

# The Magical Theory of Politics

## Mememes, Magic, and the Enchantment of Social Forces in the American Magic War

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Egil Asprem

**ABSTRACT:** The election of the 45th 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. This 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 in 2016. It brings attention to the competing views of magical efficacy that have emerged as material and political stakes increase, and theorizes 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 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

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The result of the 2016 presidential election in the United States sent shockwaves through political establishments across the world. It also marked the escalation of a veritable magic war in the occult community being fought over the 45th president of the United States and the future of the American republic by 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, preexisting tensions among Pagans, occultists, and magicians were activated in social media. Unlike their “Muggle world” compatriots,<sup>1</sup> however, the occult demographic has boosted its repertoire of incendiary tactics with magic.

The present article is an attempt at making sense of the magic war which, at the time of research in spring 2018, was still unfolding. Four questions guide the effort: Who are the belligerents of the magic war? What magic are they doing? How do they view its efficacy? And why are people pursuing politics with magical means in the first place? While the first three questions are straightforward who and what questions, the fourth explanatory “why” question is more ambitious. A sufficient answer must proceed by seeing the magic 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. I will argue that the “magical theory of politics” undergirding both pro- and anti-Trump belligerents, from 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 Émile Durkheim’s idea of collective effervescence and the notion of charisma formulated by Max Weber. In addition, the concept of “affective networking,” inspired in equal measure by affective neuroscience<sup>2</sup> and actor-network theory,<sup>3</sup> highlights the important roles that emotional associations distributed and shared via social media play in whipping up collective effervescence. This collective effervescence, on the one hand, affords translation into theories of magical efficacy (and appropriate magical actions), and, on the other hand, can be transformed into political capital (and the desired voting behavior) when invested in a charismatic political figure.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these theoretical tools may not only offer insights into how Trumpism turned esoteric (and spurred its own occultist resistance after Donald Trump became president); it also points toward a general theory of magic as a political resource in times of crisis.

## **THE BELLIGERENTS: RESISTANCE AND REACTION WITH MAGICAL MEANS**

We may conveniently distinguish the belligerents in the magic war over the 45th president of the United States 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 conflict that stand in a chronological and dialectical relationship to one another. Taken in a broad sense, the Cult of Kek refers to a religionizing turn in online alt-right culture, primarily on imageboards<sup>5</sup> like 4chan and 8chan, but also in a network of extreme-right blogs such as *The Atlantic Centurion*, *The Right Stuff*, and *Counter-Currents Publishing*.<sup>6</sup> This development started during the primaries in 2016. The Magic Resistance refers to the highly publicized attempt by people disaffected by Trump's victory in the presidential election on 8 November 2016 to use spells and rituals to "bind" Trump and his supporters. It experienced its breakthrough into public consciousness amidst rising media attention in early 2017. Finally, these anti-Trump efforts have sparked a 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 (such as #MagicResistance, #BindTrump). As for the Cult of Kek, its very existence outside of a strand of memes is debatable, and the intent of the anonymous posters who invented it is ambiguous at best. What follows, then, is a rough sketch of key developments along with basic historical contextualization and identification of some individuals and texts that are illustrative of the developments. We will enter the story with the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the emergence of the Magic Resistance and its Magic Reaction. We will then 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 associated with the Cult of Kek.

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

That "witchcraft" had entered the American political landscape first became common knowledge nearly a month after Trump's

inauguration on 20 January 2017. On 16 February, 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>7</sup> The text outlined a ritual to be performed “at midnight on every waning crescent moon until he is removed from office,” the first such event taking place on 24 February 2017. To perform the simple ritual the practitioner would need an “unflattering photo of Trump,” The Tower tarot card, and a 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,” and 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, 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 stub of the orange candle, and held above an ashtray until it crumbles to dust as the practitioner, with increasing passion, speaks the words:

