

Modern Enchantment: A Structural Theory

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Abstract

Contemporary sociology often assumes that enchantment belongs to the premodern world, surviving in modernity only as residue, illusion, or revival. This paper challenges that assumption by developing a structural theory of modern enchantment, arguing that modernity generates its own distinctive forms of enchantment rooted in modern culture and social organization rather than survivals from an earlier epoch. Revisiting classical diagnoses of disenchantment, I derive a structural definition of enchantment as the generation of affective intensity from foundational principles of social life. I then offer a reinterpretation of Durkheim's theory of the sacred better suited to modern conditions, foregrounding the ambivalent nature of the sacred—its pure and impure poles—as a core mechanism through which such intensity is produced. I illustrate how this mechanism operates across three strategic domains of modern enchantment: mystery, escape, and hope. These domains show that modern enchantments are structurally decentralized, embedded across differentiated social and institutional spheres, and central to understanding motivation, cultural practices, and social life today.

Introduction

Modern social theory has long been organized around a powerful diagnosis: modernity is a disenchanted condition. From Weber onward, affective intensity, sacred meaning, and existential depth have been cast as casualties of rationalization and social differentiation (Weber, 1958; Scaff, 1989; Weber, 2003; Berger, 1967). Contemporary sociology largely inherits this view, documenting in ever more refined ways the cooling, alienating, profanizing, and increasingly totalizing tendencies of late modern institutions—whether expressed through regimes of instrumental rationality, neoliberal responsibilization, or diffuse forms of immanent control that penetrate ever deeper into everyday life (Foucault, 1995; Sennett, 1977; Riesman et al., 1950).

Beneath these accounts lies a largely uncontested assumption: enchantment properly belongs to the premodern world and can persist under modern conditions only as residue, illusion, or hybrid anomaly (Taylor, 2007; Berger, 1967; Partridge, 2016; Tiryakian, 1974; Critchley, 2024; Bennett, 2016; Bennett, 2010). Even those who complicate the disenchantment thesis often do so by narrating returns of the sacred or revivals of forms presumed lost (Maffesoli, 1996; Tiryakian, 1974; Berger, 1967). Modernity thus appears structurally incapable of generating *distinctively modern* mechanisms that would anchor enduring forms of emotional attachment and affective intensity. What enthusiasm exists—whether in consumer culture, media spectacle, or political mobilization—tends to be interpreted as compensatory, manipulated, or epiphenomenal, rather than as grounded in fundamental principles of modern social organization.

I challenge this assumption. I argue that modernity generates its own distinctive forms of enchantment—forms endogenous to modern social conditions and rooted in social structures rather than survivals from an earlier epoch or effects of extra-social vitality. To make this case, I first reconstruct the hidden premises of the disenchantment thesis, treating enchantment as a negatively and implicitly defined concept within sociological theory. This reconstruction allows me to develop a structural definition of enchantment. I then introduce a substantive model in which the ambivalent structure of the sacred operates as the core mechanism of modern enchantment under conditions of differentiation. Finally, I identify three strategic domains in which this mechanism becomes particularly visible—mystery, escape, and hope—and conclude by outlining the implications of this reconceptualization for theories of modernity and for cultural sociology.

Structural Definition of Enchantment

Enchantment occupies a paradoxical position in sociological theory: it is rarely defined directly and instead appears implicitly, through diagnoses of its loss (Gorski, 2024; Bennett, 2016). To clarify the concept, we must therefore begin with the various formulations of disenchantment that structured classical sociology—Durkheim’s anomie (Durkheim, 1933; Durkheim, 1951), Marx’s alienation (Marx, 2010; Fromm, 1961), Simmel’s blasé attitude (Simmel, 1950), Tönnies’ transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 1988), and Weber’s original formulation of the disenchantment thesis grounded in his theory of rationalization (Weber, 1958; Weber, 1993). Despite their differences, these accounts share two constitutive elements and one historical presupposition that together allow us to derive a structural definition of enchantment.

The first element is phenomenological. Enchantment is recognized through experiences of heightened affective intensity and deep emotional attachment to a meaningful center. Its absence appears as thinning, cooling, or fragmentation of affective life. Yet enchantment cannot be reduced to the sheer quantity of emotion circulating in social life. Intensity alone is insufficient.

The second constitutive element is ontological. For enchantment to occur, affective intensity must be anchored in fundamental principles of natural and social order—whether divine order, moral totality, communal unity, or ultimate values. Classical diagnoses of disenchantment consistently describe not merely emotional decline but a severing of affect from foundational structures of meaning. Alienation, anomie, rationalization, and cultural fragmentation all describe conditions in which emotional life becomes detached from the deepest organizing principles of the social world.

From these shared elements emerges a structural definition: enchantment refers to the principal ways of generating affective intensity out of foundational principles and conditions of social life. Disenchantment, in turn, denotes the disintegration of this connection between affect, meaning, and social and cultural order.

