

# **The Magical Theory of Politics: Meme Magic, the Cult of Kek, and How to Topple an Egregore**

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**Abstract:** The election of the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States set in motion a hidden war in the world of the occult. From the meme-filled underworld of alt-right-dominated imageboards to a widely publicized “binding spell” against Trump and his supporters, the social and ideological divides ripping the American social fabric apart are mirrored by witches, magicians, and other esotericists fighting each other with magical means. The article identifies key currents and developments, and attempts to make sense of the wider phenomenon of why and how the occult becomes a political resource. The focus is on the alt-right’s emerging online esoteric religion, the increasingly enchanted notion of “meme magic,” and the open confrontation between different magical paradigms that has ensued since Trump’s election. It brings attention to the competing views of magical efficacy that have emerged as material and political stakes increase, and seeks to theorize the religionizing tendency of segments of the alt-right online as a partly *spontaneous* and partially *deliberate* attempt to create “collective effervescence” and galvanize a movement around a distinctly non-legalistic and non-traditional charismatic authority. Special focus is given to the ways in which the politicized magic of both the left and the right produce “affect networks” that motivate political behaviors through the mobilization of (mostly aversive) emotions.

**Keywords:** memes, magic, alt-right, 4chan, Cult of Kek, egregores, charisma, collective effervescence, affect networks.

## **1. Introduction: The Magical War Over the 45<sup>th</sup> POTUS**

The result of the 2016 American presidential election sent shockwaves through political establishments across the world. But it also marked the escalation of a veritable magical war in the occult community, fighting over the 45th President of the United States and the future of the American republic with the means of spells, rituals – and memes. Just as the primaries and the campaign had mobilized deep-seated political, cultural, and value differences in the American population, so, too, pre-existing tensions among pagans, occultists, and magicians were activated in social media. Unlike their “muggle world” compatriots, however, the occult demographic has boosted its repertoire of incendiary tactics with magic.

The present article is an attempt at making sense of the unfolding magical war. Three questions guide the effort: Who are the belligerents of the magical war? What magic are they doing and how do they view its efficacy? Why are people pursuing politics with magical means in the first place? While the first two questions are straightforward who and what questions, the third explanatory “why” question is more ambitious. I argue that a sufficient answer must proceed by seeing the magical war not simply as an internal political dispute in the magical community (although it is that as well), but rather as a response to a broader crisis of political legitimacy that has engulfed the United States, and is sensed in many other Western countries as well. In a nutshell, I will argue that the “magical theory of politics” undergirding both pro- and anti-Trump belligerents, from the 4chan trolls turned chaos magicians to activist witches hexing the president every new moon, can be understood as “enchanted” interpretations of social forces that are typically unleashed during anti-Establishment political mobilization in times when political legitimacy is fracturing. I will draw on two classical sociological concepts to make my case, namely Durkheim’s idea of collective effervescence and the Weberian notion of charisma. In addition, the concept of “affective networking,” inspired in equal measure by affective neuroscience<sup>1</sup> and actor-network theory,<sup>2</sup> highlights the important role that emotional associations distributed and shared via social media plays in whipping up collective effervescence that, on the one hand, affords translation into theories of magical efficacy (and appropriate magical actions), and, on the other, can be transformed into political capital (and appropriate voting behavior) when invested in a charismatic political figure.<sup>3</sup> Taken together, these theoretical tools may not only offer insights into how Trumpism turned esoteric (and spurred its own occultist insurgency after Trump became president); it also points toward a general theory of magic as a political resource in times of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> I also draw inspiration from feminist media theorist Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social Text* 22.2 (2004), as well as Jessica Johnson, “The Self-Radicalization of White Men: ‘Fake News’ and the Affective Networking of Paranoia,” *Communication, Culture, & Critique* 11 (2018), 100-115

## **2. The Belligerents: Resistance and Reaction with Magical Means**

We may conveniently distinguish the belligerents in the magical war over the 45<sup>th</sup> POTUS by distinguishing three camps: (1) The Cult of Kek; (2) The Magic Resistance, and (3) the Magic Reaction. This is a heuristic classification only: It does not pick out stable, close-knit social groups that can be clearly identified and demarcated. Instead, it points to three phases of the conflagration that stand in a chronological and dialectical relationship to one another. Taken in a broad sense, the Cult of Kek here refers to a religionizing turn in online alt-right culture, primarily on image boards like 4chan and 8chan, but also in a network of right-wing blogs such as *The Atlantic Centurion*, *The Right Stuff*, and *Counter-Currents*. This development started already during the primaries in 2016. The Magic Resistance refers to the highly publicized attempt by people disaffected by Trump's victory to use spells and rituals to "bind" the president and his supporters. It developed in the wake of the election result, and had its public breakthrough amidst rising media attention early in 2017. Finally, these anti-Trump efforts have sparked Magic Reaction, attempting to unite Trump-supporting magicians, occultists, and alternative spirituality practitioners of all stripes in an effort to thwart the Magic Resistance's spells.

While the chronology is clear enough, it is often harder to identify, locate, and quantify individuals and groups involved with the efforts. In part, this reflects the nature of the most important theater of war: social media. The Magic Resistance is primarily organized around a collection of hashtags (#MagicResistance, #BindTrump). As for the Cult of Kek, its very existence outside of a strand of memes is debatable, and the authorial intent of the anonymous posters who have invented it ambiguous at best. What follows, then, is merely a rough sketch of key developments along with a basic historical contextualization and identification of some individuals and texts that are illustrative of the developments at hand. We will enter the story at Trump's election and the emergence of the Magic Resistance and its Reaction. In the next section we will work our way backwards to see how Trumpism turned esoteric via the alt-right's strategic orientation toward "metapolitics" and a "post-ironic" interest in chaos magic.

### ***The Magic Resistance: Synchronized Spellcasting to Bind Donald J. Trump***

That "witchcraft" had entered the American political landscape first became common knowledge on February 16, 2017. On this date, Michael M. Hughes, an author and

lecturer on the occult, published “A Spell to Bind Donald Trump and All Those Who Abet Him” on the online publishing platform Medium.<sup>4</sup> The text outlined a ritual to be performed “at midnight on every waning crescent moon until he [Trump] is removed from office,” the first such event taking place on February 24, 2017. To perform the simple ritual the practitioner would need an “unflattering photo of Trump,” a Tower tarot card, and a tiny stub of an orange candle, in addition to various ingredients representing the four elements and other magical principles. The practitioner should write “Donald J. Trump” on the orange candle stub, arrange items “in a pleasing circle,” say a “prayer for protection and invoke blessings from [their] preferred spirit or deity.” “Experienced magicians” were additionally instructed to perform an “appropriate banishing ritual.” In the incantation that follows, the practitioner would implore the gods of their choice

To bind  
 Donald J. Trump  
 So that his malignant works may fail utterly  
 ...  
 Bind him so that he shall not break our polity  
 Usurp our liberty  
 Or fill our minds with hate, confusion, fear, or despair  
 And bind, too,  
 All those who enable his wickedness  
 And those whose mouths speak his poisonous lies  
 ...  
 Bind them in chains  
 Bind their tongues  
 Bind their works  
 Bind their wickedness

The unflattering photo of Trump is then lit from the flame of the orange candle, and held above an ashtray until it crumbles to dust as the practitioner, with increasing passion, speaks the words

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<sup>4</sup> Michael M. Hughes, “A Spell to Bind Donald Trump and All Those Who Abet Him: February 24th Mass Ritual,” *Medium Extra Newsfeed* (Feb. 16 2017), URL: <https://extranewsfeed.com/a-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-and-all-those-who-abet-him-february-24th-mass-ritual-51f3d94f62f4#.ncb3ies1j> (accessed March 28, 2018).

