

## BOLIVIAN MINING

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"SI ME PERMITEN HABLAR . . .": TESTIMONIO DE DOMITILA, UNA MUJER DE LAS MINAS DE BOLIVIA. By DOMITILA BARRIOS DE CHUNGARA. (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1977. Pp. 257.)

THE DEVIL AND COMMODITY FETISHISM IN SOUTH AMERICA. By MICHAEL T. TAUSSIG. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980. Pp. 264. \$7.95.)

Viewed from the outside, Bolivia is a mining country; viewed from the inside, it is a peasant-based society. Bolivian peasants have been the subject of many anthropological studies since the turn of the century, but miners have not. Several factors that may explain this void are the relative absence and unreliability of mining data, the difficulties of conducting research underground, the miners' militancy, and the proclivity of anthropologists for studying traditional societies.

Since the 1970s, however, a wave of new writings on Bolivian mining has emerged. Pioneered by June Nash's work among the miners of Oruro, Huanuni, and Siglo XX, the interest in mining was quickly taken up by Bolivian and foreign anthropologists such as Javier Albó, Guillermo Delgado, Thomas Greaves, Olivia Harris, Tristan Platt, and Michael Taussig. The books under review here emerged as part of this larger trend but stand out for their originality rather than for their representativeness.

The two books contrast sharply: while Domitila Barrios's *Testimonio* is an autobiography, Michael Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* is a carefully crafted and sophisticated interpretative work; while Barrios deals with the business of making a living in an impoverished setting and with politics, Taussig deals with the more esoteric aspects of social life, such as symbolic representations of exploitation.

In Taussig's book, the psychiatrist-turned-anthropologist discusses the social history of the devil concept among two South American peasant groups that are undergoing rapid proletarianization. According to Taussig, peasants dislocated from traditional subsistence activities in the southern Cauca Valley of Colombia and in the largest

tin mines of Bolivia independently create the devil figure, at once a mediator of tensions and a symbolization of evil, alienation, and exploitation.

Taussig is quick to distance himself from intellectual ancestors who have written on the significance of the devil. In a message familiar to students of contemporary symbolic anthropology, Taussig asserts that the devil figure cannot be reduced to a psychological mechanism for coping with anxiety nor to an all-pervasive egalitarian ideology (such as Foster's Image of Limited Good) because to do so would reduce a rich cultural form to its functions and consequences. Taussig finds that such explanations can "tell us next to nothing" about the detailed motifs, "precise configuration," vividness, and inner meanings of so rich a collective representation. Moreover, positivist social sciences simply obscure concrete social reality because they uncritically accept fetishized categories of thought such as time, labor, and capital, which themselves need decodification before meanings can be uncovered. Taussig's own "esoteric attempt" to clarify the devil belief system consists in viewing it in its own right, as a cultural and symbolic representation of alienation. His ultimate aim is thus not so much historical or explicative as literary—to "convey something of the 'feel' of social experience."

With these epistemological and methodological issues out of the way, Taussig goes on to analyze the emergence and significance of the devil figure among the sugarcane workers of the southern Cauca Valley from the end of slavery through the enclosure movement and the period of *violencia* (1949–58). Bringing the account closer to the present, he discusses the process of hacienda growth, increasing landlessness and sale of labor, the proliferation of contract work, and the deleterious effects of the Green Revolution.

Explicit in Taussig's analysis of the Colombian (and Bolivian) material is a dichotomization of modes of production into precapitalist (peasant) and capitalist. The precapitalist mode of production is characterized by use value, reciprocity, loose division of labor, need satisfaction, and efficiency. Furthermore, precapitalist agriculture attempts to "replicate the natural ecology" and thus "preserves most of the pre-existing ecosystem." The capitalist mode of production is characterized contrastingly by market (exchange) value, accumulation, unequal exchange, and rigid division of labor. As capitalist modes of production supplant precapitalist formations, social tensions arise, providing the groundwork for the emergence of the devil belief. More specifically, as Cauca men were unwillingly incorporated into sugar plantations, secret production contracts between workers and the devil emerged. Taussig is unsure about the existence of such contracts, but he dismisses the issue because he is interested in examining the content of

these normative agreements as a text. The terms of the contract are simple: in exchange for a short-term increase in sugar production and income, piece-rate workers give up their fertility and eventually their lives. Thus, as Colombian peasants undergo proletarianization, their souls become a commodity, something they can exchange with the devil for other goods.

