experience. In other words, our interpretation is enabled by the existence of an other, and our ability to render the other's otherness will determine the justice of our interpretation. This can be most interestingly achieved by critically engaging our own cultural presuppositions about economy and society with the possibilities of difference opened up in the representation of the society being studied.

Finally, I should make it clear that I have not wanted to assume a relativist position and to argue that we can not come to any valid judgments on the Inca state and economy due to our historical and cultural distance from it. It should also be reiterated that my argument has not been that empirical research cannot yield any valuable insights about the Inca empire and state. In this paper, I have considered the critical implications of a more dialogical approach where the process of coming to interpretive judgments about political economy has to deal in a more fundamental way with the speculative interface between Andean conceptions of materiality, nature, and livelihood and Western historical representations thereof.

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