


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Degenerateness, Mental Hygiene, and Spiritism: Debates in the Argentine Medical Press (1930–1946)

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ABSTRACT

The disputes between spiritualists and physicians occurred in the context of hygienism and the degeneration theory, where spiritualists were considered agents requiring health care by alienists and psychiatrists. French psychiatry defended this interpretation to isolate and treat “spiritual delirium,” which came to have considerable importance in the debates between spiritism and psychiatry. Specifically, *pathologization* and *psychologization* became strategies to deal with the disruptive experience of mediumship and the sense of threat from spiritualism. Psychiatrists initiated anti-spiritualist campaigns, inspiring responses from the spiritualist communities and their representatives, along with arguments to refute such diagnostic criteria. The debates between alienists and spiritists are an example of how, the rhetoric of spiritists, physicians, and some philosophers led to hostile positions regarding the designation of limits in the recognition of psychological and religious experiences.

1 | Introduction

Throughout the late 19th century and until the middle of the 20th century, spiritism and psychiatry—the latter of which was becoming a science following the positivist current of the time—were vectors in the dispute between practitioners of spiritism and its defenders, on the one hand, and alienists, on the other, who considered that such practices could cause clearly perverse consequences for mental hygiene. Alienists often established the diagnosis of spiritist insanity as “evidence” of insanity, basically because Spiritist practices were seen as a threat to mental health. By the way, alienist may mean different things to different historians working on different subject matters and contexts. The term here refers to physicians, general practitioners, or psychiatrists. In 1920s Argentina it also mean teachers, philosophers, and even lawyers so those not familiarized with Argentinian historiography of psychology, would not be able to grasp the meaning of these terms nor their background (Guerrino 1982; Gutiérrez Avendaño 2021).

According to Kardec, Spiritism is a science and a philosophy with moral implications, not a religion in a theological sense; it combined utopian socialism, including beliefs about reincarnation, with a new conception of Christian morality and the notion of charity as key to reach, through progressive reincarnations, a superior moral state. Kardec defended social reform, just as the post-Kardecist spiritists fought for equity in social and gender roles. The political and social criticism of the spiritist movement and the popularity of the new doctrine found points of agreement in the interaction between spiritism and science, psychology, and Catholic theology (see Edelman 2004 and Sharp 2006).

Degenerationism was a penetrating theory in the thinking and feeling of the medical community in the first three decades of the 20th century. Indeed, although mental disorders had been the object of long-standing concern for French and German alienists since the mid-seventeenth century, this new emphasis turned out to be a “relief theory” for a medicine in crisis that had to respond correctly to the etiology and treatment of

disorders that were once the object of ridicule, confinement, or torture.

The objective of this study is to analyze the arguments and disputes between spiritualists and physicians published in both the spiritist and the medical press. The concepts coined by psychiatrists are analyzed to define ideas such as “spiritual delirium,” “parapsychiatric states,” “metapsychic forces,” and “supranormal psychology,” which led to the separation of the study of mediums from that of subjects who were presumed to have forms of *aggravation* of perception such as mediums. Discussions around spiritualists and their practices took place a relevant but scarcely explored period in the history of medicine, particularly in terms of the public anti-spiritualist campaign initiated by Gonzalo Bosch, Fernando Gorriti, and Daniel Stockdale, among others, along with the responses of the spiritist communities and their representatives in the face of such attacks, as well as their arguments to refute such diagnostic criteria.

Spiritualism was a determining factor for which mediums and their defenders were targeted by alienists, who considered that such practices could cause perverse consequences antithetical to mental hygiene. The alienists presented statements from their own authorities in the field or statistics on the frequency of this madness that such practices induced. In addition, Kardecist spiritualism confronted both religious and secular intellectuals in public disputes in theaters and other settings attended by relevant figures from culture, politics, and science (Quereilhac 2012, 2013, 2016). José Ingenieros made virulent attacks, even though he agreed to participate in sessions with mediums, and other members of the clergy confronted their religious disagreements with other Kardecist leaders in the pulpit. At the opposite pole, the Kardecists also found points of convergence in social praxis among socialists and other political groups, although religious identity and the positive perspective of science influenced spiritist discourse in a period of increasing tensions.

The first medical journals in Buenos Aires (*Revista Médico-Quirúrgica*, *La Semana Médica*, and *Archivos de Psiquiatría, Criminología y Ciencias Afines*) had paid attention to disorders caused by the harmful influence of quackery practices and some manifestations of popular religiosity, in general due to the rivalry between quackery and medicine for control of the physical and mental illnesses of citizens. Healers were exposed as charlatans, tricksters, or mentally ill people, in a discourse that pathologized popular healing practices in contrast to so-called scientific medicine (Mailhe 2015). In fact, although some physicians reacted with suspicion to any eccentricity in the practices of their colleagues or anything that had been previously questioned in Europe, other however reacted in an inverse sense. For example, William James championed psychical research in the United States to the exasperation of his colleagues, and between 1890 and the 1920s many high-profile psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, Amy Tanner, Henry Goddard, Morton Prince, Harry Hollingworth, Eugen Bleuler, Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Binet, and Gardner Murphy not only did not react against mediumship, but actually carried out research in an attempt to clarify the mental phenomena involved in spiritualism overlapping between experimental

psychology and psychopathology on the one hand, and psychical research on the other (e.g., see Sommer 2013).

Another characteristic was the suitability of women for mediumship in spiritism, which at the turn of the century reflected a stereotyped Victorian pathologization of femininity and female sexuality that spread throughout the culture of the time. In medicine, at the end of the 19th century, the discourse on hysteria was dominant in this regard, so that the supposed connection between mediums and hysteria was a topic of great interest to many neurologists and psychologists of the time (Quereilhac 2014, 2020). This pattern of pathologization was also strongly sexualized in relation to women who transgressed traditional gender roles. This is where the main distinction of (female) mediumship within spiritualism became evident because the dominant medical discourse understood the mediumistic state as a symptom of hysteria and, therefore, a female nervous disorder. The debates between alienists and spiritists, inside or outside spiritism, exemplified how, toward the rhetoric of Kardecists, physicians, and some philosophers adapted their positions regarding the dispute of limitations.