*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 23 February, dressed in black and performing 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*, *Dazed*, *Vanity Fair*, 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 24 February, it was, as he later 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 have participated is hard to assess given the distributed and decentralized structure of these events. Rituals have been performed individually, in small groups, and occasionally in public as a visible form of protest performance. Hughes estimated monthly participation in the thousands;<sup>10</sup> the official Magic Resistance Facebook group had 4,968 members in January 2020,<sup>11</sup> but this, of course, is not a reliable indication of how many have participated in 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 fifteen Twitter users deployed the hashtags in a random week, although the reach of their tweets (i.e. unique users exposed to them) was 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 and #theresistance. This gives an indication that despite the media hype in 2017, the Magic Resistance persisted as 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 United States president and his administration. 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 magical 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 that were 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 was not so much the literal belief in the magical efficacy of binding spells as the successful engagement of people's 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 February 2017 also spurred a countermovement of Trump-supporting occultists attempting to thwart the binding spells and empower the president. This Magic Reaction was 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 named the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>13</sup> It was the entry of Griffin and McQuade that transformed the magical engagement with United States politics into a multilateral conflict between occultists of different political persuasions. 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 take 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 Monnastre (formerly Patricia Behman), a former lover and disciple of Israel Regardie, and elevated to the degree of Adeptus Major in 1994. Griffin's growing involvement coincided with a conflict between Monnastre 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 Griffin experienced the Golden Dawn schism; for example, he attributed the Northridge, California earthquake in January 1994, which devastated parts of Los Angeles (where Griffin and Monnastre were at the time), to a magical attack by Chic Cicero.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after, Monnastre tasked Griffin, who had been residing part-time in Sweden, with opening the Isis-Nut Temple in Stockholm. From this European base, Griffin led the Monnastre line's efforts to balance Cicero's push toward trademarking the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn brand in the United States by seeking a parallel trademark under European legislation. The effort succeeded in 1998, with the result that the Golden Dawn trademark was split between two organizations in different jurisdictions—the Monnastre/Griffin line's HOGD® in Europe and the Cicero line's HOGD Inc. in the United States.<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 had 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-Hillary Clinton during the campaign, publishing a number of posts on the blog attacking “mainstream media,” milking the leak of the personal emails of John Podesta (then chairman of Clinton’s presidential campaign) in March 2016, and alleging contacts between Clinton’s inner circle and the Ku Klux Klan. These posts often appear motivated by the fact that rival personalities in the occult milieu displayed pro-Clinton stances on social media.<sup>18</sup> Since Trump’s election, however, Griffin’s anti-Hillary sentiments developed into a decisively pro-Trump stance. Once again, the main catalyst of this development appears to have been a reaction to what other magicians were doing—in this case Michael Hughes’ binding spell. Starting on 24 February 2017, 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”<sup>20</sup> 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 4 March 2017:

David and 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>21</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, which collected material related to the stand-off.<sup>22</sup>

The website had a download link to magical self-defense material, but consisted mainly of YouTube videos, including conspiracist material from Alex Jones' Infowars channel.<sup>23</sup>

As with the Magic Resistance, it is hard to estimate how many participated in Griffin's counter-spell efforts and what, exactly, they were doing. In contrast to the Magic Resistance's fixed but "open-source" ritual template, Griffin's invitation was entirely non-committal, inviting practitioners from different traditions to do whatever felt right for them. Prayer, positive thinking, the law of attraction, and magic were all welcome, as long as the intention of the workings remained the same: to counter the witches and protect the president. In addition to private rituals, however, Griffin and McQuade also performed a public ritual at the Donald Trump star on Hollywood Boulevard.<sup>24</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.

### **THE CULT OF KEK: THE EMERGENCE OF A POST-IRONIC, MAGICO-POLITICAL RELIGION**

Before the war between magicians over President Trump, there was the Cult of Kek. Best described as the place where occultism intersected with online imageboard culture and the alt-right, the background of the Cult of Kek can be found in the attempt by a group of 4chan users to troll "politically correct" liberals with internet memes. Articulate participants tended 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 electoral politics directly, metapolitics is by now a long-standing strategy of the extreme right originating in far-right ideologues' appropriation of Marxist philosopher 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 neo-Nazi publishing company Nordiska förlaget, Arktos Media<sup>25</sup> exemplifies the rebranding of right-wing extremism through a rapprochement with Traditionalist spirituality (of the sort inspired by perennialist René Guénon and far-right esoteric thinker Julius Evola), and an emphasis on terms like "civilization," "culture," and "identity." This sort of entryism, by which right-wing ideologues reach a new audience interested in "esotericism" and "spiritual traditions," was an element of the Cult of Kek discourse as well.



The metapolitical use of memes to spread far-right content to the mainstream was a key context for the emergence of the Cult of Kek, but its origins were 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 imageboard, where hundreds of thousands of messages are posted anonymously at high pace every day, elements of modern occultism were woven into the emerging alt-right’s blend of tactics, ideology, and interpretations 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<sup>26</sup> referred to itself as “post-ironic,” which seems an apt description for much of what has been going on in this corner of the internet. The *tone* of irony and satire was central to the movement’s activities, but its very persistence, aggression, and focused cultivation of negative affect betrayed underlying moods and motivations that were anything but playful.

