

# Marcel Mauss and the magical agents of our time

Irene Skovgaard-Smith and Alison Hirst

Irene Skovgaard-Smith  
University of East Anglia (UEA)  
Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK  
[irene.smith@uea.ac.uk](mailto:irene.smith@uea.ac.uk)

Alison Hirst  
Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)  
Cambridge, CB1 1PT, UK  
[alison.hirst@aru.ac.uk](mailto:alison.hirst@aru.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article revisits Marcel Mauss's theory of magic in the context of contemporary capitalism. Mauss saw magic as the art of transforming, socially accomplished via processes of differentiation that endow specialised agents, and their symbolic acts, with an ambiguous and unstable potentiality to do the extraordinary. Applying Mauss's conception, we argue that significant figures of late capitalism, such as leaders, consultants and entrepreneurs, are set apart and socially constituted as magical agents with supernormal powers to solve unfathomable problems, 'create value' and make things happen. Based on collective beliefs and expectations, they are infused with a transformative social efficacy that further entrenches dominant neoliberal values and practices. The article contributes to highlighting the continued sociological relevance of Mauss's theory of magic and his insistence on the importance of symbolic thought and action in the constitution of the social.

**Keywords:** figures of capitalism, magic, magical efficacy, mana workers, Marcel Mauss, symbolic action

*Author Accepted Manuscript - Journal of Classical Sociology - 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2023*

*It is public opinion which makes the magician and creates the power he wields. Thanks to public opinion he knows everything and can do anything.*

Mauss (2001 [1950]: 50) *A General Theory of Magic*

Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) was Émile Durkheim's nephew and one of the leading figures of the French school of sociology (Fournier, 2006). Mauss is often seen as a Durkheimian, 'but he was one in his own way', as Fournier (2006: 2) notes. Mauss's theoretical stance was more flexible (Fournier, 2012), and concerned with complexity and the specificities of concrete experience (James, 1998; Mauss, 2007). 'I do not greatly believe in scientific systems', as Mauss stated (1998 [1930]: 32). He also avoided endorsing the individual/society dualism of Durkheim (James, 1998) and was unique among early twentieth-century social theorists in challenging the dominant evolutionary scheme of traditional versus modern society (Kwon, 2014). Mauss proposed a relational stance to social phenomena and tentatively began approaching these as open to movement, process and shifting interactions (Hart and James, 2014; James, 1998).

Mauss's rich intellectual legacy influenced a broad range of social theorists, notably Pierre Bourdieu<sup>1</sup>, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille and Louis Dumont (Fournier, 2002, 2006, 2012). Yet, his profound influence on modern social theory is often understated and the originality and relevance of his work 'long unappreciated by everyone but anthropologists' (Fournier, 2006: 1; Hart and James, 2014). Beyond Mauss's most famous essay *The Gift* (2016 [1925]) and his writings on body techniques (Mauss, 1973 [1934]), much of his work remains relatively unknown (Gauthier, 2020). Key to the influence and relevance of Mauss's work is his central thesis that the social is constituted through a 'world of symbolic relationships'

(Mauss, 1924 in Levi-Strauss, 1950/2002: 10) and ‘the active, and interactive, life of the imagination’ (Hart and James, 2014: 3).

In this article we revisit Mauss’s *A General Theory of Magic* (2001 [1950]) and explore its relevance in the context of late capitalism. For Mauss, magic is ‘the art of changing’, ‘of doing things’ by vague, indeterminate, and invisible means. ‘With words and gestures, [magic] does what techniques achieve by labour’, he argued (2001 [1950]: 76, 175). These performative acts ‘do things’ in ways that are different from ‘mechanical effectiveness’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 25). Mauss’s notion of magic thus refers to symbolic action with transformative social efficacy; producing ‘a change of state’ (Mauss 2001 [1950]: 75). The efficacy of magical acts in all their ‘infinite diversity’ (ibid. 107) is derived from collective imaginings of invisible powers that imbue them with an efficacy that is out of the ordinary. As such, magic is a social phenomenon.

A Maussian perspective invites us to question assumptions of magic as necessarily related to the realm of the occult and ‘human control of supernatural forces’ such as spirits, demons, angels or gods (Davies, 2012: 1). As Hanegraff (2016) argues, we cannot assume that certain modes of thought and action are magical *per se*, while others are not. Instead, we must ask how the extraordinary powers that imbue symbolic acts with social efficacy are collectively imagined and recognised in specific social contexts. To explore the contemporary relevance of Mauss’s conception of magic, we focus in this article on collective imaginings of supernormal *human* powers for ‘value-creation’ and solving problems to fulfill the neoliberal promise of contemporary capitalism.

Leaders, consultants, entrepreneurs, marketeers and creative professionals, to name a few, are significant figures of the capitalist order, made and imbued with ‘a special kind of efficacy’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 23, 119) by dominant discourses. With words, images, and numbers, they ‘put to work collective forces and ideas’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: p. 175) – wielding

the powers attributed to them – as they performatively make things happen, transform things, bring things into the world, and make things ‘work’ (Mazzarella, 2017: 4). This relates to the broader context of financialised capitalism driven by self-fulfilling magical performativity (Lee, 2022) and the increasing immateriality of not just money, but also labour (Ekman, 2015). Capitalist technologies ‘generate their own ‘magicalities’ (Pels, 2003: 31) and many aspects of business, finance, advertising, cultural production and consumption ‘operate according to magical premises’ (Moeran and Malefyt, 2018: 1). Yet, social theory has tended to approach magic as modernity’s antithesis, as Pels (2003) notes, calling instead for examination of the magic of modernity itself. The aim of this article is to revisit Mauss’s theory of magic and explore how it may contribute to such an agenda.

