

## BOOK REVIEW

### Magical mystery tour-de-force

**Magic and the Will to Science: A Political Anthropology of Liminal Technicality**, Agnes Horvath (2024) Routledge, London, £135 (hardback) 218pp. ISBN 978-1032457369

Agnes Horvath has written about politics, sociology and the social functions of tricksters and other subversive forces. She appears well qualified to discuss the social function of magic, especially if, as the title of her book suggests, this function is associated with the social function of science. Magic and science are socially significant in pursuit of advantage through arcane knowledge and, usually, forces unperceived by the laity. The only problem with the title is that magic is a thing, while the ‘will to science’ is presumably a human psychological state. Is Horvath comparing apples with a lust for oranges? Surely in the course of this book, all will be made clear. Unfortunately, all is not made clear.

Horvath bases her thesis on the mysterious pre-Socratic Greek intellectual Empedocles whose fragmentary writings are not widely known; the quotes she gives are gnomic. She bases part of her opening thesis on a play by Plautus, the Roman Republican playwright. So, one writer whose truth is not verifiable and one writer whose work does not depend on truth, both writers probably unfamiliar to many readers, but both treated as sources of verity. This is problematic.

Horvath’s insights include sentences like ‘[t]he language of magic uses the hazy vocabulary of infinite unconsciousness’ (p.10). A hazy vocabulary might be discernible, but what is infinite unconsciousness? How can unconsciousness, infinite or not, generate a vocabulary, unless Horvath is talking about the magical nonsense words of the dreamer in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*? (Actually, Joyce doesn’t appear in the book.)

A problem pervading the book is that it treats magic as a single entity about which indiscriminating generalizations may be made. Opening the book at random one finds: ‘Annihilation is the main concern of magic’ (p.57). This arises from a claim made more tentatively on the previous page, that magic is about ‘voiding the properties and characteristics of integrities’. Consider a simple magical rite, the Christian ceremony of Holy Communion, where a piece of unleavened bread and a sip of liquid are transformed into the flesh and blood of the founder of Christianity, or symbolize the flesh and blood of the founder of Christianity. In the former case the properties and characteristics of the integrity of the bread and liquid are supposedly changed to display the magical power of the Supreme Being. In the latter case, the properties and the characteristics of the materials remain unchanged, but by participating in the action they supposedly enable the celebrant to commune with the Supreme Being and access the Supreme Being’s magical power. In neither case is anything annihilated.

The same is true of magical alchemy; lead might become gold, or sperm and faeces might become a living being, so the properties and characteristics of some ‘integrity’ generate other properties and characteristics. The consequences of magic are not supposed to be flux or annihilation, or how could magic have any meaningful effect? Horvath’s claims about magic are clearly falsifiable as general rules. Horvath often relies on what she assumes to be relics of prehistoric magic, such as disputable claims about the architecture of ancient settlements or the ornaments of ancient caves. In these cases her claims about magic are not verifiable, and hence arguably meaningless.

Horvath’s lack of coherence about magic might be a product of the field, magic being necessarily mysterious and elusive. Unfortunately, her claims about science and technology are no better. She refers to the ‘snake-like appearance of sensuals’ (p.29); ‘sensuals’ appears to be a neologism for the sensory nervous system and its perceptual peripheries. She claims that this has been known about ‘from time eternal’, offering no evidence except the appearance of what may be snake imagery in neolithic sites. However, nerves do not look like snakes, nor was their physiological function known until recently. Hence Horvath’s insistence that an ancient Anatolian sculpture must

refer to sensuals is baseless. She exploits the trappings of biology and archaeology to create an illusion of coherence in the service of – what? It is difficult to perceive an argument.

Horvath does not restrict herself to the physical sciences in this regard. She declares that Marx and Engels, in the *Communist Manifesto*, were ‘evoking delirious effluences’ (p.60), words which Horvath nowhere coherently explains, in pursuit of ‘a clear distortion of civilisational proportions’ (p.61). One might argue that any work of propaganda is liable to embody distortions and arouse emotions which a hostile observer might deem ‘delirious’. But when Horvath alludes to the two ‘enthusiasts of delirium’ (p.61), she ignores the fact that the *Manifesto* is a response to a real revolutionary outburst across Europe driven by real oppression by a corrupt and brutal ruling class. No delirium or distortion was required.

At times, Horvath’s deployment of scientific phraseology is self-evidently absurd. Some archaeologists hold that the death rate increased in the Eurasian Neolithic (Horvath essentially ignores other continents). Horvath explains this through the contemporary appearance of megalithic structures. She says that ‘by stimulating an electro-magnetic energetic mechanism into activity quasi-objects and unconsciousness are stimulated, with effects spreading themselves inside the void by reducing the quality of life’ (p.163). There is no evidence of such a mechanism, it is not said what ‘quasi-objects’ are, why electromagnetism should cause unconsciousness, how this relates to a void, nor why this should reduce the quality of life. Horvath ignores the possibility of social factors in generating a hypothetical ‘lethal period’; all must be explained by moving big rocks.

In the end, says Horvath, ‘magic has no genuine kingship [*sic*]’ – the proofreading in this text is inept – ‘with anything social, apart from religion on the one hand and science and technology on the other’ (p.180). Religion and science and technology between them cover a rather large space. Actually Horvath hardly mentions religion, nor science and technology, in any systematic way or in their social function as magical systems. When she says that ‘magic is naturally a counterpart to life and to the integrity of any lawful state’ (p.25), this observation might seem to have a social meaning. Yet what if religion is not merely kin to magic, but is a magical activity in itself? Then the various Catholic Kings of Europe, or the Christian National State of South Africa during the apartheid era or the Islamic Republic of Iran, become lawful states founded on magic. Horvath refuses to acknowledge such possibilities. Her critique of the scientism (magical representations of science and technology) of modern (nominally) secular states fails to represent our world.

All this obscurity could be forgiven if its purpose were to defamiliarize a topic in order to force a reevaluation of a thesis or an ideological framework which might normally be neglected. Horvath’s book does not seem to do this, nor pursue an actual thesis. The book is a series of unsubstantiated and nebulous assertions connected by tenuous links with unfounded claims around anthropology, political science, literary analysis and psychology. Perhaps Horvath has something more than this to say and is unable or unwilling to say it here. But as things stand, the text seems extraordinarily unproductive and banal. Michael Taussig (2003) maintains that the efficacy of magic may often depend on a skilled interplay of revelation and concealment. This book, however, obscures more than it reveals.

## Reference

Taussig, M. (2003) *Law in a Lawless Land: Diary of a Limpieza in Columbia*, New Press, New York.

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