Politics

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A nonpartisan perspective on the problemsolving process that prevails on the Potomac

by Amitai Etzioni

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST from the Chukheoe tribe, reporting to his people in the Siberian tundra about American practices, probably would describe our shamanism as inferior. "When they are faced with societal ills," he might report, "the President, the Congress, the governors, and the mayors gesticulate grandly, and emit fantastic noises—usually a series of promises and threats—but nothing much ever comes of all this. Their chiefs are like rainmakers during a rather dry season."

Vanish. We natives know the Let's-Solve-a-Social-Problem dance all too well. The President usually begins the ritual with a speech. He announces that he is going to slay the evil spirit and that the demon-inflicted plague will vanish. He promises: poverty will be eradicated, or the wave of crime will be turned back or pollution will be wiped out. After a great fanfare, the elders meet ceremoniously, the President asks Congress to enact a program, and a new agency comes into being.

A year or so later, we hear about the new agency's performance. Things often haven't improved; in fact, the original social malady may have worsened. A few spots may experience partial remission, perhaps brought about by the agency's therapy or by spontaneous changes in society. Either way, the magicians, of course, credit their conjuring. However, most social problems do not recede at all. So the shamans prescribe more magic: they may reshuffle the agency and give
Progress, one that death and the infatuation of intellectual deliverance on the promises he made in Latin America through the Alliance for Democraticization and Development in the Kennedy era, unobscured by his tragic Resturct was followed mainly by more "Ask them."

Incantations change; the problems do not. Melt. Modern shamans dazzle us with a variety of magic. Speech-making, the modern equivalent of the witch doctor's mumbo-jumbo, seeks to create around words the illusion of deeds. At the height of the civil-rights movement, President Johnson stood on a podium at a leading black university in one of the blackest of America's cities, waved his arms, and shouted "Freedom now!" He elated his audience; they took his endorsement of its full weight to prompt remedy of 400 years of injustice. But the President's gesture was followed mainly by more speeches. I believe that frank evaluation of the Kennedy era, unobscured by his tragic death and the infatuation of intellectuals, will show that JFK was a grand shaman. He tended to deliver magnificent speeches but to pay little attention to delivering on the promises he made in them. After his famous inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for you . . .") there were no specific plans that could be pursued by the millions of Americans who had been moved by the speech. Similarly, Kennedy's call for democratization and development in Latin America through the Alliance for Progress, one of his best speeches, avoided discussion of how the South and Central American military elites, established and entrenched with U.S. help, would melt away. They did not, power does not yield to magic. However, the tribe applauded from coast to coast and many believed that grand changes were imminent.

Divine. Commissioneering is another contemporary form of black magic. Superficially it is sensible: some community elders convene to explore a problem and to divine a solution, helped by experts and researchers. Actually, most American commissions are appointed to conceal in-action. The commissioners often ignore the research findings and, in turn, Presidents tend to dismiss commissions' recommendations. Frequently, by the time a commission's report is ready, political pressures have moved elsewhere and the recommendations are not in line with the politics of the moment—the chief may not even want to receive the report, as if acceptance alone would imply his endorsement.

At the height of the black-ghetto riots in 1967, President Johnson—under pressure for major reforms—announced a national day of prayer and appointed a commission. Seven months later, the Kerner Commission reported: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Unless drastic and costly remedies were begun at once, the commission said, there would be a "continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values." Many observers interpreted these ringing words as indications that the nation finally was owning up to its past. Tom Wicker stated: "Reading it [the Kerner report] is an ugly experience but one that brings, finally, some indication of the beginning. What had to be said has been said at last, and by representatives of that white, moderate, responsible America that, alone, needed to say it."

The commission included several scores of recommendations for specific reforms. But Kenneth Clark commented: "I read that report . . . of the 1919 riot in Chicago, and it is as if I were reading the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '35, the report of the investigating committee on the Harlem riot of '43, the report of the McCone Commission on the Watts riot. I must again in candid say to you members of this Commission—it is a kind of Alice in Wonderland with the same moving picture reshown over and over again, the same analysis, the same recommendations, and the same inaction." Since none of the recommendations was detailed, well-planned, or given even a rough price tag, the document was mostly rhetoric. Small wonder that its programs were largely ignored.

More recent commissions have come to even more dismal ends: the President rejected two key recommendations of the Commission on Population Growth, turned down a key suggestion of the First Report of the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, and rejected "totally" the report of the National Commission on Obscenity and Pornography.