Taussig's Bolivian analysis follows the same intellectual outline: the transformation of the peasant mode of production generates conflict, suffering, and alienation, all of which concretize in the devil figure. As Bolivian peasants were proletarianized, their rituals changed: the incorporeal mother earth spirit, *la pachamama*, was replaced by the devil, *el tío*, a virile and unpredictable figure. Unlike the *pachamama*, the devil is represented in idol form and requires frequent ritual libations. In agrarian rituals, peasants engage in balanced reciprocity with the *pachamama*; in mining rituals, peasants are simple intermediaries between the devil and the proprietors.

Despite his impressive erudition and literary skills, Taussig's analysis remains unconvincing for several reasons. He critiques positivist orientations such as functionalism because they reduce social forms to the part they play in the maintenance of social systems. Despite his attempt to liberate himself from the fetters of so-called capitalist epistemologies, Taussig's own "esoteric" approach does not amount to more than a sophisticated symbolic form of new functionalism, in which belief systems serve the role of mediating tensions, critiquing capitalist systems of production, or fetishizing evil. The functionalism of social structural interdependencies is replaced by the functionalism of interrelated symbols.

The book is premised on the notion that "neophyte proletarians" are "indifferent and outright hostile" to participation in the market economy. This premise is an empirical proposition, not a philosophical conclusion. As applied to Bolivia, it is wrong because Andean peasants entered the mines during the first sixty years of Spanish rule to find, extract, and market the ore on their own free will. The Bolivian mines during the first half-century of colonial rule were not run by Spaniards, but by voluntary Indian workers who had been "attracted to the mines by the profits they could make from extracting and processing the richer ores."<sup>1</sup> Taussig views the process of proletarianization as coercive, tyrannical, and unilinear; I am suggesting that there was and is a voluntary and, as will be shown, reversible dimension to this process.

Although approximately equal length is allotted to each case study, the qualitative treatment is far from even. Because of his extensive ethnographic and archival research in Colombia, Taussig's discussion of the devil among Colombian peasants is rich in historical detail and subtle in symbolic interpretation. In contrast, his treatment of the

Bolivian material rests on a secondhand ethnographic base and on a thin historical record. He relies heavily on the writings of von Tschudi, Earls, Castro Pozo, Mariátegui, and Valcarcel, none of whom wrote about Bolivia or mining ritual. While Taussig invokes irrelevant authors, he neglects to discuss the seminal writings of Peter Bakewell and Joseph Barnadas in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas*, Domitila Barrios's autobiography, and the doctoral dissertations of Enrique Tandeter and Antonio Mitre, to name only some of the more glaring omissions.<sup>2</sup>

Taussig's inadequate knowledge of Bolivian mining history and ethnography leads him to serious errors of interpretation. For instance, Taussig's view of precapitalist Andean social formations as well-adapted entities is ethnographically and historically incorrect. There is ample and growing evidence to suggest that deforestation, erosion, and ecological degradation in the Andes have pre-Hispanic roots.<sup>3</sup> His vision of precapitalist societies as being characterized by exchange, efficiency, and satisfaction of needs glosses over the forceful extraction of labor services by the Inca state, relocation of contumacious populations, ideological manipulation by Inca bureaucracies, and division of labor imposed from above along community lines.

From the sixteenth century onward, much of Bolivia's mineral production has come from peasants, not from full-fledged proletarians. Moreover, during the past eighty years the Bolivian mining industry has been undergoing a process of involution: longer hours, more piece-rate workers, mining of progressively lower ore grades, less machinery, and more reliance on peasants. This reversion to precapitalist modes of production is not mentioned in Taussig's book, although it constitutes the single most important feature of Bolivia's mining history during the twentieth century. It suggests that, contrary to Taussig's claims, Bolivian peasants may be shifting back and forth between precapitalist and capitalist relations of production with much less conflict, stress, and agony than Taussig assumes. Furthermore, this integration of precapitalist and capitalist modes of production in Bolivian mining may explain the cultural and ideological continuities between miners and peasants, continuities and similarities that are ignored by Taussig's conviction that a cataclysmic break occurs once peasants become miners.