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

The immediate background of the Cult of Kek is found 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 appeared as a character in Matt Furie’s online comic book, *Boy’s Club*. By 2010, the character had become a popular motif for memes across platforms such as Myspace, 4chan, Tumblr, and Reddit, later spreading to mainstream social media like Twitter and Facebook. In 2016, a group of users on the 4chan /pol/ board (/pol/ standing for “politically incorrect,” indicating that 4chan is a hotbed for alt-right themes like misogyny, antisemitism, white power, and blood-and-soil nationalism) attempted to hijack Pepe by systematically producing memes that associated 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 breakthrough in September 2016, when the international Jewish organization, 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>27</sup> /pol/ users had largely succeeded in filling this empty signifier with very particular political connotations.

But it got weirder still. The year 2016 was also 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>28</sup> be described as

occurring in three stages. The first stage was contingent on gamer slang originating in the massive multiplayer online game, *World of Warcraft*, where the word “kek” emerged as a substitute for “lol” (shorthand for “laughing out loud”) due to an algorithm that scrambled the chatter of opposing teams into gibberish. Given the close connections between /pol/ and gamer culture,<sup>29</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).

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 of the god existed) was associated with primordial chaos and darkness, and was 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 explanation of how the imageboard 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 (over one million a day, in 2018),<sup>30</sup> it is impossible for a user to predict exactly what the last few digits will be when posting. This has given rise to a phenomenon where certain numbers, patterns, and repetitions of numbers—especially repeating digits, labeled “dubs,” “trips,” “quads,” and so on—are considered particularly auspicious. This phenomenon is related to a wider practice known as GET, by which posters on an image board would attempt to score certain integer sequences considered “special” (e.g. post number 123456789, 1000000 or 555555555).<sup>31</sup> Themes, memes, or users that frequently “GET,” or that just score many dubs and trebs, are considered special, 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 and Pepe memes were doing just this. For example, on 19 June 2016, a post on 4chan’s /p/ board with the text “Trump will win” achieved the remarkable GET 77777777.<sup>32</sup> A web of significance was gradually spun, in the usual post-ironic way, in which Trump was divinely selected, the god selecting him was Kek, and the Pepe meme was one of the god’s many manifestations.

Following 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>33</sup> Related to two virtual organizations called the Sacellum Kekellum and the Knights Keklars, this segment of the Kek movement appears heavily inspired by the playful and anti-authoritarian American religion, Discordianism, first developed in the late 1950s.<sup>34</sup> The website,

thecultofkek.com, appeared in 2017,<sup>35</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:

*Our Kek who art in memetics  
Hallowed by thy memes  
Thy Trumþdom 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 shills  
For thine is the memetic kingdom, and the shitposting, and the  
Winning, for ever and ever.  
Praise KEK<sup>36</sup>*

As Kekism continued to metastasize online, elements from esotericism and magic became standard features of the discourse. The notion of “meme magic(k)” as the central holy act of Kek was 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, were acknowledged by some.<sup>37</sup> 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<sup>38</sup> without any explicit input from existing occultist currents. Hyperactive pattern recognition in the context of high-speed posting was the basic building block of the phenomenon, giving rise to synchronistic meanings connecting memes posted on the imageboards to events in the external world. According to one insider,<sup>39</sup> the first known use of the term “meme magic” was in connection with Germanwings Flight 9525, which crashed on 24 March 2015 when the suicidal co-pilot Andreas Lubitz deliberately steered the plane 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), in which supervillain Bane downs a plane from the inside and escapes. A post on /pol/ on 26 March 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 used regularly in its own strain of memes, known as “baneposting.” The idea struck a chord with users, and in the following months 8chan got two boards dedicated specifically to meme magic: /bmw/ (Bureau of Memetic Warfare) and /magick/.<sup>40</sup>

