

Devil Pact Narratives in Rural Central America: Class, Gender and 'Resistance'

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout Latin America, and also many other parts of the world, a common theme informing peasant narratives is different kinds of pact in which the recipient obtains the power of the devil in exchange for a soul. The analysis of these narratives is not a mere cultural curiosity; rather, it is a useful way of gaining an insight into how peasants understand and give meaning to the social order in which they live and the social change they experience. Such an approach to devil pact narratives goes beyond conceiving them simply as religious or psychological expressions, and regards such discourse as a method of projecting the language of social relationships and power. It is, however, a hidden discourse not easily accessible to the outside researcher.

Only after we had lived in the village for quite some time did peasants begin to tell us the local narrative of a landlord who signed a pact with the devil. Significantly, the narrative was not told openly, in public, but secretly and in private. The most detailed account of this particular devil pact narrative was obtained after sunset, when we were alone with one of the poorest inhabitants who lived in a mud hut without electric light on the fringes of the village. But does the offstage setting of this discourse imply that peasants tell the story to subvert domination, as some observers argue? This question points to the reason for our interest in understanding precisely what the devil pact narrative, as told in rural Central America, represents. Of particular interest, therefore, is whether the telling of stories about devil pact narratives involving landlords constitutes a form of resistance by

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subordinate groups. Our analysis questions a recent tendency in the literature to assume *a priori* that offstage peasant narratives defy forms of domination.

The detailed study by Edelman [1994] of a Costa Rican devil pact narrative will serve as our starting point. The life history of the protagonist in our story, Alfredo Luna (an Honduran landowner), runs surprisingly parallel to the life of Don Cubillo, the man whose history is vividly described by Edelman. Both were wealthy landowners, who had been poor in the past, and each was a notorious womanizer. The structure of the narratives, the language and the details of the various symbols also show clear similarities. However, while Edelman focuses on the connection between the narrative and the womanizing behaviour of Cubillo, our analysis interprets the narrative as an expression of the struggles generated by capital accumulation, as is apparent in the following example:

The only thing you have to do is to take a bath. Then, you take off your clothes and you lie down under a fig tree (*mata-palo*) at midnight. You lie on your back and start to praise him. A snake will start to pass over you fifteen minutes before midnight, and when its tail passes by you have to watch out. A white flower will drop.¹ When you see it fall, you have to reach out your hand and 'chás!', you will grab it and you will talk to the devil. He will propose that you sign a paper with blood from your veins, and that you will hand over your most beloved child. Then the devil will give you lots of money (*el gran dineral*) [Ramos and Valenzuela, 1996: 45–6].

The quotation links the reasons for entering a pact to securing 'lots of money'. This is but one of the many historical plots of the devil pact narrative.

Doctor Faustus in Central America

The pact with the devil is a discourse of great antiquity, in which progress and development called forth supernatural (either divine or diabolic) retribution, an exchange which entails the acquisition of new knowledge, the power to rule, sexual pleasure, immortality, everlasting beauty and economic advancement. All the latter correspond to what might be termed the up-side of the bargain, and different legends and literary variants emphasize one or more of these aspects. In the legends of the ancient Greeks, Prometheus was punished for having provided humanity with fire stolen from heaven: although humanity benefited, Prometheus himself was made to suffer by being chained to a rock. The acquisition of knowledge as a central feature of the devil's pact is embodied in the legend of Doctor Faustus. From humble peasant stock, he studied theology and medicine,

became a medieval magician in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Wittenberg (Germany), and dabbled in the black arts and was said to be in league with the devil.² According to the legend, Faustus turned from scholarly pursuits to conjuring up the devil, with whom he then signed a bond (in his blood). The terms of the resulting contract (or pact) with the devil were that, in exchange for providing the latter with his soul, he received not only material wealth and his choice of the most beautiful women, but magical powers to do things no mere mortal could undertake.³ Sexual liberty and sinfulness as central features are also present in Mariken van Nieumeghen, a late Middle Age Dutch miracle play, and some of the Don Juan interpretations.⁴

Many aspects of the classic European depiction of the complexities and ambiguities raised by the struggle between good and evil are reproduced in the Latin American and Central American versions of the pact with the devil considered below. These all bring forward one particular theme of the legend: new riches.⁵ In the acquisition of the latter lies the clue as to the down-side of the Faustian bargain with the devil. Rapid economic advancement, the legend warns, is invariably accompanied by social costs, and this positive/negative combination is accordingly represented symbolically in terms of an exchange, whereby the material benefits obtained by an individual or society (or, indeed, humanity) are offset by long-term disadvantages, either to the individual concerned, or to society as a whole. Current debates about economic development fit neatly into this framework: continuing economic development on a global scale is perceived as having profound negative consequences for the whole of humanity, in the form of environmental pollution and global warming.

The problem of how to understand the Central American narratives is not only a consequence of the different readings of the devil pact narrative that result from the obscurity of an offstage discourse, or the richness of the symbols and the meanings with regard to the acquisition of knowledge, sexual liberty and rapid economic advancement. Two other aspects render interpretation difficult. First, the devil pact narrative we study is a living discourse – and therefore important for understanding current peasant society – but one which nevertheless takes elements from a pre-existing symbolic language to talk about contemporary social processes. The pact is accordingly not simply an imagined idiom but chillingly concrete, and its micro-politics are all-too-real [*Comaroff and Comaroff*, 1993: xxvii]. Explanations of earlier uses of this narrative are thus historically specific; both the symbolic content of the narrative and the context in which the narrative is reproduced explain why it is retold. Local interpretations of the devil are therefore highly modern and constantly changing [*Geschiere*, 1997].

A second problem faced by those reading meanings into this peasant narrative is the shift in theory itself. We therefore intend to analyse and account for an epistemological shift in the way the Faustian pact is interpreted: that is, the shift from Taussig's [1980] positioning of this narrative between different modes of production – reminiscent of the early 1980s theorizing on modes of production (although distinct from modes of production theory) – to Edelman's [1994] focus on gender identity and Foucauldian interpretations of domination – in keeping with the post-structuralist vogue of the late 1980s and 1990s – in order to explore the intertwined modalities of exploitation.

FROM CAPITALIST ALIENATION TO SEXUAL DOMINATION

Any discussion of pacts with the devil in Latin America necessarily begins by addressing the polemical argument in Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* [1980]. Thus Edelman's subsequent contribution to the debate is itself a critique of Taussig's earlier work. Taussig relates how, because they cut more cane and earned more than their fellow workers without added effort, some male Colombian sugarcane workers were said to have entered a pact with the devil. Cane cut by these workers died soon after, while the additional money they earned as a result of this pact was thought to be barren, and used by them to purchase only luxuries. Moreover, the sugarcane workers who made the pact themselves died prematurely and in great pain. According to Taussig, the narrative emerges when former peasants – now rural workers or miners – lose control over their means of production as labour relationships are transformed in the course of a transition towards capitalism. He interprets the change which gives rise to the devil pact narrative as an economic shift, from gift (use-value) to commodity exchange (exchange-value) and from peasant cultivation to wage labour relations. Undergoing these processes of commoditization and proletarianization, and trapped at a point somewhere between full-time cultivation and permanent wage labour, peasants tell a variety of stories about the devil so as to represent the process of alienation they experience with the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist relations.⁶ The devil, with all his ambiguity, serves as a mediator of the clash between petty commodity production and the capitalist mode of production [Taussig, 1980: 37]. In this framework, Faustian pact narratives are an indigenous reaction to the supplanting of a pre-existing organic unity between persons and their products by the commodity fetishism of capitalism, with its split between persons and the things they produce and exchange.

Taussig's influential study has been widely discussed and criticized, and the two interrelated objections to it are important for our discussion. A

major critique concerns Taussig's eloquently worded, but nevertheless simplifying, representation of a very recent capitalist encroachment on a 'romanticized' or 'idealized' non-market economy.⁷ Consequently, and we find this less developed in the critiques, one may question the gist of Taussig's argument, which sees devil pact narratives as a 'counter-capitalist culture' [Austen, 1993: 95] or 'oppositional cultural practice' [Taussig, 1987]. Taussig lauds the tin miners in Bolivia and sugarcane cutters in Colombia for their attempt to reconstitute the significance of the past in terms of the tensions of the present (imagining the possibility of use-value, of a gift economy, in a capitalist context). In Taussig's view, therefore, everyone is in their debt for having shown us that apparently natural relations are in fact asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, exploitative and destructive relationships between persons. The devil pact narrative is a moral indictment of the new mode of production [Taussig, 1995: 390], a rejection of capitalist logic. Although we do not question the possible value that such an analogy may have for 'the finding of meaning for us' [Taussig, 1987: 105], we do question – more modestly – whether this really is present in the narrative outlined by us below.