1.1 | Alienists Versus Kardecist-Spiritualists

Alienists often established the diagnosis of “spiritist madness” as evidence of insanity, basically because spiritualistic practices were seen as a threat to mental health. The Kardecists confronted both philosophical speculation and scientific skepticism which had attempted to resolve the problem of whether the soul survived death. Attacks rained down on them from opponents of spiritualism (atheists and men of science), who mocked the scientific pretensions of their doctrine to believers in supernatural intelligence, but who were also disbelievers in the possibility of establishing communication with spirits (Catholics, Methodists, and Protestants in general accused spiritualist ideas of being “irreverent” according to the model of divine creation, morality, and spiritual life from their respective religious institutions). Hence, the Kardecists found themselves in the middle of controversy and public ridicule that mocked their practices and ideas as acts of madness, eccentricity, and charlatanism. Often, literate Kardecists feared carrying the stigma of being called “shameful spiritualists” because of their convictions; therefore, they hid their identity in writings and public presentations by using pseudonyms, for fear of being declared heretics, witches, or madmen.

Psychiatry, which was becoming a science following the positivist current of the time, considered that spiritualism caused perverse consequences against moral and social hygiene (Piva 2000). The criteria of psychiatrists—whether Catholic or atheist—followed the teachings of Joseph Lévy-Valensi, a prominent figure in French neurology, that spiritualism was an enemy that had to be extinguished. French alienists presented statements from their own authorities in the field or statistics on the frequency of this madness as evidence of their complaints (Lévy-Valensi 1908, 1910; Lévy-Valensi and Genil-Perrin 1913; Lévy-Valensi and Ey 1931, Wimmer 1923). Although a precise definition or explanation of what methods were used to define spiritist madness was rarely given, the most

common perspective consisted of the observation and clinical evolution of those who were confined in asylums. It was often enough for a family member to say that the patient had attended spiritualistic centers or was interested in spiritualism, or that the illness was connected with spiritualism, for it to be considered the very cause of that illness. An exception that distinguished Brazilian spiritualism from Argentine spiritualism was the cultural context in which both practices grew. In the Europeanized Argentine culture, spiritualism was seen as a doctrine less syncretized with African beliefs, compared with Brazil (see Moreira-Almeida, Silva de Almeida, and Lotufo Neto 2005).

One of the first episodes is narrated by the journalist Cosme Mariño (1847–1927), leader of Argentine Kardecism, regarding a visit in 1884 to “Hospicio de las Mercedes,” the oldest asylum center in Buenos Aires. Mariño and the neurologist Lucio Meléndez (1844–1901), his director, had had a public dispute in the columns of the newspaper *La Libertad* (Mariño 1934/1963):

I needed to go to the Asylum because of some certificates that they had to give me, referring to an insane person who had died there [...] When leaving the office, I saw Dr. Lucio Meléndez coming towards me, wrapped in his duster that he never left behind. When he saw me, he shouted at me: “Oh, Monsieur Mariño! What brings you here?” I explained my mission and then added, “I was also coming to see the cell that years ago you promised to keep for me when I lost my mind.” I told him this in a joking tone, without absolutely assuming that he would carry out his threat. But then, looking serious, he said to me, “Yes, I am waiting for you.” Saying this, he blew a whistle. Immediately, when a foreman appeared, he told him: “You accompany this man and show him the cell that is waiting for him.” Stunned with shock, and fearing that he was really going to lock me up, I accompanied the foreman, who opened the door and said, “This is the cell that the director has prepared for Dr. Mariño.” When he invited me to enter, I didn’t dare do so, because the room looked like it was empty. But I also took into account the doubt and fear that the foreman was another crazy person who, after I had gone inside, would close the door on me. Once again I affirmed the opinion that I had always doubted the fairness of judgment of the directors of asylums.

Meléndez was a precursor of forensic medicine and the first professor of mental pathology at the Academy of Medicine of the University of Buenos Aires. He also attacked the Spiritualism movement and wrote of his concerns about men who entered his asylum with symptoms of “religious monomania” (or fanaticism), a term that also portrayed those who claimed to be mediums. Meléndez warned that spiritualism was the cause of the dementia of 10 asylum seekers in the Hospice under his custody. Mariño responded to the same arguments, but Meléndez responded irascibly treating the spiritualists as “exploiters of ignorant people, charlatans, propagators of madness

and suicide” (p. 30) including a list of their names and addresses (Meléndez 1882).

Alerted to the possibility of misdiagnoses, Mariño took on the task of visiting, one by one, the families of the 10 asylum patients mentioned by Meléndez, suspecting that spiritualism had not definitively been the cause of their confinements. To his surprise, he discovered that many families did not know anything about spiritualism; indeed, the subject had not even been talked about in these homes. Meléndez had been exposed. In only one case did the family confess to Mariño that the asylum seeker suffered from persecution mania with spirits and demons or spoke with angels. However, no one in that family had even read Kardec, nor attended any spiritualist society events. Mariño also reinforced the outcome of his search with statistics related to spiritualism from several asylums in the United States, a country that—according to Meléndez—was home to millions of practicing spiritualists (Meléndez 1886). Indeed, he insisted, spiritualism was not only prominent because of its religious aspect, but because the majority of the European medical community considered its practices as a threat to the hygiene of the population; thus, if necessary, it had to be opposed through the use of arrests and hospitalizations.

This criterion of pathologization of spiritualism, known under the name of “spiritual madness,” resulted in a critical intersection between two conflicting bodies of knowledge: a flourishing psychiatric community under strong European influence, on the one hand, and the expansion of practices coming from Kardecist spiritualism, on the other. Meléndez used the concept of “religious monomania” or “spiritual megalomania” as a disorder based on the conviction that mediums believed themselves to be “perfect and universal,” but that they experienced “hallucinations of hearing, sight, taste, touch, and smell and interpreted them as *Medium parlanti, andenti, scribanti* etc.” He cited as an example the case of Soria, a 53-year-old French hatter with a “nervous temperament,” who arrived at the Hospicio de las Mercedes, diagnosed as a “crazy spiritualist.” Soria had consulted an exploitative (deceptive) medium to speak with her deceased son, thanks to a “guardian angel who converses with him and through him, in all the moments of his prophetic madness.” According to Meléndez, this case was an example of a “sick brain” worthy of study, observing that “spiritualists do not boast about this indication and sometimes appear at the Hospicio de las Mercedes as some of the members of religious communities do [...] –such as the Freemasons and many other philanthropic societies [...] to ensure the needs and medical treatment of their people” (pp. 342–343).

The neurologist Wilfrido Rodríguez de la Torre, partly following Meléndez, more broadly expressed his own conclusions about how harmful spiritualist practices were (Mariño 1889; Rodríguez de la Torre 1889; Vallejo 2017). Based on a firm degenerative stance, Rodríguez de la Torre suggested that the behaviors developed by a medium not only have a hallucinatory form in the mentally weak, often due to hereditary causes but that the mediums’ practices should also be seen as aberrant or a product of “degradation” of ancient “rites and superstitions” or “leading to suicide,” a position largely similar to that found among European anthropologists at the end of the 19th century,

praised by the well-known sociologist José Ingenieros (Ingenieros 1920).

