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The realism of magic

Human beings have always needed something to leaven the effects of science and religion.

By John Gray

"In the 18th century and since, Newton came to be thought of as the first and greatest of the modern age of scientists, a rationalist, one who taught us to think along the lines of cold and untinctured reason. I do not see him in this light. I do not think anyone who has pored over the contents of the box he packed up when he finally left Cambridge in 1696 and which, though partly dispersed, have come down to us, can see him like that. Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians, the last of the Babylonians and the Sumerians, the last great mind who looked out at the intellectual and visible world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago."

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Probably not very many people could identify the author of this passage. In fact it was John Maynard Keynes, writing in an essay from the late 1930s, "Newton the Man", which was read as a lecture some months after Keynes had died in April 1946 by his brother Geoffrey Keynes. Based on a study of Newton's papers, which Keynes was the first to see before some were sold in 1936, the 20th century's greatest economist described the founder of modern science as a magician.

A practitioner of astrology and alchemy, immersed in numerology and the decoding of hidden meanings in biblical texts, Isaac Newton belonged in a time in which science and magic were indistinguishable. When Keynes described Newton's "deepest instincts" as being "occult, esoteric", he was defining a turn of mind found in many European scientists from the Renaissance onwards. A key figure in the so-called "scientific revolution", the early modern astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) was also an astrologer who promoted a cosmology derived from Plato in which the heavens embodied harmony. Magic and science were not at odds but inextricably intermixed.

Keynes showed how Newton continued the magical thinking of earlier times. But is it true that Newton represented the beginning of the end of magic as a formative influence in the way human beings live? Was he followed by an age of reason? Not if Chris Gosden, in his bold, gripping and arrestingly readable universal history of magic, is right.

For Gosden, magic is one of a "triple helix" of ways of thinking that have shaped human life. Science distances human beings from the world, removing them to a point where they can gain an abstract understanding of physical processes. In religion the primary human relation is with

gods or a god, mediated through priesthoods and places of worship. Distinct from both, and preceding them in its development, magic works through participation in the universe, which is conceived not as purely mechanical but as being animate, even sentient. Magic in Gosden's account is pre-eminently practical, serving the needs of human beings struggling to survive and prosper. Each part of the triple helix increases or decreases in importance according to historical and cultural conditions, but these three modes of interacting with the world – magic, science and religion – are coterminous with the human animal.

Applying this taxonomy, Gosden takes the reader from the end of the last Ice Age, some 40,000 years ago, through ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt; China from 20,000 BCE to the present; the Eurasian Steppe from 4,000 BCE; Jewish, Greek and Roman magic; the magics of Africa, Australia and the Americas; to medieval and modern European times and the present. This is a path-breaking study of a pervasive and strangely neglected phenomenon.

The great strength of Gosden's book is its rejection of the primitive evolutionist ideology that dominated the study of magic in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Its weakness is his failure to examine how science became a channel for magical thinking. It is impossible to understand the convulsions of the past 100 years, or take the measure of the present time, without grasping that movements that claimed to apply science in politics and society were expressions of magical thinking. "Rumours of the death of magic," Gosden writes, "have been constantly exaggerated." In fact, magical thinking is flourishing as much as it ever did.

Rightly, Gosden targets the British anthropologists EB Tylor (1832-1917) and JG Frazer (1854-1941) as representatives of the evolutionist ideology. According to them, magic was a relic left over from the archaic mind as modern Europe advanced while other peoples languished in ignorance and superstition. The colonialist provenance of this cod-Darwinian claptrap is obvious, but that is not its most interesting feature. More to the point is how these ideologues imagined themselves driving out magical thinking. Tylor designated anthropology as "an emancipatory science" that would exorcise the human mind of its demons. But for these late Victorian and Edwardian sages science was itself a type of magic, whose purpose was to anathematise other cultures and exalt the enlightened civilisation that was supposedly emerging in the West in the early years of the 20th century.

As Gosden notes, Frazer's monumental study of magic *The Golden Bough* (1890) "had huge effects on literature and thought". The belief that human thought progresses through a succession of definite stages remains enormously influential. It shapes the sacred history of secular humanism – a tissue of legends more resistant to facts than the myths of old-fashioned religions, which have long since come to be regarded by many believers as symbolical or allegorical in nature. Yet this crude theory has little if any place in anthropology today and is impossible to square with the findings of neuroscience, which show continuity and stability in the physical structures that underpin the human mind.

Gosden begins by rejecting the evolutionist model, and throughout the book repeats that all three strands of human culture are equally important. But his typology is too simple to capture their

complex interactions. He defines religion in terms of belief in deities or a deity, but there are many religions in which gods are not fundamental. Hinduism and Buddhism have large and varied pantheons; their gods are not regarded as ultimate realities, however, only consoling or fearful appearances in a world of illusion. At the bottom the universe is godless, impersonal and inconceivable. Like the distinction between nature and the supernatural, the belief that religion is about gods is a relic of monotheism.

