


DEBATES

In Search of Hope: Reimagining the “Dark” in Latin American Marxian Ethnographies

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(Received 26 August 2022; revised 28 July 2023; accepted 14 September 2023; first published online 01 March 2024)

Abstract

Marxian anthropology is a particular trend of “dark anthropology.” Michael Taussig has dedicated his work to understanding the connections of colonialism, capitalism, and local cultures under a Marxian-Benjaminian perspective. This article examines the meanings of hope and future concealed within Taussig’s “dark ethnographies” accomplished in Latin America. The purpose of this analysis is to echo Taussig’s concern to write efficiently against terror to acknowledge that even ethnographies of violence and social injustice can carry powerful cultural messages of hope.

Keywords: ethnography; Latin America; neoliberalism; dark anthropology; politics of representation; hope

Resumo

A antropologia marxista é uma tendência particular da chamada “antropologia sombria.” Michael Taussig dedicou o seu trabalho à compreensão das ligações entre o colonialismo, o capitalismo e as culturas locais sob uma perspectiva marxista/benjaminiana. Este artigo tem como objetivo examinar os significados de esperança e futuro ocultos nas “etnografias sombrias” de Taussig realizadas na América Latina. O objetivo desta análise é ecoar a preocupação de Taussig em escrever de forma eficiente contra o terror para reconhecer que mesmo etnografias de violência e injustiça social podem transportar poderosas mensagens culturais de esperança.

Palavras-chave: etnografia; América Latina; neoliberalismo; antropologia sombria; política da representação; esperança

Marxian anthropology has been a particular theoretical trend within the scope of “dark anthropology,” as Sherry Ortner (2016) named the critical anthropological contribution of and against capitalism and neoliberalism in the twentieth century. I am aware of the importance of replacing “dark,” “black,” and “non-white” tropes of negativity in the theoretical idiom of anthropology and of philosophy and science in general. Therefore, even though departing from the debate with Ortner’s insightful contribution, the use of the *dark* adjective here does not intend to promote an undervaluation of “dark” in opposition to “bright” or “white” anthropologies. On the contrary, this article seeks to highlight and promote “dark ethnographies” as powerful messages of sensitivity, empathy, and comprehension of the disadvantageous and suffering conditions imposed by capitalist power relations in Latin America. As such, they are considered urgent narratives that

promote social awareness, political resistance, and hope. To highlight the conceptual tension that accompanies the adjective, I replace the adjective *dark* with the core idea intended by Ortner (2016, 19) in her article, that is to say, an “anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them.” In other words, *dark anthropologies* is just another way to name an anthropology of human injustice. To highlight this implicit dimension of dark anthropologies, I review in hindsight two major ethnographies of Michael Taussig in Latin America that exemplify how to broaden Ortner’s contribution to other circumstances beyond the strict neoliberal contexts she envisioned.

Anthropologist Michael Taussig has dedicated two extensive ethnographies, after long years of fieldwork in the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, to understand the connections of colonialism, capitalism, and local cultures, emphasizing the violent conditions of life and labor of Afro-peasant, indigenous miners, and modern slaves in Bolivia and Colombia.¹ The ethnographies mentioned are as follows: *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980) and *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1987). These two accounts are products of extensive fieldwork and well-known contributions from the skilled combination of anthropology, history, and Marxist theories, highlighting local peoples’ cultural views and responses under the dominance of capitalist relations. As Paull (1996, 79) accurately observed: “His earlier writings examined colonialism in a way that brought together the acquisitiveness of capitalist economy with a more far-reaching representational economy.”

This article critically examines Taussig’s ethnographical politics of representation as iconic examples of dark anthropology to grasp—beyond the emphasis he places on capitalist power relations and the “suffering subjects” born of them—the meanings of hope and the projects of the future embedded in the cultures of overexploited and racialized minorities in Latin America. In this sense, this article analyzes Taussig’s work to endorse the importance of ethnographic narratives of human injustice to account for the critique of disadvantageous conditions of life and human rights violations; at the same time, it acknowledges cultural and hopeful responses to these situations.

The article does not intend to discuss Taussig’s work as a whole or extend the arguments presented here, departing from two specific ethnographies as a key to reading his production. As mentioned, the choice of these two works is due to the way Taussig promoted relating the capitalist economy with economic issues as culturally perceived in different contexts, which places these works in direct dialogue with Ortner’s reflections on dark anthropologies and neoliberalism.

Although Taussig’s ethnographies cannot be placed exactly in the same historical context as Ortner’s analytical framework designed for the anthropologies of the 1980s onward in the United States, Ortner’s insights were able to shed new interpretative light (as usual) on anthropologies worldwide.² She defines dark anthropology as an anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience (power, domination, inequality, and oppression) and the structural and historical conditions that produce them, along with the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness (Ortner 2016, 49)—that definition can work

¹ Born in Sydney, Australia, on April 3, 1940, he earned a medical degree from the University of Sydney and his PhD in anthropology from the London School of Economics. He is now professor of anthropology at Columbia University in the United States.

² Ortner herself states: “It is worth repeating my earlier acknowledgment that this article does not pretend to be written from anything other than an American perspective, in terms of its takes on both neoliberalism and anthropology” (65).

as an ideal type for the evaluation of the theoretical history of the discipline and the ethnographic works that go along with it both in different places and different times.

By using this definition to interpret the Marxian-Benjaminian ethnographies of Michael Taussig (1993 [1987], 25), this review article aims to bring together both his concern to write efficiently against terror and Ortner's (2016, 66) idea of an anthropology of resistance that claims to be a cultural critique at the same time that it thinks about alternative political and economic futures.³ This seems to be an important exercise to acknowledge that ethnographies of human injustice can carry powerful cultural messages of hope despite the antinomies and theoretical oppositions in the ideological realms of Marxism and culturalism that sometimes hover anthropology and reciprocally distort the insights each perspective has to offer.

