Historical Magicalism—Manure into Milk into Money: Colonialism, Commodity Fetishism, and Leisure Capitalism in the Himalayas

Joseph S. Alter

> The supernatural is almost as pervasive in the minds of Sirkanda villagers as is the natural, though to an observer it may be less readily apparent. Difficulty of any kind—crop failure, ailing animals, economic reversal, mysterious loss of property, persistent family troubles, disease, sterility, stillbirth, hysteria, death—is attributable ultimately to fate and more immediately to the machination of one or another of a host of supernatural beings. [Berreman 1972:82-83]

> The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the saintly form of self alienation has been unmasked, is to unmask self-alienation in its unholy forms. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of the earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of right, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics. [Marx 1959:263]

> Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby change its destination. [Taussig 1980:15]

In 1977 I left my home in India and came to the United States to enter school at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Although I had been to the United States on several occasions before, and was in many ways fairly well acculturated on account of having attended an international school in the town of Mussoorie, it was nevertheless quite dramatic, if not traumatic, to make the move from the lower Himalayas into the Ivy League culture of the East Coast. I was, for some time, quite disoriented.

In the course of time, however, I happened upon an anthropology class and was given the assignment to write a critical book review of a classic ethnography. I began browsing the shelves and, as if by magic, found a book that transported me back through time and space to the place—or almost the place—where I grew up.

The book, of course, was *Hindus of the Himalayas* (Berreman 1972), and I distinctly remember, while standing in the stacks of Olin Library, looking at the photograph on the cover—which is shot from a saddle looking east—and knowing, with almost picture perfect clarity, and without having actually been there, what the view looked like over my left shoulder facing west. Believe me, I almost turned around.

I have no idea what I said in the critical book review, but it was the discovery of Gerry's book that first gave me the idea that I, too—with some considerable practice—might be able to perform the magic of anthropology and move back and forth between two different worlds in order to reorient myself. In any event, reading that book in the middle of a cold Connecticut winter took me back home to a place I had never ever really been, and thereby—at least upon reflection—has made me intellectually superstitious, and suspicious about the nature of reality. What follows is a meditation on the nature of what, if anything, differentiates the supernatural from the natural, as these things "pervade the minds," not just of Himalayan peasants, as Berreman rightly points out, but of many other people as well.

In 1980 I was living in Chamasari—the village over my left shoulder—doing research on the relationship between caste and economic change in a peasant community. I had been in the village for several months and had come up to visit my parents who, at the time, were still living in the town of Mussoorie, a colonial hill station that was established in 1820 above the town of Dehra Dun on the first range of the Himalayas. With the compulsiveness of youth, as well as a sense of guilt attendant on feeling that one could not be at home and in the field at the same time—or get much of substance done while trying to turn one into the other—I decided to cut the visit short and headed off into the night with an old kerosene lantern, since no torches were available. The road from my parents' home to Chamasari goes through the village of Dhobi Ghat and then on into a thick oak forest on the north side of Witches Hill. The name of the hill is a bad translation of Pari Tibba, which conveys the less malevolent—but equally magical—meaning of Fairy's Hill.[1] On this night, however, I confess to a fear not only of witches and ghosts but also of bears and leopards, the likes of which my brothers and I had encountered on several occasions while camping and hunting in the forest. Up until that night I had never encountered a ghost or a witch, although the young men in the village assured me that if I insisted on walking about in the dark I would sooner or later do so.

As I rounded a curve above Dhobi Ghat I saw on the side of the road, neatly arranged, a pair of plastic women's shoes of the type commonly worn in the area. I also heard rhythmic chopping which I could recognize as the sound of someone cutting oak leaves for fodder. There was no one else around and I became curious. Why would someone be out at that time of night—about ten—all alone? I called out, but got no response. The chopping stopped, but I could clearly tell that it came from a tree that grew from below the road. The top of the tree was only a few yards away. The light from my lantern did not extend very far beyond the side of the road but I

lifted it high and called out again. I could see the tree, but could not see anyone. After spending several minutes looking and listening I decided to keep moving, and, with the volume turned up high on my radio—which is a kind of counter sorcery I learned through participant observation—I arrived in Chamasari without further incident.

Waiting for me in the school building where I lived were several boys from the village who came to keep my assistant—himself a boy from a near-by village—company. They were surprised to see me. When I explained to them my odd encounter with the shoes and the sound of chopping above Dhobi Ghat, color drained from their faces as though they had seen a ghost, rather than it being I who had seen nothing. In agitated tones they explained that the only thing it could possibly have been was a *churail*, as only churails go out at night and do things like leave their shoes by the side of the road—to ease their backward-pointing feet, I was told with great animation—so as to catch wayward travelers, suck their blood and eat their flesh.[2] My friends were convinced that I had come within an inch of my life. This was later confirmed by my friend Tulsi, a shaman who knew as much about witches and demons as he did about weaving baskets for commercial sale—thereby turning, with a practiced slight of hand, bamboo into money—which is, after all, rather magical. Tulsi was also an alcoholic, and was gifted at the fine art of making the symptoms of detoxification look like the possession trance of a healer—or was it the other way around? In any case he magically confused *devtas* (gods) and *daru* (liquor)—as both "climb onto the head"[3]—and was therefore adept at cross-cutting time and space and bringing different worlds together, as I was trying to do—and continue to do—by confusing the play of words with the two different worlds I live in.

