REPLY TO MICHAEL TAUSSIG

Sidney W. Mintz, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore

Eric R. Wolf, Department of Anthropology, Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York

We have had ample opportunity to study Michael Taussig’s objections to our work, which he originally intended to publish in two versions in two places, although, in the event, only one has appeared. At the risk of making Taussig’s commentary more intelligible than he may have intended it to be, we will begin by outlining what we understand to be our critic’s difficulties with Sweetness and Power (which he was once asked to review; hereafter S&P), and Europe and the People Without History (which he was not asked to review, but reviewed anyway; hereafter EPWH).

Taussig does not like either book. He does not like what we say, and he does not like the way we say it. Taussig seems unwilling to imagine that others might have projects different from his own. This makes him readyer than he ought to be to rely upon a rhetoric of denunciation. Venting his own ‘visceral’ reactions, he has turned an ancient argument among many different figures in the sociocultural disciplines into a discursus that struck us as more than slightly self-referential. According to him, we are historical when we should be hermeneutical; we study the history of commodities, rather than studying commodity fetishism; we treat commodities as things, rather than as fetish objects and things; we talk of causes instead of talking of ‘visceral meanings’, and by our naturalizing we appear to make inevitable in capitalism what is really only contingent. This listing gives Taussig’s critique more coherence than it possesses, but we see no need to replicate either his longwindedness or his vagueness.

We are not the positivist, naturalizing devils Taussig makes us out to be. We have even had our share of encounters with the problems of subjectivity and reflexivity. Mintz once authored a book entitled Worker in the Cane: A
Puerto Rican Life History (1960); and Wolf (with Edward Hansen) wrote a multi-perspectival, 'Brechtian' presentation of The Human Condition in Latin America (1972). But it is indeed the case that, in S&P and EPWH, we take the position that human arrangements are best understood by a grasp of the bases and workings of material life, through what Marx, in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, called 'production and productive consumption' and 'consumption and consumptive production'. We have tried to apply this approach in historically specific ways, and not only abstractly. Our insistence on a historical orientation is not new for either of us. It is exemplified, for instance, in the first paper we published together (Mintz and Wolf 1950), and in much of our subsequent work. We employ historical perspectives because both of us feel that material conditions and their consequences for social life are best weighed and best understood when seen in their development over time.

Contrary to what Taussig says of our work, we have no interest in teleological history. We do not see history as a series of stepping-stones toward the achievement of some transcendental goal. We are also unconcerned with history as a discourse that installs the effects of the real. Our concern with history is primarily methodological. Studying phenomena in their temporal dimension is not an end in itself, but a way of getting at causal forces and their incremental or diminishing consequences. Taussig concluded that we are antiquated fuddy-duddies because we look for chains of cause and effect. But our aim is to explain human arrangements as well as to interpret them. We believe that explanation requires conceptions of causality; we want to clarify causation because we aspire to understand why human beings make their own history, but under determinant and constraining conditions. We do not believe that history is just what people feel it is; we think we have a commitment to try to understand the 'facts' that undergird their lives. From where we stand, both action and choice obey a causal structure of possibilities. We want to know what determines the shape of these structures of possibilities, in both time and space. In our books, we devoted our efforts to the history of the processes by which particular goods became commodities within world capitalism. S&P deals with one such commodity, EPWH with a number of different commodities. But Taussig says we don't study commodity fetishism, which is what he would have studied had he been us. Worse, we cavalierly fail to acknowledge our debt to the man who gave the world the concept of commodity fetishism, Karl Marx. Taussig thinks that by our not dealing with the fetishistic nature of commodities, we fall into the trap of falsely hyposta-
tizing things; we treat things as if they were things. Dopes (he says)… can’t you see that they’re not things? Don’t you recognize that they can only be understood if their fetishistic nature is given as much importance as their thing-nature? That’s what Marx was talking about… he tells us. By treating things as things, by favoring history over visceral reactions (thus banishing ‘hermeneutics to intellectual purgatory’), we make everything inevitable, and we take the magic away from the relationship between persons and things. Not for us, he chides us, ‘the resort to play or trickery, the slow digesting of experience(s), the place of dream in the commodity as utopian wishing, emotions, interpretation, and all that goes along with observing oneself observing.’