Edelman starts from the many critiques of Taussig's work, and finds the latter's claims too bold, implying as they do a uniformity of peasant beliefs about devil pacts. He points out that Taussig compresses the devil contract into one single perspective: namely, a reaction by peasants to wage labour-based agrarian capitalism. Against such a view, Edelman proposes an alternative framework, the explanatory focus of which is less on wage labour, and more concerned with the intertwined modalities of exploitation. Instead of the alienating effects of wage labour and commoditization, therefore, his interpretation considers the devil pact an expression of the 'variety of socially conditioned anxieties and psychic conflicts' related to gender and ethnic domination [Edelman, 1994: 60]. This raises the question as to why, precisely, Taussig remains so important in Edelman's thinking. The answer to this, outlined below, is that both studies share the conceptualization of the devil pact narrative as counter-culture, as a form of resistance to domination: resistance against capitalist alienation in the case of Taussig, and resistance against sexual domination in the case of Edelman.⁸ The latter's argument is developed around the history of Don Cubillo, to which we now turn.

Don Cubillo in Costa Rica

Within a few years of arriving in the Costa Rican town of Filadelfia as a poor Nicaraguan immigrant, Don Chico Cubillo turned from a man of humble origins into a wealthy and powerful landowner. In local stories, this abrupt transition was attributed to the fact that Cubillo had signed a pact

with the devil. Some rural inhabitants thought that it was this which led to his sudden riches, while others rejected this explanation, and instead pointed out that Cubillo was an intelligent person who knew how to conduct business. Edelman finds it important to note that Cubillo was not considered a greedy and innately evil (= diabolical) person. Many people remembered Don Cubillo as someone who always used to invite people to drink with him. Another typical feature of Don Cubillo that local inhabitants recalled was his seduction of women. He was an inveterate womanizer, and had offspring with many women. Moreover, he recognized many of these children and left them a bequest. It is significant, however, that Edelman does not provide exact information about the way in which Cubillo amassed his wealth. He states that the accumulation of land by Don Cubillo was not perceived as a problem by other people, because at that time – between 1900 and the 1940s – unsettled land was still available in the area. Furthermore, the sale of land to rich landowners was a convenient way for poor peasants to generate much-needed cash.

Three stories about Don Cubillo's life lead Edelman to consider the devil pact entered into by the landlord not as a story that tells something about wage labour and class antagonism but rather as a commentary on sexual domination. Two of the three lead Edelman to the conclusion that rural people themselves identified with Don Cubillo and his wealth, finding little problem in his riches besides common envy. In the story of the lost *alforja* (saddlebag), therefore, a poor man who encounters a drunken Don Cubillo next to an *alforja* bulging with money makes off with the latter. Honest and humble as he is, the man then returns it to a now-sober Don Cubillo. The latter, who has not even missed the bag containing his money, offers the finder a pittance of a reward, just enough to buy a rope with which to hang himself. A second story relates how Don Cubillo visits the famous Hotel Costa Rica in the national capital San José, the best hotel in the country. When the hotel employees refuse to serve him because he is dressed like a poor peasant, he calls over the owner, shows the latter the money in his old *alforja*, and proposes to buy the whole hotel with all the employees in it. Edelman argues that both these stories constitute evidence for the presence of grassroots sympathy towards Don Cubillo, suggesting that rural people identify themselves with his caustic sense of humour. In addition to the fact that he spent his money lavishly within the rural community, for Edelman the fact that the landowner did not even miss the money when it was taken is proof that Don Cubillo was not a greedy person. Furthermore, in the episode set in the Hotel Costa Rica, the latter symbolizes the 'white' townsfolk, whereas Don Cubillo by contrast is the champion of the ethnically different rural population who 'cleverly humiliates representatives of the wealthy, white elite'.⁹ The third story deals

specifically with Don Cubillo's sexual dominance. It describes what happened in Room 21, a room in one of Cubillo's houses, where he received a great many women who had sex with him in return for money and other material goods. Edelman understands the third story as an attack on the manhood of poor Filadelfinos, in that Don Cubillo's predatory sexuality offended Latin American male supremacist values about the protection of wives, sisters, girlfriends and daughters.

According to Edelman, these stories complicate the interpretation of the devil pact narrative as a simple expression of class antagonism.¹⁰ Rather than the latter, therefore, it is sexual domination and gender antagonism which give rise to the powerful emotions that find expression in the beliefs about diabolical phenomena. By interpreting gender and not class as a key to understanding the meaning of devil pact narratives, Edelman seems to stand Taussig's analysis on its head: it is no longer capitalism but gender that is diabolical. The important issue here, therefore, is the following: by compressing the many stories of Don Cubillo's life into one single cultural interpretation of the devil pact, Edelman may have failed to recognize the multidimensional aspects and the absence of uniformity structuring peasant beliefs. Before discussing his interpretation in more detail, it is necessary to consider a parallel kind of discourse: the life history of Don Alfredo Luna in Honduras.

Our analysis of a similar Faustian pact discourse in Honduras leads us to question the explanatory shift proposed by Edelman, from capitalist alienation to sexual domination. It also leads us to question the main logic informing the analyses of Taussig and Edelman, and one which they both seem to share: the devil pact as a 'from below' cultural discourse that challenges and defies existing relations of power and exploitation.

ALFREDO LUNA AND THE DEVIL IN HONDURAS

We came across a devil pact narrative similar to that involving Don Cubillo while conducting fieldwork research in a village in the Santa Bárbara district of Honduras between 1992 and 1997.¹¹ Like Don Cubillo, the protagonist in this case was an immigrant who, having once been poor, became a dominant economic figure in the region, was a well-known womanizer, and a man whom it was said had conjured up the devil. When we met Alfredo Luna he was 90 years old and still an active person, living with a wife 40 years his junior. Arriving in the village as a petty trader in the late 1920s, he fell in love with and married a local woman, Doña Aurelia. He established himself as a retailer of consumer goods, but soon became involved in agricultural production and the merchandising of agricultural produce. He started to amass land, and became rich, powerful

and the head of a family of wealthy landowners in the village. Significantly, Alfredo did not go in for an ostentatious display of his wealth. When we visited his house, there was nothing to indicate that he had been the richest man in the region. He received visitors in rustic peasant garb: barefooted and stripped to the waist, his old trousers had holes and were held up with a simple piece of string. Other than a pair of the cheapest, locally made chairs, his house contained no furniture. Like Don Cubillo, Alfredo had a reputation as a womanizer. In spite of his marriage to Doña Aurelia, he regularly had affairs with other women. He recognizes paternity of some 40 children, 12 of them already dead, the offspring of two official spouses plus many *pegados* (literally, children 'stuck on' other women). To visitors he recounts at length how much he has spent on the education of his children, both legitimate and illegitimate, and how well they have done: 'I have an engineer, two are in the USA, there are secretaries, nurses, accountants, and my grandchildren are lawyers, engineers and doctors'.¹²

Alfredo Luna, Agrarian Change and Land Appropriation

During the 1920s and 1930s, most of the land controlled by the municipality, the so-called *ejido*, was distributed among villagers, who generally did not lack access to land [Jansen, 1998].¹³ In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the village economy was connected with external markets through the sale of cattle, pigs, coffee and indigo (the latter in the nineteenth century only), as well as artisan products (mainly sleeping mats produced from natural fibres). Cattle raising as a more specialized commercial production became profitable in the context of the opportunities offered by the national, and Central American, cattle boom of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ This expansion of commercial livestock rearing, and the related concentration of land on which to undertake this kind of economic activity, intensified the conflicts over rural property in many regions of Honduras. The steady growth and intensification of coffee cultivation, led by better-off producers and leading to the emergence of class differentiation of the cultivators into rich, middle and poor peasants, was particularly salient in the 1970s and 1980s.

The basis of Alfredo's fortune lay in his shop, the first one in this municipality of about 1,500 inhabitants. Many people bought drink and drank it on credit.¹⁵ He started to buy small pieces of land close to the village, on which to pasture the mules he used to transport goods and agricultural produce between the village and the district capital. Only later did he begin to invest in livestock rearing and coffee cultivation. He also became an important coffee trader in the village. During the 1930s and 1940s, Alfredo Luna held various political posts on the municipal council, including that of mayor. Along with his trading, producing and banking activities, this political office-holding contributed to his riches.

Throughout 1935, Alfredo frequently travelled as a village representative to the capital in order to secure a piece of land – called Juniapal – as an *ejido* for the village. However, he used these trips to advance his own personal interests, and to make himself the leaseholder of the state, in spite of the fact that the municipality had already received written permission to use the land. Evidence we have seen suggests that Alfredo also bribed the village authorities during the conflict that resulted. The documents proving that the state had assigned the land to the village and not to Alfredo, disappeared mysteriously. After years of submitting new requests to the national authorities, the municipality received approximately half of the Juniapal land, although the boundaries between it and Alfredo's portion of the holding remained the subject of dispute.