In this sense, the article favors the idea that anthropologies of human injustice can also depict cultures themselves as powerful tropes of resistance and overcoming, thus contributing to the creation of comprehensive senses of life after violent and traumatic experiences caused by capitalist exploitation and the spaces of death it often generates. Anthropologies of unjust realities, despite everything, never cease to acknowledge the "suffering helpless subjects" as epistemic hopeful agents capable of critically interpreting the past and building practical forms of coping mechanisms with it, even going so far as to beat it on occasions!

The other side of the South: Power, domination, inequality, and oppression as the common ground of neoliberalism in Latin America

In the 2016 article "Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory since the Eighties," Sherry Ortner points accurately to the fact that the works of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault prominently influenced and shaped anthropological interests, concepts, and ethnographies during that period and beyond. To put it in her words: "The work of Marx and Foucault, each in its own way, both defines and represents the shift to 'dark theory,' theory that asks us to see the world almost entirely in terms of power, exploitation, and chronic pervasive inequality" (Ortner 2016, 50). According to that perspective, "neoliberalism and its effects have become both objects of study and frameworks for understanding other objects of study across a wide range of anthropological work (for starters, see Greenhouse 2010; Gusterson and Besteman 2010)" (Ortner 2016, 51–52).

As a starter on the subject myself, I add Ganti (2014) on neoliberalism to that short list and bring to the discussion his insightful review of how neoliberalism has been perceived and theoretically appropriated by anthropologists. According to his interpretation, "Much of the anthropological scholarship appears unaware of the long history of neoliberalism and the varying national traditions of neoliberal thought, possibly because of the discipline's present oriented, inductive, fieldwork-based methodology" (Ganti 2014, 93).

To consider Marx's and Foucault's cornerstones of "dark theory" and catalysts of the rise of anti-neoliberal dark anthropology, Ortner circumscribes her analysis to the anthropological (and predominantly anglophone) literature of the 1980s onward and departs geographically from the United States. In this, she ends up falling into Ganti's critical perception of anthropological unawareness of the long history of neoliberal capitalism. Under such a restricted perspective, neoliberalism works perfectly as an ideological background explaining the "triumph of dark anthropology" during that short period considered by Ortner, so she can focus on a cluster of three interrelated areas of work that have been identified as a response to the problematic workings of neoliberalism:

³ I refer to the Brazilian Portuguese version of *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man—A Study in Terror and Healing* so I can benefit also from important reviews of this work in Brazil.

(1) the emergence of dark anthropology, including both theory and ethnography; (2) the dialectically related emergence of what have been called “anthropologies of ‘the good’”; and (3) the reemergence of the study of “resistance,” which I treat as an umbrella term for a range of new critical ethnographic and theoretical work (Ortner 2016, 48).

The problem with such periodization seems to be that, to paraphrase Ganti (2014, 93), it takes issues of political economy to be only a context or base that shapes and constrains the emergence and reemergence of anthropological areas of study rather than to be topics of ethnographic inquiry in their own right! Instead of circumscribing neoliberalism to the 1980s and the United States, “being aware of the history and genealogy of neoliberalism would enable anthropologists to carry out precisely such an inquiry and to be more reflexive about using the term” (Ganti 2014, 93). This is particularly true in Latin America, where neoliberalism has been a prescriptive economic doctrine implemented by authoritarian capitalist-military regimes since the 1960s.

Therefore, rather than seeing the three areas outlined earlier as rooted exclusively in a particular context and happening consecutively, I merge them to recognize their features in Taussig’s ethnographies, thus rendering them exemplary of a style of ethnography that is both sensitive to unjust social relations and stimulative of resistance and therefore “good” for anthropology.

In order to put this idea to work, the ideological relevance of neoliberalism as “the onset of the socio-economic-political order” (Ortner 2016, 47–48) has to be rehistoricized in Latin America in the first place. In other words, neoliberalism cannot be held responsible for framing the theoretical interests of anthropology alone. It derives its structuring power from the overwhelming late capitalist economic order. Otherwise, how to explain that previous versions of “dark anthropology,” namely, counterhegemonic anthropologies, emerged decades before neoliberalism within “peripheral anthropologies” (Cardoso de Oliveira 1998) worldwide?⁴ Besides that, if we consider that Marx’s influence on counterhegemonic anthropologies (not to mention other counterhegemonic theorists) can be traced to decades before the advent of neoliberalism in Latin America and the Caribbean, then we should indeed be referring to the power effects of a much larger and longer structuring process of chronic, pervasive inequality and injustice so as to explain the tenacity of “darkness” (in Ortner’s sense) in the anthropologies of the South as well as the undying study of cultural resistance in the region.⁵

Therefore, it is more accurate to refer to colonial and dependent capitalism as the ideological-generative backgrounds of both dark anthropologies and neoliberalism, particularly in Latin America. As a matter of fact, such a rethinking could help us render neoliberalism as a much more complex historical phenomenon in itself.⁶ Meanwhile, for this article, to consider colonial and dependent capitalism as the most proper ideological frameworks influencing anthropology and the social sciences’ theoretical interests instead of neoliberalism alone is not a simple regeneration of an “old ‘dark theory’ school” of academics from the Global South but the recognition that “power, exploitation, and chronic pervasive inequality” is indeed the very means of production of the current global political-economic order (a.k.a. post-imperialism; Ribeiro 2000) and its imperial geohistorical categories (a.k.a. Occidentalism; Coronil 1996).

Latin American social contexts can therefore be defined as intrinsically unjust considering the long duration of the socioeconomic colonial and then dependent

⁴ See Wolf (1999) for more on capitalism, colonialist expansion, and nationalist rivalry as an “environment” to the historical development of social anthropology(ies) and consequently for also framing its theoretical interests.