This is an essay about the magical nature of history that masquerades behind the many masks of cultural reality, but hopefully it does more than simply borrow and slightly twist a trope made famous by Gerry Berreman.[4] It draws inspiration from Gerry's intellectual activism reflected in the principle of a politics of truth, and is concerned, therefore, with the way in which colonialism, in the form of leisure capitalism, has ensorcelled a peasant economy in the Himalayas. And I mean this quite literally, and not as a metaphor, for the magical transformation of manure into milk—which is at the base of this horror story—is as real as the empty shoes and the disembodied sound of chopping by the side of the road. They are equally magical—and in fact substantially linked together—if one is willing to understand history as a very, very, very slow process of strategic deception, a gradual slight of hand that no one seems to notice. The possibility of this may be understood in terms of Taussig's reading of Marx.

> It is not just that our perception is historically conditioned, that the eye becomes here an organ of history, that sensations are a form of activity and not passive carbon copies of externals, but that the

> history that informs this activity also informs our understanding of seeing and of history itself. [Taussig 1980:8]

A politics of truth can be, in some sense, a kind of exorcism staged to facilitate the recovery of seeing and history by those who have been bewitched by another history they do not control. "The magic of production and the production of magic are inseparable in these circumstances" writes Taussig, in what I take to be a directly comparable situation (1980:15), particularly if one recalls Berreman's remark that "the supernatural is almost as pervasive in the minds of Sirkanda villagers as is the natural" (1972:82); and perhaps it is not just in their minds, but in their history as well.

The outline of the story is really quite simple. Up until about 1840 or so, buffalos were kept by peasant farmers in the Himalayas primarily because they produced, in large volume, an endless supply of dung. This was used to fertilize fields and thereby produce other things like wheat, lentils, and potatoes. However it may seem—particularly if you speed up time, as they do with trick photography—this cycle of decomposition, germination, growth, and decomposition, is not particularly magical. As any peasant knows, fertilization unlocks the soil-based means of production manifest in land. Particularly in the Himalayas—and especially in the rocky soil of the very low-grade land owned by the villagers of Chamasari—manure is crucial to the agricultural economy, regardless of its specific form as commercial or non-commercial farming. In any case, before 1840 land was farmed for subsistence, and by all accounts yields were low, even with the addition of buffalo dung.[5]

By 1840 the colonial hill station of Mussoorie was growing rapidly. It had been established by British military personnel who, after going on hunting expeditions out of the relatively hot, dusty, and diseased Dehra Dun valley, discovered the cool, comfortable climate of the hills and built hunting lodges on the picturesque slopes.[6] These evolved into larger commercial establishments and soon there were hotels, bars, clubs, ballrooms, and the expanding infrastructure of colonial military rest and relaxation. One of the first institutions to be built was a military hospital. The town grew quickly after Dehra Dun became a rail-head and a road was built from there to accommodate ox-carts carrying building supplies—as well as billiard tables, grand pianos, church pews, ornate gates, chandeliers, and candelabra—up to the expanding resort town. As the population of Mussoorie grew, with merchants moving in from Saharanpur, Muzzafarnagar, and Meerut to the south, rajas and maharajas building summer homes, and with missionaries of various stripes building boarding schools, there was a new and steadily increasing demand for many things—beer for one, but that is a slightly different story. One of these things, needed on a regular day-to-day basis, was milk.

At some point in time—probably as early as the first encounter between military hunters and peasant farmers—it was realized that those who desired milk but

had no cows or buffalos could buy it from those who did. These people who sold milk came to be known a *dudwallas*, which means "milk person" or "purveyor of milk" and thereby links, more or less intractably, a concept of self to the commodity form of a substance. The appellation is, in other words, a kind of nominal linguistic fetishism and is linked, as I hope to show, to the magical history of materialism. In any case, colonials taking their leisure in the hills could buy milk because, in some sense, it was the by-product of a more valued product, namely dung. I say by-product because fodder goes into the buffalo, whereas—magically it would seem—two rather different things come out, and this makes for a kind of surplus based not on the laws of political economy so much as on the serendipity of a more basic mammalian proclivity. Although buffalo milk was obviously drunk by villagers living in the hills, and factored into the diet of peasant farmers as buttermilk, yogurt, cheese, and *ghi*, buffalos were not kept to produce milk; cows were kept to do that.[7] Thus buffalo milk is a rather anomalous substance, both in terms of categorical classification as well as in terms of its value as a commodity, especially given the rich symbolic value and sacred purity of cows' milk.

A more integrated evolution from pre-capitalism to capitalism would have seen the commodification and fetishization of dung—one can clearly imagine it taking on a fixed, abstract value as subsistence articulated with a commercially based mode of production. But the real market in milk—as opposed to the mythical market in dung—was driven not so much by production, which had happened almost by accident, as by the desire for consumption. This desire cut across the short space between Chamasari and Mussoorie, and, significantly, across the much, much larger space defined by commercial transactions between hyper-elites on the one hand—resident in the lavish Hackman's Grand or Savoy Hotels—and subaltern dudwallas on the other, living in much more humble circumstances. Just as one could imagine a market in dung, wherein an entrepreneurial venture capitalist might corner the market and sell for a profit to fellow peasants, it would be possible to imagine a market in cows' milk, at least in principle. But cows in the hills, given their size, produce only a fraction of the volume that buffalos do—a fraction of both milk and dung, come to think of it—and therefore their milk has extreme use value, but no commercial value to speak of.[8] The only person I am aware of who tried to sell cows' milk was a descendent of the famous soldier of fortune James Skinner who, as a member of the old landed class with an estate in Harayana, was able to buy some Jersey stock and market, from the back of his van, gourmet milk, butter, and cheese to a small group willing to pay the price—clearly a dudwalla of a different kind.