Alfredo had also purchased smaller pieces of land adjacent to Juniapal from individual peasants, as well as one large tract of private land onto which peasants had encroached decades earlier, and which they now considered as their own private property. In the disputes that followed, an official survey of the land was carried out, from which (according to information provided by one of his sons) Alfredo benefited enormously. He got all the best land, in a continuous plot, and intensified his cattle raising accordingly. Alfredo changed his agricultural pattern from a maize-pasture-fallow rotation to permanent pasture. Henceforth tenants were no longer able to use this fertile valley land for maize cultivation.

Although in the words of the villagers Alfredo 'grabbed the land' to which the whole village was entitled, there was never a mass protest against and sustained opposition to his behaviour. Nowadays villagers blame this episode on 'the authorities of those days', who in their opinion failed 'to defend the people's interests'. Organized collective action against Alfredo's private appropriation of public land never took place. He nevertheless did not have everything his own way: complete control of the land was not possible, since it was not fully fenced, and some villagers continued to farm plots there.¹⁶ Although he did not evict them because he feared this would lead to violence, Alfredo passed the Juniapal land on to his son Pedro in 1967, not least because he anticipated potentially unfavourable changes in national legislation and politics. His family then commenced legal proceedings to secure legal title, since all leaseholders of the state had the right to convert this into ownership rights. Without the latter, the land would be affected by the agrarian reform.

When, in response to a renewed interest in agrarian reform in the prevailing political climate, some peasants attempted to occupy some of this land during the 1970s, many villagers condemned them, stating that one should not enter another's property (*meterse en lo ajeno*). The ensuing violent confrontation between, on the one hand, several armed Luna

brothers and their (military) 'bodyguards', and on the other the peasants who had invaded the land, was seen by the villagers as 'understandable' – that is, the Luna family was justified in protecting what was now perceived as their private property. The attempted occupation failed, and Pedro Luna then sold large parts of the land to his brothers. Despite the fact that nobody knew whether the Luna family had legal title to the land, and that Alfredo had probably manipulated the authorities in order to get and retain access to it two decades earlier, therefore, a certain public legitimacy was conferred on the defensive reaction by his sons to the occupation. In an important sense, this struggle had already been lost much earlier, in that the village seemingly accepted the legitimacy of Alfredo's rights by virtue of not challenging them at the time he appropriated the land (*el pueblo dormido; no se avivaron*), and that his sons had then bought the land concerned. Two local norms – being owner of something you buy (even if it is from another member of the same family) and having rights because you have fenced in the land with the tacit approval of the villagers – were violated by the 1970s land occupation.

The acquiescence in Alfredo's land appropriation of both the municipal authorities and the individual villagers was related in turn to the various ways they were tied to Alfredo. The municipality regularly borrowed money from well-to-do inhabitants like Alfredo in order to carry out public activities, such as buying land for the villagers. Once the division of the Juniapal holding appeared inevitable, it was Alfredo who paid for the land to be surveyed; while he himself did indeed benefit from the latter, it also gave villagers access to an additional and substantial amount of land suitable for maize cultivation. Moreover, Alfredo's network of personal relationships protected him from mass protest: it was said that 'Alfredo dominated the village', or that 'he was the axis of the village'. He was the only merchant in the village from whom peasants either borrowed money or purchased items on credit: it was said that 'everybody was indebted to Alfredo'. The absence of massive opposition to his appropriation of public land was due not just to this economic dependency but also to patronage ties: hence the view that 'you could wake him in the middle of the night to obtain some medicines ... He was a man of prosperity; we saw him as our father, all we asked for he gave us, he did not refuse.' His wife, Doña Aurelia, strengthened his social position; she was called 'the mother to the village' because of her generosity towards the poor. Peasants also admired his strong personality, describing him in positive terms as *vivo* ('alive, shrewd') and *trabajador* ('a hard worker').

Other people in the village stress the far-reaching 'vision' of Alfredo in the following manner: 'After the mayor had divided the land in the 1950s, many people sold their parcels to Alfredo, and he bought everything, but

cheaply. I remember that my family sold eight *manzanas* for 100 *lempiras*, which they spent on drinking.¹⁷ For booze they sold him the land; then they went to drink, together with Alfredo, in his shop.' This view includes scarcely veiled admiration for the cunning way in which Alfredo acquired land belonging to other people ('for booze, they sold land'). Furthermore, Alfredo was the only person in the village able to provide agricultural wage labourers with a substantial amount of employment (many orphans considered themselves adopted children of Alfredo, who supplied them with food, housing and work). For all these reasons, villagers perceived Alfredo with mixed feelings. They saw him as friend, father, *compadre*, employer, moneylender, esteemed authority and also land-grabber.¹⁸ These multiple and contradictory relationships with Alfredo influenced how villagers reacted to attempts by him to amass land. It was, however, the dominant presence of dependency relations that enabled him to appropriate land which belonged to the village unopposed. In turn, a combination of merchant and finance capital on the one hand, and primitive accumulation in the form of land grabbing on the other, was the key to Alfredo's later success in cattle raising and coffee production.¹⁹

The Devil and All His Works

During our conversations with Alfredo, he always looked directly into the visitor's eyes, with a penetrating stare which is much talked about, feared and respected in the village. Reference to the mysterious power of this stare was for many peasants an oblique reference to his contract with the devil. Similar in many respects to other devil pact narratives in Honduras [Aguilar, 1989: 150–51; Chapman, 1985: 168; Ramos and Valenzuela, 1996, 1997], Alfredo had sold his soul to the devil in order to become rich. The most complete story about the devil pact entered into by Alfredo was told us by Fidel Alvarado (b.1941), a poor peasant who lived on the outskirts of the village in a very dilapidated hut. His detailed account of the pact between Alfredo and the devil starts with some observations on his own father.

My father got to know Alfredo Luna at the time he started to buy and sell *petates* and other stuff in the village.²⁰ Soon, Alfredo came to live in the village. My father said that he travelled with mules as far as San Pedro to sell *petates*; eight days it took to travel from here to San Pedro. The *petate* was cheap but Alfredo nevertheless became richer very fast. Once when my father went with his *compadre* [Alfredo Luna] to his hacienda they spent the night there. On the way my father said to him that he had seen a man on a black mule counting the cattle of Alfredo. Alfredo answered: 'Just leave him there, these are

sombras (shadows), it is the friend, let him count the cattle'. When they went upstairs to enter the hacienda-house, Alfredo said: 'Wait here for me *compadre*, I have to go out to do something'. My father stayed in the old wooden house a while but then he left to look for his *compadre*. He went down and searched in a small ravine where he saw Don Alfredo sitting at a table with a tall man. In a ravine, you understand. What tables and chairs would be there? The man had a big book open on the table, and a pen; that table was well illuminated. The man was writing, bent forward. I do not know what Don Alfredo Luna was saying because my father returned to the house. When Alfredo Luna came back my father asked him: '*Compadre*, where have you been?' 'I went to do something in the ravine', Alfredo answered, and he continued: 'and you don't have the guts to do such a thing [*usted no tiene valor*]'. Five days later one of his farm labourers died. The labourer went to bathe in the river and simply drowned, even though he was healthy. Labourers of Alfredo died from drowning, or were bitten by insects, for example by ants in the mountains, or from disease. Another died just like that. One guy went to buy eggs, and when he entered the house he dropped on the floor, dead. It turned out that Alfredo handed over many people. The people worked for him because he had work for them to do. In this village we have poverty, we all are poor, so therefore people went to work for the man, because he had ways to pay labourers, many ways. Also, the late Santiago worked for him. The late Santiago was depulping coffee when a tall man, black and with a big sombrero, passed by on a black mule. Then one day Santiago drank milk from a black cow. I was still a boy and told him not to drink the milk. He was caught by cholera, and died lying on a pile of maize leaves. There was a burial; just for drinking a glass of milk! But [I know that] the late Santiago is not there [where the dead are], but stays in the black house. They say it is a black house. Some say it is a white house. One can see the black house only at noon and at midnight. People say that it is the place to enter into an agreement. I have walked a lot in San Pedro, but I have never come across that house, although I want to see it. [To make a contract you have to pass] seven rooms, each one with a big snake, before you meet him [the devil]. He instructs you to deal three blows to Jesus Christ; but Jesus Christ is weeping and shedding tears. Anyone who is timid, who lacks guts, will not make the pact when he sees Christ weeping because of the three blows he will receive. But he who masters his conscience will win; [he] who indeed wants to be rich, will strike Jesus Christ three blows. The deal is for a few days only, and [the devil] will come to collect. People say Alfredo handed over his own

daughter. They say that those handed over will never die. If, for example, someone is to be shot, Lucifer will make a puppet, and when the shot is fired he throws it, and the bullets will hit the puppet. The puppet will fall dead on the ground, and the person will be taken alive to the black house. They say that my *madrina*, Doña Aurelia, the wife of Don Alfredo, is there too. She died in childbirth, along with her baby.²¹ Alfredo sometimes goes to San Pedro, maybe to see her. His sons also travel to San Pedro often. She has told one of her sons that they should take her out there, and should construct a house outside the village. She said: 'The people think that I am dead so how can they then see me alive? You have to bring me a black cat, without any white hair. If you bring it, I will leave.' But no one brought her the cat. All the farm labourers who were handed over by Alfredo are there too. One of his sons told me. He knew all the labourers, and had seen them through a window of the house. He had seen this guy and that; he had seen about eight labourers in the black house. He had also seen my *madrina* with her son, already big now; also some uncles. Nobody was dead, all were alive. Who knows how he managed to bring so many people? In this way Don Alfredo became rich. It is not nothing to make a pact. You have to love the person who is handed over very much. He had an enormous cattle herd. He had fifty pack animals, just to lug coffee. He always had ten, twenty labourers to pay.