⁵ I am making reference to Fernando Ortiz in Cuba and José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru, just to mention two cornerstone thinkers for Latin American anthropology.

⁶ And by doing so, I also agree with Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism in the context of a wider history of governmentality (see Laval 2017).

structures that resulted in crisis and recession on a permanent basis as part of the expanded reproduction of capital. In that sense, to consider the post-neoliberal 1980s in Latin America as a “lost decade” is nothing but economic jargon. Losses, so to speak, must be accounted for at a scale of many centuries. The peoples of Latin America have been struggling in the long run to balance contradictory feelings regarding their hopes and longing for a worthy life with very frustrating economic life conditions shaped after slavery (colonial and modern) and dependent industrialization, followed by late capitalist constraints that resulted in perennial overexploitation of the labor force and overall debt of national states and its lower classes, which has been deeply aggravated by neoliberalism as an economic governmentality.

The historiography and the ethnographies of the region are deemed prolific, with descriptions and analyses of economic cycles and the social effects that prompted continuous seasons of abundance and scarcity, conservatism and change, modernization and traditionalist regression, dependence, and revolution, culminating in the agonistic coexistence of these antinomies that seem to characterize the subcontinent’s political economy. Such historical circumstances accounted for several tropes, metaphors, and notions of poverty, underdevelopment, exploitation, violence, domination, hierarchy, and power (none of them painted “black,” so to speak), which are intellectually extracted from the local realities of enslaved or overexploited collectivities of indigenes, blacks, peasants, proletarians, and so on.⁷

That is to say, for Latin Americans, the “evil doings of capitalist power” do not simply stage magic realist fictions. As a matter of fact, they are deeply structured in everyday life; that is what renders colonial and dependent capitalism an ethnographically widespread and shared reality. Therefore, Latin American political thinkers and social scientists have been almost obsessively dedicated to the critique of capitalist power relations within their own societies and in interconnection with other countries and regions, configuring a recognizable postimperialist critical tradition (see Ribeiro 2000; Beigel 2006; Falero 2006).

Inspired by or in dialogue with such tradition, ethnographies written in and about the region in the second half of the twentieth century have focused mainly on social situations and processes of interethnic domination, class exploitation, poverty, violence, racial and gender power relations, political struggles for citizenship and rights, socio-environmental conflicts, and so on, and as a necessary consequence, they also focused on the biopolitics of state management of social inequality and cultural or racialized identities.

There is also plenty of ethnographic work done and in progress on classical “cultural” subjects of the discipline, such as cosmology, kinship, rituals, visual and performing arts, literature and music, visual anthropology, popular culture, and cultural heritage, not to mention cultural studies and science studies. However, it is important to keep in mind that this classical face of Latin American anthropology has never avoided the fact that the subjects exist amid very asymmetrical social contexts and perform long-standing struggles for balancing power. That is key to identifying the very recognizable styles of doing fieldwork and writing ethnography in Latin America.

As local cultures exist under very harsh conditions of life conditioned by the long processes of colonialism and imperialism, the ethnographies carried out in Latin America seem to have no other option but to capture the unjustness of things. Taussig’s ethnographies are, then, no exception to this general rule, and they are in close dialogue with the critical style of Latin American ethnographies, for that matter. Therefore, to be able to envision any hope for our societies within such an inevitable pessimistic background, it is necessary to understand the hope-generating role anthropologies of injustice are playing in the production of a counterhegemonic discourse in Latin America. To do so, it is important to question, first, the extent to which ethnography as the

⁷ For more on the making and unmaking of the “Third World” as a trope of the capitalist development ideology, see Escobar (2011).

textualization of culture can apprehend and depict local empirical senses of hope amid harsh conditions and, second, the extent to which ethnography as a cultural critique can trigger utopian imagination to transform this same unjust reality or at least help to envision different futures.

In search of hope: Reading ethnographies of injustice as experience

Michael Taussig is a well-known anthropologist with a vast literary production built after extensive fieldwork. Per his own self-description at the Columbia University website:

I began fieldwork in 1969. I have returned every year. My writing has spanned different things in roughly the following order; two books in Spanish for local people on the history of slavery and its aftermath, and books and articles in academic journals on the: 1) commercialization of peasant agriculture, 2) slavery, 3) hunger, 4) the popular manifestations of the working of commodity fetishism, 5) the impact of colonialism (historical and contemporary) on “shamanism” and folk healing, 6) the relevance of modernism and post-modernist aesthetics for the understanding of ritual, 7) the making, talking, and writing of terror, 8) mimesis in relation to sympathetic magic, state fetishism, and secrecy, 9) defacement (meaning iconoclasm), 10) a two week diary detailing paramilitary violence, 11) a study of exciting substance loaded with seduction and evil, gold and cocaine, in a montage-ethnography of the Pacific Coast of Colombia, 11) currently writing a book entitled “What Color Is the Sacred?”⁸

For this review, I focus only on his earliest publications and depart from interviews and reviews of only two of his works.⁹ I follow Gross (1983), Fausto (1988), Leal (2014), Rebutzi (2015), and Parreiras (2020). I also address an additional review, Coronil’s (1996), but the idea is not to present a comparative perspective or to essentialize a “Latin American perspective” to the detriment of other readings and critiques of his work. The objective is to combine a few coincidental critical interpretations of Taussig’s ethnographies to sustain how feasible it is to be both realistic (or intellectually pessimistic) about the ugly realities of the world and hopeful (or consciously optimistic) about the possibilities of changing them (Ortner 2016, 60 and 66). Both attitudes are neither incompatible nor strange to a critically engaged anthropology that characterizes Latin American ethnographies, as I would like to demonstrate.

