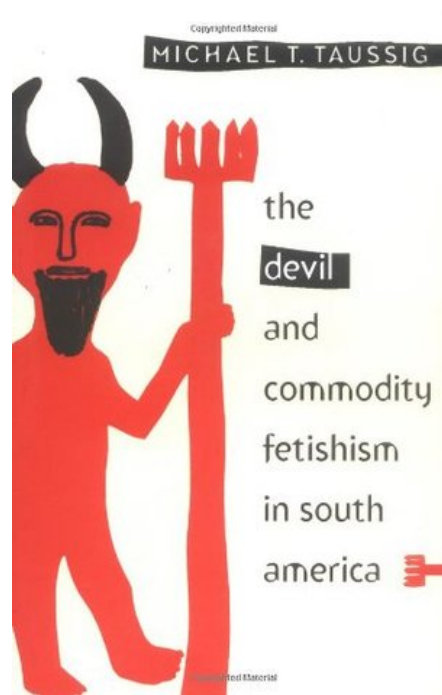




The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America

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My aim in this book is to elicit the social significance of the devil in the folklore of contemporary plantation workers and miners in South America. The devil is a stunningly apt symbol of the alienation experienced by peasants as they enter the ranks of the proletariat, and it is largely in terms of that experience that I have cast my interpretation. The historical and ethnographic context lead me to ask: What is the relationship between the image of the devil and capitalist development? What contradictions in social experience does the fetish of the spirit of evil mediate? Is there a structure of connections between the redeeming power of the antichrist and the analytic power of Marxism?

The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America Details

Date : Published January 1st 1983 by University of North Carolina Press (first published 1980)

ISBN : 9780807841068

Author : Michael Taussig

Format : Paperback 264 pages

Genre : Anthropology, Nonfiction, Ethnography, History, Academic, Philosophy, Theory



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Emma Roulette says

I think that when we read ethnography about cultures other than our own, we end up learning just as much about how weird our own culture is. Good ethnography uncovers the social relations that construct meaning in a particular society, calling into question the processes that shape the facts and concepts that we call our own. It makes us realize that we have taken for granted the paradigms that we use daily to understand our world. Our schemas of categorization have become contact lenses that have melded with our eyeballs, but ethnography shows us that those lenses are there, and attempts to describe how they came about.

There is a whole universe of matter. When we look at one organization of matter (one thing) and describe it as it is, without taking into account its relationship to other things, we “thingify” it, animate it with special qualities that emanate from itself, not from anywhere else. And that’s how “things” become reified, animated and then fetishized.

Taussig’s analyses are heavily Marxist. He shows how the transition from precapitalist (peasant) to capitalist modes of production shaped new modes of thought in each society that he studied. And of course, this makes us wonder about our own epistemological frameworks and how they have been shaped by the prevailing economic system as well. Through a very concise and helpful explanation of use- and exchange-values, we are warned against interpreting cultural phenomena in relation to its purported function or utility.

If we look at a shoe, it has two types of values: a **use-value** and an **exchange-value**. The shoe’s use-value is found in its comfort, its ease of walking, its pleasure to the eye, whatever. The shoe’s exchange-value is found when we analyze how it can be exchanged for another commodity. In exchange-value, the shoe becomes qualitatively identical to any other commodity. So a shoe can equal 10,000 paperclips, a palace can equal 10,000 shoes, and so forth. But not all cultures have a concept of objects based on their exchange value. Taussig cites Malinowsky’s ethnography of the Trobrianders. You could exchange your tobacco for their pearls. But they don’t quantify tobacco and equate it with a quantitative value of the pearl, because if you wanted one of the *really good pearls* you would have to trade something *qualitatively* different. So in terms of Taussig’s South American capitalist-transitioning societies, we see the Peasants aiming to satisfy an array of qualitatively different needs, while the Capitalists are aiming for limitless capital accumulation. Because of this transition, “commonality and mutuality give way to personal self-interest” and then “the exchange ratio of commodities mediates and determines the activities of the people.”

Our western capitalist biases push us to consider social rituals as disguises for *obtaining* some sort of capital (be it social, financial, whatever), but Taussig stresses that we must instead see each phenomenon as it is experienced by its participants, and how they make sense of that in relation to other phenomena. Because if all sociality is a mask for obtaining capital, why does it take on the *particular* form that it does, with its wealth of embedded mythologies, rather than another set of ideas or practices?

