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Pasi, M.

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Newsletter editors welcome responses to Marco Pasi's Theses de magia. Please send responses either in the body of an email (if brief) or as an attached file in MS Word format (for longer comments, especially if they involve diacritics) to LAITYK@mail.strose.edu. Responses received in time will be published in Newsletter issue 21 (Spring 2009).

Theses de magia

Marco Pasi
University of Amsterdam

During the first conference of the Societas Magica, held last June at the University of Waterloo, I presented the following theses as a culmination of my paper on the Italian anthropologist and historian of religions Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965). The paper explored some methodological problems related to the historical study of magic as they could be highlighted through an examination of de Martino's work. The theses were meant to be a way of summarizing my theoretical and methodological thoughts on the study of magic on the basis of my reading of de Martino. They are therefore heavily influenced by his ideas, particularly as they concern the concept of the 'antimagical polemic' as a fundamental feature of western culture.

'Theses de magia' is of course a sly reference to Giordano Bruno's work on magic bearing the same title. During the discussion that followed my paper, someone suggested that I could also have called them 'Conclusiones', in reference to Pico della Mirandola's own famous 900 articles (only twenty-six of which were in fact specifically devoted to magic). I thought, however, that my aim was not really to present 'conclusions', but rather 'starting points' for a

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discussion among specialists in the study of magic.

Bruno wrote fifty-six 'theses'; I have contented myself with ten. There were nine when I presented them in Waterloo, but I have decided to add a new one to make my argument clearer and more complete. However, I have started the numbering from 0, so that the last one will still be number 9. Each thesis is followed by a certain number of sub-theses that should illustrate and explain the main point. Some of the arguments discussed here had already been presented, but not so systematically, in my doctoral dissertation, *La notion de magie dans le courant occultiste en Angleterre (1875-1947)*, defended in 2004 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. An abstract of the dissertation has appeared in the *Societas Magica Newsletter* (13, Winter 2005), but the dissertation itself is still unpublished.

Being painfully aware that a serious bibliography on magic would reach monstrous proportions, I have limited my bibliographical references here to the essential.

Finally, I make no particular claim to originality with my 'theses'. Most of the points I am making will appear to some readers almost trivial, while a few of them will perhaps be seen as more problematic or controversial. What I am presenting here is partly a precipitation of ideas that have been common enough in recent

scholarly research on magic, partly a recapitulation of my own theoretical reflections on the study of magic, which have occupied my mind in the last ten years.

0. The study of magic is not the same thing as the study of the concept of magic.

0.1. One should always be wary of works that pretend to study 'magic' as such. In these works, magic is often presented as an object whose existence is already taken for granted, because it is easily discernible in the fabric of history, and its identity can be described by means of a simple definition¹. However, there is no meaningful history of magic without a historical problematization of the concept of magic. Without this problematization, the complex ways in which the concept – or rather the concepts – of magic have taken shape and have been transformed in history are obscured rather than clarified.

0.2. The study of magic should begin with this historical problematization of the concept of magic, but should not end there. It is essential to understand what people meant by 'magic' in different historical periods, but the study of magic cannot be carried out only from the perspective of intellectual history. It should obviously also include a study of the practices, of the social behaviors, and of the beliefs that have been historically associated with the concept of magic².

1. Magic is a western concept. Studying the history of magic means studying the history of western culture.

1.1. No one seriously disputes the fact that the concept of magic, however one wants to understand or define it, has originated and developed in western culture, just like its ideologically cognate concept of religion. This remains true independently of how broadly (or narrowly) we want to define the cultural and geographical space of the 'West'. Etymologically, the word derives from a particular class of Persian priests (an ethnic element was probably also involved in the term), whose name was translated in ancient Greek as 'magoi'. It is in ancient Greece that, from this noun, the term 'mageia' was derived, which served increasingly to identify not what a person was (and therefore her ethnic origin or social function), but what a person did. In identifying 'mageia' as a particular set of practices and behaviors, the process of conceptualization of magic in western culture began³. The subsequent history of the concept includes of course many complex developments, which take place in Greek, Roman and other Mediterranean cultures, and in all three Mediterranean monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All these developments belong to the same cultural history by way of mutual influences, which can be explored and understood historically.