The first book, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980), explores the social significance of the devil in the “implicit social knowledge” of contemporary plantation workers and miners in Colombia and Bolivia.¹⁰ Taussig departs from Marxist theory to question such perspective and apply the concept of fetishism into the image of

⁸ This information was available at the website <http://anthropology.columbia.edu/people/profile/376>. The actual website is: <https://anthropology.columbia.edu/content/michael-t-taussig>. A list of his major publications from 1989 to 2009 is as follows: *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1980); *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (University of Chicago Press, 1987); *The Nervous System* (Routledge, 1992); *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, 1993); *The Magic of the State* (Routledge, 1997); *Defacement* (Stanford University Press, 1999); *Law in a Lawless Land* (New Press, 2003); *My Cocaine Museum* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); and *What Color Is the Sacred?* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ The fact that I have read these two books over a decade ago and that they have caused a longstanding impression on my way of understanding, practicing and teaching anthropology cannot be undervalued for its selection here.

¹⁰ By “implicit social knowledge,” Taussig (1984, 87) meant “essentially inarticulate and imageric, nondiscursive knowing of social relationality, and in trying to understand some aspects of the way that history and memory interact in the constituting of this knowledge.”

the devil (instead of the classical application to the fetishization of commodities) to apprehend how laborers mediate the conflict between precapitalist and capitalist modes of objectifying the human condition. He links traditional narratives of the devil pact, in which the soul is bartered for illusory or transitory power, with the way production in capitalist economies causes workers to become alienated from the commodities they produce. The devil pact metaphor is the key to the anthropological interpretation of how Afro-Colombian plantation workers and Indigenous Bolivian miners culturally criticize and manage capitalist domination.

In his second book, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (1986), Taussig approaches two very complex, “long duration” subjects of Latin American history and culture: “the colonial penetration of capitalism and shamanic curing by means of hallucinogens” (Gow 1988, 347). In his book, “the space of death” is an important cultural dimension for creating meaning and consciousness, particularly for societies in which torture is endemic and the culture of terror flourishes (Taussig 1993 [1987], 26).¹¹

There is no need to explain extensively why these two books might be considered ethnographic icons of an anthropology of injustice. The “devil pact,” the “culture of terror,” and the “space of death” are self-evident tropes, for that matter. What demands examination is how to discern something good within these gloomy metaphors developed by Taussig in his ethnographies. To do so, it is important to envision ethnography not only as a kind of “writing,” as has been frequently and extensively done since Clifford and Marcus (1986), but also as a kind of “reading.” I sustain that the shift from writing to reading ethnographies is a necessary hermeneutical turn to search for hope in ethnographies of human injustice, especially when we admit that writing is a way of reading and reading is a way of attributing meaning to what has been written.

First, and following Jacobson (1991), one must keep in mind this: understanding an ethnography begins with the recognition that it involves interpretation. Ethnographies do not merely depict the object of anthropological research, whether a people, a culture, or a society. Rather, an ethnographic account constitutes the researcher’s interpretation of what he or she has observed or heard (Jacobson 1991, 3). Therefore, reading ethnographies, whether “dark” or not, needs to go beyond a mere act of dilettantism. It involves a meta-experience that begins with acceptance of the “anthropologist as researcher” problem-oriented perspective and the conceptual referents the “anthropologist as author” used to interpret reality and structure the account, which can also be referred to as his or her politics of ethnographic representation.

This tacit agreement between anthropologist as author and anthropologist as reader of ethnographies frequently stands on the common ground of a shared disciplinary culture or tradition that lends the writer and the reader the “implicit narrative structure” or “story” underlying the more explicit or written-down interpretations of ethnographic experience (Bruner 1986, 139). It is thanks to the implicit narrative structures of ethnographies that very different and complex modes of thought, rituals, and institutions are rendered comprehensible through texts to disciplined readers. Needless to say, these same narrative structures are culturally biased and therefore frequently criticized and deconstructed as cultures and intellectual work change.

¹¹ To suggest a different narrative on the same context it is important to mention Mario Vargas Llosa’s “El sueño del celta” (2010), which also focus on Roger Casement’s reports for the British Foreign Office regarding the Peruvian Rubber Company cruel practices against the Indigenous Peoples in the Putumayo River. The rhetorical power of literature and ethnographic narratives to create awareness and build hope messages could be the subject of another article. I present it here to highlight that there are many written channels of dissemination of hope narratives in the “dark” dystopias of colonialism and capitalism, even on those sites thoroughly examined by one or another literary genre.

Consequently, to say that there is a common interpretive textual ground between writer and reader does not mean that there is a tacit agreement concerning the ethnographic representation elaborated by the ethnographer to depict his or her subjects to a wider reading audience. As a matter of fact, anthropologists as readers frequently seek in ethnographies a level of descriptive accuracy and detailed minutiae that even the pleasure of reading can be lost in the experience.

Take Gross's (1983), Coronil's (1996), and Fausto's (1988) critiques of Taussig's ethnographies, for example. The first argues that Taussig, in writing *Devil*, accepted stereotypical portraits of cultural features that are not verifiably present (Gross 1983, 699). The second places *Devil* within the Occidentalist representational modality of the "destabilization of Self by Other" (Coronil 1996, 68)—that is, it uses non-Western peoples as a privileged source of knowledge for building Western self-images. According to these critical frames of interpretation, *Devil* is read as an ethnography that "exalts difference," "erase[s] historical links," and "homogenize[s] internal features" to unwittingly reinscribe "an imperial Self-Other duality even as it seeks to unsettle colonial representation" (Coronil 1996, 68). Fausto reads Taussig's *Shamanism* as a text of "generalized polyphony" that makes use of a "double language also: the brutal discourse of terror and the exquisitely nuanced discourse of shamanism. In the middle of them and through them, the anthropological discourse searches for a way to exist in the very impossibility to fully achieve its object" (Fausto 1988, 183, my translation).

