

**Weber and the witches:
Sociological theory and modern Witchcraft**
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1. Introduction

*Horned God your time is back,
Call the White and call the Black,
Earth, air, fire and water,
Bind us as one.*

The chants rose and fell on Samhain night sung from the lips of the dancers whirling round a blazing bonfire.¹ Under the night sky, bright with winter-sharp starlight and a crescent moon resting on the treetops, in a clearing in an orchard at the end of many dark lanes, in a little village within commuting distance of London, Witches worked their magic.

Witchcraft has had a long and uneven history and it would not be saying too much to state that it has been many, if not all, things to all people. My doctoral thesis, *The Re-Enchanters: Theorising Re-Enchantment and Testing for its Presence in Modern Witchcraft* (2005), conducted under the auspices of King's College, London, was concerned with a very particular sort of witchcraft, a modern, twentieth century witchcraft that began in Britain with a man called Gerald Gardner and spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon world and a little way beyond.² One thing in particular has been said about this Witchcraft,³ that it is a re-enchantment, but the way in which this has been said has been far from conclusive. Theoretical accounts of re-enchantment are devoid of empirical results and empirical findings purporting to demonstrate it are devoid of adequate and, above all, operational theory. It was this problem that I wished to resolve by firstly formulating a theory – “a systematic conception or statement of the principles of something”⁴ – of re-enchantment and then secondly by rigorously testing it upon the group so described to determine whether it is an adequate explanation of the religious phenomenon of modern Witchcraft. Plainly stated, the argument was whether Witchcraft is, or is not, an example of re-enchantment. This required (a) a definition and description of Witchcraft; (b) the contextualisation of the argument (literature review); and (c) the generation of a theory of re-enchantment, before the issue could be decided.

But why Witchcraft? Witchcraft is sociologically important for a number of reasons: (i) it is a new religion in the early stages, the first fifty years, of its

development; (ii) it is growing in popularity; and (iii) it engages with many of the themes that concern today's society. The first situation affords the valuable opportunity of examining the developmental process. The second poses the question of what its appeal is. The third goes some way to answer the second. However, there is a fourth consideration: that the beliefs and behaviours associated with Witchcraft demonstrate a reversal of, or counter to, the dominating social trend of the modern age that Max Weber identified as disenchantment.⁵ This would be of only marginal concern if it were not for its youth and popularity, and for the fact that re-enchantment is not simply a desecularisation or re-sacralisation.

2. Outline of the research

To begin with I attempted to define the subject of study more comprehensively, as every study should. I looked at what previous researchers had had to say about Witchcraft in order to give context to my work and justification for it. This involved exploring the various religious classifications of it, building a demographic model of the movement and examining what various sociological observations had been drawn from it.

Having established the bridgehead I next addressed the problem of re-enchantment itself. In a sense there were two background theories here because I was dealing with two different concepts: Witchcraft and re-enchantment. I therefore had to deal with the background theory to re-enchantment before I could focus on developing, through sustained critique, a systematic conception of re-enchantment.

Re-enchantment, in sociological terms, is an obvious counter-movement to Weber's cultural diagnosis of disenchantment. However, I found that the solutions Weber offered to disenchantment – what I called Theomachia, Demonology and Herocracy based on their principal themes – did not in themselves constitute a re-enchantment, but rather ways of living in disenchantment. This still left me with the problem of what re-enchantment could mean. Whilst Weber did not speak specifically of re-enchantment, and thus cannot be blamed for not giving us a theory of it, of those who do advance such theories (Bauman 1992; Carpenter 1996; and Ivakhiv 1996) I found a problematic tendency to be rhetorical, unempirical and partisan.

This somewhat woeful state of affairs necessitated that I took matters into my own hands. By logical inference from Weber's concept of disenchantment it was possible to determine what re-enchantment, in a Weberian sense, must involve. In generating a theory of re-enchantment I was not attempting to

second-guess what sort of theory Weber might have developed had he so wished, but to logically determine what re-enchantment must mean given the theory of disenchantment that he did put forward. Furthermore, despite the problems encountered with Bauman (1992), Carpenter (1996) and Ivakhiv (1996) it was possible to combine this inferred concept of re-enchantment with their areas of general consensus to arrive at a unified theory of re-enchantment.

