



Article

# Human radiation for medicine, spiritism and hypnosis in Argentina: scientific controversies around vital radiations (1880–1930)

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## Abstract

In the mid-nineteenth century, magnetic theories penetrated other recognized medical practices in Argentina in order to rationalize their procedures, in a culture that accepted and validated magnetism as a positive science. At the start of the twentieth century, mesmerists created a society, published books and journals, and carried out a large welfare programme; there were public lectures, and magnetic treatment for spiritualists and the general public, emphasizing the therapeutic properties of mesmerism. Magnetologists/mesmerists measured vital radiation and built devices using sensitive objects as ‘physical’ evidence of it. There was an interest in acquiring and using artefacts to measure human radiation useful in medicine. Magnetic practices survived until the end of the 1920s, when they lost importance.

## Keywords

Fluids, magnetism, medicine, mesmerism, Ovidio Rebaudi, spiritism, vital radiation

## Introduction

Spiritualism offered a religious base free from dogma: a Christian morality in the case of spiritualism, and an attempt to synthesize the religions of the East and the West in theosophy, protected by the authority of scholars and scientists who sought scientific evidence of such forces. Mesmerism, or animal magnetism, led to ideas for medical treatments (see Alvarado, 2006). This hypothetical principle has been given an enormous number of names, including prana, chi, mana, animal magnetism, nervous force, neural force, odic force, fluids, psychic force, and orgone. Nineteenth-century physics also produced controversies about the nature of forces such as N-rays, mitogenic radiation, and more modern ideas that have since been discarded, such as the ether theory or, more recently, the debate around superstring theory (Greene, 2017; Schaffner, 1972).

The aim here is to explore the impact of the ideas of animal magnetism that seduced physicists and chemists seeking to validate positivism within spiritualism through the use of technologies

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(records, medicines, photographs), as well as the controversies that these procedures produced in the scientific world (Parra, 2024). The present article will focus mainly on primary sources from the spiritualist press itself, medical articles and the general press, as well as secondary sources from previous studies that put into context the discussions and controversies around disciplines such as magnetism/mesmerism, hypnosis and Western esotericism, as well as quack practices. Indeed, many cultural migrants toured various Latin American countries as itinerant merchants, bringing back tricks and skills as telepaths, mesmerists, hypnotists and illusionists. They then paraded through courts, mansions, theatres and other public spaces – clinics, hospitals, physiology laboratories, séance halls – thanks to the seduction of hypnosis and animal magnetism (or mesmerism) in societies literally fascinated by such phenomena (Ogden, 2018; Vallejo, 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b).

### Origins of magnetism and human radial theories

In the West, the earliest recognition of these principles came from the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1733–1815), who claimed that magnets conducted and directed an invisible fluid that operated on all living beings, like the magnetic mineral itself. He called this *animal magnetism*, emanating from the body of the mesmerist and transmissible through ‘passes’ (a form of laying-on of hands). Mesmer, who began using a lodestone to heal the sick following the teachings of the astronomer and Jesuit priest Maximilian Hell (1720–1792), held that magnetic fluid emanated from celestial bodies and was present in all of nature. The practitioner directs this fluid onto a sick patient, who is then induced into a sleep (known as ‘induced sleepwalking’) that affects the human body through the nerves (Mesmer, 1779). Mesmerists – also called magnetizers – believed that animal magnetism produced healing effects, and could be reflected in mirrors, transmitted by sound, and stored in different bodies. Mesmer himself had great expectations of its use and thought that animal magnetism would revolutionize the medical profession (Pattie, 1994). Due to its popularity, mesmerism was investigated by two commissions on the orders of Louis XVI in 1784, which concluded that its results were more the effect of imagination, imitation and touch rather than an invisible ‘fluid’. For example, Chastenet de Puységur (1751–1825), one of Mesmer’s disciples, argued the importance of the magnetizer’s will and belief in this universal fluid, since his body behaved like a magnet reinforced by air, friction and other bodies and the extremities of the body, especially the hands and eyes (Darnton, 2009; Tinterow, 1970: 302–7). Despite such negative judgement, post-mesmerists or magnetizers proposed that electricity, light and heat were related to animal magnetism, defined as ‘nerve fluid’, or a modified form of other physical forces operating through a universal principle that animated matter and could be organized in different ways (see, for example, Chazarain and Declé, 1886: 12; Cullerre, 1887: xix–xx; Dechambre, 1873: 143–211).