However, these readings of Taussig's ethnographies fail to account for cultural difference as alterity, which happens to be so because the implicit narrative structure shared by these readers departs from a conception of anthropology as a realist, objective, and human science dedicated to represent the "other" to a Westernized "Self." Coronil and Fausto, alongside Leal (2014), Rebuzzi (2015), and Parreiras (2020), all agree on the efficacy of Taussig's narratives to represent the counterlogics of people either not yet fully subjected to capitalism (as they appear in *Devil*) or who became extremely victimized by it (as in *Shamanism*). Under such readings, the "devil pact" in the first ethnography and the "shamanistic healing" in the second are figurative beliefs that stand as precapitalist "others," and as such, the readers of Taussig's works consider his ethnographies of the beliefs and rituals of Latin American peasants, miners, enslaved indigenous peoples, and shamans as descriptively "thin" but aesthetically "thick."

In other words, Gross, Coronil, and Fausto would appreciate hard ethnographic objective "facts" instead of subjective, though sophisticated narrative "rhetoric." But it is precisely his conception of anthropological work as a kind of art that stems as his most important contribution in reimagining the "dark" in the anthropologies of injustice. According to Taussig, "Therefore, my work as anthropologist is to provide a new art, a new culture if you wish, against it [Western hegemony], but both are interwoven, and because of that I have this phrase, of art versus art, instead of saying the economy versus ideology, or an ideology versus another ideology" (Taussig apud Parreiras 2020, 4, personal translation).

To properly reimagine the "dark" in dark anthropology, one has to follow Taussig and his "aesthetic versus aesthetic" style of representing the counterlogics of capitalism. What his readers are rendering as a flaw can be considered a particular contribution to Latin American anthropologies of unjust power relations to counterhegemonize capitalism. Considering that Taussig is dedicated to writing his ethnographies as a cultural critique and not as "realistic descriptions" of otherness, one must keep in mind that in *Devil*, "Taussig provides a suggestive portrait of peasant cultures, but one drawn less as a means to understand 'other' societies in their unique complexity than as a way to gain a critical vantage point to critique 'our' own" (Coronil 1996, 70). And *Shamanism* is a book about the mediation of terror through the narrative and the problem of writing effectively against it (Fausto 1988, 184).

Taussig's ethnographies depart both from anthropological theory and from Marxism intertwined with German "critical theory" to render his narratives as elegantly sophisticated and innovative—Coronil (1996), Fausto (1988), and Rebuzzi (2015) all share that understanding. I argue that the writing of ethnographies on evil and death is an open-ended process that is subjectively completed in the reading of the horrors suffered by others through narrative so as to control their effects and hopefully overcome them. As noted by Rebuzzi (2015, 17), "Ethnography must have as a horizon an open dialogue to the apprehension of meaning." It is a very sensible way to deal with violence, injustice, and the suffering of actual persons, groups, and societies, because it does not intellectually explore their victimization or use the study of violence to build a career (Parreiras 2020, 7). The utmost goal is to deconstruct the fetishization of harsh capitalist relations as simulacra and simulation of their and our own reality as a unified historicity.

Given this critical use of ethnography, what seems important is precisely the appreciation of the ethnographic text not as a recipient of objective knowledge but as an open avenue for the creative work of subjectivity when the reader gives voice to the meaning of the text in time.¹²

Consequently, reading Taussig's works in search of hope implies sharing his implicit commitment to write against violence that causes the suffering of others, and that can be perceived as a dangerous task because it helps and stimulates the violence in the author, as well as in the reader (Parreiras 2020, 7). The ethnographic textualization of violence may cause the author and reader some awkward complicity that can ultimately result in an ethnographic backfiring, or ethical aversion to the critical anthropological aesthetic itself.¹³ Then, making a conscious effort to read such ethnographies becomes inevitable, which means learning to ethically and aesthetically accept the ethnographer's effort to describe very revolting facts about the extent and depth of human evilness as interpretable symbolic "things" that can be subliminally mastered (see Parreiras 2020, 3).

Nonetheless, *Devil* and *Shamanism* are very different texts stylistically speaking. Taussig (2010 [1980], 12) himself declared that *Devil* is attached to the "omniscient voice of authority," whereas *Shamanism* was acclaimed for his generalized polyphony (Fausto 1988, 183). But it is thanks to the centrality of the Marxian concepts of fetishism (as a "master trope") and alienation that Taussig found his Ariadne's thread to weave both ethnographies.

Consequently, searching for hope within his ethnographies is a three-step process. First, it is necessary to learn how to curb the impulse to ask for detailed ethnographic minutiae and to loath the misery of the human soul and its evil doings (that can generate an aversion to these ethnographic narratives and to the anthropologist who deemed such events as "objects" of interpretation) and encourage within oneself the empathy for the author's own empathy toward the suffering of others and his commitment to write against it (which can render the ethnographies both aesthetically and ethically canonical).

It means that to be able to become a "solidary" subject with the author and his interpreting intentions toward the suffering of the human subjects of his ethnographies does not necessarily mean putting oneself in the place of the victim or endorsing a victimization narrative about a generalized subaltern "other." On the contrary, the suffering of others, as unique persons, is grounded in the anthropologist's fundamental situatedness with them (Frie 2010), and that is the "common ground" between

¹² See more on the debate between objectivity and subjectivity in texts as the reference of interpretation as this generally is employed in the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) in Dibadj (1988).

¹³ This sort of unwillingness to accept the critical rhetoric about violence and terror mimics the psychoanalytic resistance toward the violence and terror existent in the social world at large. Perhaps the critical statements made against ethnographic descriptions of violence, torture, and death as "misery porn" (see Ortner 2016) come from this same oppositional behavior. If that is so, we would be allowed to wonder to what extent anthropologies of human injustice could be considered "pornographic" if the misery described is indeed so pornographically miserable. In other words, the problem lies in the reality of rhetoric or in the reality rhetorically described?

ethnographer as author, ethnographed, and anthropological reader. Therefore, interpretative solidarity is identified as an attitude that readers can embrace to read the ethnographic description of the disruptive reality of others as a form to reflexively participate in it and join the struggle against violence.