Gosden's over-simple understanding of religion has another and larger defect: it cannot properly acknowledge secular religions. Describing Nazism and communism as religions, along with much of liberalism, is not a metaphor. Like older faiths, these ideologies provided a world-view that made sense of human events and rendered the chaos of history into a meaningful pattern. By making their practitioners part of a larger story that would outlast them, they assuaged the fear of death. They contained authorities that determined the interpretation of the faith. And like older religions, they licensed their followers in persecuting unbelievers.

But these secular religions were not hermetically sealed off from science or from magic. A commonplace tale has Nazism as an outbreak of counter-Enlightenment irrationalism; but the Nazis grounded their ideology in "scientific racism", a current of thought whose pedigree is in Enlightenment thinkers like the Victorian eugenicist Francis Galton. Even before the hocus-pocus of dialectical materialism, Marx and Engels claimed scientific authority for their account of history: communism was "the riddle of history solved". From Herbert Spencer to Francis Fukuyama, liberal ideologues have represented their own societies as the end-point of social evolution.

If secular religion has always been supported by claims to scientific authority, it has also been infused with magic. It is often noted that the science that supported anti-liberal movements such as Nazism and communism was bogus, and so it was. Less often recognised is the fact that the science underpinning the belief that the world was converging on liberal values was equally counterfeit. Only a few years ago, prestigious think tanks in Washington, DC, were holding unending seminars on how China was slowly but inexorably approaching a Western-style economy and mode of government. Even today, some insist that Xi Jinping's China is merely a passing deviation along the way. The fact that the imagined destination – US democracy – is tearing itself apart is passed over.

This kind of liberalism is not science, or even religion, but magical thinking. A defining feature of magic, Gosden tells us, is the belief that the human mind and the cosmos are in some sense one and the same: "Through magic we can explore mutuality: how we are joined to the rest of the universe and the manner in which we can affect things around us through ways of participating, which have as a central element a set of moral concerns." But history shows that human events are not linked with the human mind in any such magical mirror.

The weakness of Gosden's analysis is shown in his account of magic in the 19th and 20th centuries. Starting with the Rosicrucians and the Freemasons in the 16th century, he provides intriguing snapshots of organisations and movements such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1887-1903), the Ordo Templi Orientis (circa 1908 to the present), wicca and neo-paganism,

There are also vivid portrayals of self-styled modern magicians, notably Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), a professed Satanist, and Carlos Castaneda, a UCLA doctoral student who claimed to have been apprenticed to a Yaqui magus called Don Juan Matus, and produced a global bestseller, *The Teachings of Don Juan* (1968), that purportedly recorded his experiences.

What is striking in Gosden's account is what is left out. There is no mention of Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), the German doctor, astronomer and theorist of "animal magnetism" who created the prototype of later attempts at "scientific religion" such as Ernst Haeckel's cult of Monism and Julian Huxley's "evolutionary humanism". Unlike Crowley's and Castaneda's concoctions, these cults were widely influential among scientists. Although Gosden insists that magic remains a powerful force in society, he effectively confines its recent manifestations to the cultural margins.

Gosden also misses how science has been deployed as a tool of magical thinking. The extrapolations of liberal evolutionism were like the dialectical transformations of Marxism-Leninism: alchemical formulae, not scientific hypotheses. Pretty well every-one expected post-communist Russia to be more like the liberal West, not – as has proved to be the case – more different from it. Now, the liberal West is itself becoming history. Instead of human events mirroring the human mind, they are becoming increasingly surreal and unintelligible.

A similar kind of magical thinking can be observed in oppositional movements. Here again Keynes, in 1938, is illuminating:

> I still suffer incurably from attributing an unreal rationality to other people's feelings and behaviour (and doubtless to my own too). There is one small but extraordinarily silly manifestation of this absurd idea of what is "normal", namely the impulse to protest… I behave as if there really existed some authority or standard to which I can successfully appeal if I shout loud enough – perhaps it is some hereditary vestige of a belief in the efficacy of prayer.

What Keynes identified as a relic of religion can just as well be described as the living presence of magic. By participating in the world, members of social movements believe they are reshaping it according to a model in their minds.

At the end of the book Gosden mounts an extended defence of magic as a benign force. The belief that we inhabit a sentient universe may help us deal with the environmental crisis, he suggests. But as he says himself, magic is nothing if not practical, and the sad truth is that it doesn't work. Lead was not turned into gold, the prophecies of astrologers are not borne out by events and the visions of communist and liberal ideologues have melted into air.

Yet in many ways magical thinking is flourishing. The belief in Silicon Valley that death can be avoided by uploading our minds into cyberspace is the purest magical thinking – a fantasy that ignores the fact that cyberspace relies on a material infrastructure, which can easily be destroyed in wars, revolutions and natural disasters. For those who reject religion, techno-magic offers a pseudo-remedy for the human condition.

Magical thinking will remain a powerful force in human life. What this shows isn't the potency of magic, however. The true meaning of magic is that the human mind cannot bear very much reality.

The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present
Chris Gosden
Viking, 512pp, £25

Mike Klymkowsky
from my iPad - typos likely