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*The Myth of*  
**DISENCHANTMENT**

Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences



A PHILOSOPHICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE  
DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. . . . In the authority of universal concepts, the Enlightenment detected a fear of the demons through whose effigies human beings had tried to influence nature in magic rituals. From now on, matter was finally to be controlled without the illusion of immanent powers or hidden properties.

MAX HORKHEIMER AND THEODOR ADORNO,  
*Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947

While many of the old master narratives have been unraveling, it is still widely supposed that the defining feature of modernity is the departure of the supernatural. Modernization is often equated with the rise of instrumental reason, the gradual alienation of humanity from nature, and the production of a bureaucratic and technological life world stripped of mystery and wonder. Scholars often pin this narrative to Max Weber's phrase *die Entzauberung der Welt*, the disenchantment (or literally "de-magic-ing") of the world. Indeed, if there is one thing we've been taught to take for granted, it is that the contemporary, industrial, capitalist societies of Western Europe and North America have lost their magic, and that it is this absence that makes them modern. As the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor summarized in 2011, "Everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an 'enchanted' world and we do not."<sup>15</sup>

Disenchantment is also a component of the standard account of secularization.<sup>16</sup> According to thinkers like Taylor, part of the way that religion lost its grip on the modern subject was through science eliminating the supernatural.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, support for the classical secularization thesis has withered in the face of religious revivals, but even the most vociferous critics of the death of God usually grant the decline of magic—at least, in Western Europe, if nowhere else. Indeed, part of relativizing secularism is often to present secularism as Protestant, which in turn is positioned as antimagical. If the postsecular resurgence of religion is tied to the limits of reason, magic and technology are still widely believed to be opposed, and only a few would claim that magic is making a comeback.

First and foremost, I want to challenge this model, to rewrite this particular account of modernity and its rupture from the premodern past. As discussed below, I am not alone in the study of modernity's enchantments, but the task takes on a special urgency because versions of the disenchantment thesis

have recently found fresh purchase, anchoring new movements in philosophy and political theory. Although they do not speak with one voice, a host of thinkers—Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, William Connolly, Eduardo Kohn, Manuel Vásquez, and others—have charged modern philosophy with despiritualizing nature and rendering matter dead and inanimate.<sup>18</sup> In response, they aim to recover alternate animating ontologies sometimes referred to as “agential realism” or “enchanted materialism.”<sup>19</sup> While I am sympathetic to these movements, I think that their diagnosis of the current dilemma too quickly grants, even as it inverts, the myth of Euro-American modernity and its putative relationship to rationality and nature. Simply put, these new philosophers, like the poststructuralists they seek to replace, are rebelling against a hegemon that never achieved full mastery. The enchanted ontologies and spiritualized orientations to nature they describe as missing have been available all along. In what follows, it is the both the mythic construction and contradictions of the supposedly hegemonic ontology that I want to explore.

I am particularly interested in the formation of the old-fashioned but entrenched narrative that describes the history of the modern scientific paradigm in terms of the rise of mathematical physics and the construction of an influential model of a “clockwork universe” that no longer needed spirits or a deity to drive the motor of the cosmos.<sup>20</sup> Leaving aside how few historical physicists actually subscribed to this austere model, what is fascinating to me is the way in which the image of a mechanical world took on its own life—especially among social theorists—and thus how it escaped the purview of the natural sciences to achieve an ambivalent status in the cultural formation of the contemporary world picture.<sup>21</sup> From my perspective, this particular world picture is a myth insofar as it has taken on its own narrative force and bears little relationship to the status of physics at any given moment. Yet, some version of this world picture was often presented exactly *not* as a myth, but as an ahistorical and universal “Real” against which other myths were shattered.<sup>22</sup> To be clear, I am not attacking the ontology of contemporary physics, but am instead interested in how a particular historical image of physics came to imprint the human sciences, and by doing so, spilled over into the master description of modernity as such, even as the physicists themselves were often pushing against that model from the inside.

In what follows, I ask: In the face of things like Curie’s scientific séances, spiritualist revivals, and the modern resurgence of magical orders like the Golden Dawn, how did we get the idea that modernity meant disenchantment in the first place? I will answer this question by exploring the haunting presence of magic in the very instances when disenchantment was itself being

theorized. While we know that wonder still dwells in the counterculture and it is probably a truism that scientists often hold to strange ideas outside of their specific domain of expertise, I want to investigate the least likely people—the very theorists of modernity as disenchantment—and show how they worked out their various insights inside an occult context, in a social world overflowing with spirits and magic, and how the weirdness of that world generated so much normativity. This will put us in a position to disaggregate disenchantment into inconsistent and semi-overlapping claims—regarding the loss of wonder, the de-animation of the world, the progressive rationalization of superstition, and, of course, the end of magic—which I show nevertheless share a common root.

