

## Culture

**Michael TAUSSIG, *The Devil and Commodity Fetichism in South America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980. 256 pp, US \$19.50 (cloth)**



Margaret Rodman

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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condense the four roles of Paul's paradigm into one, and if, as Paul suggests from his analysis of the iconographic depictions of Cherenzi (the patron deity of monks), the reincarnate lama appropriates the aspects of the good father and the good mother, he would embody the ultimate solution to the Oedipal crisis.

But this argument warrants careful examination. As Paul would have it, the reincarnate lama is of special joy to the monastic community in that his existence obviates the need for women. Tibetan symbolism, however, points in a slightly different direction. The reincarnate is not self-generating. The parents of a Dalai Lama are among the most venerable personages in Tibet and the reincarnate lama always travels from one death to another birth in the company of sky goddesses. The chief defender of the Dalai Lama is a wrathful goddess, whether or not she may be a 'bad mother imago', she is necessary for a Dalai Lama's 'being in the world'. Furthermore, Paul disappoints in failing to pursue the question of how a reincarnate lama achieves his 'immortality'. In Tibetan thought, all souls are immortal, subject to rebirth in different bodies and different realms. What distinguishes the reincarnate lama from this lot is the esoteric wisdom enabling him to select the precise circumstances of his rebirth for the benefit of humanity. This esoteric wisdom in Tantric parlance is known as feminine. Paul argues that reincarnate lamas do not pass through an Oedipal succession crisis, but does not mention that reincarnate lamas must demonstrate before their tutors a 'mastery' of this esoteric wisdom upon being initially recognized as the 'true' incarnation and later, upon taking examinations. This would suggest that when biological need for women is repressed, Tibetan symbolism finds a way to introduce this need on another level. The subtleties of this transformation are worth pondering.

In sum, this book is challenging and engagingly written, it submits a rich span of cultural materials to a fast-paced analysis, but at times impoverishes that same material by overlooking the discrepancies between Sherpa and Tibetan exegeses and foregoing the import of these exegeses in favor of Freudian symbolic fusions. It will invite debate from several disciplines.

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By Margaret Rodman  
University of Waterloo

Wage labourers in Colombia sugar plantations and Bolivian tin mines make contracts with the devil to increase productivity, yet they invoke God and fertility spirits when they cultivate land as peasant farmers. They regard practices that we accept as commonplace aspects of economic life, such as the transformation of labour into labour-time, as unnatural and even evil. These are elements of a central paradox whose meaning Michael Taussig explores on two levels: he examines why the people in his study represent their involvement with capitalism in terms of the devil, and he challenges our assumptions about the naturalness of our own cultural forms.

A dynamic blend of fantasy and social realism constitutes reality in the Cauca Valley of Colombia where Taussig conducted four years' research. This is the Macondo of Garcia Marquez' fiction, a land where, as Taussig observes, the production of magic is inseparable from the magic of production. Peasants share and exchange magical power with plants and mountains. Plantation workers make pacts with a devil who is ambiguously evil. Such a contract is believed to enhance the worker's productivity, thereby increasing his income, but the money is "barren": it "cannot serve as productive capital but has to be spent immediately on what are considered to be luxury consumer items" (p. 94). To make such a pact is to court danger and invite early death. For plantation workers, the devil symbolizes production and destruction, the "dialectical oneness of good and evil" (p. 113). Whether, or how often such contracts are actually made are questions the author finds irrelevant to an examination of the alleged pacts as a reaction to the restructuring of the peasants' world.

Analysts who would reduce the fantastic beliefs and practices of displaced peasants in the Cauca Valley (or in the Andean mines) to a desire for material gain, a strategy for coping with anxiety, or a response to perceptions of a Limited Good blind themselves to the vivid images cast up in the clash between an economy based on use-value and large-scale capitalist development. Taussig recognizes that one must expose devil beliefs that seem natural to practitioners for the fetiches they are. But what is

truly innovative in Taussig's study is his ability to demystify without destroying. He breathes new life into Marxist anthropology by refusing to discount the reality of symbolic fabrications. He mines the ambiguities of meaning in contracts with the devil, revealing the resources such beliefs provide for actually strengthening the critical consciousness of people who resist the reifications of capitalism in their struggle to deal with "a way of life losing its life" (p. 17).

Taussig develops Marx's ideas on the fetishism of commodities through material gathered on the geographical and metaphysical periphery of capitalism. The reader gains an appropriate vantage point from which to reflect on the false naturalness of the way we transform such abstractions as money into things that are at once animated and inanimate. As in South America, capitalism seemed neither good nor natural to European workers until the proletariat developed a new set of attitudes, accepting the illusion that labour is an end in itself and that commodities are determinants of human relationships. This transformation is profound, affecting all of capitalist culture including the analysis of socio-economic relations: it has often introduced a mechanical and empirical bias into Marxist analyses. Taussig thus comes face to face with the difficult necessity of developing a new way to appropriate the meaning of symbols that can free his analysis from the constraints of a capitalist consciousness. Unfortunately, the analogical reasoning he employs spins too fine a thread to bind Aristotle's economic theory securely to Cauca peasants' views on money. Levels become somewhat confused until, at times, it is unclear which models are the

peasants', Aristotle's, or the author's. The formality of the analysis seems at odds with the dynamic contextualization evident in the rest of the book. One wonders why Taussig chose this "animated structuralism" in preference to building on the work of others who share his conviction that the problem of commodities lies at the heart of capitalist society and forms the centre of a crisis that reverberates throughout all aspects of the social system. For example, Baudrillard's view of commodities as part of the consumption of a system of objects would seem to be particularly relevant.

Despite this weakness, the best of anthropological literature aspires to what Taussig achieves. In *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* the exotic becomes common sense and the familiar comes to seem strange, revealing its bizarre underpinnings of false consciousness. This glimpse of the social construction of reality integral to social sciences in capitalist culture confronts us with a challenge to develop tools for analyzing the appearances of phenomena as collective representations redolent with historical meaning, neither mistaking these illusions for reality nor dismissing them because they are false.

One sentence in the book's prefatory quotation from Walter Benjamin could serve to sum up Taussig's quest and his contribution: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* is a bold and provocative attempt to reintroduce a concern with the role of man's consciousness in social development into a Marxist perspective.