



## Modernity's Spell

Clare Coffey

Every so often, I consider getting into healing crystals. I like the way they look in the light. I like their names, often full of sibilants and dentalized consonants: amethyst, citrine, celestite, selenite. I like the picture of myself as the kind of person who might keep them in her house—a house with a lush shrub garden in the back, punctuated by strange and beautiful statuary, where I would talk in a soft voice to unexpected visitors. There would be a copper kettle on a gas stove, and a rosewood tea box. I would wear linen and wool.

In short, crystals allow me to indulge in aspirations *à la* Goop (Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle brand) without the hassle. There's none of the cherry-picked data that keep much of the wellness world turning in its orbit, no worrying about what my Jungian archetype means for my nutritional plan. The premise is simple: The world is full of beautiful glowing stones, and they are magical. Take it or leave it. You don't even need to be into wellness; maybe you just want to be a beneficent sorceress and don't mind paying for the opportunity.

Also, I remind myself, the placebo effect is real and powerful. If I got into crystals, maybe I could believe in them enough to cure a headache. Really, wouldn't getting into crystals make me the most rational one of all? The meta-rational?

Like my aspirationally beloved crystals, this attitude presents different faces depending on how the light hits it. Is the desire to believe in magical glowing stones more or less stupid when you are consciously exploiting your own naïveté? Is the desire to believe meaningfully different from belief? Which self is more real, the one in search of a bewitched amulet or the one keeping the other under strict if indulgent monitor? Should I just go out and buy a damned kettle?

All this is to say that the problems Emily Ogden, assistant professor of English at the University of

Virginia, deals with in her new book are by no means confined to the antebellum period, on which she focuses—a time when

*Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism*  
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Benjamin Franklin famously served as an investigator into mesmerism in Paris. *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* is less a fully detailed

narrative of mesmerism's ups and downs than a laser-focused inquiry into the constitutive role "irrational" belief plays in maintaining rational supremacy.

Mesmerism is the brainchild of Franz Mesmer, a German doctor born in 1734 who practiced medicine in Vienna and Paris, and who believed in the influence of magnetic fluids and astronomical movements on human physiology. (If that sounds particularly quaint, consider that today Dave Asprey has built an empire offering advice such as that walking barefoot is a necessary and healing method of getting in touch with the earth's electrical energy.)

The doctor regularly treated his patients with magnets, and one day, while employing his technique on a female patient, he discerned a fluid in her body that responded to his manipulations. Mesmer called the fluid "animal magnetism," a term that in general use now means raw charisma. As he used it, "animal" just meant "vital"; it was the force that sustains and animates us. When it became blocked or flowed in the wrong direction, physical and mental ailments resulted. In this, mesmerism resembled Reiki, developed in Japan by Mikao Usui about a hundred years later. But unlike Usui, who claimed to regulate intangible, spiritual energies, Mesmer claimed to have made a bona fide breakthrough in physiology. He presented himself as a scientist, not a healer.

Mesmerism is not best known by its originator's intent. If you say you have been "mesmerized" you do not usually mean that you have been successfully treated for a nervous complaint by having iron rods waved over your body. You mean that you have fallen under a spell, ceded your rational agency in some way, whether to a professional hypnotist, a virtuosic performance pianist, or a distractingly handsome boy in your 9 a.m. class. The curious transformation of mesmerism into its own mirror image lies at the heart of Ogden's question.

The story goes roughly like this. First, you have the good doctor claiming to have made a scientific discovery, by which he will use detailed procedures and specialized metal tools for the advancement of human wellbeing—all thoroughly scientific-sounding. The practice ostensibly produces effects such as hypnosis, convulsions, and trances for medical benefit. The doctor has his followers. Later you have a thorough debunking of the supposed new science, after which a second generation of mesmerists appears. Precisely because the debunking had attributed the marvelous effects of mesmerism to unruly imagination, the second crop of mesmerists proposes the practice as a way to harness and manage human belief in the supernatural and the outlandish.

Ogden is not perfectly clear about the degree to which second-



*A “baquet,” a tub with iron rods pointing outward, allows multiple patients to be treated at once. “The most sensible effects are produced on the appearance of Mesmer, who is said to carry the fluid by certain motions of his hands or eyes without touching the person,” wrote the Scottish physician John Grieve, who observed the procedure in Paris in 1784.*

generation mesmerists straightforwardly believed in animal magnetism, but there appears to have been some variety. For example, she writes about Mesmer's student Charles Deslon that he

prefigured the nimble about-face that practitioners would soon make en masse: he said that magnetism, rather than being a deplorable example of credulity, was actually the science of governing it. As [astronomer Jean-Sylvain] Bailly sardonically recorded, Deslon "declared in our session held at the house of Dr. Franklin... that he thought he might lay it down as a fact, that the imagination had the greatest share in the effects of animal magnetism; he said that this new agent might be no other than the imagination itself, whose power is as extensive as it is little known."