We would answer that, no, we don’t resort intentionally to play or trickery. We have done some digesting of experience, and both S&P and EPWH embody portions of our experience (though they might not be recognizable as such by everybody). As for the place of dream in the commodity as… etc, etc, it is after all simply that we were trying to do something else. Most readers and reviewers seemed to notice as much without prodding. Now, ‘All that goes along with observing oneself observing’ sounds like… well, you know, I mean like great, man. But do we all have to do it?

We suggest that there is a difference between tracing the history of particular commodities in the western world, and employing Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism to interpret the relationships among persons as mediated through commodities. The world of commodities, as Marx sought to describe it, was an emerging capitalist world of producers and consumers, a world remade by their changing relations to the means of production, and by the changing significance of exchange in that world. Through these changes producers and consumers of commodities came to stand in qualitatively different relationships to each other. But this new world of commodities as defined by Marx did not arise with a thunderclap; it did not appear overnight; it did not happen everywhere at the same time, or at the same rate, or in exactly the same way. We remain in doubt about the total variety of ways in which such transitions may occur; we are not yet confident that we can abstract from a large number of well-understood cases in order to frame universal rules about how the world became capitalistic. We believe that studies of single cases can help us understand what happened, but without always clarifying the general processes they exemplify. Hence we recognize that to speak of ‘capitalist’ and ‘precapitalist’, while highly convenient to swift and tidy exposition, is also risky… a shortcut and an abstraction. The
uneven process by which things became commodities was gradual and many-sided and took centuries; it has not ended and there persist serious arguments about when it began. All this admitted, it is nonetheless possible to study, as part of the rise of capitalism, how particular commodities came to be produced for sale in distant markets, within organizations created by capitalist entrepreneurs, uniting labor, land, capital goods and variable amounts of capital in new settings. Such commodities reached consumers whose relationships to the new world market differed widely, and in many different ways, from those of their specific producers. If one studies how palm oil or sugar or cocoa or oil or diamonds become commodities within an expanding world market, one notes that the relationships between their specific producers and consumers were similarly specific. The fetishism characteristic of the perception of those commodities is not a property of the commodities themselves but of their phenomenological status in systems of production, exchange and consumption of a capitalist kind. But all parts of those systems are not necessarily evolved to the same degree or in the same fashion. The parts of the world taken up into the system started out much differentiated among themselves, culturally, economically and otherwise. Those outsiders who came to engineer them into the system shared with each other their eventual intentions, perhaps, but not much else. Oil here, woven cloth there; sharecropping here, contract labor there; alienated land here, rented land there. Different systems of kinship, of religious belief, were invoked within newly organized ways of doing familiar things differently, or of doing different things in familiar ways.

To address the challenge of adequate analysis of this variety, it should not be enough to say that the victims have been put on the capitalist road; nor to explore, however imaginatively, their subjective reactions to their plight. That they are victims is likely; that the outcomes vary is certain; that there is much more to the story is even more certain. Both of us in different ways tried in the books reviewed to grapple with the worrisome questions which a study of the cultural history of commodities brings in its wake. If the commodities whose history we study as a means of explaining the progress of capitalism outside Europe are to be interpreted in terms of their fetishistic character, then this is a different task from analyzing the growth of a world in which the relationships between producers and consumers come to be analyzable through commodities. Neither such kind of study can be labelled ‘wrong’ because it exists. They are different kinds of study.
The study of the fetishism of commodities has become interesting to many scholars now, inside and outside of anthropology. That interest rests heavily upon analyses of the ways that contemporary consumers in the West integrate their consumption into the regnant framework of "buyers' culture". But this, too, is different from the study of the history of commodities; from the study of how these particular things became commodities; and from the study of the variety of processes involved in the emergence of uneven and widely distributed capitalist forms, inside the West as well as outside it. To learn about the concept of commodity fetishism (and to teach about it), to make its study part of anthropology, is a useful activity. We pointed to the importance of the concept ourselves, in a joint paper first published slightly more than thirty years ago (Wolf and Mintz 1957). But neither of the books causing Taussig's distress were aimed at analyzing this concept. We wonder what useful purpose it serves...though we have no doubt that it serves some...to attack us for not having written books different from the ones we wrote.

