

THE IDEA OF CHANCE: ATTITUDES AND SUPERSTITIONS

At first approach the use of the word “superstition” is such that it is impossible to apply the term strictly in the human sciences. Its connotation, that is its content, is particularly subjective and negative. And its extension, that is its area of application, is indefinite and makes of it a concept that can refer to just about anything.

The various definitions of superstition demonstrate its extreme subjectivity—they depend on the point of view of the one who defines it—and emphasize its negativity. Superstition is defined by what it is not and not by what it is. The clerical definition—whether it be Plutarch speaking for Greek religion or Saint Thomas Aquinas for Christianity—makes of superstition a deviation, a denaturation, an excess that develops around the fringes of official religion, essentially among lower classes. This is the very etymology of the word “superstition,” from the Latin *superstare*, to be above (official religion being understood). Superstition is seen as the pitfall lying beyond the true faith, whereas unbelief is the

Translated by R. Scott Walker

pitfall at the other extreme. The religious definition—which takes as frame of reference the whole of a given religion—terms “superstitions” all other religions, beliefs considered to be false. Superstition is the religion of others, in the same manner, as it has been said, that pornography is the eroticism of others! This, for example, is the attitude long adopted by Judaism, and then Christianity and Islam, with regard to other religions. And finally the anti-religious definition calls superstition any belief in the irrational, any religious belief at all. We recognize here the position of atheism and scientism, a position already present in Voltarian theism. Despite differences between the ideologies from which they issue, all these definitions have as common denominator the constantly unfavorable judgment brought against superstition considered as error, prejudice, fetishism, fanaticism, credulity.

The objects to which the term superstition has been applied are especially heterogeneous. The great number of “dictionaries of superstitions” combine beliefs coming from various religions, naturalist or meteorological folk knowledge, sayings and proverbs, magic beliefs and practices, elements of witchcraft, omens of good or bad luck, divining techniques. In this respect, the title of the dictionary by A. de Chesnel published by Abbé Migne in 1856 is significant: *Dictionary of Superstitions, Errors, Prejudices and Popular Traditions ... dealing with the spirits of the air, the earth and the waters, diabolic possession, the world of fairies and witches, forebodings, dreams, visions, apparitions, predictions, etc.* This same catalogue can be found in modern works, such as that by Andrée Ruffat¹ or even Conrad Zucker,² despite an interesting attempt to discern the notions of luck and misfortune in modern man.

Far from clarifying the problem, most psychosociologists who have studied superstitions have only muddied the issue even more by adding new beliefs to the old ones: U.F.O.'s, parapsychology, etc. As Françoise Askevis-Leherpeux has shown clearly,³ authors

¹ Andrée Ruffat, *La Superstition à travers les âges*, Paris, Payot, 1951 (new edition 1977).

² Conrad Zucker, *Psychologie de la superstition*, translated by F. Vaudou, Paris, Payot, 1952 (new edition 1972).

³ Françoise Askevis-Leherpeux, “Les corrélats de la superstition”, *Arch. de Sc. Soc. des Rel.*, 45/1, 1978.

mix together four types of beliefs: occult or quasi-religious beliefs (such as witchcraft, evil spirits); pure superstitions (Friday the thirteenth or four-leaf clovers); scientific errors (such as geocentrism, erroneous beliefs about heredity); and scientific controversies, provided that it be specified that these are not internal controversies, for example the dispute between those who hold for general relativity as opposed to partisans of quantum mechanics, but of controversies located on the margins of science (belief in U.F.O.'s, telepathy, the abominable snowman, the Loch Ness monster, etc.).

The idea of chance and attitudes associated with superstition

Instead of beginning with an set of propositions judged to be “pure superstitions,” for which it is impossible to be exhaustive (we will see why later) and the risk of heterogeneity is quite large, it seems preferable to limit this problematic by associating superstition with the idea of chance. This is one way, it seems, to make this concept functional, that is to give it the capability of delimiting a field of beliefs and practices. We propose here to limit superstition to the group of beliefs and practices deriving from the idea of good luck and its inevitable complement, bad luck.

Good luck is a religious or para-religious notion rarely studied because it is “incarnated” in quite different areas: the cult of the goddess Fortuna by the Romans, Arab belief in *baraka*, the interpretation of good and bad omens, the blessing of ships, belief in “biochance” associated with the favorable days of biorhythms, the fear of a woman coming on board a fishing boat, the use of good-luck charms, etc. Moreover superstition has disconcerted sociologists of religion because many of its forms are extremely individualized, proven by the diversity of good-luck charms and superstitious practices. This is why Marcel Mauss could write that “strictly individual acts, such as the particular superstitious practices of gamblers, cannot be called magical.”⁴ Nevertheless,

⁴ Marcel Mauss, “Esquisse d’une théorie générale de la magie” (1902-1903) in *Sociologie et anthropologie*. Paris, P.U.F., 1950, p. 11.

The Idea of Chance

Mauss himself felt that there were collective beliefs behind all this, for he also wrote:

“The ideas of good luck and bad luck [...] that are still familiar to us, are quite close to the idea of magic itself.”⁵

We must, then, view these beliefs and practices, differing depending on cultures, social levels and individuals, as manifestations of a fundamental attitude that is belief in chance. The latter is expressed through various religious or para-religious systems: the same desire to have good luck leads to lighting a candle, checking one’s horoscope or biorhythm, carrying around a four-leaf clover, the medal of a saint, a Fatma’s hand or a personal fetish. What counts is not so much the external and variable aspect of the practice as its profound motivation, belief in good and bad luck.

Simple observation shows that the idea of good and bad luck appears in children at the very time of “the age of reason,” around seven or eight, when the child becomes conscious of his action on the world but also of the resistance this world throws up against him; a day that goes bad (a fall, bad grade in school, etc.) will be referred to with the expression “it’s not my lucky day.” Early games lead to belief in magical determinism, for example a “lucky marble.”

Belief in luck can remain at the stage of mental representation, but, more often, it is made concrete in cognitive behavior, the interpretation of signs, and in pragmatic attitudes, actions destined to bring good luck or drive away bad luck.

The conceptual framework for the study of good and bad luck can be summarized as follows:

⁵ *Idem.*, p. 137.

