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Contemporary magical practices: Historical bases for typology*

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Abstract. Despite the claims of the contemporary society to progressive scientific rationality, it is difficult not to notice in our everyday life increasingly more manifestations of the “magic” in quite standardized forms, typical for the “consumer society”. The absence of an established sociological tradition for conceptualizing the magic and of the systematized empirical data for the study of its current forms explains the need for the reconstruction of the general logic of the revival of the magical/esoteric as a sociocultural phenomenon. The authors identify four conditional periods of the “magical renaissance”, which allowed the esoteric movement to acquire its features of a countercultural movement, criticizing the social order and providing space for experimental construction of identity and non-conformist self-expression (this is not a stereotypical secret community, closed to the uninitiated and hidden from the public, but rather open, internally differentiated systems of diverse structures and holistic ideas about the world order, which combine intuitive and spiritual beliefs with religious and scientific elements). In the Russian history, there are relatively synchronous

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waves of popularity of esoteric practices (with the exception of the second stage of the magical renaissance), so the authors identify common features of esoteric movements: a high level of commercialization, relative institutionalization, the predominance of people with higher education among members and followers, countercultural orientation, visual aestheticization, the private nature of practices, etc. Thus, the form, content and symbolic load of magical rituals of current esoteric movements can be considered in a structural-functional context — through collective problems, requests and needs reflected in ritualized actions (esoteric practices) which only look like manifestations of the archaic magical thinking.

Key words: magical; esoteric; magical/esoteric renaissance; periodization; Western tradition; Russian society; countercultural orientation; ritualized actions/practices

The sociological discourse of recent decades has consistently emphasized the strengthening and expansion of secularization, rationalization and digitalization trends, and digitalization is also associated with new variations of such well-known processes as post-secularization and post-rationality. However, there are clear opposite trends associated primarily with esoteric [27] and magical [12] beliefs and practices [10] which are combined in the Russian society with the conviction of the majority of the population in their religiosity and being a part of the religious community: about two-thirds of Russians declare themselves Orthodox, but at the same time two-thirds note that religion plays practically no role in their lives [31]; every tenth believes in retribution for sins, 28 % and 25 % respectively believe in the ability to predict the future and cast a spell [24] (which is usually defined as “weak religiosity” or “postulated religiosity”) [29]. Although in the 19th and 20th centuries the attitude towards magic (as a system of beliefs outside the religious field) and esoteric practices was quite indifferent due to the dominance of evolutionism interpreting magic and religion as “lower” types of knowledge than science (for example, in the famous law of three stages by O. Comte), social sciences in general and sociology in particular have studied the magical since the moment of their formation [8; 13; 21; 33] to the present day [23; 37], because magical practices retain amazing vitality and are reproduced as a system of beliefs, practices and even institutions even in those cultural systems that are considered exclusively or predominantly secular. In Russia, there is a growing interest in esoteric practices (occult [30],

neo-pagan [6] and other “irrational” and “non-traditional-religious” ones, including among younger generations [46; 50]) as evidenced by both the dynamics of demand for relevant goods [17] and educational courses [7], and the abundance of “magical” content in social networks and on television (the terms “magic”, “esotericism”, “Wicca”, “neopaganism”, etc. are not identical, but in the sociological perspective describe similar phenomena that have common roots, codes and symbols), For instance, 97 % of Russians know their zodiac sign; women more often look through content about the supernatural [34] and generally rate spiritual practices as more important personally [31].

The current situation (the expanding and differentiating social field of magic and the absence of a similar “array” of attempts at its sociological analysis) determines at least two research tasks: to provide a conceptual interpretation of contemporary magical practices and to assess the possibilities of their empirical study within the sociological framework; in this article, we focus on the first task.

More than a century and a half ago in Western societies, a “working” concept of the divided ways of thinking (magical and religious, metaphysical and scientific) developed, and in these conditional “dichotomies” magic was the least institutionalized and the most “deviant”. Such “deviance” is explained by the fact that the contemporary types of social sciences (sociology) and “occult movement” developed in the same historical period, although what we today call occult or pseudoscientific (like astrology or alchemy) was not considered as such in the period of its heyday as a special tool of knowledge; therefore, the conditional chronological framework of magical practices in their conditional current perception in secular societies can be identified as the second half of the 19th century — the present time.

