JBA
JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ANTHROPOLOGY

Magical Capitalism

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Abstract

This essay looks at ways in which various branches of capitalist enterprise and their supporting mechanisms are often not as rational as they make themselves out to be, but operate instead according to magical premises. Magical thinking, as a mode of thought, creates or invokes extraordinary connections between things, people, organizations, and beliefs in order to understand, explain, influence, and occasionally predict, events. Magical practices involve magicians, magical rites, and magical representations — almost invariably working together to perform the overcoming of uncertainty. And uncertainty, in the sense of unpredictability, is what underpins government, business, and the economy. The essay makes use of seven scenarios — ranging from Davos and Brexit to GPS and Japanese manga — to illustrate how politicians, media, education, and various forms of cultural production make use of language, technologies, and images to perform magic in contemporary societies.

Keywords

Cultural production, economy of appearances, education, illocutionary acts, magical system, media, sport, technology

JBA 6(2): 133-157
Autumn 2017

ISSN 2245-4217

www.cbs.dk/jba

"There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather […] one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform this service. This above all is what intellectualization means."

Weber (1948: 139)

"We're spellbound by Scarlett Johansson, bewitched by the opulence of vintage florals and drawn to the dark side of black party pieces. Welcome to the season of magic and sparkle."

Marie Claire (UK), December 2015

In this essay I will look at ways in which various branches of capitalist enterprise and their supporting mechanisms are often not as rational as they—or Weber, whose discussion of science, rationality, and disenchantment is quoted above—make themselves out to be, but operate instead according to magical premises. *Magical thinking*, as a mode of thought, creates or invokes extraordinary connections between things, people, organizations, and beliefs in order to understand, explain, influence, and occasionally predict, events (Lévi-Strauss 1966). *Magical practices* involve magicians, magical rites, and magical representations (Malinowski 1922: 403; Mauss 1972)—almost invariably working together to *perform* the overcoming of uncertainty (Malinowski 1954: 29-31; Gell 1992: 57). And uncertainty, in the sense of unpredictability, is what underpins government, business, and the economy—as we are all acutely aware from terrorist attacks, stock market crashes, global warming, Brexit, entertainment belly flops, and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA.

The topic of magic is almost as old as the discipline of anthropology itself. My thesis is as follows. In spite of early anthropologists' evolutionary arguments to the contrary—E. B. Tyler (1929: 111) described it as "one of the most pernicious delusions that ever vexed mankind" (his words, not mine!)—we find magic at work in all sorts of modern practices: including finance and trade, government gatherings, the law (including intellectual property and trademark law), medicine and health, technology, advertising, marketing, cultural production, and consumption.[1]

[1] See, for example: Holmes (2014) and Appadurai (2015) on central banking; Zaloom (2006) on trading floors; Garsten and Sörbom (2016) on the World Economic Forum at Davos; Yelle (2001) on law; Westbrook (2016) on legal contracts; Suchman (1989) and Leach (2012) on intellectual property; Assaf

Magical systems

Precisely because anthropologists have discussed magical practices in different parts of the world over a period of many decades, they do not necessarily agree about what, exactly, constitutes a magical system. For Marcel Mauss, all magical systems required three elements to be in conjunction with one another: magician, magical representation, and magical rite (Mauss 1972: 18). Malinowski (1922: 403) made a similar tripartite schema in which he focused on the *condition* of the performer, thereby suggesting that magic is an embodied and emergent process: a continual *becoming* of the social and the material:

> "Magic all the world over… represents three essential aspects. In its performance there enter always some words spoken or chanted, some actions carried out, and there are always the minister or ministers of the ceremony. In analysing the concrete details of magical performances, therefore, we have to distinguish between the *formula*, *the rite*, and *the condition of the performer*."[2]

I will here follow Mauss in my delineation of the systems of magic at work in contemporary capitalism. First, a *magician* has—or, rather, is seen to have—certain qualities that a lay person does not. Certain professions have been, and still are, thought to possess magical powers because of the dexterity and outstanding knowledge of their practitioners. Whether successful inventor or investor, fashion designer or financial trader, spin doctor or neuro-surgeon, barrister or business leader, "it is their profession which sets them apart from the common run of mortals, and it is this separateness which endows them with magical power" (Mauss 1972: 29). Because, like Orson Welles, they prevail over uncertainty, they are widely recognized by society as able to accomplish things beyond the power of normal human beings (Moeran 2015: 64-66).

The question arising from this, however, is: *who* becomes recognised as a "magician," and on what grounds? Clearly, it is public opinion that "makes the magician and creates the power he wields"

(2012) on trademark law; Whitehead et al. (2002) on magical practices in operating theatres; Stevens (2001) on alternative, and Farquar (1996) on Chinese medical practices; Johnson (2010) on the relation between magic, morals and health; and Hsiao (1994) on the marketization of health systems; Markus and Benjamin (1997) on information technology; Williams (1980) and McCreery (1995) on advertising; Arnould, Price and Otnes (1999) and St. James, Handelman and Taylor (2011) on marketing and consumption practices; Dion and Arnould (2011) on luxury goods; and Moeran (2015) on fashion and fashion magazines. This essay owes much to exchanges I have had over the past two years with Timothy de Waal Malefyt, with whom I am in the process of editing a book titled *Magical Capitalism*. Thank you, Timothy. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on the first draft of this essay.

[2] In a variation on the condition of the performer, Gell (1992: 57) argued that "the magical attitude is a by-product of the rational pursuit of technical objectives using technical means."

(Mauss 1972: 43). But, is it his or her pertinent skill (eloquence in a politician, for example, or creativity in an advertising copywriter), or some other factor (an ability to manipulate personal networks, for instance) that persuades a public already primed by the nature of his profession to believe in the magician? Almost certainly, recognition takes place initially within a particular social world—of politics, finance, advertising, film production, and so on. But in modern societies, this public is in large part created and sustained by the media and its various producers. This means that we need to explore not just how, when, and where a magician performs his/her magic in front of whom, for what purpose, and with what results, but how what starts out as limited recognition seeps out into society as a whole, thanks to media attention, word of mouth, and social media buzz.

