

Magic

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Etymology

“Magic” is a *Wanderwort*, a “wandering word” that looks back over more than two and a half millennia of conceptual history. The term has its origins in the old Persian *magu(š)*, a self-designation that was used by a high-ranking priest caste of the Achaemenid Empire (Panaino, 2021). The old Persian word (ma-gu-š: 𐎠𐎥𐎷𐎡𐎹 in Persian cuneiform script) is attested in a variety of texts, such as the Behistun inscription, dated to ca. 522 BCE, and the so-called Persepolis Fortification Tablets, which date to the reigns of Darius I (ca. 522–486 BCE) and Xerxes I (ca. 486–465 BCE). In these texts, the word *magu(š)* mainly refers to an Iranian – possibly Zoroastrian – priest who performs sacrificial and other rituals for high-ranking members of the Persian Empire (Otto, 2011: 149–150). This original meaning – a designation for “Iranian experts in religious matters” (Schwemer, 2015: 17) – is also preserved in subsequent Zoroastrian texts. For instance, during the Sasanian empire (third to seventh century CE), the Middle Persian derivation *magu-pati* (“high priest”) continued to function as a priestly title (Boyce, 1982: 229). The contraction *mobad* or *mowbed* (موبد) is still in use by contemporary Zoroastrian priests (Nigosian, 1993: 104). When pondering the western reception of the concept of magic, this parallel Iranian-Zoroastrian trajectory of the root word must be kept in mind as it points toward a long-term gap between insider and outsider perspectives. In historical research, scholars mark these parallel tracks by using two distinct English derivations to distinguish between (western) *magicians* and (Persian or Zoroastrian) *magians*.

Shortly after it first emerged in Persia, the term “magic” became a widely used “wandering word” that crossed multiple cultural and religious boundaries. During the Greco-Persian wars, the

old Persian self-designation *magu(š)* was hellenized into the Greek appellation *μάγος* (*mágos*), as, for instance, by Herodotus in his account of the Persian military campaigns against the Greek city-states (*Histories*, books I, III, and VII). Even though Herodotus retained the word’s root meaning, using *mágos* as a term for a Persian priest, he also outlined two associated features that were to become important anti-magical stereotypes in western history: the Persian magician’s alleged anti-religiousness and the inefficacy of their rites (Otto, 2019: 199–200). Within one or two generations, the Greek designation for a Persian priest – the *mágos* – led to the formation of an abstract Greek noun – *μαγεία* (*mageía*) – which came to denote the practices of the *mágoi*. *Mageía* was thus detached from its Persian origins and became a more general “pejorative term for ritualists whose practices, in the author’s view, lacked piety” (Schwemer, 2015: 17). The stereotypes that had been ascribed to the “practices of the enemies” (Graf, 2002: 29) – that is, blasphemy and inefficacy – prevailed in the new use of the word. Plato, among others, associated a third powerful stereotype with the term: the idea that magic is inevitably antisocial and immoral (for further details on these origins, see Otto, 2011: ch. 6).

In Latin texts from the second century BCE onwards, the Greek word *μαγεία* was latinized as *magia*, and the *μάγος* thus became a *magus* in Latin. With the spread and transformation of Latin, the word subsequently entered numerous Romanic, Germanic, and other languages, such as Portuguese (*magia*), Spanish (*magia*), Italian (*magia*), French (*magie*), German (*Magie*), Dutch (*Magie*), Swedish (*magi*), English (*magic*), Polish (*magia*), and Russian (*магия*). Magic’s millennia-long conceptual history includes a variety of multilingual retranslations, interesting examples of which include the translation of Greek *μαγεία* into Arabic *سحر* (*siḥr*) in late ancient Egypt, and the retranslation of Arabic *siḥr* into Latin *magia* in late medieval Spain (Burnett, 1996). In sum, the concept of magic today looks back over more than 2,500 years of intercultural and inter-religious transmission, which may be one of the reasons for its multifaceted semantic range.

