

The Many-Splendored Society

Volume 1 Surrounded by Symbols

Third edition

This book describes humanity's unique environment of symbols in speech and script, and it tells how freedom in using symbols creates and changes social reality. You can read it on its own.

The book is also the first installment to a larger work in seven volumes about social theory, and about a many-splendored society that is within human reach.

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1911 edition available on Kindle

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN-10: / ISBN-13:

1484106288 / 978-1484106280

1st edition filed September 2009, refiled August 2010, 2nd edition filed
March 2011, 3rd edition filed April 2013

This excerpt is from a new filing
planned for 2014

Enter Magic

It was a fantastic event when humanity found out that language used by a person can affect the behavior of other people. You say "Welcome to the table!" and people gather at the table. You say "Move this table closer to the window!" and helpful hands move it there. "Help yourself to some wine!" and people serve themselves from your wine. You say "Try this chocolate!" and people put the pieces of dark chocolate into their mouths.

Such experiences make it very easy to believe that language is omnipotent. So you say "Move this mountain!" or "Make this water into wine!" or "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk!" But nothing of the sort happens. You have merely engaged in the magic use of words in the belief that they can affect physics and move mountains, affect chemistry and turn water into wine, affect biology and cure sickness. In advanced forms, this is sorcery or witchcraft. If you try to hurt people by magic, we call it black

magic. If you try to help people, it is white magic. However, it does not matter whether you use advanced sorcery or sophisticated witchcraft, or if you have evil or good intentions.

Consider these simple rules of thumb for the normal use of language:

- Language does not affect physical reality, except as any sound waves.

- Language may affect the biological reality of humans, but only in special and limited ways specified by "vocabularies of motives," the topic of the entire Volume 3 of *The Many-Splendored Society*. It may affect animals through the process of domestication.

- Language does indeed both define and affect mankind's social reality, but only in ways and circumstances that can be stipulated in the regularities found in social structuration, dialectics, and other parts of social science. The "dialectics," mentioned here is introduced in the next chapter. The "structuration" will be presented in the Introduction of the next volume (2: 1-8) and will remain a recurrent topic in rest of *The Many-Splendored Society*.

Incantations claim to deny these rules of thumb for proper language use and put laws of nature out of play, at least temporarily. Entertainer-magicians use incantations (literally meaning "the singing of a spell on something or someone") to get around the rules for proper language use. They invoke *Abracadabra*, which is an extraordinary interesting Aramaic phrase used by their God: "I will create as I speak." *Abracadabra*, creating by speaking, could be the title of a book (like this one) on social reality. In a creative sense, *abracadabra* is a possibility for man in his social reality, but impossibility in his biological and physical reality. More on this in our discussions on Freedom in Social Reality beginning on page 1: 190 below.

A 'myth,' in its popular meaning, is a narrative that in some places violates some of the above rules of thumb for normal use of language. This leaves an awfully large amount of language in

the realm of myths. If this is to be our definition, it is clear that a human life without myths is a barren life. Fortunately there are many lively, amusing, entertaining and educating myths. They are found in story-telling, literature, theater, street life, family dinners, and the like, even in professional circles. Mass media without myths would have a limited success compared to those that routinely serve us the myth of the day. Often the myths are rich in content and most often they are cheap to come by.

The splashes of this type of language are particularly broad and vivid in children's speech and in their preferred reading: Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus. In the years after the turn of the century, books on Harry Potter, trained in a magician's school, topped the bestseller lists of children's books in many parts of the world.

Everyone knows that there are many streaks of magic in childhood and primordial societies, but few realize the wide streaks of magic in great civilizations. So, it is easy to fill our lives with myths, and no one should stop us from using this privilege we have as symbol-using beings. The thing to be aware of, however, is the part of myths that we shall call "magic."

Five Principles of Magic

Ernst Cassirer, a German philosopher in the Kantian tradition, whose ambition was to explore all major forms of symbolism, had to devote the whole second volume of his three-volume work *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen* (Cassirer 1923-29/2001-02) to "mythical thought." Some samples:

The whole and its parts are interwoven, their destinies are linked, as it were — and so they remain even after they have been detached from one another in pure fact. Even after such separation the fate of the part hangs over the whole as well. Anyone who acquires the most insignificant bodily part of a man — or even his name, his shadow, his reflection in a mirror, which for myth are also real "parts" of him — has thereby gained power over the man, has taken possession of him, has achieved magical power over him. — — — The workings of

this form of thought can be followed in respect to time as well as space: it makes over the intuition of succession and simultaneity in its own mold. — — — Among certain Indian tribes if an enemy's spittle can be obtained, it is enclosed in a potato and hung in the chimney: as the spittle dries in the smoke, the enemy's strength dwindles with it (Cassirer 1923-29/2001-02, II, 51-52).

Cassirer in his groundbreaking work sees myths, including magic, as a form of symbolism with its own principles. He explores these principles as they have appeared in historical perceptions of time and space, and in conceptions of man and fellowman. We select five of his principles of mythical thinking that also are magical, numbered by me so that we can later refer to them. The third principle, as we just learned, he considered the most fundamental. Here is our selection of five principles of magic:

1st principle of magic, or magic(1). *In time, all events that happen simultaneously belong together.* Migrating birds bring with them the summer when they arrive and later take it with them when they leave. In a magical myth, in contrast to science, correlation is always causation. The postulate in astrology that the sign of the zodiac at your birth affects you in later life is the typical example.