It is important, indeed, to track the persistence of the occult across the disciplines and not just in the natural sciences—in Bruno Latour’s own sociology, for instance. It is a sociological truism that those who study foreign cultures are themselves less religious, and few would imagine anthropologists to be easy believers in the magical.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as contemporary anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann has noted, for much its history “a central task in sociology has been to explain how the elimination of magic was ever possible, and how it was that Western society moved into its rational mode.”<sup>24</sup> But I will show that the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) emerged as academic disciplines in the nineteenth century alongside flourishing theosophical and spiritualist movements, and shared the latter’s fascination with magical knowledge and the spirits of the dead. There is much evidence that the spiritualists read social theory and, conversely, that the social theorists were often up on their spiritualism.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it was often the self-professed magicians—not the sociologists who were the first to decry despiritualization and the general loss of magic, even as they called for revivals.

Other scholars have argued that religious studies, for one, has its origins in the European empires; this is a trenchant point that may nonetheless need refining, since the canonically early figures in the discipline—Max Müller, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss—never went to India or met an Aboriginal Australian firsthand. They were, however, profoundly enmeshed in the occult milieu, and much of what they thought they knew about the non-West was mediated by European esotericism. Indeed, the very objects of their concern, their methods, and even their self-definition still bear the marks of this important early encounter with the occult. The larger project works out this occult side of the human sciences—not just the texts and thinkers who did not make it into the canon, but also those canonical figures whose esoteric preoccupations have been systematically ignored or suppressed. Instead of displacing Eurocentrism by means of explicit comparison, what follows is a work of *erasure*.

The private lives of many theorists of disenchantment seemingly run contrary to their own models; by exposing this, I aim to disrupt the old master narratives to make way for new ones.<sup>26</sup> By analogue to a similar move in gender studies, in part I am trying to “queer,” or render strange, the hegemonic tradition.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, while the social sciences are often supposed to be one of the vectors for secularization and the displacement of magic, I will show that sociology and its cousins were more likely to birth new revivals of paganism, shamanism, and even magic.<sup>28</sup>

It was not just the human sciences but also their accounts of modernity as disenchanted and secularized that were ironically articulated in the very period during which Britain, France, and Germany were in the midst of occult revivals. Indeed, I will argue that it was specifically in relation to this burgeoning culture of spirits and magic that European intellectuals gave birth to the *myth of a mythless society*.<sup>29</sup>

To clarify this seeming paradox, I need to explain what I mean by “myth.” The term *myth* is often used either polemically to indicate an erroneous belief or romantically to suggest an archaic or even sacred mode of narrative discourse.<sup>30</sup> Although I admit to willfully evoking the polemical usage, by “myth” I mainly mean to gesture toward those repeated narrative symbols (e.g., the death of God, Achilles’s heel, the naked truth) that are adopted as prefabricated tropes or metaphors and whose transposition carries unconscious meaning from one domain to another.<sup>31</sup> The prefabricated trope I am most interested in is “the myth of modernity” itself, by which I mean not the stories from a particular epoch, but the very fable that there was such an age as “modernity” and that it had certain features.

By way of explanation, Hans Robert Jauss has reminded us that modernity was not a historical event for which we might determine a date: 1492? 1648? 1789? 1868?<sup>32</sup> Modernity is first and foremost the sign of a rupture.<sup>33</sup> As a term and concept, it is a device for positing significant historical breaks. To speak of “the modern” means nothing so much as to talk of the current, of the putatively new: to describe a kind of novelty.<sup>34</sup> That the term has been used for hundreds of years might seem through sheer repetition to forfeit its claims to originality.<sup>35</sup>

We might know now that modernity is as much a *spatial* as temporal category, and that to call a culture modern is to ally it with newness and to consign its opposite to colonization or the scrap heap of history.<sup>36</sup> It is as much a project as a periodization. But the project of modernization and the period of modernity are typically entwined because modernization works by projecting an aspirational and utopian myth of modernity toward which it aspires. In this respect utopian modernity is always located elsewhere (e.g., often, colo-

nized subjects thought of the metropole as embodying modernity; or German philosophers looked to France as the epitome of the modern while French thinkers looked to England for the same). It might seem that only the dystopian modernity is thought of as here and now. We should also remember that to call an era modern, even when criticized from a postmodern vantage, is to characterize the epoch in terms of its discontinuity with the past.