Earlier cases where memes took on a life of their own offline, such as the Slender Man phenomenon that culminated in the episode in 2014 in which two 12-year-old girls in Waukesha, Wisconsin lured their friend into the woods and stabbed her to impress Slender Man, were now reinterpreted as examples of meme magic.<sup>41</sup> 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 of an anime meme representing frost in order to induce a harsh winter to kill off refugees during the migrant crisis in Europe. 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 were 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 were, however, much less enchanted, aligning closely with techniques of information warfare, psyops, or simple cyberbullying and online harassment of the type that characterized the Gamergate controversy in 2013–2014.<sup>42</sup> For example, the tactical manual provided in Saint Obamas Momjeans’ *Intermediate Meme Magic* is an instruction in weaponized social epistemology that could just as well have been written by Russia’s infamous online influence unit, the Internet Research Agency (colloquially known as the “troll factory”). 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 seen as being receptive to antiestablishment 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 favors to backwards islam \* Selling  
secrets \* Too big to jail \* War mongerer: responsible for iraq + libya<sup>43</sup>

The goal is to create a web of associations, manufacturing distrust through the networking of negative affect, 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>44</sup> The author even encourages identity theft in order to create profiles that appear authentic: “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. Make them look legit. It’s important.”<sup>45</sup> The manual gives practical recommendations on concrete tools for scraping Instagram accounts for content, links to sites where one can acquire Twitter bots, and advice on how to set up proxies to relay the posts of the army of fake meme posters all around the world. In short, while meme magic may have its veneer of supernaturalism, the tactics are textbook information warfare.

### **“Esoteric Kekism”: Occulture and the Metapolitics of Egregores**

There are, however, obvious affinities of meme magic with esoteric currents, and these were exploited by some ideologues on the alt-right’s spiritual wing. Here, the tactics of information warfare mixed with notions of magical efficacy, right-wing ideology, and alternative religion to create the Cult of Kek. It is important to emphasize that it is nearly impossible to separate a spiritual ambition from metapolitical strategy, “genuine” religionism from religion as an instrument of power. As the hard alt-right blogger writing at *Atlantic Centurion* under the pen-name Lawrence Murray (an unapologetic antisemite and white nationalist) expressed it, the “goal of meme warfare” was “to control the normies,” or, as he put it, to gain “imperium” over them.<sup>46</sup> As Murray candidly expressed 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>47</sup>

To Murray, this battle extended beyond fighting for the meanings of a given meme or mainstreaming specific antisemitic symbols: to win the narrative, it was also necessary to co-opt the language, myths, and symbolisms of religion. In a blog post on “esoteric Kekism,” Murray opened by praising the aspirations of the Greek-French Nazi author, Savitri Devi (Maximiani 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>48</sup> However, since the Hindu and esoteric conceptions were deemed 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. Buddhism, he argued, 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* (teachings of the Buddha) “could be repurposed in ways pertinent to our cause and fashioned into something appealing.” Thus, nirvana became “*Aryan* nirvana,” denoting freedom from “Mosaic samsara,”<sup>49</sup> 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, became the bodhisattva of this promised “*Aryan* nirvana,” and Pepe and Trump his incarnations.

Murray’s bizarre Buddhist vision does not seem to have caught on, but the bodhisattva idea is not the only theological concept through which Kek, and his discovery in memes, has been understood. Another candidate was 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>50</sup> In the history of occultism, the most famous example of an egregore is probably the *Fraternitas Saturni*’s GOTOS entity, which functioned as a demonic guardian for the organization, kept alive by ritual actions that included sex magic.<sup>51</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-“Social Justice Warrior” 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. Welles consistently distances her brand of spirituality from what she calls “New Age muck.”<sup>52</sup>

In her article, “The Alt Right’s Pepe the Frog Meme, Chaos Magick, and the Rise of Trump,” Welles likened 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 (1886–1956), Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and the contemporary magician Phil Hine (whose book *Condensed Chaos* appears to be Welles’ main source for chaos magic),<sup>53</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 wrote.

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 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 [*sic*] on more planes [than] just 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>54</sup>

Welles acknowledged that the vast majority of Pepe posters were likely to be oblivious about chaos magic and sigilization techniques. Nevertheless, she argued, the theory is clear: whether intended or not, collective emotions, concentration, and intensity is enough to 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>55</sup>

Welles was responsible for putting these ideas into clear prose and communicating them to a wider audience of people interested in

spirituality and the occult, but these ideas could already be found in the hard core of the Cult of Kek itself. Momjeans' introductions to meme magic included not only the tactics of information warfare discussed earlier, but also explanations of concepts such as thought forms, tulpas, egregores, sigils, mantras, evocation, states of "gnosis," and much other esoterica.<sup>56</sup> In other words, while Welles was probably right that the vast majority of Pepe posters had no idea about egregores, the phenomenon seen as a whole illustrates a key dynamic of contemporary mediated "occulture":<sup>57</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.

