Magic

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Attempts to define and describe magic must reckon with this concept's slipperiness, as magic is often understood against what supposedly it is not: typically, 'proper' religion and 'rational' science, even though both religion and science are objects just as elusive. Despite its ambiguous status and the prejudices attached to it, or maybe precisely for these reasons, magic has long enthralled scholars in the human sciences, and anthropology in particular. After first exploring the genealogy of magic as a concept, this entry will examine the manifold ways in which occult knowledges and practices play a role in the life of many societies. It will touch on the role of vernacular magic in experiences of crisis, and dwell on how anthropology has found a way to appreciate the 'truth' of magic. It then explores magic as a 'craft' – a set of techniques through which practitioners creatively shape their relationships with the world and their own selves. Emphasis will be given to magic's documented potential to activate the imagination. The case of ceremonial magic and its revival will allow the reader to appreciate the modernity of magic. The entry concludes with a reflection on the recurrent attributes of magic – often identified as a particularly experimental, do-it-yourself, and manipulation-based form of spiritual action – and its compatibility with a post-secular age that has not renounced enchantment.

Defining magic

Magic is one of the most puzzling phenomena studied by social scientists, which has inspired and challenged generations of observers. Is magic irrational, maybe even delusional, the product of minds that cannot think straight? Despite widespread prejudice, most specialists nowadays think this is not the case. Historical and ethnographic research has revealed that many reasonable, lucid, and intellectually sophisticated people, including great philosophers and artists of the past, dabbled in magic (Yates 1964; Saunders 2010; Jütte 2015). One may wonder: perhaps such people, despite their discernment, were ignorant of modern science – is magic 'primitive' or 'barbarous', then? This too is unlikely. Categories like 'primitivism' and 'barbarity' would not get us very far in exploring magic, not only because anthropologists consider such evolutionist concepts inherently misleading and derogatory, but also because all types of societies, including ones characterised by highly complex technology, organizations, and scientific knowledge, appear to have room for magic. Understanding magic, then, requires that we be prepared to shed or at least bracket ingrained prejudices. But how do we define magic, to begin with?

The word 'magic' evokes a vast array of associations: from the solemn, white-bearded sage, endowed with mystical power in fairy tales and fantasy films, to sinister witches and sorcerers surrounded by grimoires, occult sigils, potions, and astrological charts; from 'cunning folk' healers, combining incantations and herbal remedies, to stage magicians asking us, with a wink, to let our senses be deceived. Yet explaining

clearly what the many tropes associated with the concept of magic have in common is easier said than done. The concept has been used in association with divergent practices such as folk medicine, divination, palmistry, necromancy (communication with the dead), astrology, alchemy, spiritualism, occultism (the study of hidden or paranormal things), illusionism, neo-paganism (the worship of natural forces, often modelled after ancient religions), and New Age spirituality. To complicate things, the field of magic as the term is commonly understood – including amongst many of its practitioners – has come to incorporate elements that elsewhere would fall under the category of 'religion', such as Kabbalah (a Jewish mystical tradition) or Yoga (a set of spiritual doctrines emerged from within Indic Dharmic faiths). A plausible working definition of magic, loose enough to accommodate at least most of the nuances associated with it, may describe it as a set of activities and technologies intended to manipulate invisible or immaterial agencies and energies, not recognised by science, to an advantageous end. However, there are risks inherent in defining such elusive a subject as magic.

The word 'magic' has long evoked negative connotations, associated with the exotic religious customs of a threatening Other. The vocabulary and concept of magic have a distinctly Western genealogy: the word comes from the Greek *mageia*, which, in ancient Greece, was used to describe the priests (*magav*) of the arch-inimical Persian Empire (Graf 1995; Bremmer 1999). In this ancient sense, the word was associated with practices that were outlandish because they were foreign. Over time, however, and partly due to the influence of Christianity, the idea of magic became attached to spiritual or remedial practices that, while originating from within Western societies, were classified as eccentric, illegitimate, or dubious because of their external/marginal status vis-à-vis religious and scientific orthodoxy. In early modern Europe, arcane knowledge and practices were also associated with marginal groups like the Jews or peasants (Ginzburg 1991; Jütte 2015). Despite this shift in orientation, the concept of magic retained its association with notions of weirdness, mysteriousness, and unorthodoxy (Stratton 2013). When we use the category, therefore, we must be alert to both its potentially negative connotations and its shifting boundaries.