GOOD LUCK AND BAD LUCK

Type of behavior	Basic principle	Fields of application
Belief	Idea of good or bad luck that brings happiness or unhappiness.	Belief in one's lucky star, destiny, lucky breaks, fatality.
Cognitive attitude	Knowing lucky or unlucky signs.	Interpreting spontaneous signs. Provoking signs (divination).
Pragmatic attitude	Acting on fate to bring good luck or repel bad luck.	Propitiatory rituals (bringing good luck). Apotropaic rituals (repelling bad luck). Use of good luck charms.

From this a certain number of works of diverse origins can be articulated with regard to one another to supply theoretical bases for this study. We will examine successively the psychological factors and then the sociological factors that cause or encourage the appearance of beliefs and practices linked to luck. Finally we will attempt to define functions exercised by superstition associated with luck.

I. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF SUPERSTITION LINKED TO LUCK

Animal behavior: the pigeon

Is there a psychophysiological reflex underlying superstition? The psychologist Burrhus Frederic Skinner, in a study of superstition in pigeons,⁶ claims one can be found in animals. Skinner observed

The Idea of Chance

that if various actions of hungry pigeons—such as flapping their wings or going in a circle or a figure eight—occurred at the precise moment when food was given, these actions became systematic, as if the pigeons associated their behavior with the distribution of food. Superstition would thus be a particular example of the process of learning through reinforcement. Does the superstitious football player who always sits in the same place in the locker room of the stadium where he won before resemble Skinner's pigeons?

Skinner's experiment shows that animals do not distinguish between the case in which two events are associated by chance (flapping of wings and appearance of food) and the case in which two events are related by a causal link (when the pigeon pecks at a precise point to release the food). The existence of superstition in man is proof that he does not always know how to make this distinction. But the resemblance stops there, and it is through anthropocentrism, through a misuse of language, that Skinner speaks of "superstition" in animals. Although the pigeon ceases its "superstitious" behavior if the reinforcement—food—no longer appears, man, on the contrary, persists in his superstitious behavior because of the psychological importance of the stakes—happiness or unhappiness—, because of his belief in the idea that failure—if there is failure—would be even greater if he were not to respect the superstitious practice, and finally because of the pressure of cultural models for superstition.

We can only agree with the remarks of the psychosociologist Philip Zimbardo:⁷

"The learning of superstitions, even though this represents a fundamental form of human learning, has not received the full attention it merits. [...] In man, because of his remarkable cognitive capability, superstitious associations can be formed from almost any pair of stimuli."

Superstition and failed or symptomatic acts

The other source of works on the psychological factors of superstition is at the opposite end of the spectrum from Skinner;

⁷ Philip G. Zimbardo, "La psychologie sociale: une situation, une intrigue et un scénario en quête de réalité" in Serge Moscovici (dir.), *Introduction à la psychologie sociale*, Paris, Larousse, 1972, volume 1, p. 92-93.

these are the writings of Freud on undone or symptomatic acts.⁸ According to Freud superstitions are “proof of the existence of unconscious and suppressed knowledge of the motivation of undone or accidental actions.”⁹ Being unable to find something (the mischievousness of things) or a welcome discovery (lucky break), a clumsy act (*faux pas*, breaking something), a mistake (mixing up keys or telephone numbers), a preference or revulsion for certain names, words or numbers are all incidents that superstition calls “signs” or “intersigns” and that are similar in psychoanalysis. But where a superstitious person will situate the origin of these signs only in the external world, the psychoanalyst discovers a psychic causality in them: instances of the psychic apparatus (first or second topic) in reference to the subject’s history.

Freud thus described cases of the destruction of objects as “superstitious sacrifices,” with the superstitious dimension being either conscious or unconscious in the subject. The destruction is dictated by gratitude to fate, for example for an unexpected healing, or to the contrary by the desire to thwart misfortune. Thus a man absentmindedly gives a beggar a gold coin instead of some small piece of change, but he was worrying about a sick person and sought unconsciously to appease fate. Undone or symptomatic actions in married life are quite significant: forgetting to try on a wedding dress, loss of a wedding ring, a woman signing her maiden name, etc. All these actions reveal cracks in the couple’s relationship. With regard to a man obsessed by two numbers, 17 and 36, Freud showed that these figures expressed a difficult relationship between the man and his younger brother who was more successful in life. The man was born on the 27th and his brother the 26th, and the ten days added or subtracted represent the unconscious feeling of there being an unfair difference between his brother and himself. Running into a person about whom one has just been thinking can be explained by a series of psychological mechanisms: subliminal perception of the person from a distance,

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathologie de la vie quotidienne* (1901), translated by S. Jankélévitch, Paris, Payot, 1981 (13th ed.) and *Introduction à la psychanalyse* (1917), translated by S. Jankélévitch, Paris, Payot, 1981 (23rd ed.) (First part: “Les actes manqués”).

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathologie...*, p. 274.

The Idea of Chance

extremely conscious rapid daydreaming experienced as lasting longer than its actual duration, or an encounter perceived as being an extraordinary coincidence or even the realization of a premonition.

The interpretation of intersigns as it has been practiced in numerous societies is, according to Freud, an initial attempt at understanding psychic mechanisms:

“When a Roman renounced a project because he had put the wrong foot on his threshold, he showed himself superior to incredulous persons like ourselves; he showed himself to be a better psychologist than we are. For him this false step was proof of the existence of a doubt, of an inner opposition to this project, doubt and opposition whose power could wipe out the power of his intention at the moment of execution of the project.”¹⁰

Thus if the fundamental common point between the psychoanalyst and the superstitious person is the “attention paid to signs and their interpretation,” they are separated by their conception of the world and their methodology. Nevertheless, the realm of investigation is the same, even though Freud is obliged to foresee possible resistance:

“Interpreting undone acts that occur in inter-human relationships as premonitory signs and using them as indicators of even more secret intentions [...], most often we do not dare do this. We are afraid of seeming to return to superstition by going beyond science.”¹¹

The founder of psychoanalysis even undertook his own self-analysis:

“I was struck by the facility with which numbers are presented to my unconscious thinking, although I was generally bad at calculations [...]. Moreover, I find in these unconscious numerical operations a tendency to superstition, the origin of which long remained unknown to me.”¹²

¹⁰ *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹¹ *Idem, Introduction à la psychanalyse*, p. 47.

¹² *Idem, Psychopathologie...*, p. 268-69.