The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology. Edited by George Ritzer and Chris Rojek.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosm004.pub2

Semantics

Magic is not only a “wandering word” but also a “floating signifier.” Floating signifiers are characterized by “a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers may mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even any signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean” (Chandler, 2007: 78). Over the course of western history, it was largely a matter of perspective whether one considered magic to be

the art of the devil or a path to the gods, ... of natural or supernatural origin, a testimony to human folly or the crowning achievement of scientific audacity, a sin or a virtue, harmful or beneficent, overpowering or empowering, an act of othering or of self-assertion. (Otto and Stausberg, 2013: 3)

These ambivalences notwithstanding, four semantic notions have emerged that can be seen as core constituents of the semantic field of magic. These are (1) ritual, (2) power, (3) miracle, and (4) wish-fulfillment. All four notions have ancient roots but all four still function today as oft-invoked meanings of magic.

To begin with, magic typically denotes (1) a set of *rituals*, a ritual art or knowledge practice. That is to say, magic is a type of repetitive behavior, often following predefined scripts, the purpose or goal of which goes beyond the mere re-enactment of a predefined script. In other words, there is a (chrono-)logical gap between the ritual performance, or action, and its intention or envisaged outcome: rituals deemed magical are “causally opaque (i.e., the actions are not connected to their purported result)” (Sørensen, 2013: 235). Second, magic may refer to (2) a hidden or inherent *power* of things. On this understanding, magic may be perceived as a distinct force that operates independently from the performance of rituals, a force that is ascribed, for instance, to stones, herbs, or other natural phenomena. In late medieval and early modern Europe, the phrase *magia naturalis* – natural magic – was coined to describe this semantic facet (see Otto, 2011: ch. 10). Furthermore, magic also includes

the notion of (3) *miracle* or *miraculous ability* – that is, of an exceptional, extraordinary event that transgresses the usual or accepted boundaries of human existence and is thus considered remarkable or unexplainable by most observers. This notion led to wide-ranging inter-religious disputes as, from antiquity onwards, an arbitrary distinction was made between allegedly false – “magical” – miracles and those that were allegedly authentic because they were “religious” or God-ordained. This distinction was typically attached to the idea that true miracles did not require the performance of rituals, and that ritual-invoked miracles were thus less powerful when compared to those that derived from pure wisdom or God/s (this rhetorical pattern was used by late ancient Christians, but also by Neoplatonic and other pagan authors; see Otto, 2011: ch. 8; Remus, 1982). The notion of miracle was also the main driving force that propelled the development and proliferation of stage magic as an art of entertainment, particularly from the nineteenth century onwards. Finally, (4) *wish-fulfillment* refers to the idea that magic provides (ritual) means for the achievement of short-term, inner-worldly goals – typically in the realms of love/friendship, protection, healing, economic benefits, or conflict/harm – through the achievement of which practitioners hope to cope with the fundamental fragilities, unpredictabilities, iniquities, and harshnesses of human life. Whereas practices that aim at wish-fulfillment have, of course, always played a role in institutionalized religious settings, the western stereotype of the magician is that of a private ritual entrepreneur who sells his practices to “clients” below the radar of religious or public authorities (thus Durkheim’s comment: “There is no church of magic”: Durkheim, 1995: 41).

In everyday language, these four semantic notions are often intertwined, and they have also manifested in the semantic fields of other fundamental concepts (e.g., religion). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to distinguish between them when performing historical or sociological analyses, in order to avoid a range of ethnocentric biases and misunderstandings.

Functions

In addition to being a “wandering word” and a “floating signifier,” magic can also be considered a type of “precarious knowledge.” Throughout western history, practices, people, ideas, or things deemed magical have tended to provoke strong reactions that oscillate between outright fascination and horrified repudiation: Magic is a precarious and notoriously contested topic. As a consequence of this emotional weight, discourses on magic have tended toward two main social functions: ostracization and othering on the one hand, and valorization and self-identification on the other.

Clearly, the primary social function of magic was and is to mark boundaries, to “other” others, and to create deviance. This function was dominant throughout large parts of western history and manifested in the “discourse of exclusion”: an inter-religious and transcultural tradition of long duration based on polemical stereotypes, attacks, and devaluations of magicians and their alleged practices (Otto, 2011: chs 6–8). In such anti-magical discourses, practices deemed magical were typically considered to be (1) anti-religious, (2) inefficacious, and/or (3) antisocial or immoral:

The first accusation relates to the alleged opposition between “magic” and “religion” (from a Christian perspective it is, thus, often considered to be “heretical” or “blasphemous”); the second relates to the alleged opposition between “magic” and “science” (or, in simpler terms, to conventional assumptions about physical causation); and the third to the allegedly devastating societal impact of “magic.” (Bellingradt and Otto, 2017: 48)

As has already been mentioned, these polemical stereotypes have dominated western elite discourses on magic ever since classical antiquity. They underlie wide-ranging historical tragedies such as the early modern European witch persecutions, and they continue to propel polemics against contemporary writings such as the *Harry Potter* novels (see, for instance, Abanes, 2001), and the related incidences of book burnings.