### **Situating Marcel Mauss’s theory of magic**

Mauss developed his ideas on magic through a series of lectures and articles (Fournier, 2006), but the key piece is the essay *A General Theory of Magic* (Mauss, 2001 [1950]), which features among Mauss’s early work. It was first published in 1902 with Henri Hubert in *Année Sociologique* and later republished in *Sociologie et anthropologie* with Mauss as sole author (2001 [1950]). The essay on magic (Mauss, 2001 [1950]) introduced the notion of mana and, as Lévi-Strauss (2002 [1950]) notes, anticipated some of the conclusions of Durkheim’s *The Elementary forms of Religious Life* (2001 [1912]) which Mauss also contributed to, as Fournier (2006) suggests.

Mauss approached magic as a social phenomenon and held that there are, in every age and every kind of society, collective ideas that *endow* specialised agents and their symbolic actions with a special kind of power and efficacy to transform, whether for good or evil. The key proposition is that the powers of magicians and the social efficacy of their symbolic acts are derived from collective beliefs. What Mauss was suggesting, although not systematically

developing, is that magic is socially constructed and as such is real in its effects. In Levi-Strauss's (1950/2002) reading of Mauss, this social efficacy is similar in kind to the performative efficacy of language. Bourdieu's references to Mauss's ideas on magic, point in the same direction<sup>2</sup>. It is the accomplishment of 'action from a distance' (Bourdieu, 1998: 102) – 'this real transformation effected without physical contact' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 148) by an agent who is endowed with symbolic capital, and as such responds to socially constituted collective expectations and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1998: 102).

Mauss's theoretical orientation signified a clear break with how magic was predominantly understood at the time, namely as 'primitive' belief in the supernatural, and often coined as superstition, illusion and trickery (Davies, 2012). The anthropological school represented by Tylor (1958 [1871]) and Frazer (1913 [1890]) explained magic in terms of individual psychological laws (Tambiah, 1990; Valeri, 2013) and saw magic as a low form of human thought in evolutionary terms – a form of pseudo-science that had preceded religion (Mauss, 1998 [1930]). As Tambiah's (1990) historical analysis shows, these assumptions have become taken-for-granted in Western intellectual thought, where magic, religion and science were separated into distinct domains.

Magic was relegated as inferior and ineffective, and evoked as the antithesis to modern rationality in various branches of social theory, as Pels, (2003) and Thomassen (2013) note. Modern Western modes of social organisation became associated with rationalisation 'whereby traditional or magical criteria of action are replaced by technical, calculative or scientific criteria' (Watson, 2003: 39). Bureaucratic and technocratic forms of organisation 'incorporated the "objective" discourse of science' (Rooney and McKenna: 2007: 123) as the antidote to unworldly and non-rational practices, seen as representing a transition to 'effective knowledge' where 'there is and can be no room either for magic or the sacred' as Gellner (1988: 66) asserts.

This understanding of modernity as characterised by rationalisation processes is often associated with Max Weber's concept of 'disenchantment'. However, as Kalberg (1980: 1146) points out, this refers specifically to 'de-magification' as part of rationalisation processes in the religious sphere. For Weber (1968), this evolution of religion to transcend magic involved the 'rationalization of metaphysical views and a specific religious ethic' (p. 424) to constitute a doctrine, the rise of a 'priesthood' as distinct from 'practitioners of magic' (p. 425), and the practice of religious actions such as prayer, sacrifice and worship of god(s) rather than 'magical coercion' (p. 424) of supernatural forces such as demons.

While Mauss did not see magic as having preceded religion in this way, he nevertheless suggested a distinction between magic and religion in *A General Theory of Magic*. Magical action serves instrumental ends and 'a magical rite is any rite that is not part of an organized cult', as he argued (Mauss 2001 [1950]: 30). In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (2001 [1912]) built on Mauss to argue that while beliefs in both magic and religion often invoke the same forces and beings, magic pursues 'technical and utilitarian aims' (p. 41). Religion on the other hand fulfils moral goals of a community and shared beliefs and rituals. As Durkheim (2001 [1912]) stated:

'Magic does not bind its followers to one another and unite them in a single group living the same life. A church of magic does not exist. Between the magician and his followers, and between these individuals themselves, there are no lasting bonds that make them members of a moral body like the one formed by worshippers of the same god. The magician has a clientele, not a church' (p. 43).