Freud wrote further:

“You are no doubt tempted to think that, in every case, undone actions replace the *omina* or the premonitions of the Ancient world. And, in fact, certain *omina* were nothing other than undone actions, as when someone tripped or fell. Others, however, had the characteristics of an objective event and not those of a subjective act. But you cannot realize to what point it is often difficult to discern whether a given event belongs to one or the other of these categories. The act is often understood as masking a passive event.”¹³

It sometimes happens that external events, in the realization of which we have taken no part, can become, through the interpretation we give to them, the signs of our unconsciousness. For example the method of associating ideas gives the same positive results when numbers are imposed on the subject, thus objective, as with numbers chosen by the subject, that is subjective! This opens perspectives for a psychoanalytic approach to divination when this is practiced by a subject for himself, but also perhaps when it is practiced for others. For ethnologists have observed that African divining techniques began with preliminaries in which the diviner asked a series of questions of the client in order to discern his problem better.

Coincidences and probability

The same predisposition for interpreting signs causes us to perceive as *coincidences*, lucky or unlucky but in any case inexplicable, encounters with events whose subjective probability of realization appears quite low but whose real probability, defined mathematically, is quite high.¹⁴ Let us mention several classic examples of probability calculation. In a group of 50 persons, the probability that two persons at least have birthdays on the same day is 97%! In a population of 50 million people, the probability of two persons

¹³ *Idem*, *Introduction à la psychanalyse*, p. 47.

¹⁴ Ruma Falk, “On Coincidences”, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. VI, No. 2, 1981-1982.

Henri Broch, *Le Paranormal*. Paris, Le Seuil, 1985, p. 109-128.

The Idea of Chance

chosen at random, who meet and talk together, discovering that they are linked by a “bridge” made up of two other persons (A knows B who knows C who knows D who is talking to A) is equal to 99 chances out of 100! Many “miraculous chance events” and incidents of “unbelievable luck” thus enter into the framework of completely probable events.

II. THE SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS OF SUPERSTITION ASSOCIATED WITH CHANCE

The psychological approaches to superstition lead us to seek the contexts of individual or collective life that can favor superstitious attitudes by supplying cultural behavior models. Freud himself stressed that the data of folklore can be quite useful to the analyst:

“The fact of dropping, turning over or destroying objects often seems to be used as the expression of series of unconscious ideas. This can sometimes be verified with the help of analysis, but most often by taking into account the popular, superstitious or mocking interpretations attached to such acts.”¹⁵

Freud even spoke of cultural determinism:

“Our undone acts provide us with a means for remaining attached to all the pious and superstitious customs that the light of our reason, having become unbelieving, had driven from the unconsciousness.”¹⁶

Chance in traditional societies

Vast studies of comparative ethnology undertaken since the end of the 19th century in Western countries have indicated the extent of the idea of good and bad luck in traditional societies. It is known with certitude that this idea occupies an important place in many civilizations of hunters-fishermen, farmers and breeders, belonging to different cultural spheres, where the notion of chance seems to

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathologie...*, 185.

¹⁶ *Idem.*, p. 188.

be linked to that of the fertility of women, of game, of livestock and the land. As Jean Servier has written:¹⁷

“The qualification for being king among Nordic peoples was determined by his having a ‘lucky hand’; this is also, in many cases, the reason for choosing a given family whose oldest male plows the first furrow on the morning when plowing begins in the land of the Berbers [...]. Sometimes, in the mountains of Algeria [...], the last one to arrive in a village is assigned the task of inaugurating plowing. As a result of this test, when the harvest is in, the village will determine the ‘luck’ of the new arrival.”

In semitic languages, the Arab *baraka* and the Hebrew *brk* signify, etymologically, “blessed of God,” that is, protected by God. Loss of this blessing is manifested by bad luck. Among ancient Scandinavians, when things went badly it was the fault of the king who, instead of bringing good luck, had become a source of bad luck. He was then sacrificed. Likewise in imperial China, natural catastrophes or wars were the sign that “Heaven’s mandate” had been withdrawn from the emperor who had to abdicate.

Greco-Roman antiquity divinized the idea of luck and destiny in the form of the Greek goddess Tyche, whose attribute is the horn of plenty (fertility), and the Latin goddess Fortuna, most often represented with her eyes blindfolded, holding the horn of plenty or a rudder (symbol of unforeseen paths) or even a wheel (symbol of the succession of good luck and bad luck). This is the goddess who still today appears on posters advertising the national lottery. Among the Romans Fortuna was frequently associated with her masculine equivalent, the god Fors, the incarnation of chance.

The importance of the notion of chance in traditional societies seems reinforced, if not determined, by two elements: the frequency of natural catastrophes, epidemics and wars that arrive abruptly and that irremediably transform (relative) happiness into unhappiness; and the extremely strong belief in an invisible world whose messages come to us in the form of signs, which we must know how to interpret, that announce good or bad luck. However, it is not possible to affirm that the first element is the cause of the second. In our Western society, where scientific progress,

¹⁷ Jean Servier, “Le jeu du forgeron ou l’ombre de la création du monde”, *Eranos Jahrbuch*, 51, 1982. (Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main), p. 400-401.

The Idea of Chance

particularly in medicine, and the institutions of social protection have reduced natural risks and their effects, religious beliefs, despite the diminishing influence of the major religions, remain strong, or even are in full expansion, often under para-religious and para-scientific forms. Belief in chance occupies an important place therein. Nevertheless, the idea is retained of a link between uncertainty and helplessness before the events, and chance.

Historic crises and the upsurge in superstitions

In our modern societies there has been observed an upsurge in superstitious attitudes at the time of historic crises—wars, deportations, economic crises—when everyone runs the risk of ruin, the loss of a loved one, death. Albert Dauzat¹⁸ reported that in World War I a magic formula intended to provide protection from bullets was found on many German soldiers. A comment accompanied the formula: “If you doubt its power, attach the sheet to a dog and fire on him; the dog will not even be wounded.” In the *Mercure de France* of 16 August 1917, Guillaume Apollinaire listed a certain number of good luck charms used by the “poilus”: a round-trip Métro ticket purchased at the “Combat” station and punched for the first part of the journey only; a post card representing a white elephant (an ivory statuette of an elephant, with raised trunk, is still today considered a good luck charm). An agate charm bracelet sold under the arcades of the Palais-Royal was thought to turn back bullets and shrapnel; a wounded man who carried the piece that hit him would not be hit by another projectile of the same kind. Carrying cloth figurines of Nénette and Rintintin (dolls created in 1913 by Francisque Poulbot at the request of the Société française de Bébés et Jouets) was also a widespread superstitious practice.