There are different ways to stage that newness. “Modernity” is regularly equated with everything from specific artistic and philosophical movements to particular historical ruptures to distinctive sociological processes, such as urbanization, industrialization, globalization, or various forms of rationalization. I will not unravel all the possible associations and nuances of the term. From among these, I aim to undermine the myth that what sets the modern world apart from the rest is that it has experienced disenchantment and a loss of myth. I am not claiming that industrialization never happened, nor am I denying that rationalization occurred in any cultural sphere; rather, I am interested in the process by which Christendom increasingly exchanged its claim to be the unique bearer of divine revelation for the assertion that it uniquely apprehended an unmediated cosmos and did so with the sparkling clarity of universal rationality. Sometimes this account of modernity has been celebratory, rejoicing in the ascent of European science and the end of superstition. But equally often, it has been a lament, bemoaning a loss of wonder and magic.

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Another key impetus for my project is to provide a response to Horkheimer and Adorno’s monumental *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and an intervention into critical theory more broadly. Insofar as critical theory represents a single interpretive community, it might appear that we are mainly united by a common literary canon and our willingness to repeat a particular story that this canon enshrines. Variants of this tale are to be found not only in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but also to some degree in many works of the Frankfurt School and its periphery, including: Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (1966; *Negative Dialectics*), Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), Leo Löwenthal, “Das Dämonische” (“The Demonic,” 1921), Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (1954; *The Destruction of Reason*), and Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). One can even find it with a different affective tone in many of the writings of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>37</sup>

Critical theory broadly addresses the following problem: What went wrong

with modernity such that it produced the horrors of totalitarianism and mass destruction, and not the utopia of a classless society?<sup>38</sup> As expressed in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the question becomes one of “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”<sup>39</sup>

The Frankfurt School’s answers to the broader question are essentially similar within a certain range of variations and important elaborations. To juxtapose a few: Fromm, 1941: “Freedom, though it has brought [modern man] independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless,” and hence he is tempted to submit to new totalitarian leaders in order to “escape from the burden of his freedom.”<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer, 1947: “It seems that even as technical knowledge expands the horizon of man’s thought and activity, his autonomy . . . appear to be reduced. Advance in technical facilities for enlightenment is accompanied by a process of dehumanization.”<sup>41</sup> Marcuse, 1964: instead of providing “freedom from toil and domination,” “Technological rationality . . . becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.”<sup>42</sup> The primal form of critical theory’s master narrative is that autonomous reason (or freedom or science or enlightenment), once yoked to the domination of nature, turns into its opposite—namely, the domination of humanity.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the intellectual energies that were supposed to liberate us are now used to keep us in chains. To my taste, the version of this formulation that is most perspicacious is the pithy phrase in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “Enlightenment reverts to mythology.”<sup>44</sup>

It is easy to see the Weberian cast of this narrative and how it is linked to the de-animation of nature. Again, juxtapositions make this clear. Löwenthal, 1921: “The primitive metaphysical world picture vanishes and makes room for the enlightened clearing (*Auf-Klärung*) of a heaven now stripped of stars. . . . The world becomes disenchanted (*die Welt wird entzaubert*), the vividness of the demon’s grimace turns into the abstractness of the [scientific] question.”<sup>45</sup> Fromm, 1941: “Man had overthrown the domination of nature and made himself her master. . . . The abolition of external domination seemed to be not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition to attain the cherished goal: freedom of the individual.”<sup>46</sup> Horkheimer, 1947: “Reason has become completely harnessed to the social process. Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion. . . . As the end result of the process, we have . . . an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated, without any other purpose than that of this very domination.”<sup>47</sup> Habermas, 2001 “To the extent that nature is made accessible to objectivating

observation and causal explanation, it is depersonalized. Nature as an object of science is no longer part of the social frame of reference.<sup>48</sup> Again, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism. . . . Nature, stripped of qualities, becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification.”<sup>49</sup>

In summary, magic and spirits had to go if the world was to be amenable to systematic and rational interpretation. By turning nature into an object to control, humanity was caught in its own trap. Beyond the domination of nature, enlightenment became the domination of humans over each other. Instead of being liberated into a new kind of autonomy, people were turned into objects, or more properly, into abstractions—mere numbers and statistics.<sup>50</sup> The objectification of nature had led toward the objectification of humanity, and the concentration camps and Gulag are tragic expressions of this deeper impulse.

I see myself as a disciple of critical theory, and I find *Dialectic* intensely useful and have returned to it repeatedly; yet it is effectively a late expression of an old myth. It rests on a set of basically mythical binaries (myth/enlightenment, nature/human) whose breaches it stages, but nevertheless maintains.<sup>51</sup> More important for our purposes, it works by granting the triumph of disenchantment and de-animation even as it traces the negative impacts of this process and its potential returns in new myth. But *this assertion of loss* relies on the assumption that reason once ruled or turned into its opposite.<sup>52</sup> Yet, this event never occurred. It too is a myth.

