

9. Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess. Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 55. Further references are included within the text.

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## THE MAGIC OF THE STATE

Paul Magee

Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.206, ISBN: 0-415-91791-3

*And all who heard should see him there,  
And all should cry Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
and close your eyes in holy dread*

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*

### 1. 'Was this where my search for divine justice would begin?'<sup>1</sup>

This ethnography represents – in more senses than five – an extraordinary attempt to fictionalise, and thereby to materialise, the fantastic magic of the modern secular state. For Taussig the state, despite all the rationality of its official forms, is founded on an abject fantasy of spirit-possession. In *The Magic of the State* he takes this fantasy and literalises it, conjuring up a semi-fictional South American republic, centred upon a strange and dangerous mountain where pilgrims come to be possessed physically by the spirits of the national dead. Here Taussig stages – as if it were fact – what he claims lies as a latent presence within the actual state's practices of representation and law-making. To stage the magic of the state, for Taussig, is to perform it – on site and in person. So he writes of his own possession by the Spirit Queen, the figure of folk-religion who presides over these shady practices. Divesting himself

of all ethnographic realism, he begins the book by calling her forth, this popular embodiment of the inchoate magic-making of the state as a whole. The fact that she not only appears, but even replies to the questions he asks of the state only accentuates the risks Taussig is about to run in making his search for the true power of representation and law-making so uncomfortably fictional. Well may the reader's eyes close in holy dread. In all this wild fantasising, Taussig courts the danger of placing himself beyond the regard of the very disciplines whose spirit he fleshes out so excessively. Indeed, to do justice to *The Magic of the State*, a reviewer must attempt to circumscribe its excesses into a form more amenable to academic rituals of judgement. The following brief summary of the argument – a disembodied version, to be sure – will hence serve as the preliminary deposition necessary to such a process:

The secular state is a mixture of reason and violence, which, through its power to represent and embody the spirit of justice, acquires perversely religious and magical dimensions. By combining 'the promise of justice and the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence' (39), the state accrues the enormous transference power of its citizens' fears and fantasies of order, a power which far exceeds the state's own institutional resources. Hence the fetishistic power of police uniforms, so in excess of any actual power in their brute occupants. The threat of executive justice which such uniforms betoken calls forth the 'paranoid mystique' (122) that for Taussig basically defines the workings of the Law. The continual claim of the state to embody the 'true spirit' of the heroes of its own founding violence is an attempt to possess itself of precisely this fetish power. The secular state's divine authority hence lies in its ability to represent and give form to the enormous imaginary power that arises from the memory of violence and death. Yet the awkwardness of such spirit-invocations shows up a hollowness and an instability in the state's attempts to embody its own 'paranoid mystique'. For the spirit of the Law constantly breaks out of the state's own stagey representations, exceeding the official world's very attempts to set it down. Indeed the state is nothing but this performative excess; a constant series of imageric and physical coups in the name of its founding fathers, it is, at its empty heart, a 'state of emergency' (79).

Of course, to state Taussig's case in this summary manner is to diffuse the power of its setting within an ethnography of the sacred mountain. From his initial pilgrim's encounter with the Spirit Queen, Taussig goes on to paint how he became increasingly possessed by the inscrutably weird rituals of her domain. Far from dispelling confusion, as the moral architecture of ascensions would suggest, his journey up the mountain is accompanied by an ever thickening irresolution and uncertainty. The heavy atmosphere of spirits 'searching for a body' (71) to possess is thus staged within his narrative. The tension of such atmospherics is momen-