Another, related danger inherent in the vocabulary of magic is connected to its usability in non-Western contexts. For instance, let us take the Islamic notion of *siḥr*, usually translated as magic or sorcery. *Siḥr* partly resembles Christian understandings of magic as unorthodox dealings with the occult, and therefore illegitimate and sinful. However, alongside familiar items like goetia (commerce with demons) and astrology, *siḥr* also includes slander, malicious gossip, the 'charismatic seduction of crowds' (Knight 2016: 16), and other arts of deception which would not be considered 'magic' in most Western understandings. When it comes to magic, nuance risks easily getting lost in translation.

Furthermore, distinguishing between 'unorthodox' magical practices and 'legitimate' religious ones is particularly problematic in the case of religious traditions that are not based on highly codified doctrines and liturgies, and therefore do not encourage distinctions between prayer, incantation, or spell to the same extent as Christianity, in particular, as we shall see, in its Reformed versions. For instance, in certain

Tibetan Buddhist contexts, religious specialists take part in propitiatory rituals to conjure or restore 'fortune' (Humphrey 2012) that in Western settings might easily be classified as magical spells and rituals.

Magic, science, religion… and anthropology

It is impossible to omit the role of anthropology itself in construing the idea of magic that was to become dominant in the modern era. In other words, we must consider that anthropology as an academic discipline has greatly contributed to establishing what counts as magic and what does not in today's mainstream consciousness, including amongst many practitioners of magic.

The early-nineteenth-century rise of scientific interest in magic was both fuelled and conditioned by Europe's encounter with hitherto unfamiliar spiritual traditions in the colonies. Nebulous concepts like 'shamanism' and 'fetishism' both enthralled and repelled European intellectuals, divided between an optimistic embrace of empirical science and technologic progress and a hard-to-kill Romantic fascination with all things mysterious and arcane (Pels 2003). Both the asymmetries of the colonial encounter, with Europe seeking to justify its exploitation of faraway peoples as a 'civilising mission,' and the intellectual establishment's anxieties over the popularity of phenomena like occultism, thus conspired to turn magic into a veritable culture-war item. If colonialism 'required' the foil of native magic as a pretext for domination (Wiener 2003: 140), magic never stopped haunting the metropole itself through the mediation – or mediumship? – of homegrown Spiritualists and Theosophists, generating in turn the reaction of scientific-minded debunkers. The latter group encompassed novel professional figures as diverse as besuited stage illusionists, proponents of a disenchanted version of magic as pure entertainment and skill, and erudite scholars of 'native trickery': early anthropologists (Jones 2017).

Building on the reports of missionaries and explorers, Victorian-era anthropologists (of the mid- to late-nineteenth century) busied themselves with creating hierarchically organised taxonomies of social facts they had second-hand knowledge of, and that corresponded, in their view, to more or less well-defined 'steps' in an evolutionary ladder of human cultures. Influenced by the styles of reasoning of their time, these scholars classified magic, religion, and science in different categories, corresponding to progressive 'stages' of cultural complexity, with magic attached to ideas of archaism and childlike irrationality. From a magical stage, human groups would progress to a religious stage, followed by science supplanting religion at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy.