On the other hand, another influential mesmerist, J. P. F. Deleuze, believed that the fluid really existed, but had been misinterpreted throughout history because of "false physical theories or...superstition." In the cases of both Deslon and Deleuze, this reworked mesmerism was meant as a technique for manipulating credulity. Either the suggestibility of patients to performed technique produced the effects, or their pre-existing beliefs in magical thrall made them receptive to the hypnosis or clairvoyance that magnetic fluid could really induce.

Whatever beliefs the mesmerist professed, on the mesmeric stage his craft depended on performing the technique of mesmerism with seriousness and intent. With subjects selected for their predisposition to belief, mesmerist and subject constituted what Daniel O'Keefe, in *Stolen Lightning: The Social Theory of Magic* (1982), calls an "act-as-if group": a social interaction that temporarily redraws the accepted borders of reality by mutual agreement.

O'Keefe believes that the act-as-if groups are the basis for magic. Mutual agreement overvalues a temporary subjective state, giving it new meaning, creating a framework around it. The agreement then allows the subjective state to be sustained. So, by Ogden's account, you have an odd tension. By one light, the mesmerists who identified imagination as the active agent stand for greater enlightenment than those who believed in the non-existent magnetic fluid. And yet their attempts to control imagination in others hinged on encouraging and ritualizing false beliefs—exactly what some sociologists say magicians do.

The link between the two mesmerisms—and, by Ogden's account, the guarantor of mesmerism's longevity in America far into the 1800s—is a thorough debunking by Benjamin Franklin. Along with the famed chemist Antoine Lavoisier, Franklin headed a commission

deputized by Louis XVI to examine Mesmer's claims. They observed the theatrical shrieks, convulsions, and regurgitations that occurred in his own salons under the ministrations of purple-robed practitioners. The commission then told one patient, blindfolded, that they were about to mesmerize her, in actuality doing nothing. Another subject they tried to mesmerize from behind a partition without her knowledge, then again in front of her but with intentionally wrong technique. The results from these and similar experiments were as you might expect: The patients who thought they were being mesmerized displayed all the physical signs thereof, and the ones who did not, did not.

Mesmerism first gained renown in America via John Adams's account of a report the Franklin commission produced in 1784, which was translated into English the following year. Adams described how Franklin had shown that "this Magnetism can never be useful, for the best of all possible reasons, viz.—*because it does not exist.*" The Franklin report would "annihilate the enthusiasm" for mesmerism. (The "Watch X Destroy Y" form is apparently not a strict function of the clickbait economy.) Although the convulsive ecstasies of the Great Awakening could have paved its way, the practice never enjoyed an American moment in its original form, however influential it became in its second.

Ogden describes the process by which the debunking of mesmerism produced successor generations in terms of the "idol function" played by false beliefs. The destruction of an idol, the thinking goes, is not a closed and final process. When you destroy an idol, you must supply some account of the undeniable effect the idol had on the lives of its followers. Christians hewing down a tree sacred to the pagans, for example, might say that the boons received by worshippers of the tree were really the gifts of demons. In exploding the existence of animal magnetism—ostensibly a physical substance producing foreseeable effects—the debunkers imbued their subjects with much more powerful, protean, and elusive forces: credulity, credenciveness, imagination.

For the second generation of mesmerists, what was important about credulity was not simply that it, unlike animal magnetism, was real. Rather, credulity was both a resource to be exploited and a problem to be dealt with. On both counts, mesmerists styled themselves, quite literally, as an epistemic-managerial class.

Charles Poyen, who brought mesmerism to the United States in 1836, came from practicing it on the slaves of his family plantation in Guadeloupe, a French region of the Caribbean. His lecture tour's first real success arrived when he proposed that credulity could be used in controlling America's burgeoning

factory worker population. By way of example he presented Cynthia Gleason, a Pawtucket mill worker who by her own admission would rather sleep than work. The invention of the power loom had opened up new possibilities for regulating the time of weavers; a fourteen-hour day became the norm, with start, stop, and break times all determined absolutely by the factory bell. Poyen's contribution was to demonstrate that the factory bell could be internalized. In a mesmeric trance, he mentally communicated to Gleason that she must go to sleep at 8 p.m. and wake at 8 a.m. exactly. After sleeping the sleep of the dead, Gleason rose, "bright as a dollar," on the dot of 8 a.m.

Slaves, women, and the working class were all obvious targets for techniques of management. They were also considered the most natural and fitting subjects for mesmeric practice. This was partially due to prevalent gender and racial stereotypes; women, for example, had a constitutionally weaker faculty of reason, liable to be run roughshod over by their own naturally stronger organs of fancy. Ogden points out that a genre of didactic literature emerged contemporaneously with mesmerism, in which a young woman's unmonitored and uncontrolled imagination (a faculty closely aligned with credulity) leads to her sexual and social ruin. This account of woman's rational deficiencies has a literary pedigree: In *Paradise Lost*,

Eve, whose weaker and ungoverned intellect destines her for Eden's betrayer, first encounters Satan in a dream. Upon a troubled waking, Adam explains the operations of fancy to her.