During World War II, according to accounts by veterans, persons who were hunted for deportation or even those actually deported, great importance was given to the “unheard-of luck” and “miracles” that made it possible to survive or to escape the

¹⁸ Albert Dauzat, *Légendes, prophéties et superstitions de la guerre*, Paris, La Renaissance du Livre, 1920.

roundups, or to the “bad luck” and “misfortune” that led to arrest, deportation and death.

In their study of “chains” of magic letters,¹⁹ Serge Bonnet and Antoine Delestre recalled the testimony of a woman during the Algerian war:

“In 1961 I received two of them. This was during the war in Algeria, and for the person who ‘broke the chain’ there were appropriate reprisals. I had a son in Algeria. I was afraid. I did not break the chain.”

This example clearly shows the close link between a critical collective situation (the war), a strong individual concern (the fear of losing a son in combat) and an upsurge in superstitious practices. The mother of the soldier preferred to continue the “chain” of letters rather than taking the risk of “tempting fate.” Unlike Skinner’s pigeon, who ceased his “superstitious” behavior when the reinforcement (food) was withdrawn, a person who believes in good luck and bad luck cannot allow himself not to accomplish a superstitious act (the only method for verifying its validity) since in every case the outcome that is dreaded is failure, disease or death.

Socio-professional categories “at risk”

If collective crises favor the “epidemic” development of superstition, it can be expected that we will encounter “endemic” superstition in socio-professional categories where risk is an every day phenomenon. As Alex Mucchielli has shown,²⁰ mentalities are formed under the influence of a lifestyle, through the permanent confrontation with a certain type of situation. When socio-professional activities include an element of insecurity, risk, danger, inability to control unforeseeable events, they cause anxiety in individuals, and superstitious practices appear correlatively. The most astonishing factor is the variety of

¹⁹ Serge Bonnet, Antoine Delestre, “Les chaînes magiques”, *Rev. des Sc. soc. de la France de l’Est*, Strasbourg, No. 13-13 bis, 1984.

²⁰ Alex Mucchielli, *Les Mentalités*, Paris, P.U.F., 1985 (coll. “Que sais-je?”, No. 545).

The Idea of Chance

professions concerned, from those in which people risk their lives, such as deep-sea fishermen, to those in which individuals risk their careers, such as performers or statesmen.

Persons who work with nature—farmers, fishermen, hunters, miners—all have in common, according to Conrad Zucker, “the daily experience of dependence on the changing influences of nature.”²¹ Their work is the visible result (harvest, catch, game, ore) of their physical efforts, but unforeseen natural circumstances can ruin this work: bad weather, shipwreck, animal diseases, cave-ins. The fundamental attitudes of these laborers will therefore be formed both by the meaning of their effort but also by fatalism and superstition. In a questionnaire submitted to various socio-professional categories by Claude Lévy-Leboyer,²² it was workers in the agricultural sector who said they were most in agreement with the following statements:

- “A persistent effort will solve anything”: 75% yes.
- “I’m never lucky no matter what I do”: 90%-yes.

Hunters

Hunting today is no longer an activity by which people earn their living; it is a leisure activity, and the risks of being wounded or killed by game are minimal. Mythical beliefs and taboos that surrounded hunting in traditional societies have practically all disappeared from our industrial societies. A few superstitions remain, strangely similar to those of fishermen, linked to the success or the failure of the hunt: wishing hunters good luck brings bad luck; meeting a woman when leaving for the hunt is a bad omen. The same is true for meeting a beggar or a priest, in which cases the bad luck can be warded off by giving nothing to the former and by not speaking to the latter!

²¹ Conrad Zucker, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

²² Claude Lévy-Leboyer, *L’Ambition professionnelle et la mobilité sociale*, Paris, P.U.F., 1971.

Miners

Worship of the Earth-Mother, the miraculous discoveries of veins, the rituals for the opening of a new mine, the purification rites for miners, belief in fantastic beings who live in the subterranean world and who announce or provoke cave-ins are all myths and rituals of mining that exist in traditional societies engaged in the extraction of underground riches. These myths have gradually disappeared in the West, even though they survived through the Middle Ages and even the Renaissance.²³ And yet, among the remaining coal miners, where the risks of accident and disease, particularly silicosis, remain very high, belief in luck is still quite strong, but it seems to have shifted. For the especially pronounced interest of miners in games of chance—lottery, sweepstakes, race-track betting—is an indication both of the persistence of belief in luck that lies at the very origins of the mining profession and a rejection of this occupation, since the hoped-for winnings would make it possible to leave the mine at last.²⁴

Farmers

Farmers have inherited in part the mentality of traditional rural societies. Peasant superstitions, associated with still lively religious practices, are often the scattered remnants of ancient agrarian rituals intended to favor the harvests and to drive away bad weather. Certainly rituals like the excommunication of grasshoppers in order to keep them from destroying the wheat belong to the distant past, but many superstitious practices are still present, varying according to the country and region. A branch of mistletoe or hedge hung in a stable protects the livestock; a cricket on the hearth brings good luck. A child “*né coiffé*” will have good luck. In Lorraine, standing astride a plow is bad luck; in Berry, one should go at dawn on the day before St. John’s day to cut a few

²³ Paul Sébillot, *Les Travaux publics et les mines dans les traditions et les superstitions de tous les pays*, Paris, Rothschild, 1894; Mircea Eliade, *Forgerons et Alchimistes*, Paris, Flammarion, 1956 (new edition revised and enlarged, 1977).

²⁴ Juliette Minces, *Le Nord*, Paris, Maspero, 1967 (Cahiers libres, No. 102), p. 140-141.

The Idea of Chance

shafts of wheat in the fields in order to guarantee a good harvest etc.²⁵

Among peasants, the “patrimony,” in the broad sense—the land and the livestock as well as the harvests, the buildings, the health of the members of the household—is identified with a vital force that can be augmented or diminished by the magic power of a lucky or unlucky spell. It is a matter of sorcery²⁶ if the source of the spell is situated in a person (a sorcerer) and not in some abstraction deemed lucky or unlucky.

Deep-sea fishermen

It is especially among deep-sea fishermen, however, that numerous superstitious practices have been discovered. The persistence of these practices can be explained both by the attachment of these people to religion and to the risks they encounter in their profession. According to Paul Sébillot,²⁷ a fisherman who gives a light to someone loses some of his luck; wishing good luck to sailors boarding their ship brings them bad luck. The presence of a priest, a woman or a cat on board a ship is bad. Nailing a horseshoe to the mast brings good luck. Two proverbs assert that eating pork or rabbit on board the ship brings a “jinx” and inhibits good fishing.

