

# The Genesis of Capitalism amongst a South American Peasantry: Devil's Labor and the Baptism of Money

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An Australian, trained at the London School of Economics, Michael Taussig is currently professor at Columbia University, New York. He engages in a wonderful dialogue with Marx, Weber, and even Aristotle in this piece, which shows how certain "magical" practices found among plantation workers in Colombia emerge not only in response to capitalist exploitation but serve as an enlightened moral critique of its consequences. This might be seen as a late phase of the rationality debates, in which the tables are turned such that the rationality of the West comes under question from its victims and from the postcolonial world. Taussig argues that the plantation workers have an understanding of commodity fetishism akin to Marx. Commodity fetishism is a kind of inversion or transformation of totemism in which attention is placed on human products rather than natural species, but in which they are understood to have life, vitality, reproductive potential, and possibly even intentionality, while disguising the human labor entailed in their production.

Taussig's approach has stimulated much discussion; lively criticism as well as comparative material on the imagination of money can be found in Parry and Bloch (1989a [1979]; cf. Burrige 1969) and De Boeck (1999), while the local critique of forms of accumulation has formed the basis for many anthropological accounts, often with respect to witchcraft (Fisiy and Geschiere 1991, Solway 1998, Weiss 1998).

This early essay was one of the first in a remarkable stream of work by Taussig that explores the creative responses to the often horrendous impact of Europeans on Latin America and that serves, as in this essay, also as a mirror for modernity. The argument

is expanded in his 1980 book, which adds an analysis of the practices of Bolivian tin miners well described by Nash (1979). Taussig then delved into surrealism and Frankfurt School theory to produce rich books on shamanism and violence (1987) and colonial mimesis (1993; cf. Kramer 1993, Stoller 1995). This has led him to a powerful auto-critique of the functionalist inclinations of the original essay in an argument that emphasizes the seductive qualities of transgression, danger, and sheer excess (1995, cf. 1999). The 1995 essay should be read in conjunction with the present piece.

What does wage labor and capital mean to a peasantry that is subjected to rapid rural proletarianization and what is the basis of that meaning?

I wish to discuss an aspect of this question in the light of certain ideological reactions manifested by a South American lowland peasantry as expanding sugar plantations absorb their lands and peasants are converted into landless wage laborers. In the southern extremities of the Cauca Valley, Colombia, it is commonly thought that male plantation workers can increase their output, and hence their wage, through entering into a secret contract with the devil. However, the local peasants, no matter how needy they may be, never make such a contract when working their own plots or those of their peasant neighbors for wages. It is also thought that by illicitly baptizing money instead of a child in the Catholic church, that money can become interest bearing capital, while the child will be deprived of its rightful chance of entering heaven.

Analysis of these beliefs in their social and historical context indicates that the lower classes' implicit understanding of the new mode of production is inherently critical and antagonistic and that the axiomatic basis of this antagonism rests on their conscious opposition of "use values" to "exchange values" – the opposition of the satisfaction of natural wants, on the one side, to the limitless search for profits and capital accumulation on the other. In making this distinction these people share a close affinity with the economic theorizing of the Schoolmen of the European Middle Ages, and with the economic philosophy of Aristotle, whose insights on this matter were often quoted favorably by Karl Marx himself, since the opposition of use value to exchange value was basic to his entire system of analysis.

Further elucidation of this distinction leads to a discussion of the metaphysical and moral bases underlying the lower classes' understanding of capitalist relations of production and exchange, in which their folk mysticism is contrasted with that form of capitalist mystification to which Marx gave the name of "commodity fetishism." Evaluation of this contrast is enhanced by an analysis of the mode of reasoning utilized by the supporters of the use value economy. This reasoning appears to derive from a concept of the universe as an interrelated organism which is understood through the conscious application of animistic analogies, rather than by means of the atomistic causal paradigm which has gained ascendancy in the social sciences since the rise of Newtonian mechanics and the birth of the industrial revolution in the West.

### Attitudes towards Wage Labor

A theme of constant interest to historians of the industrial revolution in Europe, as well as to sociologists concerned with socio-economic development in the Third World, is the attitude of workers who are new to the modern wage labor situations. The first reaction of peasants and artisans who become wage workers in modern business enterprises is frequently if not universally one of indifference to wage incentives. Regarded as a failure to maximize market opportunities, a lack of labor commitment, or a peculiar irrationality about complying with the postulates embodied in *homo oeconomicus*, this response has persistently frustrated capitalist entrepreneurs the world over.

Max Weber referred to this response as "primitive traditionalism," and much of his research was an attempt to explain its transcendence by the capitalist spirit and the capitalist work ethic.

This traditionalism survives far down into the present; only a human lifetime in the past it was futile to double the wages of an agricultural laborer in Silesia who mowed a certain tract of land on a contract, in the hope of inducing him to increase his exertion. He would simply have reduced by half the work expended because with this half he would have been able to earn as much as before.

(Weber, 1927: 335)

In a recent work, an anthropologist sums up some of his findings on this subject in terms of the persistence of use value practices rather than in terms of "primitive traditionalism":

Recruited as plantation hands, they frequently showed themselves unwilling to work steadily. Induced to raise a cash crop, they would not react "appropriately" to market changes: as they were interested mainly in acquiring specific items of consumption, they produced that much less when crop prices rose, and that much more when prices fell off. And the introduction of new tools or plants that increased the productivity of indigenous labor might only then shorten the period of necessary work, the gains absorbed rather by an expansion of rest than of output. All these and similar responses express an enduring quality of traditional domestic production, that it is production of use values, definite in its aim, so discontinuous in its activity.

(Sahlins, 1972: 86)

The exotic attitudes and beliefs which so-called traditional cultures exhibit towards the early stages of penetration by the modern capitalist economy often seem bizarre and irrational to Western eyes. Luther's identification of the devil with capitalism (Brown, 1959: 218-19; Tawney, 1954: 72-91), some Melanesian cargo cults, certain messianic movements, Weber's examples of "primitive traditionalism," as well as the beliefs we consider below, are but some of the numerous instances of such attitudes and concepts. Rather than dismissing these responses as "traditional" or irrational, the approach adopted in this essay is that it would seem to be more true to the facts as well as more enlightening to consider these reactions as outcomes of a clash between a use value orientation and an exchange value orientation, thus viewing them as the beginning of a potential critique of capitalism. They provide us with insights into the irrational basis of our own economy and stereotype of

*homo oeconomicus*, and can be usefully considered as illustrative of a form of "primitive Marxism."