1.2. The second sentence may

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be read just as a corollary of the first one, but its meaning goes beyond a simple extension of it. In fact, it is meant to emphasize the importance of the study of magic for the understanding of the ways in which western culture has shaped its own identity. This is further explained under point 5.

2. The scholarly study of magic can develop only through a full historical awareness of the origins and the development of this concept. This means contextualizing the ways in which this concept has been used in the past both on an emic and an etic level.

2.1. The historical study of a concept, or of a cluster of concepts, can be carried out only within a broader study of the culture in which this concept, or cluster of concepts, has originated and developed. Magic has consistently been a problematic presence in western culture. It is essential to understand why it has been so. In order to do that, it is important to study the social, political, religious, and more generally ideological, functions that magic has fulfilled in western culture. Processes of exclusion and of identity-building have been made possible through the use of magic as a specific category⁴.

2.2. These processes have taken place not only among believers and opponents of magic, but also among the scholars studying it.

When we become aware of the ideological biases that can hide behind scholarly definitions of magic, we understand that these definitions belong to the history of the concept of magic as well, and do not transcend it. As scholars, we can become aware of these biases – and begin to try avoiding them – only when we have a sufficient historical knowledge of the ideological functions and of the social processes mentioned in 2.1⁵.

3. Magic is not a single object, but a complex of historical phenomena that are constantly modified by the historical processes which they go through.

3.1. The biggest problem in trying to give a simple definition of magic applicable to any historical material is that the concept of magic has been used historically in different ways, in order to perform different functions depending on the historical context. If magic has been used in order to carry out processes of exclusion (for instance of certain practices, beliefs, or social groups), the object of these exclusions has varied in time and space. There have been so many epistemological shifts and ruptures in the history of western culture that it is hard to imagine a single definition being able to capture such a complex phenomenon.

4. Nevertheless, this complex shows some aspects of continuity and consistency that have to be determined and studied.

4.1. If our historical problematization of the concept of magic makes it evident that magic is not a single, elementary object that can be easily defined, do we end up with an integral deconstruction that makes magic dissolve altogether? Should there not be a pars construens following the pars destruens of the historical problematization? As said above (0.2), the study of magic cannot be just intellectual, that is, limited to the study of the different historical concepts related to magic, and should also include aspects such as practices and beliefs. But even this would not be sufficient. The study of magic must also have an ambition to identify patterns and continuities, which can only make a 'history of magic' a meaningful project in the first place⁶.

5. The history of magic in western culture, and perhaps even western culture as a whole, cannot be fully understood if the phenomenon of antimagical polemic is not taken into account and thoroughly investigated.

5.1. Some authors have suggested that at least one pattern in the history of magic exists, and that it is the
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phenomenon of 'antimagical polemic'. Magic was born in ancient Greece as a term with polemical undertones, and the stigma attached to the word has been a permanent feature of its subsequent history⁷.

5.2. In its history, western culture has consistently used magic as a conceptual space where ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and/or practices that were considered as unacceptable would be thrown. These ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and/or practices would therefore become identified with a single category of exclusion, called 'magic'.

5.3. Creating this category of exclusion was an essential part of the process by which western culture has defined its identity throughout the centuries. By excluding what they did not want to be or do, westerners have defined, implicitly and by contrast, what they wanted to be or do. Choices were made,

in excluding certain things and accepting others, which have given western culture its specific, individual shape. For this reason, understanding the history of (the concept of) magic offers a key to understand the history of western culture as a whole.

5.4. Antimagical polemic is certainly a fundamental pattern in the history of magic, but is not necessarily the only one. Other patterns should be sought, and possibly identified. They may be more specific, and not applicable to the whole of the historical development of magic, but they are helpful nevertheless to understand certain aspects of it. One example among others may be the communication with non-human entities in order to obtain knowledge and/or power. Another may be the manipulation of an invisible, immaterial substance in order to achieve material effects.