Mauss however did not maintain this fundamental distinction between magic and religion, and he later preferred the term magico-religious (Davies, 2012; Fournier, 2006; Mauss, 1998 [1930]). 'My magic is a religion for me and an evil spell for you; your religion for me is an evil spell and magic' as Mauss (2007: 195) argued in his lectures on ethnography. Although Mauss

was not consistent in breaking with the evolutionary model, he took important steps towards liberating magic as an analytical category from its association with ‘primitive’ beliefs in the supernatural and challenging the reified distinction between magic, religion and science. Mauss also did not see magic as necessarily separate from technical means, suggesting instead that many activities are simultaneously both technical and magical, and that ‘the greater part of the human race has always had difficulty in distinguishing techniques from rites’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 24). Magic contributed to the growth of techniques, as Mauss showed, and was similarly closely linked with the development of astronomical, physical and natural sciences in different parts of the world (Mauss, 2001 [1950]).

### **Magic as a social phenomenon**

Mauss (2001 [1950]) examined a broad range of magical practices, such as shamanism, witchcraft, astrology and alchemy, using a comparative method drawing on ethnographic and historical sources from both traditional and differentiated societies. Mauss argued that magic is integral to many professions in differentiated societies, and often presupposes a body of acquired knowledge, such as in the cases of astrology and alchemy of the Middle Ages as well as modern medicine and science. The magical element of such practices refers to effects produced through something other than the technical skills and means of these professionals. The aim was to show that no matter how magic is constituted in a specific society, it involves the same basic elements and ‘is on the whole everywhere the same’ (Mauss 2001 [1950]: 19). Mauss defined these sociological elements as *actions* (symbolic acts/rites), *officers* (the agents who perform them) and *representations* (the ideas and beliefs involved). These elements are not inherently magical, but they become so as and when they are given a meaning that attributes them with out-of-the-ordinary efficacy. No act, agent or idea is in itself magical, and any act, agent or idea can become so if attributed with ‘a dose of strangeness’ (Moscovici, 2014: 764).

‘The slightest return of the ordinary, on the other hand, tends to weaken that power’ as Moscovici (2014: 764) inferred.

In a Maussian perspective, magic is thus a manifestation of the classifying faculty of human thought (Valeri, 2013). ‘The magical value of persons or things results from the relative position they occupy within society or in relation to society’ (Mauss, 2001[1950]: 148). An object is made magical by being classified as different from ordinary objects, and a person becomes a magician by being classified as ‘a being set apart’ (Mauss (2001[1950]: 29). Belonging to a profession ‘shrouded in mystery and not without prestige’ or being in a position of authority in society ‘makes a magician’. That is, differentiation ‘places these people apart from the common run of mortals, and it is this separateness which endows them with magical power’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 36-37). Magical power is thus produced by introducing difference, as Bourdieu (1987) deduced Mauss’s proposition.

Officers of magic carry out symbolic actions, often as part of technical procedures, but the extraordinary efficacy of their actions, and the objects involved, are constituted through relational differentiation between the agents who perform them and the community or clientele they serve. Personal characteristics such as particular appearances, ‘cunning looks’, or ‘oratorical or poetic gifts are often taken to be attributes of magicians’, and ‘delusions of grandeur may predispose them to believing themselves capable of special powers’. However, ‘they possess magical powers not through their individual peculiarities, but as a consequence of society’s attitude towards them and their kind’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 34-35).

Following this theoretical path, Mauss refuted the common explanation of magic as a ‘tissue of inventions and hoaxes’ (2001 [1950]: 40) whereby magicians take advantage of psychological needs to alleviate uncertainty and anxiety. Only a simplistic theory of magic would question the marvels performed by magicians and explain their profession as a hoax, he asserted. Rather:



The magician... is a kind of official, vested by society with authority, and it is incumbent upon the society to believe in him ... He assumes the spirit of his function, the gravity of a magistrate. He is serious about it because he is taken seriously, and he is taken seriously because people have need of him. Thus, what a magician believes and what the public believes are two sides of the same coin (Mauss, 2001[1950]: 119). Such collective beliefs are what Mauss called magical representations, namely ‘a world of ideas which imbues [symbolic agents and their actions] with a special kind of effectiveness’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 25). Actions that are infused with this magical significance ‘are creative; they *do* things’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 23, original emphasis) – emotionally, cognitively, socially and sometimes also physically<sup>3</sup>.

Mauss turned to the Melanesian notion of mana in search of a general principle behind magic, this force ‘par excellence’ (Fournier, 2006: 138) – the mysterious, wonder-making power whose efficacy amazes. The concept of mana was also later used in Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1995 [1912]) based on some of the same data that Mauss studied, thus pointing to joint work (Fournier, 2006). This use of an indigenous concept<sup>4</sup> to explain a social phenomenon in more universal terms spurred a long controversy (Fournier, 2006; Mazzarella, 2017; Valeri, 2013). As Levi-Strauss (2002 [1950]) argues in his critique, the conception of mana does not shed light on the phenomenon Mauss and Durkheim sought to explain; it is part of it. It is a Melanesian interpretation of the idea behind the specific forms of magic prevalent in that context (Valeri, 2013). The way Mauss used the mana concept to assert a universal dimension to the force at work in magic means that rich and illuminating analysis ended up deviating from its own path. Mauss appeared to claim to have identified an essential basis of magic, beyond its social constitution derived from collective beliefs in a specific social milieu, as he otherwise emphasised.