This "primitive Marxism" was undoubtedly inherent in the outlook of the European proletariat in the early stages of the birth of the capitalist system, but has since been largely superseded by a new world view which regards the wage contract system, market pricing, and the institutionalization of profit and greed as natural and ethically commendable. In the light of this historical amnesia, which afflicts all social classes in a developed market economy, it is all the more important to dwell on the critique offered us by those neophytic proletarians in the Third World today, who are just entering the capitalist system with their goods and labor and who often appear to regard that system as anything but natural and good. In the Cauca Valley the sense given to the devil and his role in contracting wage labor is like the definition of the early Christian fathers as "he who resists the cosmic process," which in this context comes close to the idea of forcing things in the interest of private gain without regard to what are seen as their intrinsic principles (cf. Needham 1956: 69-71).

The destruction of the pre-capitalist metaphysics of production and exchange was considered by at least two influential social theorists as mandatory for the successful establishment of modern capitalism. Max Weber regarded the magical superstitions associated with production and trade to be one of the greatest obstacles to the rationalization of economic life (1927:355), and in his essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* often reiterated the point that

Labor must . . . be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling. But such an attitude is *by no means a product of nature*. It cannot be evoked by low wages or high ones alone, but can only be the product of a long and arduous process of education. Today, capitalism once in the saddle, can recruit its laboring force in all industrial countries with comparative ease. In the past this was in every case an extremely difficult problem. (Weber, 1958: 62, my emphasis)

And as Karl Marx observed, the transition to the capitalist mode of production is only completed when direct force and external economic conditions, although still used, are only employed exceptionally. An entirely new set of traditions and habits have to be developed among the working class, to the point where common sense regards the new conditions as natural.

It is not enough that the conditions of labor are concentrated in a mass, in the shape of capital, at the one pole of society, while at the other are grouped masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labor power. Neither is it enough that they are compelled to sell it voluntarily. The advance of capitalist production develops a working class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production *as self-evident laws of Nature*. (Marx, 1967, I:737, my emphasis)

However, the behavior and certain beliefs of the lower classes on whom this article focuses suggest strongly that the characteristics of the capitalist mode of production are there viewed neither as good nor as self-evident laws of Nature; in fact they are regarded as unnatural and even evil.

The lower classes are of Afro-American stock, and until 1955 or thereabouts most of them were smallholders owning parcels of land without legal title in the southern

extremities of the Cauca Valley, an extremely fertile region in the southwest of Colombia. Since about 1955 the majority of these peasants have had little choice but to work full or part-time as wage laborers for the surrounding sugar plantations which have expropriated much of the peasant's land, often through direct physical force.

Historical sources amply demonstrate that ever since the abolition of slavery in 1851 the peasants have shown a marked aversion towards wage labor on the large estates of the rural elite. Until the early decades of the twentieth century they were able to retain their position as independent smallholders and formed a powerful political group capable of thwarting their previous owners who desperately needed labor to maintain the flagging estates and gold mines. However, with the opening of the valley to the international sea lanes in 1914, the influx of vast amounts of foreign capital at about the same time, and a sharp natural increase in local population, the large estate owners have been able to appropriate peasant lands and establish a flourishing plantation economy, a process accelerated by the *Violencia* of the early 1950s.<sup>1</sup>

Today no more than one-fifth of the population in the south of the valley lives in the countryside, while the remainder live in the rural slum towns, little more than impoverished barracks for plantation workers, bereft of clean drinking water and adequate sewerage. Few of the townspeople own land, and many of the peasants who still occupy farm land also work on the plantations. By any standards the bulk of the population is poor, and malnutrition is rife.

[...]

The workers themselves... feel that they are being constantly cheated, underpaid, and humiliated. They distrust and hate the plantations and generally resent the fact that the crops produced on the large estates are destined for export and not for local consumption. With their trade unions in ruin since the early 1960s, sabotage of mill machinery and tractors is common, and the plantation owners and managers travel the area in constant fear of assault and kidnapping. Police and soldiers are continually stationed in the mill compounds, and workers have been shot during scuffles on payday. The mill owners always travel with an escort of armed guards, and all high-ranking personnel are equipped with two-way radios in communication with the *Defensa Civil* and army located in the nearest city.

### The Devil and Proletarian Labor

In the southern Cauca Valley today, it is commonly believed by local people – townspeople and country people, proletarians and peasants – that the male plantation workers sometimes make individual and secret contracts with the devil in order to increase individual output and hence their wage. Generally speaking, it is felt that output can be increased greatly by the individual worker only if he does make such a contract. The landless wage workers are widely supposed to sell their souls to the devil in order to maintain, or more commonly increase, productivity. Indian tin miners in highland Bolivia show similar patterns of behavior (Nash, 1972). But both groups of people do *not* do this as *peasants* working their own land. It is only when they become proletarianized that the devil enters the scene in this way. While the imagery of God and good, or the spirits of Nature and of ancestors, dominate the ethos of labor in the peasant mode of production, the devil and evil permeate the local metaphysics associated with the capitalist mode of production.

It is commonly thought that such a contract can increase a plantation worker's yield by two to three times. As a result of such a contract, however, the individual concerned will die prematurely and in agony, and while alive is soulless and a mere puppet in the hands of the devil. Furthermore, certain conditions attach to the money thus gained. This money cannot serve as productive "capital" but has to be spent immediately on what are considered to be luxury consumer items such as fine clothes, liquor, butter, and so on. To invest this money so as to produce more money – i.e., to use it as capital – is to invite ruin. For example, if one buys or rents land, that land will not produce, and if one buys a piglet to fatten for market, the animal will sicken or die. It is also believed that plantation sugar cane thus cut will not regrow. The ratoon or root will die, and the plantation land will not produce until plowed over and replanted.

