

The Naked Self Unseen

Daniel Pinchbeck and the Politics of Psychic Evolution

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2007

For the godless anti-authoritarian, the hope that the current order of reality will come to an end during our lifetimes may be the last possible form of big, world-encompassing faith. For those who are faithful in this sense—whether that faith is based in scholarly readings or is purely intuitive—Daniel Pinchbeck’s recent book *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* wants to be the next Bible—or at least a book of psalms.

This well-researched and wide-ranging book is an investigation into all manner of theories about the nature of human beings, our relationship to the world, and our possible futures both dark and bright. Pinchbeck argues that the “intensifying global crisis is the material expression of a psycho-spiritual process, forcing our transition to a new and more intensified state of awareness.” In describing impending ecological and political catastrophe as the result of a spiritual or psychic process, Pinchbeck shows the destruction in an unusual light. Any imminent collapse would not really be the end, but another beginning, a doorway to a place where the “higher consciousness and conscience of our species will be forged through the process of putting the broken and intricate shards of our world back together, piece by piece.”

Pinchbeck is right that catastrophe can catalyze progress, although he’s been clear on the new website he helped create, realitysandwich.com, that the process of psychic evolution may be possible without it. However, what he leaves out of his theory is the notion that “more intensified states of awareness,” many of which, at least in my opinion, are directly political, have existed in pockets throughout history, especially during moments of resistance and revolt.

Therefore, it’s possible that what looks like an evolutionary jump or a “quantum leap of consciousness” is actually a taste of what our flawed human nature might look like liberated from the constricting chains of power. The pernicious nature of repression, in all its internal and external forms, has so deeply distorted our sense of ourselves and our possibilities that if we happen to glimpse an image of our naked self during a drug experience, a festival, or political protest, we feel shock and surprise. What Pinchbeck has recently described as the end result of “a timed evolutionary process” may actually be ordinary subjectivity, temporarily freed from the logic of power.

Though I am critical of Pinchbeck’s theory of human transformation, I recommend *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* to readers of this magazine. The author is an omnivorous and courageous thinker as well as a gifted writer. Pinchbeck’s textured, ceremonial vision of the future is one of the most enchanting utopian visions I’ve encountered, and *2012* serves as an intriguing introduction to overlapping radical currents within physics, philosophy, and the study of ancient peoples. The book is also a useful primer in the concept of psychic evolution, the belief in which may be emerging as a quasi-religious form on the American left, at least among tendencies emphasizing lifestyle and environmentalism. The astute political observer will want to recognize it when it appears.

2012 and the Mind-Stuff Universe

Along with Jared Diamond and Derrick Jensen, Daniel Pinchbeck completes a trio of contemporary thinkers on the topic of apocalypse. While Diamond and Jensen focus on the fault lines along which the current world will crumble, however, Pinchbeck interprets the term apocalypse etymologically to mean “unveiling.” Therefore, he investigates insights and revelations that might lead us toward a “quantum leap in consciousness,” which for him constitutes the true nature of apocalypse. Pinchbeck draws from a wide variety of scholars to do this, including physicists, philosophers, historians, and occultists. While his argument is complex, it’s possible to boil it down to a series of essential steps.

First of all, Pinchbeck’s reasoning is built on the hypothesis that there is some fundamental substance composing both human thought and the external universe: what quantum physicist Amit Goswami has called “mind-stuff.” He backs up this difficult idea by reference to specialists ranging from physicist F. David Peat to the mystical psychoanalyst Carl Jung. The discussion left me feeling that researchers in this area have proved that something exists that we do not yet understand, but unsure as to how powerful that something really is. In any case, if we accept the mind-stuff theory—even for the sake of argument—many consequences follow. The link between cosmic movements and personalities posited by astrology, for instance, would be elevated from mere superstition to the realm of scientific hypothesis.

For Pinchbeck, what’s important here is the notion that the universe has a rhythm and a structure that human society, for most of its history, echoed in its practices and thinking. But modern society—with its ruthless greed, calculated repression, and expansionist obsession—has divorced itself from these natural rhythms. Marching to a toxic and disconnected beat, our society leads us towards self-destruction. The Gregorian calendar, with its complete neglect of lunar cycles, is symptomatic of the larger issue.

Some might see this as a political problem, but Pinchbeck does not see political organizing in the leftist tradition as the solution. Paraphrasing the philosopher Jean Gebser, he writes: “The left-right division represents ... one of the original dualisms underlying civilization... Through the late 20th century, the movements of the Left limited themselves to a materialist understanding of reality—exemplified by Marxism—demanding social justice and economic equality but not the restoration of intuition and the recognition of the hidden, qualitative dimensions of being suppressed by the mental-rational consciousness ... The Left fought for the ‘rights’ of man, while ignoring the ‘lefts’ of man and woman.”