Mauss's theoretical orientation was both radical and revolutionary for its time, and continues to be of contemporary relevance (Gauthier, 2020; Valeri, 2013). However, when it came to the mana concept Mauss halted 'at the edge of immense possibilities', as Levi-Strauss (2002 [1950]: 45) proclaims, as he, along with other social theorists, took it in different directions. Weber, in *Economy and Society*, stated that he employed the concept of 'charisma' to refer to 'these extraordinary powers that have been designated by special terms such as 'mana' (1968, p. 400). Weber (1968) defined charisma as a gift 'that inheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment' or 'may be produced through some extraordinary means' 'in people or objects in which the gem already exists' (p. 400). Bourdieu (1998) in *Practical Reason* referred to both Weber's 'charisma' and Mauss and Durkheim's 'mana' in relation to his own concept of symbolic capital, where the influence of Mauss's approach to magical power as socially constituted is particularly evident.

In revisiting Mauss's thinking on magic here, we continue the path Mauss pointed to, rather than where he ended up with the mana concept. Symbolic action functions, as Mauss tentatively suggested, in a relationship of interdependence with what Tambiah (1990) calls technico-causal modes of thought, namely discourses that stress the rationality of instrumental action and technical causality. Tambiah (1990) argues that rationalist discourses and instrumental logics are in all societies integrated with participatory symbolic enactments<sup>5</sup> such as myths, affective and emotive language, rites and performative speech acts. Analytically separate, these simultaneously complementary and contrasting modes are in practice intertwined – each enabling the other to operate – although one or the other tends to dominate in specific milieux (Tambiah, 1990). Technico-causal modes of thought and action conceive of a predictable and homogenous order between causes and effects – 'a vigilant separation of the possible and the impossible' (Moscovici 2014: 764). But alongside this mode there is always another which is conceived to go beyond, to abolish the separation between the

observable and the imaginary. Building on Mauss, Moscovici (2014) argues that magic is constructed out of the transgression, enlarging the scope of what is possible by imagining immaterial powers and efficacies that can only be extraordinary. Such collective beliefs in extraordinary potentialities are what powers of the mana-type represent (Mazzarella, 2017), regardless of their empirical diversity. In the following section, we explore examples of what we may, with Mauss, call contemporary magical representations that infuse the magical agents of our time with transformative social efficacy.

### **Contemporary magical representations**

Moscovici (2014) suggests that the new forms of magical thought ‘so widespread in our age’ (p. 778), revolve around beliefs in the extraordinary efficacy of *human* agency and ingenuity. This implies that the social and natural world is imagined as subject to the efficient power of humans – any need, event, problem, or catastrophe can be faced, and the world put in order through speech or intelligent tools (Moscovici, 2014). As Tresch (2012) argues, technological developments at the dawn of industrialisation contributed to expanding how the creative power of humans was perceived – humans became ‘understood as a species whose perceptions, actions, and technical interventions transformed its milieu and itself’ (Tresch, 2012: 287). Magic culturally specific to contemporary Western culture and capitalist mass societies, in whatever form it takes, often derives from collective imaginaries that envision the powers of supernormal humans producing extraordinary effects. These magical representations constitute the resources for differentiating leaders, consultants, entrepreneurs, marketeers, creative professionals and other contemporary ‘mana workers’, to use Mazzarella’s (2017: 33) term, and infusing them with vague and indeterminate powers to transform societies, politics, markets, organisations, and selves.

Some of these magical representations can be referred to as ‘New Age’ ideas, drawing on a broad range of traditions from ancient occultism to Asian spirituality (Carrette and King, 2005; Hanegraff, 2003). Hanegraff (2003) argues that under conditions of modernity, traditional beliefs and practices have been reinterpreted and transformed into what he calls ‘disenchanted magic’. Aimed at personal transformation, these magical practices involve psychologising techniques for elevating individual consciousness based on beliefs in the power of the human psyche, i.e. ‘it is the mind that works magic’ (Hanegraff, 2003: 12).

Heelas (1999) argues that these widespread cultural assumptions have made it plausible to believe that humans possess the power not only to transform their selves, but also to generate financial prosperity and achieve business outcomes, for example by ‘[using] the power of your mind to increase sales’ (p. 54). Management and self-improvement gurus are the agents who propagate such New Age-inspired ideas and techniques – focused on fostering ‘creativity’ and ‘vision’ in business, unleashing ‘the power within’, ‘the innovative genius inside yourself’, ‘intuitive leadership’, ‘human potential’ and so on (Heelas, 1999). Zaidman (2015) explores how CEOs, managers and investors consult channels to seek business advice, and shows that relationships between clients and channel in many ways resemble client relations of more conventional management consultancy. As Carrette and King (2005) argue, New Age-inspired ideas and practices in corporate contexts are closely intertwined with capitalist mythologies of ‘market forces’ and the dominant ideal of utilitarian efficiency based on a calculative rationality.