Mesmerism spread throughout Europe and America, and was used for many different purposes, from pure amusement to pecuniary gain in salons, on stages and in doctors’ surgeries, awakening interest in the area of mind (or will) control. It allowed for spiritual travel to other places and planets, and influence on other bodies. Although it had been discredited by Benjamin Franklin in late eighteenth-century France, its practice even attracted the attention of the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson and his contemporaries. Magnetism was not simply a parlour experiment for modernist society; its apologists claimed that it provided the first rational means to reach ‘hidden truths’. In the 1850s, American spiritualist communities, which had surpassed the mesmerists in popularity, despite their different objectives, beliefs, metaphysics and practices, adopted magnetism, thereby giving rise to a ‘primitive practice’ that the spiritualists had rationalized. For example, ‘phrenomesmerists’ – a cross between phrenology and mesmerism – sought to use magnetism

to map more accurately the phrenological organs and modify the behaviours of the alienists' patients. Thus, mesmerism was a valuable contribution to improving a diagnostic practice rather than just a measurement technology (Stolow, 2009). In the mid-nineteenth century, magnetic theories permeated other recognized medical practices in order to rationalize their procedures, in a culture that accepted and validated magnetism as a positive science, along with other religious ideas (De Giustino, 1975: 18–23; Rebaudi, 1903: 49; Schmeller, 2016: 312–13; Wenegrat, 2001: 57–81), such as Christian Science, which introduced magnetism for evangelization into its liturgies (see Podmore, 1909).

Not only did magnetism seem to be involved in digestion and blood circulation, but to some extent these ideas were the cause of the dominant neurophysiological theories of the eighteenth century, according to which the vital force circulated through the nerves, allowing movement and the processing of sensory impressions (Clarke and Llaguet, 1912; Du Potet, 1863: 34). Beyond the speculations about its operation, the most practical phenomena were the 'magnetic cures' through laying-on of hands; occasionally, the magnetizer said he experienced fatigue after the healing session due to emitting his own fluids to support the invalid. Following this idea, in the mid-eighteenth century there were two explanatory theories held by doctors; for example, the British doctor James Esdaile (1808–59) proposed that this fluid in the nervous system carried orders to the brain and functioned as the passive end of an electrical telegraph that records the impulses received from the active end of the battery (see Esdaile, 1852: 123–5). It was believed that this fluid could travel from the magnetizer to distant places through physical barriers, and to the magnetized patient; but other mesmerists defended the idea that the fluid was not only a physical and physiological principle but also an instrument of the soul (see Cahagnet, 1890: 23–33; Lafontaine, 1886: 23). The fluid emanated from God, and therefore the human soul directed that fluid, thus giving strength to the idea that the guiding principle of animal magnetism was spiritual, not physical (Tinterow, 1970: 108).

In this context, a broader heterodox religious current was created that became the basis for the subsequent development of spiritualism. By the 1840s, there were not only physicians with sleepwalking patients who claimed to come into contact with spirits, but also magnetizers who used mesmerism to induce spiritual communication. Although most magnetizers were doctors, other self-styled magnetizers used 'passes' (a form of laying-on of hands) to induce a trance and communicate with spirits. So magnetism and spiritism converged in the so-called 'spiritual orientation magnetism', which eventually led to Allan Kardec's spiritualism. The popularity of Kardec, who became convinced of the spiritual origin of mediumistic communications after attending the sessions of the magnetizer Louis-Alphonse Cahagnet (1809–85), grew strongly after he organized the texts dictated by his mediums (Crockford, 2013).

## Magnetic practices in Latin America and Argentina

Magnetic practices were commonly used in some Latin American cities, with local nuances and diverse purposes. For example, in Brazil, the pioneers of homeopathy began the first trials by introducing doses of 'vital fluid' into their solutions. In 1823, João Lopes Cardoso Machado, a doctor from Pernambuco, introduced magnetic treatment under the name of 'spontaneous catalepsia', and in 1861 Joaquim dos Remedios Monteiro published *Magnetismo*, a journal licensed by the Imperial Academy of Medicine to investigate and demonstrate the efficacy of the new treatment (Portela-Câmara, 2003). In Mexico, in the late 1870s, the doctor Luis Hidalgo Carpio (1818–79) – a forerunner of Mexican legal medicine – observed and conducted several tests on the somnambulistic state; he published the results in the journal *Gaceta Médica*, as reported by Vallejo (2015a). Mesmerism also spread to other Latin American cities; for example, between 1890 and the beginning of the twentieth century, in Lima (Orbegoso, 2012) and Santiago de Chile, magnetizers and

hypnotists such as Alberto Díaz de la Quintana, Count Baschieri, the ‘Count of Das’, Leovigildo Maurica and Enrique Onofroff practised (Correa Gómez and Vallejo, 2019; Palma and Vallejo, 2019). These few examples demonstrate that magnetism was used as a medical practice in religious, technical (such as the clinical application of electricity), medical and entertainment contexts, among others. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, mesmerism attracted the interest of manufacturers of scientific instruments. In fact, many artisans with no scientific background became device builders who were integrated into the scientific community, sharing their practices as mediators between physicists and new disciplines like physiology. The appearance, extension and eventual disappearance of the different contexts for the use of an instrument (public entertainment, teaching, research, medicine, telegraphy, industry, etc.) illustrate both the overlap of different domains and the successive reconfigurations of such instruments (Blondel, 1997).

