

Harmful Magic, Helpful Governance

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Singh explains the development of harmful magic “without invoking group-level benefits.” Suppose his explanation is correct. Harmful magic may still provide group benefits, and where it’s prevalent, it probably does.

Just as a screwdriver can open cans though it was developed to drive screws, so can a belief or practice serve the group though it developed to please psychologies, explain misfortunes, justify hostile acts, or do anything else. Consider, for example, shamanism. According to Singh (2018a), shamanism, similar to harmful magic, develops from cultural selection for cognitively appealing superstitions—to gratify the mind, not serve the group. Nevertheless, as Singh acknowledges, “shamans likely provide benefits to clients or the group” (2018b: 48). By the same token, so does harmful magic.

Belief in harmful magic enables a technology for governing the group: the expectation that members you’ve rankled will target you with such magic. It’s wise, then, to try to avoid rankling members of your group and, when that fails, to resolve matters with those you’ve rankled. Belief in harmful magic practitioners who are evil—witches—extends this technology. It encourages participation in activities that are personally costly but benefit the group, like partaking in group sanctions of problematic members and hazarding your life in combat with enemy groups. Perception of such parties as witches magnifies their perceived threat, hence your perceived payoff of contributing to actions against them. It also magnifies the deterrent to becoming a problematic group member or defecting to an enemy group, lest you be perceived as a witch.

These incentives have protected real and intellectual property rights (Leeson 2014a; Suchman 1989), enforced contracts (Leeson 2014a; 2013a), strengthened tax compliance (Leeson 2013b), resolved conflicts (Leeson 2014b), and supported social insurance (Posner 1980) in groups where harmful magic beliefs and related superstitions are prevalent. Alas, they are not the only incentives that harmful magic creates. Harmful magic, like conventional weapons, may be used

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for predation as well as protection, and witch beliefs that encourage participation in activities that benefit the group may also be exploited for personal gain at the group's expense.¹ Harmful magic is thus not only a source of property rights and public goods; as Singh stresses, it's "a source of paranoia, distrust, and bloodshed, these beliefs divide societies, breeding contempt even among close family members." A dubious governance technology, without question. Yet that technology's effect on group welfare hinges on a different question, which Singh ignores: Compared to what?²

Compared to a governance technology such as modern American government, harmful magic is "societally corrosive" indeed. American government, too, sometimes sows paranoia, distrust, and bloodshed (e.g., the 1992 Los Angeles riots), breeds division and contempt among family members (e.g., estate litigation), even produces the odd "witch hunt" (e.g., the Smith Act trials). Still, it governs vastly better than harmful magic.

Compared to a governance technology such as modern Liberian government, however, harmful magic fares differently. Liberian government is corrupt, dysfunctional, and often inaccessible (International Crisis Group 2006; Isser et al. 2009; Leeson and Coyne 2012).³ Might harmful magic—witch-hunting warts and all—govern better than *this* technology, or no governance technology at all? Harmful magic doesn't need to govern well or even halfway decent to benefit the group, it just needs to govern *better than the group's alternatives*.

That's a low bar to clear when the group's governance options are severely constrained. Unlike harmful magic, the appurtenances of superior governance—adequate police forces, competent judges and lawyers, clerks, jailers, fine collectors, institutions to control these agents—require enormous resource outlays, and many of their costs are fixed. Thus, while wealthy societies can afford superior governance, poor societies cannot. Poor societies may skirt this constraint if they inhabit nation-states that provide superior governance and they have ready access to state institutions. But where nation-states provide lousy governance or such access is lacking, the governance menu for poor societies is short and grim: there's dubious governance technologies like harmful magic, and there's probably worse.

¹ For one (infamous) example, see Leeson and Russ (2018).

² This question is critical to understanding seemingly suboptimal institutions in general, but especially those based on superstitions. See, for instance, Leeson (2012; 2014c).

³ This, despite the nominal similarity of Liberian and American government.

Which begs the further question: Where is harmful magic prevalent? If Singh's examples are representative, it's prevalent where the governance alternatives are probably worse than harmful magic. The societies in eHRAF's Probability Sample File are "tribal and peasant societies" (*Behavior Science Notes* 1967: 81), in other words, societies whose governance options are severely constrained.⁴ They are poor; further, most are located in dysfunctional nation-states or nation-states whose governance is hard for them to access.⁵ Seventeenth-century Europe was poor, and poorly state-governed, too.⁶

Despite this, Singh describes harmful magic beliefs as "ubiquitous." That may be true in one sense: a sufficiently large population is bound to contain some people who profess belief in most anything. What seems far more important, however, is *variation* in the prevalence and social significance of harmful magic beliefs, variation that I suspect is immense and tracks variation in the severity of societies' governance constraints. No doubt some members of wealthy societies believe in harmful magic, but their share, I hazard, is comparatively small. Who needs sorcery when you have responsive police, reliable courts, and the rule of law?

I have supposed that Singh's explanation of how harmful magic develops is correct. In fact, while I find his account fascinating, I'm skeptical that social scientists can learn the psychological roots of people's beliefs. I'm confident, however, that we can learn how people's beliefs affect their incentives and therefore behavior. The incentives that harmful magic creates and thus also its governance outcomes are seriously flawed. But they are probably less flawed than the alternatives amid severe constraints, and it's amid such constraints that harmful magic seems to be prevalent.

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⁴ The Probability Sample File excludes "modern, industrial societies" (Ember and Ember 2019), hence also the subset that is wealthy.

⁵ See the Fragile States Index.

⁶ See the Maddison Project Database.

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