What happened after 1840 is, I would submit, a kind of sorcery based on slippages in the calculation of value, and confusion concerning the objects and objective of production. This slippage and confusion was caused by the rather sudden appearance of Mussoorie and the disorientation it caused. Even as a hill station Mussoorie was, and to some extent still is, relatively unique, and has been characterized by several historians as a town that, if not hedonistically decadent—like

some coeval frontier towns in the American Wild West—was most certainly built around the principle of affected self-indulgence and unabashed consumption (see Alter 1999; Bond and Saili 1992; Uttarkhandi 1995). Apart from missionaries who built schools, and sought to turn it into a place of elite learning—with some success, it seems—Mussoorie was a town where those motivated by a more oblique allegiance to the Protestant Ethic—and more directly implicated in the work of Empire—could let their hair down. It is said that at the Savoy Hotel a pre-breakfast bell was rung so that everyone could get discretely back into their appropriate bed, after venturing out into the night. Here in the pre-dawn darkness discretion obliquely signified a life style of indiscretion, and this, as we shall see, is the ironic ambiguity reflected in fetishism—making the invisible visible and the visible invisible. In any case, as it came to be known as "Queen of the Hills" during the roaring, gay, Edwardian era, the resort town of Mussoorie had the power to cast a kind of spell, albeit inadvertently—and thus much like those little fairy princesses, the *matriya*—by virtue of the production of a desire for consumption as an end unto itself; as a fact of its sociality. But then again, as Durkheim pointed out (1995), there is an ineffable aura of the supernatural built into the very idea of social facts. And there is no question but that Mussoorie signified that—a social fact in the urban sociology of Empire.

To understand the confusion of objects and the objective of production within the illusory of consumptive desire, it is necessary to have some idea of the agricultural cycle. In many respects the cycle of planting and harvesting in Himalayan villages is geared to the monsoon rains in June, July, August, and September most directly, and secondarily to the winter rains in December and January. Farming is labor intensive. Draft oxen, selected for their diminutive size, sharp turning radiuses, and—at least in the laconic humor of men like Tulsi—shorter legs on their "up-hill side," pull steel tipped wooden plows along very narrow, not-nearly-as-level-as-they-should-be terraced fields. Everything else—planting, weeding, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing—is done by hand.

There are two primary harvests. Barley and wheat, as well as some lentils, are planted in mid-November and harvested in April and May. Millet of various kinds, vegetables, amaranth, maize, and gram are planted in May before the onset of the monsoon rains in June, and these crops are harvested when the monsoon rains end in early September. The harvest of these crops continues through October when the plowing begins for wheat and barley. There are numerous other activities including up to three annual potato harvests, as well as home and field repair and the need for aggressive harrowing and weeding during the monsoon. However the two-and-a-half month period from late March to early June is a time of maximum labor allocation to harvesting, threshing, winnowing, and plowing—including the all-important transport of dung to the fields. In all of this, precise timing and community coordination is crucial. Wheat—which in Chamasari at least is by far the dominant crop—must be harvested only when the crop is fully ripe, but long enough before the onset of the monsoon to allow for the sheaves to fully dry, be threshed under the hooves of

tethered oxen, and then winnowed by hand on communal threshing floors. In terms of farming, the month of May in particular entails hard work from sunrise to sunset.

Unlike farming, which follows the changing pattern of the seasons, animal husbandry is governed by a day-to-day routine. Buffalos, by virtue of their size and awkward motility, must be kept tethered. Hence fodder and water must be brought to them. How much of what kind of fodder a buffalo can or should eat is a crucial question—as crucial as, and as directly related to, the question of how much milk, lentils, yogurt, and bread a growing child should eat—but one that cannot be answered definitively. It is, you might say, just outside the circle of light. The invisible, shape-shifting signified marked off by a plethora of material signifiers. This unanswerable, but always being asked, question also sucks blood and eats flesh, but we will get to that.

If one has several buffalos and all one really desires is their dung, and if one is able to satisfy one's basic needs, at least in part, by whatever milk they produce, one is liable to feed one's buffalos the amount of fodder one has time to cut, and provide for them the volume of water one has time to collect and transport after other more immediately pressing tasks have been completed. It is not as though buffalos in this scheme are the lowest priority. They are valued, and kept healthy. But they are not fetishized. They fit into a use-value economy, which is quite different from having market value extracted from them, extracted from the labor that is invested in the production of that value, and extracted from the environmental resources that are exploited to produce milk as a commodity.

After about 1840, with a period of very rapid growth in the 1920s, significant expansion in 1947 with the influx of refugees from the Punjab after the partition of India and Pakistan, and finally, with the advent of highly mobile middle-class tourism and phenomenal development since the mid-to-late 1970s up to the present, buffalos and milk have become increasingly fetishized as the economy has shifted increasingly toward commercial dairying. This sentence—long as it is, and strategically so—compresses time and events even though it refers to a span of one hundred and sixty years, almost six generations. In this compressed time the resident population of Mussoorie has increased dramatically, but even more dramatic has been the expansion of the resort industry along with its associated infrastructure: hotels, restaurants, cinemas, coffee shops, handicraft emporiums, ice-cream parlors, and video arcades, to name but a few. There is an annual influx of tens of thousands of tourists, each of whom, in one way or another drinks milk—by the glass or in tea or coffee—eats its derived products—as ghi, *makhan, mallai, dehi, lassi*, and *panir*—or consumes its condensed essence in the form of various confections, most commonly *burfi*. In a slightly different but related context I have described how the sweets bought from *mishtan bhandars* (sweet shops or confectioners) are put on display during the festival of Diwali:

