



TRICKS, POLITICS, AND THE “MAGIC NEGRO”

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Is politics nothing but trickery? Are political leaders nothing but tricksters? Certainly many of us believe so, and not without reason. In this essay, however, I want to step slightly back from these self-evident suspicions to look more closely at how their self-evidence takes shape through the work of an analogy between the domains of democratic politics and entertainment magic—the realm of deception par excellence. Usually, analogy is used as a tool for making sense of something difficult to understand through a comparison with something more commonplace. Yet I argue that the ubiquity of the analogy likening politics to a kind of conjuring act, like a form of legerdemain itself, can be used to conceal as much as it reveals—such as injuries of class and race.

Journalists brand politicians as ‘magicians’ all the time. Consider the following examples, culled willy-nilly from around the world. On Obama’s energy policies:

This conjuror’s trick has gone wrong; Mr. Obama is actually cutting the beautiful young lady in half as he cripples the energy sector.¹

On South Africa’s budget:

Like a magician whipping a rabbit out of a hat, President Jacob Zuma wowed us with impressive figures for dramatically enhanced infrastructure spending in his state of the nation speech.²

On Israel’s new unity government:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is known as the Magician for his ability to pull off political tricks that challenge the [election] genie. Magic tricks, as we all know, rely on timing, creating the right atmosphere and behind-the-scenes preparation. Political tricks, it seems, require the same basic elements.³

Political barbs like these or editorial cartoons depicting

politicians as magicians go back to the 19th century (at least). But what’s so bad about being called a magician anyway? Most people enjoy being baffled by a magician’s feats, right? To appreciate the incisiveness of this comparison requires that we reflect more carefully on the disparate domains of politics and magic, and how analogy functions to connect them.

Analogy is a key part of the way we make sense of the world, a strategy for plotting patterns of resemblance between things known and things less familiar. Some analogies prove so useful that they crop up again and again, or seep into the conceptual background of conventional wisdom—precisely like the conventionalized analogy between magic and politics.

Analogies work by mapping features from a “source” or “base” domain onto a “target” domain.⁴ They call attention to resemblances between the analogized domains, and also reinforce underlying cultural attitudes that make certain resemblances particularly salient. The mapping of magic onto democracy through the analogical metaphor⁵ “politics is magic” or “politicians are magicians” has several important entailments. It implies that democratic politics produces a professional class of expert deceivers, who manipulate the truth and hide secrets. It suggests that politicians traffic in pleasing artifice rather than potentially unpleasant substance. This analogy frames members of the voting public as spectators at a magic show who enjoy being deceived, while situating the journalists, cartoonists, and satirists who mobilize the magical comparison outside of (and above) the performer-audience dyad as exposers of a sordid truth.

The attitude underlying the analogization of magic and politics, I argue, goes back to ancient critiques of Athenian democracy most closely associated with the work of Plato.⁶ Entertainment magicians were well known in antiquity, and there are some tantalizing cultural parallels between the cups-and-balls magicians who played tricks

with little pebbles and the rhetoricians who manipulated a public that voted by casting similar little pebbles.⁷ Plato, however, does not compare politics to that kind of magic. He compares it to something more sinister: sorcery.

Plato's anti-rhetorical stance links the figure of the sophist, an expert in the skill of rhetorical persuasion, with the figure of the sorcerer, who can cloud people's judgment, bend their will, and distort their perception through supernatural means.⁸ For Plato, the sophists were sinister because they could argue "pro" or "contra" and win arguments, without even having substantive knowledge of the topic at hand.⁹ Plato considered this this deception of the highest sort, and spurned democracy because of the influence it gives to experts in rhetoric rather than experts in statecraft. In the *Republic*, he advocates instead for a kind of philosophical technocracy, in which experts in statecraft (philosophers) reign without appeal to popular opinion (though with occasional recourse to manipulating opinion).

From Plato, we inherit the cynical idea that democratic politics gives the upper hand to expert deceivers who pander to the *hoi polloi*'s susceptibility to pleasing illusion. Journalists (and others) who deploy magical analogies to the target domain of politics align themselves with this Platonic critique, bolstering its continuing relevance in an era when sophists have been replaced by "spin doctors" working around the clock to control political "messaging" in 24/7 news cycles.

