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Respecting the Animal Spirit: Contemporary Paganism, Animals, and Re-enchantment

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Abstract

This article addresses the significant development of secularization theory as it emerged from the collaboration of José Casanova and Charles Taylor. In Casanova's approach, he attempts to maintain the conclusions of sociological and religious studies interpretations of contemporary social processes, based on the original secularization theory; at the same time, his deconstruction of the original theory and the further development of its elements offer an interpretative framework that is particularly suited for the examination of public religious dimensions of the East Central European societies following the political system change around 1990. First, I will review Casanova's main theses on secularization and public religion in order to facilitate the argument following it, in which I will examine the role religion plays in different East Central European democracies in relation to the state, party politics and civil society.

Keywords:
José Casanova; Charles Taylor; secularization; sociology of religion; democracy; public religion

1. Introduction

Contemporary paganism is a useful umbrella term to describe a *continuum* of movements and groups that look up to civilizations of the past and/or of "ethnographic interest" to construct their own religious identities[1] and worldviews. Furthermore, the civilizations taken as references are often seen as examples of good practices in terms of experiencing the world and forging lifestyle politics[2] and political practices in the public arena.

Talking about this social field, a widespread and multi-sited community of practices, means discussing how it was formed and how it absorbed and often re-enchanted socio-political dynamics typical of countercultures (even *ante litteram*),[3] as in the case explored in this paper,

[1] Campbell 2020.
[2] Giddens 1991.
[3] D'Agostino 2022a; 2022b.

of contemporary sensibilities surrounding the world of animals and their rights.[4]

From its very beginnings, contemporary paganism has drawn on references to the animal world developed in past civilizations and/or societies of "ethnographic interest", whose accounts were disseminated within European and North American contexts from the 19th century onward through the narratives of travelers, ethnographers, and folklorists. This process, fostered by an interest in "other" societies – both European and non-European – provided "alternative" imaginaries to dominant models, useful to re-imagine subjectivities and worldviews. European agropastoral societies, societies of the past, and civilizations of "ethnographic interest" appeared, in the eyes of many, as a set of valuable practices to be reclaimed in order to counteract the negative consequences of industrialization and "modernity".[5]

Within these dynamics, the role of animals changes and assumes other meanings:

1) animals and animal remains are often re-interpreted through worldviews divergent from the "hegemonic norms", derived and drawn from imaginaries of civilizations of the past and/or "ethnographic interest" (that are, because of this, relevant for people who reject those norms);
2) animals and their interpretations nourish reflections upon new contemporary ways to see and interpret them, as well as other living beings, in the guise of subjects and peers of humankind in a vaster world.

2. Contemporary paganism and countercultural inspirations

Before we dive into the topic, it's important to outline what "contemporary paganism" means in this context. Here the term is used as an umbrella category[6] that describes a range of practices and narratives related to the perception and interpretation of sacredness; often, through processes of reinvention, these draw on the traditions of civilizations of the past and/or of "ethnographic interest".[7] These forms of spiritualities promote sacralities associated with categories such as polytheism, animism, shamanism, and so on.

It was in the 19th century that contemporary paganism took on its most defined form, with the establishment of groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,[8] which represented the forerunners of many of the practices and worldviews

[4] This article examines one of the aspects that emerged during the author's ethnographic research on contemporary paganism in Italy, which began in August 2019 and is still ongoing. The research employed both a classical research methodology (interviews, field notes, and participation in events) and a netnographic approach, involving the collection of qualitative data from social media. Starting from a small and recently established pagan festival in Val Brembana (Lombardy, Italy), the author investigated the first-, second-, and third-degree relationships of the participants (40 people) in relation to contemporary paganism. In this context, the names of the individuals involved in the research will be anonymized using pseudonyms.

[5] Urban 2019.

[6] In this article, contemporary paganism is used as a category that includes multiple movements and identities, following Michael York's interpretation and analysis, for whom paganism should be seen as a segmented, polycentric, and integrated network, putting emphasis on the commonalities between the various pagan traditions (York 2009). York's interpretation of the pagan milieu is still prevailing in the academic sphere, and similar approaches to the subject are still promoted in the Pagan Studies field (Castagnetto Alessio – Palmisano – Pannofino 2026: 4–5).

