

TAUSSIG

CAUCA VALLEY

THE DEVIL AND PROLETARIAN LABOR

-
- Taussig, M. 1977. 'The Genesis of Capitalism amongst a South American Peasantry: Devil's Labor and the Baptism of Money'.
Comparative Studies in Society and History.
Vol. 19, No. 2. pp.130-155.

-
- What does wage labor and capital mean to a peasantry that is subjected to rapid rural proletarianization and what is?
 - Taussig looks at ideological reactions manifested by a South American lowland peasantry as expanding sugar plantations absorb their lands and peasants are converted into landless wage labourers

-
- 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 neighbours 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

-
- Tension between use value and exchange value
 - That is to say: a tension between satisfaction of natural wants and accumulation of capital

FOLK MYSTICISM / CAPITALIST MYSTIFICATION

- Contrasts folk mysticism with capitalist mystification: commodity fetishism
- Tension between ontologies
 - Universe as an interrelated organism
 - Atomistic causal paradigm of Newtonian legacy and influence on western epistemologies

INDIFFERENCE TO WAGE INCENTIVES

- Workers who are new to wage labour situations
- What are the first reaction to this different mode of production
- Notices, initial reaction: indifference to wage incentives
- This is an area of frustration for capitalist entrepreneurs

-
- Weber referred to this response as 'primitive traditionalism'
 - Argues Weber's research attempted to explain this transcendence by the capitalist spirit and capitalist work ethic
 - Persistence of use value practices rather than 'primitive traditionalism'

USE-VALUE ORIENTATION

- Taussig looks at the clash between 'use value orientation' and 'exchange value orientation' and how this could be used as a potential critique of capitalism
- Highlights irrational basis of our own economy

GOOD AND NATURAL

- Tension between capitalist economies and the presentation of the wage contract system, market pricing, and the institutionalisation of profit as natural and ethically good...
- ... and those who are just entering capitalist modes of production with their goods and labour who regard it as anything but good and natural

ROLE OF EDUCATION

- Weber argued that magical superstitions associated with production and trade were the greatest obstacle to rationalization of economic life
- 1927 essay on The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism
- Weber quote: Labour 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

MARX

- Excerpt from Marx used:
- 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)

-
- Taussig notes the community at the heart of his discussion:
 - 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.

APPROPRIATION

- The opening of the valley to the international sea lanes in 1914
- Influx of vast amounts of foreign capital at about the same time
- Sharp natural increase in local population
- Large estate owners have been able to appropriate peasant lands and establish a flourishing plantation economy

POVERTY

- “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 sewer”

1851

- Historical sources 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. (p.3)
- despite high rates of unemployment in the area, estate managers state it is hard find 'sufficient numbers of workers'

-
- Workers feel: that they are being constantly cheated, under-paid, and humiliated.
 - Distrust and hate the plantations and generally resent the fact that the crops produced go outside of the local community

CONTRACTS WITH THE DEVIL

- 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 wages

THE DEVIL AND CAPITALISM

- Sell the soul increase productivity
- Peasants working their own land do not do this, it is only when thy become proletarianized
- Devil permeates capitalist mode of production

THE CONTRACT

- Repercussions for individual: soulless, die early, and in agony
- Certain conditions in terms of the money acquired, must be spent immediately on butter, liquor, fine clothes
- It is also believed that plantation sugar cane cut in this manner will not grow again

COMMODITY FETISHISM

- The extraction of money in this way applies only to the proletarian
- Section on commodity fetishism and baptism
- Notes commodity fetishism occurs when capital and workers' products are spoken of in terms that are used for persons and animate beings

-
- “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 [...] 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 artefacts”

-
- “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 behaviour could be relevant to a critique of classical economic theory”

-
- “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”.