Although the earliest antecedent of magnetism in Buenos Aires came from Kardecist spiritualism, at the beginning of the 1880s a number of performers of apparent miracles promised extraordinary cures. Some Buenos Aires newspapers denounced doctors, *manosantas* (blessed hands), drugstores and apothecaries that promoted a documentary manual of natural products for treating various conditions such as baldness, hiccups, asthma and neurasthenia, among others, using naturism and herbal medicine, homeopathy, and even hydrotherapies based on various baths and treatments using electricity (Di Liscia, 2003). In fact, electricity occupied a privileged place in the general press through images of vigorous bodies and faces, restored moods and hygienic routines which were offered by thermal establishments, hospitals, public baths, mechanotherapy institutes, and stores that offered therapeutic products for the treatment of nervous diseases (Correa Gómez, 2014).

Mesmerism turned out to be as popular as it was dangerous, both for doctors and for the Church. One example was the explicit criticism by the priest Miguel Ángel Mossi (1819–95), who in the early 1870s wrote a short essay to warn of its dangers because of diabolic attributes, such as the use of tables ‘that move by themselves’ due to the action of the effluvia (Mossi, 1872: 18; for further analysis, see Vallejo, 2014a). These magnetic practices gradually became widely employed by many amateurs, such as the French magnetologist ‘Professor’ Henry Beck, who in 1883 treated ‘the poor for free from noon to 2 p.m.’ in his clinic for nervous diseases (Vallejo, 2021b).

The main medical journals in Buenos Aires (*Revista Médico-Quirúrgica*, *La Semana Médica* and *Archivos de Psiquiatría, Criminología y Ciencias Afines*) paid attention – albeit in a pessimistic way – to disorders caused by the harmful influence of quackery practices and some manifestations of popular religiosity; in general this was due to the rivalry between quackery and medicine for control of the physical and mental illnesses of citizens, as occurred in the cases of Pancho Sierra and Madre María, among many others. 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, some doctors reacted with suspicion to any eccentricity in the practices of their colleagues or anything that had been previously questioned in Europe. However, others were sympathetic to these new tools in their therapies, for example, in the use of metals in the form of magnets, bracelets, pendants and other applications used with the promise of restoring or protecting health, as in the case of Bartolome Novaro and his ‘metal therapy’, about which he lectured at the Argentine Medical Circle (Novaro, 1880a, 1880b).

Leonidas Facio strongly criticized hypnosis because of its association with magnetism and electricity, but he emphasized the findings of Jean-Martin Charcot and other French alienists about what he considered ‘laws’ of human psychology; he proposed that suggestions coming from healers were effective, because they served as a legitimate therapeutic resource that – with precautions – could be taken advantage of (Facio, 1910). With a strong secular and anti-clerical imprint, psychiatrists and criminologists paid attention to the ideal of a ‘moderate’ religiosity in contrast to any

form of religious fanaticism, considered an anti-modern superstition on the way to becoming a dangerous mental illness.

In the context of the validity of their practices, some doctors presented hypnosis independently of magnetic ideas as a ‘moral medicine’ (Güemes, 1879). Examples include: the study of experimental hypnosis conducted by Georges Borda (1886; see also Vallejo, 2014a; Vallejo and Conforte, 2015a); various medical doctoral theses, such as that on suggestion therapy by the neurologist Gregorio Rebasea (1892); and the applications of hypnosis by Enrique Luque (1886). The legal problems arising from its clinical applications were presented by the lawyer Manuel García Reynoso (1887); they were examples of the controversies around the medical efficacy of hypnosis that avoided the unpleasant side effects of magnetism and presented hypnosis as a valid method in the treatment of many diseases.