Let us now turn to magical *rites*. Every magical system includes one or more central operations in which the magician acts. An economic summit, a trading floor, an operating theatre, a film set, a court of law, a television talk show[3]—such magical rites are often "precisely those which, at first glance, seem to be imbued with the least amount of sacred power" (Mauss 1972: 9), although there are many other "tournaments of values" (Appadurai 1986; Moeran 2010) (an auction, a fashion collection, a museum exhibition, the Booker Prize, Academy and Grammy Awards) which are designed to configure and "consecrate" a particular field (of art, fashion, culture, literature, film and music) by means of magical performances (Bourdieu 1993: 120-125; Mauss 1972: 47; see also English 2005).[4] To be effective, creative and to *do* things (Mauss 1972: 19), such events also take place – like the World Economic Forum in Davos – in specially qualified places (art galleries, law courts, [operating] theatres, concert halls, stock exchanges) (ibid. p. 46).[5]

Magical rites like these are designed to effect *transformations* (in share prices, in a patient's health, in defining "fashion," in the interpretation of a political or criminal act), and thus tend to be strictly prescribed in terms of time, as well as location; they are performed regularly at particular times of the year (fashion "weeks," various awards ceremonies) or, if daily, within strictly controlled time limits (hence the opening and closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange). Magical rites,

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[3] Caitlin Zaloom (2006) and Laura Grindstaff (2002) have written perspicaciously on financial trading and television talk shows respectively. Katz (1981) and Whitehead et al (2002) have commented on ritual behaviour in the operating theatre, while, several decades earlier, Hortense Powdermaker (1951: 281-306) outlined ways in which she saw Hollywood film production as being imbued with magical thinking.

[4] See also Smith (1989) on auctions; Anand and Watson (2004) on the Grammy awards; and Anand and Jones (2008) on the Booker Prize.

[5] See Katz (1981: 336-7) for an example of how ritual space is divided up in a hospital surgical area.

like ritual in general, make use of, or themselves are, a form of language, which translates ideas and their *representations* to display magic's *effect* (a Bank of England fan chart, forecasting inflation [Holmes 2014: 22]; a Bank of Japan risk balance chart forecasting real GDP growth; a *Happy* perfume advertisement with a wide-mouthed, laughing woman looking happy). Almost invariably, the part is identified with the whole in a form of contiguous magic (fan and risk balance charts represent the [future] economy; use of a single product an entire state of being). This is what Mauss calls "the first law of magic" (Mauss 1972: 64; Tambiah 1968: 190).

So, too, with Mauss's second law of magical representation, that of similarity, in which like both produces and acts upon like, so that an object (a fan chart or perfume bottle) is designed, and able, to represent the whole (the economy or attractiveness) while also acting on it to make it happen. By so doing, the idea of the image assumes the nature of a symbol: a good economy signals financial security, political acceptance, employment, family contentment, and so on; attractiveness a carefree woman, happy, smiling, and not in any way participating in the economy (except as consumer). For both the economy and attractiveness to become *real*, rather than imaginary, it is sufficient for the magician to select a single quality (inflation, happiness), which can then be set in opposition (the third law of magical representation) to other selected qualities (bank rates and stock market price indices, for example, or seduction and romance) (Mauss 1972: 68-69).

Many forms of representation used in magical rites are verbal. Indeed, uttering words in the form of a spell is itself a ritual, which progresses from word to thought, to power, and finally to deed (Tambiah 1968: 175). This is why Malinowski (1922: 408) regards the "virtue, the force, the effective principle of magic" as lying in the spell. Whether we are looking at a beauty advertisement (*South Florida's fresh option for cosmetic medicine*), reading the latest pronouncement in a fashion magazine (*Galliano weaves magic at Haute Couture collection*), or watching a Bloomberg news video (*Is 2,500 the magic number in Shanghai?*), magic rites are used to:

> "Re-structure and integrate the minds and emotions of the actors. The technique combines verbal and non-verbal behaviour and exploits their special properties. Language is an artificial construct and its strength is that its form owes nothing to external reality: it thus enjoys the power to invoke images and comparisons, refer to time past and future and relate events which cannot be represented in action. Non-verbal action on the other hand, excels in what words cannot easily do—it can codify analogically by imitating real events, reproduce technical acts and express multiple implications simultaneously. Words excel in expressive enlargement, physical actions in realistic representation" (Tambiah 1968: 202).

Having laid out my understanding of Mauss's theory of magic, I will now illustrate my thesis that magic is alive and well in contemporary societies by offering seven scenarios of magical thinking and magical practices—ranging from cultural production to technology, by way of media, finance, government, education, and the socially underprivileged. I will finish by taking into account how the system of magicians, rites, and representations is *performed* in our everyday lives.