The difference between Plato's source domain—the instrumental magic of sorcery—and the source domain I'm interested in—the entertainment magic of illusionism—may not seem that significant at first blush. You might say magic is magic, allowances made for shifting cultural sensibilities. But I'd like to take a slightly closer look at what it means to analogize democratic politics with this kind of magic at the present historical moment. In the rest of this essay, I look in greater detail at two particular

cases, one French, the other American, in which this analogy is systematically applied. I show that the seeming uniformity of the analogy between magic and politics belies contextual differences and, indeed, that uniformity itself can allow for the insinuation—through analogical sleight-of-hand—of otherwise objectionable messages under the veil of convention.

The first case I consider comes from my anthropological field research on French entertainment magic.¹⁰ In 1989, France's charismatic minister of culture, Jack Lang, was elected mayor of, Blois, a small provincial capital in the Loire river valley. (French politicians can acquire multiple posts simultaneously, through a practice called the "accumulation of mandates.") Lang was a flamboyant figure, who had already radically reshaped French cultural politics. Under his stewardship, the Ministry of Culture ceased to be only a custodian of France's cultural heritage in the fine arts, reimagining its role as a patron of cultural producers in popular genres like graffiti, breakdance, and hip hop. Blois, a sleepy town of 50,000, seemed an unlikely fit for this larger than life figure.

Among its few claims to fame, Blois was the birthplace of the magician Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805-1871). Known among magicians as the "Father of Modern Magic," Robert-Houdin revolutionized entertainment magic, elevating it (according to magicians' catechism) "from the street to the stage." He took an oftentimes coarse and technically crude form of entertainment associated with carnivals or marketplaces and their lower-class denizens (Robert-Houdin called them "gawkers") and moved it into the culturally safer space of a fashionable Parisian theatre. He dressed in elegant evening attire, and used his skills as a clockmaker to pioneer tricks of unprecedented technical sophistication. A young American, Ehrich Weiss, was so impressed by the achievements Robert-Houdin described in his 1858 memoir that he chose the stage name "Houdini" (in typical Oedipal fashion, he later wrote a book-length

smear, *The Unmasking of Robert-Houdin*).¹¹

Magicians had been making pilgrimages to Blois for generations, but few outside of their narrow coterie had heard of Robert-Houdin or, for that matter, considered magic worthy of serious cultural consideration. The shrewd Lang sensed an opportunity. He allocated 46 million Francs (probably something on the magnitude of 20 million U.S dollars in 2015 terms) from the Ministry of Culture to create a National Center of the Arts of Magic and Illusion, and used municipal funds to purchase a gargantuan mansion to house it. The Center's objective was to establish a respectable position for magic among the kinds of fine arts—music, literature, painting, etc.—that the Ministry had traditionally championed.

As these things generally do, the project eventually spiraled over budget (the mansion needed to be ratcheted skywards so that an underground magic theatre could be excavated beneath it). At some point, it became national news. On March 12, 1993, *Le Monde*, France's paper of record, ran a story called "A House of Illusion for Mr. Lang." The story started out nicely enough, but ended with a nasty dagger-like flourish.

Construction, which began last fall, is proceeding well.... The initial investment ... is entirely covered by the Ministry of Culture , ... which is thus extending (an important first!) its prerogative to the celebration of ectoplasm. This generosity will certainly be appreciated by the Ministry's traditional beneficiaries at a time when the budget is facing drastic reductions.... Even Mr. Lang's worshipers and the proponents of his brand of cultural pluralism think the magician of the rue de Valois [the location of the Ministry of Culture] has finally overdone it, especially on the eve of legislative elections.¹²

Someone intimately involved in planning the National Magic Center told me in an interview years later, "When

Le Monde called Lang the 'magician of the rue de Valois', that brought an end to the project. Lang saw that and he wanted out. He dropped us like a hot potato." While Lang distanced himself from the project, ignominy followed. Several years later, *Le Monde* described him as "a *prince of illusion*, criticized in the corridors of his very ministry for... making public bids for rabbits hidden in bottomless hats."¹³

In both instances, Lang himself is the target of the analogy with magic, but magic itself also falls victim to the pejorative tone of comparison. Clearly, an analogy with magic is never meant to make politicians look good. But as a form a perjuror, I argue that the analogy does not only concern the mechanics of prestidigitation (making things—like money—appear to be where they are not or appear not to be where they are), but also the cultural status of prestidigitation as a signifying practice. In Western culture, Simon During writes, entertainment magic today carries "little cultural weight. It is apparently trivial."¹⁴ The depictions of Lang as a magician presuppose such triviality and use it to rhetorical effect: for instance, an anachronistic reference to "ectoplasm," the yucky stuff 19th century spirit mediums purported to secrete, denies any connection between magic and the arts, linking it instead to charlatanism and the discredited occult.