It is crucial to realize that the local *peasantry* do *not* make contracts with the devil in order to augment or maintain productivity levels on their own plots. Neither do they make such a contract when working for wages on the plots of other peasants. People point out that such a practice would damage the peasant plot and that the money gained could not be used to maintain equipment or land. Despite the poverty that afflicts the majority of the local peasants, they are not therefore tempted by the monetary rewards that result from the devil contract, since those rewards are thought to diminish or curtail natural fertility. The notion of extracting more money from nature in the above way applies only to proletarians.<sup>2</sup>

The only magic allegedly used on the peasant plots is "good" magic worked through the Catholic saints and the *ánimas* – the souls of the ancestors – and such magic is aimed at curing the plot of malign influences in general and as a prophylaxis against thieving in particular. Petty retailers and middlemen also use magic to ensure success, but once again this is considered to be "good" magic and is worked through the medium of the Saints and the *ánimas*.<sup>3</sup>

### Baptism of Money and the Secret of Interest-bearing Capital

According to the belief in *el bautizo del billete* (baptism of the bill), the Godparent-to-be conceals a peso note in his or her hand during the baptism of the child by the Catholic priest. The peso bill is thus believed to receive baptism instead of the child. When such a baptized bill enters into general monetary circulation it is believed that it will continually return to its owner with interest, enriching the owner and impoverishing the other parties to the deals transacted by the owner of the bill. The owner is now the Godparent of the peso bill. The child remains unbaptized, a cause of great concern since the child's soul is denied supernatural legitimacy and has no chance of escaping from Limbo or Purgatory, depending on when it dies. This practice is heavily penalized by the Church.

The baptized bill receives the name – the "Christian name" as we say in English – that the baptismal ritual was meant to bestow on the child and is now referred to by that name. It is then set to work as follows. The Godparent pays the bill over as part of a routine monetary transaction, as when one pays for goods in a store. The Godparent mutters the following type of refrain:

José

¿te vas o te quedas?

¿te vas o te quedas?

¿te vas o te quedas?

José

Are you going or staying?

Are you going or staying?

Are you going or staying?

The bill, referred to by its name, is asked three times whether it is going to return to its Godparent or not. If everything works as it should, then it will soon return to its Godparent, bringing a large amount of money with it. This transfer is accomplished invisibly.

A black middle-class family owned a corner store in the village. Halfway through the morning, when the wife was alone, she went out the back and then quickly returned because she thought she heard a noise in the till. Opening it she found all the cash gone. She then remembered that one of the customers had behaved peculiarly earlier that morning, and realized that someone had passed her a baptized bill. As soon as her back was turned, this bill had made off with all the money in the cash register.

In a busy supermarket in the large city nearby, a shop detective was startled to hear a woman standing near a cash register chanting under her breath: "Guillermo! ¿Te vas o te quedas? ¿Te vas o te quedas? ¿Te vas o te quedas?" He promptly concluded that she had passed a baptized bill and was waiting for it to return to her with the contents of the register, and he immediately arrested her. She was taken away and nobody knows what happened thereafter.

One of the few successful black store owners in the village was saved from a great loss only by a most unusual coincidence. Serving in his shop he was startled to hear a strange noise in his cash register. Peering in he saw two bills fighting with each other for possession of the contents, and he realized that two customers, each with their own baptized bills, must have just paid them over and were awaiting their return. This strange coincidence allowed him to prevent the spiriting away of his cash.

### Interpretation

Let us examine these beliefs with two questions in mind. What is the natural character attributed to monetary exchange and the productive process? What is the system of reasoning used to explain the exchange economy in a society geared to the production of use values? We will discuss the former in terms of commodity fetishism, and the latter in terms of analogical reasoning.

### *Commodity fetishism*

Bizarre as the aforementioned beliefs may appear, in what way do they differ from our own? If we look at popular conceptions of capital in a developed capitalist society, we may note that elaborate metaphorical identifications of capital with the animate world are pervasive.

Take the financial section of the *New York Times* (April, 1974) for example. We read of the "economic climate," the "sagging dollar," of "earnings booming ahead," of "cash flows," of treasury bills "backing up," of runaway and galloping inflation, of

"climbing interest rates," of "bear markets" and "bull markets," of factories referred to as "plants," of "money growing" in accordance with investment, of how "your investments can go to work for you," and so on. The active mood predominates: "Weakness in the market was widespread and reflected the performance of the 15 most active issues" and "Despite gasoline shortages and uncertain supplies, 10 of the 15 most active issues traded on Monday could be classed as travel-oriented." "Can the individual investor still find happiness in the market?" asks the muse, who on reflection answers, "today there are dozens of ways to put your capital to work." A Chicago banker is reported as saying, "A general feeling seems to persist that something had definitely gone wrong with what had come to be regarded as the natural order of economic, financial and commercial life." The price of copper bears no proportion to the value of the coins in which it is minted; one spokesman for an important producer said, "While our selling price is killing us, we do have contractual and other obligations to deliver, whether we like to or not." "Splitting his time between New York and his plant in Italy, Joe can't afford to waste time when he's dealing with his bank. That's where Bob comes in. 'As far as I'm concerned,' Joe says, 'Bob is Chemical Bank.'" Hence, "Our Man is your bank - Chemical Bank. The businessman, when his needs are financial, his reaction is chemical."

These are but commonplace manifestations of what Marx referred to as *commodity fetishism* occurring in a developed capitalist culture wherein capital and workers' products are spoken of in terms that are used for people and animate beings. It is money as interest-bearing capital that lends itself most readily to this type of fetishism. Capital appears to have an *innate* property of self-expansion, and this property diffuses into all economic life since in capitalism money is the universal equivalent and mediator between persons and all objects. Everything has to be paid for and everything has its price. "Cast in this role, money is said to have changed into a true God, for the intermediary reigns in real power over the things it mediates for me. Its cult becomes an end in itself" (Marx, cited in Ollman, 1971: 203).