In contrast, hypnosis also satisfied the pecuniary interests of many theatrical artists, such as the parade of hypnotists and magnetizers in Buenos Aires. They publicly demonstrated the benevolence of hypnosis (Vallejo, 2015b), for example: the extraordinary feats of bodies that did not experience pain (i.e. fakirism); the impact of their influence on a vulnerable woman, like the doctor Diógenes Decoud (1857–1920) and his patient ‘Angelica’, whom he claimed to have rescued from the ‘jaws’ of spiritualism (Decoud, 1888, 1896); and the demonstrations of the Spanish doctor Alberto Díaz de la Quintana in his ‘Hypnotherapeutic Cabinet’.

The cases of Onofroff and Alberto de Sarâk may be used to illustrate these types of performances. Enrique Onofroff (1863–1930) toured several countries in the Americas as an itinerant hypnotist, exhibiting his skills as a telepath, magnetizer, hypnotist and illusionist. He gave many public displays of bodily paralysis, mental dissociation, provoked sleepwalking and ‘Cumberlandism’ (a type of pseudotelepathy based on the detection of muscular movements) at the Odeon Theater in Buenos Aires. In 1895, the alienist Domingo Cabred, director of the Hospice de la Mercedes (as if emulating Charcot at La Salpêtrière in Paris), invited Onofroff to demonstrate his techniques in the presence of a number of renowned doctors, who issued a ‘favourable judgement’ about his effectiveness as a hypnotist (Vallejo, 2013, 2014b, 2019). Alberto de Sarâk, or ‘the Count of Das’ (the pseudonym of Alberto Santini-Sgaluppi), an Italian theosophist and medium, gained great popular notoriety in 1892. Together with his wife, he offered fascinating performances, including meetings and demonstrations of pseudo-telepathy in private rooms and theatres. De Sarâk also founded the Instituto Argentino de Psicología, where he brought together, for the first time, doctors, lawyers, criminologists and educators interested in the nascent scientific subject of psychology (among them, José Ingenieros and Francisco de Veyga). But the Institute ended in a scandal, when the Hygiene Department closed it two years later (Vallejo, 2017). The appropriation of a psychology still in its infancy in order to gain respect and recognition was not new; spiritualism also coined the term ‘psychological studies’, because many spiritualists called themselves psychologists. For example, in France there was an explicit ban on the participation of spiritualists in meetings on psychic research organized by the Institut Métapsychique International in Paris (Meyer, 1927). Allan Kardec’s *Revue Spirite* had the subtitle *Journal d’Études Psychologiques* (Plas, 2012), and the Société Scientifique d’Études Psychologiques of 1883 was a group made up of mesmerists and spiritualists who were very resistant to scientific practices (Alvarado, 2021).

In sum, hypnotists promised to cure diseases of the ‘body or soul’ because they had the trust of their patients, even though some lacked medical degrees. The hypnotists – unlike the magnetizers – not only acted by suggestion, as most doctors argued, but also emitted a ‘fluid’ that explained the success of their interventions (Vallejo, 2021b: 34–46). The roles of the magnetizer and the somnambulist were clearly delimited in this process, which was largely characterized by passivity, an automatic concomitant of the hypnotist’s adherence to an external influence, an ideal that was partly influenced by romanticism (Buescher, 2005). This ability to surrender to a mystical state in

which a medium could experience transcendence (strongly involving the body) was mainly attributed to women. Therefore, the sleepwalking woman was understood as a reflection of the discourse that makes women more suitable for transcendent communication (even demonic possession), due to the assumption that they are weaker-willed, more susceptible to influence, and emotionally more sensitive and passive. Their physical weakness was supposed to make it easier for them to transcend the mundane realm into the afterlife through sleepwalking. This pathologizing of the feminine is an attribute that is found not only in the characterization of somnambulism but also in the female mediumship of British and American spiritualism of the nineteenth century (Featherstone, 2011).

Another hypnotist was the Spanish journalist Justo Sanjurjo López de Gómara (1859–1923), based in Buenos Aires and author of a book on hypnosis in 1891. He unsuccessfully tried to create a Faculty of Hypnology in Buenos Aires, featuring physics, magnetism, electricity, philosophy and psychology (López de Gómara, 1891; see also Vallejo and Conforte, 2015b). Hygienists of the time balked at it, because hypnosis was considered to be a dangerous type of ‘omniscience’. In fact, the presumption was that these procedures made it possible to gain wisdom easily, and scientists and Roman Catholics felt unhappy about the claim that, like Esoterism, these practices could offer an easy source of knowledge. Again, the debate here seemed to be a problem of the frontiers of science, that is, authenticating the efficacy of magnetism according to the idea that a subtle substance was capable of being controlled and given to a sufferer, so that the spiritualists appropriated magnetism not only as a way to legitimize the medium, but also as a reasonable explanation for communication with spirits.