Nevertheless, the Kardecists complained about the statements of Rodríguez de la Torre, for whom spiritualists were “crazy people who make mistakes and believe they perceive what they do not perceive [...]—and perceive what does not exist.” The Kardecists refuted these statements by saying that not all mediums functioned in the same way: “Because there are hallucinated individuals who believe that spiritualists are spiritualists, and since they have not witnessed the phenomena of spiritualism, they believe that those who have seen them have been victims of their senses and hallucinated or crazy unfortunates” (Ferrer 1889, 245). Rodríguez de la Torre also added to the accusation of fraud as well as mental illness because a year before (in 1888) one of the Fox sisters, a pioneer medium of spiritualism in the United States, had been scandalously unmasked, when she was discovered producing her famous raps in New York by snapping her toes (Weisberg 2004).

So these disputes emphasized more medical than religious arguments; for example, for the hygienist José María Ramos Mejía (1849–1914), spiritualism was “an invisible and invasive virus” and he considered mediums in the category of “degenerates of the character”—following French philosopher Paul Groussac (1895)—understanding that “they are more prone to the production of delusions, concentration on incomprehensible things, dark environments and passionate adherence to doctrine generating a state of consciousness with nervous disorders” (Mariño 1892a, 274). Ramos Mejía inferred this argument from the number of interned people due to spiritualist practices and shared with Rodríguez de la Torre the idea that mediums were also “degenerate neuropaths whose illness does not present itself in a loud and ostensible way, as happens in the case of the crazy,” that “spiritualists are on the same footing as thieves, shameless sluts and lazy people” (Mariño 1892a, 274), or that they are “sick with cerebral weakness and have a soul languishing and anemic like the physical body” (Mariño 1892b, 281). Both alienists agreed on these dangers, considering spiritualism as delusional ideation, involving cases of deception, quackery practices, and exploitation of its clients (González Leandri, 2008). Ironically, the Kardecists celebrated his work, invoking authority figures such as the legislator and judge Luis Varela, who had witnessed the mediumship of medium Castilla and other mediums in spiritualist societies and hoped to be able to produce a book refuting the alienists, but in the end it did not happen (Mariño 1889).

2 | Psychiatrists, Mental Hygiene, and Spiritism After 1930

An associated issue is the idea of a “prevention” or treatment program for degeneration under the heading of *eugenics*. As part of the development of the Latin American eugenics movement and the appropriation of theories, such as biological evolutionism or social Darwinism, this movement basically contributed new clinical concepts, based above all on alterations that were considered pathological deviations from normality, mainly focused on the hereditary nature of mental illnesses. In fact, Morel postulated that the inheritance of

mental illness was not direct, but marked by a genetic polymorphism; in other words, the first generation of offspring affected would be hysterical children; the next generation, epileptic children; and finally, imbeciles. But this scheme was purely theoretical, far from based on genuine clinical observation. For French psychiatrists, Magnan's theory of degeneration was a form of “evolutionary biology” that was based on an hereditary precept, who used terms such as *bouffée délirante* (transitory delusional psychosis) and *délire chronique évolution systématique* (chronic systemized delusional disorder) as descriptive categories of mental illness (Dowbiggin 1996; Nari 1999).

Alienists viewed mental illness as an unfortunate event that happened to a previously healthy individual, by a mechanism called *graft*. The “insane”—a common term among alienists at the end of the 19th century—were exempt from criminal responsibility, because they lacked free will. Under the impulses of a degenerate brain, the criminal was the subject of an organic and incurable nature. If alleged criminals suffered this form of madness, they could be punished only through medical expertise on certain physical features, such as the shape of their heads, expressions on their faces, even the configuration of their bodies, which were taken as “stigmata” or evidence of brain degeneration. If the judges were persuaded, their opinion could be decisive in declaring the defendants insane rather than criminal and finding “neuropathic features” in the family history. Usually, alcoholism, epilepsy, syphilis, or suicide were all strong arguments in favor of degenerative insanity. Originally started by Clifford Beers in the United States, mental hygiene was a body of psychiatric theories, techniques and institutions that emphasized the prevention of mental degeneration and the early treatment of problem behaviors. In his “madness by degeneration” theory, Morel established a complicated classification of causes: (1) resulting from intoxication; (2) resulting from the social environment; (3) resulting from a previous morbid illness or temperament; (4) linked to a mental illness; (5) resulting from congenital diseases or diseases acquired in childhood; or (6) related to hereditary influences (Berrios and Porter 1995; Huertas 1992). These concepts were also developed in other Latin American countries, such as Chile (Araya Ibañache 2021; Sánchez 2014), and Mexico (Horcasitas-Urías 2004).

In the first half of the 20th century, the leagues had their origin in common, as well as their operation in neuropsychiatry associations and their close relationship both with eugenic societies that had a childcare section and with pediatrics, which included a eugenics section. There was a social turn toward prevention, deployed by disciplines and policies such as the “social question of health,” hygiene, social medicine, and psychology (see Beers 1921). In Latin America, this process of extension to the wider population emerged as *social psychiatry*, a field that stood out the most during the 20th century (Gutiérrez Avendaño 2021).

Faced with the risk of a potential degradation of the human race, as a late remnant of the theories of degeneration, the hygienists presented themselves as guardians of a new order. For example, in the Association of Biotypology, Eugenics, and Social Medicine [Asociación de Biotipología, Eugenesia y Medicina Social] created in Buenos Aires in 1929, anti-Semitic

fascists coexisted with liberal-minded psychiatrists and secular educators. The ideas of the “biotype” are an example of the way in which intellectuals, after the military coup of 1930, showed some sympathy toward the Axis countries. In fact, the biotypological ideas of the Italian physician Nicola Pende (1880–1970), who defended eugenic theories and admired Mussolini, encouraged biotypologists to defend the values of mental hygiene freed of all racial degeneration (Ben Plotkin 2001).

The Argentinean hygienist movement gave importance to early detection and outpatient treatment of mental pathology. In the mid-20th century, the influence of the Liga Brasileña de Higiene Mental [Brazilian Mental Hygiene League] on the construction of scientific psychology in Brazil focused on scholarly education inspired by historical materialism. Psychological knowledge was considered basic in the educational process to disseminate the ideology of the League and the idea of progress (Freire-Figueira & Boarini 2014). This movement accentuated the role of environmental factors based on pre-existing eugenic ideas, that is, a “mental prophylaxis” that insisted on the value of early diagnosis and the need to intervene in the customs associated with social thought at the end of the 19th century. In sum, the main objective of hygienism was the intervention of the cultural context, along with social assistance and disease prevention institutions (Dagfal 2015; Kirsh, Falcone, and Rodríguez-Sturla 2008; Klappenbach 1999; Talak 2005).