The institutionalization of social sciences was a period of intensive social transformations affecting, among other things, the attitude to religion and leading to the “cult” of scientific and technological progress, urbanization and industrial revolution. In other words, scientific disciplines and esoteric trends reflect the features of social systems, which allows to consider contemporary esoteric practices as a separate category: in previous historical periods, the

demarcation lines between magic, science and religion were not as clear and obvious as today. For instance, several centuries ago, alchemy and astrology were not opposed to the corresponding scientific disciplines (chemistry and astronomy), thus uniting magical and scientific knowledge into a single system. However, there is numerous evidence of ritual-“applied” activities in monotheistic confessions, which, in their contemporary perception, do not imply any magical “atavisms” [11] (like protective symbols above the doors and windows of churches to protect the sacred space from “low-ranking” evil spirits).

In order to understand why large-scale and profound changes in lifestyle and worldview initially led to the perception of magic as a kind of “atavism” [40] — magical (occult, esoteric) practices turned into a specific and independent social-cultural phenomenon from the unchanging element of everyday or spiritual life (sometimes even into countercultural phenomenon [22]), and then magic has regained its lost positions, we should identify those conditional and sociologically significant transformations of magic over the past century and a half, which determined the current “esoteric/magical renaissance” (as a “re-enchantment” that followed the “disenchantment” described by M. Weber as the price for rationality, scientific thinking and progress [18. P. 11]). During this period, magic experienced several periods of popularity: the occult was perceived as a separate and partly counter-cultural way of understanding the world in the last quarter of the 19th century, primarily due to the Theosophical Society (founded in 1875 by H. Blavatsky [30. P. 270–277]) and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (founded in 1888 [26. P. 65]). Both communities albeit to varying degrees strove to achieve the “ultimate truth” (absolute knowledge) through the analysis of scientific disciplines, philosophical concepts, and spiritual postulates of different cultures, i.e., focused on the multicultural and multi-confessional nature of cognition: if the “truth” is “scattered” across different areas of knowledge, there is no point in limiting oneself to European science.

The change in gender roles played an important role in this first period [4; 44]: the conditionally countercultural nature of esoteric practices

combined with their focus on “natural” principles allowed women not only to “officially” join occult communities but also to become their active participants and even leaders. The subsequent discussions about psychoanalysis as a theory/method and sexology led to the experiments of occult communities with corporality and sexuality, which later also contributed to a rethinking of women’s roles, but in the context of intimate and family relationships. The connection between occultism and a rethinking of sexuality, primarily of women, can be traced as strengthening in the following periods of growing popularity of magic.

Moreover, the Western society was seriously influenced by the consequences of colonialism as recorded in anthropological studies [43] and culturally affecting colonizers, i.e., there was a mutual diffusion of cultures even in their obviously unequal positions [42] (the paradigm of progress that dominated at that time placed European societies of the past and contemporary “primitive” cultures of the colonies at the same stages of “civilizational development”). On the one hand, the colonial powers perceived and positioned themselves as dominant cultures in relation to the colonies; on the other hand, subcultural and even countercultural movements in Western societies attempted to preserve/restore some forgotten (or newly found) spiritual wisdom of the past, relying, among other things, on the magical practices of “primitive” communities. In this sense, Victorian and contemporary esoteric movements have similar features borrowed from ancient African, Buddhist, Jewish, Islamic and other religious, philosophical and spiritual movements [1; 15; 35].

The second generally recognized period of the popularity of occult practices occurred in the 1960s and is often referred to as the “New Age” [2]: it is often defined as a neo-magical movement (ideology, sect, organization [45]), but it is more correct to consider this collective term as a name for a wide range of generally unrelated practices, or an “invisible” religion. Although the New Age period is considered to continue the first stage of the occult renaissance, being based on the teachings of H. Blavatsky and S.L. Mathers [2. P. 107], it is characterized by fragmentation, decentralization and broader geography, by a fundamental rejection of the dogmatism of the first stage and a tendency

towards free interpretations, associativity and intuitiveness. In general, the “philosophy” of neopaganism focuses on equality in all senses of the word (gender, racial, national, etc.). Moreover, in the late 1960s, Wicca was formed in its contemporary definition — as an open spiritual movement uniting many practices [50. P. 52]. Certainly, historically Wicca is much older, but during the development of the New Age, the structure and combination of numerous practices, which are typical for today, were formed, originating from different religious movements (the Celtic Wheel of the Year, meditation, channeling, tarot, Scandinavian runes, work with the aura, etc.) [3].