tarly released (and just as soon resumed) in the series of bizarre events which repeatedly punctuate it: a man, now become a Jehovah's Witness, whom Taussig meets in a bakery in the Capital, tells how a friend, possessed on the Mountain, suddenly cut off a woman's head (73). Interspersed among such happenings, yet without really explaining them, are brilliant shards of theory and analysis, revealing (and just as swiftly re-veiling) glimpses of an overarching theory of spirit-possession and power. In this manner Taussig stages the very process of seeking out the performative power of the state amid inscrutable magic, random violence and epistemological anxiety. Meanwhile the figure of the Spirit Queen begins to assume more and more presence, revealing herself as the popular representation of a 'feminised abject within the founding violence of Law' (120). This 'feminised abject' is something like the abject nature of a Law that is, in essence, devoid of content, and based only its formal capacity to embody paranoiac desires for order. The Spirit Queen and her mountain are hence seen to form the underside of a sexually bifurcated body of state whose official representative, at home in the Capital and the surrounding countryside, is the image of the Liberator (a barely disguised version of Simon Bolívar). For, according to the fantasy Taussig here presents as fact, such an awkwardly repressed form-seeking spirit lies dormant within the Law itself, always on the verge of breaking out of the founding father's empty statues.

This makes for a very weird ethnography, not to mention a very strange chronicle of its author's 'search for divine justice' (15). Yet the weirdness of these practices, is not, as the Spirit Queen tells Taussig, due to 'the weirdness of the pilgrims. To the contrary. It's the weirdness of the state' (8). How then, is one to judge *The Magic of the State*?

## 2. 'Searching for a body'

On what facts can one build one's case? There is nothing realist about this ethnography, unless one finds a sort of hyper-realism in its 'literalisation, as if staged, of the mystique of sovereignty' (18). Yet far from curtailed off by all the secular trappings of state, this 'mystique' is already there, on the very face of things, in the form of empty metaphors that no one takes seriously. Taussig quotes Nietzsche's definition of truths:

... worn-out metaphors which have become powerless to affect the senses; coins which have their obverse effaced and are now no longer of account as coins but merely as metal (35).

Taussig's praxis is to *make literal the metaphor*, to flesh out what is already there on the surface itself. Conjuring up the magic implicit in the very minting of such metaphors, he reads quite literally a trope integral to everyday stately rhetoric throughout Latin America – the invocation

of Bolívar's spirit. The attempt at spirit-possession, within such an invocation, is equally apparent in the state's excessive statuary, its constant attempts to embody the Liberator in stone. What it thereby does, Taussig claims, is crazily similar to what the suppliants do on the mountain as they attempt to open up their bodies to the spirits, to become, like living statues, momentary shrines to the national dead. Such literalisations bring out, in a flash of brilliance, the fantastic underside of the secular state's fetishism; for official statues are indeed attempts to contain and thereby possess an ever volatile sacred power. The magic of this text is very much in these shock-like manoeuvres, where prosaic reality suddenly reveals itself in all its original *poesis*, when statues seem as possessed as people, when coins regain the inspiration for their minting. The confusing and even vexing relationship Taussig weaves between fantasy and the Law, the Spirit Queen and the Liberator, seems, at such moments to fuse into something like a flash of symmetrical interdependency. Yet, for all that, they cannot be reduced to any easily reversible binary opposition: '[t]wo sides of the old coin we now know so well' (71). On the contrary, Taussig's genius lies in his ability to find the *third side* of the coin. And to keep it spinning on that edge.

The danger here is that the metaphors Taussig literalises are often so tacky! It is no easy task to maintain a Kafkaesque tension in the face of the Spirit Queen. The kitsch aspect of Taussig's pilgrimage through the stately sublime is perhaps already apparent. His prose, with all its funkiness, both evocative and a touch daggy, make it clear that this is no Divine Comedy either. Or if it is, the Spirit Queen, his 'muse', comes perilously close to losing the plot. She seems constantly on the verge of slipping from her basically Kristevan function as a sort of Chora/figure of abjection into a grotesque Jungian entelechy, the *anima* behind every Great Man's *animus*. As such, this sexuation of state, for all its grounding in fantasy, begs the question why the abject side of the law is a 'feminised' one? For whom? In which state? The fiction wavers and one starts to wonder how the gendering of abjection effects the actual women made to relate to such fantasies. If the fictional identity of the Spirit Queen appears rather disturbingly untheorised, the theory, on the other hand, interspersed within the fiction, constantly staggers the pace of the narrative. Tripping through an already very difficult text, it is hard for the reader to be possessed by the story of Taussig's possession. In many ways he seems to be saying, along with Bataille, who is definitely Virgil to his Dante in this book, that 'the object of my research cannot be distinguished from the subject [i.e. the author] at its boiling point?'<sup>2</sup> Yet can the reader ignore the rather forced nature of all this – the fact that it is the author himself who turns on the heat? Indeed, the temptation is there to cast judgement on the success, or the failure, of Taussig's representation on these very

grounds. Disturbed by the overly academic fiction – or overly fictive academia – one could well flatten the spinning coin and make it come down fast on one side or the other.