What unites classical and many contemporary accounts, however, is a historical presupposition I challenge: that such fusion properly belongs to the premodern world. Modernity, in this view, may preserve remnants of enchantment, or relocate them to peripheral domains, but cannot generate them as structural effects of its own organization. I call this assumption the residualist logic of enchantment.

The argument developed here challenges this residualist logic. Rather than treating enchantment as survival, compensation, or revival, I propose that each epoch generates its own specific mechanisms for fusing affect with foundational principles. The task, then, is not to trace residues—though such residues undoubtedly persist—but to identify the distinctively modern form of this fusion.

This shift does not deny the central tendencies toward rationalization, differentiation, and the expansion of diffuse and internalized forms of control diagnosed by classical and contemporary social theory (Gorski, 2024). Rather, it suggests that processes commonly described as disenchanting simultaneously reorganize the conditions under which enchantment becomes possible. The disenchantment of premodern forms and the emergence of modern forms of enchantment are not opposing trajectories but intertwined dynamics of the same historical transformation.

The Ambivalent Sacred

If we follow the structural definition from the previous section, Durkheim's theory of the sacred offers a paradigmatic sociological articulation of enchantment. Phenomenologically, the sacred is generated by extraordinary collective emotions whose intensity exceeds individually generated affect. Ontologically, the sacred–profane opposition articulates the social ontology of the 'homo duplex': the dual constitution of human beings shaped simultaneously by individual and collective forces (Durkheim, 1995; Durkheim, 1973). Culture, structured by the sacred/profane foundational opposition, binds affective intensity to the deepest principles of social organization (Alexander, 1992; Alexander, 2003; Durkheim, 1995; Smith, 2020). In this sense, the theory of the sacred provides the conceptual point of departure for reconstructing enchantment under modern conditions.

Yet the extension of this model to modern societies has faced persistent difficulty. Classical institutional embodiments of the sacred—church, community, unified moral order—appear increasingly changeable, decentralized, fluid, and differentiated in modernity. When the sacred is equated primarily with stable and cohesive forms of collective integration, modernity seems to erode its very conditions of possibility (Shils and Young, 1953; Shils, 1965; Shils, 1975; Bellah, 1967).

This difficulty, however, stems from an incomplete reading of the sacred. A crucial feature—well documented in anthropology, ethnography, and theology but remarkably underdeveloped in sociology—is its constitutive ambiguity (Robertson Smith, 2002; Otto, 1958; Kurakin, 2015; Girard, 2005; Douglas, 1966; Hertz, 2009; Kurakin, 2019b). As first systematically articulated by William Robertson Smith, the sacred contains two opposed but equally fundamental poles: the pure and the impure (sometimes described as ‘right’ and ‘left’ sacred). Both stand in opposition to the profane, yet they differ dramatically in affective tone and social effects.

The pure sacred appears stable, integrative, and morally ordered. The impure sacred, by contrast, is unstable, transgressive, and often terrifying; it threatens established boundaries, generates horror, and opens the possibility of chaos. Yet it is also intensely attractive, emotionally charged, and generative of transformation, creativity, and desire. Crucially, these two modes are not separate domains but dynamically convertible. When the pure sacred is violated, polluted, or destabilized, it may transform into its impure counterpart, producing heightened affective intensity. In turn, the volatile impure mode may consolidate into a renewed configuration of the pure sacred.

Under conditions of modern differentiation and accelerated social and institutional dynamics, this oscillation between purity and transgression becomes structurally amplified. As unified moral orders fragment and symbolic boundaries proliferate, the sacred is no longer anchored in a single institutional center. Instead, it circulates across differentiated spheres, where processes of boundary-making, violation, and reconstitution intensify its ambivalence. It is precisely this intensified oscillation—rather than the persistence of stable sacred forms—that generates distinctively modern modes of enchantment.

The argument advanced here therefore does not abandon the theory of the sacred; it radicalizes it. By foregrounding the ambivalent structure of the sacred, we can identify a key mechanism through which modernity reorganizes—rather than eliminates—the fusion of affect with foundational principles of social order.

Strategic Domains of Modern Enchantment

Modern epistemic regime prizes rational explanation, insists on uninterrupted causality, and intolerates uncertainty. Yet contemporary life is marked by accelerating social and institutional change, fluidity, and growing unpredictability. The tension between the normative demand for certainty and the structural impossibility of fully predictable knowledge challenges actors and their reflexive projects (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Beck et al., 1994). The theory developed here moves beyond the frameworks and propositions of existing theories of modernity. It shows how the ambivalent sacred operates through a dynamic oscillation between boundary stabilization and transgression, multiplying the sites of enchantment.