Because radical organizations—whether Marxist, Anarchist, or leftist university departments—are often narrow in their social and artistic norms, it’s easy to sympathize with this sentiment. Anyone who’s spent time in groups like these knows what it’s like to have one’s ideas torched as heresy. But consider the conclusion Pinchbeck draws next: “If ‘mind-stuff’ rather than matter, is the fundamental ground of being, then a transformation of consciousness has, potentially, far-reaching effects—not just in the psychic world, but in the one we perceive to be physical, as well.” Accepting this idea would have far-reaching repercussions, particularly on notions of theory and practice. There would be much less difference between them: the work of thinking and reasoning would direct events in ways we might not at first understand. While I find it difficult to accept this point for a number of reasons, it’s interesting that Pinchbeck’s thinking brings him in line with what political theorists such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos have been saying for years about the need to better integrate theory and practice.

All of this groundwork prepares the way for Pinchbeck’s concept of apocalypse or psychic evolution. On December 21, 2012, the sun will rise over the dark rift at the precise center of the Milky Way, a cosmic event that takes place only once every 25,800 years. This is the event the ancient Mayans used to mark the beginning and end of historical epochs. As we approach that date, social exploitation and environmental holocaust seem to threaten our society’s very existence. In an age of melting ice caps, fictitious capital, and desperate inequality, the prophesied year seems too spot-on to be coincidence.

Change is inevitable and all things must come to an end. However, if one believes that our minds are linked to the cosmos and that there’s a crucial rhythm we’ve forgotten how to hear, then 2012 begins to cast a peculiar kind of shadow, a shadow that covers everything at once, a shadow that flits and moves across the landscape like that quicksilver birdsnake the ancient Mayans predicted would return at this very time.

Power and the Problem of Evolutionary Paradigms

Pinchbeck suggests that psychic evolution may be the only way for humanity to survive the difficult years ahead. The mechanics by which he imagines this taking place are informed by the concept of punctuated equilibrium, a post-Darwinian revision to the theory of evolution that sees change occurring not at a constant gradual pace, but rather in quick spurts during times of trouble and environmental upheaval. Pinchbeck takes this theory and maps it onto the mind: when the previous mental structure “enters its ultimate crisis,” new forms of consciousness appear as mutations and open up new capacities for survival. Those among these mutations that succeed will then multiply and proliferate.

The first problem with this story is the idea that global capitalism is truly down to the last cards in its hand. It is true that peak oil, global warming, and mass extinction all threaten the current order. But even worse, for those of us who share Pinchbeck’s faith in a more joyous and human-centered world, is a vision of our current society, wracked by almost unimaginable humanitarian and environmental disasters, but still holding on, as it does today in places like New Orleans and Iraq. There are many possible outcomes and the complete collapse of capitalism is certainly one.

What I object to is *counting* on that collapse, but then saying it’s okay because the collapse will force us to “evolve” into a higher form. We should not forget that civilizations have collapsed before. While the ensuing lack of centralized power may lead to a brief period of happiness and liberation for some—see, for instance, the discussions of radical life in early colonial America in James Koehnline’s and Ron Sakolsky’s anthology *Gone to Croatan*—power has a way of coming back on the scene empowered by new technologies of repression.

But even if we imagine that 2012 will bring the mother of all collapses, why must we speak of the resultant human change as evolution? The changes Pinchbeck suggests include: the adoption of a lunar calendar; the reintegration of psychedelic drugs into legitimate social and political life; a return to subsistence agriculture (or even hunting and gathering); the abandonment of rational thought as the sole arbiter of truth; and the flowering of the human mind’s latent telepathic and psychic abilities. With the possible and important exception of the latter, all of these involve cultural, not biological change and, in most cases, appropriation of practices developed in the past. If we want to adopt these practices, that’s a conscious political decision we can make. We should know that our decisions are going to be mediated by the existing structures of power, most of which will be in vehement opposition, in part because they want us to keep buying their products and making them rich. Does the language of evolution add anything essential to our picture of cultural change?

Anthropology has fought an academic Hundred Years War over this very question. Generally, those who wanted the field nested within the hard sciences argued yes and those who found scientific explanations of history reductionist argued no. For the most part, the opposition won—at least in the academy. One reason for this, according to biologist Richard Lewontin and historian Joseph Fracchia, is that the project always contains a notion of which societies embody “higher” and “lower” stages of human culture and therefore tends to collapse under its own political weight. Pinchbeck’s thinking is no exception: those who are living for art and spirituality and abandoning the seductions of the capitalist world are more evolved than those who continue to engage fully with it.