Renee says

Too communist-heavy for my liking.

Malcolm says

Despite the title, this is not an exploration of satanic rituals – but it is very much an ethnography of religion, colonialism and the changes brought about in life experience as a result of the imposition of the new ways of being that colonialism brings about. Good cross cultural scholarship and ethnography can expose and reveal an enormous amount about the ‘home’ culture of the researcher while at the same time unravelling and allowing us to make sense of another way of being and living.

In this case, Taussig has problematised many of the taken for granted aspects of capitalism, not as an exploitative economic system or any of those other critiques from the left, but in terms of a capitalist way of relating to the people and things around us (the things Bertell Ollman explores in his brilliant book *Alienation* even though it, too, is demanding). He has done this by taking two cases of societies-in-transition, of communities in Colombia and Bolivia where the peasantry is becoming proletarianised – that is, being made into a working class we can recognise as waged labourer. Based on fieldwork conducted in the 1970s, Taussig was able to draw on informants whose lives spanned much of the 20th century and as such who had witnessed and been part of the gradual collapse of the traditional *hacienda* system with its social relations and hierarchies in favour of a gradual incorporation in a global capitalist economy.

He built the case around two settings. In the first, we see peasant farmers in north-west Colombia being drawn into capitalist agriculture, but more importantly whose residual peasant systems are being rolled back as agribusiness established itself in the region. In the second, he draws on evidence from mining communities in Bolivia, where the change is much slower – there were commercial mines from the time of Spanish conquest – but the industrial change much more severe as workers are removed from anything resembling the former agricultural settings.

In both cases, his analysis turns around systems of exchange. In the Colombian case (the Cauca valley, on Colombia’s Pacific coast), he paints a picture of two parallel economic systems – a peasant economy built on notions of gift, reciprocity and exchange with minimal need for cash, and a capitalist economy based in the trade in commodities and dependence on externally supplied markets. As part of this transition, peasant small holdings allowing relative self-sufficiency (he is careful not to romanticise the extent of self-sufficiency or quality of life) with work cycles based in mutuality were being wound back as agribusiness, in this case sugar, established itself as the dominant cash crop and peasant farmers were transformed into farm labourers.

The role of the devil in the cosmology of this region centres on the ability to gain advantage over others, principally through deals done to produce wealth – but the cost of these deals is enormous: first, the land becomes unproductive and second the wealth is tainted and cannot be used for anything but consumption. That is, the cost of consorting with the devil is the loss of productivity. The devil, then, can only be invoked in the capitalist economy, not the peasant economy which is, to a large degree, non-acquisitive and local provisions prevent the transfer of peasant wealth to descendants. Crucially, the devil arrived with colonialism, and in this area had become associated with the conservative land owning class that, among other things, invoked the devil and the church to maintain its power through years of conflict in the 19th and 20th centuries. That is, the devil informs a class analysis and class consciousness among workers in the region. Taussig is careful not to overplay this relation, but to see the devil (and therefore an external source of evil) as a factor in the breakdown of older forms of peasant-based reciprocity in favour of capitalist social relations.

The other case draws on a very different experience of proletarianisation in the form of commercial mining in and around Oruro in Bolivia. Here the economic transformation is quite different, given the extent of disruption to lifestyles, but also there is a very different underlying cosmology drawing on local concepts of balance and Inca notions of dominant deities (with all the contradictions this brings). Here, the devil-like form is the controller of the mines who must be propitiated and who remains a constant threat to miners.

Again, drawing on historical evidence and field work with older miners and several centuries of archival material, Taussig is able to point to a transformation in owners'/bosses' relations with these cosmological forces. In this case, however, the change is not newly framed capitalist relations but the nationalisation of the mines in the late 1940s. The picture Taussig paints is of previous owners' recognising the power of the devil, here called Tio (uncle), as a force in mine production and safety; a recognition lost once bureaucratic management took over under state ownership.

The image of the devil in these miners' lives is much more complex than the clearer lines of change in the Colombian case in part because Taussig is able to show how traditional cosmology provided sites for resistance of both Inca rule and subsequent Spanish and later rule. He paints a compelling picture of colonised peoples taking on the cosmology of their rulers and reinscribing the figures of that religion (the Inca's Sun God, from the Spaniards, Christ, the Devil and the Virgin) and weaving them into their cosmology and with it their way of organising the world to make those figures forces of resistance to external dominance and assertion of local autonomy and control. Once again, he draws a powerful contrast with gift economies and systems of reciprocity, and in doing so reveals the changes social links, relations and associations associated with capitalist relations of production.