So mote it be!

So mote it be!

***So mote it be!***

Hughes' ritual quickly gathered steam on social media. Shared with the hashtags #MagicResistance and #BindTrump, it was picked up by mass media after singer Lana Del Rey tweeted a cryptic picture of herself on February 23, dressed in black and doing a hand sign in front of a red background, with the text "At the stroke of midnight / Feb 24, March 26, April 24, May 23," listing the dates of upcoming new moons. With a pop star's endorsement, magazines such as *Elle*,<sup>5</sup> *Dazed*,<sup>6</sup> *Vanity Fair*,<sup>7</sup> and *Vox*<sup>8</sup> soon published stories on the Bind Trump movement. When Michael Hughes got together with friends to perform the first binding ritual in Baltimore on February 24, it was, as he later has put it,

the culmination of an extraordinarily surreal week of intense international press coverage, nonstop phone and email interviews, all accompanied by my growing sense that I had not merely written a humorous spell that had gone viral, but had unknowingly assisted in the birth of something far bigger.<sup>9</sup>

Binding rituals have continued to be performed on every new moon since the initial event in February 2017. Just how many are participating is hard to assess, given the

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<sup>5</sup> Jaya Saxena, "Are You Going to Cast a Spell on Trump?" *Elle*, February 23, 2017, url: <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a43285/casting-spell-donald-trump/> (accessed March 29, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Anon., "Lana Del Rey 'to cast ritual binding spell on Donald Trump'," *Dazed*, February 24, 2017, url: <http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/34876/1/lana-del-rey-to-cast-ritual-binding-spell-on-donald-trump> (accessed March 29, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Kenzie Bryant, "Yes, Lana Del Rey Hexed Donald Trump," *Vanity Fair*, July 25, 2017, url: <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/07/lana-del-rey-spell-donald-trump> (accessed March 29, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Tara Isabella Burton, "Each Month, Thousands of Witches Cast a Spell against Donald Trump," *Vox*, October 30, 2017, url: <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/20/15830312/magicresistance-restance-witches-magic-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-mememagic> (accessed March 29, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, "Binding Trump: Looking Back on One Year of #MagicResistance ... And Looking Ahead," *Medium* February 12, 2018, url: <https://medium.com/@michaelmhughes/binding-trump-looking-back-on-one-year-of-magicresistance-and-looking-ahead-46c1f46a264c> (accessed March 29, 2018).

distributed and decentralized structure of these events. Rituals are performed individually, in small groups, and occasionally in public as a visible form of protest performance. Hughes estimates monthly participation in the thousands;<sup>10</sup> the official Magic Resistance Facebook group has more than 3,200 members at the time of writing,<sup>11</sup> but this, of course, is no reliable indication of how many participates in the synchronized spellcasting. If use of the movement's hashtags gives a sound indication, it would appear that engagement has waned since the initial enthusiasm in early 2017. A Keyhole search on the hashtags #magicresistance and #bindtrump in April 2018 revealed that fewer than 15 Twitter users deployed the hashtags in a random week, although the reach of their tweets (i.e. unique users exposed to them) are considerably higher, at close to 30,000. Similarly, an analysis through the branding tool RiteTag shows how the two tags are related to other, much more successful, hashtags such as #impeachtrump or #theresistance. This gives an indication that despite the media hype in 2017, the Magic Resistance remains a marginal subsection of a much bigger demographic of political discontents.

Regardless of its actual outreach, the Magic Resistance is best described as a social media-coordinated protest movement leveraging the trappings of magic and witchcraft to mobilize resistance against the incumbent US government. By emphasizing the *trappings* of magic, I am not suggesting that “sincerity of belief” in magical efficacy is entirely absent; the movement has sparked theological debates among pagans and magicians over issues such as the ethics of casting binding spells, how the efficacy of the spells are mediated (i.e., whether demonic entities might be involved), and, of course, whether the effect of the casting is likely to be as intended or instead produce a backlash. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the Magic Resistance's initial mobilization in the winter of 2017 was primarily driven by the striking images, material objects, magical circles, Tarot cards and other external trappings of magic, photographed, filmed, and shared in social media. The aesthetics of magic carried the movement's reach far outside of the limited population of practicing magicians. The driving force here, I submit, is not so much the literal belief in the magical efficacy of binding spells as the successful engagement of people's

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<sup>10</sup> See Hughes, “Binding Trump.”

<sup>11</sup> Bind Trump (Official), Facebook group (public). Url: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OfficialBindTrump/> (accessed April 3, 2018).

emotions through the subversive power associated with magic and witchcraft in the popular imaginary.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Magic Reaction: The Golden Dawn Goes Pro-Trump***

The rise of the Magic Resistance in the winter of 2017 also spurred a countermovement of Trump supporting occultists attempting to thwart the binding spells and empower the president. This “magic reaction” has been spearheaded by David Griffin and Leslie McQuade, the Nevada based leaders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn® (hereafter HOGD®), one of the many successor organizations to the influential late-nineteenth century magical order, the Golden Dawn.<sup>13</sup> It is Griffin and McQuade’s entry that transformed the magical engagement with US politics into a multilateral conflict between occultists of different stripes. It was also Griffin who started labeling the conflict a “magic war.” In order to understand why Griffin and McQuade have taken this active role and adopted martial metaphors for describing it, it is necessary to have a brief look at Griffin’s background.

Griffin has been a controversial figure in the magical scene since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> He appears to have been initiated into the Golden Dawn tradition in 1992 by Cris Monastre (formerly Patricia Anne Behman), one of Israel Regardie’s former disciples and lover, and elevated to the degree of 6=4 in 1994. Griffin’s growing involvement coincided with a conflict between Monastre and Chic Cicero, another Regardie student and the founder (in the late 1970s) of the “Regardie line” of the Golden Dawn. It is notable that the notion of “magic war” was already very much part of how

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<sup>12</sup> See the discussion of affective networking in the final part of this article. For further analysis of the Magic Resistance movement, as well as its historical precursors in American protest movements of the twentieth century, [see the contributions by Aloï and Magliocco in this special issue](#).

<sup>13</sup> By “successor” I do not mean to suggest a direct lineage of succession. Although the leadership claims to have established contact with the very same “secret chiefs” as had directed the British-based order over a century ago, HOGD® is one of several groups that can trace its origin no further back than the reception of the order’s rituals and teaching published by Israel Regardie and reissued for a wider audience in the early 1970s.

<sup>14</sup> The factual claims in this paragraph are based in part on information provided by various users in a thread on the alt.magick Yahoo forum (now Google group) on May 19 2007 entitled “A Attempted Objective and ‘Unbiased Timeline of the Golden Dawn Conflict’” (url: [https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.magick/\\_xcpLIGK5Q8](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.magick/_xcpLIGK5Q8)), and partially on information provided me by an informant close to the events in Europe since the late 1980s.

Griffin experienced the Golden Dawn schism; for example, he would attribute the Northridge earthquake in January 1994 that devastated Los Angeles (where Griffin and Monastre were at the time) to a magical attack by Chic Cicero.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after, Monastre tasked Griffin, who had been residing part-time in Sweden with his then partner since the late 1980s, with opening the Isis-Nut Temple in Stockholm. From this European base, Griffin led the Monastre line's efforts to counter Cicero's push toward trademarking the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn brand in the US by seeking a parallel trademark under European legislation. The effort succeeded in 1998, with the result that the Golden Dawn brand was split between two legislations – the Monastre/Griffin line's HOGD® in Europe and the Cicero line's HOGD Inc. in the US.<sup>16</sup>

Griffin has had a strong internet presence since the late 1990s. The so-called Golden Dawn “flame wars” that erupted around the schisms and legal battles were conducted largely online, through the exchange of incendiary attacks and allegations on websites, forums, and blogs. While mutual attacks between warring Golden Dawn factions have muted over the previous decade, Griffin has continued to pursue an aggressive social media strategy. His Golden Dawn blog,<sup>17</sup> which has attracted more than 1.4 million readers since it opened in 2009 (about 175 000 readers a year), contains a mixture of HOGD® announcements, occult instruction videos, and personal attacks on people in the occult community with whom Griffin does not get along.