Like the first wave of the esoteric renaissance, the New Age developed as a kind of countercultural movement: as in the late 19th century, it criticized the excessive consumerism and materialism of the capitalist society and its lifestyle. As at the previous stage, the occult movement had a clear gender-specific character, taking shape under the sexual revolution: at the first stage of the magical renaissance, the female subjectivity as such was discussed; in the 1960s, the debates were not only about women’s rights *de jure* but also about female corporality and sexuality. Also, despite its generally holistic position (the denial of any religion or philosophy as the only true one), the New Age was more interested in individualism and psychology — not to separate more strongly from science but to integrate science into its philosophy, offering a kind of “theory of everything”. Thus, the New Age interprets the psyche as one of the sacred elements of reality, which can be worked with using esoteric methods; thereby, esoteric rituals have become a tool for psychological self-help, self-improvement and personal development [14] (sometimes with the help of psychoactive drugs).

The third conventional esoteric period in contemporary Western societies was identified as the end of the millennium and is often characterized as a commercial version of the 1960s [28], while the current period of magical renaissance is usually considered to logically continue the esoteric wave of the 1990s. As before, the esoteric movement opposes the paradigm of scientific-technological progress or rather its objective and social-cultural consequences in the capitalist society, but at the same time it is characterized

by the greatest degree of commercialization. In the 1990s, the magical acquired its current “appearance”: specialized stores of magic goods, esoteric goods even on “secular” marketplaces, courses on yoga and other spiritual practices with a pronounced eastern “spirituality flair”, numerous films and television programs about witches, magic, ghosts and supernatural phenomena [49. P. 237]. On the one hand, the pronounced commercialization led to the accusations of the esoteric wave in the banal deception of people to make a profit; on the other hand, including due to consistent marketization, Wicca has acquired features of completed institutionalization — magical practices became part of everyday life, and some esoteric knowledge like ideas about the aura and chakras, the astrological position of the luminaries, etc., become part of the everyday worldview.

Therefore, esoteric practices once again constitute the space of countercultural practices, making us rethink established collective ideas and behavioral patterns together with the causes and results of previous waves of magical renaissance, including in the sphere of sexuality and corporality. The first and second waves were mainly about the return of subjectivity (legal, social, personal) to women and about racial and national contradictions; in the 1990s, the emphasis shifted to issues of sexual orientation (the esoteric became a sphere of expression of female experience as such, but especially of the non-traditional one, in particular queer). However, the gender bias in management, which is typical for the contemporary society, is also reproduced in the sphere of magic: despite the obvious connection of witch movements with feminism, men dominate among the leaders of most communities and authors of books on Wicca and other movements [50. P. 70].

The fourth stage of the magical renaissance began in the 2020s: following its general logic, the current esoteric movement has a countercultural character (criticizes the consumer society for the pursuit of profit, working and living conditions in megacities), is gender-specific and gender-critical, and strives for holism (attempting to combine philosophical and religious paradigms, practices of religious and spiritual movements with local, often pagan beliefs) [25. P. 176]. The clear predominance of women among practitioners

led to a kind of social stigmatization of the movement and/or to its devaluation as a “strange female hobby”.

A striking distinctive feature of the contemporary esoteric movement is its almost complete transition to the online space [46. P. 118], and the “digitalization” of magic determines serious changes in the structure of spiritual movements. First, practices and rituals have become more individual and personally oriented: offline covens (communities of witches) and group rituals have become less common, most often people become practitioners after finding some materials in the open Internet sources and a kind of “self-initiation”. Second, such a “blurring” of magical practices weakens the boundaries between movements; thereby, it is difficult to identify which school of magic certain rituals belong to and whether they can be clearly classified in principle. Third, peculiarities of online communication lead to the simplification of magical practices and beliefs, since the online space prefers formats that require as little time and effort as possible for understanding (short videos with an emphasis on visual appeal). Thereby, there is a clear aestheticization of magical practices — their beauty turns out to be primary in relation to the conceptual esoteric base.