But that, in turn, would be to ignore the fact that the 'artefactuality' (17) of this praxis is Taussig's very point – and that the extraordinary effects of his text arise from his spinning theory from that very spot of self-conscious fiction. In its 'artefactuality', the Spirit-Queen's domain partakes of a similarly empty magic to the state itself. Indeed the obverse of this tacky Dantesque pilgrimage is the artificial and hollow 'festive opera' that is the state in all its self-styled sublimity. After his long sojourn in the mountain, Taussig proceeds to investigate the country itself in the second part of the book, 'The Liberator's Court'. This new terrain seems rather more down to earth and realistic, mainly because of all the material on Bolívar, though there is something of the mountain's operatic staginess in the air here too. The whole point of opera is, of course, that one is carried away by the performance, for all the tackiness of the words. So Taussig argues that the magic of the ideological inscription lies in the 'public secret', the fact that everyone knows that those vapid invocations are merely words. By giving such a fundamental place to the subject's disbelief in – and concomitant enchantment by – the melodramatic stately arias to which they are subjected, Taussig reanimates the whole sung-to-death issue of representation, addressing the very forms of mimesis that were never meant to be taken seriously. In literalising the rhetoric of the 'festive opera' of state, he echoes the very politics of opera critique, as if taking his cue from Catherine Clément's attempt to release the power locked within those empty words. As Clément states, introducing her unwriting of *Opera, The Undoing of Women*, 'I am going to commit the *sacrilège* of listening to the words, reading the libretti, following the twisted, tangled plots [my italics]'.<sup>3</sup>

However, unlike Clément, Taussig – giving the coin yet another spin – argues that the 'sacrilège' of taking the stately facade seriously, making literal its hollow metaphors, is far from necessarily critical. Actually, it is part of the same act. Following the tenor of Bataille's perversion of the Hegelian 'labour of the negative' (5), Taussig argues that the state finds its magic in the desecration of its own stately forms. For while it may be simply 'second nature' for pre-modern magicians and sorcerers to perform acts of spirit-possession 'it is not all that easy for modern state machinery to pull this off without looking gauche or stupid' (95). The cunning, as it were, of the state lies in the way it makes its subjects release the very magic within, through the very sort of 'sacrilège' Clément commits upon opera. In such moments, the critic defacing the monument simply sets the stage upon which 'the sacred emerges and emerges no longer as symbol but with bodily force' (188). Kitsch is the true genre of

stately representation; for kitsch, with all its childish claims to spiritual presence, is always found to be lacking: 'the great desire of the monument is its need for defacement' (95). In this manner Taussig locates – and it strikes me as a virtuoso piece of diagnosis and insight – the essence of the state in the barely suppressed comic-absurdity of its naive forms, so redolent of 'the adult's imagination of the child's imagination' (97). This 'adult-executed childish iconography' (114) inspires both critique and laughter from the grown-ups subjected to it; yet far from undermining the state, such sacrilegious acts only serve to fortify it.

So, virtuoso performances aside, where does this leave critique?