The concept of commodity fetishism is meant to draw attention to the fact that capitalist society presents itself to consciousness as something other than it basically is, even though that consciousness does reflect the more or less superficial and hypostatized configuration of society. Fetishism denotes the attribution of life, autonomy, power, and even dominance to otherwise inanimate objects and presupposes the draining of these qualities from the human actors who bestow the attribution. Thus in the case of commodity fetishism, social relationships are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between things - the products of labor exchanged on the market - so that the sociology of exploitation masquerades as a natural relationship between systemic artifacts. Definite social relationships are reduced to the magical matrix of things. An ether of naturalness - fate and physicality - conceals and enshrouds human social organization and the historical human significance of the market and the development of a propertyless wage-earning class. Rather than man being the aim of production, production has become the aim of man and wealth the aim of production; rather than tools and the productive mechanism in general having liberated man from the slavery of toil, man has become the slave of tools and the instituted processes of production.

In surveying the opinions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British economists and statesmen on the question of capital and interest. Marx sarcastically pointed out that in their eyes it becomes "a property of money to generate value



and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear trees to bear pears... Thus we get the fetish form of capital and the conception of fetish capital... a mystification of capital in its most flagrant form" (Marx, 1967, III:392). Elsewhere in the same chapter in *Capital* Marx quotes at length from economists like Price and Josiah Child, and from economic journals of the mid-nineteenth century. He makes lavish use of the biological metaphors that their views of money so strongly suggest. "Money is now pregnant." "As the growing process is to trees, so generating money appears as innate in capital in its form as money-capital."...

Benjamin Franklin in his *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748) could just as well have been the target of Marx's irony.

Remember, that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again it is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding-sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. (Franklin, cited in Weber, 1958:49)

At the same time these "fabulous fancies which outdid by far the fantasies of the alchemists" were systematically interwoven with the *Weltanschauung* of *homo economicus* – the supposed epitome of rationality. How could such an odd combination of rationality and fantasy so systematically coexist? What gave conviction to these biological metaphors? The answer lies in the peculiar and unique character of the social relations embodied both in capital and the commodities produced in the capitalist mode of production.

At great length and from a variety of viewpoints Marx argued that these social relations of production impressed themselves on everyday consciousness in such a way that the entire process of production and of the generation of surplus value is overlooked or slighted so that the social process of capital reproduction and expansion may easily appear as a property inherent in the thing itself, rather than the process of which it is part. This socially conditioned appearance is a mystification in which the entire social context conspires, so to speak, to mask itself. In this process of decontextualization, profit no longer appears to be the result of a social *relation*, but of a *thing*; i.e. reification.

Marx made his views on this clear when he compared the formula for interest bearing capital with what he called merchant's capital.

The relations of capital assume their most externalised and most fetish-like form in interest bearing capital. We have here M-M', money creating more money, self-expanding value, without the process that effectuates these two extremes. In merchant's capital, M-C-M', there is at least the general form of the capitalist movement, although it confines itself solely to the sphere of circulation, so that profit appears merely as profit derived from alienation; but it is at least seen to be the product of social *relation*, not the product of a mere *thing*. (Marx, 1967, III:391)

The same point is made by Marx in many of his writings. For instance in the *Grundrisse*, in a passage where his antipathy to what he calls crude materialism is explained in terms of fetishism, he says:

The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the *natural properties* of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them.

(Marx, 1973: 687)

Appealing to nature, to the paradoxical extreme wherein certain lifeless things are seen as animated, is merely one historically specific manifestation of that probably universal tendency whereby any culture externalizes its social categories onto nature, and then turns to nature in order to validate its social norms as "natural". Durkheim saw this attempt to invoke the principle of biological determinism in the ideology of "primitive" society, and Marx spotted the same phenomenon in the genesis, acceptance, and use of Darwinism.

The whole Darwinist teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes' doctrine of "bellum omnium contra omnes" and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus' theory of population. When this conjuror's trick has been performed... the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved.

(cited in Schmid, 1971: 47)

The same point can perhaps be made with regard to Newtonian physics and the role of human beings subordinated to the impersonal controls of the self-regulating market, the central institution if not the "solar system" of capitalist economy. E.A. Burtt draws our attention to the following characteristics of Newtonian metaphysics which have direct implications for our discussion of commodity fetishism and the philosophical roots of the ideology to be found in a market society.

Here were those residual souls of men, irregularly scattered among the atoms of mass that swam mechanically among the ethereal vapors in time and space, and still retaining vestiges of the Cartesian *res cogitans*. They too must be reduced to mechanical products and parts of the self-regulating cosmic clock... Wherever it [the universal formula of gravitation], was taught as truth there was also insinuated as a nimbus of surrounding belief that man is but the puny and local spectator, nay irrelevant product of an infinite self-moving engine... which consists of raw masses wandering to no purpose in an undiscoverable time and space, and is in general wholly devoid of any qualities that might spell satisfaction for the major interests of human nature...

(Burtt, 1954: 300-1)

Thus, in the fetishism of commodities we encounter a more general formula guiding social awareness which can apply to capitalist culture as a whole. This formula, following Marx, is rooted in the relations of production and exchange as they impress themselves on consciousness in the workaday world. Briefly, this formula is none other than that the social relation is consummated in the relationship of a thing to itself, and that ontology lies not in a relational gestalt but squarely within the thing itself. Atomized, self-encapsulated things – what Burtt refers to as "raw masses" – become the prime object of analysis because their meaning and properties appear to lie within themselves alone. True explanation and understanding now seek to reduce

whole phenomena to their simplest parts, and ultimate causality is to be found in the unchanging movement of elementary physical atoms. This dominance of "thinghood" (together with the logical conventions of identity and noncontradiction) tends to obliterate peoples' awareness and efface their capacity for moral evaluation of the bio-logic and socio-logic of relationships and process, particularly as regards their awareness of socio-economic activities and relationships. This is not to say that in this view things as such cannot be related to other such things and harmoniously related at that. Newton's scheme of the planets and Adam Smith's view of the self-regulating market are the outstanding examples of corpuscular interrelatedness forming an harmonious totality, much as modern Systems Theory is today. However, the relations that bind the things are viewed as *external* to the individuated things-in-themselves, whose identity and power is given in themselves alone.