> In the late 1970 the proprietor of Omi's Sweet Shop, in Landour's Shivaji Market, removed all the tables and chairs from the seating area in his shop, set up a floor-to-ceiling tiered construction, and filled it with four of five kinds of laddo, five or six varieties of creamy white burfi made with pistachio and almonds, rasgoola, rasmalai, son halva, mallai chop, gulab jamun, and any number of other confections arranged in gigantic, meter-high, gold- and silver-covered symmetrical mounds. Behind the tiered construction he carefully placed full length mirrors to give the impression that one was not looking into a sweet shop but an unending cavern of sparkling, precious jewels. [Alter 1999:110-111]

This is the fetishization of a fetish, and on the side of the road that runs from one end of town to the other there are close to 100 such commercial establishments, each of which represents something very real, but not really visible. I will return in a moment to burfi, as well as to the mishtan bhandars that endlessly produce burfi, for it is these shops that signify the spirit of leisure capitalism.

Commercialization and the fetishization of commodities is a process. It does not occur overnight. Because of this use value, as a residual force, functions as a drag against market value. In other words, it is not as though milk immediately became a commodity with value unto itself the first time it was sold. And Garhwali peasant farmers did not, willy-nilly, become dudwallas, any more so than did buffalos wake up one morning to find they were valued for a different kind of body function. Nevertheless, one can construct a scenario wherein an increased dependency on money earned from selling milk progressively caused a shift in labor investment away from farming toward dairying. As the value of milk increased, more and more time and energy was spent cutting fodder, more and more time and energy drawing and carrying water, more and more time and energy delivering milk, negotiating contracts, borrowing money to increase stock, and arranging for the purchase and sale of buffalos; more and more time dealing with banks and trying to refinance loans with money lenders and clients, among many other things. Under these conditions milk came to be fetishized as a commodity. As Taussig puts it:

> 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 who bestow the attribution. Thus, in the case of commodity fetishism, social relationships are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between mere things—the product of labor exchanged on the market—so that the sociology of exploitation masquerades as a natural relationship between systemic artifacts. Definite social relationships are reduced to the magical matrix of things. [1980:32]

The matrix of things here is the magical relationship between money and milk. Milk, however, is a curious kind of fetish. The necessity of its daily production, and the relatively short loop between labor investment, production, and sale—to say nothing of the buffalo's own embodied consumption and production of things—makes milk a commodity into which the social relationships of production do not easily dissolve and disappear. Milk, in other words, retains a degree of its artifactuality, and, regardless of its fluid nature, does not easily contain the drainage of human life, autonomy, and power. Use value and social relationships "leak out" from the fetishization of milk, much in the same way that the supernatural seeps into the natural world of calamity, death, and disease. In other words, better than through money, better than through crops like sugarcane, green revolution high-yield wheat, soybeans, cotton, and tea—each of which has an absolute value pegged to the world market—one can see in milk the masquerade of exploitation, and this exploitation is encoded in the magical history of materialism.

Buffalos tend to be kept in *chans* which are utilitarian hamlets located above outlaying village fields so that dung can be easily transported down hill. Since chans, and the shifting meaning of a chan in the landscape of historical magicalism, is crucial, I would like to nail their significance down—at least for a moment in time—by quoting what Berreman has to say on the subject. In Sirkanda, in 1957-58, 54% of the village population lived in chans or second houses outside the village.

> There were 71 chans and second houses, owned by 34 families (all but four of them Rajput families) situated in 31 distinct locations, all within a radius of eight miles from the village. The largest family (25 members) owned the largest number of chans (5). All chan residents were regarded by themselves and others as being members of the village community; all were members of families which maintained a house in the village; all came to the village on occasions of ceremony, crisis, or respite; all thought of the village as home. The chans were regarded as more or less temporary extensions of the village, occupied in order to take advantage of cultivated fields or pastures.... or to take advantage of markets for milk and milk products. [Berreman 1978a:333-334]

No wonder walking about in the dead of night is a necessity at times, if not by any means desirable. In any case, chans are designed to effect an efficient balance between farming and animal husbandry. They are closer to fields than is the village home, and can be used for storing agricultural tools and keeping bullocks safe. By living in chans while crops ripen, family members can protect their fields from birds, browsing deer, porcupines, and troops of marauding monkeys, as well as from herds of vagrant cows. On the other hand, chans are almost always closer to sources of fresh fodder and water, than are homes in the village. Since families often own several chans, one is usually located at a relatively higher altitude and the other lower

down in a valley. This allows for stock to be moved up and out of the summer heat or down and out of the winter cold. In summer buffalos are kept inside the chan, and the stalls are cleaned out daily. In winter they are tethered out in the sun and their dung is collected at the end of the day and composted with scraps of leaves, twigs, and other organic refuse.

It is in this composted dung—rather than in the chan itself—where the labor investment of agriculture and animal husbandry comes together. In this sense manure is not in the least bit fetishized. In the domain of subsistence it does not manifest much, if any, of the "phantom objectivity" so characteristic of commodities in capitalism. Yet dung is fundamentally the materialization of profound social relationships of production manifest as labor (Taussig 1980:4). Dung, in other words, is a thing without any value unto itself, but a thing with tremendous value as a means of natural reproduction.