5.5. Old anthropological and sociological definitions of magic,

dated and out of fashion as they may seem to be today, may still be useful for an historical understanding of magic, because they may help us identify further patterns. An example may be James G. Frazer's definition, based on the idea of 'sympathetic magic'⁸. The problem with these definitions has been that they often arbitrarily make one of these specific patterns an absolute discriminating factor for a general definition of magic. See also 8.5.

6. For this reason, in order to understand the historical complexity of magic, it is essential to be aware of its dual, perhaps even dialectical, aspect. The history of magic includes in fact both 'positive' and 'negative' attitudes. The former belong to authors who have propounded a positive concept of 'magic' as part of a representation of their worldviews; the latter belong to authors who have condemned 'magic' as dangerous, illicit,

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ineffective, or preposterous (in a word: unacceptable).

6.1. *It is obvious that magic, despite its consistent use as a category of exclusion by authoritative social actors, has been seen as a positive self-identifying category by many persons in the history of western culture. That which was perceived as unacceptable by some, has been seen not only as acceptable, but even as desirable, by others. Those who have supported a positive perception of magic have often placed themselves in a situation of tension and conflict with their cultural and social environment.*

6.2. *A sound history of magic should focus on both ideal-typical camps. Popular histories of magic have often focused only on those who have identified themselves positively with magic⁹. However, one cannot write a history of magic where 'magicians' are the only protagonists, and where their ideas are not contrasted with the cultural environment in which they have operated. Those who have opposed magic (thereby also conceptualizing it) are just as important for a historical study of magic as those who have defended it or have claimed to believe in and practice it. Pliny the Elder and Augustine are just as important for the history of magic as Marsilio Ficino and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa.*

7. Magic has to be considered as an historical problem that covers

the history of western culture as a whole and spans from its beginnings to our day. For this reason magic has to be studied and understood ideally in its entire historical complexity, and not by focusing only on single periods.

7.1. *This is a call to specialists in the history of magic not to remain confined in a given historical period, but to try to be familiar with the developments of magic in other periods as well. Knowledge of other periods can sometimes throw light on aspects of the period on which one's own research focuses.*

7.2. *If it is accepted that the search for patterns and continuities, and not only ruptures and differences, is a legitimate aspect of research on magic, then it becomes clear why it is important to know at least the general lines of developments in periods that do not belong to our field of specialization. No pattern can emerge by focusing narrowly on single periods or local contexts.*

8. Studying magic in cultures that are not western means projecting a western concept on cultures that originally do not possess it.

8.1. *This is one of the most important acquisitions of a deconstructionist approach to the study of magic. Magic has been considered by generations of scholars, working especially from anthropological, ethnological, and sociological perspectives, as a universal element of human culture. However, if one accepts the points above, it becomes*

clear that magic has served to circumscribe a specific area within western culture, in order to identify, isolate, and often repress, beliefs, ideas, behaviors, and/or practices that were perceived as differing from the norm. The social function of this process has its specific history in western culture, which cannot be automatically transposed to other cultures. What was perceived in western culture as 'dangerous', 'illicit', 'deviant', and thereby defined as 'magic,' was not necessarily perceived in the same way in other cultures. As a consequence, the particular conceptual space that was created in western culture through the category of magic did not necessarily exist elsewhere. Denying this problem – or ignoring it – leads easily to the projection of this conceptual space to cultures that have not produced this space autonomously through their local cultural dynamic. This is the source of universalistic discourses on magic¹⁰.

8.2. *It is not a single belief, idea, practice and/or behavior that makes magic specific to western culture, but the way in which all those elements have been combined together in specific patterns, in order to fulfill a specific function.*

8.3. *If magic cannot be identified only by certain beliefs, ideas, practices, and/or behaviors (as in old anthropological or sociological definitions), but also by its social or ideological*

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function in the specific context of a particular culture, then it becomes clear why the cultural specificity of magic cannot be easily renounced in favor of universalistic applications.