But from another perspective this view is a gross deception since these apparently self-bounded and potent "things" are but the embodiments and concretizations of relationships which bind them to a larger whole. Their identity, existence, and natural properties spring from their *position* in an all-encompassing organic *pattern* of organization in which things are understood as but partial expressions of a self-organizing totality. The properties and activities of things will then be explained holistically and "structurally" in terms of their reticulate intelligibility as parts of an organic whole, and not in terms of mechanical causation and corpuscular collisions as separate bits of matter. If attention focuses on a single thing, as it must at some point in any analysis, then the thing is to be seen as containing its relational network and surrounding context within itself; the "thing" is a system of relationships.

On the other hand, if the atomistic view prevails, as it does in our culture, then the isolated thing-in-itself must inevitably tend to appear as animated because in reality it is part of an active process. If we "thingify" parts of a living system, close our eyes to the context of which they are part, and then observe that the things move, so to speak, it logically follows that the things may well be regarded or spoken of as though they were alive with their own autonomous powers. If regarded as mere things, they will appear as though they are indeed *animate* things – fetishes – so that capital, for instance, is regarded as analogous to a tree that bears fruit, and the thing itself is the source of its own increase. Hence, reification leads to fetishism.

### *Fetishism: pre-capitalist versus capitalist*

In pre-capitalist societies, where commodity exchange and the market are absent, animism, magic, and various forms of fetishism flourish. But is this fetishism similar to the fetishism of commodities to be found in a capitalist mode of production, and is there anything to be gained by asking such a question? Marx, for one, was clearly of the opinion that there was a world of difference, and that in posing the question one was well on the way towards demystifying the illusions induced by the commodity form of exchange. "The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor as long as they take the form of commodities," he wrote, "vanishes therefore so soon as we come to other forms of production" (1967:76).

Following this suggestion, we return to the belief in the baptism of money in the southern Cauca Valley. The belief is that through this illicit religious mechanism –

illicit in that it deceives the parents, the child, and the priest, and spiritually mutilates the child, annihilating its acceptance into the citizenry of God – money shall breed money, or that money will grow. In other words, it is an exotic expression of the standard Marxist formula for capitalist circulation, M-C-M' (money-commodity-more money) or simply M-M', as opposed to the circulation associated with use value and the peasant mode of production, C-M-C (commodity A-money-Commodity B; selling in order to buy). The problem that Marx set himself, the mystery of capitalist economic growth and accumulation of capital whereby capital appeared to breed more of itself, is in this situation seen to occur as a result of the supernatural forces incurred by the Christian baptism of the money bill. Once activated in this way money becomes interest-bearing capital. An inert medium of exchange becomes a self-breeding quantity, and in this sense becomes a fetish, a thing with lifelike powers.

If this is a bizarre belief, then one has to consider that the system against which it is levelled is surely no less bizarre. We who have been accustomed to the laws of capitalist economics for several centuries have come to accept the manifestation of these laws as utterly natural and commonplace. The early prophets and analysts of capitalism, such as Benjamin Franklin, regarded the operations of the economy as completely natural to the degree that they could casually refer to interest as an inherent property of capital itself. The peasantry of the southern Cauca Valley, however, regard this as utterly unreal and supernatural, and their belief in the baptism of money expresses this unreality.

Not only is it unreal, but it is done at the terrible cost of denying the child a legitimate place in rites of the life cycle and in the cosmological order, and hence bears the same profound stigma as does the wage workers' contract with the devil. This, in the second place, is what makes the difference with "pure" or capitalist commodity fetishism, because the baptism is seen as *immoral*.

Third, and, quite apart from this powerful value judgment, the sacrilegious baptism is still seen as the outcome of a chain of events *initiated by man*. It is true that the relationship is still "mystified," since *supernatural* power is seen as necessary for the money to bear interest, yet it is clearly understood that the money would *not* do this *on its own*. The multiplication of money as capital is not seen as a power inherent in money. It is not *commodity* fetishism since these people do not consider it a *natural* property of money to reproduce more of itself. Indeed, it is so unnatural that supernatural power has to be obtained by devious and destructive means. And while the true relationship of capital to labor is mystified, there still remains the fact that Man is seen as necessary to trigger off the magical cycles, and this is in keeping with the fact that in a use value economy the regulations that men enter into in their work appear to them as direct, reciprocal, personal relations, and not as activities controlled by the relationships of their products. Indeed, it is precisely due to this consciousness of human interdependence and reciprocity in which both persons and their products are seen as forming a unity, that the specific forms of pre-capitalist fetishism that here concern us arise. When people are confronted by the early stages of penetration of the commodity market, it is the warping and imbalancing of that interdependence which casts the fetish into the realm of the unnatural and evil – the illicit baptism of money and the proletarians' devil contract. Until the spread of capitalist institutions has permeated most aspects of social life, the lower classes continue to perceive the bonds that unite people with their employers and with the

fruits of their labor as mutual personal relations, albeit relations which are distorted, evil, and destructive, and not as the result of forces naturally inherent in things.

### *Analogical reason and the philosophy of use value*

The principles underlying the belief in the baptized bill bear a striking resemblance to those concerning money and exchange in Aristotle's *Politics* and the economic theory of the late Middle Ages. Basic to this outlook was the distinction Aristotle drew between what are today called *use* value and *exchange* value, a distinction that occupies a central place in Marxist theory as well. In Book I of *The Politics* Aristotle writes:

Every article or property has a double use; both uses are uses of the thing itself, but they are not similar uses; for one is the proper use of the article in question, the other is not. For example a shoe may be used either to put on your foot or to offer in exchange. Both are uses of the shoe; for even he that gives a shoe to someone who requires a shoe, and receives in exchange cash or food, is making use of the shoe as shoe, but not the use proper to it, for a shoe is not expressly made for exchange purposes. The same is the case with other articles of property. . . .

While the exchange function of any article could be utilized legitimately within a householding or subsistence economy, it was from this exchange function that money-making or capitalism arose to the detriment of the householding or "natural economy."