Let me put this differently. What I am saying is that not only is myth myth; not only is the opposition to myth myth; *but the recognition of the opposition to myth as myth* is itself myth. To clarify, we know that the tale of Prometheus was a myth; Adorno and others have shown us that enlightenment’s claim to progress was a myth and that enlightenment’s attack on mythology only bred more irrationalism in response; what is needed now is the recognition that this last claim—our enlightenment critique—has yielded myth. As a critical theorist, you can achieve high levels of reflexivity on the issue and still have your initial argument swept out from under you. If what you are doing in the mode of enlightenment critique is lamenting the disillusion of myth, then myth has not been dissolved. Your mourning reinstates the object of your grief.

Faced with this impasse, I aim to ascertain how Horkheimer and Adorno (and the legacy of thinkers they draw on) came to the idea that enlightenment was fundamentally disenchanting and thus bequeathed their left Weberianism to our generation. To do so requires a methodological epoché, a suspension of our central terms. What follows will take precisely *not* as given the meaning of magic, religion, or science. This is necessary because the key terms of

our analysis had different meanings in different historical moments, and their reoccurrence obscures breaks, discontinuities, and important shifts. Moreover, concepts are partially defined differentially, and current terminology often bears the legacy of lost oppositions. Accordingly, we must pay careful attention to the construction of putative antagonisms (e.g., between myth and enlightenment).

To this discourse analysis, I will contribute another area of suspicion. Because de-animation is central to many of the accounts of disenchantment (not the least in *Dialectic*), in addition to discussing magic as understood in the historical context in question, I will also attend to instances when nature is conceptualized as populated with animating entities and/or spiritual forces. Put differently, reaching past *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I aim to perform a philosophical archaeology of this conception of modernity, the one that identifies the modern with the Enlightenment and the end of magic, the domination of nature, and the extirpation of spirits.

#### REFLEXIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES: THE ENTANGLED FORMATION OF RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND MAGIC

In general terms, this book is a case study in what I have been calling “reflexive religious studies.” Contemporary sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash have begun to work out the way that sociology itself reflexively shapes society.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant articulated a “reflexive sociology” capable of studying sociology itself in sociological terms.<sup>54</sup> This is by far the most interesting insight to come out of these movements, and it is probably best to phrase it dynamically. Sociology suffers from a certain problem: any social knowledge it produces gets fed back into the system, which is thereby changed. This means that sociology is always describing the social field the way it was *before* sociology described it.

Beck, Giddens, and Lash point to two distinct kinds of problems. The first is in the domain of information theory. Their observation might seem to fit easily into a Weberian notion of rationalization; that is, it might initially appear that academic social science produces feedback in culture in such a way that it produces greater coherence in the social sphere that it then studies. But in fact, it also introduces a new element: the sociological study of society adds a new incalculability. It is as though the thing that information gathering cannot properly reckon with is the *effect* of information gathering on the system. Thus, it would appear to be an analogue to the observer effect in quantum

mechanics and need to be factored in. In other words, a reflexive sociology becomes necessary as sociologists try to reckon with the project of gathering sociological information about and within a society that has taken on the insights of sociology.

The second problem cuts deeper, and for our purposes is more important. As Beck and Giddens are both aware, sociology contributes to the production of certain kinds of societies. They do not just mean professional bodies like the American Sociological Association. Instead, sociology as a discipline authorizes certain kinds of information gathering or surveillance (or censuses), which then produce new kinds of social locations and new kinds of collective organizations and institutions. Sociological surveys, for instance, influence their subjects producing new kinds of social identities. Reflexive sociology, therefore, is needed to be able to theorize the kind of societies sociology produces.

Sociology is not the only discipline that has this problem. Anthropologists have had to deal with the way that anthropological theory changes the peoples that they study; for example, producing new tribes and authenticating some forms of indigenous culture over others.<sup>55</sup> The analogue of this issue for literary theorists becomes how to interpret the vast volume of novels and poems that have been written with literary theory in mind. As Christian Thorne has observed, queer theory has gained a sufficient purchase in American education that it has now begun to shape the sexuality of undergraduates. There is thus a need for a reflexive queer theory to theorize the effect that queer theory has on constructing the interpretation of different sexual acts and identities.<sup>56</sup>

In what follows, I aim to extend this insight to formulate a reflexive religious studies. For some time, scholars in the field have been engaged in interrogating the relationship between their own personal faiths and their object of study.<sup>57</sup> This has been useful, but what I am calling for in the name of reflexivity is not so much autobiographical reflections as a reflexivity addressing the discipline as such.<sup>58</sup> As I conceive it, reflexive religious studies would reckon with ways that the academic study of religion—in a range of disciplinary formations—is porous and tends to seep into the cultures that it purports to study. Moreover, as I have been arguing for some time now, the category “religion” is itself transformative, such that importing it as a second-order category (in scholastic, legal, and other discourses) transforms the society into which it has been introduced, effectively transforming other cultural systems into “religions.” “Reflexive religious studies” would examine those societies in which the category “religion” and its entangled differentiations (e.g., the distinction between religion and the secular) have begun to function as concepts. It would trace the

continuities and disruptions that this category produces in older conceptual orders and aim for precision. And it would also necessarily take into account how the disciplines of religious studies shapes and produces religions.