**DISCUSSION:  
THE EGREGORE AS COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE  
AND CHARISMA**

It should now be clear that the trappings, tools, and theories of occultist magic have been utilized in the pursuit of political goals on both the left and the right in contemporary America. Whether using the aesthetics of magic to bring 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 disenchanting, social terms: namely, charisma and collective effervescence. While Weber's 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.



## **The Magic War, the Political Climate, and Emic Views of Efficacy**

The magic war that started in 2017, with the inauguration of Trump as president of the United States, was the result of both an endogenous phenomenon erupting among participants in occult milieus, and external processes through which non-occultists discovered magic for the first time. On one end of the spectrum, David Griffin's Magic Reaction war on the resistance magic of the witches was 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 always been vital ingredients. The external event of a controversial United States president sparked the exchanges, but the constellations of allies and opponents as well as the weapons by which the war was fought appear predictable to anyone who has been following the modern magical traditions. 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>58</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, many 4chan and 8chan meme magicians appear to have discovered magic independently and started digging into existing materials as a result. Here, occultism is not so much a preexisting background as a set of resources discovered, mined, and adapted to suit goals and activities. The Magic Resistance displays both tendencies: it was started by an identifiable practicing magician who mobilized people primarily in 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 the relevant external and generic factors having to do with how people act during political upheavals. As the previous section has given a basic idea of the endogenous factors, this section will focus on the second, more general issue of how enchantments can be incited by, and feed back into, politics.

Another question that must be dealt with at this stage is the emic view 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, causal potency in their own right? In other words, is the efficacy of magic understood in disenchanting (e.g., psychological, social) or enchanted (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 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 4chan and 8chan meme magicians, and sublimated into a form of worship in the holy texts of the Cult of Kek.<sup>59</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 would be 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" (i.e., that whatever the magician puts out into the world, be it positive or negative, will be returned threefold), as well as questioning the magical skill of those mobilized by the campaign and the prudence of calling forth "infernal spirits."<sup>60</sup> These objections and anxieties assume the possibility of occult efficacy. Finally, the occult efficacy of spellcasting is a central motivation for David Griffin's counter-spells. In a number 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 Mojave Desert) were the result of the Magic Resistance's attacks on "all those that abet" Donald Trump.<sup>61</sup> In a clear statement on efficacy, Griffin wrote, referencing the 1993 Transcendental Meditation study on crime reduction through meditation,<sup>62</sup> that

[w]hether 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>63</sup>

This quote occasions another observation: Whatever the theory imposed to explain the efficacy of magic, participants in the magic war over Trump's presidency all tended to highlight the importance of *synchronic actions*. The Magic Resistance's solitary practitioners were to direct their efforts at the exact same time, Griffin's counter-spell instructions followed the very same idea, and meme magicians acted 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 has been playing out in the magic war over Trump's presidency.

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

Two useful concepts for making sense of the sociopolitical dynamics of the magic war are Weber's notion of charisma, and Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence. Following Weber,<sup>64</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; he or she is "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), 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>65</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>66</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 A. Tiryakian has pointed out, charisma and collective effervescence feed into each other.<sup>67</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 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. 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>68</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 leader, and at the same time, incites further affective expressions in the audience.

Tiryakian used this combined model to make sense of the political upheavals in Eastern Bloc countries during the 1980s, leading up to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>69</sup> For example, Pope John Paul II (papacy 1978–2005) 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 Catholic Church became “totemistic” symbols in this uprising, representing the sacred unity of the Polish people. Soon after came the Gdańsk shipyard strike in 1980, followed by 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 (b. 1943), who succeeded in routinizing some of this charisma in organizational form. Similarly, in Prague, Václav Havel (1936–2011) became the Durkheimian “interpreter” of collective effervescence on the eve of the Soviet Union collapse, embodying charismatic authority against Soviet state power. Protests had erupted in January 1989; by November, Havel had become the charismatic 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 notes that the symbolic language around which these Eastern Bloc protest movements tended to rally was 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>70</sup>

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

It may seem strange at first sight to compare Havel, Wałęsa, and Pope John Paul II to Trump, and politically repressed Czechoslovakians to 4chan meme warriors who predominantly belong—as we must assume, despite a carefully cultivated identity of marginality—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 figure 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 (2010–2012) and Occupy Wall Street (2011–2012) to the Euromaidan revolution (2014), Brexit (2016), 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 form 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 often anonymous agents on 4chan, 8chan, and Reddit serve to generate collective effervescence. When transposed to social media like Facebook, 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 define and signal in-group membership and belonging through shared ridicule, distrust, and disgust of reified outgroup competitors ("SJWs" [social justice warriors], "cuckservatives," "normies").