In accordance with the distinction between use value and exchange value, Aristotle distinguished between the natural and unnatural uses of money. As Eric Roll points out, this distinction between the two arts of money making,

was not just an attempt to drive home an ethical distinction. It was also a true analysis of two different forms in which money acts in the economic process: as a medium of exchange whose function is completed by the acquisition of the good required for the satisfaction of a want; and in the shape of money capital leading men to the desire for limitless accumulation.

(1973:33)

Roll gives emphasis in his discussion of Aristotle to the idea that money as used in the circulation of use values – Aristotle's householding, the natural economy – is *barren*. "Money is intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest; it is by nature barren; through usury it breeds, and this must be the most unnatural of all the ways of making money" (1973:33). Table I shows this in tabular form.

From this set of contrasts several analogies clearly emerge. For instance:

Use Value of Money (money)	:	Exchange Value of Money (capital)
<u>natural</u> barren		<u>unnatural</u> fertile

Table I

<i>Types of Value</i>	<i>Use Value</i>	<i>Exchange Value</i>
Aim of Circulation	To satisfy natural wants	To gain money as an end in itself
Characteristics of Money	Means of exchange (C-M-C) Natural Barren	Means to make more money (means as ends; capital) (M-C-M') Unnatural Fertile

But in nature, in the biological world for example, things are naturally fertile, and Aristotle says on this score, "Money was intended to be a means of exchange, interest represents an increase in the money itself. We speak of it as a yield, as of a crop or a litter; for each animal produces its like, and interest is money produced out of money. Hence of all ways of getting wealth this is the most contrary to nature."

Following the method propounded by Hesse in her discussion of analogy (1963); this can be expressed as a set of positive and negative analogies, in which there is explicit recognition of *both* similarity and difference between the paired terms that constitute the analogy (see Table 2).

The analogy between animals and money as use value expresses a relationship of both similarity and of difference: they are similar because both are part of the natural world, and their properties function so as to ensure the original purpose of the ideal society ("to reestablish nature's own equilibrium of self-sufficiency," as Aristotle phrases it); and different because it is the natural property of animals to breed more of themselves, while money is by nature barren.

The analogy between animals and capital, or between money and capital, is also based on a set of similarities and differences. For instance capital exhibits the same properties as animals with regard to multiplication, but while one is natural, the other is unnatural. Similarly, money in the use value paradigm is similar to money as capital, but while the former is barren, the latter is fertile.

The task facing the inhabitants of the plantation zones in the southern Cauca Valley is how to explain and in some cases actually effect the transfer of properties of similarity into those of difference and those of difference into relationships of similarity. How to transmute the properties of animals, for example, into those of money, whose natural property is to remain barren? How to explain the transformation of money into interest-bearing capital? How to convert use values into exchange values?

Table 2 *Positive and Negative Analogies*

[biological realm] (natural)	[use value of money] (natural)	[exchange value of money] (unnatural)
animal litter	$\frac{M}{M}$	$\frac{M}{M'}$

(Where M = Money, and M' = Money plus interest on that money; i.e. capital.)

This is done through the illicit rite of baptizing money. Unbaptized or natural money is not and should not be capital; it cannot and should not yield interest in the way capital or animals are seen to breed more of themselves. Money can achieve this unnatural property if it is acted on ritually through means of baptism. Barren money can become unnaturally fertile when transferred to God's domain and stamped with His life-giving properties.

The efficacy and rationality of the magical act would seem to be understood by means of a comparison between observed relationships of similarity and difference in separate spheres of existence, and the rite is utilized to manipulate and transmute relationships of difference into relationships of similarity.

NATURAL		UNNATURAL
<u>animal</u>	:	<u>M</u>
litter		M'

The litter is the natural yield of the animal, whereas the increase of capital (M') is unnatural. The negative analogy (the comparison of difference) can be overcome and harnessed to the comparison of similarity (positive analogy) by means of the baptismal rite. Thus:

<u>baptism of child</u>		<u>illicit baptism of money</u>
legitimation and growth	:	delegitimation and growth

Nevertheless, that transfer is achieved by an *illicit* rite when applied to money, and is a sacrilege which deprives a human child of salvation and the endorsement necessary to the fulfillment of human potential. Thus although money can be converted into interest-bearing capital, this is seen as both supernatural and anti-natural. Capital is thus explained in terms which reveal it to be unnatural and immoral. The analogical paradigms based on a use value orientation can be restructured through supernatural means, but for all the restructuring, the original meaning of use-value economics is still upheld.

### *The devil contract and the magic of capitalist production*

In the case of the devil contract made by the plantation wage laborers in order to increase production, the money earned is understood to be barren. Thus, while the proletarian's production can increase, the money is not fertile; in fact it is redolent with infertility – the antithesis of baptized money. What is the meaning of this?

At one level this could be explained by the fact that as opposed to God, the contract is made with His antithesis – the devil. But one can dig deeper behind the symbols and explore Aristotle's and Marx's distinctions further. Aristotle makes the connection between production and the different forms of money in the following way:

Hence we seek to define wealth and money-making in different ways; and we are right in doing so, for they *are* different; on the one hand true wealth, in accordance with nature, belonging to household management, productive; on the other money-making,

with no place in nature, belonging to trade and not productive of goods in the full sense.

Here the antithesis between money as a mere means of exchange, and money as capital, is paralleled by the contrast between productive and non-productive goods and activities. Indeed, for Aristotle the contrast is even more stark than this, since "money-making" or capitalism is inherently *destructive* of the natural or householding economy, destructive of the reciprocal interplay of natural forces responsible for production and growth.

Thus the initial frame of reference which referred to the barren and fertile characteristics of money as a medium of *exchange*, is placed in the wider and more determinate context of *production* and a more profound sense of fertility. The analogy between animals and their offspring on the one side and money breeding money on the other is a totally unnatural one in Aristotle's eyes; unnatural especially in the sense that the naturally barren form of money is grounded in productive activity - "in the full sense" - while the fertile form of money is not. Only in its naturally barren form does "money keep to its original purpose; to reestablish nature's own equilibrium of self-sufficiency." Hence use-values, money as a neutral mediator of exchange, nature's equilibrium of self-sufficiency, and productivity in the full sense, are all intrinsically related and necessary to one another.