While to my knowledge there has never been a serious previous attempt to work out a reflexive religious studies, scholars have spent some time thinking about the way in which the higher criticism of the Bible produces different kinds of religious projects. The old fashioned version of this trope is to read the Protestant Reformation, for example, as inspired by Erasmus's humanism. To the degree that there is a version of this narrative about religious studies today, it is often to imagine that the discipline is secularizing, that the act of comparison between religions tends to relativize and therefore extinguish religious beliefs. But this is far from the whole picture. The first insight of reflexive religious studies is that the social scientific study actually reverberates in the religious field, revitalizing and even producing religions. Examples are easy to find. One does not have to look hard to see that the study of shamanism, for instance, has actually worked to produce contemporary neo-shamanic movements.<sup>59</sup>

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There is another way that taking this meta-level view of the category religion will help our current inquiry. It is my contention that tracing the genealogy of the notion of a conflict between religion and science will give us clues to both the appearance and occlusion of enchantment. While I will explain disenchantment on many levels, I will argue that *one* of the mechanisms that both makes magic appealing and motivates its suppression is the reification of a putative binary opposition between religion and science, and the production of a "third term" (*superstition, magic*, and so on) that signifies repeated attempts to stage or prevent reconciliation between these opposed discursive terrains. Let me explain.

Many accounts of modernity have been undergirded by the legend of a titanic struggle between two opposing forces—religion and science—in which the latter is often declared victor. The myth that these two powers had always been in contestation was formed in the nineteenth century; and then, like many other myths we'll explore, it was projected backward in a series of dramatized confrontations.<sup>60</sup> Today many nonspecialists mistakenly believe that Galileo was really tortured by the Inquisition for promoting heliocentrism or that medieval Europeans thought that the world was flat before Columbus proved them wrong.<sup>61</sup>

Nonetheless, religious studies and science studies have now spent decades relativizing their respective objects. Scholars of religion now know that “religion” is not a universal part of human nature, but is a culturally specific category that initially took shape in Western Christendom at the end of the seventeenth century and then was radically transformed through a globalization process over the course of the long nineteenth century, producing both “world religions” and discourses around “religion” as an autonomous domain of human experience.<sup>62</sup> Although the issue is more controversial, philosophers of science also know that there is no single universal scientific method, and that “modern science” emerged in the long nineteenth century with a radical reformulation of European natural philosophy and expanded through globalization and the selective absorption and disintegration of local knowledge systems.<sup>63</sup>

By combining these two critiques, the contemporary historian Peter Harrison has delineated how religion and science emerged together in European thought through a parallel process of mutual distinction and reification.<sup>64</sup> In broadest of strokes, Harrison demonstrates that science and religion come into being with a common epistemic basis that if anything made possible the birth of modern science.<sup>65</sup> But eventually they came to be understood as separate systems with their own spheres. Hence this initial cooperation collapsed as the sciences gained part of their respective notion of coherence in contradistinction to religion as an irrational belief system, while religion became “a kind of negative image of science, and this contrast has become important for the integrity of the boundaries of science.”<sup>66</sup> In effect, both discursive systems gained coherence through a purification process in which they came to be distinguished from each other.

Harrison’s account is only part of the picture. While he describes the history of a binary opposition between religion and science, Serge Margel has emphasized an earlier dialectic between religion and superstition that gave each term its meaning; moreover, Michel de Certeau has noted that science was formulated through rhetorical opposition to superstition.<sup>67</sup> More recently, Wouter Hanegraaff has argued that the broader enterprise of the European academy was predicated on excluding forms of pagan knowledge it marked as superstitious, magic, or occult.<sup>68</sup> Both concepts of religion and science came into existence by being distinguished from “superstition,” understood as the false double of religion and later as the false double of science or scientific knowledge (in both humanistic and naturalistic modes). Accordingly, instead of binaries, I see a trinary formation in which religion is negated by science, which is in turn negated by superstition or magic.

Put differently, the concept of true or orthodox “religion” was in some sense

constructed by being distinguished from the false religion of “superstition” (we can hear echoes of Protestant anti-Catholicism and earlier Christian anti-paganism). Similarly, true “science” or proper scholarship was formulated in opposition to “superstition” (often understood as occult or fake science). Moreover, from both vantages, the prototypical superstitions were belief in spirits and “magic.” In this respect, terms like *superstition* and *magic*, while fluid, open ended, and constantly changing, nevertheless were not completely empty signifiers because they inherited these older polemics. Superstition went from “wrong” because it was diabolical or pagan to “mistaken” because it was antiscientific.