Strongly associated with the practices of social medicine, which, instead of isolating mental patients, insisted that they should be allowed into open spaces, hygienism defended the theory of eugenics, insisting that measures for the protection of the race were a prophylactic approach that promoted mental health for present and future generations of citizens. This discourse advocated the practice of targeting racial groups and policies related to maintaining public order, restricting immigration, sterilizing certain individuals (e.g., rapists, convicts, and homeless people), requiring a prenuptial certificate (in Argentina, promulgated by Law 12,331, in force as of 1936), eugenic abortion, and birth control (Ferraro and Rousseaux 2014; Talak 2006, 2010). Specifically, hygienism was developed within the framework of government programs and actions and, in the field of mental health, with the creation of a “league” to fight against these scourges. This impetus occurred specifically in the field of medicine, branching out to other areas such as pedagogy, religion, and workplace and industrial safety, to promote production or control “risk areas” such as art, music, sexuality, and sports. These initiatives emerged particularly among the alienists and the psychiatrists of the Argentine Society of Neurology and Psychiatry [Sociedad Argentina de Neurología y Psiquiatría] of Buenos Aires, between 1926 and 1929.

The Argentine Mental Hygiene League [Liga Argentina de Higiene Mental (LAHM)], founded by the alienist Gonzalo Bosch (1885–1967), was a benchmark for Argentine psychiatry in the thirties, as it defended eugenic theories, affected by cultural currents potentially threatening national identity (Rodríguez-Sturla, 2004). The LAHM included sections on assistance to psychopaths, immigration, industrial and professional hygiene, syphilis, alcoholism and drug addiction, work organization and psychotechnics, antisocial reactions (vagrancy and delinquency),

and sexual, social, and individual hygiene in childhood, among others. It was also established that mental hygiene measures included child care, the regularization of the marriage regime, the extension of the network of psychiatric hospitals, and the creation of dispensaries (Loudet and Loudet 1971; Guerrino 1982). In fact, Bosch, who wrote in the *Anales de Biotipología* magazine, addressed certain social and political issues in terms of degeneration, as a product or cause of various social weaknesses: homosexuality, delinquency, the mixture of races, anarchism, prostitution, addictions (such as alcoholism and drug dependency), epilepsy, psychosis, delinquency, and homelessness, including spiritualist practices (Beltrán 1929; Bosch 1933; Bosch and Mó 1929; Reca 1945).

Bosch was appointed head of the Argentine Association of Biotypology, Eugenics, and Social Medicine in 1933, strongly influenced by magazines such as *L'Hygiène Mentale*, a monthly supplement to the magazine *L'Encéphale* (directed by Joseph Déjerine and Henri Claude since 1906) and *La Prophylaxie Mentale*, the newsletter of the *Ligue* created by Édouard Toulouse, Joseph Briand, and Georges Génil-Perrin in 1920. One of the first actions of the League was to create open services for “lucid and nonaggressive psychopaths” (Dagfal 2006). The work of mental hygiene consisted of the propitious modification of the family environment to preserve psychiatric problems and the population at risk, thus anticipating the notion of *mental health* (Ferraro and Rousseaux 2014; Rodríguez-Sturla, 2004).

In effect, the view taken by most of the international psychiatric community at the beginning of the 20th century was that such practices were a threat to public health. The pathologization of spiritualism in France was the framework adopted by all Argentine alienists, not only in the face of its strong scientific and cultural influence but also because of the rise of positivism to the detriment of other epistemologies—a crisis of fact that encouraged people to look beyond Christian miracles for evidence of the afterlife and the divine. Spiritism became the great “battlefield” for a psychiatry who felt encouraged to produce new norms for religious beliefs (see Kirsch 2004 and Stagnaro 2011). Alienists offered a variety of new classification categories for justifying the treatment of people involved with spiritists, so that mediums, in particular, were deemed to espouse a form of excessive religiosity that corresponded to symptoms of degeneracy (also called “religious monomania”). The mediums were deemed to be maladjusted people who had a hereditary predisposition to mental disorders, so a family made up of spiritualists—mostly European immigrants—was seen as being in potential double jeopardy for degeneracy. The fact that they adopted Kardec's doctrine or other forms of mysticism did not matter, since it was only a secondary aspect that operated within this imbalance. This “wave of delusions” had a direct link with spiritualism in its form and content, also known as *Spiritist delirium*, for which the alienists assigned a place in disease classification based on the convictions and paradoxes that these delusions aroused, questioning the relationship between pathology and belief.

French positivism, an ideology characterized by ideals of modernity, order, progress, and rationality, encouraged those psychiatrists who intended to collaborate to create a prosperous, modern, and healthy nation. For example, one of the most

influential alienists in French psychiatry, who had an impact on his Argentine colleagues, was Joseph Lévy-Valensi (1879–1943). Lévy-Valensi was convinced that mediumistic practices were characterized by three fundamental features: (1) that the medium experienced a contagion fostered by the social environment and a doctrine that fostered delirium (morbidity); (2) that, in turn, people subject to delusions were predisposed, and, for this reason; (3) that the delusion was essentially hallucinatory. The alienists portrayed three types of hallucinations that gave the syndrome its hallmark, to the extent that it was linked to Spiritism: auditory and verbal hallucinations (coming from the medium's verbalizations or the spirit speaking through the medium's mouth); graphic hallucinations (automatic writing); and the sensation of levitation of the body or objects (e.g., the narratives of “astral journeys” and the recollection of past incarnations, which were considered signs of dream delirium). In addition, the mediums were “subject to delirium” because they functioned automatically—that is, their announcements occurred outside their will, with the appearance of a split or division in their personality, a kind of short-circuiting of the lower mental functions. In clinical practice, cases of spiritist delusion illustrated the conceptual framework of “delusion of influence”—that is, the situation of individuals under the influence of an alien force that directed and guided their thoughts and commanded their actions and behavior in such a way that it could be either permanent or temporary (Lévy-Valensi 1927). Lévy-Valensi also examined the so-called “dispossession” syndrome as part of the mental automatism syndrome—that is, the impression of not belonging to oneself (which characterized the behavior of mediumistic incorporation). This syndrome had a considerable influence on the neurology of delusion (Lévy-Valensi 1910; Lévy-Valensi and Génil-Perrin 1912; Lévy-Valensi 1930).