### 3. *Tour de force*

How does one judge *The Magic of the State* without simply laughing at the absurd irony of even attempting to do so? The whole point for Taussig is to maintain, in his text's wild inscrutability, the *anomie* upon whose violent repression, through representation, the Law is founded. The execution of justice keeps such disorder at bay, routinising the unknown and shielding one off from its threat. The monopoly of violence is integral to such a rational process, for, in Benjamin's words, the power of the Law 'resides in the fact that there is only one fate, and that what exists, and in particular what threatens, belongs inviolably to its order'<sup>4</sup>. This image of the Law, as that reasonable violence which reduces *anomie* to the mythical domain of order (by allying the forces of reason with 'fate'!), is disturbing. It seems as much an illustration of the executive motions of academic rationality, review and justice (witness the word 'discipline') as of any state legal system. It disturbs me, this 'discipline', disconcerting me with the *forced nature* of that 'heads or tails' process of coming down fast on one side or the other of a book as polyhedrally perverse as this one. Taussig describes just such a crisis of sovereignty, the unstable moment 'where violence and reason blend' to such an extent that the whole system of justice seems about to collapse; such a crisis evokes the presence of 'ghosts and images and above all, of formless, nauseating intangibility' (121).

Such a wrist-wringing moment screws one back into Taussig's torturous logic – for according to his argument, the very act of critiquing the Law for its inadequacy to the spirit of justice serves, like sacrilege, to release and sanctify that spirit. The return of that which the Law repressed is thus co-opted for the greater good of the state. Returning that very return of the repressed, Taussig spins the circularity of his logic to the extreme point that equates the most rigorous expressions of the Law with their own wild dismemberment. Take, for example, the reified form of scientific representation which Adorno and Horkheimer termed 'mimesis-  
... death) that which seeks to eat the spirit of its authority into the

cement of undebatable 'fact'.<sup>5</sup> Such unyielding facts, Taussig shows, are already open to their own self-rendering re-animation – a magical fact alluded to so unconsciously in that naive positivist idea of letting 'the facts speak for themselves' (91). In like manner, burying Bolívar and setting him in stone in the National Parthenon only serves to set the stage for his spirit's release: 'perhaps the harder the substance the more evanescent the spirit it houses' (169). This leads Taussig to argue, of the writhing 'Nervous System' that is the state, that the 'crisis of sovereignty ... is, in fact, sovereignty itself' (141). Making crisis the essence of Law places all disciplinary critique, both his own, and that of those who would critique him, on a dangerous edge. Where does one go from here, if to bring the object of critique to crisis point is to do no less – and indeed no more – than to re-animate its magical power?

Taussig's way out of this impasse is quite literally no way out at all. The role of ritual possession on the Mountain was to take on an *anomie* that 'resisted logic and stasis while demanding both' (64). The aim of the pilgrim was not so much to reconcile those opposing forces as to personify the contradiction, 'to tap into that impossibility' (64) and to make that magic his own. The metaphor for such possession on the Mountain is 'transportation' (167). Literalising that process, Taussig's book races through its own contents, becoming the form-seeking 'riot of figurational impulse' (166) whose crazy movements it chases. His project, the 'mystery of the presence of God in modernity' (149), is still recognisably Benjaminian, and certainly owes much to the spirit of *One-Way Street*. Yet the whole idea is to keep up the performance! To stay in motion! To increase the pace! Zooming beyond that early twentieth century *einbahnstrasse*, Taussig turns his book into a hyper-modern multi-lane *autobahn*, running finally into an analysis of the sacral dimensions of the state highway system itself! Magic momentarily flares up in snapshot encounters with police checks, passing graffiti, and road accidents – especially road accidents, pre-eminent sites for the presence of God in modernity! Meanwhile, moving precipitously beyond all such stop-starts, *The Magic of the State* is found in the continual *dialectic am stillstand* (dialectic at standstill) moments of crisis-in-circulation itself. The effect is dizzying, the performance overwhelming – this book is indeed a *tour de force*.

But this tour of the state's order-in-disorder leads its author, on a 'search for divine justice', to a book which is fundamentally unjustifiable. For one cannot find *The Magic of the State* to have failed, by whatever criterion, without satisfying its own monumental desire for defacement. Even to critique this extraordinary performance is to crown it with the spirit of its own dismemberment, driving the mimetic circuit onto yet another self-sanctioning revolution. There is simply no case to be had

here, unless one chooses to follow the rather uninviting path of a concluding anarchistic reference to a 'divine violence' (194) that would destroy power altogether. There is no case to be had here, unless one discovers a side of the state whose Law operates outside of this endlessly spinning circuit of performance, failure and redemptive excess.