In the epistemic domain, this oscillation is most clearly visible: the pull toward certainty constitutes the ‘pure’ pole, while occasional exceptions, breakdowns, and contradictions—generated by stochastic complexity and informational abundance—transgress this pole, forming the ‘impure.’ In this way, mundane gaps in knowledge transform into a sublime *mystery*, a dominant mode of modern enchantment. It generates affective intensity, commands attention, and cathects phenomena that cannot be fully known or controlled. This cathexis elevates mystery into an object of sustained and sometimes obsessive attention, while simultaneously investing speculative imagination with a structural openness to the supernatural and the sublime. The epistemic domain, represented by mystery, can be grouped with two other strategic domains corresponding to fundamental dimensions of social experience: space and time, each giving room to specific forms of enchantment. The former is illustrated by the mechanism of *escape*, and the latter by the mechanism of *hope*.

In a regime that demands full explanation and predictive control, gaps in knowledge and irreducible uncertainty do not merely register as errors or inconveniences; they become culturally potent sites of affective investment. Rationalization and scientism thus paradoxically intensify the very phenomenon they seek to eliminate: mystery. Rather than surviving as a premodern residual, mystery is generated endogenously by the structural conditions of rationalized modernity. Empirically, this mechanism is pervasive. In Western societies, diffuse beliefs in mystery exceed levels of institutional religious participation (Kurakin and Smith, 2025). Real-life enigmas attract devoted publics numbering in the millions (Kurakin, 2019a), while in fiction mystery remains a dominant genre, extending into thriving forms such as true crime and investigative podcasts. Beyond explicit genres, mystery animates urban imagination through figures like the ‘mysterious stranger,’ organizes scientific curiosity around the ‘mysteries of the universe,’ structures leisure practices built on riddles and puzzles, and shapes intimate life through ideals of romantic opacity and ‘love at first sight.’ Across these domains, a common mechanism is at work: mundane and often trivial absences of knowledge are reframed as matters of heightened, even sublime, significance. Mystery is thus a distinctively modern source of enchantment. Unlike religion-centered enchantment of premodern orders, it is decentralized, diffuse, and woven into the epistemic fabric of everyday life.

Modernity intensifies the rigidity of institutional and spatial boundaries as processes of differentiation produce increasingly formalized and regulated domains. Mechanisms of control expand, and sensitivity to boundary violations grows accordingly. The more strictly boundaries are defined and rigidly enforced, the more intensely their violation is affectively charged. Under these conditions, escape crystallizes as a paradigmatic form of spatial and institutional enchantment. If mystery reframes mundane epistemic gaps into sites of sublime significance, escape reconfigures spatial and institutional constraints as invitations to transgression. In modern culture, escape crystallizes into a distinctive cognitive and emotional complex: a movement from the familiar and regulated toward an imagined elsewhere charged with promise. This dynamic animates both fiction and social life. Cultural fascination with figures such as D. B. Cooper—who, despite hijacking an airplane and extorting ransom, continues to attract public sympathy—reveals the affective power of successful disappearance and evasion. More institutionally routinized forms, including migration, upward mobility, and educational aspiration, are often narrated through the idiom of ‘getting out’ or ‘moving beyond.’ Across these contexts, escape functions as a semi-controlled transgression: a spatial and institutional mechanism through which modern actors experience enchantment.

Similarly, hope represents the pure sacred projected into future, activated by an imagined rupture with troubled present. Although not exclusively modern—religious narratives of salvation institutionalize enduring forms of hope—it is structurally amplified under conditions of permanent crisis and instability. Hope thus emerges as one of the signature enchantments of modernity. Like mystery and escape, hope operates through the mechanism of the ambivalent sacred: it transposes the mundane dullness or constraints of the present into a sacred future charged with promise through a leap of faith toward a benevolent future. This differentiates hope from optimism understood as a cognitive disposition or cultural strategy. Hope is not merely a belief about probability; it is a structural effect of modern enchantment—an affective intensification rooted in uncertainty. It animates educational striving, entrepreneurial risk-taking (as in startup culture), patterns of family formation, and community-building. As James Davison Hunter has argued in his recent work, hope functions as a necessary performative element of contemporary American democracy, enabling solidarity, dignity, and collective agency (Hunter, 2024).

Modern enchantment is not located in isolated cultural objects or institutional centers; it emerges from the structural intensification of boundary oscillations across differentiated domains of social life.

Conclusion and Discussion

Even in the most empirically oriented subfields of sociology, prevailing views of modernity continue to shape research strategies and analytical frameworks. By introducing a revised understanding of modernity and the structural effects of enchantment, I open new analytical possibilities. The following implications illustrate key ways in which recognizing modern enchantments reshapes sociological analysis, though this list is far from exhaustive.

Firstly, it illuminates how culture, cognition, and affect fuse into patterned configurations in modern social life. Secondly, it challenges the dominance of classical instrumental-rational models of motivation, showing that action is often oriented outward from conditions of experience toward open-ended and polyphonic imaginaries rather than toward fixed destinations such as goals or values. Thirdly, it moves beyond secularization debates, revealing that modern enchantments are structurally decentralized, emerging across multiple social and institutional domains and encompassing forms such as mystery, escape, and hope.

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