Reassure. An Act of Congress ought to be a real act, not a symbolic one. However, a law frequently is passed only to reassure the masses that the matter is being taken care of, while the actual implementation or enforcement is featherweight. A common trick is for Congress to pass a really tough law, and then—under interest-group pressure—to turn over the enforcement to the 50 states, most of which lack professional staff, are corrupt, and are even more open to political manipulation than Congress itself. For example, the states are supposed to enforce most pollution-control laws. Their effectiveness can be summarized quickly: since 1965 the Federal Government has investigated 4,000 industries and cities contributing to heavy pollution and found that almost all of them have state permits for their levels of discharge.

Wave. An unenforced law may be just a piece of paper, but surely a Government program is the real thing. Not often. The Johnson Administration instituted 345 new domestic programs. A typical program had one or more directors, one or more press officers, one or more offices in Washington, and bureaucrats numbering from several hundreds to many thousands. But practically all of these programs were so underfunded that they could not possibly carry out their missions. And when their original allotments were expanded, many—having been documented—turned out to be too poorly thought-out to accomplish much. A recent case was Mr. Nixon's anticrime campaign. In August of 1968 the President declared that fighting crime would be his prime domestic goal. He announced: "The wave of crime is not going to be the wave of the future in the United States of America. We shall reestablish freedom from fear in America." Yet in each year of his administration the crime rate has risen. In 1968 there
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were 295 crimes of violence per 100,000 population; in 1969 there were 324; and in 1970 there were 360. Crimes against property also have increased: the rate per 100,000 population in 1968 was 1,940, in 1969 it was 2,153, and in 1970 it was 2,381. Comparable figures for 1971 and 1972 are not available but rough data show that crime continued to rise.

Sheer size is no guarantee that a program will succeed. Recently, a House subcommittee studied the Government's top Federal-state crime-fighting drive and reported that the program, despite an expenditure of $1.5 billion to upgrade state law-enforcement, had "no visible impact on the incidence of crime in the United States." Funds were diverted for purposes other than the fighting of crime, and to the purchase of hardware, from armored cars to ultrapowerful radios, that was not used.

Murray Edelman, in The Symbolic Uses of Politics, which contributes much to understanding contemporary shamanism, points out that agencies and interest groups often play out complex psychodramas for the public's "benefit." As in medieval passion plays, the script features rivalries and conflict when in fact there is collusion. For example, the nation has half a dozen agencies that supposedly regulate everything from airlines to public utilities, from television stations to railroads. However, the regulatory agencies only seem to control these industries; in effect, they often follow the industries' dictates.

Mesmerize. All this make-believe is a major reason that none of the domestic problems identified over the last 20 years has been solved. Nobody has yet done on earth what we did in outer space. We decided in 1961 to explore the moon, nine years and $25 billion later, we did. True, some domestic problems have been reduced—the level of poverty, the scope of school segregation. A few other problems have receded largely because of changes outside governmental control—population growth, for example. But most problems still are with us large as life and larger—crime, pollution, highway fatalities, alcoholism, smoking, mental illness. They do not yield to magical incantations.

But the shamans serve certain societal functions. Before we can hope to curb the witch doctors, we must understand why shamanism is so widespread, why so many are mesmerized for so long, on so many issues.

One reason the bluff of shamanism is not often called—and the reason why no one heeds if it is called—is that some of our problems are only in our minds. An example is the fear that we will all turn into deviants, libertines or heroin addicts unless homosexuals, prostitutes and marijuana smokers are whipped regularly. In a liberated, psychologically healthy society, we would learn to understand the sources of these fears and we would outgrow them. But our society has perhaps one hundred million or more up-tight persons—many of them too old to outgrow hangups—and all are caught in a system that exploits fears rather than helping to resolve them. Hence, our anxieties must be managed somehow.

Soothe. The chiefs have found that an effective way to deal with these irrational anxieties is not to confront them, but to soothe, to reassure, to perform a ritual of public service. Thus, we have laws against sexual deviation, prostitution and marijuana smoking, but these generally are not enforced, and increasingly they constitute a gesture to mollify the upright.