Dung signifies the social relations of subsistence. It represents—either as present tense fact or as past participle history—the combination of animal husbandry and agriculture as a single unified enterprise. With the commodification of milk, however, dung becomes, in essence, the residual trace of an articulating mode of production and comes to reflect, as the by-product of milk, the phantom objectivity of a commodity most pure. In some sense, piles and piles of redolent, composted, bug and worm infested dung reveal the labor invested in milk, labor that is otherwise masked by its pure market value—price. As Taussig points out, "this is precisely the formal mechanism of fetishism (as we see it used by Marx and Freud), whereby the signifier depends upon yet erases its signification" (1993:225). As the material of a particular history of production, dung reinscribes signification on a fetish form that is already somewhat transparent.

It is useful to think of the piles and piles and piles of burfi covered with micro-millimeter thin layers of gold and silver leaf, along with the vats of boiling, steaming, gradually transubstantiating milk prominently displayed for consumers to see as they walk past mishtan bhandars, as the gross form of leisure capitalism. A mishtan bhandar is a kind of milk-fat based confectionery, and the connotation of the sanskritized designation is of a treasure trove of taste, or a den of delicious desire. With their rows of glass-cased display cabinets mishtan bhandars make a spectacle of the sweets they sell, and it is in the nature of spectacle to exaggerate significance almost to the point of farce and parody—taste for the sake of taste; gluttony pure and simple. Albeit masked in the pretense of reciprocal gift exchange to mark auspicious events—graduation, employment, promotion, the birth of the son, marriage, or what have you—burfi may be thought of as the penultimate fetishization of an ambiguously fetishized form. With money in my pocket—and confusing heavenly taste for inherent value—I distinctly remember thinking of it not just as an animate thing but as divine, insofar as its incipiently sacred form effects a kind of transubstantiation when manifest as a ritual gift of *prasad*. To think of burfi as so purely fetishized as to blur

the distinction between commodity and gift is to recognize the potential of dung to effect a similar confusion of categories. But whereas burfi refers to a mythical world of divine consumption and abstracted disarticulated social relations—marked most clearly during the festival of Diwali—dung reproduces a real world of blood sucking, flesh eating witchcraft—alienating labor, greed based competition, envy, and hyper-individualized distrust by any other name, those natural things that pervade the mind.

Not insignificantly burfi takes shape in the market—is reproduced, shall we say, in the manner in which something original, rare, and unique is reproduced—thereby more or less effectively erasing the shoes left by the side of the path, and silencing the sound of chopping, but also thereby enhancing the value of those things' rediscovery as not just things but as "facts and things that stand in some way as social relations" (Taussig 1980:23-38). There is in this rediscovery the potential for recovering the work that women and children do when they climb into trees to cut fodder and the work that men do as they transport milk into town and return—sometimes late at night, and sometimes drunk (which is also a kind of counter sorcery)—with the things that money can buy. Most significantly, however, what is important here is understanding how it is that in signifying an invisible, ghostly witch, visible shoes and audible sounds represent the value of production as a social fact, rather than the production of valuable things. It is the condensed milk fat manifest in burfi—the distilled essence of countless kilograms of oak leaves, innumerable liters of spring water, hours and hours of time, and kilocalories and kilocalories of energy—which, in perverting any sense of reciprocal equivalence, and making labor invisible, precisely allows for the visualization of an alternative history. Although not in so many words, Berreman indicates, with the eye of an ethnographer, what the gendered nature of this history involves:

> Women cook and care for children. They collect most of the fodder for animals and, with the children, tend the animals most of the time. They take care of the manure, dry it, store it, and are primarily responsible for seeing that the fields are fertilized with it. They carry most of the water for the family and animals. They winnow the grain after it is threshed and prepare it for storage. When the time comes, they prepare the food for cooking. They do unskilled labor in assisting men in constructing houses, terracing fields, and clearing land. [1972:76]

The invisible, demonic spirit of capitalism reflected in burfi—and remember, as Weber (1958) pointed out, that this spirit first emerged out of the abject fear of eternal damnation among industrializing English Protestants—is perhaps more terrifying than the invisible, ghostly witch chopping away at the interface of an articulating mode of production; more terrifying simply because it appears real and thereby more effectively masks the dismemberment and dissolution of social relationships, as Taussig (1980) puts it. In any case, without magic materialism clearly distorts reality.

Mussoorie has always been a seasonal town. Like Simla to the West, which was the government's summer capital prior to independence, Mussoorie was a town where colonials came to get away from the summer heat and dust. As such—and in fairly sharp, and perhaps affected contrast to Simla's more stayed and serious reputation—Mussoorie's *reson d'etre* was to eat, drink, and be merry. By some accounts, it was one long garden party—with interludes for dramatic performances, ballroom dancing, polo, costume parties, lavish high-teas, roller skating at the indoor rink, bridge and cribbage tournaments, parades, and nightly performances by various military ensembles on the bandstand in the center of town. In any case, during the hot season from late March through June, Mussoorie expanded in size with the influx of a large population looking for ways to spend their leisure time. Many of those who came set up residence for the whole summer, returning back to the plains either with the onset of the monsoon, or certainly by mid-October.

This pattern continues up to the present, although the middle-class tourist population is now more transient, often coming up by car or train from Delhi, Meerut, or Lucknow and staying in one of several hundred hotels for a long weekend, or a week at the most. Since the 1970s the so-called tourist season—or "season" for short—has also extended through the monsoon, when schools in the Punjab are on holiday. To some extent there is now a regular influx of tourists on every holiday weekend year round, and fewer and fewer businesses close for the winter. Nevertheless, the peak season is still April, May, and June. On warm May evenings the Mall Road, through the heart of town from the old Picture Palace cinema past Hammer's department store and Kwalitys's Restaurant to Hackman's Grand Hotel, is a mile long solid mass of people promenading. Along this stretch there are at least ten large mishtan bhandars.