Where did the assumption underpinning nineteenth century academic conceptualizations of magic come from? Later scholars of magic (Tambiah 1990) have identified a mindset imbued with Protestant sensitivities, and the prestige of classical heritage and erudition, as crucial factors in shaping magic as an object of social-scientific study. Some of the most influential pioneers in the study of religious life had a

Protestant background, in particular E.B. Tylor, who famously defined religion as 'belief in Spiritual Beings' (2008: 25). Scholars like Tylor, however, were reluctant to put religion – a respectable sphere of contemplation and worship – on the same footing as 'base' magic. It has been persuasively argued (Tambiah 1990: 12-5) that evolutionistic ideas of magic as distinct from and inferior to religion were likely fuelled by Protestantism's deep dislike of occult practices and Biblical characterizations of magic as diabolical. This Protestant legacy contributed to the consolidation of a narrow idea of religion as a system of abstract beliefs (cf. Tylor's definition), culminating in theology and metaphysics, as opposed to magic with its hands-on, result-oriented manipulation practices. A distinction between prayer (religious) and spell (magical) epitomised this opposition.

As far as the second source of influence – the Hellenic tradition – is concerned, Classical Greece grouped what we today call magic (understood as the occult manipulation of invisible forces) together with philosophy, the manipulation of concepts, and medicine, the manipulation of bodily substances. These activities were quite distinct from the sphere of religion understood as the worship of the Gods. While the first realm was characterised by an inquisitive, experimental attitude, the realm of divinity was not seen as an arena of human disputation. Stanley Tambiah (1990: 8-11) has argued that, given the prestige of Hellenic traditions in Western academia, a separation between magic and religion ended up influencing Victorian anthropologists such as James Frazer. In his pioneering research into magic, Frazer came to consider magic a failed attempt at science, as both systems were thought to share the idea that the universe is regulated by impersonal forces that can be intervened upon, harnessed, and manipulated. However, magic was understood to be based on incorrect ideas about these forces, as well as distorted and incomplete factual knowledge of the world (Jarvie & Agassi 1970).

Scholars in the turn-of-the-century French sociological tradition came up with yet different reasons to push magic to the margins of spiritual life. Émile Durkheim, one of the key figures of the early social science of religion, defined religion as a set of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things and shared by a moral community: a 'Church'. He expressed the view that magic, while consisting of belief and rites like religion, though 'less developed', should be considered distinct from the latter because, being chiefly an individual endeavour, magic fails to generate proper 'Churches' (1995: 39-42). This notion too contributed to framing magic as something eccentric, peripheral, and somewhat lacking vis-à-vis religion, despite being tightly connected to it.

Later scholarship, based on ethnographic fieldwork and extensive time spent in the company of magic practitioners observing how magic is carried out in practice, became more interested in understanding magic rather than debunking it. Resulting approaches tended to call into question the notion that clear-cut divisions, let alone hierarchies, between magical, religious, and scientific worldviews can be objectively established. Furthermore, a consensus has emerged amongst anthropologists and religious studies specialists that deciding where religion (e.g. belief in spiritual beings), folk knowledge (e.g. non-biomedical

healing systems), or 'natural philosophy' (e.g. astronomy) end and magic begins, has more to do with cultural boundary-making and social normativities than with any 'objective' reality. In innumerable historical and socio-cultural settings, drawing clear lines would be impossible. In Renaissance Europe, magic was performed by clergymen, scientists, and philosophers, while twentieth-century occultists, guided by a keen interest in scientific discoveries, moved in a grey area between science and magic producing ambiguous yet highly successful concepts such as 'animal magnetism', 'mesmerism', or 'psychic energy'. In colonial Africa, sorcery was part and parcel of communities' everyday religious and ritual life (Evans-Pritchard 1937). In 1980s Euro-America, witchcraft was rediscovered by tight communities of college-educated urbanites. These cases invite us to abandon the deeply ingrained stereotypes about magic as spiritually aberrant, irrational, and irredeemably 'other' that influenced early anthropology.