#### 4. *Habeas corpus*

My way to do justice to this magic is to flesh out an alternative mimetic circuit from the materials, or rather spirit-mediums, Taussig offers. For the risk he runs, shape-shifting his arguments in such a dizzying manner, is not so much of losing his audience (the book is, as I said, a *tour de force*), as losing the very people to which his text refers. The tension, in *The Magic of the State*, is all in the author's performance, the erotics of the reader's desire to hang onto Taussig's words and to take them for law. The adequacy of his reference to a given situation is of relevance here *only* in so far as it effects his audience's judgement of his performance. What disappears, in all this focus on representation and law-making as performance, is the tension of reference (the uneasy relation words bear to the ontology of that which they represent) *in its own right*. For the tension of justice might well reside *not* merely in an audience's transference relation to a given representation of the spirit of the Law, but rather in the relation of the represented to that which claims to represent, and ultimately to refer to, them. These categories slide into each other easily, but they are by no means necessarily the same. What I want initially to problematise, through this distinction between performance and reference, is Taussig's model of the body in its relationship to stately representation. Pursuing this path will take the case away from his endlessly unjustifiable revolutions, and into a different court all together.

I am not holding that Taussig ignores any fundamental *naked truths* of the body – though doubtless that would be a comfortably conservative finding for people freaked out by the idea of a fictive academic ethnography – on the contrary, he needs to be praised for daring to make an academic text interesting. He is entirely right, I think, to catch the body in its fictive clothing. As Lacan put it: 'If the King is, in fact, naked, it is only in so far as he is so beneath a certain number of clothes – no doubt fictitious but nevertheless essential to his nudity'.<sup>6</sup> The problem I am addressing is not that of fiction *per se*, but rather of the relationship between the body and those signifying systems which fashion its representations. What is the role of the body in the fetishistic act which clothes the King's clothing in power? It strikes me that Taussig finds his flesh in the very process of representation itself, above and beyond any bodily substance in the referent. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for instance, in the National Parthenon, embodies the very figuring of nullity, releasing

thereby 'a constant evacuation of its nothingness in a never-ending pursuit of a body' (175). It is the empty signifier itself that is embodied in this image, not that unknown mass of soldierly flesh to which it refers. For the tomb signifies nothing more than 'nothingness' itself. The body of the state, that is to say, resides solely in the folds of its clothing. That is why, I rejoin, there is so little room here for a critique of ill-fitting representations and the way they steal and indeed possess the life-forces of the real bodies under their sway. For the power of the King is the power of the bodies whose labour builds his kingdom, and whose interests his crown supposedly represents. Such power may be invested in his very garments of power, but it is enacted, all the same, in the bodies and labours of his subjects, the alienated power source to which those fetishistic investments ultimately refer. To divest representation of the problem of reference, as Taussig does, is to void it of all political substance.

*Obiter Dicta:* It is as if, in taking language so literally, Taussig has fleshed out an extreme already inherent in the anti-essentialist notion that sexual difference can only ever be a matter of textuality and performance. For, according to the fantasy he presents here, it is not simply that the King's power is all in his clothes; the real joke is that the King has no body! This perhaps explains why the performative dimensions of language are so thoroughly sexualised in *The Magic of the State*. The only space left for gender here is in the fleshy folds of language itself. The bodies that appear here are little more than signifiers, receptacles for spirit-power. This leads to the scenario where stately statues dance and seem as possessed as human suppliants. They have the same ontological status, as indifferent units of signification. Similarly, the removal of sexual difference from any grounding in the real means that anybody (and for that matter any statue) can perform the choric functions of the Spirit Queen or the phallic function of the Liberator. Hence the King without a body appears as something of a Queen on the inside (on the inside lining, that is). By the logic of the fantasy he is always an uneasy balance of both. What returns, in the return of the repressed – in the defacing of Bolivar's statue for instance – is the 'feminised object' integral to the performance of the law itself. The repressed, in Taussig's argument, is never a repressed referent – i.e. an actual woman. Yet to focus so exclusively on the performative dimensions of gender creates real problems. For to take the justice of a notion like the 'feminised object' so beyond the problem of its reference to actual women, is to erase the very ligatures that relate such abstract notions to a political constituency, both at the points of reference and audience. What disappears, for instance, is the fact that women's bodies, by any scale of reference, do an overwhelmingly unequal share of the world's most under-paid, under-represented and indeed object work. The ironic result then, of making difference so totally a matter of signification and

performance – at least here – is to miss the injustice of the way the same representation acts differently upon different bodies.<sup>7</sup>