Since the 2016 presidential campaign, these elements have become increasingly mixed with political content and conspiracy theories. Griffin was emphatically anti-Clinton during the campaign, publishing a number of posts on the blog attacking “mainstream media,” milking the Podesta email leaks, and alleging

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<sup>15</sup> For Griffin's version of events, see, for example, his obituary of Monastre: Griffin, “Remembering Golden Dawn Matriarch – Cris Monnastre (1946-2017),” *Golden Dawn blog*, July 21, 2017, url: <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/2017/07/remembering-golden-dawn-matriarch-cris.html> (accessed May 1, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Note, however, that both organizations currently use the ® in their logos, brandishing their respective EU and US trademark registration numbers. For ease of reference, however, I refer to Cicero's US-trademarked group with the distinguishing suffix “Inc.”

<sup>17</sup> *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn® Blog*, url: <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.com/> (last accessed April 30, 2018).

contacts between Hillary's inner circle and the KKK. These posts often appear motivated by the fact that rivaling personalities in the occult milieu displayed pro-Clinton stances on social media.<sup>18</sup> Since Trump's election, however, the anti-Hillary sentiments have developed into a decisively pro-Trump stance. Once again, however, the main catalyst of this development appears to be a reaction to what other magicians are doing – in this case Michael Hughes' binding spell. Starting on February 24, the date of the first New Moon ritual, Griffin published the first of a string of posts attacking the Bind Trump movement, which he described with increasingly fantastical language as a gang of “black magicians,” “traitors,” “Satanist terrorists,” and “crypto-Fascist witches – whose REAL objective is to establish a globalist world Empire!”<sup>19</sup>

Griffin's response to the threatening “army of witches” was to mobilize a broad front of pro-Trump spiritual practitioners, forming an interfaith coalition of diverse magical and religious practices to thwart the Magic Resistance's efforts. The following call was published on March 4, 2017:

the Order of the Golden Dawn are calling on all believers in spirituality, manifesting, magic, the law of attraction, prayer and even positive thinkers, regardless of their race, religion, affiliation, beliefs, class or creed to join in efforts to combat the potential threat presented by the gathering of the witches event by synchronising our efforts through prayer, White Magick, etc, at the same times of their rites.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the Spring, Griffin and McQuade offered an online “Black Magick Self-Defense” workshop, marketed particularly to regular people who might feel implicated by the Magic Resistance's targeting of “all those who abet” Trump. In May, Griffin registered the domain [magickwars.com](http://magickwars.com), which collects material related to the stand-off.<sup>21</sup> The website has a download link to magical self-defense material,

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., Griffin, “The TRUTH About KKK Support for Hillary Clinton and the Body Count That Follows Her (reply to Frater “Blowhard” Barrabbas,” *Golden Dawn blog*, August 29, 2016, url: <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/2016/08/the-truth-about-clinton-body-count.html> (accessed May 1, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> See Griffin, “MagickWars: Crypto-Nazi Witches vs. Magi of Light.”

<sup>20</sup> Griffin, “Ancient Mystery School.”

<sup>21</sup> On May 22, according to a Whois domain query performed on April 4, 2018.

but consists mainly of YouTube videos, including conspiracist material from Alex Jones' Infowars channel.<sup>22</sup>

As with the Magic Resistance, it is hard to estimate how many participate in Griffin's counter-spell efforts and what, exactly, they are doing. In contrast to the Magic Resistance's fixed but "open-source" ritual template, Griffin's invitation is entirely non-committal, inviting practitioners from different traditions to do whatever is right for them. Prayer, positive thinking, the law of attraction, and magic are all applicable, as long as the intention of the workings remain the same: to counter the witches and protect the president. In addition to private rituals, however, Griffin and McQuade have also performed a public ritual at the Donald Trump star on Hollywood Boulevard.<sup>23</sup> This theatrical "spell to liberate humanity and break enchantments" was filmed and published on the HOGD® YouTube channel, occupying a place between magic and a performative counter protest in a public space, not dissimilar in method from the public demonstrations performed in the name of the Magic Resistance.

### **3. The Cult of Kek: The Emergence of a Post-Ironic, Magico-Political Religion**

Before the war between magicians there was the Cult of Kek. Best described as the place where occultism intersects with online image board culture and the alt-right, the background of the Cult of Kek lies in the attempt by a group of 4chan users of trolling "politically correct" liberals with internet memes. Articulate participants tend to couch this weaponization of memes as a form of "metapolitics." Denoting the strategy of pursuing political goals by targeting general culture rather than entering parliamentary politics directly, metapolitics is by now a long-standing strategy of the

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<sup>22</sup> In fact, Griffin's attempt to forge links with conspiracist authors such as Leo Zagami is one of the most fascinating recent developments of his online Golden Dawn ventures in recent years. See, for example, Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn® (YouTube user), "Documentary Exposé: Illuminati, Rosicrucians, and the Golden Dawn," YouTube, posted Nov 9, 2015, url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1ePnH8Fnx8> (accessed April 4, 2018), in which Griffin defends against grand conspiracy narratives that have implicated the Golden Dawn as part of an Illuminati, New World Order takeover, by countering that the Golden Dawn Rosicrucian heritage is the traditional enemy of the Illuminati and a force for "good" against the satanic "globalist" agenda of the Illuminati.

<sup>23</sup> Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn® (YouTube user), "Magick Wars in Hollywood: 'Spell to Liberate Humanity and Break Enchantments,'" YouTube, posted Oct 23, 2017, url: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ\\_ooRPHG6c&t=189s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ_ooRPHG6c&t=189s) (Accessed April 9, 2018).

extreme right originating in far-right ideologues' appropriation of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. A prominent example is the publishing front Arktos Media; created in 2009 through a merger of the small Danish publisher Integral Tradition Publishing and the Swedish old-school neo-Nazi publisher Nordiska förlaget, Arktos exemplifies the rebranding of right-wing extremism through a rapprochement with traditionalist spirituality, and an emphasis on terms like "civilization," "culture," and "identity." This sort of "spiritual entrisism" is an element of the Cult of Kek discourse as well.

The metapolitical use of memes to spread far-right content to the mainstream is a key context for the Cult of Kek's emergence, but its origins are stranger and, in a sense, more "magical" than that. Through a string of coincidences and contingencies that could probably only have taken place on an image board where hundreds of thousands of messages are posted anonymously at high pace every day, elements of modern occultism were weaved into the emerging alt-right's blend of tactics, ideology, and rationalizations of unfolding events. The result was the birth of an online religion, situated somewhere between parody, make-believe, metapolitical strategy, genuine messianic expectations, and magic. The leading Cult of Kek website ([thecultofkek.com](http://thecultofkek.com)) refers to itself as "post-ironic," which seems an apt description for much of what goes on in this corner of the internet. The *tone* of irony and satire is central to the movement's activities, but its very persistence, aggression, and focused cultivation of negative affect betray underlying moods and motivations that are anything but playful.