Though it is useful, this shamanistic approach has several serious failings. All too frequently, it entails beating up some deviants to reassure the community that the law is being enforced. (Although it is never "real" in its promised intent which is to stop or even sincerely curbed the phenomenon.) Also, these rituals reinforce prejudices and unrealistic fears instead of helping the community to outgrow them. For example, many older Americans fear thatabolition of antihomosexual laws will unleash their own repressed homosexual drives and pervert the youth of America. Occasional raids on gay bars, police beatings of homosexuals, and public trials help to reassure these worried Americans, but the same activities also reinforce their prejudices.

Liberation from fear could begin, if these people could be made to see that toleration of a variety of sexual practices—as in Amsterdam—does not lead to depravity in kindergartens or loss of self-control.

Unfortunately, such education takes time, and many Americans are still too frightened to open themselves to it. In the short run, there may be no effective way to release the anxiety-ridden millions from their hangups, reassuring signs may be the only way to keep them from striking out on their own, lymphing the deviants, and bloodying the kids, as for instance, hard-hats did when they felt that New York authorities were too lenient with long-haired demonstrators.

Allevi. With such problems that are imaginary to begin with, the changing of a name (a typical magic procedure employed to ward off the evil eye), often helps. This magic is most frequently practiced in foreign policy. For decades the majority of Americans lived in fear of the bogey of "expansionist Communism." For decades our chieftains pointed to this demon to justify escalating defense budgets, meddlesome American interventions abroad, and neglect of social problems at home. Until 1963, when Kennedy exorcised the Cold War spirit and 1972 when Nixon laid hands on the Great Wall of China, the demon of international Communism played a key role in the internal psychodrama of American politics.

These events of 1963 and 1972 did not reflect sudden changes in the economic-sociopolitical structure of the U.S.S.R. or Red China. Rather, two Presidents and their aides, for reasons of their own, decided that it was time to deemphasize the old demons. They then engaged in exchanges of gifts, ceremonial meals, public hugs, mutual visits, and new nomenclature for the Communist bloc, and they succeeded in allaying many of the fears of Americans (and probably those of many Russians and Chinese).

Cure. The magic of name-changing also was invoked in the recent shift from fighting the devil heroin to embracing methadone, the new heroine. While the problems heroin causes are physiologically real enough, the social malaise is mostly a result of the taboo, not the drug. The outlawing of the drug created a major crime problem, turned the addictive material into a luring forbidden fruit, and persuaded addicts that they were beyond redemption, a persuasion that many nonaddicts eagerly shared.

After attempts to jail addicts and suppliers failed, after efforts to curb foreign production and importation of heroin did not get very far, and after psychotherapeutic efforts proved to be costly and often ineffectual, American officials now increasingly rely on name-change magic. While they cannot deal with the devil by dispensing heroin freely to...
About these investigations, they immediately ask me what are the parallels I see with contemporary social trends. Of course, no time and country can be exactly like any other, we are not the United States of the Depression nor are we the Germany of Hitler's Reich. But there are parallels. For example, threat abound in contemporary America. The country has just experienced a sharp recession, and its effects are still with us. Unemployment has increased markedly. The nation's balance-of-payments situation has worsened considerably. Inflation has gnawed away at the savings of retired persons, unemployed aerospace engineers, and small shopkeepers. Race riots and violent clashes between police and students have diminished, but crime rates remain at historically high levels. We have recently seen several major political assassinations, or attempted assassinations, and a vast increase in drug usage, and during the late 1960s we were subjected to a substantial rise in labor unrest.

Obviously, not all of us have been touched equally by these events: large numbers of Americans have received yearly raises during the past few years, have never been mugged or burglarized, and have avoided violent confrontation with mobs, students, or police. However, millions of other Americans have not been so lucky.

Pinscher. Along with this increase in threat, we have seen an increase in many of those authoritarian behaviors that accompanied the Depression. Fundamentalist religion has gathered renewed strength. Interest in astrology, witchcraft, and other mystical phenomena flourishes. Tough fictional characters of the Clint Eastwood type have become extremely popular, as have violent movies—and, intriguingly, the so-called attack dogs—German shepherds, Doberman pinschers and Great Danes. According to Dorothy Hochrein and Julian Rotter, college students have become far more cynical than the students of a decade ago, and support for local police forces is again a powerful sentiment. Finally, the length of sentences given to rapists in Allegheny County has begun to increase again. There are numerous nonauthoritarian tendencies in American society. But authoritarianism may well be on the rise, possibly in response to economic and social threat. If our speculations are accurate, then any prospect of increased or prolonged threat—say from a major economic recession—should give all of us some pause.

