



A note on Witchcraft Beliefs

RICCARDO PELIZZO

Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University Astana, Kazakhstan.



Article History

Published by: 19 December 2024

After publishing his *Hitler e il Nazismo Magico* (Galli, 1989), a book that explored the esoteric interests of National Socialists, Galli noted that much to his surprise political scientists had paid little to no attention to the relationship between magic/witchcraft and politics.

The fact that political scientists (and economists) had paid so little attention to the interplay between political and economic behavior and institutions on the one hand and witchcraft beliefs on the other hand was particularly surprising because other social sciences, from anthropology (Fraser) to sociology (Pareto) to psychoanalysis (Freud) had long been fascinated by the survival of witchcraft beliefs.

Frazer (1927) - like Pareto (1918) few years earlier, or like Baris and Pelizzo (2023) more recently - explained the survival and the pervasiveness of witchcraft beliefs in proto-functionalist terms by basically suggesting that these non-rational beliefs/forces are instrumental in securing the stability of social relations and the performance of institutions (O'Dea, 1955:178).

In the aftermath of the publication of Galli's book, economists and political scientists have started paying increasing attention to the role, presence, and consequences of witchcraft beliefs. This wave of studies has, in some respects, corroborated the claims advanced by social scientists at the beginning of the 20th century, but it has also rejected some of them.

The first theme on which there has been some disagreement between the contemporary scholars and their predecessors concerns the relation between mind and matter, that is whether ideas, beliefs, including witchcraft beliefs, are a function or a byproduct of material conditions and forces, whether such beliefs

CONTACT Riccardo Pelizzo ✉ riccardo.pelizzo@nu.edu.kz 📍 Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University Astana, Kazakhstan.



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Enviro Research Publishers.

This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons license: Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY).

Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.7.2.01>

shape material conditions and forces or whether material and ideational forces influence each other in a dynamic fashion. In this respect there is a wide spread of opinion. Douglas (1982) regards culture, cultural change and the transformation of traditional beliefs as a result of a transformation in the material/contextual conditions under which individuals and society operate. At the other extreme there are scholars (Frazer, 1927; Tubadji, 2022) who regard ideational forces, such as traditional beliefs, as the determinants of material conditions. And, in between, we have studies that question/problematize the impact of changes in material conditions on ideas and beliefs (Pelizzo, *et al.*, 2023) or that highlight the fact that ideational beliefs and material conditions affect one another. Finally, there are studies that have documented how ideational forces and beliefs are instrumental in shaping, stimulating, generating other ideas and beliefs (Kuzenbayev *et al.*, 2023; Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023a; Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023b; Kinyondo, *et al.*, 2024).

The second respect in which one could detect a disagreement between the early 20th century studies and the contemporary ones is the relationship between religion on the one hand and traditional (including witchcraft) beliefs on the other hand. Early studies, notably Frazer (1907), believed/suggested that societies would go through three stages-magic, religious and rational- and that with the diffusion of religion, traditional beliefs would disappear or become remarkably less popular. This claim does not seem to be consistent with the evidence presented in several studies published in the aftermath of Frazer (1907). Mbiti (1970) has shown that magic/witchcraft still remains a significant component of traditional religions; religiosity has not disappeared even in countries that have made considerable progress along the developmental path (Norris and Inglehart, 2011) and Gershman (2022) documented that two-fifths of the world adult population still believes in witchcraft and that witchcraft beliefs are still held by large portions of the population of the global North.

The third respect on which there is a disagreement between the early 20th century studies and the most recent ones concerns the alleged benefits of traditional beliefs including witchcraft beliefs. The early studies (Pareto, 1916; Frazer, 1927) suggested that traditional beliefs ensured the stability of the social order and the proper functioning of institutions. The more recent studies paint an altogether different picture: witchcraft beliefs contribute to the erosion of social capital (Gershman, 2016), promote the acceptability of conspiracy theories (Kinyondo, *et al.*, 2024), undermine the level of electoral participation (Harakan, *et al.*, 2023; Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023), favor antidemocratic attitudes (Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023a; Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023b) and secure the stability of party system in poorly institutionalized setting by preventing the elections from securing a minimal level of electoral accountability (Pasquino *et al.*, 2022; Pelizzo *et al.*, 2023).

It is precisely because traditional beliefs, including witchcraft beliefs, continue to have far reaching consequences for the proper functioning of our political systems, that greater efforts should be made to investigate the nexus between such beliefs and the quality of governance.

References

1. Baris, Omer F., & Pelizzo R. (2023) "Introduction To The Special Issue: Magic, Rationality, and Politics—the Political Consequences of Traditional Beliefs." *World Affairs* 186 (4), 852-868.
2. Douglas, Mary. "The effects of modernization on religious change." *Daedalus* (1982): 1-19.
3. Frazer, James George. 1907. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London. Macmillan. 1907.
4. Frazer, James George. *The Devil's Advocate: A Plea for Superstition*. London: Macmillan, 1927.
5. Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and taboo*. London: Routledge, 2012 [1913].
6. Galli, Giorgio. *Hitler e il Nazismo Magico*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1989.
7. Gershman, B. (2016) "Witchcraft beliefs and the erosion of social capital: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond." *Journal of Development Economics* 120, 182-208.
8. Gershman, B. (2022) "Witchcraft beliefs around the world: An exploratory analysis." *Plos one* 17 (11)

e0276872.

9. Harakan, A., Pelizzo R., & Nygmetzhan K. (2023) "Traditional Beliefs and Electoral Behavior in Indonesia." *World Affairs* 186 (4) 896-924.
10. Kinyondo, A., Nygmetzhan K., & Pelizzo R. (2024) "Witchcraft beliefs and conspiracy theorizing: Evidence from Tanzania and cross-national datasets." *Politics & Policy*.
11. Kuzenbayev, Nygmetzhan, and Pelizzo R. (2023) "Political Stability, Confidence in the Future, and Values." *Social Sciences* 12 (2), 82.
12. Mbiti, John S. 1970. *African Religions and Philosophy*. New York: Anchor Books.
13. Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and secular: Religion and politics worldwide*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
14. O'Dea, Thomas F. (1955) "The" residues" of Pareto: an operational definition of natural law." *The American Catholic Sociological Review* 16 (3), 170-182.
15. Pareto, Vilfredo. *Trattato di sociologia generale*. Firenze: Barbèra, 1916.
16. Pasquino, Gianfranco and Riccardo Pelizzo. *The culture of accountability*. London: Routledge, 2022.
17. Pelizzo, R., Daulet T., & Nygmetzhan K. (2023) "Modernization, Superstition, And Cultural Change." *World Affairs* 186 (4), 869-895.
18. Pelizzo, R., & Nygmetzhan K. (2023 a) "Beyond Religion: Superstition, Traditional Beliefs and the Extreme Right." *World Affairs* 186 (4), 978-1018.
19. Pelizzo, R., & Nygmetzhan K. (2023 b) "Traditional Practices and Support for the Strongman." *World Affairs* 186 (4), 951-977.
20. Pelizzo, R., Moise K., Nygmetzhan K., & Abel K. (2023) "Traditional Beliefs and Electoral Behavior: Some Evidence from Togo." *World Affairs* 186 (4), 925-950.
21. Tubadji, Annie. "UK Witches: Subversive Narratives and Radicalization." *Available at SSRN* 4212249 (2022).