[7] The concept describes the interest sparked by travelers' accounts and ethnographic and folkloric studies in European and North American societies of the time. These productions nourished contemporary paganism as an environment to interpret the world and the sacredness from an "alternative" perspective to dominant models (Urban 2019).

[8] Ibid., 30.

present in today's pagan milieu. In the formation of this social field, the objects and accounts brought to the "West" by archaeologists, anthropologists, and folklorists played a fundamental role. These were tools through which the public could connect with the "extra-European others" and, in return, with the "European others", the world of popular cultures, following a comparativism that also animated the ethno-anthropological debates of the time. The encounter with these "others" was a fruitful field of reflection for all those who did not identify with the hegemonic models existing in the "West", so much so that this relationship with "otherness" – constructed, imagined, and reinvented in continuous processes of meaning – will be a cornerstone for all those seeking examples and possibilities of being different – even giving them some social and political legitimacy – for their "non-conforming identities".[9]

The "countercultural" aspect, in fact, is a constant feature throughout the history of the movement. A famous manifestation and demonstration of this feature became visible in the 1970s, when the aesthetics and poetics of contemporary paganism – especially in its most Wiccan-like guise – met with ecofeminism and environmental activism, through actions such as those of activist Starhawk, who performed, along with other neo-pagans, ritual performances during the *Earth First!* movement protests.[10]

It should come as no surprise that contemporary paganism has so congenially interacted with political movements and sensibilities regarding the relationship between humans and nature: among the processes that influenced the "pagan effervescence" of the 19th century, we find industrial society and its social and cultural consequences. In the face of the negative outcomes of industrialization, a shared sensibility developed, expressed by Romanticism and its protagonists, in which past civilizations and agropastoral life assumed the role of examples of healthier lifestyle compared to the hardships, pollution, and "social pathologies" typical of the urban spaces of the time. At the roots of what we recognize today as contemporary paganism, we find all the experiences that nourished the idea of a "nature religion",[11] a concept that would have found fertile ground in Europe and North America as an answer to hegemonic paradigms within economy and politics.

Given its creative nature, it is often difficult to define the boundaries of what is and what is not part of contemporary paganism, and it is common for its participants to adopt a syncretic and inclusive approach toward other social fields that position themselves against hegemonic models.[12] Moreover, it is difficult for researchers to investigate this blurred field through statistical methodologies, but, as noticed by the sociologists Marco Castagnetto Alessio, Stefania Palmisano, and Nicola Pannofino, this is a common feature for most part of the statistical research on contemporary paganism worldwide:

> "It is difficult to provide an accurate estimate of the number of practitioners who identify with the different movements present in the country. This complexity can also be found in international research and is essentially caused by the heuristic use of categories that do not distinguish between different contemporary pagan movements and New Age movements or other minority religious movements.

[9] D'Agostino 2022b.
[10] Feraro 2019; Cusack 2009; Lanternari 2003.
[11] Clifton 2009.
[12] Castagnetto Alessio – Palmisano – Pannofino 2026: 10–12.

> According to data from the Pew Research Center (2025), the contemporary pagan presence in the United States is about 1% of the total population. These data would confirm the Italian counterpart, as calculated by the Centro Studi sulle Nuove Religioni (CESNUR) in Turin for the year 2024. However, these are downward estimates, based on different definitions and not necessarily relevant to our topic of study. The census of contemporary paganism conducted by the Pagan Federation in England and Wales appears more precise (0.7%) and suggests a research framework that will be necessary for future studies of Italian contemporary paganism. However, the deeper significance of neopagan presences in Italy and in the rest of the world does not lie in their quantitative dimension, albeit a growing one, but rather – as we have seen – in their nature as social laboratories, where innovative forms of social, economic, and political proactivity are often pioneered."[13]

3. Fragmentation and shared coordinates

Contemporary paganism is an extremely fragmented and diversified social field, albeit vast and composed by groups and individuals who often don't even self-identify as belonging to contemporary paganism, deeming this expression ambiguous. This concept is used here for its heuristic value, aligning with the use of this term in academic and popular contexts.[14] Indeed, it is perhaps more useful to refer to this social field as a continuum of movements, groups, and individuals who, despite their differences and contrasts, have four coordinates that represent all the participants:

1) Constant reference to civilizations of the past and/or of "ethnographic interest", perceived as bearers of good practices for the spiritual, philosophical, and socio-political worldviews for today's society.
2) Predominant ecocentric approach to the world, which usually leads to actual socio-political actions to profess a paradigm shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism.
3) Aversion to globalization and to capitalist systems.
4) Suspicion (and sometimes outright hostility) toward monotheistic religions, especially when perceived as assuming a dominant and oppressive role.