In Kardecist circles, nonmedium members were not only “passive” observers; in a certain way, they also participated as cogs in the experience of mediumship through, for example, the “fluidic chain” during a spiritist session. They were even seen as “potential” mediums, where they functioned as the end of a continuum in the process toward active mediumship. In practice, for some mediums, the slightest sign of skepticism and disbelief on the part of the attendees was considered an *attack* against the spiritual manifestation, and the medium assumed the right to cancel the session, if necessary.

3 | Parapsychiatric States and Metapsychic Forces

Strongly inspired by the writings of Lévy-Valensi, the psychiatrist and alienist Fernando Gorriti (1876–1970), considered a pioneer in the introduction of psychoanalysis in Argentina and a member of the French Psychoanalytic Society, showed great interest in spiritism. Although his initial motivation is not entirely clear, Gorriti used to attend meetings of various Spiritualist societies, such as Luz del Porvenir, among others. This idea was already present among the leading neurologists at the end of the 19th century, such as Pierre Janet and Joseph Grasset (see Grasset 1904).

Gorriti's most relevant concept is the so-called *parapsychiatric state*, as his ideas connected both mediumship from a dysfunctional perspective, following Lévy-Valensi, and his interest in the study of British psychic or French metapsychic research.

In a communication presented to the Sociedad de Neurología y Psiquiatría [Society of Neurology and Psychiatry], on December 2, 1936, Gorriti defined such *delirium* as a nosographic entity that was a direct consequence of the abuse of spiritist practices until it ended in chronicity, similar in the mechanism of its development to religious delirium, although he warned that spiritualism did nothing more than “color” the delirium rather than create it. According to Gorriti, the delirium was a clinical variety of paranoia that occurred in trance mediums, which he qualified as frankly hysterical phenomena or neuropathic syndromes. From a nosographic point of view, the spiritist doctrine served only as a structure for delirium. Gorriti also examined cases of mediums who exhibited exceptional conditions, as revealed by his interest in so-called “metapsychic forces.” Along with Gonzalo Bosch, he analyzed drawings “in the style of paranoids” of a trance medium who painted in oil. During one of his visits to spiritualist centers, Gorriti described the case of an (anonymous) “clairvoyant, typological, verbal, and drawing medium, with physical effects,” shared by his relatives who were frightened by such phenomena. The medium had been admitted to the Hospicio de las Mercedes up to three times (the third and last in 1930) and had been referred to other asylum (Colonia Domingo Cabred) in 1931 with a diagnosis of early dementia and alcoholism.

Under the categorization of *parapsychiatric states*, Gorriti risked his interpretation that certain mechanisms typical of mediumship and other experiences had “momentary, voluntary, or spontaneous recurring and more or less conscious” characteristics, to end up later convinced that “they never disturbed the personality, outside of these fleeting states” (Gorriti 1937, 4). His advice, in the case of mediums, was that these singular phenomena occurred in the context of an adequate neuropathic and hysterical constitution called *paranormal*, but that they rarely accessed medical services or hospitals, despite “sometimes acting in a truly alarming way from the point of view of their own mental hygiene, [...] promoting themselves during the spiritist sessions in their character of mediums.” Thus, he distinguished the mediumship of metapsychic phenomena in conjunction from the “semi-alienated” forms according to the criteria of psychiatrist Nerio Rojas (1890–1971) (Rojas 1936, 4).

In another study, Gorriti examined six photographs of a medium/patient aimed at justifying his delusions regarding stains that he interpreted as indicating the presence of spirits or entities that tormented him, obtained in his presence, together with that of Bosch, with the purpose of demonstrating the existence of the harassing spirits: “The practices of mediumship [he concluded] present a more or less special neuropathic or paranormal constitution.” Finally, he provided the following clinical recommendation: “that paranormals (mediums and other similar claimants) should lead a much-needed hygienic, peaceful life, with lots of fresh air, especially in the countryside, with trees, the greenery of the environment and wide blue sky in sight, thereby contributing to quieting the nervous system due to the well-known sedative action of certain colors” (Gorriti 1956, 11–12).

Despite this recommendation, Bosch spoke out categorically and rather harshly against spiritist practices in two lectures, as a crusader for preserving eugenic theories. In his so-called

“hygienic campaign,” with the purpose of demonstrating the perniciousness of these practices, his authority figure did not go unnoticed, and large audiences, including spiritualists, filled the halls of public libraries to listen to him. Gorriti was one of the first Latin Americans to maintain a reciprocal correspondence with Sigmund Freud, even before the creation of the Argentine Psychoanalytic Association (Gorriti 1930). Although Gorriti also attended these presentations, a curious fact has been noted: On August 12, 1932, the Instituto Popular de Conferencias of the newspaper *La Prensa* invited him to present the topic “Metapsychic Forces,” in which he distinguished the pathological component of spiritualist practices from the “true” experiences of metágnomos (a functional equivalent for “psychic”). In other words, he recognized the distinction between certain phenomena of mediums in contrast to those of the metagnomes of psychical research, placing the two types in different nosographic categories. He gave at least three lectures, one on the theme *Illusions and Hallucinations in Life and Art*, delivered on August 7 in the Great Aula of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters; another under the theme *Clairvoyance*, delivered at the Psychology Society on August 24 in the Literary Association “Bellas Artes” [Fine Arts]; and a third, *Suggestion and Spiritism*, on September 7, 1936, in the Argentine League of Mental Hygiene. By the way, *Metagnomie* was a denomination created by the French psychologist Emile Boirac, used for individuals with extrasensory, psychic, or sensitive qualities (see Boirac 1908).

For example, Gorriti wrote a few lines about Enrique Marchesini (1906–1975) (Gimeno 2007), a well-known clairvoyant with whom he carried out a series of “psychic readings” (Gómez 2008, 18). Marchesini, for example, was particularly renowned in the General Paz neighborhood in Córdoba, giving diagnoses in person or remotely, using a garment, or a photo, but more commonly the trace of a pencil on a piece of paper carried by another person through a technique known as “token-object” reader (in Spiritualism is called psychometry). That same lecture series was published in the form of a brochure distributed by the Confederación Espiritista Argentina [Argentine Spiritist Confederation], whose leaders may have considered that the content of their presentation was a “tacit” recognition of their practices (Gorriti 1932).

According to Marchesini, these capacities were “awakened” after a car accident in 1929. Since then, he began to experience visions, until Irma Maggi (1882–1972), another renowned seer, convinced him to dedicate himself to something more useful and supportive: diagnosing only diseases. Gorriti had examined this condition at the Hospicio de las Mercedes in Buenos Aires, stating:

For Enrique Marchesini, from Córdoba, who described the most characteristic features of any person unknown to him, it was enough for said person to draw any line with a pencil on a piece of paper, while at the same time running one of the fingers of his hand over the line of pencil, before an instant of inspiration aroused by reading the stanzas of some verses that he had written in a notebook (Gorriti 1932, 18).