The notion of "affective networking" is particularly apt for capturing how collective effervescence is created and leveraged in the heavily mediated attention economy.<sup>71</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, procreating 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>72</sup> On the other hand, 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>73</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>74</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>75</sup> It is an *affective* and not a cognitive association that links object with sign in

the mind, and it is this emotional quality that gives a symbol (e.g., a totem or a flag) the power to motivate individuals to the extent that it sometimes “directly determines action.”<sup>76</sup>

This process can be understood in simple disenchanted terms, as a form of mobilization through action, communication, 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 have a life of their own or are 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, thought forms, sigils, and bodhisattvas.

## CONCLUSION

The magic war over the 45th United States president 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 votes cast for a charismatic leader.

Only one of the sides in the United States magic war has been able to accomplish the latter. While the Republican candidate was and remains a figure invested with transgressive charismatic authority that the affective networking of online meme magicians can feed and tap into, the Magic Resistance lacks a vehicle for transforming magic into coordinated voter behavior. Will the Democratic egregore step up?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the *Harry Potter* book series, and associated movies, “Muggle” is the term for ordinary people who do not possess magical powers.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> I also draw inspiration from feminist media theorist Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39; as well as Jessica Johnson, "The Self-Radicalization of White Men: 'Fake News' and the Affective Networking of Paranoia," *Communication, Culture, & Critique* 11, no. 1 (March 2018): 100–15.

<sup>5</sup> A type of internet forum that first became popular in Japan in the early 2000s, focusing on the posting of images, though usually also with text.

<sup>6</sup> *Atlantic Centurion: Blogging from the Age of Blood & Irony*, <https://atlanticcenturion.wordpress.com/> [now defunct]; *The Right Stuff.biz*, <https://therightstuff.biz/>; *Counter-Currents Publishing*, <https://www.counter-currents.com/>, accessed 20 February 2020. Since the research for this article was conducted in the winter of 2017–2018, *Atlantic Centurion* has been taken down and *The Right Stuff* has changed to a podcast and membership model.

<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Hughes, "A Spell to Bind Donald Trump and All Those Who Abet Him: February 24th Mass Ritual," Medium Extra Newsfeed, 16 February 2017, <https://extranewsfeed.com/a-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-and-all-those-who-abet-him-february-24th-mass-ritual-51f3d94f62f4#.ncb3ies1j>.

<sup>8</sup> Jaya Saxena, "Are You Going to Cast a Spell on Trump?" *Elle*, 23 February 2017, <https://www.elle.com/culture/politics/news/a43285/casting-spell-donald-trump/>; Dominique Sisley, "Lana Del Rey 'to cast ritual binding spell on Donald Trump,'" *Dazed*, 24 February 2017, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/34876/1/lana-del-rey-to-cast-ritual-binding-spell-on-donald-trump>; Kenzie Bryant, "Yes, Lana Del Rey Hexed Donald Trump," *Vanity Fair*, 25 July 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/07/lana-del-rey-spell-donald-trump>; Tara Isabella Burton, "Each Month, Thousands of Witches Cast a Spell against Donald Trump," *Vox*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/6/20/15830312/magicresistance-stance-witches-magic-spell-to-bind-donald-trump-mememagic>.

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

<sup>10</sup> See Hughes, "Binding Trump."

<sup>11</sup> Bind Trump (Official), Facebook group (public), <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OfficialBindTrump/>, accessed 20 January 2020.

<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 article by Sabina Magliocco, "Witchcraft as Political Resistance: Magical Responses to the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States," in this special issue of *Nova Religio*.

<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<sup>®</sup> 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 19 May 2007 entitled "A Attempted Objective and Unbiased Timeline of the Golden Dawn Conflict," [https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.magick/\\_xcpLIGK5Q8](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.magick/_xcpLIGK5Q8), and partially on information provided to me by an informant close to the events in Europe since the late 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> For Griffin's version of events, see, for example, his obituary of Monnastre: David Griffin, "Remembering Golden Dawn Matriarch—Cris Monnastre (1946–2017)," *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, 21 July 2017, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/2017/07/remembering-golden-dawn-matriarch-cris.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Note, however, that both organizations currently use ® in their logos, branding their respective European Union and United States trademark registration numbers. For ease of reference, however, I refer to Cicero's United States-trademarked group with the distinguishing suffix "Inc."