Second, while searching for “hope” and “good” within Taussig’s ethnographies, it can be easy to endorse a Pollyannaish attitude toward the horrific facts depicted in ethnographic writing, particularly in the first part of *Shamanism*, entitled “Terror.” By taking a Pollyanna attitude, I refer to the naive exercise of seeking the “bright” side of “the devil pact,” evilness, and the space of death through concepts such as resistance, resilience, agency, and other optimistic concepts alike. To search for hope within ethnographies of human, unjust facts has nothing to do with being “positive” or “well spirited” toward pain, suffering, and terror. On the contrary, following Taussig’s tropes, to search for hope is to search not for the remedy for evil and death but for the cultural pathways that rebuild senses of life after larger “meaning-destructive” contexts. One may dare to say that we should aim at a “shamanistic anthropology.”

And third, to read “dark” ethnographies does not aim to apprehend from local cultures what they did to resist and overcome evil or to romanticize the “natives” as superhumans who vanquished pain, suffering, and death. One of the troubles with the emphasis the discipline has placed on the “suffering subject” (see Hébert 2016 for a critique of such emphasis) is the victimization discourse of indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and local communities who were symbolically deprived of their social and political agency toward disadvantageous situations. To try to counterbalance the “suffering subject” with the image of an overpowerful “hoping subject” who can endure all the pain, resist every abuse, and override all the bad, all the trauma, and all the subalternity by means of their local cultures is simply wrong. It creates only caricatures or allegories of resistance.

A sensible reading of ethnographies of human injustice must depart from the fact that unjust social realities are as real as they are hallucinatorily seductive.¹⁴ They are constituted by several histories of defeat, deceit, co-optation, surrender, loss, and so on. People are commonly violated, brutalized, kidnapped, tortured, enslaved, incarcerated, overexploited, starved, and killed. The survivors may experience and witness it all and be obliged to destroy, burn, and bury the corpses, which turns into an endless chain of terror and suffering. People become traumatized, silenced, forgotten, and deprived of all sense of a meaningful human existence and therefore deprived of any hope.

The ethnography of violence, exploitation, and social suffering under or about such circumstances must be read not because it renders unjust experiences palatable at the same time that it redeems the suffering subject, but because it brings the reader closer to knowing the suffering mechanisms that are put to work in the world as symbolic productive forces. Ethnography should be considered effective against terror, and particularly capitalist neoliberal terror, if it not only depicts what is wrong with this world but also can awaken imaginative ways to build collaboratively with others “worlds not yet in being” (Hébert 2016).

Reimagining the “dark” in Michael Taussig’s Marxian ethnographies

I hope it has been sufficiently explained that I will focus not on ethnographic data but on Taussig’s Marxian ethnographies as icons of dark anthropology’s politics of representation. That being said, *Devil* brings a cover of the Satan figure painted with his horned head,

¹⁴ Interviewed by Parreiras (2020, 7), Taussig comments that his “sensation is that to write about violence, to write against violence, is dangerous because it helps and stimulates the violence within the author, as well as the violence in the reader, and a certain level of stimulation like this (he believes) is necessary to think about violence on an oppositional way, but it is a force that will be probably self-destructive” (personal translation).

black-bearded face, and little red tail holding a trident. The book is divided into three parts. The first presents “fetishism” as the master trope to account for precapitalist interpretations and practices toward capitalist modes of production. The second covers the plantations of the Cauca Valley in Colombia. The last describes the Bolivian tin mines.

This book starts with three epigraphs from the book of Job to suggest the ubiquity of Satan, “walking up and down” on Earth. Another by Walter Benjamin emphasizes that the “enemy has not ceased to be victorious.” And the last were Marx’s on “pre-capitalist economic formations, when he realizes that man, in the ancient conception, is the aim of production, while in the modern world, “production is the aim of man” and “wealth the aim of production.” In this quote, it is possible to find the core of Taussig’s message of hope that comes out of his ethnography. He recognizes in the contemporary struggle of plantation workers and miners a more fundamental struggle than the social classes struggle envisioned by Marx in *Capital*, and that is the struggle between precapitalist conceptions of production and capitalist conceptions: “In short, the meaning of capitalism will be subject to precapitalist meanings, and the conflict expressed in such a confrontation will be one in which man is seen as the aim of production, and not production as the aim of man” (Taussig 1980, 11).

After acknowledging this, *Devil* starts with the immediate exposition of Taussig’s (1980, xi) main objective: “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.” To pursue this goal, he poses a series of questions that the historical and ethnographic contexts led him 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?” (Taussig 1980, xi). The approach to these questions can be seen in the narrative structure of the book, which departs from the symbolic context of medieval religion in Europe and Latin America, the historical context of conquest and colonialism, and the symbolic context of indigenous and African cosmologies and closes each part emphasizing ritual and magic.

After debating theoretically “fetishism” as a trope, Taussig starts his ethnography by showing the plantations of the Cauca Valley and the Bolivian tin mines as empirical elucidations of that trope. In other words, if we recall that commodity-based societies produce concepts, such as labor-time, as if they were real things, this means that to render it real in the first place, society’s members have to deny their own social construction of reality (Taussig 1980, 4). In other words, time is the quintessential fetish of society! It is through the phantom existence of mechanical time that precapitalist societies are enslaved, by accepting its separation from social life and conceiving of it as an animated other entity responsible for the destruction of life itself.