In spite of the fallacies of evolutionism outlined so far, the works of Victorian anthropologists remain relevant today. Some of their ideas are still compelling and they are frequently referenced by contemporary occultists themselves. One example of such lasting contributions is Frazer's typological distinction between imitative magic, based on similarity, and contagious magic, based on contact. In the case of imitative magic, actions, objects, or enactments that resemble a given thing, person, or event, are understood to have an effect on the latter (e.g., enacting a hunt to secure abundant game); contagious magic, on the other hand involves using items once connected to the intended target of magical action (e.g., using someone's clothes or nail pairings to cast a spell on them). This distinction has become a staple in magical studies and even within magical milieus. More broadly, early social scientists' characterization of magic as a quintessentially pragmatic, experimental endeavour, an attempt to harness and manipulate occult forces – getting one's hands dirty with the occult, so to speak – retains most of its validity today, even if we might not want to see this as absolutely incompatible with, or subordinate to, canonical religion or academic scientific thinking.

Dealing with the negative: maleficium and modernity

If drawing clear boundaries and establishing hierarchies with respect to magic may be difficult, how does contemporary, fieldwork-based anthropology go about understanding it? Especially after anthropology's methodological revolution in the 1920s that established ethnographic fieldwork as the paramount avenue to investigate social and cultural life, anthropologists have become particularly interested in understanding magic in and through practice – in other words, in figuring out what people do exactly, when they do magic.

Focusing on the uses and meanings of magic in concrete social settings has had the effect of showing us that magic, far from being something archaic, lies at the heart of global modernity. As people from Latin America, to central Africa, to Mongolia, to the US and Europe become engulfed in urbanization, capitalist markets, and dreams of social mobility, ideas about the occult gain currency. They reveal deep connections

between personal experiences of distress and anxiety, historical transformations marked by dynamics that exceed the ordinary and the visible, and lasting yet flexible cultural models of the cosmos which include both visible and invisible forces (Geschiere 1997, Harding & Stewart 2003, Buyandelger 2007, Barkun 2013). Magic, thus, serves as a powerful resource through which people across the globe cope with their lives in a complex, unpredictable, and often intractable world.

Indeed, scholarship based on immersion in concrete socio-cultural settings has, from its inception, recognised magic as an existential resource people draw upon 'to compensate for the uncertainties of chance and to forearm against bad luck' and 'create confidence, enhance hopes and anticipations', as fieldwork pioneer Bronislaw Malinowski wrote describing vernacular propitiatory agricultural spells amongst Trobriand islanders (1935: 217, 246). Malinowski thereby suggested that magic becomes psychologically salient when humans are confronted with the problem of the unknown: a spell is a linguistic buffer against anxiety in the face of an ever-present threat of misfortune. Malinowski's explanation of the psychological function of magic – as part of an explanatory approach called 'functionalism' – has spearheaded studies that focus on cognition, some of which will be discussed in the next section (Luhrmann 1989).

In a watershed study conducted in the 1930s, Edward Evans Evans-Pritchard investigated witchcraft and anti-witch vengeance magic among members of the Azande ethnic group of current day South Sudan. The concept of witchcraft, i.e. the capability to cause harm to others through mystical means either deliberately or unwittingly, was described by him as providing members of the Azande with 'a natural philosophy by which the relationship between men and unfortunate events is explained'. In addition to offering practical means of dealing with misfortune, Azande witchcraft theory also pointed to a system of values regulating human conduct (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 18). Hostile or envious attitudes carried the risk of attracting ruinous witchcraft accusations. Furthermore, misdeeds could result in retaliatory magical attacks. Azande witchcraft theory thus inhibited socially disruptive behaviours, thereby strengthening the stability of what Evans-Pritchard saw as a social system. Interestingly, witchcraft accusations did not undermine social cohesion in this analysis. Instead, witchcraft could be seen to contribute to social stability.

The Azande, however, were perfectly aware of non-magical causal links. Witchcraft was not meant to explain all aspects of how a certain misfortune occurred. For example, when a building collapsed and killed somebody, any Azande could easily figure that its supporting structure had been weakened by termites. However, magic offered a framework to explain why something happened to a particular person and not someone else. Evans-Pritchard famously described this as the theory of the 'second spear'. If a man is killed by an elephant, the elephant – the direct cause – is the first spear. Maleficium (causing evil through occult means) is the second spear. The elephant rammed into him, and not someone else, because he, not someone else, was bewitched.