Scenario 1: Magical realism and the uncertainties of cultural production

In October 2015, hard on the heels of Paris Fashion Week, Suzy Menkes—who, at one stage at least, epitomised the nearest thing one could get to "objective" reporting in the fashion industry—praised Alber Elbaz, chief designer at Lanvin, for his "magical realism." Precisely where such magical realism was to be found was hard to judge. Was it in the "stretchy corsets [made] to fit snugly under a one-shoulder black dress with slits between the angular drapes?" Or in the designer's ability to "simplify the closet into an art form?"[6] Whatever, Menkes' take on magical realism seems a long way from that of another fashion designer, Tata Christiane, whose magical realism collection blurred "what is real and what is fiction" with "mocked mood, mixture of fabrics and motivs [*sic*]. Feathers and froufrou. Fantastic and marvellous. And Humour."[7]

Neither of these takes on magical realism bears much resemblance to its artistic and literary origins,[8] although (unless we are dedicated fashionistas) we would recognize that, in the world of fashion, magical realism speaks from the perspective of people who live in our world but experience a different reality from the one we call objective. In short, it endeavours to show us a world through the eyes of others. In this respect, we may note that fashion is often described in terms of magic, and the industry itself operates according to magical thinking (Moeran 2015). Designers are "magicians" or "shamans" who have "muses"; their

[6] Suzy Menkes, "#SuzyPFW: Lanvin—Magical realism." October 1, 2015. http://www.vogue.com.tw/suzymenkes/content_en.asp?ids=22294

[7] Tata Christiane, "Magical realism chapter 1." December 10, 2011. https://www.behance.net/gallery/2655981/Magical-Realism-Chapter-I-editorial

[8] Although first brought to public attention as "magic realism" by the German art critic, Franz Roh, "magical realism" was later applied to the work of South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabelle Allende, and was first enunciated in the field of fashion in a series of iconic photographs taken by Melvin Sokolsky in the mid-1960s. Sokolsky's influence can be seen today in the work of contemporary fashion photographers like Craig McDean, Steven Meisel, and Ryan McGinley.

collections are "magical" as they play with fantasy and reality; and fashion itself is all about "glamour"—an old Scottish word meaning "enchantment." In some ways not recognized by Menkes or Christiane, the fashion system may be rather close to magical realism, in that for it, too, time is not linear, causality is subjective, and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same. Even so, magical realism comes and goes in terms of critical consciousness: in this season, out the next—a fact which leads me to comment on the uncertainty characterizing not just fashion and the fashion industry, but cultural production in general.

The uncertainty of cultural production (by which I refer to the processes by which art, fashion, film, literature, music, performing arts, and video games are conceived, created, distributed, and sold) is first and foremost *financial*, since demand is uncertain and "nobody knows" (Caves 2000: 3) whether any creative product is ever going to be a "hit" or a "miss" (Bielby and Bielby 2004). Luciana Arrighi, Production Designer for the Merchant Ivory film *Howards End*, put it this way:

> "None of us ever know whether a film is going to be a success or not, and I think that's part of the magic of the film industry, because you know what is good or bad—or, at least, *I* can—but you *never* know whether it's going to hit the jackpot."

This financial uncertainty principle in cultural production is accompanied by another of what we may broadly define as "aesthetics." Magazine editors, stylists, photographers, fashion designers, and other creative personnel can rarely—if ever—be pinned down beforehand about the aesthetic choices that go into the structuring of a fashion magazine issue, the shooting of a fashion well, the selection of a model, and so on. They may try to stage things beforehand, but they are in fact looking for what Mario Testino has referred to as "unpremeditated magic" to make things happen. As Orson Welles once remarked of film: "As a film director I preside over uncertainty."

This *aesthetic* uncertainty (what Richard Caves [2000: 3-10], in his seminal work on creative industries, refers to as the *art for art's sake* property) stems in large part from the often unanticipated *transformations* that occur as mental concept takes on two- or three-dimensional form and is then re-used with its own internal transformations (witness a fashion magazine description of a collection: *A flourish of feathers turns a semi-long coat utterly seductive*). The fact that nobody is ever quite sure about how an inner vision will materialise during the creation of a product, nor how an audience will react to it, explains both aesthetic and financial uncertainty, while also adding to the finished product's perceived magical quality.

Like all forms of cultural production, making a fashion collection or editing a fashion magazine requires careful coordination of the diverse skills of designers, seamstresses, fabric cutters, editors, make-up artists,

photographers, publishers, layout artists, advertising managers, hair stylists, models, and so on and so forth. This is what Caves refers to as a *motley crew* property.

With every step along the way to completion, all the necessary personnel must come together and do their necessary work within an allotted time frame. This method of work organization involves considerable negotiation among the different creative people about how best to persuade their audience of the efficacy of their magical practices. Although all forms of cultural production are subject to hierarchical forms of management, there is still a lot of room for manoeuvring with regard to what the final product will look like, so that *social* uncertainty also prevails. Those involved in cultural production are never quite sure how others are going to react to their ideas and ways of doing things. It is within such a framework of uncertainties that the fashion, film, music, media, art, *anime* and other cultural industries operate.

Scenario 2: Media and the magic of football

Let us now turn to another kind of uncertainty: chance. In modern societies, as I suggested earlier, a magician's public is in large part created and sustained by the media and its various producers. Mainstream media report, primarily, the words and deeds of individuals and organizations seen to be central to the structure of a society (politics, the economy, education, healthcare, and, in the scenario that follows, sport). In that (in theory, at least) they check content and subject it to editorial scrutiny, mainstream media act as gatekeepers who "organize" magicians, together with their rites and representations—something we saw rather clearly at the end of the English Premier League football season in the late spring of 2016.

It is said that bookies tend to fit into two categories in their assessments of chance: those "who rely on putting endless amounts of 'big' data into algorithmic machines," in an effort to remove chance and luck from the equation; and those who "rely on experience, form, intuition, pundits and the history books."[9] Either way, their agreed calculation in August 2015, at the start of the football season in question, was that the odds against Leicester City winning the England football league premiership title were 5000-1. They were, perhaps, influenced by the facts that, first, Leicester had "miraculously" escaped relegation in the previous season; second, their new manager, Claudio Ranieri, "the nearly man", had been sacked by Greece that summer (for losing at home to the

[9] Mark Shapland, "As lucky punters collect on Leicester City winning the Premier League at 5,000-1, why did bookies offer such crazily high odds?" *This is Money.co.uk* , May 6, 2016. http://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/news/article-3571428/Why-did-bookies-offer-crazily-high-5-000-1-odds-Leicester-City.html

Faroe Islands), and had never won a top-flight title in his managing career; and third, the Premier League had been dominated by four clubs which had shared 22 of the 23 titles since its inauguration in 1992. Media gleefully pointed out that bookies were offering shorter odds on, for example, Britain's Prime Minister, David Cameron, being appointed manager of Aston Villa football club (2500-1); Elvis Presley being discovered alive (2000-1); Hugh Hefner admitting he is a virgin (1000-1); or Simon Cowell, of *X-Factor* and *American Idol* fame, becoming next Prime Minister after David Cameron (500-1).