Other pervasive contemporary magical beliefs are reflected in the imaginings of exceptional, superhero leaders, attributed with magnificent powers to create extraordinary effects, whether for better or for worse. Populist political leaders such as Donald Trump are topical examples (e.g., Krause-Jensen and Martin, 2018; Schneiker, 2020). Mythologies of ‘transformational’, ‘visionary’ and ‘charismatic’ leaders abound in business, politics,

professional sports, culture, and other domains. Variations of such representations are also evident in the ‘Great Man’ theories of business leadership literature (for critical reviews, see Ford et al., 2022; Robinson and Kerr, 2009), New Age inspired leadership training (Heelas, 1999), and media and political discourse. In the context of cultural organisations for instance, Nisbett and Walmsley (2016) show how arts managers, policymakers, and audiences idealise popular leaders as ‘clever’, ‘charismatic’, and ‘enthusiastic’ and exalt the possibilities and extraordinary effects of their leadership. Such tales are not simply exercises of the imagination or an expression of fantasies. Their constant repetition turns them into social facts as objects of collective confirmation (Mauss, 2001[1950]). They become part of the contemporary ‘world of ideas’ – the collective beliefs and expectations from which the separateness of specialised agents and powers of the magical kind can be constituted.

Related imaginaries of the powers of personhood are embedded in mythologies of creative potential and genius. Ekman (2015) for instance shows how ‘talent’ and ‘passion’ are perceived to enable creative knowledge workers to innovate and create ‘endless wealth out of nothing’, in the same way as ‘alchemy promises to transform lead into gold’ (p. 589). These ‘soap bubble fantasies’ constitute magical representations rooted in late capitalism ‘where possibilities are endless, and the law of contradiction has been annulled’ (Ekman, 2015: 589). As Moscovici (2014: 764) notes, ‘there is no such word as ‘can’t’ in magic’.

Arnould et al. (2018) illustrate how creative directors of luxury fashion brands are attributed with artistic genius, ground-breaking aesthetic vision and exceptional, transformational abilities. Salamon (2005) similarly shows how the figure of the entrepreneur is imagined as possessed with enthusiasm, zest and passion for enterprise and growth, and ‘creating value out of the not-yet-seen and not-yet done’ (p. 47). The passionate, eccentric ‘genius’ is attributed with ‘alchemist abilities’ to turn anything into value ‘as the purest, finest, financial capital’ and seen to possess special insights into a common consciousness enabling

the entrepreneur to ‘intuitively predict and sense the direction of business’ (Salamon, 2005: 53). This may be cast as a pursuit of global dimensions, and the entrepreneurial ‘genius’ by implication is a prophet of global capitalism (Salamon, 2001).

Professionals such as marketeers, publicists and political ‘spin doctors’, are examples of communication experts attributed with extraordinary powers, albeit at times of a darker kind (Geschiere, 2003; Mazzarella, 2017; Stivers, 2001). Imaginings of their manipulative arts and enormous influence cast them as ‘pimps, conmen, and silver-tongued serpents’ (Mazzarella, 2017, p. 104). The agents of ‘corporate voodoo’ (Carrette and King, 2005) selling New Age inspired training and advice services often stand similarly accused, as do more conventional management consultants (Strang et al., 2014). Management gurus, marketeers and consultants have been depicted as ‘witchdoctors’ (Clark and Salaman, 1996; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997), ‘sorcerers’ (Cleverley, 1973), ‘wizards’ and ‘spellbinders’ (Malinowski, 2002 [1935]), and such metaphors contribute further to the magification of these figures of capitalism – ‘sometimes by divinization, sometimes by demonization’ as Czarniawska and Mazza (2003: 268) note.

As with advertising and other forms of mass publicity, so have consultancy services become deeply embedded in developed economies, exerting an enormous influence in a broad range of sectors (McKenna, 2006; Stein, 2017). The figure of the expert consultant is increasingly important in shaping social life in profound ways through calculative practices, as Prince (2014) shows in the context of the cultural sector. Stein (2017) explores how management consultants perform the ‘abstract labour’ of ‘selling speed’, namely capitalist acceleration, altering corporate life and social relations using representations that refer to ‘entities and activities that lay far beyond’ the concretely observable (p. 5). Thus, consultants ‘do things’ with PowerPoint slides, Excel models and other representations (Bourgoin and Muniesa, 2016; Smith, 2013) in ways that remain opaque to all involved, as Stein (2017)

argues. As officers of the capitalist order *par excellence*, they are routinely called upon to reverse the misfortunes of all types of organisations to realise the neoliberal promise. Imaginings of the special powers that set them apart as magical Others (Smith, 2013) are based on management fads sold as ‘scientific’ techniques that can eradicate inefficiencies and deliver magical solutions to managerial problems (Fincham, 2000; Huczynski, 2006; Strang et al., 2014).

Stivers (2001) examines a range of psychological and administrative techniques widespread in management, advertising, politics, media, and therapy, and argues that these techniques are profusely magical means of manipulation that sell the *illusion* of solutions and results. Like traditional magic, these techniques are irrational and ineffective, Stivers (2001) claims. Similar assumptions of ‘consulting wizardry and managerial gullibility’ are evident in critical literature on consultancy, as Strang et al. (2014: 228) note, and in critical analysis of advertising and political oratory where the power of modern ‘wizards’ continues to be equated with irrational, reactionary tendencies and deception, portrayed using primitivist metaphors (Mazzarella, 2017). Mauss on the other hand insisted that magical reasoning has a rational character, meaning ‘the logic reigning in collective thought’ (Mauss in Fournier, 2006: 139). Magical practices prevail, not because people are blinded by irrational beliefs, delusion and inability to perceive contrary evidence, but because the reasoning that explains contrary evidence is part and parcel of the collective logic of magic.