This study revolutionised understandings of magic by framing it as a socially appropriate and culturally meaningful answer to the problem of a negative unknown, rather than a cognitively inadequate one. It emphasised that the Azande were not credulous, but people who prized inquisitiveness and rational thinking, and whose mental processes where not dissimilar from those of Evans-Pritchard's fellow Europeans. Indeed, a major implication in Evans-Pritchard's work is that it draws attention to the fact that all humans are likely to ask the question 'why me?' when visited by misfortune, with recourse to supernatural strategies. Azande witchcraft was not, after all, so exotic. This realization led to the emergence of sustained debates on the 'rationality' of magic that have been engaging anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers of various backgrounds and orientations (Winch 1970, Jarvie & Agassi 1970, Sperber 1982, Lewis 1994, Boyer 2002) ever since. These on-going debates have helped establish that multiple forms of rationality, apt to address complex moral, relational, and emotional problems alongside technical ones, are at play in all human societies. 'Apparently irrational beliefs' may appear much less outlandish once considered as parts – and expressions – of broader social and cultural logics.

In addition to recognising the social meaning of magic, anthropologists have also drawn attention to its therapeutic efficaciousness vis-à-vis experiences of the negative, especially illness and trauma (Lévi-Strauss 1974; Lindquist 2005; Favret-Saada 2015). Writing on folk magic in the deep rural south of Italy after World War II, Ernesto De Martino (2015) shed light on the experiences of anguish that characterised communities caught between impoverishment and rapid modernization – and especially the most vulnerable groups, labourers and women. He wrote, '[t]he root of … any form of magic, is the immense power of the negative throughout an individual's lifetime, with its trail of traumas, checks, frustrations, and the corresponding restrictedness and fragility of the positive' (2015: 87). In circumstances such as illness, exploitation, or uprooting, vulnerable individuals and communities faced a radical existential uncertainty that manifested itself in altered states of consciousness ranging from frenzy to catatonia, a condition called tarantism (literally a 'tarantula's bite'). De Martino investigated the vernacular magic-based emergency procedures, most prominently spells and ecstatic dances (Tarantella), activated in these cases. Folk magical techniques are, in De Martino's view, procedures that facilitate recovery from crises, helping to overcome illness and existential dread. Magic enables people to makes sense of suffering, and offers a 'first aid kit' of materials, spells, exorcisms, and ritual specialists capable of reabsorbing the negative and thereby restoring a sufferer's sense of self. De Martino mixes a phenomenological approach characterised by a focus on first-person experience, useful to grasp the intimate, personal dimension of magic, with a Marxian concern with the 'structural' dimension of the problem of suffering.

Related post-Marxist approaches have further illuminated magic's relation with political-economic dynamics, such as the rapid development of capitalist markets disrupting pre-existing social arrangements and spreading anxieties across social bodies. Michael Taussig (1977), for example, has explored how in the 1960s, impoverished labourers in Latin American mines and sugar plantations employed the occult idiom of

'the devil' and the trope of the Faustian pact – the risk of losing one's soul – to make sense of their [work](). These ideas were used to express intellectual and moral statements about the 'hidden' mechanisms of aggressive capitalism, such as uncompensated labour, the extraction of surplus value with the amassment of wealth into a few private hands, and commodity fetishism.

Indeed, devil talk turns out to be a surprisingly sophisticated tool through which unschooled peasants and miners could formulate theories and critical judgements about their political and economic reality of exploitation. Inspired by such studies, as well as Max Gluckmann's notion of 'magic of despair', anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff have further contributed to our understanding of the political economy of magic and witchcraft though their notion of 'occult economy' (1999), i.e. imaginative and material practices connected to the use of magical means to achieve utilitarian ends. Phenomena such as witchcraft 'epidemics', urban lore on zombie labour, or occult-related conspiracy theories are, the Comaroffs submit, 'symptoms' of occult economies 'waxing behind the civil surfaces' of development. Cultural tropes such as the undead slave and the blood-sucking warlock become urgently salient when entire populations are drafted into regimented, mindless, and exhausting forms of labour or confronted with exploitative, seemingly invincible corporations. The term 'occult economies' thus indicates people's 'recourse to the occult in situations of rapid social transformation, under historical conditions that yield an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness, of desire and despair, of mass joblessness and hunger amidst the accumulation, by some, of great amounts of new wealth' (1999: 283): it is easy to see why although the Comaroff's main focus is Africa, their approach has been applied to multiple contexts across the global South.