Overlaps between “religion” and “science” were often described as “superstition” or pseudosciences.<sup>69</sup> Policing “superstitions” became part of the way that the categories of “religion” and “science” were formed in differentiation. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that the rejection of “superstition” was necessarily incomplete, and hence it was always possible to partially transform it into a site of resistance. I am fascinated by a kind of sublation or occlusion that functions by suppressing something at the same moment that another aspect of the suppressed is being reincorporated. Treating esotericism or magic as predominantly “rejected knowledge” only captures part of the picture. It explains how categories like “superstition” were produced to exclude certain beliefs or knowledges, but it doesn’t explain what makes those forms of knowledge appealing in the first place. My intuition is that while this type of negation is basically disempowering, it also represents a location from which one can criticize the original position.

Approached differently, the construction of science and religion as antagonists implied a third position representing where the categories both convene and collapse. In my last book I deployed this trinary in a genealogy of the category “religion,” but here I want to follow the third term. Negatively valenced, it is understood to be *superstition* and in this respect appears as the double of either religion or science. Hence, a certain cross-section of scientists trumpeted the power of their respective domain by suggesting that all of religion was a superstition. Positively valenced, the third term is *magic*, which was often supposed to take the best elements of religion and science together or to recover things suppressed by “modern” science or religion. Indeed, most of what gets classified as contemporary esotericism or occultism came into being as an attempt to repair the rupture between religion and science.<sup>70</sup>

Restated in broad terms, once “religion” and “science” are formulated as opposing discursive terrains, religion-science hybrids become both threatening and appealing. They are threatening because they risk destabilizing the

system's points of closure and because they suggest pre-hybrid and therefore supposedly premodern systems. But also they are appealing because they promise to heal the split between the two notionally opposed terrains. Moreover, the more "magic" becomes marked as antimodern, the more it becomes potentially attractive as a site from which to criticize "modernity." Finally, for all the polemical attacks against superstition and magic, disenchanting efforts were only sporadically enforced within the disciplines, such that notions of magic and spirits keep resurfacing as redemptive possibilities.

All told, this triadic structure is not the only reason that European thinkers came up with the theory of disenchantment and put it into place as a regulative ideal (the chapters that follow will explore other entangled issues). But, as I will demonstrate, looked at from the reverse vantage point, the myth of disenchantment has two divergent effects—first, it functions as a regime of truth, embedding the paradigm of modernity in the core of the sciences and giving energy to various projects aiming to eliminate superstition; and second, it is self-refuting, giving life to the very thing it characterizes as expiring, stimulating magical revivals, paranormal research, and new attempts to spiritualize the sciences.

In sum, in the binary operation between religion and science, superstition/magic functions as the third term in a Derridean sense.<sup>71</sup> "Magic" is the point where the system does not close. Like all of these terms, it has a dynamic function. Its role emerges from a position as the negation of the negation; and therefore, looked at from one perspective, it is the conjunction from which the system emerges. From another perspective, magic is either an imitation of the science or an imitation of religion; the origin of the religion or the origin of science; or the excluded middle.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE WORK: EUROPE IS NOT EUROPE

Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks—if not actually "died"—in the nineteenth-century European story of "the disenchantment of the world," the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called "superstition" have never died anywhere.

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, *Provincializing Europe*, 2000

Throughout the academy there continues to be a massive and ongoing investment in the modernization thesis, which when not taken for granted is alternately celebrated or condemned.<sup>72</sup> Fortunately, two small but significant groups of dissenters have rejected this grand narrative: first, a cluster of post-

colonial thinkers has worked to shatter the reflexive linkage between Eurocentrism and modernization;<sup>73</sup> and second, a handful of historians working on Europe and America have come to emphasize contemporary enchantments therein.<sup>74</sup> The first group has demonstrated how the claim that disenchanted modernity was the distinctive feature of the West was used to justify colonization and violence. The second group of scholars has argued that magic is everywhere in Euro-American “modernity”—in the religious world, the secular world, popular culture, literature, the scientific academy, and so on. In what follows I build on the insights of both movements and in so doing I aim to historicize—or we might say, following Dipesh Chakrabarty, to “provincialize”—the myth of modernity and its various incarnations in European social theory.<sup>75</sup>

The first implication of taking both movements together, however, is a seeming paradox—postcolonialists have demonstrated that modernity is just another name for Europe. Meanwhile, historians have shown that European history does not really fit the classic trajectory of modernity. Accordingly, if the rejection of the supernatural is supposed to be the defining feature of both European culture and modernity, then in this respect—Europe is not Europe.