Even though magic has predominantly functioned as a locus for polemical invective

throughout western history, there is another side to this coin, a related process that has long been overlooked. Eventually, at least some people come to identify with concepts, ideas, theories, or groups that are ostracized and devalued by “mainstream” cultural or religious discourses. This is exactly what has happened with the notion of magic. From at least late antiquity onwards – beginning with the so-called Greek Magical Papyri (see Otto, 2016: 173, 185–186) – historical actors sympathized with the concept of magic and began to label themselves as magicians and their practices as magic. Indeed, ritual scripts that have their origins in the practices of these early self-identified magicians have survived through to the present day (Betz, 1996). As a result, it is possible to reconstruct a continuous history of the transmission of such positive and identificatory uses of the concept of magic from late antiquity down to the twenty-first century – including neutral or intermediate positions – thus shedding light on a genuine textual-ritual tradition which could be called “western learned magic” (see, exemplarily, Otto 2016; Bellingradt and Otto, 2017; Otto and Johannsen, 2021).

Three aspects of this magical “insider” tradition are particularly interesting. First, practitioners of western learned magic usually invert the stereotypes that are entrenched in the anti-magical “discourse of exclusion.” In contrast to the three polemical stereotypes mentioned above (blasphemy, inefficacy, immorality), practitioners of western learned magic typically perceive their ritual art as (1) spiritually valuable, indeed even the peak of all religious aspiration; (2) absolutely powerful and efficacious; and (3) morally legitimate, even divinely ordained (see further Otto, 2021: 335–336). Second, and this is the reason why most scholarly definitions and theories of magic are deeply problematic (see below), western learned magic “continuously adopts ritual patterns and techniques from older sources, discards unnecessary or unwanted elements, adapts to novel cultural and religious environments or practitioner milieus, and continuously invents modes of ritual performance or efficacy” (Otto, 2016: 189–190). In other words, western learned magic was and is ever-changing in a variety of

domains, which destines to failure any attempt to pinpoint its essence by means of scholarly definitions. Third, the millennia-long multicultural transmission history of western learned magic is particularly striking, given that large parts of this history took place in extremely hostile cultural, religious, and legislative environments, often with life-threatening implications for its practitioners (see Otto, 2016: 203–204). Even after the so-called “*crimen magiae*” (“crime of magic”) was removed from most European codes of law during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Levack, 2004: 181–190), magic found itself in the firing line of Enlightenment authors and has remained a popular target for rationalist and modernist rhetorics and ideologies ever since (Styers, 2004). Despite being continuously devalued, ostracized, and criminalized throughout western history, western learned magic has been strikingly resilient, and remains so in the present day, a capacity that is still not thoroughly understood.

Magic and Modernity

Positive notions of magic have become widespread and influential motifs in popular media, contemporary spiritualities, and new religious movements over the last several decades. The most telling indication of this development is the great success of the modern fantasy genre, in which the magician is typically portrayed as a figure to be positively identified with, indeed sometimes even as a world savior. The great success of novels such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (first published in 1954) and, later, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (starting with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, first published in 1997) led, in the latter half of the twentieth century, to a fundamental reevaluation of the figure of the magician in popular discourse. The positive magicians portrayed in these novels stand in stark contrast to the stereotypical “witch” and the other negative magical figures that pervaded premodern textual genres for centuries (e.g., Christian *exempla* literature, fairy tales, legends, myth). In this regard, the *Harry Potter* novels in particular were a global game changer, with over 500 million copies sold worldwide and translations into more than 75 languages. To name just one of the many effects of “Pottermania,” magic came to

be by far the most frequently used trigger word in advertisements – particularly for electronic products – from the late 1990s onwards. It is plain that, in many contemporary societies, magic sells. This development, which led to nothing less than a “stereotype reversal” in everyday language and, hence, the public imagination, is striking given that, in just a few decades, it significantly loosened the grip of 2,500 years of anti-magical polemics.