2nd principle of magic, or magic(2). *In space, all things that have once touched each other thereafter hang together.* In the coronation of a king, you transfer the royal attributes of past kings by giving the regalia to the new king: the crown, the scepter, the sword, and the scourge. In alchemy, you can transfer a property of one metal such as its glow into another by a special mixing of the two. At the turn of the century, a number of African males held that HIV/AIDS could be cured by sexual intercourse with a virgin; the purity of the girl would transfer to the smitten male. In myths, unlike in science, even the remotest contact can be seen as causation.

3rd principle of magic, or magic(3). *What holds true for the part always also holds for the whole, and vice versa.* With a strand of hair

from a person you get control of the entire person. Merely by knowing someone's name you have an advantage, and still better, if you have an image of the person you can control him or her by manipulating the image. In science, such "holographic" parallels in which the whole has exactly all the properties of its parts are rare; in myths, they are the rule.

4th principle of magic, or magic(4). *All happenings and creations are willed by some being.* There are beings in material things and behind events. There may be a spirit in a tree, a stone, in everything. There are gods who blow the winds from their places in the north, south, east, and west. The ultimate myth is that a being designed or created the entire universe. When Adam Smith wrote that "an invisible hand" set the prices in the economy, he alluded to this magical view of his time. In reality, as he most certainly knew, there was no hand at all. The prices were a spontaneous order, a result of human action but not of human design.

5th principle of magic, or magic(5). *A verbal formula can produce a quick change from anything evil to something good, and vice versa.* The formula is known to medicine men of yore who could incant it to solve everyday problems in their tribe. In ancient Greece, a "love strike" would bring miraculous benefits. In Medieval Europe magicians outside the Church said "Hocus Pocus," a corruption of the Latin of the priests who said "hoc est corpus," i.e. the magical change of the substances of bread and wine into that of the body and blood of Christ.

The medieval magicians have latter-day counterparts. They may promote quick fixes to personal problems by a new diet. They may solve social issues by slogans about anti-globalization. They may save the planet by abandoning automobiles. They have formulas to turn poverty into riches by neoliberal market shocks or by socialist wage earners' funds. Others have formulas to turn war into peace by making love, not war. Worst of all, some political practitioners of magic promise a blitz war to end all wars. A common denominator of all magical formulas using the fifth principle of magic is that the promised changes are effected straight away, or almost immediately.

When any of these five principles appears in a tale or a myth it turns the tale or myth into a *magical* myth.

Magic is never science. While magic and science are like fire and water, one can nevertheless be scientific about magic. Malinowski (*Magic, Science and Religion* 1925/1948) discovered that the natives of the Trobriand Islands were quite able to distinguish practical efforts from magical ones. They would scoff if you suggested that they attempt to replace their practices of gardening or fishing with magic. However, at all uncertain turns in their lives, be it unpredictable weather or poor prospects of crop survival, they punctuated their cultivation and fishing with magic.

A second skill a student of humanity must learn is thus to identify magic; the first was the identification of spuma. A common indication of "progress" is the stripping of magic elements from the language of a society. It is not an easy task for there are many magical elements in modern institutions. Natural science, wherever it is taught freely, has done a magnificent job in eradicating magic from our views on nature; the social sciences have some to catch up in this regard. More on the relation between magic and science in 4: 82.

It is not easy to resist mankind's long romance with magical thinking.

Without the ingrained quick-fix fifth principle of magic, Europeans would not so readily have embraced Socialism. The socialists replaced "Silent night," as the most popular song, by the Internationale. In 1871, Eugene Pottier wrote its magic message: "*C'est la lutte finale / Groupons-nous et demain / L'Internationale / Sera le genre humain.*" (In English: "So comrades, come rally / And the *last fight* let us face / The Internationale unites the human race.") Italics are supplied here. Only a magic(5) fight is sure to be the last one.

Without the ingrained third principle of magic, terrorism would have less appeal. Terrorism is the use of violence guided by the third principle of magic; by destroying a small part you believe that you destroy the whole. The terrorist who pulled the

trigger of his gun on the 28th of June 1914 in Sarajevo against the Austrian crown prince and his wife believed in the magic that by destroying this visible pair of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, he would destroy the whole empire. A series of unexpected circumstances led to the First World War, and to the actual fall of the empire. It is the task of serious historians to explain this process by other means than magic; allowing for the important fact that the assassin believed in the magic(3) of terrorist acts.

Without the ingrained fourth principle of magic, the world of the first decade of the twenty-first century would not so readily have accepted the idea that the main cause of global warming is man's emission of CO₂ into the atmosphere. The non-human processes in nature that affect global temperature were perceived as more marginal. They include cloud formation, solar, volcanic, and oceanographic activities. Scientists advising the United Nations seemed unaware that their CO₂-message on climate change, regardless of the level of support it had from research, played into an old pattern of magic, and for this reason got a good part of its quick and overwhelming public acceptance. Willy-nilly, the world obtained a magic(4)-supported opinion about global warming from a body of scientists.

Due to the public's long experience of magic(1) and magic(2), we have reason to expect similar boosts in public acceptance to other findings, be they true or spurious, from the now fashionable research with "Big Data". See page 1: 196 below.

Of particular importance for social science is the debunking of the fourth principle of magic. For this principle means that the social world has no spontaneous formation: all is willed or designed by some being. This unwarranted superstition turns human history into a story of villains and heroes, and it turns social thinking into conspiracy theories. It ignores the fact that spontaneous orders are not only legion in society but also essential for its functioning. In addition, social scientists can be scientific about them. Examples of such spontaneous orders are public opinion in the body politic, market prices in the economy, Wikipedia's in realms of knowledge.