As the thesis was about re-enchantment I had to make one major assumption about the social world we inhabit: that it is disenchanted. I was not the only one who had to make this assumption: it has been made by all of those who have announced the appearance of re-enchantment (Carpenter 1996; Ivakhiv 1996; Griffin 1995; Luhrmann 1989). The argument pursued in my thesis – that Witchcraft is an example of re-enchantment, that Witches are re-enchanted – was drawn from these authors, so I had to work from their premise, that for Witchcraft to be an example of re-enchantment it must emerge from a context of disenchantment. Whilst acknowledging that disenchantment is still under debate I was required to bracket this uncertainty, at least for the time being, in order to proceed.

Because the theories currently on offer were distinctly unoperational, my aim was to arrive at an operational theory of re-enchantment. This meant that I had to decide upon the most appropriate and the most practical method of testing the theory, taking into account other considerations such as sample size and non-response. To this end I developed a structured questionnaire comprising both qualitative and quantitative questions, and administered it via telephone to an opportunity sample drawn from known participants in Witchcraft and neo-Paganism.⁶

I broke the examination of the results down into two sections. The first built up a general description of the sample by looking at its gender distribution, age profile, educational attainments, occupational choices, income levels and so on. The second looked more closely, section by section, at the dimensions of re-enchantment to determine whether or not the sample demonstrated what I had earlier defined as re-enchantment. Finally, I summarised the results and concluded with an examination of the implications these findings have for the theory of re-enchantment and the study of Witchcraft in general.⁷

When people ask me about Witchcraft they typically still confuse it with Satanism or reduce it to the practice of magic. I think that in my thesis I demonstrated that Witchcraft is more than just spell-casting and, as it is practised by the people I met and talked to over the course of four years,

nothing at all to do with Satanism. Instead I found that it is a rich and fulfilling religion for those who practise it and of sociological significance for those who do not. There is no proselytising intent in these words, nor in any other that I wrote in my thesis. The motivation that drove my research was that of ‘science’, simply, *to know*.

3. Summary of the results

From being the historically dubious invention of a retired civil servant (Gerald Gardner) to a global religious phenomenon, modern religious Witchcraft has come a long way. It is a journey that can also be traced in the sociological and anthropological literature. From being the subject of a marginal sociology of the occult, Witchcraft has moved into wider spheres and as the senses of the academic scrutinisers sharpened it became distinguished from Satanism and seen as something important in its own right.

Within the wider context of the mooted condition of declining or ‘post-’ Christianity (York 1995; Woodhead 1993) the rise of Witchcraft (and Paganism generally) is all the more significant. Within the terms of this present debate Witchcraft is important as a test of the theory of re-enchantment that I developed in my thesis; and re-enchantment is not just an issue confined to currently ‘alternative’ spiritualities, but has the potential to overcome or displace the dominant social dynamic of disenchantment, that is, if we can establish that it exists.

I laid out and explored Weber’s theory of disenchantment, examining what that ‘enchantment’ was that was being eradicated, and by logical inference generated a theory of re-enchantment. By this method I determined that re-enchantment must be a multi-dimensional concept defined by non-rational modes of knowing, a re-valuation of mystery, mythologisation, magical practice and the seeking of magical salvation, the belief in personal gods and in a living, spiritual world in which everything is interconnected, an individual perception of empowerment, a high level of the extent of re-enchantment in everyday life and attitudes (saturation of the life-world), the objectivisation of culture, of ‘re-’ enchantment (a perceived change in beliefs and attitudes) and resistance to disenchantment.

After having brought to bear survey methodology on the operationalised theory what answers did I arrive at? Was the sample as a whole re-enchanting? Were Witches more re-enchanting than the others? Additionally, what other factors could have had a bearing on the results?

My research did indeed show that the sample was re-enchanted. Of the spiritual paths encountered in the survey – Witches, Pagans and ‘others’ – the ‘others’ were the most re-enchanted and Witches the least.⁸ Looking at gender, women gave re-enchanted responses more often than men. This was one of the most significant correlations in my data. In general, gender and spiritual path were more important than other classificatory data such as age, education, occupation and income. Age had some influence, although an inconsistent one, whilst the other factors had almost none. Age, education, occupation and income were found to occasionally relate to gender, but it was gender on its own that demonstrated the most noticeable affect on the question of re-enchantment. This might suggest that these other factors – age, education, occupation and income – were less significant determinants on their own than the gender of respondents and may have shown correlations that were due not to themselves, but to gender. This raises some interesting issues to do with gender, but as they were incidental to my main concern I decided that they would be better suited as the subject of further research.