Many of the symbols in Fidel's devil pact narrative appear in similar form in other Honduran devil pact narratives. For example, the black mule accompanying the devil, the ravine with a table and a chair at midnight, the sudden and unexpected death of day labourers and family members, the black cat, and the empty coffins, or coffins filled with puppets. Another recurring theme is the pact as a signed document.²² Significantly, the basement of Don Alfredo's house appears in many versions of the narrative. Alfredo's house was the only one in the village with a basement. One of his granddaughters asked him one day why he had constructed the basement, and he said that he used it to keep 'things' in. But people thought of it as a place of evil.²³ Most stories about Alfredo's devil pact refer to his extraordinary powers. In one of the stories, a certain Anastacio, who lived near the river, left his house on a night of torrential rainfall to check his belongings. It was midnight, and he saw Don Alfredo passing on a black mule. Alfredo went to his hacienda to look for his animals. Anastacio told him not to go because he had to cross the river, which was in torrent and had swept away entire trees. Alfredo nevertheless crossed the flooded river, mounted on his mule, and disappeared entirely under the torrent. Anastacio thought Alfredo had drowned until he heard him shout on the other side of

the river. Everybody still wonders how Alfredo succeeded in crossing the flooded river. Another example of his extraordinary powers is his age, about which people say: 'eighty-nine years and he still mounts horses and keeps glaring at people with eyes full of fire. Nobody of that age is so energetic.' These stories have two sides: Alfredo is human, but he is also super-human, as he can do things of which normal people are incapable. These are taken as signs that Alfredo really does have a pact with the devil which gives him everlasting life.

The speed at which Alfredo became rich is important. As one villager expressed it: 'He rapidly became *Don Alfredo*'.²⁴ Alfredo arrived rather poor and became incredibly rich very fast. He handed over to the devil his own family and his farm workers, he had courage (*valor*) and he possessed super-human powers. The sacrifice of his own family underlines the widespread conviction that he personally handed over his farm workers. Someone who is capable of handing over members of his own family can certainly be expected to hand over his farm workers as well. The fear on the part of day labourers who refuse to work for Alfredo is therefore accepted as plausible and well-founded. 'Having guts' is important because it explains why only he and nobody else made this pact with the devil: only he had sufficient courage to do this. At the same time it conveys respect for those who find it necessary to maintain working relationships with Alfredo. In spite of what he does to his fellow beings, it is possible for some villagers to have dealings with him. Alfredo himself is accordingly not totally evil, he just has the courage to make bargains with evil. The ideological sub-text is inescapable: because he is courageous, Don Alfredo deserves to acquire things of value; his wealth is, in the end, a result of his own work.²⁵

CONTRADICTORY ASPECTS OF THE DEVIL PACT

The life history of Don Cubillo, the protagonist of Edelman's devil pact narrative in Costa Rica, is in three important respects very similar to that of Alfredo Luna in Honduras: a sudden economic ascent, a pact with the devil and the reputation of being a womanizer. But is Edelman correct in his assertion that the devil pact of Don Cubillo is primarily a discourse not about his wealth but rather about his sexual liaisons with women? Edelman argues that Don Cubillo's wealth cannot be the source of the devil pact narrative because there were also other rich men in town without a pact with the devil. In support of his claim, Edelman invokes two additional arguments: that peasants tended to identify with Don Cubillo because, first, the regional economy revolved around him, and second, he championed their rural/ethnic 'otherness' against the urban white population. These same peasants, however, do not identify themselves with the sexually

predatory behaviour of Don Cubillo: according to Edelman, therefore, the element of devilish evil refers (and is confined) to this particular aspect of Don Cubillo's life. Such a claim is also supported by the fact that the only difference between Don Cubillo and other wealthy men was his womanizing. We will first discuss this problematic epistemological shift in Edelman's explanation, to sexual domination, before discussing the issue of whether or not peasants identified with Don Cubillo.

Sexual Liberty and Male Protection

A central claim made by Taussig, that only men could sign a pact with the devil, has been accepted rather too uncritically: it is certainly not true of the Honduran devil pact narrative.²⁶ Several of the Honduran narratives chronicled by Ramos and Valenzuela [1996, 1997] relate of women who have entered into pacts with the devil. In the course of our own fieldwork research in Honduras, informants stated that Alfredo's eldest daughter Josefa inherited the pact; they also told us about women in other villages who had made pacts with the devil.²⁷ In the case of Honduras, therefore, entering a devil pact is not the exclusive preserve of men. One might nevertheless argue that, where Don Cubillo and Don Alfredo Luna are concerned, the pact is not a gender specific one, involving antagonism between males and females, but rather one involving sexual behaviour, a discourse about promiscuity versus marital faithfulness and/or pre-marital chastity (for both men and women).²⁸

According to Edelman [1994: 74], Don Cubillo's womanizing and sexual promiscuity 'represented an attack on the manhood of poor Filadelfinos'. This libidinous behaviour generated both admiration and anxiety, an antinomic reaction that provided fertile ground on which the myth of the devil pact could flourish. The story of Room 21 symbolized a twofold attack: not just on the reputation of women, but also on their male relatives who were supposed to protect them. A woman's reputation for virtue can only be lost once, and if this happens men, too, are drawn into the ensuing scandal: it is as much the reputation of males, who are supposed to protect their women, which is dishonoured, and both lose face if this defensive role is not performed. Although the libidinous behaviour of Don Cubillo is the subject of male admiration, therefore, men are nevertheless anxious when this libidinous gaze settles on women under their own protection.

In the event, Don Cubillo chose his women, and 'there was not likely very much that a poor servant girl could do about it' [Edelman, 1994: 71]. As depicted by Edelman, however, these women were passive victims of Don Cubillo's libido; they had no capacity to consider the advantages and the disadvantages of such a relationship, and to decide for themselves; they

were unable to act in their own right. Because females aspire to conform to the 'traditional Latin American male supremacist values', women's reputations are also important to men [Edelman, 1994: 73].²⁹ Invoking the presence of Latin American male chauvinism (*machismo*), Edelman tends to accept it as standard ideology, the only representation of real practice; in contrast to this interpretation, others (such as Melhuus and Stolen [1996]) have pointed out how the responsibility of men to protect the 'reputation' of women actually varies a lot in practice. Furthermore, many men live with women whose reputation has been 'lost'. The argument that men simply wish to uphold traditional male chauvinist values leaves little scope for any consideration of the ideological variations and contradictions that inform Latin American rural *machismo*.

Alfredo Luna was a womanizer like Don Cubillo, and many villagers liked to gossip about it, but no storyteller linked the devil pact narrative directly with Alfredo's extramarital affairs. Womanizing is not at all uncommon in the village. Many rich and poor men maintain relationships with several women during their lives, and recognize the offspring of several partners as their own. We know of some men who were poor, but who spent alternate nights of the week with different women in different houses. None of these men are said to have made a pact with the devil. Hence, womanizing is not an exclusive preserve of Alfredo alone, nor it is restricted to men who are wealthy. It affects men and women in all social groups.³⁰

To substantiate the claim that the devil pact is an expression of gender relations, Edelman refers to other myths and narratives, which combine the theme of reproduction and female sexuality/fertility with evil. In these stories women change to animals, or evil creatures who disguise themselves as beautiful seducers to destroy men. During our fieldwork research we came across numerous similar stories. Sorcery and witchcraft were connected to the night, to certain places (where somebody was murdered, or had died in suspicious circumstances), or to sinful practices such as adultery.³¹ However, most of these stories, full of references to sorcery and demonic creatures, never once referred to a pact with the devil. Examining all the different variations in Honduras, our conclusion is that the element of evil generated by the devil pact narrative is connected with the exchange whereby men and women gain a specific advantage, either by becoming rich (the most common attribute that attracts opprobrium), or less commonly by acquiring knowledge (academic titles) which also gives them access to wealth.³²

One might propose, therefore, an alternative reading of the sexual domination as practised by Don Cubillo in Costa Rica: rather than an attack on Latin American male values, which are not negated but reproduced by

inveterate womanizing and the repeated violation of women's 'reputation', sexual domination should be seen as a form of competitiveness between rich and poor men. Males who are poor both admire and fear Don Cubillo's libidinous behaviour, and dread the potential dishonour it brings through the failure to guard against the loss to him of female reputation that it is their responsibility to uphold. That the root of this antinomy is to be found elsewhere is clear from an observation by Edelman [1994: 74] that 'Cubillo could suborn local women and girls by providing significant material inducements that were beyond the ability of "their" men to provide': in other words, he has *the means to buy* women's favours in a way that was denied to those who were poor. Given this, it is unclear why Edelman does not push the argument to its logical conclusion: the narrative about Don Cubillo's devil pact is ultimately one about his wealth, and thus also about class antagonism.³³ Why does Cubillo's money 'upset the balance of control over wealth between the sexes' [Edelman, 1994: 74] instead of between classes?³⁴