Here is the rub. April, May, and June are months of peak season demand for milk, and many dudwallas peg their investment in stock to meet this demand, and yet these are the very same months which require the most intensive investment of labor in farming. No matter to what degree farming and dairying can be accommodated to one another at other times of the year, in April, May, and June they run at cross purposes. There are simply not enough people in the house or hours in the day to do the requisite work, even if children as young as eight or nine climb into tall trees with sharp sickles or walk down long, dark narrow paths to carry their own weight in water back up to endlessly thirsty buffalos. In other words, it is in April, May, and June that a precariously articulated mode of production becomes strikingly disarticulated—to harvest, plant, and be self-sufficient or milk, transport, and sell, that is the question. And in Hamlet—as well as in village chans—witchcraft and sorcery are at work.

I remember quite distinctly while growing up in Mussoorie spending most of my free time hanging out in the kitchen with the cook and the cook's helper as they prepared food for the seemingly endless dinner and tea parties my parents would host for various groups—a convention of bishops from the Church of North India, an

entourage from the Soviet Embassy seeking the admission of their children to school, members of the Rotary Club from town, as well as the Association of Mussoorie School Principals, among countless gatherings of faculty, staff, and families from the local missionary school community. A daily ritual in the kitchen was the arrival of the dudwalla. Squatting on the ground with a large cooking pan on the floor in front of him, he would rest a twenty-liter milk jug on one knee and carefully pour out, liter by liter, the volume of milk we had ordered. The milk was then placed on the stove to boil, and then put aside to cool before being placed in the refrigerator.

Dudwallas and their clients come into direct and daily contact with one another in the kitchens of houses, restaurants, boarding schools, tea shops, and mishtan bhandars. The transaction is real and immediate; it is a specific kind of market exchange—milk for money, money for milk. And yet there is also another kind of exchange which goes on, a verbal exchange that points to the fact that "the magic of production and the production of magic are inseparable under these circumstances" (Taussig 1980:15). It is virtually a commonplace in Mussoorie for consumers to accuse producers of diluting the milk they sell with water. These are deadly serious accusations, as deadly, one might say, as accusations of witchcraft or sorcery, and just as real—in the sense that greed, envy, and the desire for self protection are real—and just as ineffable. Although deadly—in the sense of leading to lost contracts, arrests, extortionist bribes to avoid arrest, and sometimes violence—these exchanges also take on the character of a light, comic banter: "Ah, there you are," our cook Prem would say, as Chandu, his helper, winked from the doorway, "what have you for us today, milky water, or watery milk?" And the response would invariably be some version of this—an incontrovertible fact: "what can I say, sahib, milk by its very nature is always pure."

Since, as Berreman quoting C.W. Mills has pointed out, any statement of fact is a political and moral act (1978b:71), I will state for a fact that I simply do not know of a single dudwalla who has ever added water to milk. But it is true that more milk is sold in Mussoorie than could possibly be produced in villages like Chamasari. This, if I may continue to invoke Berreman's apt invocation of C.W. Mills's pointed witticism (1978b:71), may well make my statement of fact an expression of some kind of nonsense. Regardless, it is in the impossibility of ever knowing when, where, why, and how often water is added to milk—or milk to water, as the case may be—that economics transubstantiates into sorcery and witchcraft. Initial attempts at interpreting the practice of adulteration always seemed to lead, inexorably it would seem, to the problem of facticity, mathematical computations, and questions of abstract value rather than focus on what is probably the much more significant fact of artifactuality—the slight of hand—which is at the very base of milk's commodity form. The point is that since there is no single standard of "pure" milk, milk itself as a commodity only signifies the possibility of purity, regardless of its religious significance, its specific gravity as a measure of fat content, or its specific value as a measure of money. In conducting my research I was always on the lookout for proof;

the smoking gun of a peasant caught in the act. But now it seems that I had seen what was important long before ever realizing that proof distorts the truth of the world. I had seen the shoes by the side of the road and heard the sound of chopping and thereby—through signs rather than in substance—encountered a ghostly witch. To recognize this is, as Marx put it, to "establish the truth of this world" (1959:263) as against a world beyond truth defined either by the law of supply and demand, the Will of God, or the power of witches to way-lay travelers and suck their blood. As Taussig puts it:

> Magical beliefs are revelatory and fascinating not because they are ill-conceived instruments of utility but because they are poetic echoes of the cadences that guide the innermost course of the world. Magic takes language, symbols and intelligibility to their outermost limits, to explore life and thereby change its destination. [1980:15]

But what of history? What does the enigma of dilution tell us about the political economy of dairying as it has developed over the course of roughly six generations in the village of Chamasari. Dilution is, I think, a kind of counter sorcery directed against the fetishization of milk and money. As the addition of something of no value—water—to something of tremendous value measured in terms of the investment of not only time and energy but critical, irreversible choices—to plant or not to plant, to weed or not to weed—dilution is an act of profound signification. However, unlike the fetish which depends upon yet erases its signification, the dilution of milk depends upon and yet erases the signified—pure milk appears to be there, but is not; or at least no one is quite sure anymore. Wherein human agency is "drained off" into the fetish as the fetish is brought to life and endowed with pure value, dilution is an act which intimately inhibits drainage and thereby contaminates the fetish with a residual trace of the social relations which constitute the experience of being human while living in widely dispersed chans on Witches Hill, and elsewhere.