According to some coincident accounts, in 1935, Marchesini received an “official diploma” authorizing him to carry out these unique diagnoses free from all police persecution. The meetings at the Hospicio (it is not known how many there were, and no details of their results are reported) occurred under the scrutiny of Bosch and the pedagogue Mariano J. Barilari (1892–1985), who recalled that, in the past, they had already visited and observed “true macabre scenes of hysteria and true breeding grounds of psychoneurosis in the dimly lit environment of the sessions of various metropolitan spiritualist societies” (Gorriti 1932, 12). In fact, Gorriti predicted:

The day will come when a writer of genius demolishes forever the false precepts of the spiritualist doctrine, whose adherents are legion throughout the world, formed in the virgin land of ignorance and sustained by a certain kind of mystical credulity that makes them endure in their faith, imagining [...] that highlights [...] the implausible, ridiculous and dangerous doctrine. (Gorriti 1956, 18).

Journalistic interviews with witnesses narrated numerous experiences with Marchesini (see Acevedo 2008; Alvarez Lopez 1995; Bertini 2005). However, with some ambivalence, he acknowledged that his conclusion:

[...] does not take away, on the other hand, the great interest that these issues arouse for those who investigate this class of supernormal functions, which have led to the description of a new form of paranormal psychology, with extraordinary results [...] because the mechanism of their marvelous occurrence is unknown, we are currently unable but to imagine hypotheses to provisionally fill these gaps in our knowledge of the subject.

So far, Gorriti has seemed prudent in distinguishing “supernormal phenomena” that seek a satisfactory explanation. In fact, he maintained that, in his opinion, “we have not yet been able to prove the existence of truly extraordinary properties in this class of subjects” (p. 22). Despite his pessimism, Gorriti organized his parapsychiatry in analogy to paranormal psychology: “[...] the possibility of (un)doubling of personality, the existence of a double interior [...] but with the awareness of being always the same person in all cases raises interesting problems for general psychology [...] autoscopic hallucination, a curious and very rare phenomenon, with an external, spatial vision of its own being, its double, speculating on itself [...] that could go from the double internal state, or *baldeísmo*, to external action” (Gorriti 1935, 23). “The phenomenon of *baldeísmo* is that in which the person sees his ideational double resembling his paranormal spatial objective image, while seeing his own and different ideative manifestations, thought, read, spoken or heard as before a mirror, possibly alluding to an out-of-body experience, also known as *astral travel* in Western esotericism” (Gorriti 1952, 731).

Gorriti collected a large number of these “supranormal phenomena.” For example, in a conference at the Society of Neurology, Psychiatry, and Neurosurgery, on May 16, 1952, he

described a case of “paranormal bi-ubiquity” of one of his patients who “had a certain opportunity in the royal palace of Madrid, knowing all its dependencies in their smallest details—that is, without having moved from Buenos Aires, from his own house” (Gorriti 1952, 8). Bi-ubiquity is similar to the so-called out-of-body experience, where individuals experience the sensation that their self is outside their physical body and can see their own body above it (Blackmore 2017; Monroe 2008).

In another case, he mentioned a “hallucination of an invisible external presence” (Gorriti 1950, 123) to refer to the case of a woman, a member of a Buenos Aires theosophical branch, who experienced sensations of the presence of an entity, “a verbal and auditory hallucination of a patient associated with the true hallucinations of metapsychists” (Bosch and Gorriti 1932, 839), as well as the case of the intervention of a medium from the society Luz del Porvenir to solve a crime, whom he described as endowed with a “extremely acute sensory receptivity [...] of a neuropathic, hysterical constitution” (Gorriti 1933, 1179), and a case of the stigmatization of a woman whose wounds bled during Holy Week (Gorriti 1943). Gorriti maintained that this class of mystics was momentarily alienated—or semi-alienated—and should be incorporated into the official academic designation of mental alienation during the trance periods of spiritualist mediums (Gorriti 1945a, 650), comparing them to the divinatory practices of the fortune tellers in ancient Greece (Gorriti 1953). During his visit to the Kardecist society “Luz del Porvenir,” Gorriti witnessed a seance of more than 50 people, most of them women, falling into a state of “hysterical catalepsy” and even rare cases of sleepwalking: “But the most serious aspect of the cases [...] in these sessions, was that in them we saw some little children in a frank state of great hysteria, prematurely aroused by teaching the development of mediumship.” Gorriti alerted his readers that among those who attend these centers, links are sometimes arranged, which add up to the organic defects that predispose them more easily to psychoneuroses, and may, over time, undoubtedly lead to true families of spiritist sects with paranormal properties, even when the laws of heredity are happily not fulfilled with a mathematical exactness; otherwise, what would become of our current world! (Gorriti 1948, 130).

He also described *spiritism* as a form of “cultural hysteria,” whose enhancement was encouraged by a “credulous audience determined by a hyperemotional neuropathic personality” (Gorriti 1948, 135). A similar opinion appears in the medical press of the 1930s, somewhat tinged with religious prejudice, where spiritism is not only undervalued as “a cultivation of pathologies” (p. 363) but suggests that the delusion of possession is a common interpretation (Rodríguez-Iturbide, 1933).

Twenty years later, Gorriti maintained his position, but his statements became more moderate without abandoning hygienism. For example, he warned of “an alarming resurgence of a morbid spiritism, much more serious ... than the original spiritism.” To combat that trend, he recommended a full, intelligent, and constant medical illustration on behalf of mental hygiene among members of the class of people who did not stop having great hardships just because *paranormal manifestations are pleasant* [italics mine] (Gorriti 1956, 11). In

summary, Gorriti was committed to maintaining a differential diagnosis, excluding metagnomes from a dysfunctional category, recognizing the differences between a picture of spiritist delirium and the manifestations of the so-called “supernormal psychology,” and urging his medical colleagues to undertake further investigation. Despite this position, it is noteworthy that, although both Gorriti and Bosch similarly condemned spiritist practices, Gorriti, in particular, was more introspective in his conclusions, distinguishing between the so-called *supernormal phenomena* and *Spiritist delirium*. The stigmatization or pathologization of these phenomena gained a certain margin of permeability regarding their legitimacy, which qualified in large measure the positivism of these actors.