<sup>17</sup> *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.com/>, accessed 19 January 2020.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., David Griffin, "The TRUTH About KKK Support for Hillary Clinton and the Body Count That Follows Her (Reply to Frater 'Blowhard' Barrabbas)," *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, 29 August 2016, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/2016/08/the-truth-about-clinton-body-count.html>.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Leslie McQuade and David Griffin, "MagickWars: Crypto-Nazi Witches vs. Magi of Light," *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, 24 February 2017, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.com/2017/02/magickwars-crypto-nazi-witches-vs-magi.html>; Griffin, "Ancient Mystery School Gives Dire Warning to Army of Witches," *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, 4 March 2017, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.com/2017/03/ancient-mystery-school-gives-dire.html>; Griffin, "Satanists Perform Black Magic To Harm President Trump—And FAIL!" *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*<sup>®</sup> Blog, 9 July 2017, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.com/2017/07/satanists-perform-black-magic-to-harm.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Griffin, "Ancient Mystery School Gives Dire Warning."

<sup>21</sup> Griffin, "Ancient Mystery School Gives Dire Warning."

<sup>22</sup> On 22 May, according to a Whois domain query performed on 4 April 2018. *Magick Wars*<sup>™</sup>.com, *magickwars.com*, accessed 14 February 2020.

<sup>23</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*<sup>®</sup>, "EXPOSED: The Illuminati Conspiracy and the Golden Dawn," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1ePnH8Fnx8>, posted 9 November 2015, 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>24</sup> Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn®, “Ritual to Free Humanity from Bondage and Enchantment (Live on Hollywood Blvd!),” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ\\_oORPHG6c&t=189s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ_oORPHG6c&t=189s), posted 23 October 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Arktos, <https://arktos.com/>, accessed 14 February 2020.

<sup>26</sup> The Cult of Kek, [thecultofkek.com](http://thecultofkek.com), presently leads to the Cult of Kek Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/cultofkek777/>, accessed 14 February 2020.

<sup>27</sup> “Pepe the Frog,” ADL, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog>, accessed 19 January 2020.

<sup>28</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, 9 May 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic>; David Lawrence, “HNH Explains . . . the Cult of Kek,” Hope Not Hate, 15 November 2017, <https://hopenothate.com/2017/11/15/hnh-explains-cult-kek/>; cf. the more detailed insider account in “The Truth about Pepe the Frog and the Cult of Kek,” *Pepe the Frog Faith blog*, <https://pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com/>, accessed 19 January 2020.

<sup>29</sup> On this, see Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> According to DMR Business Statistics, which published an updated overview on 31 March 2018. See “12 Amazing 4chan Statistics and Facts (March 2018),” DMR Business Statistics, <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/4chan-statistics-facts/>, accessed 10 April 2018.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. “GET,” Know Your Meme, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/get>, accessed 26 January 2020.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. “The Truth about Pepe the Frog and the Cult of Kek.”

<sup>33</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>34</sup> One of the Kek movement’s “holy texts” (really a compendium of memes) also references the goddess 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>35</sup> According to a Whois search performed on 30 April 2018, the domain was registered on 16 January 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.

<sup>36</sup> “Prayer to Kek,” <http://thecultofkek.com/a-prayer-to-kek/>, accessed 21 August 2019; now defunct, archived in the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, [https://web.archive.org/web/2019\\*/http://thecultofkek.com/a-prayer-to-kek/](https://web.archive.org/web/2019*/http://thecultofkek.com/a-prayer-to-kek/), accessed 16 February 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Evolian Traditionalism refers to the brand of “Radical Traditionalist” thought first developed by the Italian extreme-right author and esotericist Julius Evola (1898–1974); see Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2004). Miguel Serrano (1917–2009) was a Chilean diplomat, neo-Nazi, and a central author of “esoteric Hitlerism”; see e.g. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 173–92. On Savitri Devi, see below.

<sup>38</sup> 8chan at 8ch.net was opened by Frederick Brennan in 2013 as a “free-speech friendly” alternative to 4chan, which Brennan thought had descended into politically correct censorship. 8chan was forced off the publicly available internet as a response to the El Paso, Texas mass shooting on 3 August 2019. The El Paso shooter, Patrick Crusius, became the most high-profile person to have announced his terrorist attack in advance on 8chan where he published a “manifesto.”

<sup>39</sup> Saint Obamas Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic* (N.p.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 7–8.