Working on the invisible: the magus craft

Despite the importance of studies that explore magic as a phenomenon straddling the personal, the cosmological, and the socio-historical, some scholars have argued that insisting on its negative aspects does not tell us the entire story. The occult is more than a symptom of suffering, turmoil, and distress. Indeed, a well-established scholarly tradition focuses on magic as an occult technology – a 'craft' – used to bring about desired change in both self and world. These approaches should not be seen as antithetical to the ones discussed above, and indeed the two aspects often coexist within the same instance, as the change being pursued with magical means may aim to restore balance and wholeness in the face of affliction or illness. Bearing in mind that distinguishing between 'negative'- and 'craft'-oriented approaches to the study of magic is to some extent an analytical artifice, this section will foreground examples of the creative and positive dimension of magic.

The case of ceremonial magic and especially Western esotericism is particularly helpful to appreciate magic's 'craft'. While all types of occult practices and knowledges are learned with varying degrees of mastery, Western ceremonial magic, being based on written bodies of tradition and often socialised

through relatively organised communities, offers an ideal case study of magic as a set of techniques for the transformation of both the self and the world.

Many consider the Renaissance the golden era of European ceremonial magic. From the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries CE, polymaths and thinkers such as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Giordano Bruno, Isabella Cortese, or John Dee devoted considerable energy to the investigation of both the visible and the invisible dimensions of the universe. These figures, at once proto-scientists, theologians, and explorers of the occult, played an important role in defining the field of 'erudite' Western magic, drawing on repertoires as different as astrology, Christian theology and ethics, Greek mystery religion and philosophy, and Jewish mysticism (Yates 1964, 2001; Culianu 1984; Jütte 2015). The Renaissance model of the cosmos featured an ethereal dimension, called *pneuma*, existing between the physical and the spiritual realms. All persons and things, although materially separate from each other, were understood to be invisibly interconnected at the 'pneumatic' level, clinging to each other in secret correspondences that escaped the base senses. Anthropologists working on magic have identified comparable models of reality in a vast number of societies. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl has classically defined this model 'participatory' (1999); more recently, Philippe Descola has proposed the notion of 'analogism' to describe models of the world in which all things are thought to be invisibly interlinked (2013).

Importantly, accessing the etheric dimension required sophisticated training of one's imaginative and affective faculties. This involved rigorous spiritual discipline, encyclopaedic knowledge, articulated ceremonials, and the craft of handling matter according to its occult, etheric properties. In what is known as 'desire magic', for instance, Renaissance magicians would use their ability to discern and activate ethereal interconnections between objects, including persons, to influence the latter's psychic life.

Intriguingly, this has originated the hypothesis that Renaissance magic is best understood not as a prefiguration of natural science, but rather of advertising, propaganda, and 'mass psychology' – the use of affective means to induce inter-psychic dynamics (Culianu 1984: 88). Indeed, the fact that there seems to be a strong family resemblance between 'magic', understood as the ability to generate and control interpersonal affective states, and mass publicity phenomena – from charismatic leadership to the attractiveness of brands – has long been recognised by anthropologists (Mazzarella 2017).