### *Pepe the Frog: The Apotheosis of a Meme*

The immediate background of the Cult of Kek lies in a key event of the 4chan meme war, namely the hostile takeover of the anthropomorphic frog meme, Pepe. The timeline can roughly be reconstructed as follows. In 2005, Pepe appears as a character in Matt Furie's online comic book, *Boy's Club*. By 2010, the character has become a popular motif for memes across platforms such as Myspace, 4chan, and Tumblr. In 2016, a group of users on the 4chan /pol/ channel (/pol/ standing for "politically incorrect," and a hotbed for alt-right themes like misogyny, anti-Semitism, white power, and blood-and-soil nationalism) attempted to hijack Pepe by systematically producing memes which associate the frog with extreme-right views (e.g. depicting him with a swastika armband, as a concentration camp guard, making racist slurs, and

so forth), and plastering these memes all over the internet. The campaign reached a break-through in September 2016, when the Anti-Defamation League included the cartoon frog in its database of hate symbols. Although ADL clarified that the “meaning” of the meme is not stable and must always be interpreted in context,<sup>24</sup> /pol/ users had largely succeeded in filling this empty signifier with very particular political connotations.

But it gets weirder still. 2016 was also the year when the anthropomorphic frog meme transmuted into the image of the Egyptian god Kek. This apotheosis also took place on /pol/ and can, according to commentators who have followed the development,<sup>25</sup> be described in three stages. The first stage is contingent on gamer slang originating in *World of Warcraft*, where the word “kek” emerged as a substitute for “lol” (laughing out loud) due to an algorithm that scrambles the chatter of opposing teams into gibberish. Given the close connections between /pol/ and gamer culture,<sup>26</sup> “kek” therefore became embedded in Pepe memes and connected with “shitposting” (that is, posting huge amounts of ironic, insulting, or ridiculously [and usually intentionally] poor content) more generally.

The next step was the discovery by /pol/ users that Kek is also the name of one of the eight gods of the Egyptian Old Kingdom ogdoad theology. More specifically, he/she (both male and female forms existed) was associated with primordial chaos and darkness, and typically represented with the head of a snake, a cat – or a frog.

Finally, this dimly sensed frog god of chaos and memes was connected to Trump through a particular form of playful superstition on 4chan. A quick

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<sup>24</sup> “Pepe the Frog,” Anti-Defamation League. Url: <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog> (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> “Kekist” insiders and outside critics appear to agree on the basic facts about the religion’s emergence. See e.g. the outsider accounts of David Neiwert, “What the Kek: Explaining the Alt-Right ‘Deity’ behind Their ‘Meme Magic,’” Southern Poverty Law Center, May 8, 2017; url: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic> (accessed April 10, 2018); David Lawrence, “HNH Explains .... the Cult of Kek,” Hope Not Hate, November 15, 2017, url: <https://hopenohate.com/2017/11/15/hnh-explains-cult-kek/> (accessed April 10, 2018); cf. the more detailed insider account, anon., “The Truth about Pepe the Frog and the Cult of Kek,” *Pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com* (blog), url: <https://pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com/> (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> On this, see Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2017).

explanation of how the image board works is necessary here. Posts on 4chan are consecutively given an identifying number (currently nine digits, reflecting the fact that the total number of posts number in the billions). Due to the very high posting frequency (currently over one million a day),<sup>27</sup> it is impossible for a user to predict exactly what the last few digits will be when pushing the button. This has given rise to a phenomenon where certain numbers, patterns, and repetitions of numbers – especially repeating digits, labeled “dubs,” “trebs,” “quads,” and so on – are considered particularly auspicious. Getting these numbers is called a “get.” Themes, memes, or users that frequently “get” are considered special and meaningful, allowing for hidden patterns and connections to emerge in the minds of users. During the primaries and the presidential campaign, a perception formed on /pol/ that Trump memes were accruing many more dubs than chance would predict. A web of significance was gradually spun, in the usual post-ironic way, in which Trump was divinely selected, that the god selecting him was Kek, and that the Pepe meme was one of the god’s many manifestations.

Since these “discoveries,” things happened fast. A number of short “holy texts” and instruction manuals in “meme magick” started appearing on Amazon in 2016, published under the pseudonym “Saint Obamas Momjeans.”<sup>28</sup> Related to two virtual organizations called the Sacellum Kekellum and the Knights Keklars, this segment of the Kek movement appears heavily inspired by Discordianism.<sup>29</sup> The website thecultofkek.com appeared in 2017,<sup>30</sup> alongside multiple Facebook pages, groups and smaller blogs worshipping Kek through the dissemination of memes in social media. The Kekian prayer, (post-)ironically satirizing the Lord’s Prayer, gives a whiff of the movement’s atmosphere:

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<sup>27</sup> According to DMR Business Statistics, which published an updated overview on March 31, 2018. See “12 Amazing 4chan Statistics and Facts (March 2018),” url: <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/4chan-statistics-facts/> (accessed April 10, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Five of these booklets were collected in Saint Obamas Momjeans, *The One True Bible of Kek* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> One of the “holy texts” (really a compendium of memes) also references Eris, who is central to Discordians, on a meme with the text “ERIS DISCORDIA REVEALED TO BE YET ANOTHER INCARNATION OF THE DIVINE KEK.” See Momjeans, *The One True Bible of Kek*, unpaginated.

<sup>30</sup> According to a whois search performed on April 30, 2018, the domain was registered on January 16, 2017, through the domain privacy company WhoisGuard Inc, registered in Panama. The company is used by individuals and organizations that wish to set up anonymous websites.

*Our Kek who art in memetics*  
*Hallowed by [sic] thy memes*  
*Thy Trumpdom come*  
*Thy will be done*  
*In real life as it is on /pol/*  
*Give us this day our daily dubs*  
*And forgive us of our baiting*  
*As we forgive those who bait against us*  
*And lead us not into cuckoldry*  
*But deliver us from skills*  
*For thine is the memetic kingdom, and the shitposting, and the*  
*Winning, for ever and ever.*  
*Praise KEK<sup>31</sup>*

As Kekism has continued to metastasize online, elements from esotericism and magic have become standard features of the discourse. The notion of “meme magic(k)” as the central holy act of Kek is sometimes explicitly connected with chaos magic, while the historical parallels between Kekism and earlier attempts at inventing a new spirituality on the extreme right, from Evolian Traditionalism to the “esoteric Hitlerism” of Savitri Devi or Miguel Serrano is acknowledged by some. In the following sections, we will have a closer look at these aspects.

*Meme Magic: From Slender Man and Ebola-chan to Information Warfare Tactics*

The notion of meme magic appears to have first developed on 4chan and 8chan (opened in 2013 as a “free-speech friendly” alternative to 4chan, which its creator, Frederick Brennan, thought had descended into authoritarianism and censorship)<sup>32</sup> without any explicit input from existing occultist currents. Hyperactive pattern recognition in the context of high-speed posting is a basic building block of the phenomenon, giving rise to synchronistic meanings connecting memes posted on the image board to events in the external world. According to one insider,<sup>33</sup> the first known use of the term “meme magic” was in connection with Germanwings Flight 9525, which crashed on March 24, 2015 when the suicidal co-pilot Andreas Lubitz

<sup>31</sup> “Prayer to Kek”. Url: <http://thecultofkek.com/a-prayer-to-kek/>

<sup>32</sup> 8ch.net. The imageboard’s url is currently blocked by Google searches.

<sup>33</sup> Saint Obamas Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 7-8.

deliberately steered the passenger flight into a peak in the Massif des Trois-Évêchés region of the French Alps, killing all 150 passengers. YouTubers and 8chan users recognized a similarity between the event and the opening scene of the Batman movie, *Dark Knight Rises* (2012), where supervillain Bane downs a plane from the inside and escapes. A post on /pol/ on March 26 suggested the Germanwings flight had been brought down through the (unintentional) use of “meme magic,” as footage from the opening scene of the Batman movie was regularly used in its own genre of memes, known as “baneposting.”