8.4. This does not mean, however, that beliefs, ideas, practices and/or behaviors associated with magic in western culture cannot be compared to similar beliefs, ideas, practices, and/or behaviors in other cultures. But one thing is to compare these different elements, another to assume that they all belong to a single category. Combining these elements together in ways that belong to the western conceptualization of magic will tell us more about our own culture than about the culture we want to compare it to. This will be, in fact, an act of projection.

8.5. If the universalistic claim of general definitions of magic is abandoned, these definitions can often offer interesting insight into the patterns of the development of magic in the history of western culture. See also 5.5.

9. The scholarly study of magic may be ideally interdisciplinary, but its foundation must necessarily be historical.

9.1. Anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cognitive science can help us understand many aspects of the ways in which magic has become such a significant presence in western culture (see for instance 5.4). But it is history that should study

the ways in which the concept of magic has taken shape. Without this historical awareness, we will always tend to use magic as an easily definable, potentially universal category, instead of the result of culture-specific ideological conflicts that are still lurking behind our simplistic definitions¹¹.

Endnotes

¹ Even great classics such as Lynn Thorndike's *History of Magic and Experimental Science* (8 vv., New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-1958), are not exempt from this problem.

² An example of a sophisticated approach that combines the historical problematization of the concept with such an 'integral' study of the phenomena associated with it in a given period is Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ On the formation of the concept of magic in ancient Greece see Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Walter Burkert, *Da Omero ai Magi. La tradizione orientale nella cultura greca* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999) (as far as I am aware there is no English edition of this book); Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London / New York: Routledge, 2001). On the perception of the Persian *magoi* in Greek culture, see Albert de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi. Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden / New York / Köln: Brill, 1997).

⁴ The general importance of an historical awareness and contextualization of the conceptual tools used by scholars, particularly

when dealing with problematic categories such as magic, is emphasized by Ernesto de Martino in all of his works, and is consonant with the particular historicist tradition to which he belonged. It will suffice to mention here the work by de Martino that is most relevant for our purpose: *Magia e civiltà* (Milano: Garzanti, 1962). More recently, a similar call to a historical awareness of the origins of the concept of magic has also been made, among others, by Randall Styers in his fundamental *Making Magic. Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). However, whereas Styers focuses only on the modern period, de Martino's discussion takes the whole history of western culture into consideration.

⁵ Again, de Martino, *Magia e civiltà* and Styers, *Making Magic* are essential here. They both show to what extent the theories and the **cont'd on page 8**

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definitions of magic that have been given by scholars in the last century and a half often express ideological presuppositions whose ultimate origin can be found in theological discourses about magic.

⁶ This is perhaps the weak point of Styers, *Making Magic*. He works a healthy deconstruction of the term 'magic', but seems to leave the matter there. Once we know that magic has been used as a category of exclusion in western culture, and that scholars with their simplistic, a-historical definitions are no exception to this rule, is all we need to know about magic already there?

⁷ The actual expression 'antimagical polemic' ('polemica antimagica') is used by de Martino in his *Magia e civiltà*, p. 6.

⁸ The reference here of course

is to Frazer's famous definition of 'sympathetic magic' that can be found in the third chapter of his *Golden Bough* (in the 1922 Macmillan edition). A useful survey of scholarly theories of magic can be found in Graham Cunningham, *Religion and magic. Approaches and Theories* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Other important critical surveys can be found in Edward E. Evans-Pritchard's classic, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); and in Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁹ Just one example from the many that could be given: Kurt Seligman, *The History of Magic and the Occult* (New York: Harmony

Books, 1975).

¹⁰ Apart from the aforementioned de Martino and Styers, one of the most significant advocates of a 'deconstructionist' approach to magic has been Jonathan Z. Smith. See for instance his "Trading Places" in Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden / New York / Köln: E. J. Brill, 1995), 13-27.

¹¹ Recent attempts at reviving a scholarly discourse on magic from an anthropological perspective show all the weaknesses that derive from an insufficient historical problematization of the concept. See for instance the collection of essays edited by Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels, *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of Revelation and Concealment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).