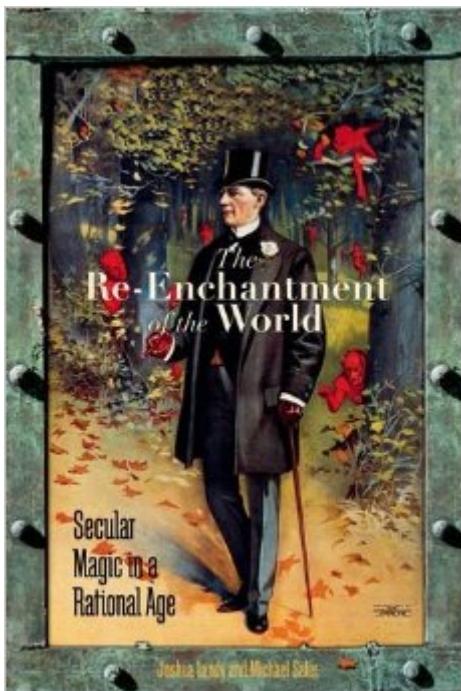


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The Re-Enchantment Of The World: Secular Magic In A Rational Age



Synopsis

The Re-Enchantment of the World is an interdisciplinary volume that challenges the long-prevailing view of modernity as "disenchanted." There is of course something to the widespread idea, so memorably put into words by Max Weber, that modernity is characterized by the "progressive disenchantment of the world." Yet what is less often recognized is the fact that a powerful counter-tendency runs alongside this one, an overwhelming urge to fill the vacuum left by departed convictions, and to do so without invoking superseded belief systems. In fact, modernity produces an array of strategies for re-enchantment, each fully compatible with secular rationality. It has to, because God has many "aspects"; or to put it in more secular terms, because traditional religion offers so much in so many domains. From one thinker to the next, the question of just what, in religious enchantment, needs to be replaced in a secular world receives an entirely different answer. Now, for the first time, many of these strategies are laid out in a single volume, with contributions by specialists in literature, history, and philosophy.

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Customer Reviews

Magnificent book. If you're feeling at all cynical, you ought to read it. Any time I see anything about enchantment in modernity, the tone is wistful -- the authors mourn a primitive mode of experience that has been driven to extinction by the rational worldview. The essays in this book do no such thing. Instead, each presents a possible way of finding a sense of wonder without relinquishing the scientific thinking to which we moderns so desperately cling. Remarkably, each essay provides a

different solution to the problem and contributes a unique, and often surprising, perspective to the picture of modern enchantment. What a relief (and delight!) to discover such a wealth of magic so close at hand.

At first blush one wouldn't think using the words "magic" and "secular" in a complementary fashion would work. But this collection of essays does succeed - at least in some degree - to meld magic and rationality. The various essays begin with Max Weber's plaint (or proclamation - your choice) that "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'" This has generally been taken to mean that the project of the Enlightenment - its reason and increasingly scientific method - has taken (or will take) away the mysteries of life, the aspects that we conventionally see as beyond human involvement and understanding. This has, of course, been anathema to the theses of religion as we commonly know it, and has been at the root of the centuries-old friction between religion and reason. But this book takes on itself a project that I applaud: a healing of this rift, in all its manifestations. Each essay is an attempt to do just this in various fields of endeavor. We see in looking to the re-enchantment latent in gardens and place, in architecture, religion, art, literature, philosophy, and even in politics, elements of human experience that allow us to become re-enchanted with life, secular life in particular. The point is made here that re-enchantment isn't a return to a primitive human way of viewing things, after centuries of science and reason, when we should know better. Instead, it's allowing ourselves to be re-enchanted with life - within the world given to us via centuries of rational progress. There's a tacit suspicion here that reason, too, has its limits, as the difficulties of the last hundred years or so have caused humanity. While this may be in part because of a remaining lack of development of reason within world culture, it is hard to avoid the idea that the working of the left brain will never be without the right brain's enchanting spectacle. And, conversely, that enchantment will forever need reason as its anchor, lest it lead humanity astray. Admittedly, the editors and separate essayists have bitten off a lot with this project. Still, it's a vital one, a project that can nudge reason into a proper intellectual panoply. I'd encourage anyone who has read this far into this review to take this book on, and I'd point readers primarily toward the section on ideology and on Nietzsche. It's that important a subject.

Beyond a doubt the book is scholarly and insightful. But it is also dead, dry, ivory tower intellectualism--the essence of disenchantment. I am not sure who the intended audience is. The collection is rather like a chemist's version of chocolate mousse; it may be a valid, even useful

analysis, but it misses the point. The first comparison that bubbled up was David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, which is along the same lines if not precisely the same. But Abram evinces a deep tenderness for his subject which is lacking here. I suspect Merlin would not get through the first paragraph of any of the essays and, certainly, this is why Peter Pan did not want to grow up.

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