

An Army of Jacks

to fight the power

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In fairy tales, humans can possess exterior souls, things magically containing or embodying individual life force—stone, egg, ring, bird or animal, c. If the thing is destroyed, the human dies. But while the thing persists, the human enjoys a kind of immortality or at least invulnerability. Money could be seen as such an exteriorized soul. Humans created it, in some sense, in order to hide their souls in things that could be locked away (in tower or cave) and hidden so their bodies would acquire magical invulnerability—wealth, health, the victoriousness of enjoyment, power over enemies—even over fate.

But these exterior souls need not be hidden away—they can be divided almost indefinitely and circulated, exchanged for desire, passed on to heirs like an immortal virus, or, rather like a dead thing that magically contains life and begets itself endlessly in usury. It constitutes humanity's one really totally successful experiment in magic: no one calls the bluff and after 6000 years, it seems almost like Nature. (In fact, an old Chinese cosmogonic text claimed the two basic principles of the universe are Water and Money.)

It's worth noting that in marchen, folk tales, the characters with external souls are often the villains. Clearly, the practice must appear uncanny to any normal society—in which magic (call it collective consciousness in active mode) is channeled through ritual and custom to the life of all—not the aggrandizement of one against all (black magic or witchcraft). In the form of money, the exterior soul, shattered into fragments, so to speak, can be put into circulation but also stolen, monopolized guarded by dragons, so that some unlucky humans can be stripped of all soul, while others gorge or hoard up soul-bits of ancestors and victims in their ghoulish caves or “banks,” etc.

The beloved in the tales may also have an exterior soul. It falls into the grasp of the evil sorcerer or dragon and must be rescued. In other words, desire, which is alienated in the form of a symbolic object (reified, fetishized), can only be restored to its true fate (love) by re-appropriation from the expropriator, stealing it back from the wizard. The task falls to “Jack,” the third and youngest, sometimes an orphan or disinherited, possibly a fool, a peasant with more heart than any prince, generous, bold, and lucky.

Exactly the same story can be seen acted out in every honest ethnographic report on the introduction of money into some pre-monetary tribal economy. Even without the usual means of force, terror, oppression, colonialist imperialism or missionary zeal, money alone destroys every normal culture it touches.

Interestingly, in nearly every case, some sort of messianic movement, Cargo Cult, or Ghost Dance type resistance movement springs up within a generation or two after first alien contact. These cults invariably make appeal to spirits (or even demons when circumstances really begin to deteriorate) for the power to overcome money, to “provide good things” without recourse to the black magic of money, the vampirization of other peoples' external souls—the malignancy of wealth that is not shared.

This is a major trope in all the tales. Jack gives away part of his last loaf precisely to the power-animal or shaman or old lady with the very gift he'll need in his quest, but he gives unwittingly, not in expectation of exchange. Jack always stands for what Polanyi and Mauss call the Economy of the Gift.

A great many fairy tales must have originated in “folk memories” of earlier non-hierarchical social structures, embodied in narrative (myth) and ritual, and given focus during the period when this ancient polity was threatened and finally overcome by later or alien systems—particularly by money, by the coins that always appear in these tales.

Proudhon believed that money had originally been invented by the People as a means to pry loose and force into circulation the hoarded wealth of the “dragon,” the oppressor class. This idea has interesting resonances.

It points to the fact that for “the people,” money in hand represents not oppression but pleasure, gratified desire. Money may be the root of all evil, but given the existence of money, “love of money” is quite natural. Alchemy epitomizes this jouissance of money in the fairy-tale concept of transmutation, production of gold without labor as free gift of Nature to her lovers: Jove’s body as shower of golden coins.

As “the people” in person, Jack wins the treasure, but in doing so removes its curse, its dragonish malignancy, because in him the treasure finds its rightful end in happiness (i.e., free distribution, the Gift). Hence, the great feast that ends so many tales and the wedding between peasant lad and princess that levels distinctions and restores external souls to their bodies.

But Proudhon’s notion is contradicted by myth which attributes the invention of coins to a king—not Croesus of Lydia, who actually did invent coins (7th Century BC), but Midas, who choked on magical gold, his externalized soul. Dionysus and Silenus gave him his wish and then saved him by revoking it, allowing him to vomit all the gold into the river Pactolus in Phrygia.

The historical Midas lived in the 8th century BC, and Phrygia is not far from Lydia, where rivers also ran with gold and electrum and coins first appeared as temple tokens. Coins may seem to regain their innocence when they are spent rather than hoarded, but, in fact, just at this moment they betray us by leaving us and never returning. In the end, all coins end up in the usurer’s vault. Money is already debt. It says so on the US \$1 bill, that encyclopedia of Hermetic imagery and secret doctrine of money.

JACK NEVER REALLY WINS

Jack’s triumph lies not in the “ever after,” but only in a moment that is forever remembered and invoked as lost. Obviously Jack never really wins, otherwise we wouldn’t call these stories fairy tales and relegate them to the nursery, the savage pre-monetary world of mere childhood. The idea that marchen contain esoteric teachings on economics will probably sound ridiculous, but only to those who’ve never read them with Polanyi’s or Mauss’s economic anthropology in mind.

The old Russian cycle (Jack = Ivan) strikes me as particularly sensitive to this aspect of the material, almost as if socialism had a subconscious pre-echo in the great Russian fairy tale collections of the early 1900s. Among the uniquely Slavic motifs of this cycle, everyone loves the tales of the Baba Yaga, the little house on great chicken legs that walks and moves wherever the wicked witch desires. The image’s power involves implications that Baba Yaga functions not only as the witch’s house, but also as external soul. It is both shield and weapon, space and motion, cave and magic carpet.

I can’t help thinking of it as a symbol of Capital itself, especially in its purely magical end phase in the Global era. The Baba Yaga might be an offshore bank ready to pull up stakes and flee to some freer market or a shoe factory on its way to Mexico.

The mention of Mexico is reminiscent of a story about the Mexican Revolution. Around 1910, thousands of North American anarchists, Wobblies, and adventurers crossed the border under false generic names to join Pancho Villa or the Magonistas and thus came to be called the Army of Smiths.

Given the proliferation and gigantism of Baba Yagas in our times, perhaps what we need is an Army of Jacks.

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