Realizing this, Taussig (1980, 5–6) proposes that “the task before us is to liberate ourselves from the fetishism and phantom objectivity with which society obscures itself, to take issue with the ether of naturalness that confuses and disguises social relations. The ‘natural’ appearance of such things has to be exposed as a social product that can itself determine reality; thus, society may become master of its self-victimization.” He continues: “There is a methodological liberating aspect of such task for anthropologists as well, that is: To peel off the disguised and fictional quality of our social reality, the analyst has the far harder task of working through the appearance that phenomena acquire, not so much as symbols, but as the outcome of their interaction with the historically produced categories of thought that have been imposed on them” (Taussig 1980, 9).

From such a perspective, the evil figure of the devil appears to Afro-American peasants in the sugarcane plantations of Colombia and to Indian miners in the Bolivian highlands, which are two widely separated areas of rural Latin America, “as part of the process of maintaining or increasing production” (Taussig 1980, 13) in a world that is under

transformation but not yet entirely absent of God's rule. In such contexts, Taussig (1980, 17) points out: "It is not growth per se but the character and immense human significance of a society geared to accumulation for its own sake that is the cause for concern" either for the "natives" or for the anthropologist.

Considering that there is not enough textual space to present the attitudes toward wage labor and capitalist development triggered by the neophyte proletarians and their devil beliefs, it is sufficient to say that Taussig learned from these beliefs that they are not irrational responses to a system that is based on the production of exchange values. Quite to the contrary, the devil trope manifested in popular culture expresses the resistance of the precapitalist mentality to embracing a market mentality. Or to put it more simply, we realize that there are alternative ways of thinking about persons as persons and commodities as animated entities that can dominate persons through diabolic power relations.

But, the most relevant message of hope that is implicit in the narrative structured by these interpretations is not the agency of peasants and miners resisting capitalism but the fact that capitalism has not yet conquered all social dimensions of social and symbolic life. As Taussig (1980, 38) pointed out: "Until the capitalist institutions have permeated all aspects of economic life and the revolution in the mode of production is complete, the lower classes will persist in viewing the bonds between persons in their modern economic activities for what they really are—asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, exploitative, and destructive of relationships between persons—and not as natural relations between forces supposedly inherent in potent things."

This means only that capitalism cannot be mistaken for total domination, because different cultures always work to acknowledge and domesticate what is "devilish" in it, subordinating that to their own counterlogics and, eventually, spiriting it away.¹⁵ This is not the same as saying that precapitalist cultures or traditions face capitalist forces on an equal basis. As Gross correctly puts it: the "'discovery' that peasants or proletarians conserve a prequest outlook in their folklore may serve as little more than as a salve to the Western conscience, because it implies that capitalism, no matter how destructive and alienating, may not have erased indigenous thought. To insist on these alternative modes of thought as adequate responses to capitalist exploitation is rather like urging the natives to form a millenarian cult. They express much but accomplish little" (Gross 1983, 701–702).

Quite to the contrary, the hopefulness in Taussig's ethnographic representation does not lie in an essentialized idea of a precapitalist mentality resisting religiously to capitalist colonization but in the fact that local cultures produce counterknowledge and counterpractices to what is evil in capitalism and colonialism. That is to say, the devil contract stands as a cultural metaphor of capitalist alienation by the peasants and miners that, therefore, culturally mediates the precapitalist and the capitalist social formations in the Cauca Valley and the Bolivian mines.

These lessons learned from *Devil* are put to an empirical test in the "study of terror." The ethnographic case analyzed in *Shamanism* is not a situation of "neophyte proletarians" of indigenous peoples enslaved by *caucho* companies in the upper Caquetá and Putumayo rivers on the international borders of Colombia and Peru. *Shamanism* challenges the very *rationale* of capitalism. In a context of labor-force scarcity, the rubber company promotes the destruction of the local indigenous labor force by adopting the most irrational forms of

¹⁵ Sahlins (1988) presents a similar, although less "darker," argument concerning the "cosmologies of capitalism." The major difference to be registered here is that for Sahlins, capitalism may configure a symbolic "enrichment of the local system" where natives build a "neo-traditional development." Departing from Taussig's ethnographies, we are taught to envision historical situations differently, the material "impoverishment of the local systems" build an "anticapitalist tradition" which stems out as a hopeful cultural practice against the advancement of capitalism as a cosmology.

cruelty. The local culture there was one not of precapitalist versus capitalist modes of mentality but of terror *per se*.

As a matter of fact, *Shamanism* presents the devil in person, not metaphorically. Julio César Arana del Águila (Rioja, San Martín, 1864–Magdalena del Mar, Lima, 1952) was a *caucho* entrepreneur and Peruvian politician. He earned huge fortunes through exploitation in the Amazon forest. His company, Casa Arana, became the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company in 1907 with the participation of British capital. After the “Putumayo scandals,” Arana was held responsible for the exploitation and death of thousands of Uitoto, Bora, Okaina, Muinane, Andoque, Nonuya, Miraña, Yukuna, and Matapí peoples of the region, who were exploited by his company.

Under the auspices of the British government, Roger Casement wrote the reports that motivated the lawsuit and conviction of Arana, but the outbreak of World War I interrupted the process, and Arana came to be senator for Loreto and president of the chamber of commerce in the region.

The front cover of *Shamanism* brings a picture of Casement among a dressed indigenous woman and child and an indigenous man. That picture is an icon of European heroism during colonial times and as such hides the ugliest side of colonial terror cultures.

What is striking about *Shamanism* as an ethnography of human injustice is the absurdity of life under colonial domination. The challenge to think through terror and torture to understand it does not mean, for Taussig, an attempt to render it rational. On the contrary, the idea is to face colonial modernity and the “savagery” it evokes and promotes as a “stage” (in the double sense) of “primitive accumulation” (in another double sense) that is rehearsed and performed repeatedly as rites of conquest of nature and men. The political economy of conquest is seen in this ethnography as a politics of terror that has a long tradition in the “New World” of transforming man into debt. The “fetishism of commodity” here is replaced by the “fetishism of debt” that often flourishes in a very paranoid white mythology of savagery, cannibalism, treason, and wilderness and the power it takes to tame those and render them lucrative.