The coordinates described here, taken together, represent two aspects of the process of re-enchantment[15] that involves contemporary paganism. On the one hand, contemporary paganism, throughout its historical phases, has always tailored its vision of sacredness to the socio-cultural dynamics of the time, often embracing demands that, more or less accurately, could be defined as countercultural or, at the very least, anomalous when compared to dominant paradigms on a local and/or global scale. On the other hand, contemporary paganism proposes and constructs cognitive, symbolic, and practical processes that re-enchant political, cultural, and social dynamics through the sensibilities and worldviews coined and promoted by the milieu itself. One of the most paradigmatic examples of this attitude is James Lovelock, developer of the Gaia Theory, who, as a declared agnostic, always emphasized that Gaia, for him, was a metaphor and not a goddess. Over time, however, he refined his reflection on the popular spiritual

[13] Ivi 13.
[14] Lewis – Pizza 2009.
[15] Jenkins 2000.

interpretations of his theory and came to appreciate their positive consequences from a social, emotional, and educational point of view.[16]

Furthermore – since it has become an extremely popular social field, through a path started in the 1950s and accelerated by the advent of the Internet and, later, social media – worldviews and practices shared inside the milieu have also reached the general public. Contemporary paganism, indeed, has become an ensemble of imaginaries, ideas, and narratives meaningful even for those who, while not identifying as pagans in a religious or spiritual way, use parts of their worldviews to discuss and reflect about contemporary topics and issues such as globalization, climate emergency, and the consequences of the capitalist economic system.[17]

To understand such social dynamics, where influences are often intertwined and it is sometimes difficult to discern what influenced what in the first place, it is heuristically useful to think about the re-enchantment of the Earth[18] as a spectrum, whose poles are:

1) Secular forms of ecospirituality that involve a concept of sacredness mediated by biophilic perspectives and connected to the idea of a spiritual wellbeing[19] on a psychological and biological level, often including deep ecology's themes.
2) Forms of spirituality that revolve around the idea of a "natural religion"; among them, contemporary paganism is a well-known and prominent case study.

Starting from this suggestion, which brings together "ecospiritual sensibilities" on a spectrum, describing them not in opposition but as a large and complex phenomenon (often beyond stereotypical visions of sacredness and religion), it is possible to better understand how contemporary pagan imagery is circulating in different social fields that are part of the aforementioned spectrum.

Indeed, it is not uncommon for environmental activists to use narratives and symbols born in contemporary paganism to construct discourses and imaginaries, leveraging many of the aspects they share with this milieu, including ecocentrism, anti-globalist views, anti-speciesism, etc. In this regard, for example, Debitum Naturae,[20] an Italian collective of environmental activists who promote their concerns through art and dissemination of scientific and political data about the environmental struggle and the necessity of a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric worldview, frequently uses symbols and interpretations of the animal world derived from or shared by contemporary pagan fields, despite the fact that a big portion of the participants of the group are not part of the milieu and even dissent towards any form of religious aggregation.

4. Animals against the myth of infinite progress

In the contemporary pagan milieu, animals are constantly present. The title of this article itself refers to the connection between the milieu and animal realm: it is a quote from the long conversations I had with two members of the contemporary pagan world in Italy, Jane and Michael, who – describing themselves as close to animistic visions of reality – engage in art and

[16] Taylor 2010: 76.
[17] D'Agostino 2022b.
[18] With this concept, we refer to all the phenomena of re-enchantment that involve the theme of the relationship between humans and nature, in an ecologist and/or ecocentric perspective.
[19] Heintzman – Mannell 2003; D'Agostino – Letardi 2023.
[20] For more information about the collective see their official website: www.debitumnaturae.it.

craftsmanship that involve the use of animal remains (bones, teeth, horns, etc.) found in nature. From their point of view, it is essential for the spirits of deceased animals to "give their consent" to the use of their remains, an aspect that both Jane and Michael investigate through ritual practices (especially when it comes to skulls).

