

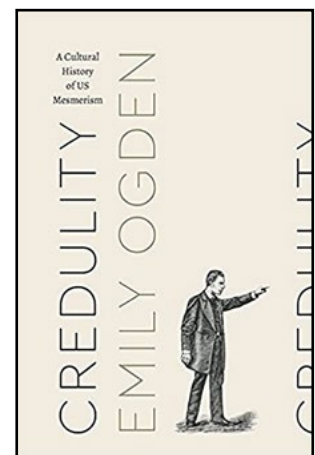
## For Credulity's Sake<sup>1</sup>

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A Review of *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism*. By Emily Ogden. University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. ix- 267. ISBN 13:978-0-226-53233-2

Secularization, the bifurcation of the human world into a religious sphere and an a-religious sphere is, according to scholars, a distinguishing feature of modernity. A clear-eyed agentic self and a cool ordered mind is the secular ideal because that allows people to operate rationally in the public sphere, independent of religious belief. Recent scholarly work on secularization points to how varied are its expressions (Taylor, 2007) as well as how challenging and incomplete is its boundary-making (Modern, 2011).



Arguably, it was in the Enlightenment when the self-consciously more modern, secular rationalists began to pick fights with their irrational “others” – those they saw as overly superstitious, prone to delusions, or offensively emotional about their God. Ridding people of their “backward” beliefs in magic and witchcraft and curbing their excessive feelings for the supernatural that had “infected their brains” – as Voltaire famously put it – became an activating cause. Roy Porter (1999) called this campaign, the “Enlightenment Crusade.” Scientific analysis and rational discourse became the esteemed methods to defeat, or at least to marginalize, the many forms of human irrationality lurking about.

Emily Ogden, author of *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* and Associate Professor of English at the University of Virginia, tackles the closely related topic of believability (or gullibility) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by fusing the uneven advance of secularization with a second body of sociological work addressing the enchantment-disenchantment process. First introduced by Max Weber, this modernization meta-narrative – if you will – involves liberating the person from enthrallment in fictitious beliefs. The aim is to disenchant, achieved by adopting attitudes supporting objectivity and rationalism. Interestingly, there is now an enchantment literature that juxtaposes the march toward modernity with enchantment’s persistent presence. Beliefs in magic, the occult, the paranormal and assorted inexplicable (often religiously-tinged) experiences are frequent subjects of such studies. This literature includes Morris Berman’s (1981) classic work bemoaning the loss of enchantment in the modern world and Alex Owen’s (2004) study of late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century British occultists who synthesized esotericism

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with advancing ideals of modernity. A number of these works ask why, in our modern rational age, do otherwise intelligent, normal people allow themselves to be so enchanted – and, in the minds of their skeptics – deceived into believing in hidden mind powers and psychic abilities? Confounding matters even more, Ogden cites contemporary scholars who propose that enchantment is not so bad for moderns after all! By imbuing the persistence of enchantment with both positive and negative valences, however, it becomes a not so neatly bifurcated concept to work with.

For brevity, I will call Ogden's synthesis, the secularization-disenchantment view (still a mouthful!). Ogden rightly proposes that mesmerism is a worthy topic of study for this form of analysis. By the 1840s, the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer's 18<sup>th</sup> century maverick healing method based on the manipulation of a subtle, unseen naturalistic substance he called animal magnetism, had grown into an international phenomenon. Mesmerism had spread from Western Europe to the United States, Canada, India, and the Caribbean. It had grown into a radical form of medicine that treated illnesses outside of regular medicine's capacities, and, through the discovery of the mesmeric trance – so believers held – a means to induce people into a higher realm of mind powers and metaphysical truths. Groups of Americans and Europeans were aglow with the promise of this "new science." Not so fast, claimed the incredulous inheritors of the Enlightenment Crusade. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, these crusaders had grown into groups of debunkers and skeptics who found in popular delusions, investment scheme crazes, upstart religions, and faddish medical marvels fitting targets upon which they disgorged a stream of sarcasm and ridicule. Those who believed in mesmerism's alleged transcendental offerings, they claimed, were "dupes, knaves and mountebanks." Mesmerism's supporters, infused with noble romantic sentiments, countered by portraying debunkers as mean, unimaginative people, blighted of hope and resistant to human progress. Needless to say, there is plenty of contested terrain here for Ogden to explore.

A third focus of Ogden's book is built on a body of work, initiated, at least in part, by members of the Modern Language Association, which examines the ways mesmerism influenced 19<sup>th</sup> century writers. Fred Caplan's *Dickens and Mesmerism; The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (1975) and more recently, Bruce Mills's *Poe, Fuller and the Mesmeric Arts* (2006) are part of this scholarship. The Americans Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Margaret Fuller allowed mesmerism to inhabit their writing in different ways. Analysis of their work appears often in Ogden's book, especially of Hawthorne. How these writers used mesmerism as a springboard for story-telling or used it to explore credulity-incredulity issues of their day are addressed in some detail. Ogden also draws analogies between being in the mesmeric trance and being absorbed in reading a book. Isn't a reader's "suspension of disbelief" that permits entry into the imaginary worlds spun by a novelist similar to being mesmerized?