Let me approach this differently. In the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*, Michel Foucault set out to challenge what he called the “repressive hypothesis”; namely, the widespread belief in the twentieth century that earlier generations were sexually repressed. In doing so, Foucault expressed a set of doubts that I want to loosely adapt here to address what we might call the “myth of disenchantment,” the “modernity hypothesis,” or the “modernity paradigm.”<sup>76</sup> First doubt: Is the disenchantment of the world truly an established historical pattern? Was there actually a historical rupture between the epoch of magic and the critique of disenchantment? Does modernity really define a singular breach, or is it a mythic epoch? Call this the *historical doubt*.

Once this doubt begins to take hold, it leads to new doubts whose resolution will be of interest to postcolonialists and historians of enchantment alike—if we reject the old European story of the “disenchantment of the world” (and I think there are plenty of good reasons to do so), we still have the second doubt: Why did European societies come to think of themselves as disenchanted? How did Europe come to imagine—even to the extent of taking it as the central feature of its civilization—that it did not believe in spirits, despite persistent evidence to the contrary? Why were social scientists drawn irrevocably to the very beliefs they decried as primitive superstitions? How in the face of widespread belief in spirits and magic did disenchantment come to function as a regime of truth or disciplinary norm in the human sciences? In other words, how did Europeans come to end up with a society that both re-

presses magic and in which magic proliferates? When and how did the myth of disenchantment emerge? As I address these issues in what follows, the phrase *occult disavowal* will be my shorthand for the regulative function of the myth of disenchantment that results in the simultaneous private embrace and public rejection of enchantment. Call this the *critical-historical doubt*.

This in turn leads to a third and final doubt: Have the workings of domination in Euro-American societies really belonged primarily to the mode of disenchantment? Or is the critique of disenchantment part of the same power mechanism as the thing it criticizes? This is the *politico-theoretical doubt*.

To respond to these entangled issues, the work that follows is first and foremost therefore a novel history of the human sciences that, having suspended the assumption of disenchantment, shows how their disciplining processes occurred against a background of magic and religious revivals. Doing so should enable us to undercut the modernization thesis by revealing its paradoxical origins in the shared terrain between spiritualists, sorcerers, and scholars.

The argument of the book proceeds as follows:

An initial background chapter, “Enchanted (Post) Modernity,” takes as its starting point present-day sociology and anthropology. It shows that today in neither Europe, nor America, nor the rest of the globe can one find the disenchanted world anticipated by the major theorists of modernity. It then uses sociological data to explore the function of enchantment today. Moreover, it unlinks traditional accounts of secularization and disenchantment to show that in many cases ghosts and spirits come to fill the space evacuated by the putative death of God. Significantly, it begins to excavate one of the logics of occult disavowal by showing how belief in one form of enchantment often comes at the cost of another, such that supernatural beliefs can actively function in the service of disenchantment.

Part 1, “God’s Shadow,” begins with chapter 2, “Revenge of the Magicians,” which is historical in scope. It takes as its starting point various figures—from Giordano Bruno to Isaac Newton—who have been blamed for the rise of instrumental reason and the disenchantment of nature, and it demonstrates their respective magical projects. It then recovers two moments often seen as the watershed of modernity—Francis Bacon’s formulation of the scientific method and the French *philosophes*’ publication of the *Encyclopédie*—to demonstrate that neither embody the disenchantment usually attributed to them. In so doing, it separates the putative “birth of science” from the death of magic, and shows that the enlightenment project was initially articulated not in terms of a conflict between religion and science or faith and reason, but as

a divine science. Nevertheless, it sees in both movements the roots of occult disavowal in the myth of modernity as the end of superstition.

The third chapter, “The Myth of Absence,” traces the myth that the *philosophes* and the mechanistic cosmology had eliminated the divine. It demonstrates that several key mythemes—the mythless age, the de-divination of nature, nihilism, and the death of God—had a conjoined genesis in German philosophical circles several decades before Nietzsche. Focusing on the writings of G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Jacobi, and Friedrich Schiller, it shows how a generation of German philosophers came to believe that they lived in a uniquely mythless epoch and then transmitted this particular lament to later generations, including our own. Turning to Jacob Burckhardt, it shows how the myth-of-the-end-of-myth was projected backward, producing the historiography of other epochs, such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

Chapter 4, “The Shadow of God,” highlights a crucially important dialectical movement. It shows how a putative opposition between religion and science, combined with fears of despiritualization and mourning for the death of God, motivated the rise of spiritualism and occult movements, and contributed to the birth of religious studies as a discipline. Looking at Edward Burnett Tylor, Friedrich Max Müller, Éliphas Lévi, and Helena Blavatsky, it demonstrates how scholars, spiritualists, and magicians not only moved in common social circles, but also shared an engagement with spirits, mysticism, and “Oriental” mysteries. The chapter maps out the messy intermediate terrain between two spheres that considered themselves to be different and were sometimes opposed, but nevertheless exhibited the same basic habits of thought—including a myth of lost magic.