The power of the King's clothing, as it survives in the modern police uniform, is an integral facet of the secular state. The distinction I am drawing between the fleshiness of the clothing, and the bodies to which it makes reference, is certainly already there on the surface of Taussig's text. It appears quite clearly in his debate with Marx over the interpretation of money and its representational relationship to value. Still spinning coins, Taussig now turns to the face on the currency itself, to bring out the presence of the Prince on all those well-worn *bolivares*. From where, Taussig asks, does surplus value come, if not from the 'incarnating abstraction' (138) enacted by circulation itself, the endless 'alchemical' (the word is Marx's) circuit of C-M-C, commodity into money and back again (141). The Marxism of these notions is quickly derailed in Taussig's re-definition of certain key concepts. The 'universal equivalent', for instance, which for Marx was the quantifying form of the commodity, is here redefined as the uniformed Liberator, that personification of the state's brute justice and rational force. It is his unstable and yet fearful presence, Taussig claims, which provides the virtual guarantee that keeps the currency in motion. Indeed, it is all a matter of motion, of maintaining the magical alchemy of the C-M-C cycle, for 'value lies in transformation' itself (139). Compare the Marxian critique of the commodity which Taussig espoused some twenty years ago in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*.<sup>8</sup> There he focused on the alienation, through misrepresentation, of actual heterogeneous labour power when it is homogenised, formalised and fetishised as unitary measures of 'abstract human labour', i.e. value.<sup>9</sup> Worlds away from those ideas, the *The Magic of the State* argues that the surplus of Capital arises – as if *ex nihilo* – from the 'spiritual labour power' – the very performance, in all its transformative circuits of exchange – of the sheer act of representation itself!

Has Taussig sold his soul to the Devil? He has certainly ignored recent attempts to re-animate the Marxist monolith through reiterating the tension inherent in its categories. In 'Marx after Marxism', for instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty has outlined a programme for re-reading 'real labour', and for that matter 'precapitalism', as categories with no more ontological consistency than their abstracting role in the structure of Capital itself.<sup>10</sup> This post-mortem reinvocation of Marx's spirit allows for an immanent critique focussed on the repression of material difference necessary – by definition – to arrive at abstract and homogenising terms like value, the commodity and labour (and even, to take my own term, 'the body'<sup>11</sup>). Such artificial 'categories of erasure' appear ridden with tension, bursting at the seams with the 'traces of what they cannot enclose'.<sup>12</sup> It is hasty to dismiss Marx for his supposedly essentialist

commitment to the *bare facts* and *naked truths* of labour. For him too, politics is all in the clothing. Marx does not, however – and this is the real point – relinquish the problem of reference. There are bodies labouring beneath those clothes, even if their labours are only accountable in terms of the uniform values worn over them. The erasure of material difference integral to the representation of value must always be stressed, for it is precisely such an unaccountable surplus in the referent which accrues to the capitalist as 'his' profit – the supposedly natural profit of the sheer act of investment. That is why I cannot buy Taussig's notion that it is simply the positing of value itself – conceived of as an empty signifier, the lure which gives rise to the fantasy of substance – which creates wealth and 'makes truth' (184). His argument certainly seems to have some validity, in regard to the extraordinary influence of speculative economics and international consultancy on the powerful fictions (i.e. GNP) regulating the economies of countries like the one he is considering (142–5). But what country, I want to ask! Built on whose labour? Women's or men's? For those manifold labours, erased from the representation of value, serve all the same to give stately fictions their power to cloak some in rags and others in splendour.