Under such contexts, in which hope is destroyed because terror nourishes itself by the destruction of sense and meaning, we end up learning how the logic and logistics of commerce, the rationality of the market, that embody terror as a means of production creates the fetishism of debt. In Taussig’s (1986, 133) words: “There, where the labor force was not free or capable of being transformed into commodity, not only rubber and the European commodities were made fetishes. More important than that was the fetishization of the situation of economic indentured servitude that these commodities constellate and which concentrated all the force of imagination, ritualization, and corruption of the colonial society. A gigantic simulacrum, the debt was the point where the gift economy of the Indian intertwined with the capitalist economy of the colonizer.”

The torture and killings of indigenous “indentured servants” were a way to calculate the cost efficiency of the *caucho* company. It was ostensibly to make them work and increase production, even if that implied producing the scarcity of labor force. How to extract ethnographic hope from such a violent economy? As argued earlier, one has to read Taussig’s text not as a realist ethnography but as an impressionist composition: “The seduced reader will know how to go through with some dexterity the tortuous discursive pathways that Taussig tracks in the route of terror and shamanic healing in the Colombian Southeast” (Fausto 1988, 183, personal translation). In other words, Taussig did not present an objective description of a “dark” exploitative reality, but a diptych, half terror, half healing, provided by culture as a historical unraveling process.

Hence, the second and largest part of *Shamanism* is a long account of healing from modern and colonial wounds through *yagé* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), a hallucinogen used in healing by the shamans in the forests on the eastern side of the Andes. But how can anyone be healed from colonialism?

“The mystic and magic space fixed in the image of the Indian in South America is filled with political irony,” Taussig says in the beginning of the ninth chapter, “Las tres potencias: The Magic of Races.” In this chapter, we are put face-to-face with the fact that the indigenous population in Colombia has reached a tiny fraction of the national society, but, in contrast, the “Indian” has accumulated an enormous magical reputation after all colonial history of terror and social production of new meanings and identities. Away from marginalized, impoverished communities, we come face-to-face with the “Indian spell,” whether in libraries, bookstores, movies, or anthropology congresses. In other words, the “modern” did not manage to exorcize the “premodern” from its fantasies.

Just as we have learned that precapitalist mentality challenges reinterprets and resists capitalist categories, we are now dealing with the encompassing of a contrary, as Louis Dumont once put it. Shamanism survives and resists in capitalist societies as an alternative logic that helps heal the illnesses of capitalist colonial life, history, and traumas. Taussig develops his insights focusing on the initiation processes of becoming a shaman, or better put, a healer, which is a way of learning how to walk in the “space of death.” This is a powerful message of hope brought forward by this ethnography through the paths of shamanism in Colombia: in order to heal, one must become a healer, and according to Taussig, that is a process mimicry implicit in his shamanistic style of ethnographic writing (see Parreiras 2020).

Colonialism has produced many traumas through its economy of terror. In fact, contemporary Latin American societies are the result of such violent processes of sociogenesis. The outcomes, as we know, are very unequal social structures, racially hierarchized and secularly violent. Nevertheless, there is hope in its people’s cultural implicit knowledge. Neither colonialism nor capitalism seems to be able to totally impose itself as a closed monoculture. As a kind of unexpected gift, the colonizers built and relegated to the present a powerful image of the “wild man” that refuses to disappear. According to Taussig (1986, 436): “Facing the powers of such a gift the colonizers would be blind if it was not for the reciprocity of the colonized, who brings to the dialogic imagination of colonization an image that extracts from civilization its devilish power.”

Epilogue

This opening commentary was presented by Daniel Gross (1983, 694) when he reviewed Taussig’s *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* alongside June Nash’s 1979 ethnography, *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us: Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*: “Nineteenth-century anthropologists disparaged ‘primitive’ societies and posed the emerging industrial civilization of the West as the pinnacle of progressive development . . . Today, the matter seems to have come full circle as anthropologists disparage their own civilization and vaunt precapitalist societies as superior to the capitalist West.”

It could not be more precise to contextualize the background of the emergence of Latin American(ist) “dark” anthropologies vis-à-vis Ortner’s definition that was expounded upon here to accommodate an extra-neoliberal US setting.

More than a decade later, Coronil envisioned such anthropological disparaging of their own civilization as a particular form of Occidentalist representational modality: “the destabilization of the Self (a.k.a. capitalist West) by the Other (meaning non-Western peoples).” According to Coronil, such representational modality follows a paradigmatic structure that “conjures up an image of an alternative culture” and “avoids producing a conventional ethnographic account that reproduces the West’s objectifying gaze” (Coronil 1996, 70). In that sense, “Taussig’s exceptional contribution to the ethnography of Latin America lies precisely in his having opened up an imaginative space for understanding fundamental cultural differences” (Coronil 1996, 70).

Taussig's analysis of a set of beliefs and rituals toward capitalist commodification in Latin America presents a particular kind of cultural critique that may seem gloomy at first, but such negativity is not only aesthetically coherent with the ethnographic settings of his fieldwork but also advantageous for depicting cultures themselves as powerful tropes of resistance to capitalist forms of exploitation of wage and labor. In that sense, Taussig's ethnographies of human injustice reinforce the lesson that to demystify capitalist culture, one must do it from its precapitalist margins (Coronil 1996, 71). It is by resisting and rearticulating the interconnected beliefs of peasants, miners, and indigenes in Latin America as a cultural critique of capitalism that ethnography is able to create transcultural meanings to cope with capitalism and its chronicle pervasive inequalities.

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