A basic set of positive and negative analogies derived from this view is as follows:

<u>money</u>	:	<u>productive capacity</u>
capital		destructive

The problem facing the people in this culture is, therefore, how to explain and effect the inversion of these natural analogies, since it is empirically true that production can be maintained and increased within the sphere of capitalist production. On inversion:

<u>money</u>	:	<u>destructive</u>
capital		productive

This inversion is effected and explained in terms of the devil contract. Through the agency of this evil and destructive force, production within capitalist relations on the sugar plantations can be increased, and at the same time, as the analogy so neatly displays, the money wage gained is non-productive; it kills whatever it buys except for luxury articles consumed immediately. The natural set of relationships that should obtain according to the use-value paradigm can be transformed into capitalist relationships which defy the use-value analogies. But these capitalist relationships are viewed neither as natural nor as good since they necessitate the agency of the devil.

### Conclusion

The "superstitions" we encountered in the Cauca Valley are thus revealed to be beliefs which systematically endorse the logic of the contradiction between use



values and exchange values. In doing so, these beliefs are identical with the basic tenets of Aristotelian economics, the dominant doctrine of economics as postulated by Aquinas and others in the late Middle Ages, and one of the basic premises of Marxism. (Not for nothing did R. H. Tawney call Marx the last of the Schoolmen.) These "superstitions" are not confused vestiges deriving from a prior era when peasant life or Church influence was more intact, but are precise formulations which entail a systematic critique of the encroachment of the capitalist mode of production.

The sensitivity to the distinction between use values and exchange values as manifested by these beliefs is not merely the result of mummified ideals retained from the days when the peasant mode of production was flourishing. Nor would it seem solely due to the fact that some peasant production still coexists with the developing capitalist mode of production. It is also due to the fact that the "slum economy" of the recently urbanized peasants is similarly one based to a major degree on use value practices.

The paradigm of rationality entailed in these formulations is heavily dependent on analogical reason, examples of which are given above. Analogical explanations involve an account of the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, and the analogical mode of reasoning at issue here is inherently holistic and dependent on identifying things in terms of their relationships to larger wholes. On the other hand, the causal paradigm which so thoroughly permeates modern Western social science and the mainstream of what is loosely called "Western thought" since the seventeenth century, is inherently atomistic and reductionist, defining identity in terms of the thing itself and not in relation to the context of which the thing is part. In light of this enormous epistemological difference it is obvious that the categories of contemporary sociology and classical economics tend to mystify peasant economics and to deny that peasant economic theory and behavior could be relevant to a critique of classical economics.

The mode of analogical reason outlined above would appear to be most prolific and consciously used in cultures which are guided by use value economics. As Tambiah has so elegantly shown in his interpretation of Zande magic, an awareness of its logic and systematization dispels the pejorative confusions entailed when such beliefs are subjected to the canons of validity embodied in modern positivist methodology. Where Tambiah falls short, however, is in his failure to consider the underlying system of metaphysics from which the terms in such analogies draw their meaning. While it is a great service to have demonstrated how apparently weird connections and influences between phenomena can be postulated and upheld in terms of the purely *formal* properties of an analogical set, the indigenous ontology has to be considered as well. Placing the emphasis on the formal characteristics of analogical rationality gives us an understanding of the systematic precision entailed in modes of explanation which are not based on the cause-effect paradigm alone. Nevertheless, one still has to ask why certain properties and co-occurrences are considered to be analogically related, and why those properties are thought to exist in the first place. While we can point to the analogical relationship between money and capital, for instance, and demonstrate the problem and solution such an analogy conveys, we are still doing no more than pointing to a set of givens whose meaning ultimately lies in a basis other than that given in the formal reasoning rules themselves. This basis is to be found in the metaphysics of nature and the indigenous

social philosophy of the group concerned, and in this specific case a large aspect of that philosophy is conveyed by the paradigm of use value economics.

In a culture where Nature is regarded as animate, things which we consider as inert seem to be credited with mind, intelligence, and volition, in the same manner as we reserve those characteristics for the human being exclusively. Nature is seen as permeated with Mind, regulating some Grand Design. The human understanding of things in nature thus proceeds as much through a reckoning of the *meaning* and *intent* established by these things, as through their observable empirical characteristics. Furthermore, given this metaphysical scheme, the meaning and power of things depends on the *relational network* of which the thing is part, which is precisely what makes the analogical mode of reason so compelling.

The types of analogies considered in the examples taken from the Cauca Valley are exceedingly interesting in that the relationships of cause and similarity between the separate terms that make up any analogy depend upon the total set and are not given in the terms themselves. The concept of "cause" herein entailed is not that of mechanical causation, but rather that of "pattern," association, and purpose. In subjecting the latter to the mechanical paradigm of interacting forces akin to the percussion of rebounding billiard balls or interlocking cog wheels, nothing but confusion can result; hence the misguided attribution of irrationality by Western observers when presented with such forms of reason. In describing the properties of the following type of analogy, which is the same type as those considered above, Mary Hesse points out that the relations of similarity at the horizontal level are contingent upon the particular meaning established by the vertical relationships.

<u>father</u>	:	<u>state</u>
child		citizens

Moreover, the vertical relationships themselves are not causal in any specific sense, and furthermore, if the individual terms are considered apart from the total analogical set, they each possess a *variety* of connotations.

Thus the specific meaning of any of the terms within the total structure is dependent on the total set of relationships. This is surely what Lévi-Strauss in his analyses of the "savage mind" means by his obscure directive to look for meaning in relationships and not in the things themselves.

This is to say that the significance of the individual terms does *not* emerge when they are viewed as having meaning as isolates, disconnected from other isolates. Rather, as individual terms they are relational terms which embody the meaning established by the set of relationships of which any term is part. Things are relationships, and these relationships are ontological rather than logical.