Over the course of time since 1820 Chamasari proper has become something of a ghost town. It has not been abandoned as such, but the peasants for whom it is home live elsewhere. Less than half of the houses in the village are occupied, and they are occupied, for the most part, by fragments of larger families—older men and women and young children. More than half of the population has shifted out of the village and lives in chans—utilitarian, self-consciously rustic structures which have become permanent homes. Since few, if any, structural changes have taken place in the simple architecture of chan construction, the demographic process is best understood as translation rather than structural transformation. Thus, in a sense, living permanently in a chan is to confuse categories of meaning and thereby connect the routine of life—either daily or annual—to the contingency of past and present circumstance rather than to a fixed, future-tense prospective. What has happened is that the rotating residence pattern and geographically flexible distribution of labor as

analyzed by Berreman for Sirkanda in 1958 (1978a), has become, for Chamasari villagers progressively since 1840, an increasingly inflexible shift toward dependency on the market and money on the one hand, and "natural" resources on the other. People live in chans so as to try and reconcile the conflicting demands of farming and dairying. They cannot reconcile this conflict, and therefore live in a condition of permanent impermanence, and the addition of water to milk signifies the contingency of production under these circumstances.

It is useful to think of the history manifest in the dilution of milk in terms of what Taussig, inspired by Roland Barthes but following Walter Benjamin, refers to as "history as sorcery" (1991:366-392, especially 368-370). What he means by this is the way in which history must be understood not as a representation of the past in terms of obvious signs but rather in terms of obtuse images. Obtuse images relate to, but are not limited by, fixed objective reality. Obtuse images are meaningful not so much in terms of what they denote, but in terms of the expansive range of meanings they make possible. Thus, as Barthes points out, obtuse images are reflected in such phenomenon as "puns, buffoonery and useless expenditure;" obtuse images are "indifferent to moral and aesthetic categories" and are "on the side of carnival" (Barthes 1977 in Taussig 1991:367). As such, obtuse images lend themselves to magical forms of real signification—to witchcraft.

Following Benjamin, Taussig develops the idea of dialectical images in general and the principle of montage in particular. He distinguishes between montage and deconstruction, the former being a means by which to "facilitate the construction of paradise from the glimpses provided by alternative futures when otherwise concealed or forgotten connections with the past [are] revealed by the juxtaposition of images" (1991:367). Carrying this principle over into history is a means of changing history, and changing history entails breaking with "vulgar naturalism" and grasping "the design of history as such." "That is, to build up the structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment" (Benjamin 1979 in Taussig 1991:369). I take this statement—as it can represent a poor peasant nervously looking over his shoulder or bemusedly shrugging in the pre-dawn dark as he adds water to milk, wondering what ratio he can, or needs to, pass off as pure milk—to be a kind of skeptical, superstitious, and somewhat carnivalesque phenomenology; a kind of magical historicism; a kind of ironic politics of truth. In any case, the dialectical obtuse imagery of montage is manifest in the fact that piles of dung and heaps of burfi constitute a dialectic of history. The farcical chicanery of adding water to milk so as to increase its market value, reveals—through juxtaposition—the way in which things mask social value.

> 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]

The point is not to recover dung by deconstructing the market in milk or to applaud dilution as a revolutionary form of struggle. The point is to liberate history from reality as it is ascribed to categorically material things, for there are multiple realities that fold in upon one another to produce history, the interpretation of history. As Berreman puts it at the end of one his most well known essays:

> The question of whether the performance, definition or impression fostered by one group is more real or true than that put forth by another, or whether a planned impression is more or less true than the backstage behavior behind it, is not a fruitful one for argument. All are essential to an understanding of the social interaction being observed. [1972: vii]

The interwoven, interdependent nature of one group's reality set against another's is also essential to the recovery of alternative histories.

At the beginning of this essay, I pointed out that there was a direct and immediate connection between history as sorcery, as analyzed here, and the plastic shoes and sound of chopping, as sensory signifiers of an unseeable ghostly witch looping off oak leaves for fodder in the dead of night. I also pointed out that the always-being-asked-but-never-being-answered question of how much fodder should be fed to a buffalo, is a blood sucking, flesh eating, enigmatic question. Although the question cannot be answered, and therefore history does not take shape as a natural thing, history as sorcery is indexed by material things like trees: oak trees in particular. If you look at the oak forests around Chamasari almost all of the trees have been lopped, and although oak leaves grow back every spring, after years and years of lopping oak trees appear as tall, tufted, branchless poles. To cut oak leaves, even in the light of day, is to inscribe on the landscape a certain representation of history, just as cutting oak leaves at night is a representation of witchcraft and sorcery. What I mean is simply this: a forest of lopped pole-like trees signifies years and years of time and energy cutting fodder, tying it in bundles, feeding it to buffalos, milking those buffalos, cleaning out their stalls, and then going back out to cut more fodder. This is hard work and work that has increasingly become valued in terms of the money it produces through the transformation of fodder into milk. Work of this sort, as labor, sucks—or to use Taussig's term "drains"—life from those who do it: the women and children who "tend the animals most of the time" (Berreman 1972:76). Most of the time—what a perfectly innocuous, yet perfectly back-breaking, life shortening, and fundamentally exploitative thing time can be when it is linked, through labor, to money.