The advent of Protestantism likely drove ceremonial magic and its etheric intermediate dimension underground, ushering in an order of the universe premised upon a stark separation between the terrestrial and divine realms (Orsi 2002). However, the extent to which this transformation was successful is disputable: as we have seen in the previous section, modernity remains far from magic-free. Anthropological research (Luhrmann 1989, Lewis 1996) has revealed that ceremonial magic did not altogether disappear; rather, it withdrew to the counter-culture, where today it is actively pursued by new generations of practitioners. In contemporary Euro-America, occult circles of various types, such as Wiccan

and neopagan covens, consciously attempt to revive Renaissance magic. Yet unlike their predecessors, latter-day Western occultists inhabit a post-Enlightenment, Cartesian mainstream anxious to exorcise the unruly spectre of magic (Pels 2003) or at least push it out of sight – either into the disreputable category of the 'primitive' or into the sanitised realm of 'art' (Mazzarella 2017).

Under these unfavourable conditions, anthropologists are interested in exploring how people who are socialised in a secular, non-magical, scientific cosmos, actively learn to 'believe' in magic. In other words, through which activities ordinary, scientifically literate Westerners reorganise their cognitive processes in order to 'see' the invisible workings of magic, in the mundane flux of everyday life. Anthropologists have described the transformative processes whereby magicians accustom themselves to finding magic persuasive as a work of cognitive cultivation. They have proposed concepts such as 'interpretive drift' (Luhrmann 1989) and 'magical consciousness' (Greenwood 2013; 2014) to characterise changes in magicians' thinking styles.

Although magical forces are unpredictable, practitioners attempt to become alert to, and manipulate, them through disciplines requiring assiduous training, such as meditation, visualization, and dream interpretation. Ritual is equally important to 'forge magical selves' (Pike 1996). Consider the following example reported by Tanja Luhrmann: in the 1980s a London-based sorcerer performs a ceremony to propitiate fortune in finding accommodation (even then a notoriously tall order in the city's housing market). A few days after the ritual, 'no house is forthcoming, but a packet of advertising leaflets on house maintenance arrives in the post. This is reported with pride and self-mockery – the rite worked, but not quite with the intended results' (Luhrmann 1989: 130). Recognising and attributing importance to hidden connections does not imply naiveté on the sorcerer's part. Rather, doing magic entails a degree of irony, and a valorization of the imagination. Fantasy is not dismissed as mere 'pretend', but valorised as a 'serious play', a realm in which things and events are meaningful and wondrous. As Greenwood put it, while participating in magical consciousness, the question of belief in the 'real' existence of spiritual forces and beings frequently becomes 'irrelevant' (2014: 203).

What often counts for practitioners is that magic offers an avenue to positively engage with the world, while at the same time cultivating cognitive skills and imaginative or emotional resources that otherwise would remain inert. Owing to its ability to generate desirable affective states, William Mazzarella (2017) surmises, magic makes reality more enjoyable and pleasureful – even the mundane encounter with a packet of leaflets is experienced with delight – and this has positive repercussions on a sorcerer's self. Ethnographic studies suggest that not only the goals, but also the methods of magic are considered invigorating by practitioners. When it comes to ritual, for instance, ceremonial magic allows ample scope for creativity compared to mainstream religious organizations: ceremonies change over time and magical milieus borrow from multiple traditions such as mythology, folklore, academic literature, and pop culture. Far from being seen as problematic, eclecticism in ritual is often proudly declared, an emphasis on

creativity and bricolage understood as empowering (Magliocco 1996: 99; 2006).

While in this section we have focused on Western magic, it should be stressed that this form of 'erudite' occult craft is by no means the only one that underwent a revival in recent years. Consider, for example, the *Book of Changes* or *I Ching* – a classic Chinese divination text dealing with techniques of prognostication based on casting lots. Straddling philosophy, metaphysics, and soothsaying, *I Ching* has been described by some modern scholars as evidence that imperial-era Chinese literati were immersed in a 'magical worldview' (Chun 2014: 30). While, historically, divination has not been pushed underground or stigmatised to the same extent as Renaissance magic, *I Ching* was nonetheless harshly critiqued as superstitious during socialist-led modernization. Recently, however, *I Ching* divination made a comeback amongst middle-class urbanites, with some seeing it as having ethical value in view of its association with 'traditional' Chinese virtues. Others appreciate it for complementing scientific knowledge without being incompatible with a rational picture of the world (Matthews 2016, 2017). This example shows that in non-Western settings, too, occult disciplines may come to be cherished as helpful tools for 'positive' self-development and satisfying engagements with the world.