Attraction and Betrayal

A major theme in devil pact narratives is betrayal.³⁵ Many devil pact narratives contain references to the attraction of new technology and other aspects linked to the process of modernization. Some of the storytellers laid emphasis on Don Alfredo's desire to introduce new technologies into the village as the reason for his pact with the devil. He was the first to own a radio, a water pump next to his house, and a coffee pulping machine; that is, economic innovations which are viewed as attractive but also potentially evil. Other Honduran narratives positing the existence of a contract with the devil often refer to new elements entering peasant village life from the outside world. In the village of Don Alfredo, the engineering company that constructed a hydroelectric power plant during the early 1980s introduced new machinery and, for the first time, industrial employment opportunities into the village. For their part, villagers suspected the company of having made a pact with the devil. The souls of the men who died during the work, it was said, were handed over to the devil and still wander around as *malas espíritus* (evil spirits) on the land near the power plant.³⁶ This combination of new technology, capital accumulation and new social relationships, is also present in stories about banana, sugar and mining companies operating in Honduras, all of which are said to have signed a contract with the devil.³⁷

Most devil pact narratives in rural Latin America refer to one of the following two kinds of betrayal. In the first kind, the subject of the narrative competes strongly with other members of his peer group and threatens group identity. The sugarcane cutter in Taussig's analysis belongs to this category of betrayal.³⁸ The second kind concerns subjects who transcend a

particular class location, or the poor person who becomes extremely rich. The latter is no longer considered 'one of us' since he/she now belongs among the ranks (and is an ally) of the 'other'.³⁹ The protagonist in this second category, someone who commits an act of betrayal by entering a pact with the devil, is no longer regarded as a co-worker/peasant, but as a patron/capitalist. Often the subject who betrays his fellows does so by securing large tracts of land, a category into which Don Alfredo clearly fits. He arrived poor, with holes in his trousers, and married into the village. However, unlike the other villagers, he then went on to amass much property, became rich within a few years, and was the first villager to employ a substantial amount of farm workers throughout the year. Until that episode, people regarded it as well-nigh impossible for someone to have enough money to pay or provide for so many agricultural labourers. By establishing what was virtually a new kind of labour relation, accumulating lots of land and applying new agricultural technologies, Alfredo became in part the classic non-peasant 'other' of the devil pact narrative and its theme of betrayal, while at the same time remaining an important co-villager. The devil pact represents this shift as a betrayal of existing social relations of production and exchange uniting members of the community (while at the same time it mystifies this relation: see below). This variant of the narrative identifies the source of wealth: the latter not only is generated by earlier riches or by personal endeavour, but also is created as a result of power over others. Alfredo became rich, therefore, because he was able to do two things: first, to hand day labourers over to the devil, that is, to exploit labour-power under his control; and second, to take over land belonging to peasants (including the 'theft' of such property). To accumulate his wealth, therefore, it was necessary for Don Alfredo to cause the death of the farm labourers who worked for him, an exchange which is emblematic not only of the devil pact narrative but also of the theme of betrayal within the narrative itself.

Betrayal does not necessarily result in the destruction of all relationships. The blandishments introduced by the devil cause new relationships to be established, and the power Alfredo gained attracted other villagers to him. Like Don Cubillo in Costa Rica, he developed into a typical Central American *patron*. People sought him out to borrow money, find work, sell their products, find political protection, rent land, get information, ask him to become a *compadre*, drink with him, find a new parental home and so on.⁴⁰ In contrast to suggestion made by Edelman, such an identification with the *patron* as co-villager, important as it is for the local economy, does not imply that the *patron* himself is seen as equal with the peasant.⁴¹ To substantiate his analysis of Don Cubillo's social relationships, with sameness/'identification' in the economic field and

difference/opposition in the field of gender relations, Edelman identifies the former as the domain of 'good' (= not the devil) and the latter as the realm of 'evil', and therefore the devil.⁴² In a similar vein, Taussig tends to characterize the devil in absolute terms, as the embodiment of evil.⁴³ By doing so, both Edelman and Taussig follow a theologic/Eurocentric epistemology, in which the devil embodies an evil that must be challenged and defeated. In the peasant reading of Alfredo's pact, however, the very strength of Don Alfredo is also a source of his good deeds: that is, the patronage which emanates either directly from him or indirectly from his wife. His economic power made him not only a danger for the village, therefore, but also attractive as an ally to individual peasants and the peasant community/municipality as a whole. The epistemological border between God/virtue and the devil/evil is, in the context of devil pact narratives and their meanings, far too absolute.⁴⁴

Heavenly and Earthly Powers Compared

The argument developed hitherto, about the devil pact narrative in Central America as symbolic reference to new forms of exploitation and the resultant class contradictions (instead of gender/ethnic domination), is essentially one concerning the content of the narrative. A necessary second step is to explain why a narrative about exploitation and class contradictions is located in the realm of the supernatural. Taussig suggests that the narrative offers a much better account of labour relations under capitalism than those who live in a fully developed capitalist society might imagine. Broadly speaking, the latter tend to perceive capitalist relations as natural and thus unchangeable phenomena, and not as actively and socially produced forms of inequality between human beings. By contrast, peasant narratives about the devil pact break with this naturalization of capitalist relationships. The narrative is viewed in essence as a social explanation, either of capitalism (Taussig) or of gender (Edelman).

The devil pact narrative about Don Alfredo does indeed seem to be an alternative to natural explanations. The new and unusual situation, of one individual becoming very rich while living and working in the same socio-economic environment as his co-villagers, is not easily explained away as a natural occurrence. None of the villagers could imagine it possible that one of them could become so wealthy so easily and rapidly. They all worked very hard throughout their life, but nobody had ever managed to amass a comparable fortune. It is true that some were better off than others, but this had always been a result of differences in inherited property and industriousness. This kind of explanation was impossible where Alfredo's wealth was concerned. His rapid and phenomenal economic success could not even be explained by reference to his commercial activities, as these

involved low-value produce, such as *petates*, beans and coffee, and high costs in order to transport them to faraway cities. Hence the rapidity of his accumulation did not itself fit into the existing notions of a natural process. But is the devil pact narrative therefore a social explanation? People in the village were, to a certain extent, well aware that Alfredo's riches had something to do with his relationship to them. But why did this lead not to a straightforwardly social explanation, but rather to a devil pact narrative? Why did not a peasant narrative emerge that explains directly how Alfredo exploited labour, made people indebted to him, and practised forms of primitive accumulation in order to expand the amount of landed property he owned? This question – why supernatural and not temporal explanations are invoked – is not answered satisfactorily, either by Taussig or by Edelman.

Rather obviously, the devil is not part of the social environment but belongs to, or comes from, the supernatural realm. Hence the attractiveness of the devil pact narrative as an ideological representation of new forms of social inequality may lie precisely in its supernatural (= 'other worldly') character. By displacing the locus of antagonism, from earth into the realms of the supernatural, it represents the new situation precisely as a non-natural occurrence, and thus precludes a specifically social explanation involving relations of exploitation. The latter kind of explanation, were it to circulate in public discourse, would provoke tensions, anxieties and discomfort among the peasants, not least because its remedy would involve action on their part that undermined the existing social order. If Alfredo's wealth came simply from exploiting his co-villagers, they could and should recover it forcibly, both by taking it back and refusing to participate further in exploitative relationships. But if his wealth emanated from a supernatural source, then this was a situation that lay beyond the capacity of simple human beings to alter. Alfredo's influential position in the village, his wide network of personal and family relations, and his economic and political power, all made organized opposition difficult. Socially and economically, people allied themselves with Alfredo for the reasons outlined above. At the same time, however, these same people, who inhabited an individualized peasant community, were resistant to the idea that they were simply clients – dependent on others and tied into social relations that generated inequality.

Not surprisingly, therefore, villagers occupying the same social and economic domain as Don Alfredo were reluctant to locate the cause of their relative powerlessness in relationships with him in themselves, in their own silence and complicity. Instead, they opted for a classic ideological displacement, and relocated the cause in a realm where they themselves were – quite literally – powerless, thereby justifying their acquiescence and simultaneously presenting their disempowerment in a positive light, both to

themselves and to others. Hence what appears as contradictory in natural and social explanations – a rapid increase in riches/accumulation, new exploitative social relationships, all coupled with a ‘from below’ endorsement on the part of the rural poor – appears as much more logical and acceptable in this supernatural explanation. For villagers who felt betrayed by Don Alfredo’s economic success, but at the same time participated in and to a limited degree benefited from this process (= ‘trickle down’ effect), and for this reason did not offer resistance, a supernatural explanation serves well.