More broadly, the hackneyed references to rabbits-in-hats and ladies-in-boxes, unavoidable in this kind of parodization, summon up the most clichéd cultural associations, projecting magic outside the historical present and back into the vaudevillian past. Such intentional trivialization makes another kind of argument: politicians are like magicians not only because they are tricksters, but also because their coat-and-tail gravitas, their oversized sense of self-importance, is disproportionate to the value and content of what they actually do. And when their gimmicks fail them (say, when Obama can't put the lady back together again), they are helpless. Magicians themselves wage constant battle



against these clichés,¹⁵ but political satirists, at least, aren't apt to give them up any time soon.

These tacit imputations of triviality carry particular weight in France. Pierre Bourdieu has written that “the persistence... of the aristocratic model of ‘court society’” in contemporary France, through which “a Parisian *haute bourgeoisie*” combines “all forms of prestige and all the titles of economic and cultural nobility, has no counterpart elsewhere, at least for the arrogance of its cultural judgments.”¹⁶ According to the model Bourdieu sketches, taste maps onto social class, and cultural choices emblemize social hierarchies. Magic in this system (at least until only very recently) has been eminently *déclassé*. Labeling Lang a magician, in this setting, isn't just a way to discredit him as a political charlatan. It also damns him for failing to uphold an elite—and elitist—vision of culture as a switchboard of social distinction.

The second case I consider suggested itself after I anecdotally observed an uptick in the analogization of magic and U.S. politics with the entry of Barack Obama into the 2008 presidential election. A nonsystematic comparison of political cartoons satirizing Obama and his predecessors suggests a dramatic increase in the frequency of prestidigitatory portrayals. While George W. Bush was sometimes depicted as a magician, he was much more often represented as a fool or a dunce—a hapless victim rather than a crafty manipulator of circumstance. Obama's early flashes of charisma and rhetorical brilliance would seem to have made him an “easy” target for magical analogies.

For instance, in the lead-up to the 2008 election, a *Wall Street Journal* editorialist wrote: “And now, America, we introduce the Great Obama! The world's most gifted political magician! A thing of wonder. A thing of awe. Just watch him defy politics, economics, even gravity!”

(And hold your applause until the end, please.)”¹⁷ The accompanying editorial cartoon showed a tuxedoed Obama nonchalantly pulling a bewildered bunny from a hat. Scores of other images elaborated on “The Great Obama” conceit. A particularly troubling image (to me) was a 2009 cartoon in which a ghoulishly smiling Obama produces his own miniature doppelganger (with the same ghoulish smile) from a top hat. In an astonishing feat of self-referential showmanship, this political magician’s greatest illusion is his own self-manufacture as a savior figure, replete with feel-good flag-waving and cash giveaways.

Clearly, the resonance of the magical metaphor had much to do with Obama’s astonishing populist appeal and perhaps some wariness surrounding his savvy use of social media to mobilize young voters. As Lempert and Silverstein note:

*In the Democratic presidential primaries of 2007 and 2008, once Senator Obama was identified as a “rock star” by virtue of huge, screaming crowds at almost every campaign venue, including his statesmanlike speeches in Europe, the campaign of Senator Clinton contrasted this with the subdued seriousness of its own political occasions, wishing to render Senator Obama a mere celebrity lightweight, a political entertainer of the young in essence. In the lead-up to the general election, the McCain campaign took up this line of attack with abandon...*¹⁸

In this sense, magic is just a convenient stand-in for showbiz writ-large. And let’s not forget that Plato too drew damning comparisons between sophists and the showbiz celebrities of his day: poets.