Marée de cochon, marée de guigon.
Mange du lapin, la marée est faite.²⁸

Even today sailors believe that it brings bad luck if someone on board talks about the rigging, kills an animal, eats rabbit or even pronounces the name of this animal. In a study conducted in the early 1980's by Jean Rieucan²⁹ of the fishing community in the

²⁵ *Dictionnaire des superstitions*, Forcalquier (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence), Robert Morel, 1967.

²⁶ Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Les Mots, la mort, les sorts*, Paris, Gallimard, 1977.

²⁷ Paul Sébillot, *Le Folk-Lore des pêcheurs*, Paris, Maisonneuve & Larose, 1901.

²⁸ Jean Recher, *Le Grand Métier*, Paris, Plon, 1977 (coll. “Terre Humaine”), p. 184-205.

²⁹ Jean Rieucan, *Encadrement et pratiques religieuses de la communauté halieutique de Honfleur au Crotoy*, RCP 08-687, 1983, pp. 235-274. Text reproduced in Jean Rieucan, *La Pêche de l'estuaire de la Seine à la Baie de Somme et les occupations conflictuelles du littoral*, thesis 3^e cycle in geography, Brest, 1983, p. 184-205.

region of Caux in Normandy, the author insisted on the religiosity stamped with superstition of this sea-faring people. Devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints essentially plays a role of protecting against the dangers of the sea. Despite efforts by the clergy to bring reason to bear, some devotions remain strong:

“In the church of Notre-Dame du Pollet, the seventy-three sacred figures honored and implored twenty years ago were reduced (by the clergy) to three in 1982: Notre-Dame du Bon Secours, Saint Peter and Saint Rita.”³⁰

The Virgin Mary is especially venerated as miraculous, as the very numerous ex-votos in which she appears indicate. Saint Peter is the patron saint of fishermen, and Saint Rita is the patroness of hopeless causes, which demonstrates the intensity of the feeling of helplessness that sailors still experience when facing the dangers of navigation. Statistics indicate that the primary cause of accidents at sea is bad weather.

Customs issuing from rural folklore, such as a sailor keeping bits of straw from the Christmas crib or branches blessed on Palm Sunday, are thought to bring good luck. Other practices are as much rituals for warding off bad luck as propitiatory rites:

“Belief in bad luck or a curse remains strong. What fisherman, returning from a trip with a small catch, will not say, “Someone is doing me wrong!”? The clergy of Fécamp, resistant to going to Yport, notes the strong demand for blessings of rooms, homes and persons.”³¹

The blessing of ships is a ritual to which fishermen are especially attached, despite the resistance of the clergy who do not fail on this occasion to recall that the ceremony is not intended to cast a lucky spell on the crew or the vessel. At Crotoy the blessing of the nets at the beginning of the herring season is explained by the fact that this kind of fishing is dangerous and risky. The herring season begins in late October or early November, when the heavy storms also arrive. At Fécamp, when every new fishing boat is launched, a painting of the vessel is hung in the sailors' chapel in the harbor.

³⁰ *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 255.

³¹ *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 257.

The Idea of Chance

Inversely, but complementary to this, protective signs are placed on the ship:

“Medals of Saint Peter are placed in the hold, in the bunks, in the pilot-house of the ship. The mast carries a crucifix and an image of the Virgin. If this is lost, a bad catch is attributed to this fact. The ships with saints’ names are many [...]. Likewise, the first time a trawler casts its nets, the captain throws holy water from the blessing ceremony on the ship.”³²

The analogy with the sacred rites that accompany the plowing of the first furrow in the agricultural community is striking.

An anecdote recounted by Jean Rieucou shows that belief in the bad luck thought to be caused by the presence of a stranger on board a ship (a belief attested to already in the biblical account of Jonas) is still alive today (fortunately the author was not thrown overboard!):

“From my own experience I can testify to the reactions of the crew of a small trawler from Dieppe [...], fishing in the Channel, who linked my presence on board to their bad catch. These fishermen, whose ages were between 25 and 40, spoke of their bad luck several weeks earlier due to the presence of a biologist on board. Persons in the fishing sector like to be mothered, which explains the success of saints like Saint Rita and the various local variants on Notre-Dame. But women, especially at sea on a ship, retain an impure quality.”³³

Through symbolic analogy to women, cats and rabbits (both metaphors for the female sex) as well as priests (asexual because of sacerdotal celibacy and feminine because of their cassocks) are considered bad luck on board a ship.

Popular rituals in the urban context

In his famous study of the lifestyle of the lower classes—unskilled manual laborers—in an urban context in England in the 1950’s, Richard Hoggart emphasized belief in good and bad luck:

³² *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 261.

³³ *Idem, Ibid.*

“The world of popular experience appears as a geographical map in which the points noted—specially dense in the most frequented passages—would be represented in two colors, one corresponding to ‘things bringing good luck’ and the other to those ‘bringing bad luck’. This division of acts is constantly referred to, almost automatically, in every instant of daily life.”³⁴

Hoggart then lists a catalogue of superstitious practices, most of which are also found in France. It is bad luck to walk under a ladder, to break a mirror, to give a knife as a present and so on. It brings good luck to find a four-leaf clover, to have a dimple on the chin, etc.

“The term ‘luck’, that crops up everywhere in conversations, summarizes the popular experience of destiny. People believe in luck and admire it. One is born lucky but can never become so. It is a *gift*, just like intelligence or good eyesight. Of course, there are signs [...] but, fundamentally, it is a gift that is given to you at birth [...] For lower-class persons, luck represents a factor in success as effective as hard work, intelligence or beauty.”³⁵

An opinion poll cited by Pierre Bourdieu confirms Hoggart’s observations:

% of women who think it preferable...	Profession of head of family			
	Farmer	Laborer	Mid-level employee	Top level employee, professionals
– to be beautiful	9.8	14.0	17.5	17.4
– to be lucky	83.7	83.3	76.8	75.8

Source: Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, Paris, Editions de Minuit 1979, p. 226.

³⁴ Richard Hoggart, *La Culture du pauvre* (1957), translated by F. and J.-Cl. Garcias, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1970, p. 60.

³⁵ *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 188-89.

The Idea of Chance

We can note that women from the lower classes accord a greater importance to luck than women from the wealthier levels of society. But it is no less remarkable that, no matter what the social category, the majority of women think it preferable to be lucky than to be beautiful.