Grand Shaman. The high priests of methadone argue that it gives a longer, more stable high, which allows its addicts to work or study better than heroin addicts can. The question is not whether the methadone high is really different. Clearly, the most significant difference is that getting methadone usually is no more of a crime than buying beer; its takers are not labeled as criminals, and persons who take it can get jobs—all because society defines it as a medication, a blessing, while society views heroin as a curse. It is only a slight exaggeration to see methadone-maintenance programs as efforts to treat heroin problems by calling the addictive narcotic by a new name. Thus, for some social problems, magic does provide a substantial cure.

Collapse. If some social questions arise out of neurosis, others have roots in metaphysics. They concern ultimate causes and such questions as: Who fashioned the world we encounter? Why is there injustice? Why death? The British anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard tells the following story about the Azande: "In Zalandel sometimes an old granary collapses. There is nothing remarkable in this. . . . termites eat the supports. . . . Now a granary is the summerhouse of a Zande homestead and people sit beneath it in the heat of the day. . . . Consequently it may happen that there are people sitting beneath the granary when it collapses and they are injured. . . . That it should collapse is easily intelligible, but why should it have collapsed at the particular moment when these particular people were sitting beneath it?"

"We say that the granary collapses because its supports were eaten away by termites. . . . We also say that people were sitting under it at the time because it was in the heat of the day. . . . To our minds the only relationship between these two independently caused facts is their coincidence in time and space. We have no explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them.

"Zande philosophy can supply the missing link. The Zande knows that the supports were undermined by termites and that people were sitting beneath the granary in order to escape the heat and glare of the sun. But he knows besides why these two events occurred at a precisely similar moment in time and space. It was due to the action of witchcraft. . . . Witchcraft explains the coincidence of these two happenings."

Answer. Science deals with statistics, not individuals. It can tell you that there is a 0.03 chance that a house will collapse each year, but not which one, or when. Hence, science cannot explain why a particular person was afflicted, why this charming kid was crushed while the old bitch next door was well and alive. And of course it cannot answer the deeper why—why pain, or injustice, or death?

No wonder, despite all prior predictions, that science has failed to drive out religion or magic. Astrology, witchcraft and uninstitutionalized religions all thrive. Also, with the use of nationalism, secular political leaders have pretended to answer "why" questions. The young die for the nation, workers toil to develop the country or keep it at the top, etc.

Promise. Shamanism serves still another function. There are more demands on the public coffers and resources than can be met. Even in this age of ultra-affluence, the nation cannot spend $285 billion on depollution, $400 billion on reparations to black people, $66 billion on National Health Insurance. One of the main legitimate jobs of the political leader is to negotiate these demands and soothe those whose needs cannot be responded to fully, at least in the near future. Thus, gestures have a political function. Anthony Downs, the political analyst, points out another aspect of this political function: "In order to overcome widespread congressional and public resistance to new expenditures, the administration is tempted to exaggerate the potential effectiveness of anything it proposes. It therefore makes rhetorical promises that each new program will provide a 'total solution' to the problems concerned." Downs also points to the dangers of this approach: "Such claims at first tend to generate great expectations among the relatively poorly informed persons suffering from the ills concerned. But repeated disillusionment eventually induces a deep cynicism toward all Government programs."

The politician's temptation is to oversell, abuse, and ultimately exploit his shamanistic powers. Thus, whenever he has to make a tough decision, one demands by one part of his constituency but opposed by another, his inclination is to gesture rather than to act. In taking
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from the rich and powerful to give to the poor and disadvantaged, he is tempted to tokenize, to turn small symbolic offerings into seemingly large sacrifices. Whenever the hard work of developing an effective program is called for, he tends to act as though the labor had been done, while actually many a program is thrown together hastily, disregarding expert advice, without careful testing. The launching ritual is what is sought for the headlines. Fly now, plan later.

Exorcise. While it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate shamanism completely, the welfare of the community requires that it be curbed. It is good that some problems that exist only in the minds of men are exorcised and that some feathers are soothing by the laying on of hands. The danger is that magic often replaces hard work, that mesmerizing rituals supersede badly needed action.