The idea hit a nerve, and in the following months 8chan got two lists dedicated specifically to meme magic: /bmw/ (Bureau of Memetic Warfare) and /magick/.<sup>34</sup> Earlier cases where memes took on a life of their own offline, such as the Slender Man phenomenon that culminated in the stabbing episode in 2014, where two 12-year-old girls in Waukesha, Wisconsin, lured their friend into the woods and stabbed her to death to impress Slender Man, were now reinterpreted as examples of meme magic. Soon, the term also came to apply to new, intentional attempts at affecting the world outside through the creation and spreading of memes. One example is the “Ebola-chan” meme, in which meme magicians invented and spread a female anime character personifying the Ebola virus in an attempt to intensify the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. Another example is the spread an anime meme representing frost in order to induce a harsh winter to kill off refugees during the European migrant crisis. Regardless of whether these examples are to be viewed merely as “ironic” expressions of genocidal wish fulfillment (which would echo a Freudian understanding of magical thinking) or as sincere attempts at inflicting harm through magic, the very idea of a magic connection between memes and world events was now firmly established in the milieu.

Causal links between memes and real-world events is a central element in the conception of meme magic and crucial to the subjective experience that there is “something going on.” The bare-knuckles *tactics* of meme magic are, however, much less enchanted, aligning closely with techniques of information warfare, psyops, or simple cyber bullying and online harassment of the type that characterized the Gamergate controversy in 2013-2014.<sup>35</sup> For example, the tactical manual provided in

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>35</sup> For a brief overview, see Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 16-27.

Saint Obamas Momjeans' *Intermediate Meme Magic* is an instruction in weaponized social epistemology that could just as well have been written by Russia's Internet Research Agency (it still might). The manual talks about astroturfing (taking over comment sections so that it looks like a certain point of view is overwhelmingly dominant, inciting casual readers to fall in line), choosing strategic targets such as "bernouts" (a reference to Bernie Sanders supporters, who are likely to be receptive to anti-Establishment rhetoric), and the importance of engaging the emotions and creating outrageous rumors that would impact the target negatively if entertained as a vague possibility. The following quote is illustrative of how affective and suggestive language is mobilized instrumentally:

The idea is to create one liners that we can memify and mass produce. These need to appeal to emotion strongly. We have to literally be the hate machine we're known as. Some angles to consider: \* Hill Racism quotes "fucking nigger, kike, fucking retards" <---- EXTREMELY POWERFUL \* CF Corruption \* Hill/Bill Corruption \* Rapist Bill + Rape Plane + Air Fuck One + Pedo Island \* "Hillary Loves Rapists" > link to Epstein \* Child molestation \* Human Trafficking \* Greed/Money \* Old/Sickley Bill and Hill \* Selling out our nation \* Selling facors to backwards islam \* Selling secrets \* Too big to jail \* War mongerer: responsible for iraq + libya<sup>36</sup>

The goal is to create a web of associations, manufacturing distrust through the networking of negative affect,<sup>37</sup> especially contempt and disgust. In addition to engaging the emotions, manipulating the apparent source of messages and boosting the frequency of repetitions are also important for maximizing impact. This is where "botting" enters the picture: using fake accounts to amplify the frequency of the message as well as engineering its social status by inventing desired (and desirable) profiles. Momjeans' manual gives the following advice: "Use hot girl usernames/pics (Bonus points for ethnic sounding usernames). – These are best for gaining massive amounts of followers."<sup>38</sup> The author even encourages identity theft in order to create as authentic profiles as possible: "Pick hot girl Instagram accounts and rip their pics. Pic twitter accounts and rip all their tweets and make them your own. Don't be lazy.

<sup>36</sup> Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 33-4.

<sup>37</sup> See discussion in the final section of this article.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Make them look legit. It's important."<sup>39</sup> The manual gives practical recommendations on concrete tools for scraping Instagram for content, links to sites where one can acquire twitter bots, and advices on how to set up proxies to relay the army of fake meme posters all around the world. In short, while meme magic may have its veneer of supernaturalism, the bare-knuckle tactics are textbook information warfare.

*"Esoteric Kekism": Occulture and the Metapolitics of Egregores*

There are, however, obvious affinities with esoteric currents that have been exploited by ideologues on the alt-right's spiritual wing. Here, the tactics of information warfare mix with notions of magical efficacy, right-wing ideology, and alternative religion to create the Cult of Kek. It is important to note that here, too, it is impossible to separate a spiritual ambition from metapolitical strategy, "genuine" religionism from religion as *instrumentum regni*. As the hard alt-right blogger writing at *Atlantic Centurion* under the pen-name Lawrence Murray (an unapologetic anti-Semite and white nationalist) expressed it, the "goal of meme warfare" is "to control the normies", or, as he puts it, to gain "imperium" over them.<sup>40</sup> As Murray candidly expresses it,

For those of us involved in White nationalism and the Alt-Right, the value and importance of the war of ideas, metapolitical warfare, is paramount. It is necessary to teach people our truths—truths about race, sex, society, culture, and the fate of the West—and to skillfully do so with finesse and impact. We embrace whatever methods that we've been furnished with or seek out innovative ways of using them, with the goal of converting people to our cause . . . . From Twitter, to comments sections, to naive reporters, to printers and fax machines, we turn no vehicle of communication away.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>40</sup> Lawrence Murray, "On Normies," *Atlantic Centurion*, 31 May, 2016, url: <https://atlanticcenturion.wordpress.com/2016/05/31/on-normies/> (taken down late 2017; accessible via Waybackmachine)

<sup>41</sup> Murray, "Esoteric Kekism, or Kek as a Bodhisattva of Racial Enlightenment," *The Right Stuff* (blog), url: <http://therightstuff.biz/2016/08/14/esoteric-kekism-or-kek-as-a-bodhisattva-of-racial-enlightenment/>. The blog post has since been taken down, but copies are accessible via Waybackmachine).

To Murray, this battle extends beyond fighting for the meanings of a given meme or mainstreaming specific anti-Semitic symbols: to win the narrative, it is also necessary to coopt the language, myths, and symbolisms of religion. In a blog post about “esoteric Kekism,” Murray opened by praising the aspirations of the Greek-French Nazi author, Savitri Devi (Maximiniani Julia Portas, 1905–1982), whose ideas on Hitler as the avatar of Vishnu helped spawn new forms of esoteric, millennialist neo-Nazism in post-war generations.<sup>42</sup> However, since the Hindu and esoteric conceptions are too alien to contemporary western audiences, and the direct veneration of Hitler too easy to dismiss, Murray argued that an update for contemporary times would do better to work with the language of Buddhism combined with online meme culture. Buddhism, he argues, already enjoys large appeal among young westerners; thus, by emphasizing myths about the Buddha’s blue eyes and pale skin, and forging connections with existing nationalist interpretations in places like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Japan, Murray held that the *dharma* “could be repurposed in ways pertinent to our cause and fashioned into something appealing.” Thus, nirvana becomes “*Aryan nirvana*,” denoting freedom from “Mosaic samsara,” and its objective radically immanentized as the creation, in this world, of a “karmic nation.” The frog-headed meme-god Kek, in an awkward leap, becomes the bodhisattva of this promised “*Aryan nirvana*,” and Pepe and Trump two of its incarnations.