Taussig is writing of the fetishism of the state over and beyond that of the commodity. Yet his treatment of commodity fetishism opens up other inroads – or rather, a certain dead end – in his argument. He seeks to dismember the reified labour theory of value from within and release its hidden spirit; so, paraphrasing Adam Smith, he describes the commodity's value as 'equal to the quantity of labour which it enables the owner of that commodity to purchase or *command* [my italics]' (135). Stressing the word 'command', Taussig discovers here, once more, the figure of the Prince. Interpersonal and openly fetishistic relations of subordination are integral, he argues, not only to the circulation of capital, but also to the form of the commodity itself, as this definition of labour makes clear. One might recall here certain feminist critiques of the labour theory of value, which focus on similar issues, such as Carole Pateman's incisive discussion of prostitution in *The Sexual Contract*.<sup>13</sup> (Such critiques do not necessarily rule out the sort of re-animated Marxism I pointed to above – the entire point is that such diverse and particular power relations are constitutively disregarded by the depersonalising process that derives value from them by reducing them to 'abstract human labour'.) In taking things back to the Liberator in this manner, Taussig locates the fetish fundamentally within the psychology of the 'paranoiac mystique' which defines the *Magic of the State* for him.

Here lies my main point of disenchantment with his argument, as regards the analysis of the commodity, the state, and by extension the very notion of justice itself. Marx is not a theorist of paranoia. The significance of his

reading of the fetishistic sway the commodity has over its producers surely lies in the way he diagnosed the fetish as one which operated *not* in their conscious (or even unconscious) understandings of their situation, but rather *in their very actions*. The fetish is already there within the act of exchange itself. Such an act-based theory of value and its representation has nothing to do with the imaginary mental realms in which paranoia and its projections determine the subject's motions. Surely that is the point of the famous 'they do not know that they are doing this, but they do it'?<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it doesn't matter what they, in all their secular and disenchanting consciousnesses, think, fear or fetishise. Their acts speak for them. Alfred Sohn-Rethel puts it well: 'In commodity exchange, the action and the consciousness of people go separate ways. Only the action is abstract; the consciousness of the actors is not'.<sup>15</sup>

Nor can Hegel, to take another of Taussig's sources, be pushed solely into the imaginary realm of paranoiac fetishism. For him, the Idea acts to erect the state through the very actions – often contrary to the designs and desires of their agents – of those who only in the fullness of time will become the self-reflexive subjects of the Idea-become-Spirit in the state.<sup>16</sup> That is the 'cunning of Reason';<sup>17</sup> the fact that reason exists, at least initially, outside of the very human minds who will later come to think it – in Hegel's utopian vision at any rate. Of course for Marx the whole point is that this Utopian state of self-representing subjects is a sham – relations of servitude remain in the modern bourgeois state. They simply recede from the realm of conscious discourse (we are, after all, all legally equal) and inhere to people's actions instead. If that insight is the 'cunning' of Marxist analysis, it provides the reason why a critique of the state cannot focus exclusively on the imaginary representations, for all their binding force, that, in Bataille's words, 'a kind of lucid dream borrows from the realm of the crowd'.<sup>18</sup> It is necessary to combine analyses of such 'paranoiac mystique' with the discourses and fantasies inherent in people's actions. Such analyses delve into state fantasies all the more for their grounding in physical movements through concrete institutions. After all, there are bodies behind those grey facades – bodies that could well burst through the cement that holds the facades in place. For political power surely lies in the ever tense relationship of the fetishistic signifier to its alienated referent.

### 5. Possession is nine-tenths of the law

*The Magic of the State* is basically a narratology of justice. So, of necessity, is any judgement passed on it. If I erase the performative dimension of Taussig's text to reach a verdict, this very erasure reflects my own theory of justice – or rather its perversion. The possession, I am claiming, that takes hold of the law is the largely impersonal power of

property itself. The dispossessed simply cannot perform their way out of that court of law, for it relates to the depersonalised – and by that token ever more outrageous – power of accumulated capital. For Taussig, on the other hand, the possession that founds the law is the imageric *coup d'état* of a successfully performed act of violent spirit possession. The Law's performance of power, as a representation of the spirit of justice, lays claim to the paranoid allegiance of its subjects. Were one to accept this theory *tout court*, it would be hard not to judge *The Magic of the State* a success. One would feel compelled to hold that this polyhedrally perverse book does, indeed, coin its own currency, and, through the sheer force of its own *chutzpah*, manages to create a law unto itself. Indeed, to do otherwise would be a miscarriage of justice. Yet I cannot relegate the problem of justice to this wholly imaginary realm.