Should we replace the politically incorrect idea that societies are higher and lower on an evolutionary scale according to their technological development with a new scale that measures them according to their spirituality and sustain-ability? Perhaps. But we should think deeply before adopting any inherently hierarchical notions that categorize human choices according to a dualistic scale. The framework of evolution can add imperialist tendencies to even the healthiest notions of progress.

There are additional problems with the application of evolutionary models to human thought. The attempts of biologists such as E.O. Wilson to cram the complexities of human history into a linear evolutionary model have seen results that will not satisfy the skeptical thinker. If the modern West is the pinnacle of cultural evolution because of its advanced technology, how can we explain the simultaneous barbarisms of imperialism and Nazism? Those who apply evolutionary models to history portray themselves as more scientific and rigorous, yet their descriptions tend towards myopia.

The Critical Art Ensemble may have pinpointed the problem in their book *The Flesh Machine*:

“There is little basis for likening a blind, groping process of species configuration ... to a rationally engineered process of social and economic development ... Retrograde notions of cultural development, such as providence, progress, and manifest destiny, have more explanatory power, because they at least recognize intentional design in cultural dynamics, and at the very least they imply the existence of a power structure within the cultural environment. Evolutionary theory, in its social sense, is blind to the variable of power, let alone to the inequalities in distribution.”

But power must remain the subject of the radical gaze, because it is power—and our own weakness in confronting and dismantling it—that most directly prevents us from making the changes that Pinchbeck wants to see.

Ask yourself: What is it that keeps us stuck in this place where the honey flowing down the rocks of the future is visible but out of reach? Is it something wrong with all of us, something so deep inside that we need to transform ourselves completely in order to change it? Or is it a habit of domination, of seeking power over one another, that we’ve learned and internalized?

Judging by the moments when I believe I’ve witnessed freedom, I’d pick the latter. We don’t need to evolve into higher beings to dip a finger into that sweetness. We’ve tasted it a thousand times with these bodies and these minds: in Paris in 1968, in Seattle in 1999, at random small-town jazz shows, at Burning Man, and a hundred places lesser known. Everyone will have their own list of life’s radical moments, but the commonality that runs through mine is that they all happen away from power’s gaze. They take place when power is weak and we are strong. In those moments, we get a rare glimpse in the mirror. And we’re surprised at the naked self we see.

Expecting the unexpected

Pinchbeck is a great utopian writer, and his vision of a post-capitalist world excites me. However, I do not believe that psychic evolution is needed to get us there, nor even really possible. What characterizes the moments that have allowed men and women to experience freedom in the ways Pinchbeck describes is not psychic evolution but the relative weakness of centralized power, which often—though not always—amounts to a weakness in technology. The self that we find in freedom is so different and so much more powerful than we’re used to that we’re likely to take it for a brush with a higher species.

It’s true that some people today might respond to power’s retreat by attempting to grab it themselves, perhaps through direct physical violence. However, the fact that fifty thousand people—fifty thousand, I repeat—can take drugs, participate in artistic creation, and explore their minds together at Burning Man gives me hope that this dominating tendency can, at least for a time, be overcome. Many anarchists, for instance, already believe that human nature is essentially artistic, sexual, creative, and psychic, and encourage political rebellion infused with artistic expression.

Nothing is gained by thinking of these proposed and occasionally realized acts of creation and rebellion as an evolutionary step. First of all, evolution, as scientists understand it, involves random mutations interacting with the environment, with some mutations generating higher rates of survival than others. It’s an insult to our choices to call them random, and it’s an oxymoron to call evolution “conscious.”

But the even more significant problem is that the biggest obstacle to our success in creating true liberation, in communicating with each other deeply, in understanding the rhythms of the earth and cosmos and incorporating them into our lives, is *power*. And power is better discussed using the framework negotiation and struggle—even when conducted on highly irrational grounds—than the framework of evolution, which does not describe social change well.

It may sound like a fantasy to some, but I get the feeling that people today are genuinely exhausted with life under the kind of totalizing power that rules our lives today. They’re exhausted by its severe demands and counterfeit rewards. They may not talk about it, but they know the possibilities are wider than anyone ordinarily acknowledges. And so, from time to time, usually in private, they take off their masks and show their true faces. It happens unexpectedly in bars, in taxicabs, in bed, in cars pulled over by the side of the road.

Pinchbeck is right that we'll have to change ourselves to achieve even a fragment of the kind of world he imagines so well. He's also right that the current time presents a unique opportunity for doing so. But the change will involve the unleashing of something we see bits and pieces of all the time, not a transformation into an unknown higher consciousness. It will mean confronting the lust for domination, both within ourselves and without, and finding another side of human nature on which to found our society.

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Fifth Estate #376, Halloween, 2007

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