However, the previously developed typology of magical practices is preserved. For instance, astrology, magic crystals or fortune telling on tarot cards seem to be elements of one “movement”, although they may not be connected by an outside observer or practitioners. According to S.L. Mathers, H. Blavatsky and A. Crowley, symbols, bodies, reactions and other categories of “being” are invariably interconnected: planets — with days of the week, chemical elements, types of chemical reactions, alphabetic systems, etc.; symbols of tarot cards — with occult disciplines (alchemy, astrology, numerology, etc.) [26. P. 98]. However, today these interconnections seem to have been broken, for instance, tarot cards are considered a separate category of practical magic and tarologists — “specialists” who prefer not to use other elements of esotericism. Thus, it is difficult to talk about some single subject field of esotericism (as a set of knowledge, beliefs and practices) and to develop a scientific conceptualization of the magical movement (as a system

of interconnected communities rather than a collection of fragments under an “umbrella” name). However, even in its current popularized, commercialized, simplified and aestheticized version the esoteric/magical as a social-cultural phenomenon retains its key features acquired at the end of the 19th century.

It should be noted that the general availability of esoteric knowledge (due to its popular formats) does not contradict the concept of magic as such despite its stereotypical interpretation as something hidden and forbidden for the uninitiated. First, the initial secrecy was determined not so much by the desire to hide from the masses but by the need to convey information to them in a structured manner and in a certain sequence for better understanding and systematization. Second, the principle of secrecy was quickly violated for preserving materials and popularizing practices [47]. Thereby, if we consider secrecy (closedness to the public) as the fundamental criterion of the esoteric movement, practically none of many movements that rely on the ideas that developed at the first stage of the magic renaissance would claim the status of esoteric. Another feature of the current magical renaissance is the increasing secularity and even “scientific nature” of magical practices, however paradoxical it may sound. At the first stages of its renaissance, occultism aimed at providing an alternative way of knowing and explaining the world (the “religious” bias was replaced by a “magical” one), but gradually the degree of secularity of both society and spiritual practices has increased: rituals that look magical (In form) are increasingly explained by cognitive-behavioral processes using psychological and psychotherapeutic terminology, which again complicates the unambiguous conceptualization of esotericism [19. P. 104].

In other words, it is difficult to reconstruct the history of esoteric knowledge in Russia, since for objective reasons the historical continuity of many social institutions and phenomena was disrupted. In pre-revolutionary Russia, the esoteric movement was quite popular, and in general the first stage of the magical renaissance in Western societies and in Russia coincided due to the close ties between the Russian and European intelligentsia (for instance, there were branches of the Theosophical Society in many Russian cities [40]). After the October Revolution, members of esoteric communities were repressed for

their spiritual beliefs and/or left the country, and in 1929 all movements that did not share the ideological postulates of the Soviet state (such disagreement was a characteristic feature of esoteric communities) were banned [32. P. 313]. Therefore, studies of esoteric movements in the contemporary Russian history date their emergence to the 1990s [10]: on the one hand, there was an objective surge of interest in magical practices, superstitions and the supernatural in the broadest sense of the word; on the other hand, researchers got access to the empirical data and the opportunity to interact with Western scientists. The collapse of the USSR as an obvious crisis was accompanied by the popularization of esoteric movements, alternative spiritual and religious communities, cults, etc., which was also facilitated by many years of the previous stigmatization of religious beliefs and confessions.

The same reasons led to the development in post-Soviet Russia of the so-called “Native Faith” (Rodnovery) movement — a Slavic version of neopaganism [36]. Although it requires separate consideration, we can argue that this movement is part of the magical renaissance: despite its claims to historical authenticity, in the social-cultural-functional perspective, many elements of the “Native Faith” movement were determined by the same demands and needs as Western esoteric movements. Moreover, the “Native Faith” and Slavic pagan movements also began with the popularization of historical beliefs that were of great interest to the Russian society in the 19th century, which makes this Russian trend similar to the Western esoteric renaissance (return of the “lost” knowledge, restoration and partial reconstruction of Slavic paganism in a form adapted to new historical realities). Many elements of today’s Slavic paganism in its popular format were not only reconstructed (rethought and modified to be better understood, often based on today’s cultural clichés to fill in the inevitable, historically determined “blank spots”) but also falsified (well-known examples are the “Slavic runes” and the “Veles Book” [5; 41]).