Of course there are more than two sides to this coin, split between property and performance. Or rather these two courts co-exist on the same surface. Taussig's theorisation and literalisation of the Law's 'paranoiac mystique' is at times quite dazzling. There is no need at all to dismiss this extraordinary and challenging performance *tout court*, just because one court is not enough. Nor will my pre-possession necessarily answer those of others; this is particularly the case for a book as shape-shifting and adventurous as this one. *The Magic of the State* is a book so set on edge that ultimately only its reader – not its spirit-stealing reviewer – can work it out for him or herself. For the imaginary country Taussig conjures up here is not a thing that can be simply shipped from place to place or from reviewer to reader, without losing much of its magic on the way. You must take Taussig on, in his own terrain, to decide whether he has, indeed, been possessed by the spirit of justice, or simply had by its empty forms.

### Notes

1. Michael Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.15. (Further references are included within the text.)
2. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, An Essay on General Economy* Vol.1 (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p.10. The question is Lacan's, asked not of Bataille but of the analysand; it comes from his unpublished *Seminar IX on Identification*, where he states, in like manner, that 'in order to pull a rabbit out of a hat you must have put it in beforehand'.
3. Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 12.
4. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 285.
5. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1984), cited in Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, p. 7.

6. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 14.
7. Taussig reserves a small space for differentiation here, in his recognition that 'it is by and large the poor, especially the urban poor who fulfill this desperate need for a body' (187). Slightly later he says a similar thing of women, the most common spirit mediums (191). The problem, however, is that the 'need for a body' of which he speaks is in relation to the theatre of the state's spirit-possessing; the need for the excess 'paranoiac mystique' to speak itself. Bodies are still conceived of simply as signifiers, and nothing more. This 'need for a body' is a long way from the old 'capitalism as cannibalism' metaphor, that at least credited those exploited by capitalism with more than just a name to their name.
8. Compare the chapter entitled 'The Baptism of Money and the Secret of Capital' therein: *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 126–39.
9. Karl Marx, *Capital, a Critique of Political Economy*, Vol.1 (London: J.M. Dent, 1974), p. 47.
10. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity and Difference', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 2, 2 (1994), 446–63.
11. Indeed, 'the body' itself can burst at the seams – and not simply from the pressure of the material difference necessarily erased to yield 'the' body in the place of a sexed one (or rather two – at least). Lacan continues his version of the King is naked (beneath his clothes): 'in connection with these clothes, as another good story of Alphonse Allais demonstrates, his very nakedness might never be naked enough. After all, a king can be skinned alive as easily as any female dancer.' Lacan, *The Ethics*, p.14. Signification may well get right under the skin. But the fact that skin has a signifying function by no means allows you to reduce substance to signifier – or to strip off the former as you might the latter – without any attendant tensions. That is to say, there is something of the Real ('that which hurts'; which is also, incidentally, Frederic Jameson's definition of history) lying between the two; such tensions simply can't be signified out of existence.
12. Chakrabarty, 'Marx after Marxism', p. 451.
13. See Carole Pateman's chapter entitled 'What's Wrong with Prostitution?', in *The Sexual Contract*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), pp. 189–219.
14. Marx, *Capital*, p. 47.
15. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour, A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 30.
16. '[H]uman actions in history produce additional results, beyond their immediate purpose and attainment, beyond their immediate knowledge and desire ... [S]omething more is thereby accomplished which is latent in the action though not present in their consciousness and not included in their design.' G.F. Hegel, *Reason in History, A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), p. 35
17. Hegel, p. 44.

18. Georges Bataille, 'The Obelisk', in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927–39* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 213, quoted in Taussig, *The Magic of the State*, p. 149.

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