But magic has not only become an omnipresent motif in fantasy and children’s novels, movies, TV series, and computer games. Positive notions of magic have also had a significant impact on modern spiritualities and new religious movements. A large number of esoteric, neo-pagan, or neo-shamanic groupings, all founded between the late nineteenth and early twenty-first century, nowadays embrace magic – or “magick,” as it is often spelled by modern practitioners – both conceptually and ritually. Well-known examples include the Martinist Order, the various offspring of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the Ordo Templi Orientis, AMORC, the Fraternitas Saturni, Wicca, the Church of Satan, the Sweet Medicine Sundance Path, the Illuminates of Thanateros, Dragon Rouge, or the Grey School of Wizardry. Admittedly, most of these groups are quantitatively rather marginal when set beside Christian churches or other established religious traditions, but they are nevertheless far from negligible in scale when taken collectively. Wicca, for example, the new “witchcraft religion” or “magico-religion” (Doyle White, 2016: 5), has far in excess of a million adult practitioners as of today and is officially registered as a tax-free religion in various countries, including the United States of America and Great Britain. The Grey School of Wizardry, a California-based online school for adolescent practitioners of magic(k) founded in 2002 by Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, currently has around 1,000 registered students. This organization is in large parts crafted in the image of Hogwarts (see Cusack, 2021), thus demonstrating how the great success of the modern fantasy genre also propels the ongoing formation of novel magic(k)al groups and practices. Eventually, such practices also involve political dimensions, as can be seen in the “Bind Trump” movement, a series of monthly binding rituals that were performed between 2017 and 2021 by several thousand

anti-Trump practitioners of magic(k), with the goal of removing Donald Trump from his office as president of the United States of America (see Asprem, 2020).

In sum, even a quick browse through the Internet and social media suffices to show that magic(k) – whether deemed to be fantastic and illusionary or real and efficacious – has advanced to become an extremely popular topic in the media and contemporary “oculture” (a term coined by Christopher Partridge to indicate that the “occult” has today merged with “culture”: Partridge, 2004/2005), especially among the younger generations. Whether or not this fascination will affect religious landscapes on a broader institutional scale remains to be seen. For the time being, two preliminary conclusions may be drawn. First, the recent popularity of magical ideas and imagery illustrates religious trends that may be characteristic of religious change during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries more generally. These trends include the desire for noninstitutional forms of religion centered on the self (religious individualization: see Otto, 2017); the yearning for ritual self-empowerment in an apparently uncontrollable or arbitrarily changing world; and the longing for miraculous abilities that transcend the limits and boundaries of the human condition as it is normally understood. In this regard, one of the main insights of the lively debate on “magic in modernity” (see, e.g., Meyer and Pels, 2003; Landy and Saler, 2009; Bever and Styers, 2017) is that modernity did not lead to a decline but rather to the emergence and proliferation of novel and specifically “modern” magical practices and ideas: “just as religion continues to adapt and thrive in the modern world, so, too, magic and supernaturalism ... prosper in modernity ... magic *belongs* to modernity” (Bever and Steyers, 2017: 2–3). Second, and as a consequence, the often-heard claim that the success of science and technology will eventually lead to global disenchantment has obviously been proved wrong. Over the course of the last century, institutionalized religions have lost neither their social nor their political relevance: in many parts of the world, they are alive and well and remain powerful global players (e.g., Berger, 2005; Zeidan, 2010). Nor has magic(k) vanished in the face of secularization narratives and scientific progress. On the contrary, magic(k) has, over the

course of the past decades, become a widespread and influential motif in the entertainment industry and popular (oc)culture, in advertisements and everyday language, and in modern spiritualities and new religious movements. What is more, from a transcultural perspective, ritual practices for predicting, affecting, or changing the course of human life events – whether or not such practices are labeled as “magic” by practitioners or scholars – continue to function as an integral component of everyday life in many parts of the world (this is the topic of a new Center for Advanced Studies on “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective,” founded in 2022 at the University of Erlangen–Nuremberg). In light of all this, a number of recent studies have critically reassessed the “problem” or even “myth” of disenchantment (Aspre, 2014; Josephson-Storm, 2017).