I review Ogden's book as an historian of psychology and a student of mesmerism. Let me focus on the book's strong suits first. I found the best chapter was the case of Colonel William Leete Stone, a New York newspaperman and veteran who, in 1837, became interested in Loraina Brackett, a young blind woman and unusual mesmeric trance-adept. Ogden builds on historian of psychology Sheila Quinn's (2012) pioneering work on the Stone-Brackett story and digs deeper into the archives. Stone, a reportedly hard-nosed public skeptic was "converted" to the power of animal magnetism by way of Brackett's memorable psychic – or in the parlance of the day, magnetic – abilities. This included her ability to "see" the physical world when magnetized (i.e., while in trance) despite her physical blindness.

Her alleged ability to travel to distant places while magnetized and describe what she saw there was another head-turner. (This practice later became known among mesmerists as distant viewing, from whence the current practice of remote viewing is related.)

After Stone published his personal conversion story about going from incredulous critic to believer in Brackett, a public debate ensued, ably recounted by Ogden, about whether or not Stone had been duped. Among other critics, the physician David Reese, whose book, *Humbugs of New York* (1837) was one of the first debunking books published by an American, weighs into the controversy. This chapter is where Ogden's secularization-disenchantment approach as an analytical tool worked particularly well. In other chapters, it felt forced or too reductive, but not here.

Through impressive archival research, Ogden also advances our understanding of another famous chapter in the history of mesmerism in America, the story of Charles Poyen. A former medical student of French Colonial Creole descent whose family owned a Guadeloupe sugar plantation, Poyen, unexpectedly became the transmitter of French mesmerism to the U.S. In 1836, at the tender age of 22, he induced great interest in animal magnetism among elites in Boston and Providence, thus putting mesmerism on the map in America.

Other highlights of the book include a portrayal of the eclectic physician and prolific editor, Joseph Rodes Buchanan's practice of phreno-mesmerism. This mix of phrenology and mesmerism was briefly popular in the early 1840s before fading. One can see the uneven way secular understandings of human nature were constructed out of phreno-mesmerism. The chapter addressing J. Stanley Grimes, a phrenologist who embraced phreno-mesmerism and who wrestled with the expansive growth of spiritualism is also noteworthy. His lonely struggle against spirit mediumship allows Ogden to toggle back and forth between different positions of credulity and incredulity, while exploring issues involved in the secularization of self-control exposed by this practice.

There are parts of the book that needed a stronger treatment or that omitted essential features of mesmerism. First, enchantment was too broadly defined. Certainly, if you are spellbound by something you are enchanted. But what if you are intensely curious or have a strong positive feeling for something without the absorption. Is that enchantment? At one point, Ogden even equates mesmerism with enchantment. That is over-reach. Adopting such a view unnecessarily draws aspects of the practice into enchantment's lair that are not contingent upon it. Equating the whole of mesmerism practice to the manipulation of credulity is equally reductive and not supported by the period literature.

The subtitle of this book indicates that it will provide a cultural picture of U.S. mesmerism, which suggests a holistic treatment of it. I think Robert Fuller's (1982) seminal insight that mesmerism insinuated itself into religion, science, and medicine all at once is both borne out in the period literature and instructive here. To legitimately cover mesmerism, you need to acknowledge its several avenues of expression (see, for example, Winter, 1998).

Missing from this book is an analysis of experiments from the late 1830s on, routinely conducted to determine what was real and true about mesmerism and what was fake. There are dozens of experiments described in the literature and likely thousands were performed. Many experiments were specious of course, little more than parlor games that served to support believers' presuppositions.

Others, however, involved sophisticated strategies with the aim of producing objective and empirically grounded results. They represent a distinct kind of public science and psychological knowledge seeking (Schmit, 2005). By way of their methodology, these experiments are recognizable prototypes of later research methods employed in psychophysiology, consciousness studies, and parapsychology (Crabtree, 1993; Schmit, 2010). With just a couple of exceptions, they occur outside of Ogden's narrative.

The absence of a discussion of mesmeric medicine in Ogden's book – perhaps the most robust of mesmerism's varied expressions – is also an omission. For those who found relief from their sufferings from a mesmerism treatment, it was “proof” of its legitimacy. Consigning all of mesmeric medicine to the placebo effect misses the mark.

Robert Fuller (2004) and Catherine Albanese (2007) have persistently argued that mesmerism was part of an awakening of 19<sup>th</sup> century American metaphysical thought that included transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, spiritualism, and, later, mind cure. Emerson - who briefly appears in this book – for example wrote famously about the “Oversoul” but he never described for his readers how to reach it. For a number of Americans and Europeans, mesmerism's trance was a doorway to higher worlds. Innovative ideas about consciousness, interior life, and psychology were birthed during this period that far outlived the people who generated them (suggesting that these ideas were enduringly believable). The voices of these believers could have been stronger in this book.

In fairness, Ogden states in the introduction that her intent was to focus on the overlap between credulity and mesmerism. But I think readers of a book on mesmerism with this subtitle deserve an explanation why these other key aspects of this movement, which could have informed such a study, were not included. That said, Ogden leverages her secularization-disenchantment approach to reveal unfinished corners of the psychology of modernity. By examining how credulity was used and abused in period discourse, a number of the disjunctive, jagged edges of the secularizing self are exposed.

The slippery character of mesmerism combined with how it manifested in different arenas of American culture has made it difficult to write histories about it. Professor Ogden dives into a dynamic and contentious episode of the American march toward modernity and expands our knowledge of it in a fascinating (enchanting?) way. Future historians working on these topics will need to grapple with the issues raised in *Credulity*.

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