

## BOOKS &amp; THE ARTS

## It's the Discourse, Stupid!

MICAELA DI LEONARDO

**THE MAGIC OF THE STATE.**

By Michael Taussig.

Routledge. 206 pp. Paper \$17.95.

A funny thing happened in the progressive American academy on the way to the millennium. While we were distracted by rightist political shifts across Europe and the Americas, by the death throes of the Soviet sphere and China's new capitalist road, by the ineluctably connected piling-up of greater wealth and poverty across the globe and a host of local-level wars and disasters, the university gave birth to—Cultural Studies.

Originating in an amalgam of Frankfurt School work on mass media, Gramscian concern with hegemony, long-term folkloric studies of popular culture and latter-day poststructuralism/postmodernism, Cultural Studies is large and contains multitudes. Whether focused on art or ethnography, whether discerning "resistance" or "consent" (or both), this sprawling interdisciplinary field holds out the promise of sophisticated explanations of culture and consciousness. It has enhanced new modes of understanding—substance, form and audience response to global mass media; changing religious belief and practice in quotidian lives; and the shifting gendered and raced character of nationalist discourse—new ways of comprehending and thus engaging in pragmatic politics. But Cultural Studies also has a signal weakness: Its practitioners too frequently have given in to the Dark Side of the Force.

That is, in following the poststructuralist "linguistic turn" of recent years, too many in Cultural Studies have declared, "It's the discourse, stupid," and taken the purblind idealist road, literally denying the

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existence of the material world. This move sets the stage for an easy, dismissive anti-Marxism, a refusal to countenance the historical and political-economic contexts of all cultural phenomena, and the related tendency to "swallow" politics in culture—as in studies of rap as "resistance" as if Snoop Doggy Dogg (or even the magnificent Queen Latifah) were the inheritor of the mantle of SNCC and King. This depoliticization is associated with an appalling lack of respect for intellectual labor. A seventies slogan defined a Marxist-feminist as someone who goes to twice as many meetings. The interdisciplinarity of Cultural Studies demands an analogous double effort, but giving in to its Dark Side involves substituting trendy gestures and catch-phrases, making Cultural Studies an oxymoron.

*Taussig's whole is wholly false, a product of a romantic antimodernism that falsifies the very lives he claims to be representing.*

Enter anthropologist Michael Taussig, a favorite on the Cultural Studies lecture circuit. His latest production, *The Magic of the State*, is a terrible book, badly written and embarrassingly banal. But it is bad and banal in very particular ways that have everything to do with contemporary culture wars and with the strange liminal status of American anthropology: Even as the discipline undergoes institutional hard times and associated near-civil war, anthropologists have taken on the cachet of Otherness in the public sphere. We are exotics at home, those to whom others look for Primitive Wisdom, escape from modernity. But this very trope, ethnological antimodernism, denies its liberal impulses in failing to see Others as simply fellow human beings caught in and acting within shifting structures of global power. Let us look at the world, then, in this rather disappointing grain of Blakean sand.

Taussig, "torn between the overlapping claims of fiction and those of documentary," and calling himself Captain Mission or

simply Mission, recounts his peregrinations with and to individuals involved with spirit possession in an elaborately unnamed Latin American state. (This site happens to have Venezuelan currency and official history; other features unique to Colombia, including M-19 guerrillas; and the cults of María Lionza—the “Spirit Queen”—and Simón Bolívar, the former common to both countries and the latter widespread across many Latin American states.) Taussig’s descriptions of a series of ethnographic events, from treks up the Spirit Queen’s mountain to watch and engage in possession ritual, to an observation post outside a prison where a massacre had just taken place, to a variety of frustrating encounters with bureaucratic officialdom, serve as platforms for sets of increasingly all-encompassing theoretical claims about human social lives.

Taussig informs us that reifications bear relationships to one another, and are imbued with the power of the fetish: “Clearly [God, the economy, and the state] are fetishes, invented wholes of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency of being we have placed soul-stuff.” Moreover, these fetishized entities of necessity unite opposites—thus “the ethereal confluence of reason and violence... of force and fraud... constituting the state... and its fantastic entity known as the national economy.” We can actually see these processes in the “European Elsewhere”—Taussig means the Third World—unlike the Fallen West: “Here we should be mindful of the fact that for most people for most of world history, spirit possession was the norm. Whatever feeble capacity the West itself had to mobilize death this way, modernity erased with a vengeance.”

If we only read Freud (“our man in Vi-

enna”) and Marx as Taussig does, we will discover that bodies, sex, death and money are all imbued with the magic of the state, all to be explained discursively—and in sentences whose lengthy awfulness must be experienced to be believed—with reference to one another:

For [Simón Bolívar] is truly the Universal whose victorious emergence from the death-space founding the state endorses value and in whose image money not only facilitates the exchange of difference, but opens up Marx to other readings—readings wherein money is the bearer of congealed spiritual labor-power orchestrated by the state of the whole which, after all, not only designs, prints, mints, regulates, and vouchsafes money like God does man in His own image, continuing that magnificent operation of salvation of the sacred remains begun in 1842, but is the very Godhead itself, the state as repository of redemption no less than the promise of credit on which the circulation of coins and notes, like the angels and the wandering souls of purgatory, depend.