Murray’s bizarre Buddhist vision does not seem to have caught on, but the bodhisattva idea is not the only theological theory in which Kek, and his discovery in memes, has been embedded. Another candidate is the occultist concept of the “*egregore*,” an artificially created entity or thought-form with a will of its own, brought into existence and kept alive through the use of magic.<sup>43</sup> In the history of

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<sup>42</sup> Murray also cites Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Hitler’s Priestess: Savitri Devi, the Hindu-Aryan Myth, and Neo-Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), which, despite being largely a duplication of Savitri Devi’s own self-presentation in her autobiography, with very little added in terms of critical reflections, remains the only monography-length study of this fascinating and influential individual. See Julian Strube, “Savitri Devi,” in *Brill Handbook of Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup> The term’s origin, derived from the Greek ἐγρήγορος (“wakeful”), lies in the Ethiopian Book of Enoch, where it denotes the angelic spirits commonly rendered in English as the “Watchers.” While the details are not yet clear, the term appears to have entered modern occultism via the French form, *égrégoire*, which has been around since the nineteenth century, but only received its current meaning of

occultism, the most famous example of an egregore is probably the Fraternitas Saturni's GOTOS entity, functioning as a demonic guardian for the organization and kept alive by ritual actions that included sex magic.<sup>44</sup> One author who has applied the egregore idea to Kek, meme magic, and Trump's electoral victory is the blogger Manon Welles, who runs the website *Aristocrats of the Soul* (subtitled *New Right + Alt Religion*). Starting in 2011 as a blog mostly focused on tea and essential oils, it has since developed into an esoteric lifestyle blog with a clear rightwing political emphasis. The author of an anti-"SJW" book in 2016, Welles has blogged fairly extensively on Trump from a Traditionalist and magical perspective, seamlessly blending Julius Evola and radical Traditionalism with bits of Thelema, ceremonial magic, Jungian dream interpretation, and other types of esoterica with an elitist aura. Wells consistently distances her brand of spirituality from what she calls "New Age muck."<sup>45</sup>

In an article on "The Alt Right's Pepe the Frog Meme, Chaos Magick, and the Rise of Trump," Welles likens the intensive meme activity surrounding Pepe with chaos magic's notion of *sigilization*: the creation and "charging" of a symbol that will act as a conduit of will capable of influencing the world at large. Citing authorities such as Austin Osman Spare, Aleister Crowley, and the contemporary magician Phil Hine (whose *Condensed Chaos* appear to be Welles' main source for chaos magic),<sup>46</sup> she lays out the process as first making a statement of intent, then creating an artistic representation of the intent in the form of a sigil, meditating on the sigil, "charging" it through an ecstatic state of "gnosis," and finally destroying and forgetting the sigil so it can work its powers through "the unconscious." "Posting a Pepe the Frog meme fits this description of the process of sigil magic," Welles writes:

For one, most people who post Pepe memes related to the 2016 presidential election know their intent—to help Donald Trump and to hurt Hillary Clinton's campaign. But meme posters

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a guardian spirit/god created by a group through magic at some point in the twentieth century, probably under the influence of the lore surrounding Fraternitas Saturni (see main text).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Hans Thomas Hakl, "The Magical Order of the Fraternitas Saturni," in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen, 2014), 44.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Manon Welles, "About," *AOTS: New Right + Alt Religion*, url: <http://aristocratsofthesoul.com/about/> (accessed April 26, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Hine, *Condensed Chaos: An Introduction to Chaos Magic* (Tempe, AZ: The Original Falcon Press, 1995).

might want to spend more time clarifying their intent if they want to turn memes into actual sigils. Next, creating the sigil involves either finding an existing Pepe meme or creating a new one. Projecting the sigil is done by posting it online; however, to works on more planes just [sic] the physical, the posting process should be done in a state of gnosis. Given how worked up today's keyboard warriors get, such an altered state might be achieved by some simply by being on the alternate world of the Internet.<sup>47</sup>

Welles acknowledges that the vast majority of Pepe posters are likely to be oblivious about chaos magic and sigilization techniques; nevertheless, she argues, the theory is clear: whether intended or not, collective emotions, concentration, and intensity is enough to unconsciously make Pepe into a magical sigil. What, then, about Kek?

Another thing that's happening with Pepe/Kek is that all the energy focused on the memes is creating an egregore, defined either as a kind of collective mind or as an actual entity. As more Pepe/Kek memes are shared, as more people think about him and his attributes as "bringer-in of light," the more powerful he will be. Even if Pepe isn't an avatar of a more ancient god, it doesn't matter since he's being created as a new thought form on his own.<sup>48</sup>

Welles is responsible for putting these ideas into clear prose and communicating them to a wider audience of people interested in spirituality and the occult, but they are also found in the hard core of the Cult of Kek itself. Momjeans' introductions to meme magic include not only the tactics of information warfare discussed earlier, but also explanations of concepts such as thoughtforms, Tulpas, egregores, sigils, mantras, evocation, states of "gnosis," etc.<sup>49</sup> It also references esoteric authors such as William Walker Atkinson, Franz Bardon, and the "dark conspirituality"<sup>50</sup> website [montalk.net](http://montalk.net).

<sup>47</sup> Welles, "The Alt-Right's Pepe the Frog Meme, Chaos Magick, and the Rise of Trump," *AOTS: New Right + Alt Religion*, url: <http://aristocratsofthesoul.com/alt-right-pepe-the-frog-meme-chaos-magick-trump/> (accessed April 26, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Welles, "The Alt-Right's Pepe the Frog Meme."

<sup>49</sup> See Momjeans, *The One True Bible of Kek*, unpaginated.

<sup>50</sup> On the concept of conspirituality, see Charlotte Ward and David Voas, "The Emergence of Conspirituality," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26.1 (2011); but cf. Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, "Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?" *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30.3 (2015). See also Asprem and Dyrendal, "Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories," in *Brill Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, in press).

In other words, while Welles is probably right that the vast majority of Pepe posters have no idea about egregores, the phenomenon seen as a whole illustrates a key dynamic of contemporary mediatized “occulture”:<sup>51</sup> A small group of occult-inclined activists are able to reach a disproportionately large audience who, although predominantly unaware of the esoteric frameworks of the culture creators, may discover magical meanings right under the surface of mainstream culture should they stumble upon the right keys.

#### **4. Discussion: The Egregore as Collective Effervescence and Charisma**

It should now be clear that the trappings, tools, and theories of occultist magic are being utilized in the pursuit of political goals on the left and right in contemporary America. Whether using the aesthetics of magic to gain attention to a cause, protecting against supernatural magical attacks, or influencing the unwitting masses through the spread of sigils charged with magical power, occultism has produced its own forms of political activism capable of impacting public opinion. How do we account for this form of magical politics? Is it a development internal to the world of the occult, or does it rather represent a turn towards the occult in response to social circumstances? In short, how do we relate the magic war to mundane politics? In the following, I will suggest that two classical sociological concepts are crucial for understanding the “magical theory of politics” in disenchanted, social terms: namely, charisma and collective effervescence. While the notion of charisma is indispensable for understanding how religious, messianic discourse can be mobilized for political capital by oppositional, outsider candidates such as Trump, Durkheim’s idea of collective effervescence points out the relationship between collective actions and emotionally arousing events and experiences that are crucial in forging a sense of shared identity, common purpose, and belonging. Moreover, both concepts point to social processes that create a subjective sense of mystery, that a person, a group, or an action is part of something bigger, beyond the control of mere mortals. Before discussing these issues at greater depth, I will make a few preliminary observations about the phenomena discussed so far.