Chapters 5, “The Decline of Magic,” and 6, “The Revival of Magick,” turn to the birth of the classical disenchantment narrative, noting that while it is often attributed to Max Weber, one of its earliest significant formulations is in the second edition of *The Golden Bough*, by the Scottish folklorist James Frazer. Chapter 5 argues that Frazer came late to the narrative of magical decline, and that he did so within a context of psychical research and in the face of a folkloric narrative itself about the departure of fairies and the decline of magic. It shows how Frazer formulated an influential trinary opposition between religion, magic, and science while encoding this typology within a disenchantment narrative. The following chapter turns to the infamous British magician Aleister Crowley, who overlapped with Frazer at Trinity College, Cambridge. This chapter shows that Crowley drew on the very text in which Frazer worked out disenchantment to stage his revival of modern “magick”

[*sic*]. Hence, the narrative of disenchantment was self-refuting insofar as it reinvigorated the very thing it described as endangered.

In part 2, “The Horrors of Metaphysics,” the seventh chapter, “The Black Tide: Mysticism, Rationality, and the German Occult Revival,” shifts the focus back to the German-speaking world. It begins with Sigmund Freud’s references in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to a “brilliant mystic” named Carl du Prel. It explores one of Freud’s interlocutors, the German-Jewish physician Max Nordau, who theorized his own conception of degeneration alongside a broader contention that modernity led to irrationalization and mysticism. The chapter then shows how conceptions of magic and spirits haunted the German reception of Immanuel Kant and became entangled with the history of academic philosophy and psychoanalysis, and their counterpart constructions of noumena and the unconscious. It explains how Arthur Schopenhauer came to theorize the efficacy of magic and demonstrates the importance of “mysticism” as a vanishing mediator between a philosophy dedicated to exploring reason’s limits, and a psychoanalysis focused on the roots of irrationality. It then explains why Freud polished Frazer’s narrative of disenchantment into a developmental theory even as he began his own exploration of an occult terrain. Thus, it explores how Freud projected his own taboo desires onto the figure of the savage.

The next two chapters look to the places where the myth of the absence of myth has established its most systematic philosophical purchase: critical theory and Vienna Circle positivism. Chapter 8, “Dialectic of Darkness: The Magical Foundations of Critical Theory,” focuses on the German neo-pagan poet and philosopher Ludwig Klages, who formulated much of the terminology and critique of modernity as the “domination of nature” that would later become associated with the Frankfurt School. It then looks at Klages’s influence on German-Jewish philosopher and literary theorist Walter Benjamin, demonstrating that much of the terminology that seems so peculiar to Benjamin—*the aura*, *constellations*, *correspondences*, *angels*, and *Ur-images*—all were current in German esoteric circles while Benjamin was coming to his most important ideas.

Having shown that the Enlightenment critique has roots in an esoteric milieu, critical theory’s putative enemies—the positivists—would seem to be the worst candidates for closet magicians. “The Ghosts of Metaphysics: Logical Positivism and Disenchantment,” chapter 9, explores the connections between the Vienna School of positivism and the esoteric milieu. It shows how the founders of logical positivism, such as Otto Neurath, presented their philosophy as a kind of magical revival. It also demonstrates that other

positivists—such as Rudolf Carnap, Hans Hahn, and Kurt Gödel—had a profound preoccupation with ghosts and the paranormal. Taken as a whole, the book demonstrates how magic, like metaphysics, also haunts the beginnings of analytic philosophy.

The final chapter, “The World of Enchantment; or, Max Weber at the End of History,” focuses on Max Weber’s preoccupation with “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*) in the same period that Freud was formulating his own version of that myth. It complexifies conventional readings of disenchantment by showing how the term fit into Weber’s theory of rationalization. Examining a set of Weber’s letters that have only recently been made available to scholars, the chapter argues that despite Weber’s reputation for being deaf to religion, “mysticism” was not wholly negative, but perhaps a positive reaction to the “iron cage” of modernity. It demonstrates that Weber came to theorize “the disenchanting of the world” (*die Entzauberung der Welt*) not out of frustration with Prussian bureaucracy, but rather in reaction to a Swiss neo-pagan commune.

To foreshadow the complexity of the argument that follows, I am not merely complicating Weber’s master narrative, but also examining those historical moments or knots in which enchantment and disenchantment turn into each other, or are indistinguishable. In other words, I want to show that what appears to be a binary opposition—enchantment versus disenchantment (*Verzauberung gegen Entzauberung*)—fails to match up.