Redefining and Retheorizing Magic in Twenty-First-Century Scholarship

Where does all this leave us with regard to the formulation of plausible second-order definitions and theories of magic that allow for meaningful scholarly analyses and comparisons? A plethora of definitions and theories of magic have been advanced by scholars from a variety of disciplines over the past one and a half centuries. Regrettably, most of these scholars neglected to take account of the characteristics of the concept of magic with which we began this article, namely that it is a “wandering word” and a “floating signifier” that typically denotes “precarious knowledge” from a polemical or identificatory perspective, and that this feature has been responsible for the development of the concept’s polyvalent and multifaceted semantic field. Pivotal figures in the scholarly debate on magic – such as Edward B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, Émile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, and many others (for an overview, see Otto and Stausberg, 2013) – have attempted to reduce magic’s social and semantic multifacetedness by “defining” singular, clear-cut meanings, thus demarcating the concept from its alleged antipodes “science” and “religion.” All of these definitions were destined to fail for a variety of reasons. (1) Almost all existing scholarly definitions of magic stand in

the tradition of the aforementioned “discourse of exclusion,” that is, they portray magic as inefficacious, nonreligious, and/or antisocial, thus perpetuating western polemical stereotypes. (2) Different scholars singled out different facets from magic’s conceptual history, claiming that these were “universal” traits, and thus produced contradictory definitions and decades-long scholarly disputes (see Otto, 2011: 88–89). (3) Most existing definitions posit arbitrary distinctions between magic, science, and religion that are counterfactual when considered in the context of the actual historical data. To be sure, throughout western cultural history, notions of “magic” have included a vast range of concepts and ideas that also pervade the Europeanist histories of “science” and “religion.” Reciprocally, these latter also bristle with motifs and practices that have played a significant role in western discourses of magic. (4) The “magic–science–religion triangle” (Otto and Stausberg, 2013: 4) evoked by the aforementioned definitions is not only arbitrary from a historical perspective but is ultimately a Eurocentric construct that leads to distorted results when projected onto nonwestern cultures and data. (5) Finally, recent debates about critical categories in the study of religion (e.g., Taylor, 1998) and about the problem of essentialism, in particular, suggest that the time of monothetic or otherwise substantialist definitions of magic (as well as many other basic categories in the study of religion) is over. Clearly, essentialist notions of magic do not offer an appropriate path for pursuing future scholarship. Yet, magic “refuses to disappear” (Otto and Stausberg, 2013: 10), both in the scholarly debate and in many other cultural and discursive fields. So, how are we to proceed with magic from a methodological perspective?

In recent decades, various strategies have been suggested to circumvent the methodological problems of essentialism, Eurocentrism, and the magic–science–religion triangle. A new approach called the “discursive study of magic” (Otto, 2017: 43 n4) acknowledges the conceptual history and fuzzy historical semantics of magic as its analytical starting point, takes the different perspectives and terminologies employed by historical actors seriously, carves out social processes of exclusion and inclusion, and seeks to reconstruct millennia-long continuities as

well as ongoing changes and innovations in the ritual art performed by practitioners of western learned magic. For transcultural analyses and comparative work “beyond the West,” it has been suggested that the language of “patterns of magicity” should be employed as “a more differentiated and less fragile and ethnocentric conceptual apparatus” (Otto and Stausberg, 2013: 11). “‘Patterns of magicity’ do not automatically involve ‘MAGIC’ (as the supreme meta-category), nor are they ‘magic’ (as referring to ontological features), but they are a way of dealing with cross-culturally attested observations” (Otto and Stausberg, 2013: 11). Essentially, the “patterns of magicity” approach suggests that we should chop up the puzzling meta-category of magic into smaller bits and pieces (in the words of Egil Asprem, we should “reverse-engineer” the “complex cultural concept” of magic: Asprem, 2016), and then use these smaller building blocks in the classification and comparison of recurrent patterns in religious data. For all other research contexts, it may remain feasible to formulate heuristic working definitions with specific and transparent criteria, while strictly restricting these to the case study in question, thus avoiding generalizations or universalist pretensions.

SEE ALSO: Deviance; Modernity; New Religious Movements; Religion; Rite/Ritual; Science; Secularization

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