On the one hand, Jane and Michael highlight the importance and necessity of addressing animal remains, which are handled with respectful intentions and awareness of their spiritual component, for a shared and broad vision of the nature of the world and the universe, which are perceived as fully permeated by entities and spirits. On the other hand, however, they seem to interpret the animal world as very similar and close, if not identical, to the human one; in other words, animals are ascribed will, knowledge, and rights that are, in fact, usually attributed to humans in a big part of current "Western" society.

In Jane and Michael's speeches and narratives, the need to assimilate and bring the human world closer to the animal one emerges very often, as if the separation between the two worlds – often blamed on the concept of technological progress, so prevalent in contemporary times – is a fracture that is necessary to recombine, re-valuing figures such as the shapeshifter or the hybrid, related to shamanistic phenomena and to what these phenomena have become in social and religious fields not connected to their historical origins in Siberian civilizations.

Jane and Michael also dress in clothes with animal features or that recall ferality during the sacred fire ritual of Orobica Lughnasadh, the pagan festival they organize in Camerata Cornello, a mountain locality near Bergamo in the region of Lombardy in Italy. The festival's logo is based on a rock carving from Massi della Camisana (mountain rocks famous for ancient inscriptions dating as far back as the 5th century BCE), interpreted by some as the depiction of a ritual practitioner surrounded by canids. For both Jane and Michael, indeed, it is important to aesthetically conjure up what the ancient officiants might have been – following suggestions derived by historical sources – shamanistic phenomena and ideas of hybrid features that mix humanity and ferality.

A novel in a storybook written and published by Michael clearly shows worldviews nourished and constructed by a big part of the contemporary pagan milieu around these topics: the story tells the love between Ceol, a woman with a beautiful voice able to sing "animal songs", and Vuk ("wolf" in Croatian), the Wolf King, who – disguised as a wayfarer – must travel to bring an important message to the world. From their love a child is born, Farkas, who inherits the nature of both, but never meets his father because of the important mission. Vuk travels to the most remote territories telling the truth about what is coming:

> "It's coming… Cars and exhausts, gray concrete, cold steel, factories yelling hellish screams and wails. Progress is coming! I saw it. I pushed myself among the men, changing my appearance so as not to be discovered. I cried with a broken heart in my chest, but I didn't give up; I couldn't give up, because I am Vuk, the Wolf King, the son of the Moon, the last hope of the world."[21]

The story, then, elaborates on the Progress arriving in the urban spaces, where the Strangers, Progress's followers, convince the inhabitants to join them, and Ceol – overwhelmed by the

[21] [Original Italian version] "Sta arrivando… Macchine e scarichi, grigio cemento, freddo acciaio, fabbriche urlanti grida e lamenti infernali. Il Progresso sta arrivando! Io l'ho visto. Mi sono spinto fra gli uomini, mutando il mio aspetto per non farmi scoprire. Ho pianto col cuore distrutto in petto, ma non mi sono arreso; io non potevo arrendermi, perché sono Vuk, il Re Lupo, il figlio della Luna, l'ultima speranza del mondo."

events – stops singing.

> "The Strangers built houses of steel and concrete, then other Strangers razed and rebuilt [the city]. The Strangers were organized, industrious as gears. They acted systematically, issuing laws in their favor, forcing their Progress onto everyone. The green of the woods became the black of the streets. The stone and wooden houses were replaced by sterile buildings, veritable urban monsters. The voice of the river was drowned out by industrial noises, the water became undrinkable, and the animals died, carried away by the waves, seething toxic foam. 'It's the price you pay for Progress!' The inhabitants repeated, similar now in appearance and manners to the Strangers. Even the wolves around the town fled away, like shadows in the night. Nobody was someone anymore, just something. Ceol sang her last song – something poignant and nostalgic – before giving up and closing herself, voiceless, in silence."[22]

Eventually, Vuk sacrifices himself to save the life of Farkas, attacked by the Strangers, and the child is welcomed by his wolf brothers, with whom – after many years – he returns to the city, making the Strangers flee and bringing back light and beauty; and Ceol starts singing again.

This novel, full of well-known tropes, is a significant example in two regards:

1) Fantastic and speculative narratives within contemporary paganism play an essential role in transmitting and consolidating over time visions and worldviews, such as the relationship between humanity, ferality, and nature;
2) Literary and artistic narratives are among the most used tools to re-semantize and re-enchant social and political discourses.