Despite the mainstream's uneasiness with occult crafts such as ceremonial magic and divination, their stubborn refusal to simply vanish into thin air points not only to the inherent contradictions of modernity, but also to the value that practitioners attach to such crafts. Regardless of what individual scholars may think of the truth of magic, anthropology seeks to understand what makes it valuable in the eyes of its practitioners.

Re-enchantment and the future of magic

Mainstream ideas of magic and sorcery are linked to the stereotype of the broomstick-riding witch that crystallised during the Euro-American witch-hunts (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries). While witch trials are often described as 'mediaeval', it is now well established (Ginzburg 1991) that during the actual Middle Age, ecclesiastical authorities were dismissive of magical threats, as they were certain that only God had sovereignty over the unseen. It was only as Europe entered early modernity that wizards and sorceresses became a real problem and the witch-hunts started. Recent interpretations (Stephens 2002; Silverblatt 2004) suggest that the reasons for this lie in an attitude of scepticism and inquisitiveness as well as a novel bureaucratic rationality, which began to pervade early-modern European society. Institutions such as the Inquisition sought ways to methodically explore the supernatural and systematically inquire into an occult realm. The latter had already started receding from the consciousness of Western elites, and was increasingly associated with marginal populations such as women or racial minorities. Paradoxically, even though in retrospect the witch-hunt bloodsheds may strike us as irrational, they may have been driven by a dispassionate experimental and bureaucratic mindset, rather than impulsivity and credulity. The useful lesson that this historical case can offer us is that enchantment and disenchantment are often intertwined

in unpredictable ways.

This is not any less true today. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, influential European intellectuals like Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Max Weber appeared convinced that a worldwide increase in literacy, better living conditions, and growing acquaintance with modern science, would make people gradually forget their consolatory but false beliefs in spirits, gods, witches, and magical forces (Casanova 1994). On the other hand, it has been noted that occult-related themes often associated with these thinkers' works – such as fetishism, the uncanny, or charisma – haunt and complicate simple visions of progress (Pels 2003; Morris 2017). And indeed, empirical observation of recent social phenomena – such as the aforementioned global boom of occult economies or the worldwide success of Wicca and neopaganism – show that the world may not be bound to become a disenchanted and secular place after all. Contemporary scholars even propose to understand the modern as being 're-enchanted' (Partridge 2005). In such a re-enchanted world, many practitioners take 'occulture' – an eclectic milieu mixing esotericism, pop culture, and urban mysticism – to be perfectly compatible with logical thinking and a sensible outlook on life. They also treat magic as a valuable resource to address existential predicaments, foster resilience in the face of the negative, expand their cognitive resources, work on their spiritual selves, explore fantasy and creativity, and generally improve their relationship with the world.

Though scholars agree that late modernity has witnessed a resurgence of organised religions as well, magic, with its experimental, do-it-yourself character, appears particularly well-aligned with the post-secular spirituality of the twenty-first century. 'Church' religions remain powerful actors, but modernity has limited their hegemonic claims over the spiritual, enabling new opportunities for mystical, alternative, individualised spiritualities to blossom. From this point of view, Durkheim's judgment of magic as a quintessentially personal spiritual endeavour was not so mistaken, and indeed late-modern spirituality has been defined by an influential commentator as 'post-Durkheimian' (Taylor 2002). Social research has shown, however, that magic is perfectly capable of fostering communities, even if it is as yet impossible to predict how, and whether new, ebullient magical milieus – like neopaganism or Wicca – will consolidate. In any case, scholars have argued that magical spirituality should not be considered any less genuine just because religionists do not 'sit in pews' nor 'believe in systematic theologies' (Partridge 2005: 2). What seems beyond doubt is that magic is not set to vanish into thin air anytime soon.

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