CONCLUSION: PEASANT NARRATIVES AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

This article has examined both the structure of and reasons for rural narratives in Honduras about Don Alfredo Luna, who grew from a petty trader to a large landowner, and his pact with the devil. Via Alfredo, villagers became acquainted with a new combination of merchant capital, personal political ties between individual villagers and state-level politicians, permanent wage labour, primitive accumulation (grabbing of land) and new agricultural technologies.⁴⁵ As the embodiment of an expanding class of livestock owners, Alfredo took advantage of the new economic possibilities available, installed new technologies and introduced new grassland systems. No one else before Alfredo had been able to expand his farming operations as fast. The devil pact narrative about Alfredo Luna emerged quite clearly in a context where fears generated by this process of rapid accumulation combined with profound changes in the agricultural production system and labour relations. Given this, it is somewhat surprising to encounter explanations of the devil pact narrative in Central America which identify its meaning as being solely about gender and resistance. Against such views, the point made here is that the theme of sexual predation in folkloric accounts of the Faustian bargain entered by Don Cubillo in Costa Rica and Don Alfredo in Honduras does not necessarily mean that gender domination is the main reason why the story is being told. Most Central American devil pact narratives have as their central theme the unnatural acquisition of wealth, a transformation which can be viewed as a form of betrayal. If gender elements are introduced in these narratives, they do not change either the meaning or the central importance of this particular theme.

Equally surprising is the claim that the devil pact narrative corresponds to ‘from below’ resistance, an empowering form of opposition to exploitation and domination. Hence the problematic nature of the two main approaches to this issue: by Taussig [1980], who views it as grassroots

opposition against the capitalist mode of production and the exchange economy, and by Edelman [1994], who sees it mainly as a reflection of grassroots struggle over sexual dominance. The analysis of the latter is based on Crain [1991: 68], who considers the devil pact narrative as an empowering ideology of resistance against dominant interpretations and definitions of the 'real', similar to the everyday forms of peasant resistance theorized by Scott [1985] as the 'weapons of the weak'. Against these kinds of framework, all of which regard the discourse about 'the supernatural' in a positive light (= empowering), it has been argued here that equating devil pact narratives with opposition/resistance from below is problematic.

In contrast to the approach of those such as Taussig, Edelman, Crain and Scott, therefore, the case made here is that the invocation by peasants of the supernatural in the devil pact narrative offered them an alternative to natural and social explanations of Alfredo's wealth. A natural explanation was implausible, since the situation was new, nobody had ever experienced it, and his rapid accumulation of wealth was therefore non-natural. A social explanation, which would connect the exploitation and inequality in the new social relationships to the process of capital accumulation, either onstage or offstage, would in effect be a call for opposition. It would demand that villagers resist the exploitative relationships and land appropriation effected by Alfredo. A resort to supernatural powers in order to account for the origins of Alfredo's wealth, however, offered an alternative to social and natural explanations. Alfredo's practices of exploitation and primitive accumulation were identified as being evil, therefore doing something about this was banished as an option: no one could possibly resist his supernatural power, nor would anyone be expected to attempt this. Not only is the devil the embodiment of evil/betrayal, but he also represents desire. The new *patron* created by the devil was an important economic factor in the livelihood strategies of individual peasants searching for ways to survive in the changed circumstances. This element of ambiguity inherent in the devil, who simultaneously projects 'good' and 'bad', as do those who enter a compact with him, suggests an alternative explanation of the devil pact narrative: not as the empowering cultural expression of 'from below' resistance/opposition to Don Cubillo in Costa Rica and Alfredo Luna in Honduras, but much rather as a conservative representation of difference licensing in turn a disempowering form of accommodation.⁴⁶

Devil pact narratives in rural Central America enable peasants to account for new wealth, new social relations and a new set of circumstances without, however, alluding to the details of what for them are painful revelations about deceit, theft, complicity and consent.⁴⁷ It keeps distant, or perhaps even denies, the possibility of social change and political resistance.⁴⁸ In doing so, the narrative does not simply reflect underlying

social relationships, but also intervenes in social relationships themselves, by representing them in a specific way: in short, it locates them in a realm where, in effect, nothing much can be done to change them. It also helps to create social conventions and the formation of social institutions, that is, new landlord–peasant relationships. A supernatural principle – the pact with the devil – is, it could be argued, an intermediate step in the process of naturalizing new inequalities, in a stage where existing conventions are as yet too fragile to be completely naturalized.⁴⁹

NOTES

1. *Mata-palo* is not the common fig (*Ficus carica*) but a strangler fig (*Ficus glabrata* or *Ficus citrifolia*) [Williams, 1981]. Figs, according to peasants, are special trees, as they do not have flowers but do bear fruits (botanically, they have flowers, but these are not visible). Hence, the dropping of the flower is in itself an unnatural act.
2. Among the many literary variants that refer to the theme of forbidden knowledge are Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* [1589/92], Goethe's *Faust* [1808], and Harry Mulisch's *De ontdekking van de hemel* [1990, translated as *The Discovery of Heaven*]. The expulsion from the Garden of Eden of Adam and Eve, who had eaten the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, inspired this particular theme. In Mulisch's novel, the representations by Marlowe and Goethe of the thirst for knowledge on the part of Faustus are themselves inventions by the devil to obscure another, very real pact that Francis Bacon, in the name of mankind, signed with the devil at the same time as Faustus was alive. In this novel, God tries to recover the two tables of the law, since Bacon had learned from the devil how to institutionalize the scientific method and thus bartered away human morality, as inscribed in the Decalogue, in exchange for knowledge about the origin of the universe.
3. In Marlowe's version, the devil collects an unwilling Faustus at the end of the contract, and takes him down to Hell. Three centuries later, in Goethe's version, angels hoodwink Mephistopheles at the moment his part of the contract is due, and take Faust's body to heaven. Faust's thirst for knowledge is therefore rewarded. Compare this with the much more devotional end in the earlier play about Mariken van Nieumeghen [*anonymous*, c.1500] in which the Holy Mother helps Mariken, after a dissolute life, against the accusations of the devil; Mariken does penance for her sins, and dies peacefully in a convent. The peasant narrative we analyse here has no sad, happy or devotional end; the devil pact narrative has been and remains a continuous part of peasant life.
4. The power of seduction, and leading people into sinfulness, is a theme that runs through many devil pact narratives. Thus Mariken van Nieumeghen conjures up the devil and leads a life of sexual debauchery. The devil himself benefits from this when men fight over her and kill each other. Seduction by a diabolic male of females is of course a central theme in Byron's *Don Juan* [1818] and Bram Stoker's late nineteenth-century novel about the Transylvanian Count Dracula.
5. This reproduces the offer by the devil to Jesus, whereby in exchange for worshipping Satan, Jesus would receive as his reward all the kingdoms and power on earth.
6. In Marxist theory, alienation refers to the process whereby the worker undergoes a double separation, both from ownership of the means of production and the means of labour. This in turn is experienced by the subject concerned as a double estrangement: from a capacity to exercise control over the labour process, and from selfhood.
7. Taussig's study has generated much criticism, most of it ably summarized by Edelman [1994: 59–60]. One of the accusations levelled at Taussig is that he idealizes a pre-capitalist

past [Austen, 1996; Turner, 1986]; consequently, he mistakenly characterizes Latin American peasant societies as non-market economies, whereas most peasants have long been incorporated into the market [DaMatta, 1986]. Another is the fundamental opposition between gift exchange and commodity exchange advocated by Taussig and anthropological discourse in general, a point questioned by Appadurai [1986]. Taussig tends to treat the domain of gift exchange as non-exploitative, innocent and even transparent [Parry and Bloch, 1989: 9]. Yet another criticism is that Taussig views the key contradiction in the society he studied as one between capitalism and a rural pre-Conquest world, whereas it more likely lies within capitalism itself [Trouillot, 1986: 88]. Taussig also fails to account for the specific content of devil pact narratives [Gross, 1983]. In a similar vein, Chevalier [1982: 192] finds unanswered the crucial question why only co-workers and not plantation owners are said to have pacts with the devil, when both are equally responsible for the introduction of wage labour. Peasants, too, may have pacts with the devil [Parry and Bloch, 1989], so this has to be explained as well. Edelman [1994] himself questions the total rejection by Taussig of any link between devil pact narratives and socially determined fears and conflicts. If these are not to be reduced simply to individual psychology as a way of dealing with problematic situations, it is necessary to locate the reason for the reproduction of such narratives in the wider context (see also Meyer [1994] for devil contracts in Ghana). In his response to some of these critiques, Taussig [1987] insists that his book never described anything resembling a 'natural peasant economy'. Although many critics point to Taussig's idealization of peasant economy, opposed by him to the capitalist economy, little has been said about his schematic view of the ecology of peasant farming as opposed to plantation farming. His claim that peasant economy maintains soil fertility in the rainforest [Taussig, 1995] has either been dismissed in its entirety [for example, Weischet and Caviedes, 1993] or reinterpreted as an historical and location-specific phenomenon instead of a static, pre-capitalist reality [for example, Amanor, 1994]. Between 1980 and 1995 Taussig changed the key feature of the devil pact narrative while retaining the theoretical contrast between the gift economy and the exchange economy. In a later text [Taussig, 1995], therefore, devil pact narratives are no longer seen as a commentary on the development of capitalist relations of production but rather as a tale – still reconstituting the past – which shows alternative forms of consumption. It is a discourse about giving without receiving, and as such is a warning about contemporary, capitalist-created luxury and excess consumption.