Taussig favors over our methods a methodology of 'collation of meanings and power as generated by a modernist text of the modern and the mundane.' This is not what we do, and we are not convinced that it is a procedure superior to our own.

Extrapolating and juxtaposing tell-tale meanings ripped—doubtless with lots of gut feeling—from tattered books of life provides one way of apprehending something called reality; but there's the rub. Such bricolage, even when inspired, leads not to explanation but to revelation. No wonder Taussig festoons his discussion with quotations from Fredrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, the latter a seeker after deliverance for whom the goal of knowledge was Messianic redemption, the former a prophet of nihilism for whom the value of an idea lay in its power to enhance 'life'.

Life, yes; but for whom and against whom? Taussig prefers such inspirational soundings to what he calls 'the rosary beads and chains of causes and effects'. No materialist rosary in his musings, we concede in our role as fuddy-duddies; but not much responsibility to reality, either. Instead, Prometheus-Taussig invites us to transcend 'the inviolability of the referent', presumably through 'collation'. But 'collation' sounds dangerously like a methodology that emphasizes style of presentation more than it does 'the referent'. The referent sometimes gets lost in the text altogether, because of what turn out to be irresistible temptations to show off, to sound off, and to take it off...on the determinate causes of which we do not comment.
Taussig says we want to install a 'fetishized view of commodified reality'. He is exercised by what he understands as our invocation of a 'fetish-power' (his words) called Capitalist Accumulation. In our tracings of commodities and their implications for people's lives, he finds us 'trivializing' anthropology. What appeals to him in Marx is the Old Man's 'unhappiness' about commodity fetishism. It is clear that Taussig has read Part I of Das Kapital. But his reading is heavily social-psychological, cosmological, and culturalist, with rather less attention to Marx's demonstration of how this form of fetishism informs the division of labor under capitalism. Perhaps he failed to read Part VII of that same work by Marx, called The Accumulation of Capital.

Wolf, in his book, tried to show how people's lives became intertwined in the production and movement of particular commodities (including, yes, meat), and how their lives were changed as a consequence of these intertwined connections. Mintz wrote his book about how sucrose...sugar...penetrated and altered the lives of its users: the ways its meanings changed, and the way they changed its meanings. Neither of us sought to write a history or sociology or social psychology of commodities as such; we used the trajectories of commodities as 'tracers' through the veins and arteries of a developing political and economic system. If people do not live the way they did in 1400, how does one account for how they live now? Looking for causes we found them in the ways by which people were drawn into the circuits of capital and became increasingly subject to the processes that Marx labelled 'the accumulation of capital'. Taussig dislikes this 'fetishized view of a commodified reality'. Does he think this is something we imposed upon that reality?

We assure Taussig that we don't much care for capitalism, either. Nonetheless, we were greatly intrigued, as we read his interpretation, by his apparent success in staying entirely outside the system of commodity production and consumption in the course of his own social reproduction. How, indeed, does Dr. Taussig do it? Does he shave with obsidian chips of his own manufacture? Does he live in a tent of buffalo hide? Are his feet sheathed in the skins of alligators that he has himself harpooned? Can we learn to do it, too? And if not, why not? And if this impression, which we gather from his criticisms of our work, is incorrect; if he has not managed, Houdini-like, to stay entirely independent of this system we all apparently dislike, perhaps he can explain to us why the same question we put to him should not be put to Iroquois fur hunters, to Mundurucu, to Meo, or to Caribbean plantation laborers. What are the ways in which they were drawn into the capitalist world? May we not ask them what we ask Dr. Taussig?
That people can react differentially and in contradictory fashion to these involvements is hardly news. Even Taussig’s own project of opposing our ‘fetishized view of a commodified reality’ with one that is presumably non-fetishized and non-commodified is clearly predicated upon some sort of involvement with a commodified world. In the end, then, perhaps we can comprehend Taussig’s motivations for such an attempt. But we would question both the reasoning that underlies it, and the fashion in which it has been put forward.