The individual terms are not viewed atomistically. They are not conceived of by means of the Newtonian corpuscular paradigm or what A.N. Whitehead calls a philosophy of "external relations," but instead conform to a philosophy of "internal relations" in which each of the separate terms embodies the total set of relationships of which it is part (Whitehead, 1967: 111-18; Ollman, 1971: 27-42).

Put briefly, the metaphysical doctrine of external relations is the foundation of the analytic and reductive method by means of which explanation proceeds through analyzing any given phenomenon in terms of its supposedly irreducible atomistic constituents. The explanation is completed by illustrating the mathematical laws of

cause and effect that supposedly hold between these atoms, which in sum constitute the whole phenomenon. This doctrine is central to the Cartesian tradition and the view of nature with which Galileo, Descartes, and Newton propelled modern science on its successful course. Modified in theoretical physics since the early twentieth century, it still seems to provide the basis of most of modern *social* science and popular Western ideologies concerning society. Two important properties concern us here. As Whitehead says, "The character of each of these ultimate things is thus conceived as its own private qualification. Such an existent is understandable in complete disconnection from any other such existent: the ultimate truth is that it requires nothing but itself in order to exist" (1967:113).

In other words, the meaning or identity of a thing is given in itself alone, rather than the "living" context of which it is part. Second, by virtue of such de-contextualization, relationships between things (and changes of things or their relationships), are conceived of "externally" to the things themselves, and suggest recourse to a certain type of Deism, which is how Newton, himself regarded the problem.

In light of this the Cauca Valley beliefs, which stem from a contrary metaphysic, are paradoxically similar insofar as they also make appeals to divine or "external" agencies. Despite this apparent similarity, the concept of nature and ontology in the Cauca Valley situation is one in which the identity or character of things is seen to lie in their being embodiments of relationships and process; hence the doctrine of "internal relations" and a natural science akin to the ancient Greek view of nature, based on the principle that the world of nature is saturated or permeated by mind.

To employ another usage, the peasant epistemology is such that individual terms are conceptualized like Hegel's "moments," constitutive of the totality which constitutes them, with each "moment" containing part of the whole within itself – "internally." The *identity* of the thing springs from its relation to the whole, and is not given in the properties of the thing seen as an isolated or isolable atom. Marxism itself rests on an acute appreciation of such a perspective (cf. Ollman), and Marx expressed this throughout his writing as the foregoing quotations from his works indicate.

Finally, it bears repeating that although the analogical forms can be inverted and that relationships can be transformed, the fact of the matter is that in the examples drawn from the Cauca Valley, where one mode of production is displacing another, the ethics and reason of use value are maintained. The metaphysics that underlie the analogical mode are not disowned despite the fact that the peasants now own little else but their abstract labor power. The analogies are not neutral, despite the neutralizing influence of the fact-value distinction intrinsic to modern science and economic theory in which it is held that "... Economics is entirely neutral between ends; that in so far as the achievement of any end is dependent on scarce means, it is germane to the preoccupations of the economist. Economics is not concerned with ends as such" (Robbins, 1935:24).

Nothing could be further from the economic theory and behavior of the peasants and field hands in the southern Cauca Valley for whom economics is totally "concerned with ends as such." Reason, whether it be economic or whatever, is for them far more than the narrow concern with the maximal coordination of scarce means to alternate ends. Rather, reason is that which embodies the conditions of objective existence.<sup>4</sup> Their understanding of capitalist reason and the praxis it embodies, is

one which leads them to conclude that it is contrary to the laws of nature, evil, and ultimately destructive of the conditions of objective existence.

To subject their reason to the instrumentality of means and ends, and to the empty formality of analogies considered apart from their content and purpose, is to merely hasten the demise of the conditions embodied in that reason. A peasant society or community can be involved in commodity production – based on exchange value – but this need not be its total culture. A community can in many ways be affected and even controlled by the wider capitalist world, but this in itself does not necessarily make such a community a replica of the larger society and global economy. Attempts to interpret pre-capitalist social formations by means of what Polanyi called “our obsolete market mentality,” are misguided exercises in an ingenuous ethnocentrism that in fact is not even applicable to the market society itself, but merely a replication of its appearance.

## NOTES

- 1 Production of sugar in metric tons by plantations located south of the Desbaratado River in the southern region of the Cauca Valley, 1938–69 was as follows:

Year	Metric tons
1938	2,000
1963	13,220
1969	91,750

Source: Asocaña, Cali, Colombia (n.d.).

In the rural area of the southern Cauca Valley, the ratio of smallholders to landless day laborers was on the order of 53:10 in the year 1912 according to official census materials. By 1938 the ratio was around 9:10. Following the outbreak in 1948 of the so-called civil war, the *Violencia*, cash crops of the peasants were sprayed with herbicides by the plantations, reducing peasant production of cocoa by some 80 percent between 1950 and 1958, further accelerating the removal of peasants from the land.

- 2 The belief does not apply to all proletarians, but is restricted to *male* proletarians. Like peasants of both sexes, *female* wage laborers are *not* supposed to make a devil contract to increase their wages. The reason given for this is that since the “wages of the devil” are inherently destructive and barren, and since women assume almost all the obligation of raising children, it would be devastatingly counter-productive for them to try to raise a family with such money. An additional reason could be that short matrilineal forms the basis of the social structure, and that the souls of the deceased maternal ancestors are a very critical link to the rest of the supernatural world. Therefore, if a mother sells her soul to the devil, she deprives her descendants of their most crucial link with the spirit world of good ancestors, the Saints, and God.
- 3 These observations serve to emphasize that it is neither money per se, inequality, nor involvement in buying and selling activities which leads to the opprobrium of devil's work. The peasants spend most of their time in the cultivation of cash crops (cocoa and coffee) on their own plots or the plots of their neighbors, and of course retailers are almost exclusively involved in buying and selling. Furthermore, material inequalities abound within these social groups. The critical fact is that none of these activities is directly organized by capitalist relations of production, and that money is used only as a means of facilitating exchange, not as something to be maximized as an end in itself.
- 4 This formulation is the subject of intensive analysis by the “Frankfurt School” of Marxist scholars, especially Max Horkheimer in his work *The Eclipse of Reason*.

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# A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion

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