Defying the odds, as by now many of us know, Leicester City won England's Premier League and was as a result referred to in the media as a "magical team."[10] But who was its magician? The manager who, with his imaginary bell ("Dilly ding! Dilly dong!"), "turned water into wine?"[11] Or the players—a solid "back four" who didn't believe in passing to one another, while others further forward were able to "conjure magic" out of their "twinkle-toes?" Or was it neither of these, but a long dead King of England, Richard III, whose reburial in Leicester in late March 2015 came immediately before the Foxes' revival (a nice example of contagious magic)?[12] Or should the credit go to a Thai Buddhist monk who, according to a Nigerian website, had been distributing "black magic" charms to the players and blessing the soccer pitch at the club's King Power Stadium over the previous three years?[13]

Not surprisingly, there was a rationalist backlash to all this, so that media commentators—like bookies—were divided into two camps. The rationalist camp argued that the romantic camp needed to be kept in check, and started to "debunk" the club's "miracle." Leicester City's success was about systems, its proponents said; not romance. The club succeeded because it invested in marginal gains, ranging from a pioneering scouting system to rotational fouling, aimed at reducing yellow cards.[14] The club was no different from the "Big Four" (that won

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[10] "European super league: Leicester City 'magic' deserving of place in super league." *BBC Sport*, April 5, 2016. http://www.bbc.com/sport/football/35968443

[11] "How Claudio Ranieri brought magic to Leicester City." *Financial Review*, May 7, 2016. http://www.afr.com/business/sport/how-claudio-ranieri-brought-magic-to-leicester-city-20160506-gontgd

[12] The "Foxes" is the nickname given to the Leicester City team. Gary Lineker, "nothing compares to this truly magical title charge by my Leicester City." *The Guardian*, March 13, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/mar/13/gary-lineker-leicester-city-premier-league-titlere

[13] "Revealed: Leicester City have been using black magic (charms) on opponents." *AllSoccer Planet*, March 15, 2016. http://www.allsoccerplanet.com/2016/03/revealed-leicester-city-have-been-using-black-magic-charm-on-opponents/

[14] Ed Smith, "The magic of Leicester City goes well beyond football." *The*

22 out of the previous 23 championship titles) in how it made use of new technology to analyse a mass of data on how players performed. What was hyped by the media as "magic," they continued, was in fact based upon data measurement, calculation, analysis, and rationalised strategy. This argument notwithstanding, media organizations—like those in the advertising industry (McCreery 1995)—were not ashamed of using magical explanations for events they could not otherwise explain.

Scenario 3: Politicians, Grexit, and the economy of appearances

In the late spring of 2016, Eurozone finance ministers agreed to extend further loans to Greece in what was then called "a major breakthrough" in an ongoing crisis. Or did they? It seemed at one point that nobody was quite sure. What people *are* now sure about is that Greece's entry into the Eurozone was surrounded by a bit of "creative accounting," or "magic," performed by the head of the country's statistical agency, who made inflation and the budget deficit disappear in order to meet Maastricht Treaty requirements that in future all members should have a budget deficit of below three per cent.[15] Once accepted into the "EU club," the country enjoyed lower interest rates and was able to borrow exorbitant amounts of money. Public debt ballooned to 113 per cent of GDP in 2009, and by April 2015 was estimated at around 175 per cent (and in May 2016, at 180 per cent!). Instead of reforming public finances, the Greek government borrowed more and more money to meet the deficit. In retrospect, it seems astonishing that banks queued up to lend. The markets did not believe there was a risk of default because Greece's currency, the Euro, was locked into that of Germany, and Germany has been the economic powerhouse of Europe—a situation which then led to calls for Germany, not Greece, to leave the Eurozone. One of two extremes had to go![16]

Further magical thinking was performed when a new government, under Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, threatened an exit from the currency union in order to get more of a pro-growth programme from its creditors, even as it undid some of the reforms those creditors had agreed with

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Guardian, April 30, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/apr/30/leicester-city-rise-premier-league-football-capitalism

[15] Alan Little, "How 'magic' made Greek debt disappear before it joined the Euro." BBC News, February 3, 2012. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16834815

[16] "Why it's time for Germany to leave the Eurozone." *The Daily Telegraph*, May 28, 2016. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11752954/Why-its-time-for-Germany-to-leave-the-eurozone.html It turns out, however, that the UK is the country that has opted out of the EU. For a discussion of the magical practices that took place during the run-up to the Referendum in June 2016, see my short editorial in *Anthropology Today* (Moeran 2016).

previous governments in return for Greece's first two bailouts. When this failed, a new magical performance took place, as Tsipras and EU officials tried to stretch the limits of their audience's rational calculations by conjuring the possibility of the country's revitalised economic performance in the future. Arguments against further debt relief were supported by the idea that Greece's borrowings, while astronomical, came with such good terms, at below-market rates, that what appeared to be a debt level of 200 per cent of GDP was really more like 150 per cent of GDP in net present value terms. In other words, the debt load was actually quite manageable if those concerned pretended that Greece could pay it all back *right now* at the time the bail-out was offered.[17] This time, in an "economy of appearances," politicians and bankers engaged in a performance that was both economic and dramatic, just as the Bre-X gold strike in Indonesia, described by Anna Tsing, was "a drama, a conjuring trick, an illusion"—a "self-conscious making of a spectacle" that was "a necessary aid to gathering investment funds" (Tsing 2000: 118).