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<sup>51</sup> See Christopher Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

### ***Preliminary Observations on the Magic War, the Political Climate, and Emic Views of Efficacy***

As should be clear from my survey, the magic war is the result of both an endogenous phenomenon erupting within occult milieus, and external processes through which non-occultists are discovering magic for the first time. On one end of the spectrum, David Griffin's war on the witches is tied to long-standing conflicts between personalities in the occult milieu in which the notion of "magic war," "magical attack," and "magical self-defense" have been vital ingredients. The external event of a controversial presidential candidate and later president sparked the exchanges, but the constellations of allies and opponents as well as the tools by which the war is fought and the theories surrounding them are predictable for anyone who has been following the magical traditions of modern occultism. Indeed, the notion that magic can be used in order to defeat political opponents – and defend against them – enjoys a long and well-known precedent in the history of modern occultism.<sup>52</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, it appears that many 4- and 8chan meme magicians discovered magic independently and started digging into existing material as a result. Here, occultism is not so much a pre-existing background as a set of resources discovered, mined, and adapted to suit pre-existing goals and activities. Finally, the Magic Resistance displays both tendencies: it was started by an identifiable practicing magician who mobilized primarily from occult and witchcraft-oriented communities; but it also hit a nerve in the broader public, providing politically frustrated and potentially disenfranchised groups targeted by Trump's policies with an empowering language of opposition. An adequate explanation of the phenomenon as a whole must therefore account for both the internal dynamics specific to the world of occultism, and various external and generic factors having to do with how people act during political upheavals. As the previous section has given a basics idea of the endogenous factors (more research would clearly be welcome), this section will focus on the second, more general issue of how enchantments can be incited by, and feed back into, politics.

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Dion Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defence* (London: Rider & Sons, 1930); Fortune, *The Magical Battle of Britain*, Gareth Knight ed. (Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2012).

Another question that must be dealt with at this stage is the emic views of magical efficacy. Is political magic viewed primarily as expressive and symbolic in nature, or are magical acts (whether binding rituals or meme sigils) envisioned as having some kind of instrumental, supernatural causal potency in their own right? In other words, is the efficacy of magic understood in disenchanting (e.g. psychological, social) or enchanting (e.g. supernatural, paranormal) terms? Here, too, there are no clear-cut answers, as a variety of positions are found within all of the belligerent groups. One generalization does, however, seem justified: everyone agrees with the baseline assumption that magic *at the very least* works as a form of ritualized protest, channeling emotions in productive ways and thereby influencing the broader non-magical public through social contagion. This disenchanting mode of efficacy is most systematically reflected in the information warfare tactics employed by 4- and 8chan meme magicians, and sublimated into a form of worship in the holy texts of the Cult of Kek.<sup>53</sup> Michael Hughes' public statements about the Magic Resistance have also typically emphasized that magic is indistinguishable from art and performance, and that any supernatural aid that might result from its spells (such as the assistance of "infernal spirits") is an added bonus.

Full-blown enchanted models also abound. It is worth noting that Hughes' binding ritual generated criticism not only from those who disagreed with its politics, but also from Wiccans, pagans, and magicians worrying about supernatural backlash due to the "Three-fold Law" or the "Law of Return," as well as questioning the magical skill of those mobilized by the campaign and the prudence of explicitly calling forth "infernal spirits."<sup>54</sup> These objections and anxieties are meaningless without the assumption of supernatural efficacy. Finally, the supernatural efficacy of spellcasting is a central motivation for David Griffin's counter-spells. In a series of blog posts in the spring of 2017 Griffin insinuated that a series of misfortunes that had befallen him, his wife, and his dog (who died following a hiking accident in the

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<sup>53</sup> The second of the Sacellum Kekellum's "five holy Kekmandments," for example, says that "The Kekian must study and practice Meme Magic, for it is how we speak to the world through Kek." See Momjeans, *Advanced Meme Magic*, in *The One True Bible of Kek*.

<sup>54</sup> See for example John Beckett, "Why I'm Not Participating in the Mass Binding of Donald Trump and What I'm Doing Instead," *Under the Ancient Oaks: Musings of a Pagan, Druid, and Unitarian Universalist* (Patheos blog), Feb 26 2017, url: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/johnbeckett/2017/02/im-not-participating-mass-binding-donald-trump-im-instead.html>

Mojave desert) were the result of the Magic Resistance's attacks on "all those that abet" Donald Trump.<sup>55</sup> In a clear statement on efficacy, Griffin moreover writes, referencing the 1993 Transcendental Meditation study on crime reduction through meditation,<sup>56</sup> that

Whether you believe in magic or not, studies have proven that when a large group of people focus on one thing at the same time, things can happen. With half the nation being targeted by large numbers of misguided spellcasters, witches, warlocks and those who do believe magic is real, we have a very real, potentially dangerous problem. That much negative energy infecting our society can have disastrous, potentially catastrophic consequences.<sup>57</sup>

This quote also bears witness to a final observation: Whatever the theory imposed to explain the efficacy of magic, participants in the magic war over Trump's presidency all highlight the importance of *synchronic actions*. The Magic Resistance's solitary practitioners are to direct their efforts at the exact same time, Griffin's counter-spell instructions follow the very same idea, and meme magicians act in concert to create the most massive impact. Such synchronic organization of actions around symbols connected to a figure of authority is, I submit, the key to developing a social theory of the dynamics of magic and politics that is currently playing out in the magical war over Trump's presidency.

### ***Charisma and Collective Effervescence in Crises of Political Legitimacy***

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<sup>55</sup> David Griffin, "Satanists Perform Black Magic to Harm President Trump – And FAIL!" *Golden Dawn blog*, July 9, 2017, url:

<http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/search?updated-max=2017-07-13T17:13:00-07:00&max-results=1&start=10&by-date=false> (accessed April 12, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> John S. Hagelin, Maxwell V. Rainforth, Kenneth L. C. Cavanaugh, Charles N. Alexander, Susan F. Shatkin, John L. Davies, Anne O. Hughes, Emanuel Ross, David W. Orme-Johnson, "Effects of Group Practice of the Transcendental Meditation Program on Preventing Violent Crime in Washington, D.C.: Results of the National Demonstration Project, June–July 1993," *Social Indicators Research* 47:2 (1999), 153-201.

<sup>57</sup> Griffin, "Ancient Mystery School Gives Dire Warning to Army of Witches."

Two useful concepts for making sense of this phenomenon are Weber's notion of charisma, and Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence. Following Weber,<sup>58</sup> "charisma" refers to a type of authority (or "legitimate domination") pitted against both "traditional" and "rational-legalistic" forms of authority. Supporters of the charismatic individual (the "charismatic community") consider the person to embody some special, non-ordinary, and often mysterious power; they are "the chosen one," the "voice of God," or "the will of the people" incarnate. While charisma may be cultivated and institutionalized (or routinized) on a grand political scale (e.g. the divine right of kings, the Juche ideology), it is often associated with oppositional groups that upend the status quo and tends to become attractive at times when established traditional and legalistic sources of authority are destabilized (Weber called it a "specifically revolutionary force").<sup>59</sup> In a similar way, collective effervescence is also based in a break with mundane, established, everyday routines, referring specifically to collective and synchronous experiences that bring people together around a shared set of actions, thoughts, and representations. In Durkheim's theory of religion and society, it is "of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born."<sup>60</sup> The emotionally arousing collective acts suggest something bigger and more powerful acting on the group from outside. The symbols that are associated with them become the basis of shared identity, imbued with "sacred" power.

As the sociologist of religion Edward Tiryakian has pointed out, charisma and collective effervescence feed into each other.<sup>61</sup> Weber emphasized that charisma is a social and relational property, entirely dependent on the "charismatic community" that recognizes and props up the individual's status as "exceptional." Such a community will often, and especially in those revolutionary moments that Weber highlighted, display the characteristics of collective effervescence. Conversely, Durkheim described how, in a social situation characterized by collective

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<sup>58</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 212-216, 241-245.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>60</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915), 218-219.