Who were the re-enchanted? Typically, it was someone born in the 1950s, although men were on average slightly older than the women in the survey. Typically, it was someone who was married, although men were more likely than women to be single or divorced/separated. Typically, it was someone who had a job, although women generally held better status jobs than men. On average, the people I surveyed had an annual family income of £17,800 and again this showed a gender difference with women having a higher annual family income than men.

Most of the sample was involved in some form of Witchcraft (and many varieties were identified) and this was especially so in the case of men as opposed to women. This finding for male involvement in Witchcraft goes against the pattern we have been led to expect from other sources who tend to portray a predominantly female profile, but finds support from York (1995). Those involved in Witchcraft tended to be older, on average, than those involved in Paganism. On average, Pagans were also better educated and reported higher average family incomes than Witches.

Although only the slight majority of fifty-four percent of the sample were women this masked substantial differences in the gender profiles of each of the spiritual paths. Two-thirds of all Pagans were female and most of the ‘other’ category answers were given by women (sixty percent). However, most of those following Witchcraft were men (fifty-two percent). Given that there were substantial gender differences in the composition of these paths, it is not clear whether Pagans were more re-enchanted than Witches because

they were Pagans or because they were mostly women, or indeed because of an interaction between these two factors. This is clearly another fruitful area for future research.

The overall male/female distribution was broadly in line with that reported by other sources (Crowley 1996; Berger 1995; *Green Egg* 1991; Melton 1986). The sample was, however, older than most other writers suggest. They were well educated, but perhaps not as well educated as we have been led to believe. There were more graduates than in the Sorcerer's Apprentice (1989) survey, but less than in York (1995). Estimating class is always a complicated matter: they followed a wide range of occupations and had an equally wide range of family income levels. If any one class predominated it would be of the lower strata. Ethnically they were almost entirely European, a finding borne out by other studies in both the US (Berger 1995; Kyle 1993:275) and the UK (Crowley 1996; Greenwood 1995). Additionally, this continuing Caucasian predominance would suggest that, contrary to Crowley (1996), the situation is not changing.

By meeting the criteria set on all twelve dimensions of re-enchantment I concluded that the sample as a whole was re-enchanted, that men and women as a whole were re-enchanted, that Witches, Pagans and 'others' as a whole were re-enchanted. That is, at the group level they all demonstrated the following characteristics: irrationalisation; re-valuation of mystery; mythologisation; magical practice; a belief in interconnection; belief in unified spirit and matter, and in an animate and subjectified world; individual perception of empowerment; personalisation of deity; a high level of the extent of re-enchantment in their everyday lives and attitudes; objectivisation of culture; 're-' enchantment; and resistance to disenchantment.

4. Conclusion

Occultism, Paganism and Witchcraft have been dynamic, influential forces in the development of Western society and culture (Webb 1971), but have attracted relatively little attention from British sociologists of religion. The focus in the past has tended to be on Christian religion and exotic Eastern imports, whilst also very important this emphasis has not given us the full picture.

The situation is changing. Work in this area is now being increasingly undertaken. Much of this new work has been exploratory and descriptive, but I have been more concerned to test at least one of the generalisations that have already emerged from this research.

Even in defining the terms of my research important findings were made. By subjecting Witchcraft to a number of different and widely used definitions of religion⁹ I clearly established that Witchcraft meets the necessary criteria.¹⁰ The sociological significance of this in itself is to be noted. It means that Witchcraft is not simply fulfilling a “need for entertainment, diversion and titillation” (Larner 1974:83), or that it is merely a fad comparable to jogging or skate-boarding (Lefkowitz 1989:32) and, therefore, as these writers imply, something to be dismissed.¹¹ It means that Witchcraft is a new religious phenomenon and, for us in particular, it means that the perception of its religiousness is an essential element in identifying it. The consequences of this, at least in one important regard for the discipline of sociology, mean that such reference works as Marshal’s *Dictionary of Sociology* can no longer simply place ‘witchcraft’ in the sole context of ‘magic, witchcraft, and sorcery’ as the “art of performing charms, spells and rituals” with witchcraft particularly identified as “malevolent” (1998:379) and as the activity of non-Western people (1998:381).¹²