8. Taussig [1980: 230] sees the devil pact narrative mainly as an effect of imagination and not – or not yet – as an effect of politics, because in his view the latter requires, amongst other practices, political organizing. This view, however, does not prevent him from ascribing many oppositional/resistance characteristics to the discourse about the devil.
9. Edelman suggests that this is an 'ethnic' dimension of the devil pact narrative. He does not, however, explore this further, and this argument remains inferential. The focus here is therefore on the gender element in his analysis.
10. We use here Edelman's terms. Taussig's account is, in fact, not so much about class antagonism – which would exist within one mode of production – but about antagonisms between the different modes of production (or different modes of consumption in his 1995 analysis).
11. The focus of our fieldwork research in Honduras was on peasant perceptions of, on the one hand, agrarian change, natural resource use and agricultural knowledge [Jansen, 1998], and on the other the working of law and norms [Roquas, 2002]. During our long stays in the village, over different periods, recording local interpretations of Alfredo Luna's position in the village and his contract with the devil became part of our study of peasant narratives. We were unable to persuade Alfredo Luna himself to give us his view about the devil pact narrative. At his age he seemed interested in talking only about his children.
12. This occupational list is very different from the kind of list that most villagers would produce if asked about what jobs their own children held, and as such illustrates the extent to which members of the Honduran landed elite typically invest in educating their children for urban employment and often state jobs.

13. The definition and meaning of the Honduran *ejido* has changed over time (see Roquas [2002] for the different definitions, and disputes about them). For the purpose of the discussion here, it is sufficient to understand *ejido* as state land over which the municipality can claim certain rights, one of them being to concede usufruct rights to individual villagers. Peasants, however, have perceived these usufruct leases as ownership rights to this land, private property which they have subsequently sold, inherited or sublet.
14. These opportunities resulted from improved transport facilities, an emerging export beef market with new packing plants, credit from a developmentalist state, new pasture varieties and cultivation systems, and new cross-breeds and disease control [Howard, 1989; Williams, 1986].
15. Between 1952 and 1963 at least 906 people received credit from Alfredo (*source*: accounting books of Alfredo Luna).
16. Apart from secretly invading his property, directly stealing his belongings is another individual response Alfredo was required to tolerate, as the following local story illustrates. Juan Perdomo worked as a day labourer in Alfredo's warehouse. One day he ate a combination of raw onions and plantains, and his farts produced a terrible smell. He complained to Alfredo that a bad smell filled the warehouse, adding that 'there must be a dead rat somewhere'. Alfredo ordered him to look for the rat and then to get rid of it. A few hours later, he saw Juan leaving the warehouse with a big box in his arms. He asked what was in the box and where he was going. Juan replied: 'This is the dead rat and I am going to throw it away at the rubbish dump'. Alfredo gave his permission, and Juan left with the big box for the rubbish dump, and dropped it there. At night he went back and collected the box, which did not contain a rat but twenty pairs of shoes stolen from the warehouse. Just like everybody else in the village, Alfredo knew about the missing shoes, but he never claimed them back or pressed charges against Juan.
17. Officially one *manzana* measures 0.7 hectare, but in the village is 0.8361 hectare [Jansen, 1998].
18. *Compadre* refers to co-parenthood (*compadrazgo*), a form of fictive kinship which in many Latin American cultures contains, or has contained, a set of rights and duties between the godfather/mother and the parents of the godchild (which does not imply equality, however). In this particular Honduran region, *compadrazgo* has been relatively unimportant as an agrarian social institution.
19. One informant also stated that he took calves belonging to cattle owned by other villagers, livestock which then was still able to wander freely on common land; Alfredo put his own brand on the calves, and then grazed them on his land. Such thefts made him rich, according to this peasant.
20. *Petates*, or woven sleeping mats, were made by the women of the village.
21. In other versions of the story, she died of fright when a pig that was hanging from the ceiling fell off and dropped into a bin filled with water just beside her.
22. This reinforces the power and importance of signed documents, and the respect with which people treat them. There is another devil pact narrative in a neighbouring village featuring a man who signed it because he wanted to have money to allow his son to study. When his son had completed his studies, the man would hand himself over to the devil. But the son found out about this arrangement, and he went with the chain of the holy saint Francisco to the devil and tied the latter to a chair. The son then demanded that the devil return his father's contract. A contract was indeed returned by the devil, but it was one with another person. The son kept it, and demanded the right contract. Again the devil handed him a contract involving another person, which the son also kept while insisting he be given the right contract. In the end the devil handed over the right document, the contract involving his father. In this way the son rescued not only his own father but also two other individuals from the clutches of the devil.
23. Don Alfredo's granddaughter's own theory was that her grandfather used it to store his cash at a time when there were only coins and no paper money. But she also considered it possible that he used the basement for the illegal production of alcohol. He loved drinking, and frequently organized big parties in his house. The granddaughter remembered how on these occasions alcohol was procured for the party from somewhere inside the house.

24. The word 'Don' is an honorific term of address for a man who is held in respect, on account of his wealth, age, wisdom or professional title.
25. It seems unnecessary to point out that this kind of self-validation is the stock in trade of capitalists everywhere, all of whom claim that their wealth is the result of their own hard work.
26. Although Edelman [1994: 86–7] refers in two notes to other sources which indicate that women made pacts with the devil, he mentions – but does not comment upon – the claim by Taussig that women do not enter pacts with the devil.
27. In the course of conducting fieldwork research in another part of Honduras during the year 2000, we recorded a detailed story of four sisters who had entered a pact with the devil. Although they were poor, they purchased more and more land. Nobody was able to explain from where they got the money to do this.
28. A theme that appears in many versions of devil pact narratives elsewhere (see note 4 above).
29. Edelman [1994: 73] considers men's anxiety lest their women are seduced by Don Cubillo a contrast to the prevalence of 'highly unstable, informal unions, which lessened males' affective attachments to their partners and their concern and capacity for protecting female relatives ...'. Unlike Edelman, however, we did not observe that unstable or informal marital relations (widely present in our research area) automatically implied lessened affective bonds between men and women. Edelman infers that men in (supposedly) monogamous, stable marriages in western capitalist societies love their wives more than men in the Costa Rican hinterlands.
30. Neither does the combination of being rich and a womanizer of itself give rise to devil pact narratives. Several other wealthy men maintained multiple extramarital relationships, but were never said to be in league with the devil.
31. An informant told us the story about her father, a womanizer, who fell in love with one particular woman. 'He regularly followed her to her house and tried to chat with her through the kitchen window. One night, when it was very late and the village was deserted, he saw the woman he admired walking a short way ahead of him. My father immediately tried to attract her attention. She walked out of the village and he followed her. She disappeared and then suddenly reappeared, over and over again. Without warning her appearance changed, and he saw that she was no longer his beloved woman but "*la sucia*" (= 'the dirty one'). My father was seized by panic, but he had brought a cigar with him, and the smoke of a cigar can save you from *la sucia*.' Although this informant's narrative is about evil, linked to her father's adultery, such a story is not of itself evidence that the pact with the devil is necessarily a discourse about female sexuality.
32. About the role of class in the devil pact narrative, Edelman is somewhat ambivalent. His stated intention is to 'challenge the idea that devil pact beliefs are rooted in economic exploitation alone' [Edelman, 1994: 78]. Regardless of the degree to which class antagonism plays a role in his interpretation of the devil pact narrative, however, according to him the central theme remains the issue of gender and sexual domination. In our view, Edelman tends to overstate the gender issue and to confuse different social structures. Devil pact narratives may interweave issues of riches and new wealth with symbolic reference to sexuality and knowledge, but this does not necessarily mean that in this case the narrative is a coherent and encompassing explanation of all the behaviour featuring Don Alfredo Luna and/or Don Cubillo. Edelman tries to incorporate every detail of Don Cubillo's life history within the single rubric of his devil pact narrative, which is 'a nearly ubiquitous cultural matrix'. Edelman [1994: 61] argues further that 'the recognition that the rural poor (or others) do not always analytically separate "modes" of exploitation or types of power relations is key to understanding their narratives about domination and subjection. In the case that is the central concern here, intertwined modalities of exploitation are mirrored in stories that mix symbols and levels of meaning but that, in using the metaphor of the devil pact, employ a commonly available idiom or interpretative framework' (for the historical background, see Edelman [1992]). In our fieldwork conversations about Don Alfredo, villagers drew a clear distinction between class (capital accumulation) and gender (that is, sexual predation), using the devil pact narrative exclusively to deal with Alfredo's rapidly acquired riches, changes in the agricultural production system and the use of wage labour.