Bre-X, Brexit and Grexit[18] all followed a script seemingly based on rational arguments, rather than on what were in fact magical premises. "Magic, rather than strict description, calls capital" (Tsing 2000: 120). Politicians, economists, analysts, regulators, and media all participated in a conjuring trick in which spectacle and mystery played with reality as the charisma of the performers (Alexis Tsipras, Angela Merkel) moved their audience (financial institutions, the Greek people) beyond the limits of rational calculation (Tsing 2000: 118, 127) in an attempt to shore up the financial, and with it the organizational, uncertainty of the EU and its future.

Scenario 4: Magical Words at the World Economic Forum, Davos

Not for nothing is Davos still referred to as *The Magic Mountain*. Every year, in those conditions of transparency and opacity, secrecy and publicity, revelation and concealment which characterize all magical acts (Garsten and Sörbom 2016; Taussig 2003), senior executives of global corporations, heads of state, NGOs, Nobel Prize winners, Forbes List billionaires, pop singers, private-equity hedge fund managers, human rights activists, an occasional "royal" or Pope, and various other selected leaders of civil society gather at the World Economic Forum (W.E.F.) for a

[17] Tim Fernholz, "How to magically erase Greek debt with one simple trick." *Quartz*, August 17, 2015. http://qz.com/480987/how-to-magically-erase-greek-debt-with-one-simple-trick/

[18] We might here note the magical quality of the letter X which signifies, among other things, the Christian cross, the mark on a ballot paper, an illiterate's signature, a mathematical variable, and television programmes with mystical contents or outcomes, like the *X Files* and *X Factor*.

few days in order to "improve the state of the world"—a mission statement that is sometimes interpreted as "don't offend anyone."[19]

Each meeting has its theme: "The Fourth Industrial Revolution" (2016), "Resilient Dynamism" (2013), or "The Great Transformation" (2012)—the last a magical (and, in the context of Karl Polanyi's book by the same title, somewhat ironical) attempt by government and business magicians to face the fact that "capitalism no longer fits the world around us."

W.E.F. now publishes a selection of "inspirational quotes" every year. These include banalities such as: "Innovation is an inexhaustible engine for economic development" (Li Kequiang, Premier of the PRC) and "Higher education is the strongest, sturdiest ladder to increased socio-economic mobility" (Drew Faust, President, Harvard University); and somewhat more surprising lines like: "Coming out has made me a better leader" (Beth Brooke Marciniak, Global Vice Chair of Public Policy, EY), and "We've heard a lot about the Internet of things—I think we need an Internet of women" (Christine Lagarde, IMF Managing Director). We would probably underline such statements heavily in red ink if our students were to write them in their term essays, but in the context of Davos our suspect students are indeed transformed into wizards.

What emerges most strongly is the fact that "Davos" (a metonymic substitution characteristic of magic [Tambiah 1985: 36]) is a "talkfest"—"an exercise in corporate speed dating" where "the faster you walk, the more important you are"[20]—where words, thoughts, power, and the occasional deed come together in an annual rite, or tournament of values (Moeran 2010). The language used at Davos is "a mixture of corporate jargon, future-fixation and deployment of airy concepts intended to convey prescient wisdom."[21] Thus do we read about "drilling down," "catalysing multi-stakeholder value," "playing in every vertical," and "navigating a circular economy." We learn, too, of "the resilience imperative," "equalitability," "unrecruitment," "global burn-out syndrome," and "hardwire competitiveness"[22]–phrases designed through their obscurity to make ordinary people think that those participating must be smart and know what they are doing—even though, by many

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[19] "A few truths about Davos." *Davos Newbies*. http://www.davosnewbies.com/posts/a-few-truths-about-davos/

[20] Nick Paumgarten, "Magic Mountain: What happens at Davos?" *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2012. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/03/05/magic-mountain

[21] A.McE. "The language of power. The World Economic Forum has its own distinctive language." *The Economist*, January 26, 2014. http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2014/01/davos-speak?fsrc=scn/fb/wl/bl/languageofpower

[22] Ibid.

accounts, it is the participants themselves who have caused the inequality that they proclaim must be overcome.[23] Their words, then, are sacred and "possess a special kind of power not normally associated with ordinary language" (Tambiah 1985: 22) because—like Buddhist monks using the dead Pali language in rituals in northeast Thailand—they violate their communicative function by creating neologisms out of the dead language of Latin (and occasional Ancient Greek). Even though they are uttered by the anointed high priests of government, politics, business, and pop culture, their magical power should not be attributed to the speakers themselves (however elevated their status). Rather, it resides in their words, which become effective only because they are uttered in a very special context of other action—the World Economic Forum at Davos (Tambiah 1985: 18).

Scenario 5: University rankings performing education

According to the *Times Higher Education* (*THE*), Oxford University displaced the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) as the top ranked university in the world in 2016-17. They were followed by Stanford and Cambridge Universities, and then MIT. Among Asian universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS) came in at 24, Peking University at 29, Tsinghua University at 35, the University of Tokyo at 39, and the University of Hong Kong (HKU) at 43=.[24] At least one other ranking system for universities competes with that of the *THE*. The QS World University Rankings, for example, says that MIT is Number 1, followed by Stanford, Harvard, Cambridge, CalTech, and Oxford. In this "system," NUS came in at 12, HKU at 27, and Tokyo University at 34.

The criteria used by the *THE* to arrive at these rankings include teaching, international outlook, industry income, research, and citations (in that order), and would seem to include other factors such as the number of FTE (Full Time Equivalent) students, student/staff and female/male ratios. QS, on the other hand, refers to academic reputation, employer reputation, faculty student ratios, international faculty, international students, and citations per faculty.