Nevertheless, the general countercultural character of Slavic neopaganism is clear: it criticizes the excessive consumerism of the capitalist society, its separation from nature and traditions, and provides followers with esoterically designed tools for psychological reflection and self-expression,

which unites Slavic neopaganism with Western occult movements. However, the deep philosophical foundations of the “Native Faith” and esoteric knowledge are radically different: esoteric movements rely on a multicultural synthesis to achieve universal and comprehensive knowledge; the “Native Faith” movement, on the contrary, aims at restoring one specific culture in its historically authentic form, which is why some neopagan Slavic communities have a pronounced nationalistic character [36] (with elements of xenophobia [18. P. 20]). Another fundamental difference between the “Native Faith” movement and Western esotericism is the lack of connection with the feminist ideology, which is determined not only by the Soviet and post-Soviet history of the feminist movement but also by the ideological features of neopaganism. First, the “Native Faith” is more politicized (which became obvious in the 1990s, when its followers organized political parties) and, therefore, radicalized, but in Russia women are less involved in political activity, especially in its radical forms. Second, many directions of Slavic neopaganism are extremely patriarchal in their interpretation of the women’s roles, which is consistent with the equally patriarchal position of Russia’s institutional religions [9]. In other words, the “Native Faith” is countercultural not in relation to the “native” society but to the Western values imposed on it, including by feminism. Thereby, Wicca and other magical “confessions” have a rather open, horizontally decentralized character, while Slavic neopagan communities tend to recreate traditional social institutions of the patriarchal past (communities with a hierarchical structure and a gender-specific distribution of roles).

Nevertheless, the current stage of the magical renaissance in Russia is similar to the Western one: despite some differences (like elements of Orthodoxy and/or Slavic (quasi) paganism), it follows the general logic of the development of European esoteric societies (Easternization, multi-confessionalism, gender issues, etc.). The difficulties in the sociological study of the “magical” in Russia are determined by the inconsistent historical development of spiritual practices, esoteric movements and superstitions (continuity is more typical for everyday life than for the institutional level) and

by the impossibility to consider them as a sustainable social-cultural system (beliefs and practices are so different that it is difficult even to conceptualize them unambiguously), not to mention the absence of a corresponding research tradition, empirical data or even a unified terminology (for instance, in English, Wicca, (neo) paganism, witchcraft and other concepts are much closer in meaning [48] than in Russian — neopaganism primarily means “local” Slavic paganism, while Wicca and witchcraft are more “Europeanized” concepts). Moreover, when we consider magical practices and beliefs in Russia, we should keep in mind its multi-confessional population: many peoples do not belong to the main monotheistic religions and preserve pagan beliefs and rituals in a practically authentic form [20; 39]. Such pagan practices are not countercultural, and their practitioners (like shamans) can identify themselves as representatives of specific religious confessions, including Orthodoxy [38], so it is incorrect to attribute such pagan manifestations to the contemporary esoteric movements.

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Современные магические практики: исторические основания типологизации*

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Аннотация. Несмотря на претензии современного общества на прогрессивную научную рациональность, сложно не заметить в окружающей нас действительности все больше проявлений «магического» во вполне стандартизированных проявлениях «общества потребления». Отсутствие сложившейся социологической традиции концептуального осмысления магического и систематизированного эмпирического материала для его изучения в нынешних форматах заставляет начать исследовательские поиски с реконструкции общей логики возрождения магического/эзотерического как социокультурного феномена в современной истории. Здесь авторы выделяют четыре условных периода «магического ренессанса», позволившего эзотерическому движению обрести черты контркультурного движения, критикующего современный социальный порядок и предоставляющего несогласным с ним пространство для экспериментального конструирования идентичности и неконформного самовыражения (нестереотипное тайное сообщество, закрытое для непосвященных и сокрытое от общественности, а разнообразные по структуре открытые системы с внутренне дифференцированными системами холистических представлений о мироустройстве, которые сочетают интуитивные и духовные знания с элементами религиозной и научной картин мира). В российской истории прослеживаются относительно синхронные с западным обществом всплески популярности эзотерических практик (за исключением второго этапа магического ренессанса), поэтому можно выделить общие черты эзотерических движений: высокий уровень коммерциализации, относительная институционализация, преобладание среди членов и последователей людей с высшим образо-

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ванием, контркультурная ориентация, визуальная эстетизация, частный характер практик и др. Соответственно, форма, наполнение и символическая нагрузка магических ритуалов нынешних эзотерических движений могут быть рассмотрены в структурно-функциональном контексте — определив проблемы и области социальной напряженности, коллективные запросы и потребности, что отражены в ритуализированных действиях (эзотерических практиках), которые лишь выглядят как проявления архаичного магического мышления.

Ключевые слова: магическое; эзотерическое; магический/эзотерический ренессанс; периодизация; западная традиция; российское общество; контркультурная ориентация; ритуализированные действия/практики