It is perhaps symptomatic of this tendency to stereotype and marginalise (or even just ignore) Witchcraft that previous explanations of occult involvement (formulated before Witchcraft and Paganism were clearly differentiated from the occult in general) and indeed involvement in any non-traditional or otherwise alternative forms of religion tended to focus on issues of dysfunctionality such as relative deprivation (Demerath and Hammond 1969; Runciman 1966; Glock 1964; Niebhur 1929; and Troeltsch 1912), or personality disorder (Singer and Benassi 1989:383-4; Lofland and Stark 1965). Even Luhrmann (1989) still found it necessary to consider the question of mental instability, but argued convincingly against socio-economic deprivation. Such explanations are still being put forward by researchers who otherwise appear to be sympathetic to the field, eg Kirpatrick et al’s (1984) power deprivation theory, or Rabinovitch’s (1991 1992, 1996) focus on family dysfunction.

What my research suggests instead is that social stability is a more important factor in involvement than has been previously suggested. It is true that both my survey and secondary analysis of York (1995) also revealed a level of relative economic deprivation, but Scott’s (1980) explanation that economic success is not a high priority for Witches (and Pagans more generally) still seems to hold good. During participant observation I found that Witches and Pagans did not discuss money and financial success in a positive light, and were instead critical of the consumer-capitalist society. Orion (1995:68-9) came to the same conclusion when she argued that Pagans were less

materialistic than other members of society, finding instead that creativity and prestige amongst peers were more important than financial reward.

This means that re-enchantment cannot be similarly explained on the grounds of social or psychological deprivation or dysfunction. It was not a marginal social group that was studied here and in consequence the findings drawn from that study should not be marginalised.

I discovered that re-enchantment is not simply the return of, or to magic, as the name alone might suggest, just as disenchantment was not only the elimination of magic. Whereas before we could not say in what way Witches were re-enchanting, or even what re-enchantment was, we can do so now, precisely. The generalisations made by Luhrmann (1989) and Griffin (1995), for example, are unsatisfactory not only because they work with implicit and thus unverifiable theories of re-enchantment, but because they take no account of the diversity of re-enchantment within the broader neo-Pagan movement. Now having laid out an explicit and specific theory of re-enchantment there are firmer grounds for subsequent research in this area.

Even when re-enchantment is theoretically elucidated by Carpenter (1996) and Ivakhiv (1996), for example, they still fail to take account of diversity within the movement. My findings clearly showed that different sorts of people become involved in different sorts of neo-Paganism, and that they demonstrate different levels and emphases of re-enchantment.

Where Bauman (1992) described re-enchantment at the societal level my findings enabled me to say with confidence, but within the limits of generalisation acknowledged in my thesis, that re-enchantment is occurring at the individual level. In general, the sort of re-enchantment demonstrated by the sample was not absolute. They had not returned to live in Weber's 'enchanted garden', but neither did they experience re-enchantment temporarily. The mystical, mythological, ritual and especially magical practices of the sample went beyond the moment of their enactment to produce lasting changes in the experience and conduct of their lives. Nor was it a pseudo re-enchantment. Lasting changes in their behaviour and outlook had been achieved which led them to believe that they now lived better lives. Instead their re-enchantment was critical, accommodating and partial. Critical because they are aware that they are striving to achieve a different way of living. Accommodating because as 'real people' in the 'real world' they are faced by decisions that compromise and contradict that different way of living. Finally, it is necessarily partial because it is critical, accommodating and on-going.

To Weber's three ideal typical and semi-historical stages of enchantment – the primitive in the enchanted garden, the peasant of ancient times and the Athenian of Ancient Greece (see Kontos 1994) – we can now add a fourth: the neo-Pagan of post-industrial Britain. The neo-Pagan is like the Ancient Greek in being aware of his position, but aspires to be like the peasant or primitive, seeking value more often in the natural than the scientific, yet, like Weber's Ancient Greek, still using science to validate their practices and beliefs where appropriate. Yet where Weber was ideal typical and semi-historical this research has been historically contextual and empirical.

The thesis I pursued has been straightforward: it has been to subject the statement "Witchcraft is an example of re-enchantment" to the rigours of analysis. My argument has been against the uncritical use of this statement and for the generation of a reasoned, sustained and sustainable statement of re-enchantment that is operational and in operation, ie, in the testing of it, the *falsifying* of it – valid and reliable. Thus the work progressed, step by necessary step, from establishing what was meant by Witchcraft in the modern Western world to investigating and challenging 're-enchantment,' first by examining its roots in Weber's disenchantment thesis, then by analysing its conception in current sociological thought and finally by rejecting these as inadequate and deducing re-enchantment from Weber's original formulation of its antithesis.

