



Magic and Modernity

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Abstract

Witchcraft and magic are often presented as ‘a thing of the past’, as irrational remnants of a less civilized age from which modern man has distanced himself. This claim is deceiving, however, for magic remains deeply rooted in modern society and cannot be so easily dismissed. David Martin and Peter Geschiere discuss the complex concepts of witchcraft and magic, presenting them in a manner that is both accessible and innovative. They offer alternatives as to how these concepts can be approached and studied, and indicate how future research can benefit from more accurate and at the same time less refined definitions of witchcraft and magic.

Keywords: magic, witchcraft

Books Reviewed

Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in comparison* (Chicago, 2013); David Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Magic and the Sacred* (London, 2011).

According to the latest research, man has not noticeably changed over the past 70,000 years. Still we are taught that major differences exist between modern people and people from the past. These differences are not natural, based on biology, but constructed; they tell us more about the prejudices of historians and anthropologists than about the matter at hand. Focusing on magic and fantastical beliefs, the books under review here both take issue with the presumed dissimilarity between modern

and premodern man. Are magic and witchcraft characteristic only of our premodern ancestors, or are they also embedded in modern society?

Peter Geschiere skilfully approaches the intimidating concepts of witchcraft, intimacy and trust, delivering a comparison over multiple cultures and periods that combines anthropology with history. Relevant to both fields of study, his book is challenging in the sense that readers need to familiarize themselves with both historical and anthropological expertise. Despite the complexity and highly theoretical nature of the subject, it has been written in an accessibly way, demanding only a minimum of prior knowledge.

Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust provides a refreshing image of witchcraft in modern African society and its connection to intimacy and trust. Even though magic appears to be fantastical and limitless in its applications, it is often a source of distrust and even violence. Magic is presented as a way to deal with the distrust that comes with intimacy. After all, a knife in the back can only come from close by. In this book, however, the knife is invisible, and the crime unprovable. As Geschiere puts it, even when it is trying to heal, witchcraft's 'power to heal could be withheld'. Distrust, then, is inherently connected to witchcraft. Geschiere explores the African cases, comparing them to similar instances in other regions and times, to argue that Africa is not fundamentally 'other' than, say, Europe, in its belief in witchcraft. David Martin's *Curious Visions of Modernity* presents history in a very similar way. He concludes that the premodern and the modern are not mutually exclusive, despite often being presented as such.

If history is written by the victors then the history of science sometimes seems to be an empire of victors alone. In *Curious Visions of Modernity*, David Martin presents an innovative view on the gathering and structuring of knowledge, on knowledge itself and on the discourses in which knowledge is currently presented and discussed. He employs what he dubs as 'an archaeology of collection' to counter colleagues who solely write on the history of collection, often producing one-dimensional historical surveys of modern museums. Instead, Martin shows that, for example, presenting history in a chronological order deceives the reader by forcing on him a historical logic that really is not there. Through an in-depth analysis of objects and spaces related to the history of science, seemingly without any logical order, Martin unveils the incoherencies that unavoidably fall between the lines of a

heterogenized presentation of history. It is with an apparent ease that Martin connects the dots between apparently unrelated cases, offering an elegant and eloquent addition to the ever-growing literature on the history of the philosophy of science.

The book is loosely structured, rather like an early modern *Kunstkammer*. Martin purposely neglects to provide a logical or thematic structure, as this would present the past as somehow coherent or homogeneous. In doing so, Martin attempts to transcend the ordinary reader/writer relationship, in which the reader gobbles up what the writer is feeding him. Readers are challenged to ‘bring to the text their own interpretations, and inflections, and their own discursive wanderings’. This means that the reader has to contribute and can bring his own expertise to the table to create a further argument. It also means that the book is a time-consuming read.

Martin’s emotional style at times appears a little dense, despite its undeniable fluidity. For example, Martin introduces the ‘curiosities’ through which he plans to make his point by explaining:

these curiosities seemed to share a common relationship to the discourses and regimes of vision; discourses that have increasingly come to be seen as characterising and galvanizing our very understanding of Western modernity. Individually, each of these curiosities shone as a treasured item disclosing to me, their collector, a near magical ability to reveal and illuminate something lingering there in the very structures of Western scientific knowledge; something of a shadow of forgotten ways of knowing and being, haunting the homogenized and transparent surfaces of a scientific modernity triumphantly proclaiming its own “Enlightenment.”

Martin gets his point across, but a less-focussed reader will be in danger of getting lost.

Both Geschiere and Martin present their arguments convincingly. Geschiere emphasizes individual cases and refrains from drawing a more general conclusion on magic in Africa. While we learn that in Cameroon alone several hundred languages exist and that each possesses its own nuanced sentiments regarding magic, such an approach makes it hard to say anything about an ‘African’ concept of magic. Although this may leave the reader somewhat unsatisfied, it does empower Geschiere’s suggestion that the humanities should avoid using

rigid definitions of the concepts tackled in his book, since both culture and language never cease to change. The author spent several decades working in Cameroon as an anthropologist, and anecdotes based on his own experiences provide the book not just with strong emotions, but also humour and, by making clear that witchcraft has serious consequences, a sense of gravity. For example, we learn that when a member of a tribe in Cameroon is accused of using magic against his kin, he or she is not just subjected to a prejudiced form of justice, but also in danger of becoming an outcast or even of losing his or her life. The ‘selling’ of a close relative to witches to gain certain powers or become rich and successful – effectively resulting in the death of the relative – is a current problem in parts of Africa. If a family member dies of fever around the time you start having success in life, you’d better have a good alibi.

Even though Martin’s book tells a less coherent story than Geschiere’s, his arguments are no less convincing. Through examples given from the history of science, the world of museums, anthropology, cultural history and archaeology, Martin’s book has a potentially broad audience. The book is remarkable for its interdisciplinary approach, offering readers arguments from various fields and putting them on a higher theoretical plane. The book is a sublime contribution to the history of science.

Both studies undermine the claim that the premodern and the modern are separate things, as if they were two very different ages or two highly distinctive cultures. The authors do not argue that their subjects are culturally modern or premodern; they allow these qualities to coexist. With *Witchcraft Intimacy and Trust*, Geschiere answers the call of historians like Giorgy Szönyi for an approach to historical problems using anthropological methods.¹ Historians would be wise to take into account Geschiere’s discussion of the problems of definition that surround every form of magic. Martin’s *Curious Visions of Modernity* can almost be read as a manual for scholars of history who want to get a firm grip on what it means to present history, even if you do not intend to present it in a certain light. Whether one runs a museum, writes a PhD or debates the value of history as an academic field of study, history demands to be presented.

For some readers, the combination of magic, modernity, trust and science might seem odd or even forced. But the exact opposite is the case. The links between these seemingly unconnected subjects have

just not been given the attention they deserve. The answer to frequently asked questions like ‘why did the seventeenth century usher in an age of rationality?’ turns out to be that it didn’t. There was, and is, no rigid divide between the premodern and the modern, the rational and the irrational. These two books should be seen as chaperones that can help modern readers better to understand just how civilized irrationality is, and how modern the premodern age really was.

Note

- 1 G. Szönyi, *John Dee’s Occultism. Magical exaltation through powerful signs* (New York, 2004).

About the Author

Frank Bouman-van Veen studied history at Utrecht University, specializing in the late medieval and early modern occult sciences. He leads the compliance department for a major cash management company, besides working as a historically themed motivational speaker. Often appearing at corporate events, Bouman applies historical answers to modern problems, looking for opportunities to apply history to the commercial world and make it more accessible to a non-specialist audience. E-mail: frank-bouman@hotmail.com