The feeling of powerlessness before events—which for farmers, fishermen and miners are limited to natural catastrophes—is generalized among urban lower classes to the whole of existence.

“Recourse to the notion of chance expresses first of all an attitude that we have already encountered. In a situation from which one cannot reasonably expect anything, one must count on good luck. But this is also the expression of a strong belief, and a rather special one, in the supernatural, not because it proposes hope in a better future beyond the present but because it gives more flavor to life.”³⁶

“Flavor,” but also “meaning,” “significance” to events for which attribution to chance alone does not satisfy the human need to understand the why of things.

Athletes

Athletes form a group in which superstitious attitudes are frequent, primarily among those who risk their lives on race tracks or testing prototypes: airplane pilots, automobile racers and even bicycle racers.

“Both were born on the same day, July 13, 1918 ... Superstitious, Ascari wrote... to Couderc: ‘In the interests of both of us, if we learn something of importance for persons born on July 13, we should inform one another. This could be a good form of mutual insurance.’ The very day that Couderc received this letter, Ascari [...] was killed in the trial runs at Monza!” (*Pilote*, No. 14, 1960).

“Your friend ‘Boubou’ (a cycling racer) is not really superstitious, but the number 13 has never brought me good luck [...]. Of course, if has never brought me bad luck either! [...] And yet, I say it again, I am a little worried! [...] Well, believe me, the jersey with the

³⁶ *Idem, Ibid.*, p. 189.

number 13 is more relaxed than I am! Why? Because it does not attach any importance to the fact that one number is lucky while another one is not." (*Pilote*, No. 35, 1960).

The word "miracle" is used to describe "unbelievable luck":

"And then, there was a horrible catastrophe at Le Mans: Fangio came through the debris miraculously." (*Pilote*, No. 35, 1960).

"A miracle at 230 kilometers per hour [...]. Yes, it was really a miracle that the English driver, Stirling Moss, was not killed in the accident." (*Pilote* No. 36, 1960).

The above examples, taken from the sports columns of the early days of *Pilote* (the choice of title is significant), a weekly newspaper for young readers, appeared alongside fictional stories, also found in other publications, whose heroes are automobile racers (Michel Vaillant in *Tintin*) or airplane pilots (Buck Danny in *Spirou*, Dan Cooper in *Tintin*, Tanguy and Laverdure in *Pilote*). These stories frequently use the theme of good luck and bad luck.³⁷ The typical example is an adventure of Michel Vaillant in *Tintin*, in 1971-1972, entitled *Série Noire*, that features an accumulation of setbacks and accidents.

The presence of Saint Christopher medals in cars shows that ordinary drivers also seek superstitious protection against accidents. The word "superstitious" is truly appropriate here, and preferable to the word "religious," since the Roman Catholic Church recently removed Saint Christopher from the calendar of saints and forbade devotion to him because of lack of historical proof of his existence!

Bullfighting, imbued with Spanish religiosity, is quite naturally the scene of magical-religious practices. The toreros pray before holy pictures and cross themselves before entering the arena.

Other less dangerous sports are no less exempt from superstitious practices. Michel Hidalgo, former trainer for the French soccer team, stated in 1983 for the newspaper *Le Matin de Paris* (11 August 1983, p. 19), "In sports, you are more involved with superstition than with religion."

³⁷ Jean-Bruno Renard, *Bandes dessinées et croyances du siècle*, Paris, P.U.F. 1986 (ch. 4: "Entre le sacré et le profane: les miracles et les fêtes").

In analyzing the contents of the sports press, Jules Gritti³⁸ made clear the role of good and bad luck in the drama of sports, as an element of suspense and the reason for reversals in situations.

Soccer players have some rather original superstitious practices: to sit always in the same place in the locker rooms of stadiums where they have already won a match, not to wear jerseys of certain colors, to wear a religious medal or a magic charm, to put the left soccer shoe on first and then the right, to cross oneself before the beginning of play, and so on. An American researcher has shown that the superstitions of athletes represent a psychological mechanism that allows the player to overcome the stress of competition and thereby achieve his best performances.³⁹

Artists, performers, politicians

Violette Morin proposed calling "Olympians" the stars of the arts, of show business and of politics, and generally speaking all persons who have attained celebrity in a society, whether this be in the realm of cinema, of literature, of theater, of song, of money or of politics.⁴⁰ The social situation of the Olympians seems to incite them to superstition to the extent that a success, especially a smashing one, is frequently accompanied by belief in a "lucky star" or in crucial "lucky moments" in a career. But there is also the anguished feeling that a rapid fall is always possible. An American psychiatrist, Dr. Steven Berglas,⁴¹ used the term "success syndrome" to describe the ensemble of psychopathological behaviour consecutive to the stress of social success. Celebrity has as corollary the anguish of staying at the top, which leads to anxious and depressive behavior and the search for security. The superstitious attitude of the Olympians, with their incessant quest for signs that might indicate the continuation of their success, testifies both to their obsessional anxiety ("Just so it lasts!", in an

³⁸ Jules Gritti, *Sport à la une*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1975.

³⁹ G. I. Neil, "Demystifying Sport Superstition", *International Review of Sport Sociology* (Warsaw), 17/1, 1982.

⁴⁰ Violette Morin, "Les Olympiens", *Communications*, 2, 1962.

⁴¹ Steven Berglas, *The Success Syndrome. Hitting Bottom When You Reach the Top*. New York, Plenum Publishing Corporation, 1986.

expression attributed to Napoleon's mother) and to their need to be reassured.

We know, in fact, that Napoleon was very superstitious and that when choosing his generals, he first asked himself the question, "Is he lucky?" Statesmen of all times and in every culture, even in our own days, are frequently clients of seers and diviners.

According to Andrée Ruffat,⁴² performers are "superstitious by nature." For example Chopin was afraid of the number 7, Bizet of the number 3; Mérimée believed that 13 brought good luck while Hugo, Massenet and d'Annunzio thought it unlucky. Schubert feared the color green, and Zola was extremely superstitious.

The numerous superstitions among theater actors are no doubt intended to diminish the stagefright that can seize them—even, and especially, the most famous among them—before an opening night or before the curtain rises. Some cross themselves before going on stage; others avoid wearing green during the show. One must not turn on three lights in a dressing room. As with sailors it is bad luck to talk about the rigging. A big nail is driven into the stage to ward off bad luck.

Sex, age, level of instruction and religious practice of superstitious persons

If belonging to certain professional categories can lead to superstition, there are also more general social factors that seem to encourage superstitious behavior.