With re-enchantment finally and fully explicated I could operationalise it and apply it to the field. The result of this was that the hypothesis was verified: although against the control group of Paganism Witches were less re-enchanting, they were re-enchanting.

Notwithstanding the constraints of time and sample size – a survey is always a snapshot of a partial and varyingly representative sub-group of the population in question – the implications of this study are considerable. For I have shown that, for the sample group at least, disenchantment has not entirely triumphed, that it is not the final condition of all mankind, that even within disenchanted social structures re-enchantment can emerge. It casts doubt on disenchantment: were we ever entirely disenchanted? It gives rise to hope for the future: outside the iron cage there is another enchanted garden.

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Notes

¹ Samhain festival organised by a local Pagan Federation affiliated group, 31 October 1995.

² One might consult Bracelin's (1960) uncritical biography of Gerald Gardner as at least a starting place for learning something more about him, although Gardner's

own works shed more light on how he conceptualised Wicca (Gardner, 1949, 1954, 1959). One should not overlook the intellectual debt Gardner owed to Murray (1921, 1933). See also my *Witchcraft Out of the Shadows* (Ruickbie, 2004) for an in-depth analysis of Wicca and my reasoned argument that it was an ‘invented’ religion.

³ Throughout the following the modern religious movement stemming principally from the works of Gardner (1949, 1954, 1959) is capitalised as Witchcraft; the phenomena recounted in the trial records, popular accounts and so on dating from the Middle Ages and sometimes earlier, that referred to in the anthropological studies of other cultures, and all other non-specific references to some form or other of witchcraft is designated without capitalisation. This is in keeping with the conventions established by the movement itself, which most usually refers to itself capitalised (eg, Kelly, 1991), and to academic usage in the anthropological (eg, Marwick, 1990), and historical literature (eg, Russell, 1980), which most usually does not refer to witchcraft with capitalisation.

Likewise, paganism when used to designate the modern variety is capitalised either as Paganism or neo-Paganism. ‘Paganism’ is the movement’s preferred term, but analytically ‘neo-Paganism’ is superior. This difference in usage is essentially British, the Americans using ‘neo-Pagan’ whether they are Pagans or academics. Indeed, Melton (1986:325) ascribes the origination of ‘neo-Pagan’ to the Pagan Tim Zell (also known as Otter Zell), although the term has an older, British derivation. The two terms, ‘Pagan’ and ‘neo-Paganism’ have been used interchangeably throughout. Some unavoidable variety in capitalisation, and also in hyphenation, will be noted in the quoted text.

⁴ Simpson et al, 1992:2040.

⁵ Nowhere in his writings does Weber provide a neat definition of what he meant by disenchantment. The two post-war essays on the ‘calling’ in the modern world, ‘Politics as a Vocation’ and ‘Science as a Vocation’, deal extensively with disenchantment (see Weber, 1948 and 1989). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1987) and *Economy and Society* (1968) are also rich sources.

⁶ My sampling frame was generated from personal contacts and ‘movement’ literature.

⁷ To aid readers in seeing how the research was executed a specimen copy of the questionnaire used in the survey was included in an Appendix. I hoped that this would also prove useful in understanding how the theory of re-enchantment was operationalised. The extensive nomenclature I developed to categorise the answers given on questions of religion, magic and deity was collected in a Glossary.

⁸ Strictly speaking, the ‘others’ were not a spiritual path. In addition, there were few ‘others’ relative to the other paths making comparison between them more problematic than would otherwise have been the case.

⁹ Here I am bracketing ‘definition’ and ‘religion’ from the philosophical problems I considered in depth in my thesis.

¹⁰ Any sort of ‘definition’ of ‘religion’ is rarely if ever used and when it is is often outdated or otherwise problematic. For example, Hutton (1999:3-4) only used Tylor’s (1970:II:8) definition of religion, first made in 1871, as a belief in spiritual

beings as his sole referent for defining religion and the way in which what he called 'pagan witchcraft' is religious. See Hamilton (1995) for a critique of Tylor.

¹¹ This does not mean that it does not entertain, titillate, or have faddish elements, of course it does (the recent spate of films, of which *The Craft* might serve as an example, attests to that), but it does mean that it is not simply an entertainment, titillation or fad.

¹² Cf. Jary and Jary (1995:732-3), and Mitchell (1975:110-1) where similar terms are employed.

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