QS also operates a "star" system, independent of rankings, which is based on: (1) "core criteria" of teaching, employability, research, and internationalization (with between four and seven "indicators" for each); (2) learning environment (facilities and online/distance learning); (3) specialist criteria (discipline ranking and accreditation); and (4)

[23] "Davos geniuses ill-equipped to recognize economic structural problems, address inequality." Interview with Curtis Ellis, *RT*. January 22, 2015. https://www.rt.com/op-edge/225039-economy-davos-switzerland-rich/

[24] https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/world-university-rankings-2016-2017-results-announced

"advanced criteria" (social responsibility, innovation, arts & culture, inclusiveness). Universities are invited to apply for "star rating" to help their branding, marketing, student recruitment, employment placements, increased media awareness, and other similar administrative exercises.

What is clear here is that such criteria must be reducible to numbers, and it is such numbers that are indicative of magical thinking in that they imply persuasive (not predictive) analogies between indicators, rankings, and the quality of university education. Their aim of "like attracts like" (good universities attract good teachers, good researchers, good students, and vice versa) is a typical example of sympathetic and contagious magic that allows rankings to be *constitutive*. Like Bank of England fan charts and economic activity (Holmes 2014: 23), rankings and star ratings create education—which is a non-quantifiable experience—as an empirical fact. They are a set of instruments contributing to the construction of educational settings, actors, and institutions (Mackenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007: 3-4); they define the "value" of research (through citation indices); oblige scholars to publish in journals (which are themselves ranked and give points to researchers who publish in them) (see Brenneis 2016); encourage the formation of mutual back-slapping cliques (who use mutual citation to establish their worth); and discourage innovative thinking that does not conform to the core of a discipline. In this sense, then, statistics do indeed *transform* what is accepted as tertiary education (Didier 2007: 302). To adapt something said by Michel Callon (2009: 19): there are no effects of—or *on*—knowledge without well-designed interventions. The issue, then, is not what criteria (for example: teaching, research, citation indices, A/B list journals) we should use to define university *education*, but how behaviours, institutions, *agencements*, and rules of the game affecting university education are *learned*. In short, we are dealing with—and my apologies for such a bastardization of the English language—"educationization"; in other words, with how "education" appears (Callon 2009: 22).

Rankings, and the accompanying arguments surrounding their presence, are a fine example of how a magical rite is *performative*. In other words, they cannot be described merely as *saying* something, since they also *do* it. In this sense, they are illocutionary acts (Austin 1975) which, simply by being published every year, have consequences and effect change (in terms of faculty hirings, student numbers, research grants, external funding, and so on). Like ritual acts in general, rankings cannot be subjected to verification and, besides acting as a control mechanism on researchers, "are often geared to achieving practical results" (Tambiah 1985: 81, 83). This is the function of university rankings and all other forms of measurement that currently "bedevil" higher education.

Scenario 6: GPS and the enchantment of technology

In February 2016, an American tourist in Iceland, Noel Santillon, directed the GPS unit in his rental car to guide him from Keflavik International Airport to a hotel in nearby Reykjavik.[25] Many hours and more than 250 icy miles later, he pulled over in Siglufjordur, a fishing village on the outskirts of the Arctic Circle. Although he had "an inkling that something might be wrong"—on the way north he had seen signs showing that Reykjavik was in the other direction—he later said that he had "put his faith in the GPS."[26] Although his error was initially one of spelling (an extra letter *r* in the name of the street in which his hotel was to be found), Mr. Santillon is not the only person who has placed absolute faith in GPS technology. A group of Japanese tourists in Western Australia wound up in the middle of Moreton Bay at high tide, when they insisted on following their car's GPS instructions to turn onto a submerged causeway (only visible and possibly passable at low tide), rather than drive across a bridge (visible at all times) to their island destination (*Figure 5*). Other drivers have ended up in a swamp, a river, a pile of sand, and a cherry tree by obeying their GPS.[27] A woman in Belgium, who asked the GPS in her car to take her to pick up a friend at a station near Brussels less than two hours away, turned up in Croatia two days (and 900 miles) later.[28]

What is going on here? Alfred Gell (1988, 1992) has argued that one way human beings distinguish themselves from other species is by their technological capabilities. We use—sometimes simple, sometimes complex—technical means to form a bridge between a set of "given" elements (the body, for instance, or a base material, or environmental feature), and a goal that we want to achieve by making use of these givens (the achievement of beauty, for instance, or the perfection of alchemy, or saving the rain forest).

One of the technologies that we often use is that of *enchantment*.

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[25] I am grateful to Timothy Malefyt for sharing with me some of the examples and ideas described here.

[26] Dan Bilefsky, "GPS mix-up brings wrong turn – and celebrity – to American in Iceland." *The New York Times*, February 4, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/world/europe/iceland-american-tourist-gps.html?_r=0

[27] Robert Wabash, "Nine car accidents caused by Google Maps & GPS." *Ranker*. http://www.ranker.com/list/9-car-accidents-caused-by-google-maps-and-gps/robert-wabash?var=5&utm_expid=16418821-201.EEIZkBszS3O1rZiBcoCRjg.2&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com.hk%2F

[28] Sara Malm, "Belgian woman blindly drove 900 miles across Europe as she followed broken GPS instead of 38 miles to the station." *Mail Online*, January 14, 2013. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2262149/Belgian-woman-67-picking-friend-railway-station-ends-Zagreb-900-miles-away-satnav-disaster.html

The technology of enchantment, he says, is probably *the* most sophisticated psychological weapon we use to exert control over the thoughts and actions of other human beings, because it "exploits innate or derived psychological biases to enchant the other person and cause him/her to perceive social reality in a way favourable to the social interests of the enchanter" (Gell 1988: 7).