Environmentalists have gotten up in arms about the degradation of Himalayan forests, and periodically there are campaigns against lopping. The Forest Department has banned the cutting of trees for house construction and firewood. Therefore lopping is, in some sense, a political act of necessity. For peasants who live near privately owned land, like the forest between Dhobi Ghat and Chamasari, or near designated Forest Department Land, to cut fodder is also a crime. To avoid getting caught, it is sometimes done in the dead of night. So, in terms of montage and obtuse images, the ghostly witch I didn't see in the tree was engaged in a kind of counter sorcery. It is not as though the shape of the trees, or even what they mean in terms of the natural environment's degradation, changes as a consequence of witchcraft. What changes, however, is the way in which the trees can be seen instead of the forest; the way in which they stand for a history of colonial and post-colonial leisure that has possessed and dispossessed a community of people, rather than for a natural history of peasant production.

Works Cited

Alter, Andrew B.

2000 Dancing the Gods: Power and Meaning in the Music of Garhwal, North India. Ph.D. dissertation, School of Music—Conservatorium, Monash University, Australia.

Alter, Joseph S.

1999 Knowing Dil Das: Stories of an Himalayan Hunter. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Avard

n.d. Jaunpur Block Tehri Garhwal District, Uttar Pradesh: A Socio-Economic Survey. Mimeo, Author's Files.

Berreman, Gerald D.

1961 Himalayan Rope Sliding and Village Hinduism: An Analysis. Southwestern Journal of Anthropological Research 17: 326-342.

1964 Brahmins and Shamans in Pahari Religion. Journal of Asian Studies 23: 53-69.

1972 [1963] Hindus of the Himalayas: Ethnography and Change. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

1978a Ecology, Demography and Domestic Strategies in the Western Himalayas. Journal of Anthropological Research 34: 326-368.

1978b Himalayan Research: What, Whither and Whether. *In* Himalayan Anthropology. James F. Fisher, ed. Pp. 67-74. The Hague: Mouton Publishers.

Bond, Ruskin and Ganesh Saili
1992 Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine and Roses. New Delhi: Lustre Press Pvt. Ltd.

Durkheim, Emile
1995 The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. Karen Fields, trans. New York: Free Press.

Lal, Prem Hari Har
1993 The Doon Valley Down the Ages. Delhi: Interprint.

Marx, Karl
1959 [1844] Excerpts from "Toward the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." *In* Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy. Lewis Feuer, ed. Pp. 262-266. New York: Anchor Books.

Negi, Kastura Devi
1998 History of the Dhera Dun Valley from 1654-1814 AD. Dehra Dun: Bishen Singh Mahendra Pal Singh.

Rawat, Ajay
1989 History of Garhwal 1358-1947: An Erstwhile Kingdom in the Himalayas. New Delhi: Indus Publishers.

Taussig, Michael
1980 The Devil and Commodity Fetishism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1991 [1986] Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wildman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Uttarkhandi, J. P.
1995 Masuri Dastavej 1815-1995. Mussoorie: Uttarkhand Bigul.

Weber, Max
1958 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. New York: Scribner.

---

[1] A *pari* is really more akin to the *matriva* Berreman refers to in his study of Sirkanda. Matriya are "harmful but not malicious" (1972:113). Like fairy princesses in English tales, they reside on mountain tops and flit around in small flocks. They can be extremely dangerous if one happens to cross their path, but they do not go out of their way to cause harm.

[2] As Berreman points out, "the categories of supernatural beings, such as spirits, ghosts, household gods, and village gods, as well as the subdivisions of these categories, are not entirely distinct and in practice constitute a continuum or spectrum of intergrading types of supernatural beings with similarities running through all" (1972:114). It is with this in mind that references to various categories of supernatural being—ghosts, demons, and witches in particular—will be consciously imprecise. A *churail* is, therefore, a ghost-like witch.

---

[3] See Berreman 1972:111. For a detailed discussion of shamanic healing in Garhwal see Berreman 1961 and 1964. With regard to the music associated with shamanic possession trance see A. B. Alter 2000; with regard to the heady effects of being "possessed" by alcohol see J. S. Alter 1999.

[4] "Behind Many Masks, Ethnography and Impression Management," a classic statement on reflexivity in anthropology, was first published in 1962. It is republished as the prologue to the 1972 edition of *Hindus of the Himalayas.*

[5] The evidence for this comes from informal interviews I conducted with a number of men living in Chamasari as they reflected on the past. Supporting evidence comes from more structured interviews I helped conduct during the early assessment stage of a development project based out of Rajpur. Dung is available in the hills as fertilizer in part because it is not used as a source of fuel, as in the plains. A socio-economic survey of Jaunpur block, to the north of Chamasari, points out that the volume of chemical fertilizers used in the area is negligible "due to the extensive use of compost manures, the production of which amounted to over 79,000 tons during 1976-1977" (Avard n.d.:34). This is indicative of the broader historical pattern.

[6] Although there are general accounts of the history of Garhwal (see, for example, Rawat 1989) and several recent studies of the Dehra Doon Valley (Lal 1993; Negi 1998), the most comprehensive history of Mussoorie is Jai Prakash Uttarkhandi's *Masuri Dastavej: 1815 - 1995* (1995). Ruskin Bond's account in *Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine and Roses* (1992) provides historical vignettes, and gives a good sense of the town's colonial flavor and its lingering aftertaste.

[7] As Berreman points out, "in the markets buffalo milk is generally preferred. It is admitted that buffalo milk is 'better for the body' and makes men virile (any appreciative wife or lover will feed her man buffalo milk and its products frequently), but it does not help the brain. One villager commented that, 'If you drink too much buffalo milk you will get buffalo wisdom,' that is, stupidity" (1972:51).

[8] As Berreman points out, milk from different animals is graded according to a hierarchy of value, although the criteria of value appear to be variable, being based partly on the quality and variety of diet, but also—since mother's milk is the best of all (1972:51)—on some principle of abstract purity.