5. Animals as symbols

Practices, aesthetics and narratives like those of Jane and Michael are common among contemporary pagans. Although, as previously mentioned, the field is extremely fragmented, complex, and highly affected by variations regarding practices and interpretations – often harboring an eclectic and inclusive disposition to blend multiple currents and traditions – animals, shapeshifters, and ecocentric worldviews are a constant reference. And art and craftsmanship promoted and created inside the contemporary pagan milieu are one of the most evident ways in which these practices, aesthetics, and narratives emerge.

For example, animal remains are used to create jewelry or objects, even not necessarily for ritual purposes; this shows that creators and potential buyers are driven by similar behavior and worldviews around the natural world.

While practices and behavior vary from participant to participant, animals are always meant to be respected, with participants recognizing their subjectivities, emotions, and consciousness.

[22] [Original Italian version] "Gli Sconosciuti costruirono case di acciaio e cemento, poi altri Sconosciuti rasero al suolo e ricostruirono [la città]. Gli Sconosciuti erano organizzati, operosi come ingranaggi. Agivano in maniera sistematica, impartendo leggi a loro favore, obbligando chiunque al loro Progresso. Il verde dei boschi divenne il nero delle strade. Le casette di pietra e legno furono sostituite da sterili palazzi, dei veri mostri urbani. La voce del fiume fu soffocata dai rumori industriali, l'acqua divenne imbevibile e gli animali morivano, trasportati via dai flutti, ribollenti schiume tossiche. 'È il prezzo da pagare per il Progresso!'. Ripetevano gli abitanti, ormai simili nell'aspetto e nei modi agli Sconosciuti. Persino i lupi attorno al paese fuggirono via, come ombre nella notte. Nessuno era più qualcuno, ma solo qualcosa. Ceol cantò il suo ultimo canto – qualcosa di struggente e nostalgico – prima di rassegnarsi e chiudersi, muta, nel silenzio."

In an interview, Isabella – one of the leading artists in Italy in the field of macabre art on animal remains, whose spiritual identity is influenced by the idea of a paleolithic shamanism[23] – reported that she treats bone remains with fumigations of white sage. She also refuses to create artworks that could violate the dignity of the animal, and frequently draws inspiration from subjects such as prehistoric cave paintings. Furthermore, Jon, another artist who works with animal bone art and who, like Isabella, identifies with the idea of paleolithic shamanism, spoke of the importance of knowing exactly where a bone comes from and what its story is. In this regard, he told an anecdote:

> "Once a friend of mine said to me: 'Look, I hunt and you know it, I have this hawk skull to give you', and I said 'Okay, give it to me.' And in that moment, when I cleaned it and then held the skull of that bird in my hand, I immediately wrote to him: 'Don't give me skulls like this anymore.' Because I felt in that skull a lot, a lot, a lot of anger, and I added to my friend: 'I'm not asking you how this animal could have died. So please don't tell me anymore that you have skulls like this, because I'm not interested in it.' And moreover, to this hunter friend, I told him, 'If by chance you find remains of carcasses around, that's fine, that's fine with me.' And indeed, one day, he told me that while wandering through the woods he had found a nutria skull, which was already perfectly clean. And indeed, I told him: 'I'm fine with this, and therefore I'm fine with having it, but animals should never, never, be killed just because you know that you have a friend who can work on this, this, and this.'"[24]

Jon – who works with the archaeological park of Naquane, in Val Camonica (Lombardy, Italy) – is fascinated and inspired by paleolithic artworks on rocks and ancient animal bones; his art and spiritual imaginary are profoundly influenced by them, too. For Jon, a bone is a bridge between life and death; it encapsulates both worlds, inspiring a sense of sacredness; bones are more than a mere tool for artistic practices.

The examples reported here, which describe a clear ethical behavior linked to ecocentric approaches to reality toward animals and their remains, show a re-enchanting process that involves modern sensibilities around animals and environments as bearers of rights and will. This worldview also inspires spiritual interpretations of incidents and mishaps that involve artists and crafters that show a potential unrespectful attitude around animal remains.[25]

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[23] Here, by "paleolithic shamanism", we mean a form of contemporary spirituality that follows the interpretation that some academics advanced about prehistoric sacred practices. Such interpretations, based on comparisons, sometimes even very bold (as the ones in André Leroi-Gourhan's book published in 2001, *Les religions de la Préhistoire*), between prehistory and the societies of "ethnographical interest", gave birth to various spiritual beliefs that are currently included under the umbrella term "contemporary paganism".

