

Review of: "Re-calling Magical Thinking: Different, yet Connected Views on Magical Thinking"

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Magical thinking

This is a succinct but well-argued synthesis of traditional approaches to the study of magic with some interesting insights concerning its application to contemporary phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic. There are three key issues that need to be taken into account when looking at magic from an anthropological perspective. First, an important distinction should be drawn between magical thinking and merely mistaken beliefs. This was a distinction glossed over by the traditional views on magic that the author surveys, such as Frazer's and Piaget's. However, it was a fundamental distinction in another classic text that the author does not take into account. This is Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert's *General Theory of Magic* (1904). Mauss and Hubert focused their theory on the concept of 'mana', which they glossed as the specific power that magic acts are supposed to possess and that makes them different from any other form of social action. The important point about Mauss and Hubert's text is precisely their emphasis on the singularity of magical thinking and, therefore, its radical divergence from Frazer's notion of 'bastard science' or Piaget's association with infantile thought. Magical thinking is not just an erroneous or immature set of beliefs, but a singular form of thinking incommensurable with any other belief system, such as science or the rational thought of adult human beings. The second issue is to ponder what this 'mana' could possibly be. Here Mauss and Hubert, faithful to their phenomenological approach, refused to provide any explanation or definition of the concept, for magic should be understood only on its own terms and could not be associated with any other form of thinking. But we do not need to follow them in their radical historicism. Some of the texts cited by the author, such as Nemeroff and Rozin's suggestion that magical thinking should be viewed as 'The cognitive intuition or belief in the existence of imperceptible forces or essences' (p. 3), are particularly informative in this regard. Magical thinking is a form of supernatural thinking that attributes causal efficacy not to particular behaviours (magical rituals) per se but to the kind of supernatural powers that those behaviours are meant to mobilise. These supernatural powers can be either personal (spirits) or impersonal (spells), but in any case, they are deprived of any moral component. That is what makes them different not only from science or rational thought in general, but also from the alleged effects of religious supernatural beings' actions. Finally, the third question has to do with the popularity of magical thinking across cultures. This is closely related to the author's final reflections on the relationship between magical thinking and COVID-19, which he rightly describes as 'an "extension" of germ theory in the form of a consensus between magical and causal thinking' (p. 7). One could legitimately wonder why magical beliefs are so widespread in so many different cultural settings around the world. Even though beliefs in causally efficacious supernatural powers might not be universal, these beliefs recruit or piggyback upon our universal hardwired inference systems that deal with possible

contamination and contagion (Boyer, *Religion Explained*, p. 134). It could be plausibly argued that even though magical thinking may not have any 'function' or adaptive value in itself, those inference systems caused adaptive behaviour in humans for much of their evolutionary history. Consequently, even in secularised cultural contexts apparently deprived of supernatural ontologies of any kind, they (those inference systems) could very well be responsible for the production of attitudes clearly analogous to those we normally associate with magical thinking under specific historical circumstances, such as the generalised panic of contamination triggered off by the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, this is an engaging text that happily, and perceptively, brings together traditional views on human irrational behaviour with very modern concerns.