

The Magical Imagination: Magic and Modernity in Urban England 1780-1914

Review Number:

1335

Publish date:

Thursday, 18 October, 2012

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ISBN:

9781107002005

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£60.00

Pages:

308pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

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Magic is difficult to historicize. There are many reasons for this. To begin with, it has long been scorned by both rationalists and the religious, so that people are often reluctant to confess to believing in it. Indeed in the period of this study many of its forms were illegal, at least as soon as they were used to make money. At the very least, it tended to possess a negative value as cultural capital. As a consequence, those interested in ferreting it out were often baffled.

In the 1920s, for instance, the urban folklorist Edward Lovett observed while collecting magic amulets:

The collector in search of folk-beliefs and articles connected with them meets with far more difficulties than the collector of old china or other merely material objects. The objections to giving him information arise from a double set of motives, those of the ardent believer who will not expose sacred things to an outsider, and those of the unbeliever who refuses information about what he considers to be degrading superstitions or discreditable survivals.⁽¹⁾

Thinking like this, Lovett often suspected his subjects of dissimulation when they denied believing in magic. But were they in fact dissimulating? It seems precipitate simply to suppose so.

Magic is conceptually elusive for deeper and more philosophical reasons too. It is closely, indeed

constitutively, connected to 'belief'. When it comes to magic the first step is always 'do you believe in it?', with the officially approved answer long being 'no' of course. But it is not easy to ascertain whether someone – including oneself – *believes* in magic or not.

I buy an untested anti-aging cream for my skin. Magic? I like to wear a particular pair of shorts when I run a marathon. More magic? I avoid walking under ladders. Magic again? I wonder whether aliens might be communicating through crop circles. Magic too? Are genuine irrational beliefs involved in all these cases? Or might they be – just to float some possibilities – ways of cheering myself up, or of entertaining myself in a kind of fantasy, or of structuring my life around rituals, activities which do not necessarily suppose that anti-aging creams work, or one pair of shorts is as better than another when it comes to running competitively, or ladders actually cause bad luck, or even that crop circles aren't also a hoax.

Difficulties like this encroach upon Karl Bell's book. He has written a very useful account of popular magic's survival in urban England in the long century after the Enlightenment (although he concentrates in the period around 1900). But as contemporary academic historiography strongly encourages, he positions his argument as a revisionist one. He wants to correct what he calls, following Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, 'ironic' or 'antinomian' understandings of modern magic. The ironic or secular magic thesis emphasizes that in the post-Enlightenment world we have the capacity simultaneously to stand in and out of magic, to believe and not to believe it, which is also to say we can engage in it 'as if' it were true. This new paradigm, was developed in Terry Castle's *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* and James Cook's *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*; it was first conceptualized in the terms I have just outlined in my own *Modern Enchantments: the Cultural Power of Secular Magic*; it was further extended by Landy and Saler in their edited collection *Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* and more recently still in Michael Saler's powerful and innovative *As if: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (2). It has the advantage (amongst other things) of being able to deal with the huge increase in commercially produced fictional forms of magic from the 18th century on – whether in magic conjuring shows, or special-effects spectacles, ghost stories or the like, as well as with more ambiguous magic forms like the spiritualist séance. Bell sometimes seems to believe that the antinomian account of magic makes the division between 'real' and pretend magic harder. In fact it doesn't, it puts all kinds of magic into a zone of ambiguity where (largely because of the problem in locating belief) both can be true at once. In this it is, to use a current term, 'post-secular'.

At any rate Karl Bell stands against the secular/post-secular magic tide. He insists that, especially when one shifts attention away from the middle class, it is possible to uncover 'the previously underestimated extent of genuine belief in the fantastical in the nineteenth century' (p. 6). In particular he contends that the urban 'plebeian magical imagination' (as he calls it) used magic without irony – seriously, genuinely – in order to negotiate the various situations in which the working class now found itself. This was possible because urban modernity did not constitute a radical break with older plebeian life-ways, but was rather a continuing set of transformations of them. (This is a 'long revolution' argument that I for one find wholly persuasive.)