But aside from assumed mental weaknesses, the various groups were fitted for the role of mesmeric subject by their actual social position: as subjects and dependents who could not play the role of autonomous modern agent, as people whose primary social role was the furtherance of others' comfort, prosperity, and autonomy.

Ogden adopts Talal Asad's definition of secular agency, from his *Formations of the Secular* (2003), as the idea of a person "having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain." The final goal of those who aim at secularity is total autonomy and self-realization, not simply freedom from taboo and magic. "This agent's fundamental question," Ogden writes, "is 'what should human beings do to realize their freedom, empower themselves, and choose pleasure?'"

But secular agency does not correspond well to a world in which we are often sick, ignorant, poor, or incapable in ways large and small; in which we can neither bring about our own births nor choose the hour of our deaths. It is more of an

asymptote than a lived condition, an always imperfectly grasped ideal to which some come closer than others. Because, on this reading, secular agency is always an aim rather than an established fact, narratives of one's own disenchantment are aspirations rather than triumphal hymns. Inevitable anxiety about whether you have been sufficiently disenchanted is especially urgent when the dividing line between the modern and the unenlightened is credulity. Since credulity, by nature, is not a trait easily self-diagnosed, its threat engenders a constant search for more credulous rubes against which to measure yourself. Secularism proves to be a pyramid scheme.

The peculiar nature of mesmerism made it ideal for this type of transaction. If credulity is, as Ogden puts it, "the compound of passion and imagination that leads one to attribute power where no power exists," mesmerists in their later form were consciously practicing a hygienic version of it. They solidified their status as rational agents in two ways: both by exorcising their own irrationalism through a meta-rationality that allowed them to act as if they held beliefs they knew to be false, and by identifying and controlling a more abject credulity in others. Such were the attractions of both fictional stories of seduction and exposés of mesmerism's purported frauds. Ogden writes that readers of these exposés

get a symbolic control over their own imaginations by virtue of knowing how the dupes' imaginations work and when they are active. Setting out to master the imagination, debunker-readers might well find themselves pursuing a more complex set of pleasures: mastering others' imaginations as a proxy for their own.

The flip side of this dynamic is that mesmerists become oddly dependent on their dependent subjects. As Ogden points out, the more central that superiority over the credulity of others is to your self-understanding, the more fervently you will need to elicit this credulity in others.

Sometimes this need was translated literally into the structure of mesmerism's variants. For example, in psychometry, a variant or offshoot of mesmerism that emerged in the 1840s, a person supposed to have clairvoyant powers would perform a reading on a subject by merely touching a letter the subject had signed. From this touch, the psychometer would temporarily lose her own personality in favor of the subject's:

A "very delicate" lady, while touching a letter written by Henry Clay, "became so possessed of its spirit" that "she replied haughtily to the questions...proposed, as though she considered them quite impertinent or insulting."

In mesmerism's pursuit of proving its mastery of character, the distinction

between subject and master finally became blurred, the possessor of ostensible psychic powers now totally dependent on the once vulnerable subject of the reading.

Ogden's animating insight—that irrational beliefs, at least in others, help one to build up a rational self—is probably true as individual psychology, unprovable as a universal law, and extremely plausible as a process of secularism in particular. Ogden's whole project can be summed up in a quote that occurs early on, after she mentions how scholars, in order to refute the idea of secularism, often hyperbolically assert that "enchantment *can* be modern":

On my view, the following (equally hyperbolic) exclamation might be closer to the truth: enchantment can *only* be modern! Instead of the titillating oxymoron we sometimes think it is, modern enchantment may actually be a redundancy. There is only modern enchantment, because declaring someone else's practice to be a primitive remnant implies an imagined renaissance in the present....[I]f we are talking about enchantment at all, we must be talking about a modernizing gesture.

Identifying primitive belief and calling it "enchantment"—the term for that state of the world before

modernity when one is in awe but in error, like Max Weber's propitiating savage—is a defining aspect of modern secular culture. Enchantment is a periodizing word, that is: The world used to be enchanted, and now it is not. In this way, enchantment and modernity are not opposing forces but belong together. For mesmerists,

enchantment stands revealed as a part of secular discourse, not an exception to it. Mesmerists were aiming at modernity—but this did not stop them from aiming other people away from it or from experimenting with, and hoping to control, the credulity of others.

Ogden's work suggests that the enchanted and disenchanted are two countries that lack a border, forever one dissolving into and reconstituting the other. And insofar as this binary reflects an opposition between mystical awe and technical power, this is nothing new. Spiritual forces can be both objects and tools of management: A canny huckster may hug himself to think of all the indulgences by which he has cheated God out of purgatory; workers can be kept in line by sermons on the Almighty's pleasure in working-class thrift and industry, or by a self-help guru preaching myopic focus on individual wellbeing (after all, look at how well it's worked for the guru). Everyone now, on some



level, acknowledges a world beyond what the average Joe can immediately perceive, whether it's quantum physics or celestial order or merely the limitless possibilities of human potential. There is no periodizing movement, forward or back, which

will settle for us the question of which account of the invisible is most true—nor, equally important, what it demands of us.

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