Magical powers are collectively constituted potentialities attributed to specialised agents, and as such they are ambiguous, volatile, and subject to contestation in concrete situations. Scepticism is an integral part of the belief in magical solutions, as Taussig (2003) notes. Magical action is continuously at risk of failure – of not successfully responding to and satisfying collective expectations – and magic therefore provides itself with ‘loop-holes’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 62). The magician takes refuge behind procedure and technicalities ‘in

case of failure in magical prowess’ (p. 62). Thus, failure ‘can always be held to be the work of counter-magic’ or ‘result from some error in the way magical actions were performed’ (Mauss, 2001 [1950]: 114). Failure can also, with varying ease, be attributed to the magician, as the swift replacement of many a superhero CEO, political spin doctor or top sports manager so aptly illustrates. Less high-profile ‘mana-workers’ (Mazzarella, 2017) face similar, but perhaps less obviously dramatic, risks. As Ekman (2015) argues in the context of the creative industries, knowledge workers are turned into ‘bottomless fountains of value creation’ as part of the ‘alchemistic formula of commodification’ (p. 259). Wielding such attributed powers to realise limitless potentials is an uncertain business. This results in new vulnerabilities and extreme work regimes for creative professionals (Ekman, 2015), as Stein (2017) similarly shows in the context of consultancy work. A great deal of effort, long hours and sometimes your entire sense of self, goes into seeking to performatively create, by vague and indeterminate means, that which is collectively imagined.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to revisit Mauss’s theory of magic and explore how a Maussian approach to magic as a social phenomenon may contribute to the agenda of studying the magicalities of late capitalism. We argued that a Maussian lens can illuminate how contemporary figures of the capitalist order, such as leaders, consultants, entrepreneurs, marketers and creative professionals, are set apart and *made* as magical agents. Based on collective beliefs and expectations they are endowed with ambiguous and unstable potentialities to do the extraordinary – to indeterminately solve problems, ‘create value’ and generate growth. The magical dimension of their professional roles involves putting to work the powers they are infused with; to performatively ‘do things’ with words, images and



numbers, subtly redefining social, cultural and economic life in accordance with neoliberal ideals.

In a Maussian perspective, magical action cannot however be reduced to deception or manipulation at the hand of skilled ‘mana workers’ such as marketeers or consultants. Magic is collectively produced to imagine a transformative social efficacy that exceeds and overflows, to embody that ‘something more’ at the heart of any given social order, which is ‘both instrumentally and symbolically indispensable’, as Mazzarella (2017: 4) writes. Notions of extraordinary powers attributed to specialised agents are generic and vague, representing an ‘indeterminate value of signification’ to use Levi-Strauss’s (2002 [1950]: 55) expression, and it is by virtue of this quality that they can operate despite the contradictions inherent in them.

Following in Mauss’s footsteps to reinterpret his ideas on magic, as we have in this article, is an endeavour itself marked by contradictions. Mauss’s writings are ‘both dated and contemporary’ (Valeri, 2013: 263) and open to contrasting interpretations (Hart, 2014). His theorising appears at times inconsistent and insufficiently systematic, but it is at the same time alive with insights that inspire and fuel the sociological imagination. Clearly, it is not only his masterpiece *The Gift* ‘that keeps on giving’, to use Guyer’s (2016: 1) expression. Mauss’s published work is however dispersed across hundreds of articles and several unfinished book projects (Fournier, 2006; 2012) – constituting ‘somewhat piecemeal’, ‘scattered fragments’, as Mauss himself stated (1998 [1930]: 32-33). Much of his work was collaborative and unsigned or remains untranslated, as Hart and James (2014) note, making it difficult to access for non-French speakers. Nevertheless, despite these limitations for writing about his work, we hope to have shown that his theory of magic deserves to be known more widely and, most importantly, be put to work in studies of the pervasive magical beliefs, agents and practices of our time, as they are constituted and contested in interaction.

Mauss provided us, as Gauthier (2020) suggests, with ‘a powerful set of arguments against secularization and disenchantment narratives’, as well as, we might add, an antidote to any dogmatic stance on the social. His thesis on magic (Mauss, 2001 [1950]) is based on the examination of a diverse range of magical agents, practices and notions of the mana-type across widely separate parts of the world and different types of societies. This examination of magical ideas and practices in such ‘an infinite diversity’ (p. 107) showed that ‘the subject is even more ambiguous and indeterminate than ever’, as Mauss noted (p. 106). Magic ‘cannot be defined by its aims, processes or its ideas’ and ‘its vital parts have neither a fixed position nor a fixed function’ (p. 108). Its constitution is, rather, dependent on ‘the circumstances in which these rites occur’ (p. 12). We see here Mauss’s flexible stance and his openness to the situational and interactional (Hart and James, 2014). What is general across societal contexts is that ‘the diverse elements of magic are created and qualified by the collectivity’ (p. 109) and that the evocation of these shared beliefs in symbolic action can produce transformative social effects.

Thus, rather than confining the content of magical thinking to one kind or another, a Maussian lens invites us to explore magic-making and its effects in particular social milieux, ‘since it is only in the milieu, where these rites occur, that we can find the *raison d’être* of those practices’ (Mauss (2001 [1950]: 12). Therefore, ‘above all we must make parallel studies of magical systems’ in all types of societies, as Mauss (2001 [1950]: 19) urged, including our own.