Domitila Barrios de Chungara's book is everything Taussig's is not: clear, readable, accurate, unambiguous, and unpretentious. Born in Siglo XX, one of Bolivia's largest tin mines, Barrios tells the story of her life: how she moved to Pulacayo (another tin mine) when she was only three years old, her mother's death and her father's involvement in politics, her marriage and subsequent return to Siglo XX at the age of twenty, and her increasing involvement in politics, especially after the 1952 revolution. A discussion of Barrios's life after she returned to Siglo

XX is a discussion of the most important political events in Bolivia, especially as they relate to the miners. These include the growth of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, the bureaucratization of the state-owned mining corporation (the Corporación Minera de Bolivia, or COMIBOL), the creation of the housewives' committee, the repression by the Barrientos and Banzer regimes, and the organization of female spallars. Throughout the book, one is impressed by Barrios's sincerity, commitment, penetrating intelligence, and courage.

As anthropologists have learned, however, a participant's account is not necessarily complete, and this generalization holds for Barrios's story. The most important omission in Barrios's narrative is that of peasants. The neglect of peasants is significant because the relationship between the mining and peasant sector has been strained. In the mining camps, peasants are second-rate citizens, only slightly better than animals. Because of the low wages paid to miners, their female kin regularly comb the countryside each year after the harvest, exchanging (and sometimes forcefully usurping) a wide assortment of recently harvested crops for their commissary-bought goods. While much of this agrarian produce is used to feed the miners' families, some is sold by miners later in the year, when the supply of food is at a low ebb. Peasants resent the use of traditional barter mechanisms for extracting surpluses from them for later sale. The military, capitalizing on the division between peasants and miners, has succeeded in building peasant backing in the countryside.

From Barrios's account we learn of a heroic people fighting against local elites, the army, and the COMIBOL bureaucracy; and all of that is true. But we never learn of the miners' racism, of the unequal exchanges and forceful usurpations, or of the political tensions between the mining and agrarian sectors.

Anthropological studies of Bolivian mining are still in a formative stage. The two works reviewed here have done much to inspire new and interesting research among a younger generation of students; they have also been central to making the life of the Bolivian miner known to outsiders. But both books suffer from various shortcomings, perhaps chief of which is the failure to examine the mine or workplace itself. Neither of these books deals with what miners do on a daily basis. While each focuses in its own way on how miners think and feel about the supernatural, evil, politics, the state, and other major topics, what miners do for a living is only tangentially discussed.

#### NOTES

1. Peter J. Bakewell, "Registered Silver Production in the Potosí District, 1550–1735," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 12 (1975):60;

- also his "Technological Change in Potosí: The Silver Boom of the 1570s," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 14 (1977):65; Luis Capoche, *Relación general de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* (Madrid: Atlas, 1959), p. 108; Antonio Mitre, "The Economic and Social Structure of Silver Mining in Nineteenth-Century Bolivia," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University; Enrique Tandeter, "La producción como actividad popular: 'ladrones de minas' en Potosí," *Nova Americana* 4 (1981):47; also Tandeter's "Forced and Free Labour in Late Colonial Potosí," *Past and Present* 93 (1981):130.
2. See Bakewell, "Registered Silver Production," pp. 57–103, and "Technological Change in Potosí," pp. 57–77. Also, Mitre's dissertation, cited in note 1; Joseph Barnadas, "Una polémica colonial: Potosí, 1579–1584," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas* 10 (1973):16–70; and Enrique Tandeter, "La Rente comme rapport de production et comme rapport de distribution: la cas de l'industrie minière de Potosí, 1750–1810," Ph.D. diss., University of Paris, 1980.
  3. See María Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, *Recursos naturales renovables y pesca, siglos xvi y xvii* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1981), p. 68; R. M. M. Crawford, D. Wishart, and R. M. Campbell, "A Numerical Analysis of High Altitude Scrub Vegetation in Relation to Soil Erosion in the Eastern Cordillera," *Journal of Ecology* 58 (1970):176; H. Ellenberg, "Man's Influence on Tropical Mountain Ecosystems in South America," *Journal of Ecology* 67 (1979):401–16; O. F. Cook, "Agriculture and Native Vegetation in Peru," *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 6 (1916):289–90; and David Browman, "Pastoral Nomadism in the Andes," *Current Anthropology* 15 (1974):193. See also Ricardo Godoy, "Ecological Degradation and Agricultural Intensification in the Andes," *Human Ecology* (forthcoming).