<sup>40</sup> Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> On the Slender Man episode, see Natasha L. Mikles and Joseph P. Laycock, “Tracking the *Tulpa*: Exploring the ‘Tibetan’ Origins of a Contemporary Paranormal Idea,” *Nova Religio* 19, no. 1 (August 2015): 87–97.

<sup>42</sup> The controversy primarily concerned raw sexism and bullying in the online gaming community, which escalated to an all-out politicized culture war in the community. For a brief overview, see Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 16–27.

<sup>43</sup> Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 33–34.

<sup>44</sup> Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 35.

<sup>45</sup> Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Murray, “On Normies,” *Atlantic Centurion*, 31 May 2016, <https://atlanticcenturion.wordpress.com/2016/05/31/on-normies/> (taken down late 2017; accessible via Wayback Machine).

<sup>47</sup> Laurence Murray, “Esoteric Kekism, or Kek as a Bodhisattva of Racial Enlightenment,” *The Right Stuff (blog)*, 14 August 2016, <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 Wayback Machine.

<sup>48</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 analysis, remains the only monograph-length study of this influential individual on the far-right. See Julian Strube, “Savitri Devi,” in *Brill Handbook of Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

<sup>49</sup> In Buddhism, the goal of *nirvāṇa* involves liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

<sup>50</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 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, a magical order founded in 1926 in Germany.

<sup>51</sup> See e.g. Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Magical Order of the Fraternitas Saturni,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (New York: Routledge, 2014), 44.

<sup>52</sup> See, e.g., Manon Welles, “About,” AOTS: New Right + Alt Religion, <http://aristocratsofthesoul.com/about/>, accessed 19 January 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Phil Hine, *Condensed Chaos: An Introduction to Chaos Magic* (Tempe, AZ: The Original Falcon Press, 1995).

<sup>54</sup> Manon Welles, “The Alt-Right’s Pepe the Frog Meme, Chaos Magick, and the Rise of Trump,” AOTS: New Right + Alt Religion, 19 October 2016, <http://aristocratsofthesoul.com/alt-right-pepe-the-frog-meme-chaos-magick-trump/>.

<sup>55</sup> Welles, “The Alt-Right’s Pepe the Frog Meme.”

<sup>56</sup> See Momjeans, *The One True Bible of Kek*, unpaginated. On the concept of thought forms see Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, *Thought Forms* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1905).

<sup>57</sup> See Christopher Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2013): 113–33.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Dion Fortune, *Psychic Self-Defence* (London: Rider & Sons, 1930); Fortune, *The Magical Battle of Britain: The War Letters of Dion Fortune*, ed. Gareth Knight (Cheltenham: Skylight Press, 2012).

<sup>59</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 Saint Obamas Momjeans, *Advanced Meme Magic: For The Knights Keklar of SacellumK* (N.p.: Saint Obamas Momjeans, 2016), 13.

<sup>60</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, 26 February 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/johnbeckett/2017/02/im-not-participating-mass-binding-donald-trump-im-instead.html>.

<sup>61</sup> David Griffin, “Satanists Perform Black Magic to Harm President Trump—And FAIL!” *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn® Blog*, 9 July 2017, <http://hermetic-golden-dawn.blogspot.se/search?updated-max=2017-07-13T17:13:00-07:00&max-results=1&start=10&by-date=false>.

<sup>62</sup> John S. Hagelin, Maxwell V. Rainforth, David W. Orme-Johnson, Kenneth L. Cavanaugh, Charles N. Alexander, Susan F. Shatkin, John L. Davies, Anne O. Hughes, and Emanuel Ross, “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, no. 2 (June 1999): 153–201.

<sup>63</sup> Griffin, “Ancient Mystery School Gives Dire Warning.”

<sup>64</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1:212–16, 241–45.

<sup>65</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1:244.

<sup>66</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915), 218–19.

<sup>67</sup> See Edward A. Tiryakian, “Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma: Durkheim, Weber and 1989,” *International Sociology* 10, no. 3 (September 1995): 271–74.

<sup>68</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 241.

<sup>69</sup> Tiryakian, “Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma,” 274–78.

<sup>70</sup> Tiryakian, “Collective Effervescence, Social Change and Charisma,” 276.

<sup>71</sup> The “attention economy,” a marketplace in which individuals’ attentional resources are 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 on the Internet* 2, no. 4 (1997), available at <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/519/440>.

<sup>72</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>73</sup> Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 117.

<sup>74</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 are often immersed.

<sup>75</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 119–221.

<sup>76</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 220.