Most studies reveal a *greater propensity for women* to be superstitious. In a survey conducted in Nancy by Antoine Delestre,⁴³ the percentages of those believing in and practicing superstition are systematically higher among women, principally among women at home. A SOFRES survey on "The Superstitions of the French" (*Elle*, 7-13 June 1980) indicated that although overall 16% of the persons questioned thought that walking under a ladder brings bad luck, the percentage rose to 20% among

⁴² Andrée Ruffat, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

⁴³ Antoine Delestre, *Clément XV: prêtre lorrain et pape à Clémery*, Nancy, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, Metz, Ed. Serpenoise, 1985 (ch. "Religions et superstitions à Nancy").

The Idea of Chance

women. As for distribution by age, this would seem to indicate that the highest percentages fall at the two extremes. *The oldest and the youngest* are the most superstitious.

The socio-economic profile of superstitious persons is thus rather similar to that of readers of the popular press:⁴⁴ an inactive economic situation—the case of women at home, young people, retired persons—encourages an imagination in which belief in good and bad luck occupies an important place, no doubt because such persons depend on society in general and do not assume their own destiny by having a profession.

Although generally speaking superstitious practices are inversely proportional to the level of education,⁴⁵ things are not as simple as that since studies have demonstrated⁴⁶ that the fact of having pursued higher education in no way diminishes superstitious beliefs. Almost one American student out of two thinks that walking under a ladder brings bad luck! In reality the original cultural environment and the socio-economic situation of individuals seem to be the determining factors.

Antoine Delestre has shown in his survey in Nancy that superstition was correlated to the importance attached to religion. The more people accord an importance to religion, the more they are superstitious. Belief in chance thus seems *linked to religious feelings*, with the same idea of a transcendent causality, the same importance attached to signs.

III. THE ROLES OF BELIEFS AND PRACTICES LINKED TO THE IDEA OF CHANCE

Superstitious acts thus seem to have the function of being psychosociological *defence mechanisms* against the threat or the realization of unlucky events, whether these be brought on by nature or by society. Although superstition can be fostered by belonging to one or another social or professional environment, it

⁴⁴ Georges Auclair, *Le "Mana" quotidien. Structures et fonctions de la chronique des faits divers*, Paris, Anthropos, 1970 (2nd ed., 1982).

⁴⁵ Antoine Delestre, *op. cit.*, p. 190-191.

⁴⁶ Françoise Askevis-Leherpeux, *art. cit.*, p. 169.

is experienced as a personal attitude, as a response to a stressful situation. The individual draws reassurance both from acts inspired from cultural models of superstition (not going under a ladder, owning a rabbit foot, etc.) as well as from strictly individual practices (a personal object, such as a piece of colored glass or a toy stuffed animal, is considered to be a good luck charm), or from personal variants of collective models (the number 13 might be considered lucky by some, unlucky by others). What counts is not so much the symbolic form of the superstitious act—a symbolism whose origin and meaning are often unknown to the subject himself, for example the color green or the number 13—as the role it plays.

Superstitious behavior belongs to several types in the classification of defence mechanisms proposed by Alex Mucchielli.⁴⁷ Five such types can be distinguished: avoidance, attack, refraction, seduction and justification.

Avoidance behavior, in which the subject avoids danger, and, when flight is no longer possible, attack behavior, in which the subject seeks to distance himself from the danger, both belong to the same category of “defence by imposing a distance.”

Avoidance behavior corresponds to all taboos and to all prohibitions of superstition. One or another thing must not be done because it brings bad luck. For example, one must not walk under a ladder, eat rabbit on board a ship, seat thirteen people at a table. In the United States most hotels do not have a room 13 and sometimes not even a floor numbered 13!

Attack behavior is adopted when the intersigns of bad luck manifest themselves. The essentially protective role of superstition causes belief in signs of bad luck to be less frequent than belief in signs of good luck. Only 13% of people surveyed believed in signs of bad luck.⁴⁸ Among those most frequently cited are spiders, crows, the number 4, the colors green or black, a broken mirror, upside down bread, a black cat, a house, a car, a street, a person. These unlucky signs or encounters are then cancelled by counter-signs: making the sign of the cross, crossing one's fingers, touching a piece of wood or metal, touching a good luck charm, etc.

⁴⁷ Alex Mucchielli, *Les Mécanismes de défense*, Paris, P.U.F., 1981 (coll. “Que sais-je?”, No. 1899).

⁴⁸ Antoine Delestre, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

The Idea of Chance

A certain number of superstitious acts fall into the category of “defence through immobilization” and correspond to *retraction* behavior, an act of protection or of seeking shelter. This attitude can be observed in the use of good luck charms, talismans and all protective objects and rituals. The good luck charm is more an object of protection—a shield against bad luck—than an object that attracts good luck. Just as darkness is necessarily anterior to light (as the earliest myths demonstrate), bad luck is similarly the background for which good luck is but the localized negation. According to the survey by Antoine Delestre, 27% of persons asked have a lucky number (generally 13, 7 or 9), 25% wear a medal for protective purposes (religious medals, north stone, southern cross, sign of the zodiac, Fatma hand) and 14% own a good luck charm. These range from such classic objects as a rabbit’s foot, four-leaf clover, horseshoe or a Saint Anthony or Saint Christopher medal to completely heterogeneous items like a stone, a ticket to a concert, a coin, a baby’s pacifier, a ball-point pen, a toy stuffed animal, an African fetish and even a child or a house!⁴⁹

Numerous superstitious practices are associated with difficult moments, whose outcome is uncertain, that individuals must face: sickness, an important decision that must be made, an examination. In this case superstitious behavior belongs to two modalities of the same general category of “defence through *rapprochement*” in which the individual seeks to come to terms with his destiny: seduction and justification.

Seduction, tinted with submission, is an act of offering through which good luck is in a sense “negotiated” in return for a sacrifice. Destiny will take the victim rather than the one offering the sacrifice. In superstition the thing sacrificed can be a candle, a donation of money or an object, a vow, a prayer. When persons find themselves in some difficult situation, 41% implore God, 14% a deceased relative or friend, 7% a saint; 46% light a candle in a place of prayer.⁵⁰

Once the random event has passed, the good or bad luck encountered can be cited as *justification*, playing the role of an explanatory myth that makes up for the absence of a rational

⁴⁹ See also the recent work by Marie-Odile Andrade, *Les Porte-bonheur*, Paris, Christine Bonneton, 1987.