At this point we need to know how important, potent or consequential these symbols and symbolic manipulation are. The question has been debated since idealist philosophers took issue with realists in ancient Greece. On the one hand there are those who hold that the world is made of symbols and hence their rearrangements are all-important. "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed," says the UNESCO constitution. W. I. Thomas, the sociologist, has stated: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." His conclusion is often quoted by social scientists. Most recently ethnomethodologists and other psychologists from R.D. Laing to Thomas Szasz insist that there is no mental illness, only persons labeled—or mislabeled—"mad." On the other hand, Marxists tire of reminding us that symbols are just reflections of "real" technological and economic relations, and have little power of their own. Shamanism is a set of symbolic exercises. The effects of the wave of a hand, of a ritual, of magic, all are in the eye of the beholder and have no real power to make rain or reduce pollution.

If shamanism, then, just one more trick of the ruling classes, expressive only of their interests, easily dispensed with? Or is the social world largely composed of status symbols, authority attitudes, property relations, and so on, so that symbolic acts take on great power?

Struggle. Most social scientists take a middle position, viewing the social world as a complex mixture of real and symbolic elements, that interact. Thus, it is not enough to give "dignity" and "recognition" to poor people. Starving children must be fed and slum dwellers need houses. But man does not live by bread alone, he must also be allowed self-esteem. And while both the real and the symbolic realms have dynamics of their own, they also affect each other: persons who respect themselves tend to find it easier to get jobs, and persons who have jobs usually find it easier to respect themselves.

Shamanism is thus of middling importance. It is a mistake to assume that large groups of citizens who are aware of a problem—discrimination, crime, pollution—can for long be kept content with gestures and tokens. At the same time, the things that people are promised and come to believe make a great deal of difference; part of the struggle to improve the world is a struggle over definitions, an effort to move them closer to reality, away from the self-serving labels attached by interest groups and elites.

Dazzle. Curbing the shamans is a matter of citizen-activation and consciousness-raising. As more and more citizens become aware of the difference between a gesture (four women pages in Congress, one woman jockey) and real change (equal pay for equal work), between initiation rites (the President's announcing a program) and results (measurable poverty decline), they more and more learn to tell pseudo-events (visits by heads of state) from real ones (changes in superpower relations), and shamanism will become less potent. As more and more citizens learn to regard—with applause, respect and votes—those who develop effective programs and talk truthfully about what can be done, and to laugh out loud when the oversell is turned on, more and more witch doctors will join in the national trend toward early retirement.

One way to separate sociopolitical reality from razzle-dazzle is to confront the issues personally. There is no better way for a citizen to understand the way a city government works (or pretends to) than to participate actively in the management of a school, a clinic, a park. There is no more effective way for a group of citizens to find out the distance between a fine idea and an effective program than to set up one themselves. And few activities are more eye-opening than taking part in a bit of national politics, whether it is campaigning for a presidential candidate, lobbying for a public cause in Washington, or attending a party convention.

Of course, we must not wait until each citizen discovers for himself the difference between pseudo-reality and reality; leaders, intellectuals, social scientists, and whoever sees the lay of the land have a duty to share their findings with those who remain hosed.

Distort. Critical publications may help reduce public magic. By and large, the mass media are a main conduit of shamanistic influence. The way that mass media conceal and distort the world-as-it-is has been studied by historian Daniel J. Boorstin in The Image. Citizens, he reports, are turned into an overexcited, overstimulated audience, who need—like addicts—a continuous flow of dramatic events to keep them entertained. Politics is a circus. When nothing blows on a quiet day, the media create pseudo-events by turning trivia into crises, differences of opinion into conflicts, spokesmen's asides into governmental breakdowns. These pseudo-events then feed on each other and the public-turned-audience loses the capacity to tell the significant from the ephemeral, the real from the sham. Shamanism will be curbed only when the media take more seriously its duty to teach the public to see the difference between a clandestine trip to Paris and a peace settlement, between troop withdrawals (accompanied by air bombardment increases) and armistice, between legislation about pollution and enforcement of depollution. The citizens themselves can help—they can drop the titillating media in favor of responsible and critical ones.

Confront. The credibility crisis—the disbelief that growing segments of the public express about the promises of officials—suggest that a curb of shamanism is overdue. Our swelling domestic problems suggest that the laying on of hands no longer can be relied upon as the preferred therapeutic technique. We must break the spell, we must confront our social problems—and in the process, ourselves—and cease trying to magic them away.