Thus to cite just one of Bell's concrete examples: beliefs in ghosts and the supernatural were used 'to animate and dramatize perceptions of social and moral divides in nineteenth-century English cities' (p. 224), as when ghost ballads expressed or predicted violence against class enemies. The picture then is of an urban working class using older folk magic beliefs and practices to deal with the increasingly industrialized, massified and commercialized urban life in which relations between classes were rapidly mutating.

I am fairly convinced by this larger case, though it is worth noting that the countervailing tendency among the working class towards increased engagement in non-magical, non-folkloric knowledges and cultures, their will to rationality as it were (as spelled out in Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working-Classes* for instance(3)), is not addressed. Could it be that different working-class fractions were driven in different directions in this regard? Or could it be (as the secular magic thesis would lead one to suppose) that members of the working class could be *simultaneously* more involved in rationality and education into rationality *and* more (or anyway not less) involved in magic?

So I am not sure that the evidence that Bell presents, or the functionalist argument that he makes, requires, or even harmonizes with, his revisionist argument against ironic or secular understandings of modern magic. Much of his evidence is secondary, as it must be in this difficult historiographical field. It is taken from newspaper reports about magic events and formations, from legal evidence in trials against fortune tellers and others, from ballads and stories. That is an archive at some remove from actual magical practices, and therefore is not especially useful in helping us to discover how 'genuine' plebeian magic beliefs actually were. As we have seen, even those in direct contact with magic practitioners like Edward Lovett found that hard to figure out. (For some reason, Lovett is not one of Bell's sources.) But in the end I cannot see that it really matters. We tend to overestimate the genuineness or seriousness even of pre-modern magic 'beliefs'. Certainly the degree to which, in the 19th century, plebeian Londoners who visited fortune tellers, or bought lucky charms, or avoided haunted houses actually 'believed' in supernatural powers is all but immaterial in examining the uses to which their involvement in this culture was put. It's not just that one cannot know, it is also that that structural ignorance is of little account.

It is also the case that Bell's revisionist argument takes us back some way to those older understandings of magic according to which it was the poor and uneducated or the 'primitive' who were mired in magic beliefs and superstition and the bourgeoisie and the educated and the Westerners who were freed from them. The secular magic argument undoes that hard division, which is one reason why it was developed in the first place.

There is another important question that Bell's study raises, and indeed goes some way to answering, even if Bell himself does not place it at his argument's centre. That question is, why did the 'plebeian magical imagination' gradually dissolve? The answer Bell suggests is that its commercialization and 'democratization' weakened it. During the period, it was drawn into the apparatuses of consumption and entertainment. That too strikes me as a persuasive argument, once more not at odds with the secular magic thesis. But nonetheless it ignores magic's persistence.

After all, it is not as if we are today less magical than they were in the 19th century. We still use lucky charms. We consult fortune tellers (or Tarot card readers or horoscopes). We purchase an extraordinary range of magical remedies, from penis extenders to baldness cures and anti-aging skin creams, as well as many 'health food' products. A whole 'metaphysical' culture has been built around semi-precious stones, crystals, and astrology. Yet something has changed. Magic belongs to the various worlds of therapy, self-development, entertainment, spirituality, shopping-lifestyles. But these practices and formations have been removed from the term 'magic' itself, and, by the same stroke, from the incubus of 'superstition'. Non-magic magic's cultural-capital value would appear now to be, not a negative number, but rather close to zero.

Given this, it would have been interesting had Bell thought less about plebeian magic as a survival, and more about it in relation to the origins of modern non-magic magic. Those origins are to be found, I'd reckon, in the 19th-century worlds of esotericism and spiritualism. Those worlds might then have been too bourgeois for Bell's project. But even if we concede that, had he more fully attended to them, he might have offered us a richer analysis of differences and connections between plebeian and bourgeois magics in the period. This, of course, is not to underestimate the real new contribution to our knowledge of urban plebeian cultures and lifeways that *The Magical Imagination* provides.

Notes

1. E. Lovett, 'Amulets from costers' barrows in London, Rome, and Naples', *Folklore*, 20, 1 (March 30 1909), 70–1. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford, 1995); James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: the Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); *Re-Enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age*, ed. Joshua

Landy and Michael Saler (Berkeley, CA, 2009); Michael Saler, *As if: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working-Class* (New Haven, CT, 2000).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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