These are rich and engaging ethnographies that tell us much about social relations in transition in these regions. This is enough to make the book valuable. There is the second tier, however, that Taussig notes early in the discussion but then, for the most part, leaves implicit. For many of us, capitalism is simply a taken for granted, along with the ways and forms of social relations that flow from it.

Stepping back from that set of taken for granted views by looking at societies-in-transition allows us to ask significant questions dominant everyday ways of being in the world – and this is where commodity fetishism comes into the case. This notion, developed most comprehensively by Marx in *Capital*, provides a means to explain acquisition and the mediation of social relations through things. It is not an easy concept to get hold of; Taussig's way into the problem here is to present commodity fetishism through the distinction between use value (which he sees as the dominant facet of gift/reciprocal/peasant economies) and exchange value (as the dominant form of value in capitalism). In this he is being classically Marxist (the book remains, for me, one of the best pieces of Marxist analysis and for that reason alone is great for teaching). As a result of this analysis, Taussig has not only given us a rich ethnography but has allowed us as readers to look back on our ways of being (that frame and shape our reading position) to allow us to ask fundamental questions about social organisation, cosmology and ways of being in capitalist societies.

The book was first published in 1980, and I first read it a few years later while still an undergraduate; it hurt my head then, especially the opening theoretical chapters, and it is still, in places, quite demanding, but I think 30 years later I recognise its power and importance, its subtle grasp of the cultural relations of colonialism and its insightful and important interweaving of economic, religious and daily social relations into a potent explanation of how oppressed and marginalised groups make sense of and keep power over their lives and ways of being in the world. Three decades later and on a second read, I still think it one of the finest analyses of social relations, of colonialism and resistance to it and of the alienation from self (individually and collectively) that results from capitalism's form.

Katrina says

A little too much economics for my taste.

Matt Webb says

Recommended by Anne G after a discussion about understanding exchange and use values better.

Dave says

Really brings it home how something isn't intrinsically itself, but has qualities only so far as its different from the things around it. Makes a great case for a relational rather than an atomistic view of reality.

Youssef says

Finally finished this damn book after three years. Sorry Saba, I hope ur doing well.

Also thanks Taussig, I guess.

Viii Legion says

Triumphs as an ethnography, fails at political commentary. The author expertly chronicles the synthetic blend of Roman-Catholic, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin superstitions and religious faiths South American agricultural workers harbor which is very interesting. However, the author occasionally inserts his naive belief that Marxism can somehow save these people from exploitation which detracts from the ethnography. Not to get too political, but if Capitalism and Marxism both become susceptible to the inherent factor of human greed, and conveniently ignores the innumerable atrocities that fall on the wrong side of hilarious that Marxism is responsible for. If the author was able to restrain himself from using this novel as an occasional pulpit for idol-Marxism worship, it would be a sure five star.

Kylie says

As far as ethnographies go, this one is pretty good. Easily readable for anyone not familiar with the theory that's being applied in the study. However, there is a bit of a slog through the history at the start of the book, I would almost go so far as to say to skip the first 50-70 pages.

_ says

"And this is, after all, the lot of our disciplines of History and Anthropology, their fundamental power lying in their stockpiling the excess without which meaning and representation could not exist, namely, the belief in the literal basis to metaphor--that once upon a time, or in distant places, human sacrifice and spirit possession and miracles did occur, and ghosts and spirits, sorcerers and witches, gods and people making devil's pacts did walk the face of the earth. History and Anthropology become, together with the folk tale and a certain type of popular wisdom, the depositories and proof of those unbelievable acts required now by

language to carry off its tricks of reference, its tropes and figures."

Peter says

Interesting but I was ultimately left unconvinced, particularly by the final chapter

Reid says

Very good and highly informative.

Catherine says

Marxist historians CANNOT write.

John Victor says

Very interesting anthropological study imo

Myka says

This book is soooooooooo cool! it takes two examples of indigenous communities in latin america and looks at how they have begun to use discourses of the devil and the demonic at the same time as capitalism was forced on their lives. It essentially argues that capitalism can be best understood/revealed/denaturalized by using the imagery of the devil, soul stealers, etc.