⁵⁰ Antoine Delestre, *op. cit.*, p. 185-187.

explanation often impossible to produce. Thus good luck will be called responsible for getting over sickness, success in an examination or escaping injury in a serious accident. Inversely bad luck will be seen responsible for disease, failure or accidents. Chance can also be cited as the mythical justification for social success or failure. Robert Merton⁵¹ has shown that wealthy people speak of the luck they have had while the poor speak of the luck they did not have. In American society, where the myth of “equal chances” reigns, the myth of “unequal chance” rationalizes and justifies real inequalities. In France, Alain Girard observed in his study of social success⁵² that the social factors of success—native social environment, sex, native city, level of education, bonds of relationship or marriage—are minimized or even ignored by individuals who have succeeded, in favor of personal factors such as hard work, innate “gifts” (they were winners in the genetic lottery!) and “the chance” they knew how to take hold of, sometimes even Providence which placed them where they are. With this attitude those who have succeeded defend themselves against having the legitimacy of their social position questioned. Inversely those who have not succeeded dismiss their personal responsibility and find an excuse for their social failure by attributing it to bad luck.

Superstition thus appears as a defence mechanism that plays an anxiety-reducing, anti-stress and tranquillizing role, even one of encouraging success by assisting in overcoming difficulties thanks to the phenomenon of autosuggestion and “self-fulfilling prediction.” An event occurs or does not occur because one “believes” that it should occur or not occur. It is not astonishing that it has been established that drivers with a Saint Christopher medal in their cars had the least number of accidents. The two facts both result from the same prudent attitude!

It may be objected that, for the same reasons, superstition can be anxiety-producing (the superstitious person being ever on the lookout for unlucky signs) and that the same phenomenon of self-fulfilling prediction determines failures, accidents and mis-

⁵¹ Robert K. Merton, *Éléments de théorie et de méthode sociologique*, Paris, Plon, 1965.

⁵² Alain Girard, *La Réussite sociale*, Paris, P.U.F., 1967 (coll. “Que sais-je?”, No. 1277), p. 113-114.

The Idea of Chance

fortunes. But we have seen that this negative aspect of superstition is greatly minimized in beliefs and practices linked to chance. Belief is stronger in signs of good luck than in signs of bad luck, and actions are prescribed for warding off bad luck.

Conclusion. The place of chance in contemporary culture

The social representation of chance pervades modern culture, and the child as well as the adult are prepared for and then encouraged in their beliefs.

Chance and fictional writing

Fictional writing assigns chance a role that is no less important than the one it held in serial stories of the 19th century. It is a constant feature of popular literature to have lucky breaks abound alongside the whims of fortune and the interventions of a *deus ex machina*. In comic strips, the fact of appearing in episodes has even accentuated this phenomenon by responding to the commercial requirement of ensuring a weekly purchase. The hero, who was left in a dangerous situation in the last frame, with the notation “to be continued,” is “miraculously” saved in the first image of the episode appearing the following week. We may cite as an example the very frequent case of a character who falls over a cliff ... only to have his fall broken by a providential branch! In the world of Walt Disney (Mickey Mouse and others) there are not only a large number of good luck charms (among others the first dollar earned by Uncle Scrooge), but there is even a character who is the very prototype of the lucky person. In contrast Donald Duck is antithetically the eternally unlucky one. Cinema has also used the theme of bad luck, in a dramatic manner in the detective film *La Scoumoune* (by José Giovanni, France, 1972) as well as in a comic manner with *Les Malheurs d'Alfred* (by Pierre Richard, France, 1971) and *La Chèvre* (by Francis Veber, France, 1981).

Half-way between literature and board games, we find “fantastic role-playing” as well as “books in which you are the hero,” inspired

by the Anglo-Saxon trend for heroic fantasy (Tolkien in particular) in which the irrational occupies an important position.

“With your CHANCE points you will know if you are naturally lucky or unlucky. Chance and magic are realities of life in the imaginary universe you are about to discover.” (“La pierre de Shanbara,” an adventure in which you are the hero, *Piranha*, No. 7, 1986).

Games of chance, occultism and the daily news

Games involving chance quite naturally provoke superstitious beliefs and practices. This ranges from the lucky marble of the primary school child to the fetish numbers of lottery players or those around a casino roulette table. An advertising slogan for the lottery proclaims that “good luck doesn’t just happen to others!”. The French national lottery holds special “zodiac” drawings, and in 1986 there was even a “Halley’s Comet drawing,” thereby renewing contact with age-old beliefs in signs from the sky.

In data processing, the “random” function, used to generate random numbers, is part of all programs for games of chance, but also for economic or political simulation. This function is the electronic equivalent of chance. Since it is already possible to pick at random from one’s micro-computer the name of a winning horse or the result of a lottery, there is no doubt that certain users will soon deduce that their machine is lucky or unlucky!

Advertising extols the powers of talismans that bring luck—north stone, southern cross, a statuette of a Hindu goddess, a pyramid with positive waves—while mediums and parapsychologists promise to neutralize harmful influences and to bring good luck. In bookstores are being sold a republished edition of the *Livre de la chance* by the occultist Papus and works by his contemporary successors such as Roger de Lafforest, author of *Lois de la chance* (Paris, Laffont 1978), and Simone de Tervagne who has just published *Le Collier magique: bijoux et objets maléfiques ou bénéfiques* (Paris, Garancière 1986).

And finally, good luck and bad luck show up in the local news columns of newspapers. The trace of the occult appears in criminal

The Idea of Chance

stories or in unusual or catastrophic incidents, as well as in lucky or unlucky events in the lives of celebrities, covered by the sensational press. Fate is used to explain a series of misfortunes that happen to a person. A curse has been on a family for generations. A movie star escapes miraculously unhurt from an accident. One place brings good luck while some other place brings bad luck. As Georges Auclair has written:

“The fearsome, the whimsical and the unpredictable are like gods without faces or demons who prowl around us, hidden behind things that cannot be understood: Chance, Good and Bad Luck, Destiny, Fate, Miracle ... These words, and others as well, by which we designate the unfathomable in our lives, form a system together. The most ordinary and most everyday system possible, it articulates our representation of what has been called the *numinous*, on the fringes of the supernatural but on this side of the sacred, naturally well removed from the religious.⁵³

This is the description of the parareligious “system” that we have attempted to outline here.

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⁵³ Georges Auclair, *op. cit.*, p. 21.