Finally, all modern architecture, everywhere, including roads and vehicles, can be explained with reference to this dialectical magic of the state: “Think modern with the ‘concrete frame of reference’ flowing from marble outcrops of the dead planted on the carnage of originary violence. Forget the ground. Forget the underground. It’s all a matter of cement gushing across the face of the earth in elaborate traceries bracing the territory in hardening grids and tunnels of user-friendly monumentation.”

At many points, as we can see, Taussig is only telling us, badly, what others have told us before. His discussions of the emo-

tional and far-flung powers of nationalism, for example, draw from Benedict Anderson’s important work, but are stripped of his careful historicization, re-injected with ethnological antimodernism, and then fed through a New Age Stylewriter for that ineffable Allen Ginsberg-on-a-very-bad-day tone. Historians and anthropologists of religion have done much better, detailed work on spirit possession across time and space, and scholars from Maurice Bloch to Viviana Zelizer have enlightened us on the varying cultural meanings of money. Ditto for modern architecture. Taussig seems not even to know that Fredric Jameson, Mike Davis and Russell Jacoby have commented before him on the “postmodern” living structure in which “cars came and went through the garage at the back, so... [t]here was no point in building doors for people any more.”

Taussig’s reply might be that what he contributes is the vision of the whole. But that is precisely the problem: His whole is wholly false, a product of a romantic antimodernism that falsifies the very “European Elsewhere” lives he claims to be representing. In addition, his rotund proclamations, in denying cultural specificity and historical change, fall to the ground in a welter of self-contradictions. Spirit possession is *not* by any means always tied to national fetishes; human beings represent their bodies, and viscerally experience those representations, in ways other than he acknowledges; states themselves vary enormously in the ways in which they mobilize nationalist discourse and iconography.

And Taussig’s contempt for scholarship leads him into lengthy absurdities, as when he hooks an entire section discussing the impact of cars on the Latin American landscape on a false etymology for the word *chévere*: “The expression *chevere* that came to signify ‘wonderful’ was in fact derived from the Chevie. Mission used to hear it in the seventies... on the lips of cane cutters [who] of course could only dream of ever possessing an automobile.” But *in fact*, an hour or so in the library with national dictionaries of Spanish indicates that *chévere* derives from a Mayan word meaning to cry, has been widespread across northern Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean at least since the twenties and carries both positive (correct, elegant, fresh) and negative (bully, braggart, spoiled) meanings. Cultural Studies as oxymoron, in action.

We all of course make mistakes, but Taussig has an instructive history, over the course of four books, of fleeing like a latter-day Artful Dodger from a swelling river of

## THE WREN

Paper clips are rusted to the pages  
before I have come back to hear a bell  
I remember out of another age  
echo from the cold mist of one morning  
in white May and then a wren still singing  
from the thicket at the foot of the wall

that is one of the voices without question  
and without answer like the beam of some  
star familiar but in no sense known threading  
time upon time on its solitary way  
once more I hear it without understanding  
and without division in the new day

W.S. Merwin

polite scholarly correctives. After anthropologists Michel-Rolph Trouillot, William Roseberry and many others pointed out that his *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*—which elegantly interpreted Colombian and Bolivian proletarian “devil” rituals as indigenous resistance to capitalist impositions—itsself imposed an entirely false pre-capitalist “natural economy” on its subjects, Taussig abandoned political economy.

Then, eminent Latin Americanist June Nash, whose Bolivian material Taussig had misused in *The Devil*, scored his next effort, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, as “flights of fancy” in which he “evok[ed] real natives as plants to substantiate his mock analysis.” And Marcelo Suárez-Orozco has pointed out Taussig’s simplistic analysis of colonial torture, and silence on “the new dirty wars and terror” that “remain an epidemic in the South American world long after the conquest.” Taussig’s next two books, *Mimesis and Alterity* and *The Nervous System*, attempted to escape ethnographers’ scrutiny through the lavish use of Frankfurt School work as theoretical imprimatur and further moved toward postmodern writing. Intellectual historian Martin Jay, reviewing both books, pointed out that Taussig’s tenuous grasp of the works of Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin led him both to make major errors in quotation and attribution and—more important—to fail to see the contradiction in using the Frankfurt School Marxists to commend magical thinking, given its “profoundly hieratic and non-democratic implications.” He also notes that “I can’t remember another non-autobiography in which the pronoun ‘I’ appears so frequently”—thus the subsequent resort to “Mission.”

And so we return to *The Magic of the State*, and can see that Taussig has been writing essentially the same book over and over again, with each iteration abandoning scholarly domains where he had been proven shaky, until he ends “torn between” documentary and fiction. Torn, or oscillating to escape being found out? Marx famously noted of Proudhon that “in France, he has the right to be a bad economist, because he passes for a good German philosopher. In Germany, he has the right to be a bad philosopher, because he passes for one of the greatest of the French economists.” Taussig is merely updating the Proudhon Scam for the contemporary Cultural Studies scene: If it’s bad ethnography, it must be good art, and vice versa. At one point, Taussig claims that a “Black Cuban” accuses him of “working in obscurity”... with malign spirits.” The black Cuban was half right, but maybe he’ll turn out to be prophetic. ■

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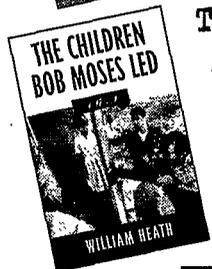


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