Clearly, technology enchants; it has the power of casting a spell over us (Gell 1992: 163). In this respect, there is no basis for an opposition between the technical and the magical (Gell 1988: 6) for all the drivers mentioned above were enchanted by their GPS to perceive reality the way in which their GPS wanted them to perceive it (p. 7). At the same time, the symbolic media commentary on their mishaps can border on magical thinking ("inkling," "faith," "blindly followed," "distracted"). In this way, technology, together with its media reporting, sustains magic (p. 9).

And yet the enchantment that took place does not fit Gell's idea that the technology of enchantment is for *social* purposes, aimed at controlling the thoughts and actions of other people (Malefyt 2017). Rather, it is uniquely *personal*, involving individual people's idiosyncratic ways of using the technology in their cars. A GPS is like IT—information technology whose implementation, it is believed, can transform an organization's work practices. By purchasing the appropriate software programmes, both line managers and IT specialists are convinced that IT will magically bring about organizational change. What they fail to realise is that this "magic bullet" does not—indeed, *cannot*—ensure that users will use IT (or a GPS system) as intended (Markus and Benjamin 1997: 59). No gun fires itself; it needs someone to pick it up, aim at a target, and squeeze the trigger. Some people, as we have just seen when it comes to GPS navigation, are not very good at firing. They take aim, but somehow (through inattention or inadvertence) fire at the wrong target and, in so doing, allow their enchantment with technology to overrule common sense.

Scenario 7: Magical transformations of social inferiors

Popular culture has always had an interest in magical beings—as the fairly recent fad for *Harry Potter* books has reminded us. I will, however, look further afield to illustrate this point.[29] Japanese popular literature

[29] One of the reviewers of my original submission to the *JBA* seemed surprised that I should choose a non-Western example in this magical scenario. Perhaps I should remind my readers of two things: first, a journal of business anthropology should be looking at trading practices *beyond* the Western hemisphere; second, Japan is an advanced capitalist society where many of the scenarios provided here are also to be found. The same may be said, to some degree at least, of China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and other Asian countries. What we need to research is whether the degree to which they are found there is the same, and in

has for many centuries incorporated magical beings into one or other of its numerous forms. From Kaguyahime (in the tenth century *Taketori no Monogatari*) to the contemporary animation series, *Sailor Moon*, by way of medieval literature characters like Momotarō, we encounter magical beings who come from or battle with other worlds, and who transform themselves and/or others during the process.[30] Such transformations can be in terms of material well-being—as when the discovery of Kaguyahime and Momotarō leads to great wealth on the part of the poverty-stricken, childless, old couples who found them and brought them up. They almost invariably involve a transformation from childhood to adulthood—witness the girl heroines of contemporary *anime*, *Minky Momo* and *Creamy Mami*, who share the magical ability to morph into grown-up images of themselves (as a fairy princess and pop idol, respectively).

In one respect, such magical transformations focus on gender relations in Japan: Kaguyahime is a young woman beset by suitors (including the Emperor) asking for her hand in marriage, but whom she successfully rebuts; *Sailor Moon*'s magical warriors are Japan's symbols of "girl power," battling evil on their own, without the leadership of men. Many contemporary magical girl (*mahō shōjo*) *manga* and *anime* allow young girls not just to fantasize about adulthood, but temporarily to experience it before returning to their childhood lives. Magic is used to bridge the gap between girls' real selves and their ideal of young womanhood as they "start coming to grips with social norms of feminine beauty and sexuality" (Sugawa 2015).

At the same time, the introduction of magical beings into popular culture often accompanies the uncertainties of major social change.[31] The story of Kaguyahime, the moon princess who is courted by the Emperor of Japan, might be interpreted as an allegory of the arrival of Buddhism in Japan and its inevitable clash with the native religion of Shintō; the *manga* heroine, Sally the Witch (*Mahōtsukai Sarī* [1966]), who also comes from another distant world, represents a potent metaphor for Japan's westernization and modernization in its high-growth period, as Sally brings novelty and transformation to the world of humans (Japan) from a

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which sectors of society magical practices are prevalent.

[30] Kaguyahime appears in various media forms: manga (*Kimimaro Kaguya*), anime (*Kaguya Sumeragi*), computer games (*Kaguya Hōraisan*), and video games (*Kaguya Nanbi*). Momotarō was a popular character representing the Japanese Government in Japanese World War II films, as it fought against "American devils" (*oni*). The character is also found in contemporary anime (*Mahō no Princess Minky Momo*) and video games (*Momotarō Densetsu*).

[31] This suggests that current uncertainties surrounding results of the EU Referendum in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA may give rise to a proliferation of magical performances (see, for example, Moeran 2016).

remote and magical realm (the West).

From poverty to wealth, from diminutive and nondescript schoolgirl to long-legged beauty, from pre-pubescent girl to eroticised super-warrior, the magical transformations wrought on behalf of the socially underprivileged in Japanese popular culture extend into other areas of gender uncertainty: female empowerment, maternal nurturing, and the rejection of heterosexual relations in favour of lesbian-themed girls' love (*yuri*) (in, for example, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica*) (Sugawa 2015).

It goes without saying, of course, that female characters in Japanese popular visuals bear little resemblance to real-life women in Japan, even though "the magical girl genre has been an active site of contesting ideas surrounding gender roles and identities" (Saito 2014: 145). What is perhaps interesting is Saito's assertion that the magical girl genre is driven by the marketing strategies of major toy companies, like Bandai, which capitalise on gender-divided sales of character merchandise and gadgets used by characters in television anime programmes (ibid. p. 144). In other words, the magical exploits of *Sailor Moon*'s Tsukino Usagi (literally Rabbit from the Moon) and other magical girl characters at the level of popular cultural content are not used to reveal, but to skilfully conceal (Taussig 2003: 298), the trickery of another magical practice: that of marketing.