But the analogy between Obama and not just showbiz in general but the genre of magic specifically turns out to have more troubling connotations. Alim and Smitherman remind us that, starting in 2007,

*Rush Limbaugh... popularized the use of magic to describe Barack Obama among Republicans. He broadcast the song “Barack the Magic Negro” (based on “Puff the Magic Dragon”) on his radio show, and it was later sent out to members of the Republican National Committee. Barack Obama, depicted as the “Magic Negro” by White Republicans is beyond offensive for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the purposeful use of the word Negro to describe Obama. With its usage here, we also see yet another way that Barack Obama has been framed as the “exceptional Negro,” standing on call, ready to alleviate White fears and enlighten them on issues of race.*¹⁹

The lyrics of the “Magic Dragon” parody emphasized the magical thinking of “guilty” Whites who “feel good” about themselves by supporting a candidate who’s “Black but not authentically” so—unlike “real Black men” such as “Snoop Dogg,” “Farrakhan,” or Al Sharpton, the character who ostensibly “sings” the song.²⁰ The “magic” of the “Magic Negro” is the expiation of white guilt—the production of the illusion of White innocence—in spite of his own lack of political experience (or expertise, in the Platonic sense).²¹ Emphasizing the complicit credulity of Obama’s White voters, the song provides a conceptual grounding for the public-as-dupe component of the magical analogy.

While there may be deep historical roots in the metaphor “politics is magic,” in the case of Barack Obama, the activation of this conventionalized comparison carried strong racialized undertones. How else to explain the meteoric rise of a Black presidential candidate, the trope of the “magic Negro” implied, if not for the kind of perfidious demagoguery that magic has come conventionally to analogize?

Reconsider the some of the examples above with this in mind. The *Wall Street Journal* calls Obama “A thing of wonder. A thing of awe.” A *thing*. On the surface, this

phraseology has a formal resemblance with what you might expect to hear from a nineteenth century carnival barker or vaudeville impresario. But let us not forget that era's ugly history of exhibiting Black bodies as objects of spectacle; P.T. Barnum, for instance, exhibited an African-American man as the evolutionary missing link under the banner "What Is It?"²² And does not the magician's exaggerated smile and servile stoop in the Obama-pulls-Obama-from-a-hat cartoon suggest a repellent allusion to the body language of minstrelsy? In both cases, the verbal rhetoric and visual iconography of old-time magic allow for the sneaking in of a racially denigrating subtext.

But here too, magic itself has not stood still. In the tenacious image of Robert-Houdin, the genre has been historically dominated by White men, while relegating women and racialized others to fetishized or exoticized positions. Nevertheless, pioneering African-American performers like Richard Potter, William Carl, and Black Herman resourcefully worked within and around the racial strictures of Euro-American show business to forge successful careers as entertainment magicians.²³ In 2014, the 5,000 member-strong Society of American magicians made history, electing its first African-American president, the formidable showman Kenrick "Ice" McDonald.²⁴

When an analogy becomes as conventional as "politics is magic," it acquires a kind of intuitive obviousness that makes it easily available to lampoonists. But that obviousness itself hinges on the simulacrum of continuity, the illusion of similarity. While politics is a recurrent target for magical analogies, it is a moving one. In the two cases I have discussed, magical analogies do different kinds of conceptual work. Calling Jack Lang a "magician," French editorialists activated an invidious

comparison between magic (as a metonym for low culture) and fine arts—reasserting class-based hierarchies of taste. Calling Barack Obama a magician, American editorialists and satirists activated racist anxieties about the nature of Black political agency. Thus these magical analogies do different kinds of conceptual work at different times and places, even if there is an underlying anti-political logic that unites them.

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Endnotes

1. Sanders 2011.
2. Cohen 2012.
3. Collins 2012.
4. Gentner (1983), Lakoff (1993).
5. In what follows, I treat metaphor as a sub-category of analogy.
6. For the broader context, see Hesk (2000), Tell (2007).
7. Taillefer (2009).
8. See, for instance, Gellrich (1994), Rhodes (1992: 10-12).
9. I thank Richard A. Jones for this insight.
10. For a more detailed account, see Jones (2011: 215-221).
11. See Houdini (1908).
12. Roux (1993).
13. Bugier (1998).
14. During (2002: 2).
15. See for instance Jones (2011: 225-231). For a discussion of the way an avant-garde artist reworks the classic iconography of magic, see my essay on Jamie Isenstein (Jones 2013).
16. Bourdieu (1984: xi).
17. Strassel (2008).
18. Lempert and Silverstein (2012: 10-11).
19. Alim and Smitherman (2012: 38).
20. Shanklin (2007).
21. I thank Richard A. Jones for his commentary on these lyrics.
22. See Cook (2001), Chapter 3.
23. See for instance Chireau (2007).
24. See <http://www.npr.org/2014/08/04/334884989/magician-kenrick-ice-mcdonald-sees-the-light-in-the-dark-arts>, accessed January 12, 2015.