Contemporary capitalist societies are profoundly magical, dominated by a constant tsunami of all manner of things being done at a distance with words, images and numbers. It is a social world characterised by ‘deep mediatization’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017) that confronts us as ever more arbitrary, disorderly, unpredictable and noisy (Moscovici, 2014). It is also a world where cultural imaginaries of extraordinary humans with great powers to magically save, solve and cut through that noise, are widespread and increasingly polarising. Heeding Mauss’s

call, we must study the evolving multiplicity of magical systems in our global capitalist era of corporatisation, hyper-individualisation, digitalisation and mediatisation. Investigating how and when ‘doing things’ with words, images and numbers is collectively imbued with a heightened performative efficacy, and with what consequences, is an urgent task. Mauss’s intellectual legacy and his insistence on the importance of the symbolic in the constitution of the social, represents a rich resource on which we may draw.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu's concept of habitus for instance represents an extension of Mauss's ideas on body techniques (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In *Techniques of the body*, Mauss (1973 [1934]) used the concept of habitus to refer to ways of acting as 'collective and individual practical reason' (Mauss quoted in Fournier, 2006: 290).

<sup>2</sup> This is evident in Bourdieu's writings on the magical efficacy of words and other performative acts (Bourdieu, 1992; 1998). He applied Mauss's theory of magic for instance in analysis of the social alchemy of the designer's signature that transforms the social quality of the product without changing its material qualities (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and in his analysis of the 'miracle of transubstantiation' that makes the artist an artist and 'not a craftsman or a Sunday painter' (Bourdieu, 1987: 203).

<sup>3</sup> In his work on body techniques, Mauss suggested that phenomena such as death by magic or healings demonstrate the potential efficacy of symbolic action on the body and that beliefs of a social nature are bound up with the biological body and its systems (Mauss, 1973 [1934]).

<sup>4</sup> Mauss also used The New Zealand theory of hau as an explanation for exchange in *The Gift*.

<sup>5</sup> Tambiah traces the development of the idea of symbolic participation from Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who was closely associated with Durkheimian sociology and a friend of Durkheim and Mauss, to Maurice Leenhardt who was Mauss's former student and later his successor holding Mauss's influential chair at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Fournier, 2006).

## References

Arnould E, Cayla J, and Dion, D (2018) Fetish, Magic, Marketing. In: Moeran B and Malefyt, TW (eds) *Magical Capitalism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.115-136.

Bourdieu P (1998) *Practical Reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P (1992) *Language and Symbolic Power*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P (1987) The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46: 201–210.

Bourdieu P and Wacquant L (1992) *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bourgoin A and Muniesa F (2016) Building a Rock-Solid Slide: Management Consulting, PowerPoint, and the Craft of Signification. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 30(3), 390–410.

Carrette J and King R (2005) *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge.

Clark T and Salaman G (1996) The Management Guru as Organizational Witchdoctor. *Organization*, 3 (1): 85–107.

Cleverley G (1973) *Managers and magic*. Harmondsworth: Pelican books.

Couldry N and Hepp A (2017) *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Czarniawska B and Mazza C (2003) Consulting as a liminal space. *Human Relations*, 56 (3): 267-290.

Davies O (2012) *Magic: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Durkheim E (1995 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.

Ekman S (2015) Win-win imageries in a soap bubble world: Personhood and norms in extreme work. *Organization* 22(4): 588–605.

Fincham R (2000) Management as Magic: Re-engineering and the search for business salvation. In: Knights D and Willmott H (eds.) *The Reengineering Revolution: Critical Studies of Corporate Change*. London: Sage Publications.

Fournier M (2002) Reflections on the Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie*. 27 (4 )(Autumn): 577-581

Fournier M (2006) *Marcel Mauss. A biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Fournier M (2012) Is there anything new to say about Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss? *International Sociology Review of Books* 27(2): 170-178.

Ford J, Harding N and Gilmore S (2022) Re/searching leadership: A critique in two agonies and nine fits. *Human Relations*, 0(0).

Frazer JG (1913 [1890]) *The golden bough*. London: Macmillan.

Gauthier F (2020) ‘Mauss, Marcel’. In: A Possamai and AJ Blasi (eds) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion*. [Online]. London: Sage UK.

Gellner E (1988) *Plough, sword and book: The structure of human history*. London: Collins Harvill.

Geschiere P (2003) On Witch Doctors and Spin Doctors: The Role of “Experts” in African and American Politics. In: B Meyer, and P Pels (eds) *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of revelation and concealment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp.159-182.

Guyer JI (2016) Translator’s Introduction: The Gift that Keeps on Giving. Mauss M (2016) *The gift: Expanded edition*. Selected, annotated, and translated by Guyer, JI Chicago: Hau Books.

Hanegraaff WJ (2003) How magic survived the disenchantment of the world. *Religion* 33(4): 357-380.

Hanegraaff WJ (2016) ‘Magic’. In G Magee (ed) *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 393-404.

Hart K (2014) Marcel Mauss's economic vision, 1920–1925: Anthropology, politics, journalism. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14(1): 34–44.

Hart K and James W (2014) Marcel Mauss: A living inspiration. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14(1): 3-10.