4 | Reactions of the Spiritists

With the exception of the doctrinal conflicts among early spiritists with the representatives of the clergy and secular or scientific intellectuals in the public debates of the late 19th century, the criticisms were less frequent in the 1930s or occurred in the refuge provided by the main entity that brought together the small and large spiritist societies: the Argentine Spiritist Confederation (CEA). Early leaders of the CEA—an organization that still functional in Buenos Aires since 1900—embodied the reply to the main alienists, mostly Bosch and the members of the LAHM, in their crusade for mental hygiene. The leaders of the spiritist movement participated and responded to Bosch’s criticisms, albeit lukewarmly, which questioned the hygienists and their conclusions, mainly through the spiritist press (e.g., *La Idea*, *La Fraternidad*, and *Constancia* magazines), interviews in print media, or brochures and other propaganda agents.

The CEA published various criticisms of the lectures and public debates of Bosch and other members of the LAHM—for example, under the title *Suggestion and Spiritism*, promoted by Bosch in the Hall of the José León Suárez Public Library on September 3, 1938, where Bosch expressed his position in favor of a theory based on suggestion and hypnosis, along with the spiritist frenzy against mesmerism (Chiesa 1936). In another presentation, Bosch, together with pioneer of psychoanalysis, a pediatrician Federico Aberastury (1905–1986), presented the topic *Clairvoyance and Divination*, where they warned about the dangers of divination practices and the exploitation of good faith because these practices needed to be subject to social prophylaxis through sanctions or prohibitions, since—according to them—they encouraged deceit and constituted a remnant of superstition and ignorance. For example, an anonymous spiritist commentator wrote that Bosch considered that Lombroso had become “soft” in the face of the phenomenon of spiritism, a weakness that had seduced the Italian criminologist in the face of apparently inexplicable events observed in sessions with the mediums (p. 703). A fairly common criticism among alienists (as Ingenieros) and some journalists about the sympathy of these scientific authorities toward spiritism was to attribute to them a trait of “senility” or “intellectual clumsiness” when judging their statements, as happened with Charles Richet and Williams Crookes, to name two examples (Cronista, 1934). To confront these statements, the spiritualists were represented by a young member of the Constancia Society,

José S. Fernández (1893–1967), together with his brother-in-law, Luis María Ravagnan (1905–1986), who at that time was a member of the Deliberative Council in Avellaneda (Fernández 1963; [Editorial 1967a, 1967b; see also Villanueva 1994, and Gimeno 2012]). Ravagnan studied and practiced as a dental surgeon. His interest in the social sciences—particularly philosophy and psychology—led to his gradual withdrawal from the dental profession, where upon he embraced the existential phenomenological orientation of which he was a pioneer. He wrote several books, one of which included a defense of parapsychology (Ravagnan 1965; for biographical review, see Klappenbach 2009 and Dagfal 2012).

Although Fernández had exposed in detail the advances in psychic research in Europe, his presentations were—according to the chronicle—“totally indifferent to Bosch and his colleagues” (Fernández 1935a, 1935b). It is not really clear if the alienist and the young engineer ever discussed the matter publicly. In addition, Fernández represented the intellectual elite of vernacular spiritism and was well informed about the studies carried out with mediums at the International Metapsychic Institute in Paris, the main European research center between the wars. In opposition, although Bosch was not ignorant of French literature either, he took a virulent position against mediumistic practices (Bosch 1935). During these debates, the “gap” between the alienist and the spiritist positions pointed against mediumship but enjoyed flexibility in favor of supranormal phenomena. This ambiguity allows us to infer to what extent there were differences rather than agreements between hygienist and spiritist doctrines; in other words, although neither Gorriti nor Bosch endorsed spiritist and occult beliefs, they assumed the existence of “latent powers of the human will” as an unknown but intriguing field of inquiry (Gorriti 1945b). However, since the investigation of these matters called for an alternative and overriding vision, the spiritist phenomena posed a dilemma: Were they *all* hallucinations, or had they been misinterpreted by the scientists who studied them?

In an unpublished lecture given by Bosch on October 6, 1936, at the Centro Iberoamericano [Ibero-American Center] under the title *Suggestion and Spiritism*, a chronicler from the spiritist magazine *La Idea* wrote: “The second part of his lecture dealt with the phenomena of spiritism, demonstrating that he had extensive knowledge about them, since he alluded to the so-called phenomena of luminous ectoplasms, or paraffin molds, which he tried to explain by physical order, neglecting the spiritist theory in explaining them” ([Anonymous], 1934, 6). The chronicler closed his article by writing: “[...] Dr. Bosch’s position is very clear: he is reluctant to make statements in favor of immortality to avoid being classified among the senile”; instead, he shares a long list of scientists who have converted to spiritism or who have admitted the legitimacy of the doctrine (Richet 1935; Morselli 1935). Fernández, for his part, simply highlighted the psychiatrist’s lack of knowledge about spiritism, his incorrect data collection, his arbitrary conclusions, and his dogmatism, rather than his manifest rancor toward spiritists (Fernández 1935c).

Whether it was due to a condescending attitude or the desire to avoid making enemies in the academic world, the controversies

between physician and spiritists continued to be equally polarized in later years; thus, for example, in 1946, the hygienist and pedagogue Daniel Stockdale published in the magazine *La Semana Médica* [The Medical Week] an acid criticism against Richet, under the title “Richet and the Ghosts,” where he questioned his sympathy for spiritism, writing:

Charles Richet, an illustrious researcher and physiologist, believed, in his old age, in the existence of ghosts and even obtained photographs of them. This was a sad end of a man of science, who stained the page of his laborious life, dedicated to the study of vital phenomena, with the exhibition of his mental decline.

Bartolomé Bosio (1877–1956), a pioneer physician of modern sexology and member of the Argentinean Communist party, responded to these statements in the same magazine, which generated an epistolary exchange with wide repercussions in the spiritist arena. Between 1937 and 1941, Bosio directed the magazine *Cultura Sexual y Física*, a monthly of popular interest published by Claridad, and was a harsh critic of quack practices (Bosio 1938, 1939, 1940).

The controversy was particularly interesting, because Stockdale disparaged spiritism, while Bosio, who was not a member of any spiritist society, was nevertheless a critic of eugenics and biotypology (Ghilbert 1954). The visible debate between Bosio and Stockdale in *La Semana Médica* was a good example of how the medical community evidenced contradictory views about spiritism and the legitimacy of the spiritists’ research (see Bosio 1945). However, hygienists between 1920 and 1930 not only attacked spiritism along with other esoteric currents but emphasized various actions to prevent degeneration through spiritual practices.