<sup>61</sup> See Tiryakian, "Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma: Durkheim, Weber and 1989," *International Sociology* 10.3 (1995), 271-274.

effervescence, certain individuals can take on the role of “interpreters” of the strong collective sentiments that are sensed and shared by everyone but only dimly understood by each individual in the group. Like the charismatic authority, such orators tend to transcend routine behavior and normal expectations of civil discourse:

His language has a grandiloquence that would be ridiculous in ordinary circumstances; his very thought is impatient of all rules and easily falls into all sorts of excesses. It is because he feels within him an abnormal over-supply of force which overflows and tries to burst out from him; sometimes he even has the feeling that he is dominated by a moral force which is greater than he and of which he is only the interpreter.<sup>62</sup>

In this sense, then, charisma emerges from and feeds into collective effervescence: the person who channels and interprets the affective energy of the crowd becomes a charismatic authority, and at the same time, incites further affective expressions in their audience.

Tiryakian used this combined model to make sense of the political upheavals in East Block countries during the 1980s, leading up to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> For example, Pope John Paul II assumed the mantle of charismatic authority when he returned to Poland in 1979, fueling the collective effervescence of protest that was already fermenting under the pressure of heightened food prices. The Pope and the Church became “totemistic” symbols in this uprising, which soon led to the Gdansk shipyard strike in 1980, the forced resignation of communist leaders, and the formation of the independent labor union Solidarity. In the aftermath, charisma was largely transferred to Solidarity’s spokesperson, Lech Wałęsa, who succeeded in routinizing some of this charisma in organizational form. Similarly, in Prague, Václav Havel became the Durkheimian “interpreter” of collective effervescence on the eve of the Soviet collapse, embodying charismatic authority against Soviet state power. Protests had erupted in January 1989; by November, Havel had become the charismatic embodiment and interpreter of what was an ideologically diverse resistance, filling stadiums with hundreds of thousands of protestors kept together by the shared affects activated and directed by Havel’s appearances. Tiryakian contrasts this mass mobilization with that of earlier communist and fascist ones, because they

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<sup>62</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 241.

<sup>63</sup> Tiryakian, “Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma,” 274-278

were spontaneous rather than planned and orchestrated. Moreover, he notes that the symbolic language around which these East Bloc protest movements tended to rally were typically excavated from individual countries' imagined religious pasts, "digging deep into the seemingly buried cultural capital to restore or revivify collective symbols that had been thought laid to rest by the communist regimes."<sup>64</sup>

### *Affective Networking and the Construction of Oppositional Identities*

It may seem strange at first sight to compare Havel, Wałęsa, and the Pope to Trump, and politically repressed Czechoslovakians to 4chan meme warriors who predominantly belong, as we must assume, to the ethnically, sexually, and socio-economically hegemonic sections of the largest superpower on the planet.

Nevertheless, the social dynamics and forces at play are quite similar: namely, the eruption of emotionally charged collective effervescence surrounding an emerging charismatic authority at a time of diminishing trust in the political establishment. In fact, looking back at the first two decades of the twenty-first century it is not hard to think of a dozen other examples of dynamics similar to those Tiryakian described, from the Arab Spring uprisings and Occupy Wall Street to the Euromaidan revolution, Brexit, aspects of the resurgent hard-right across central Europe and Turkey, or the Italian Five Star Movement.

Oppositional political and religious movements typically work through collective effervescence and charisma, and Trumpism is no exception. Trump's political capital is based on charisma, sustained through collective effervescence in the shape of rallies, social media outrage, and a cult following of his persona as a reality TV star. The meme activity and trolling campaigns orchestrated by anonymous agents on 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit serve to generate collective effervescence. Liking and sharing Pepe memes serve expressive functions, but it also leads to the creation of broad "affect networks," where patterns of social media reactivity defines and signals in-group membership and belonging through shared ridicule, distrust, and disgust of reified outgroup competitors ("SJWs," "cuckservatives," "normies").

The notion of "affective networking" is particularly apt for capturing how collective effervescence is created and leveraged in the heavily mediatized attention

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<sup>64</sup> Tiryakian, "Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma," 276.

economy.<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, the concept suggests the brain networks studied by affective neuroscience – responsible for motivating our behavior through seeking, maintaining beneficial attachments through love, facilitating learning through play, avoiding dangerous situations through panic, procreate through lust, and responding to threats through fear and rage – the anatomy of which are evolutionarily ancient and shared with a wide range of non-human animals.<sup>66</sup> On the other, affective networking also suggests that affect is not an internal property unique to the individual, but a relational one that is shared socially between individuals as well as in relations between persons, things, signs, and situations. It covers the processes by which “emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others,” as Sara Ahmed expresses it.<sup>67</sup> Seen through the lens of actor-network theory, chains of emotion linked through bodies, memes, ideas, and verbal statements take on an agency of their own;<sup>68</sup> they are not only mobilized by people reacting instinctively to that which grabs their affective attention in the moment, but, precisely because of the snowballing of spontaneous linkages, the affective network itself has a sort of agency that incites people to behave in certain ways rather than others, think certain thoughts rather than others, and have certain emotions and not others. The aggregate effect is the sudden mass-synchronization of behaviors in ways consistent with the affective motivational hierarchies of the network.

This brings us back to Durkheim, who in his discussion of collective effervescence and the origin of subjective experiences of “religious force” was completely aware of the “contagious” effects of emotion.<sup>69</sup> It is an *affective* and not a cognitive association that links object with sign in the mind, and it is this emotional

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<sup>65</sup> The “attention economy,” a marketplace in which individuals’ attentional resources is at the center of competition, appears to have first been theorized or predicted in 1997 by Michael H. Goldhaber, “The Attention Economy and the Net,” *First Monday: Peer-Reviewed Journal of the Internet* 2.4 (1997).

<sup>66</sup> See notably Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience*. The above list is based on Panksepp’s notion of “basic emotions” that have been associated with concrete networks and neuromodulatory pathways in the brain of a wide range of species, from mammals to birds.

<sup>67</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 117.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Johnson, “The Self-Radicalization of White Men,” who uses this argument to question the language of “self-radicalization” and “lone wolves” so often applied to the perpetrators of white supremacist and anti-feminist terrorism, tending to ignore the well-structured affective networks in which these individuals tend to be immersed.

<sup>69</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 119-221.

quality that gives a symbol (e.g. a totem, flag) the power to motivate individuals to the extent that it sometimes “directly determines action.”<sup>70</sup>

This process can be understood in simple disenchanted terms, as a form of mobilization through action, technology, symbolism, and shared emotions. However, my brief sketch of how the discourse has developed fits very well with Durkheim’s theory of the origins of “religion:” from the perspective of an individual caught up in the network, the social forces at work start unfolding as if they had a life of their own or were directed by some outside power. Individual actors inevitably fall for the temptation to interpret events as what they seem, grabbing symbolic resources for doing so in occultist ideas about egregores, thoughtforms, sigils, and bodhisattvas.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The magic war over POTUS 45 is not simply the eruption of political infighting among occultists, but illustrates a broader phenomenon: the enchanting powers of politics committed through the means of collective effervescence and charisma. The magical theory of politics approaches collective effervescence as an irreducible “mysterious power,” quite distinct from the individuals making up the collective and capable of effecting change in the world. It is an enchanted crowd psychology. The actions of the group feed the egregore, and the egregore protects the group: Kek brings dubs. Magical mobilization through synchronized ritual protest or the sharing of sigils is a form of affective networking, feeding and creating collective effervescence which, in turn, can be converted into real-life political capital in the shape of a charismatic authority.

Currently, only one of the sides of the US magic war is doing the latter. The Magic Resistance has a lesson to learn from the Cult of Kek. It is not enough to engage in oppositional affective networking alone. New positive symbols must also be created, elevated to the status of a totem, and associated with a political figure capable of transforming affect into votes. If there is one thing Kek has revealed, it is that the symbol itself could be just about anything.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 220.