Heelas P (1999) 'Prosperity and the New Age Movement: The efficacy of spiritual economics'. In B Wilson and J Cresswell (eds) *New Religious Movements: Challenge and response*. London: Routledge, pp.51-78.

Huczynski A (2006) *Management Gurus*. London: Routledge

James W (1998) 'One of Us': Marcel Mauss and 'English' Anthropology. In: W James and NJ Allen (eds) *Marcel Mauss. A Centenary Tribute*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp.3-26.

Kalberg S (1980) Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History. *American Journal of Sociology* 85(5): 1145–1179.

Krause-Jensen J and Martin K (2018) Trickster's Triumph: Donald Trump and the New Spirit of Capitalism. In: Moeran B and Malefyt, TW (eds) *Magical Capitalism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 89-114.

Kwon H (2014) Spirits in the work of Durkheim, Hertz and Mauss: Reflections on post-war Vietnam. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14(1): 122-131.

Lee SC (2022) Magical capitalism, gambler subjects: South Korea's bitcoin investment frenzy. *Cultural Studies* 36(1): 96-119.

Lévi-Strauss C (2002 [1950]) *Introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss*. London: Routledge.

Malinowski B (2002 [1935]) Coral gardens and their magic. Vol. 2, *The language of Magic and Gardening*. London: Routledge.

Mauss M (2016) *The Gift*: Expanded edition. Selected, annotated, and translated by Guyer, J.I. Chicago: Hau Books.

Mauss M (2007) *Manual of Ethnography*. Oxford: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books.

Mauss M (2001 [1950]). *A General Theory of Magic*. London: Routledge.

Mauss M (1998 [1930]) An intellectual self-portrait. In: W James and NJ Allen (eds) *Marcel Mauss. A Centenary Tribute*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 29-42.

Mauss M (1973 [1934]). Techniques of the body. *Economy and Society* 2(1): 70-88.

Mazzarella W (2017) *The Mana of Mass Society*. London: The University of Chicago Press.

McKenna C (2006) *The World's Newest Profession. Management Consulting in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Micklethwait J and Wooldridge A (1997) *The Witchdoctors. What the management gurus are saying, why it matters and how to make sense of it*. London: Mandarin.

Moeran B and Malefyt TW (2018) Magical Capitalism: An Introduction. In: Moeran B and Malefyt TW (eds) *Magical Capitalism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-44.

Moscovici S (2014) The new magical thinking. *Public Understanding of Science* 23(7): 759–779.

Nisbett M and Walmsley B (2016) The Romanticization of Charismatic Leadership in the Arts. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 46(1): 2-12.

Pels P (2003) Introduction: Magic and modernity. In: B Meyer and P Pels (eds) *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of revelation and concealment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-38.

Prince R (2014) Calculative Cultural Expertise? Consultants and Politics in the UK Cultural Sector. *Sociology* 48(4): 747–762.

Robinson SK and Kerr R (2009) The symbolic violence of leadership: A critical hermeneutic study of leadership and succession in a British organization in the post-Soviet context. *Human Relations* 62(6): 875–903.

Rooney D and McKenna B (2007) Wisdom in Organizations: Whence and Whither. *Social Epistemology* 21(2): 113-138.



- Salamon K (2001) 'Going Global from the Inside Out – Spiritual Globalism in the Workplace'. In M Rothstein (ed) *New Age and Globalization*. Oxford: Renner; Denmark: Aarhus University Press, pp. 150–72.
- Salamon, K. (2005) 'Possessed by Enterprise: Values and Value-creation in Mandrake Management'. In O Löfgren and R Willim (eds) *Magic, Culture and the New Economy*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 47–55.
- Schneiker A (2020) Populist Leadership: The Superhero Donald Trump as Savior in Times of Crisis. *Political Studies* 68(4): 857–874.
- Smith IS (2013) Management consultants at work with clients: Maintenance and contestation of elite status. In: Abbink J, Salverda T (eds) *The Anthropology of Elites: Power, Culture, and the Complexities of Distinction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 207–226.
- Stein F (2017) *Work, sleep, repeat: The Abstract Labour of German Management Consultants*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stivers R (2001) *Technology as Magic. The triumph of the irrational*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- Strang D, David R and Akhlaghpour S (2014) Coevolution in Management Fashion: An Agent-Based Model of Consultant-Driven Innovation. *American Journal of Sociology* 120(1): 226-264.
- Tambiah S (1990) *Magic, science, religion, and the scope of rationality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taussig M (2003) Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism: Another Theory of Magic. In: B Meyer, and P Pels (eds) *Magic and Modernity. Interfaces of revelation and concealment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 272-306.
- Thomassen B (2013) Anthropology and social theory: Renewing dialogue. *European Journal of Social Theory* 16(2): 188-207.
- Tresch J (2012) *The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology After Napoleon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tylor EB (1958 [1871]) *Primitive culture*. New York: Harper and Row.

Valeri V (2013) Marcel Mauss and the new anthropology. *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(1): 262-286.

Watson TJ (2003) *Sociology, work and industry*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. London: Routledge.

Weber M (1968) *Economy and society; an outline of interpretive sociology*. New York: Bedminster Press.

Zaidman N (2015) Business Consulting vs. Channeling: What is the Difference? *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30(1): 89-105.