This, maybe, is what magic is all about. Overtly about uncertainty and unpredictability, magical practices actually *conceal* more important issues, while partially revealing them. Politicians in Western countries use magic to conceal the fact that democracy (or socialism or communism) does *not* work on behalf of even a majority—let alone all—of the people in their everyday lives. Cultural producers talk of magic in their practices to conceal the fact that in general they are beset by aesthetic, social, and financial constraints or affordances that make it very difficult for them to work creatively (Moeran 2014). Their magical explanations also disguise the fact that the "culture" they produce is *only* made up of commodities. Governments perform "education" as a set of institutional measurements in order to cover up its primary aim: to move young people seamlessly into jobs at the expense of freedom of thought and untrammelled learning—both of which can be dangerous to a society's *status quo*. Magic, in short, plays with the extent to which we have never been modern (Meyer and Pels 2003) and our belief that the modern world, as Weber argued, is truly disenchanted (Latour 1993: 114). Like belief, we use magic to reinforce our *delusions*, by referring to:

> "The process that allows one to keep an official theory at the furthest possible distance from its informal practice, without any relationship between the two except for the passionate, anxious, and meticulous care taken to maintain the separation."

(Latour 2010: 24)

Performing Magic

The foregoing scenarios are intended to provoke thought, rather than act as definitive theoretical analyses of magical practices at work. What they all illustrate, however, is that magicians *perform* their rites and representations. If we say, with Appadurai (2015: 49), that not just financiers, but advertising agencies, architects, CEOs, consultants, entrepreneurs, fashion designers, heads of state, lawyers, marketers, and NGOs, among others, channel the workings of uncertainty so that they can become winners in what is a game of risk, then just *how* they do so needs to be examined (Holmes 2014; Moeran 2015; Vangkilde 2012). In other words, as well as asking how magicians become recognized as such, we need to examine how magic is *performed* in contemporary capitalist societies.

Let us start with the way in which language (or rhetoric [McCloskey 1998]) is used to perform an action by being spoken (what Austin [1975: 5-6] referred to as an "illocutionary act"). That "saying something makes it true" (Searle 1998: 115) is something I argued in my example of university rankings. It is an approach taken by Douglas Holmes (2014) and Arjun Appadurai (2015) in their accounts of central bankers and traders in derivatives respectively, as well as rather more generally in his discussion of markets and the economy by Michel Callon (2009).[32] As Holmes (2014: 13) notes, performative utterances may be analytical (*The variance of* unexpected *risk accounts for most of the total returns*), representational (*The faces of China's new philanthropy*),[33] or instrumental (*Billionaire hedge fund manager predicts "exceptional" trading opportunity*). Designed to manage expectations, they are the tools of every magician's trade as they work in a "magical space" (Appadurai 2015: 19).

Very often, like the Azande, whose attributions of witchcraft to all forms of misfortune were made famous by Evans-Pritchard, modern magicians make use of material substances—ranging from fan charts to fabrics, by way of written legal contracts (Westbrook 2016), conceptual models (Roberts 2014), statistics, and logos—to perform their spells, for "in the substance lies the mystical power which produces the desired end" (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 441). Hence we find Bank of England

[32] Given that Austin's analysis of performative utterances took into account both speaker and audience in what Holmes (2014) refers to as "a communicative field," I find it hard to accept Callon's (2009: 19) neologism of "co-performation," which, however much he may argue to the contrary, strikes me as redundant.

[33] The Bank of England's fan charts described by Douglas Holmes are an excellent example of representational performativity.

pronouncements like "the forecast represented by the MPC's fan chart is a key input to policy decisions" (Holmes 2014: 22); and fashion magazines proclaiming the merits of *frivolous chiffon* or *sexy silk*, while *distressed fabrics and handcrafted detailing are the latest in survivor chic*.

Magic is also a form of expressive performance that relies on the production of transformative action to overcome the unpredictability of the human condition. The purpose of performance is to effect transformation, both symbolized and actualized (Schnechner 1988: 118-119), as we saw in my example of Japanese popular cultural forms. Magic is performed symbolically as invisible power by "charismatic magicians" in encounters with "the murky and the uncertain," and is actualized as a prime source for motivating something *in* participants to appear "true" when "dealing with fundamental dilemmas of the human situation" (Graeber 2012: 34). Magical practices assume that their audiences are not stagnant, but rather implement the received effects of the transformation, thereby validating the performance, performer, and participants themselves.

Coda

The question you may now ask yourselves is this: has the argument presented here that many forms of capitalist enterprise—from economic prediction to cultural production—are, more often than not, magical—has this argument transformed your own thinking about such things and the ways they are performed? If so, then you will be obliged to recognize that I, too, am a magician who has kept you spellbound during the magical academic rite of what was first a keynote lecture, before being transformed into an international, blind peer-reviewed, academic publication.

Such self-flattery, however, raises another issue that researchers in the world of business anthropology would do well to ponder (and, hopefully, act upon). The examples of magical practices given here range from fashion to popular culture—by way of sports, finance, politics, academia, and technology. In short, it seems that magical practices might be found in almost *every*thing social. In other words, potentially, *any*one can become a magician; *any*thing can be perceived as "magical." I have a suspicion that this may well be true. What we need, therefore, are studies of the different social worlds in which magical persons and practices are found, so that we can then determine whether there are differences among them—differences that are meaningful enough to make the anthropological theory of magic worth developing and applying to contemporary business situations.

As readers of the *JBA*, you might like to ponder this. As consulting anthropologists, you might also consider whether a theory of magic is a useful way to examine and explain certain kinds of business behaviour

and, if so, whether your clients—who imagine themselves to be rational—will be persuaded by arguments pointing out that they aren't! For this, of course, you will yourselves need to become magicians, with your own special rites and representations. As we all now know from our experiences with mainstream and social media, performance is everything!

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