We think class and gender can be seen as different structures, contingently related, which – as has often been the case historically – may or may not reinforce each other: capitalism without gender oppression is theoretically imaginable, and an objective pursued in most feminist projects [Sayer, 1984]. The social structures of class and gender both appear in the life history of Alfredo Luna: the large landowner and the famous womanizer. In contrast to Edelman, who states that rural people cannot distinguish modes of exploitation, the different tales about Alfredo separate out these different structures very clearly. In the case of the devil pact narrative about Alfredo, the story told is of his capital accumulation and not of his libidinous behaviour and his 40 children. Thus the devil pact narrative is not a comprehensive cultural matrix which reflects *all* the behaviour and social relationship of the person involved.

33. Crain [1991] does consider a similar situation in Ecuador as an expression of class antagonism.
34. In fact, gender struggles are absent from Edelman's case study.
35. The structure of betrayal connects centrally with Christian narratives about the transformation of good into evil, and the absolute contrast between them: not only with regard to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and the Jesus/Judas relationship, therefore, but also to the one involving God/Lucifer/Satan. Satan was a fallen angel: that is, he was initially part of the system against which he subsequently turned, and of which he became the 'other'. In terms of a discourse about betrayal, the devil pact narrative replicates the theme of Satan's fall. Just as the rich man was poor to begin with, and like the poor an honest and virtuous person, so Lucifer – who was originally an archangel in heaven – betrayed God, and consequently became the embodiment of evil and all-that-God-is-not. Like Lucifer/Satan, therefore, those who enter a pact with the devil signal thereby a permanent and enduring process of transformation, or leaving behind 'goodness' (= peasant economy) in order to become something 'other' and 'bad', for example, an accumulator of capital (money = dirt = evil).
36. Such 'undead' – those who are neither in heaven nor in hell – also appear as the people in Alfredo's black house in San Pedro de Sula in the story cited above.
37. Crain [1991] describes a former peasant, now a foreman, who had become so obsessed with a new sawmill which he operated that he regularly remained with the machine at night and fell asleep beside it. His attachment to this symbol of danger and power led ultimately to him being handed over to the devil.
38. Trouillot [1986: 88] argues that piece-work tends to generate resentment in cases where some labourers exceed significantly the average worker's productivity. He advances the persuasive hypothesis that, in the case of the Colombian cane cutters, it was this resentment by fellow workers of the betrayal by some of their number of worker solidarity (= 'rate busting') – and not the clash between two modes of production – that was the source of the devil pact narrative.
39. We leave aside a third category, in which the subject of the devil pact narrative is predominantly an external agent that threatens peasant livelihoods. For example, the agricultural school el Zamorano in Honduras is supposed to have a pact with the devil. It acquired large tracts of the best land in the Zamorano valley on which it erected buildings remarkable for their beautiful architecture. Each year, when its board of trustees meets, it is thought that these 'gringos' have their annual devils' sabbath. The dead souls are handed over to the devil on the last bend of the road that descends from the mountain and enters the valley, a spot where many accidents always result in fatalities. All three categories mentioned are constructed by and circulate within the domain of popular culture. Devil pact narratives may also be constructed by elites who feel threatened by lower classes: for example, the witchcraft trials in European history [Wardt, 1989] and the demonization of the Indian population by the Spanish conquerors [Cervantes, 1994].
40. Villagers did not perceive Alfredo as completely diabolical or greedy. Many people reported that Alfredo liked to drink and invited them to drink with him. The same is true of Don Cubillo, and Edelman emphasizes that he, too, was not greedy, and thus not entirely evil, which he takes as evidence for the fact it was not his wealth which led to the devil pact narrative. However, the point about Alfredo is that a person in league with the devil always

- finds new money in his coffin, and thus is able to keep inviting others to drink with him.
41. According to Edelman, because many storytellers identify themselves in some way with Don Cubillo, the devil pact narrative cannot express hostility or class antagonism. He considers the story of the lost *alforja* as an expression of precisely this identification. However, the lost *alforja* could equally well be interpreted as another form of identification: not with Don Cubillo, who lost it, but with the impoverished finder. The moral of this story could just as easily be that the finder was poor because he was too honest, the inference being that those who are rich become so by being dishonest.
 42. Edelman stresses the importance of recording the stories not only from people who believe in the devil pact, but also from those who deny that Cubillo conjured up the devil. He invokes the latter stories as evidence for his assertion that devil pact narratives were not principally about capital accumulation. However, we also recorded stories by those who did not believe in the pact with the devil; although they did not equate the pact with the illicit acquisition of wealth, such people did indeed identify other mechanisms used by Alfredo to become rich. Let us consider the view of one informant, who told us: 'I do not believe in it – no such pact exists. That man loaned half a bag of beans to someone who later had to return him three quarters of a bag. These were loaned out again, and so Alfredo got more and more. Furthermore, he sold everything in his shop ... Alfredo also became rich because he took away from the poor animals belonging to them that were wandering free. He branded these animals and put them in his own sheds. This is the way the rich become rich, by taking from the poor'. In this account, Alfredo's wealth is based on accumulation through commanding exchange and credit in kind and through what has been called primitive accumulation: the forcible appropriation of means of production belonging to others. Whilst denying the existence of a pact with the devil, however, this view nevertheless confirms its central theme: the specific ways in which Alfredo became rich – by usury, commerce and dispossessing peasant smallholders. The veracity of devil pact narratives is also denied by those villagers belonging to new evangelical religious movements, who dismiss such beliefs as 'superstition'. One such villager said: 'People say Alfredo has a pact with the devil. I do not believe this. The devil has no money with which to make someone rich. God has not created the rich and the poor for nothing. There have to be rich and poor. The poor can work as farm labourers for the rich and share in some of their wealth. The poor and the rich are there for each other.' This representation of social relationships recurs in the perspective of many poor people. If the rich did not exist, the poor would be unable to find work and receive payment. Although the villager in question rejected the mythological explanation of Alfredo's wealth, he too identified the same link between this wealth and the labourers who work for Alfredo. In his rejection of the devil pact narrative the villager nevertheless confirms that it is centrally about relations between employers and workers. The only difference is that for him it is God and not the Devil who is the source of wealth. In the accounts of both kinds of non-believer, the central theme of the devil pact narrative remains intact.
 43. Taussig [1980: 113] acknowledges the importance of the paradoxical and contradictory processes we find in the devil, but his devil is mainly evil, and thus lacks benevolent and attractive qualities. Taussig's *Tío* in the Bolivian tin mines therefore seems more of an European devil than a pre-Columbian deity: the latter possessed malevolent and benevolent qualities, depending on whether or not it received sacrifices, and was only transformed into the 'devil' during the Spanish conquest [Cervantes, 1994]. The European version seems to come closer to the characterization of Nash [1979]: 'We eat the mines and the mines eat us'.
 44. See Geschiere [1997] for a similar view on the close relationship between evil and good in devil and witchcraft stories in Africa, and Cervantes [1994] for the devil as a god exhibiting both malevolent and benevolent behaviour in post-Columbian Indian religion.
 45. This changing context differs from Taussig's case [1980]. When Alfredo Luna arrived, exchange value was already a common element in the village economy.
 46. We do not deny the possibility that the devil pact narrative could be used in a process of collective resistance, but we deny the *a priori* connection between peasant culture and empowerment/resistance. If there is any opposition to the landowner in the devil pact narrative, it is a symbolic one only; disagreement and condemnation is permitted, but

- outright opposition – in the form of agency to rectify the situation – is not. In keeping with other popular and official Christian/Catholic beliefs, it teaches that rectification or the pursuit of justice is something which is the preserve of God in heaven (not humanity on earth). While on earth, wealth and power are not to be challenged; if punishment is due, this will be meted out only after death. It thus reinforces passivity and fatalism.
47. Those storytellers who thought that Alfredo was in league with the devil generally talked in admiring terms about Alfredo; by contrast, those who did not express admiration for him, and held far more negative views about the kind of person he was, were precisely the ones who explained his acquiring of riches not as a result of a pact with the devil but rather by means of land grabbing, money lending and trading. The argument that such a narrative, as an offstage discourse of gossip and calumny, undermines the power of the landlord, is not valid in the case of Alfredo. It would anyway be a somewhat one-dimensional explanation, negating the dynamics present in the betrayal/attraction dialectic.
 48. It generates consent in this case, not in the sense of an elite discourse imposed upon the peasantry, but as a popular culture giving meaning to its acquiescence.
 49. When this grounding in nature through the supernatural is recognized, this fragile convention may collapse or be challenged – for example, when peasants state that it is not the pact with the devil but rental payment which makes Alfredo rich.

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