5 | Further Remarks

The classification of *delirium* as a pathological entity was not due exclusively to spiritist practices but also to practices among people who were not adherents of spiritism. In fact, after the First World War, the psychiatric community underwent a transformation, especially regarding the notions of *mental illness* or the relations between the normal and the pathological. The investigation and theorization of mediumistic phenomena affected both psychiatry and psychology, in such areas as motor automatism and automatic neural action, concepts of the subconscious by Frederic W.H. Myers and William James (and, later, Freud’s concept of the unconscious), the studies of telepathy by Edmund Gurney and Charles Richet, and the psychopathology of mediums according to Pierre Janet and Joseph Grasset, who believed that these phenomena required different explanations from those proposed by the psychiatric model of that time.

These roles also affected their social status, based on their commitment to a mission that generated disciples, schools, and religious groups that ended up separating them from their matrix leaders. This is the reason why it is difficult, or even impossible, to reference a single spiritualism, as opposed to a

current that generated a diverse range of mediumistic practices. Kardecism is a form of Spiritualism—but not the only one—that argued for a strategic space of inclusion, in contrast to those who adopted a mediumship univocally constructed for the emotional states seeking relief in the absence of psychotherapy, nonexistent at that time, or even medicine, still very far from the concerns of the human *psyche*.

Psychology also reacted against the phenomenon of mediumship because, in addition, spiritism questioned the dependence of thought and consciousness on the nervous system, contrary to what had been learned about the locations of sensorimotor functioning during the 19th century. Indeed, theorizing about the mediumistic phenomenon contributed to a great extent to the development of aspects of psychiatry and psychology (see Alvarado 2002, 2017a, 2017b). Concepts such as the *unconscious* in psychology and the *perispirit* in spiritism had already been questioned at the beginning of the 20th century. For example, the naturalist and spiritualist Pedro Serié warned: “[...] the ‘unconsciousness’ of materialism is, for example, a happy discovery of wonderful elasticity, which accounts for everything inexplicable up to now, and which still allows concealing much ignorance under the austere shadow of science” (Serié 1900, 389–390).

As stated above, in longstanding attempts to distance itself from the charges of insanity that were prevalent at the time of eugenic theories, the spiritist collective went to great lengths to avoid the so-called “false spiritists,” often persecuted and convicted by political power. This impression generated a double image of the medium: a figure *consecrated* by spiritists but *alienated* by public opinion that associated spiritism with *curanderismo* (spiritual healing based on the use of traditional herbs and remedies) or “strange beliefs” (problems similar to those that Mariño and his contemporaries had at the end of the 19th century). This problem led the spiritists to reduce or strengthen, at different historical moments, their propaganda activities and publications that illustrated their doctrines and practices. Kardecists maintained that “healing, whether the spirits intervene or whether it is exercised by people who give remedies or medical advice or use their fluids and magnetic practices or hypnotism and whether these practices are charged or free, is absolutely excluded from the confederated spiritist centers” (see the Argentine Spiritist Confederation 1922, 46). The medium should remain, indeed, in the doctrinal, emotional, and spiritual custody of the leaders of the society, above all because of the concept of mediums’ potential danger to the society of being subjected to restrictions and sanctions from the hygienist authorities.

While other nascent sciences, including experimental psychology, had established themselves in laboratories and universities by the early 20th century, the so-called “experimental” (or scientific) spiritualism still bore traces of religious spiritualism. There was a moral challenge to engage in a “disinfection” or sanitation process that would purify doctrine and free it of a shameful past. For example, the dispute between alienists and spiritualists can also be seen as an attempt to clean spiritualism of the stigma of mental illness. It was necessary for spiritualists who were members of the elite to inoculate themselves in a

scientific environment to debate in public forums or in newspapers and magazines to “purify” spiritualism.

Rather than pathological arguments more generally, Gorriti and Bosch also adhered to degeneration ideas as a weapon in their battle against spiritualism. Both were proponents of eugenics, as stronger illustrations in what regard they associated spiritualism with degeneration specifically. Bosch supported a naturalistic explanation of spiritualism and Gorriti described spiritism as a cultural hysteria stimulated by a neuropathic disposition. While Gorriti rejecting spiritualism, does not seem to relate to degeneration. It should be noted the rejection of spiritualist afterlife beliefs by psychical researchers was never rare: Richet, despite Stockdale’s misleading claim, was never a spiritualist or even a believer in “ghosts” or the mind’s survival of death, despite his studies of mediums and alleged coinage of “ectoplasm.” Also, in spite of Morselli’s alleged sympathies with spiritualism, Morselli would always remain a particularly rabid anti-spiritualist. He did firmly believe in the reality of physical phenomena ostensibly produced by mediums like Eusapia Palladino and others, which he explained not in terms of discarnate spirits but through obscure and quasi-pathological organic dispositions of mediums.

The sanitary practices of the mid-forties put the focus—not without characteristics appropriate to “hard” hygiene—on the mediums of spiritist societies, but under the gaze of the State as an agent of control regarding such practices, increasingly widespread in various urban centers. While the practice of mediumship did not decline, the controversies around it acquired a growing effervescence, involving the concerns of the State as well as those of the experimentalists, who sought to distance themselves from religious spiritism in the realm of nascent psychology.

Regardless of the discussions about the “harmful” nature of spiritist practices and the conceptual value of the belief in communication with spirits, mediums were considered subjects capable of “dissociating” their personalities and having access to “unconscious forces.” In the mid-19th century, neurologists who were members of the Société Médico-Psychologique de Paris even used examples of a *spiritual delirium syndrome* to demonstrate the role of automatisms in the genesis of the disorder and their definition of *hallucinations*. According to these theories, the effect of the “terrible” nature of the emotions induced by the practice of spiritism caused a disturbance in the functioning of the brain, inhibiting the faculties that escaped the will until ending up with a split personality.

French psychiatry defended this interpretation to isolate and treat medium condition as delirium, which came to have considerable importance in the debates between spiritism and psychiatry. These phenomena were described and, above all, interpreted in various ways, according to the theoretical leanings of the philosophers, alienists, or psychologists; in other words, either it was the expression of the lower activities of the mind as a pathognomonic sign of an unbalanced mental state (sensation, imagination, memory), or it was the manifestation of another part of the personality: the spirit in the case of the spiritists, or the unconscious in the case of the psychologists. In spite of the view taken by most of the international psychiatric

community at the beginning of the 20th century was that spiritualism practices were a threat to public health, especially in France where there was a widespread pathologization of spiritualism, many illustrious French psychiatrists, Pierre Janet among them, went beyond flirtation with psychic phenomena and partook in experimental research on psychical phenomena, even if they eventually ended up disowning the field. Sommer (2013) also shows that the French and English medical establishments were not as taxative in their opinions on psychical research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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