[24] [Original version in Italian] "Una volta un mio amico [cacciatore] mi fa: 'Guarda, io lo faccio e tu lo sai, ho questo teschietto di falco da darti,' e io gli faccio 'Vabbè, dammelo.' E in quel momento, quando l'ho ripulito e quando poi l'ho tenuto in mano il teschietto di quel volatile, gli ho scritto subito: 'Non darmi più teschi come questo.' Perché sentivo in quel teschio tanta, tanta, tantissima rabbia, e ho aggiunto al mio amico: 'Non ti chiedo come questo animale possa essere morto. Quindi per favore non dirmi più che hai teschi di questo tipo, perché la cosa non mi interessa.' E in più, a questo amico cacciatore, gli ho detto 'Se per caso tu trovi in giro resti di carcasse, va bene, questo mi sta bene.' E infatti, un giorno, mi ha detto di aver trovato girando per i boschi un teschio di nutria, che era già perfettamente pulito. E infatti, gli ho detto: 'Questo mi sta bene, e quindi mi sta bene averlo, però che non vengano mai e poi mai uccisi animali solo perché sai che hai un amico che può lavorare questo, questo e questo'."

[25] D'Agostino – Sperduti 2022.

Even though every aspect of flora and fauna is re-enchanted and interpreted through the processes described, it is animals that historically bring with them a complex and layered symbolism from a transcultural perspective – such as with deer, bears, and wolves – that most often influence the iconography and narratives connected to the re-enchantment of the Earth, shaping contemporary pagan taste and aesthetics. This has also become the subject of self-deprecating irony on how some characteristic narratives could negatively affect the perception of contemporary paganism by general society today, thanks also to the influence of social media and of the entertainment industry.[26] In this regard, a pagan who intended to criticize the commodification that has involved contemporary paganism for decades,[27] leading a large number of people to define themselves as pagans without much knowledge or depth, stated: "What a coincidence – they are all called Björn and have the bear or the wolf as their spiritual animal."

This ironic and critical remark shows how the extremely positive views of ferality and the animal world – seen as a wild essence that humanity should reclaim – have entered so deeply into popular culture that they have strongly shaped the stereotypes surrounding contemporary paganism and its affiliates.

6. Animal advocacy[28] and re-enchantment

In the previous pages, as well in the extant scholarly literature, contemporary paganism has been discussed as a case study in order to explore two aspects of the phenomenon of re-enchantment. On the one hand, contemporary paganism has been enriched with narratives centered on reflections and analysis (countercultural, too) around the relationship between humankind and environment, in addition to interpretations of civilizations of the past and/or of "ethnographic interest" as examples of good practices about this relationship. On the other hand, however, the contemporary pagan milieu re-semantizes, in spiritual fashion, many aspects of contemporary society, such as environmental crisis, anti-capitalist movements, etc.[29]

It is not surprising, then, that modern sensibilities linked to animal advocacy have entered contemporary paganism's re-enchantment process.

Furthermore, animal advocacy is born by social and cultural inputs that contributed to the emergence of contemporary paganism. Indeed, according to the sociocultural anthropologist Sabrina Tonutti, "the strong sense of protection toward animals that marked the rise of the broader animal advocacy movement grew during the same historical period in which humanitarianism, evangelicalism, and Romantic poetry began to reshape the manners and customs of the time,"[30] and in reference to "the development of this 19th-century 'way of feeling' and the corresponding social movement occurred, it should be recalled, within a context of widespread industrialization."[31] These social and political tendencies led to reflections on the negative outcomes of industrialization itself, the establishment of a strong bond with pets, the

[26] Aloi 2009.
[27] Ezzy 2001.
[28] Here, by "animal advocacy", we refer to all processes and socio-political practices that focus on the sensibility towards animals, their suffering and their rights; we are aware, however, that within the animal advocacy phenomenon we can find different visions and points of views, paradoxically including the very rejection of the term "animal advocacy".
[29] D'Agostino 2022a.
[30] Tonutti 2007: 39.
[31] Ibid., 86.

emergence of the concept of "compassion," the widespread fear and suspicion towards technology applied to medicine and science, the spread of vegetarianism as a response to the problems of malnutrition and as a reformist solution to the miserable conditions of the working classes, and the influence of humanism in its numerous forms (anti-slavery, women's rights, etc.[32]).

In sum, contemporary paganism and animal advocacy share some historical, social, and political grounds; and they were also rooted in Romantic visions that saw the past and the encounter with the "otherness"[33] as the starting point for new interpretations of the relationship between humans and nature.

Stemming from similar socio-political needs, the worldviews of animal advocacy have assumed an important role within the contemporary pagan milieu, which have re-invented and re-enchanted anti-speciesism, the choice of predominantly plant-based diet, animal rights, etc.

Moreover, widespread imaginaries of the relationship between "non-Western others" and "Western others" with nature and animal world – re-invented and shaped in the "West", assuming the role of stereotypes such as the myth of "noble savage" or the idea of "primitive humans in full contact with nature" – have influenced the construction of identities and narratives inside the contemporary pagan universe. For practitioners of contemporary paganism, in fact, European folklore and histories that involve agro-pastoral worldviews and practices, as well as what is testified by the approaches to the world elaborated in extra-European contexts, represent an ensemble of poetics and aesthetics for creating and inventing new identities, politics, and societies.

All these influences merged with countercultural movements in the 1970s, when animal advocacy, deep ecology, and ecofeminism served as additional springboards for the re-enchantment processes cited above.[34] This legacy is still alive, reshaping itself in to new ways to socially answer the present and future ramifications of contemporary hegemonic politics and economics.

7. Conclusions

This article analyzed how the animal world is re-enchanted and narrated by contemporary pagans, influencing the imaginaries related to the re-enchantment of the Earth as a larger phenomenon that involves contemporary paganism itself. The contemporary pagan milieu re-signifies, from a spiritual perspective, socio-political dynamics linked to the relationship between humankind and environment, and the emergence of ecospirituality, the birth of deep ecology, and animal rights movements. This social field is also a product of countercultural boosts that often share narratives, aesthetics, and practices with the aforementioned socio-cultural dynamics. These boosts are a reaction to historical processes, sometimes accompanied by negative consequences such as industrialization, the capitalist system, and globalization. Such a reaction has been frequently nourished by reflections and thoughts around "otherness", encountered in the past or in civilizations of "ethnographic interest", re-invented as an ensemble of possible answers and

[32] Ibid., 86–87.

[33] "Otherness" refers here to the ensemble of practices, worldviews, and symbols belonging to non-hegemonic models in the European and North American societies, such as rural civilizations, as well as civilizations of general "ethnographic interest".

[34] Lanternari 2003.

solutions to the problems of the present.

Following these assumptions, the words of the ethologist and philosopher Roberto Marchesini and the sociocultural anthropologist Sabrina Tonutti regarding what animals represent for contemporary "Western" societies provide an interesting point of view, open to new and further suggestions:

> "We are accustomed to thinking of modern Western culture as the triumph of rationality and the defeat of those legacies that once fueled magical thinking. In reality, contemporary imagination is far from having freed the animal from its magical meanings and, in particular, from its sacred use. Even today, at the heart of hyper-technological Western metropolises, amidst the frantic pace of the age of information and globalization, humans still perform magical rites, sacrifices, and acts of divination through animals, using them whenever they must face the challenge of the unknown. […] [H]umans continue to need the animal as a reference point in their quest for knowledge – or rather, to build solid foundations for their attempts to cross the boundaries of the known."[35]

Contemporary paganism has been inspired since the 19th century by accounts and collecting practices related to civilizations of the past and of "ethnographic interest" that represent other ways to interpret and to experience the world, and by intellectual and artistic movements that professed the need to "return to nature," often in open opposition to dominant religious paradigms. Within these dynamics, animals – the closest to humans among all living beings – have always played a central role, representing the feral counterpart of humankind when discussing encounters and clashes involving the anthropic space and the cultural space.

Within the contemporary pagan milieu, the animal world is invested with symbolic, cultural, and spiritual meanings, and it appears as a recurrent element in narratives about the meeting of humanity and natural wildness. Aesthetics, poetics, and artistic practices within contemporary paganism, in fact, are enriched with references to shapeshifters and human-animal hybrids, involving features taken from historical polytheisms and shamanistic scenarios (even those reinvented by popular culture) with the aim to contrast the negative outcomes of "modernity".

[35] Marchesini – Tonutti 2019: 57.

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