## Spirits or fluids? Human radiation and medical practice

In the context of Kardecist spiritualism in Argentina, the most relevant figure in the practice of magnetism was Ovidio Rebaudi Balestra (1860–1931), who was a prominent scientist both in the field of physicochemical sciences and in the natural sciences. Due to the spectrum of studies he covered, he was considered to be a South American Charles Richet (the French Nobel Prize winner). Rebaudi also founded the *Revista de Química y Farmacia*. Rebaudi participated early on in the sessions of the American medium Henry Slade (1835–1905), who visited Buenos Aires in 1887 for several months. The mediumship around Slade – mainly writings on sealed blackboards, among other feats – made such an impression on Rebaudi that he joined the spiritualists. Under the patronage of Cosme Mariño (one of the founders of Argentine spiritualism in 1878), Rebaudi established a Magnetism Society in 1894 at the headquarters of the Constancia Society, which three years later became the Sociedad Magnetológica Argentina.

The purpose of the ‘Magnetológica’ – as it was informally known among spiritualists – was to bring together men of science, engineers, physicists and chemists, such as the French pharmacist and homeopath Enrique Bonicel, the doctor Carlos Soto who had been educated in Paris, the engineers José Montagner and Luis Sidler, the chemist Alejandro Paquet, the naturalist Pedro Serié (1865–1951) (see Freiberg, 1954; Nale, 1947), the photographer Alfredo Reynaud, and the chemist Jaime Saborit, who used their own instruments to photograph the effluvia of the mediums (Conforte, 2019; Conforte and Vallejo, 2016). Another doctor, Camilo Clausollés (1845–1915), who was a homeopath and founder of the Argentine Hahnemannian Society (a short-lived homeopathic group), also applied therapies based on magnetism, electricity, compressed air (using *Jourdanet’s* low-pressure chamber) and hydrotherapy or other types of baths. Several supporters of spiritualism joined the supporters of magnetology, such as José Casanova Moure, Juan García, Juan Amado, José Gatti, Justino Balech, Francisco Cañas, Francisco Durand, Luis Odell and Nicolás Rinaldini (most of them members of families with a spiritualist tradition). They all began an enthusiastic

series of physically and physiologically oriented magnetism experiments in parallel with outreach efforts in lectures, articles and pamphlets.

Together with Emilio de Mársico, owner of a spiritualist book-printing press, they edited the *Revista Magnetológica* (Rebaudi despised the term ‘mesmerism’, associating it with quackery), between 1897 and 1925, with two brief interruptions. In this journal, they wrote about their own experiments, case studies and experiences in magnetic treatment, mind reading, and the externalization of sensitivity. Rebaudi also published several books about magnetology between 1896 and 1910 (Rebaudi, 1896, 1899, 1900a, 1900b, 1900c, 1910). *Revista Magnetológica* went through three stages: it began as a *Revista Magnetológica* and between 1897 and 1908 was edited by the Sociedad Magnetológica Argentina; in 1911–13, it was called *Revista de Metapsíquica Experimental* and was edited by the Sociedad Científica de Estudios Psíquicos; and in 1922–5 the (renamed) Instituto Metapsíquico produced 172 issues, a record for the time. The content of the journal was quite modest, just two or three articles per issue, along with descriptions of some magnetological devices, translations (dispersed throughout several issues), and a section on news, books and magazines.

Argentinian magnetologists also organized cultural and welfare activities, public conferences, and magnetic treatment for spiritualists and the general public, emphasizing its therapeutic properties, which in 1901 led to the inauguration of an Escuela de Magnetología y Kinesiterapia (School of Magnetology and Kinesiotherapy). The courses were intended for the training of magnetizers to promote a future ‘League’, with the purpose of enacting a law in the Senate to allow its practice (Anon., 1923). These educational programmes, which lasted up to four years, were run by Saborit, Rebaudi and Luis P Vandevelde – initially a member of Constancia Society – who had taken a distance-learning course on magnetism under the tutelage of Henri Durville, rector of the Free Faculty of Magnetology in Paris. Vandevelde advertised its magnetic products (bracelets called ‘vitalizing plates’) in the popular magazine *Caras & Caretas*, which, according to him, had been approved by the Argentine Hygiene Council (Duprat, 1904). In 1912 Vandevelde gained recognition when he treated Manuel Silva, a medium who ‘suffered’ levitations of objects, blows, and pieces of furniture that ‘moved by themselves’ in his house, but this treatment was interrupted when Vandevelde resigned, due to conflicts with other spiritualists.

Some of the members of the Institute of Magnetology also contributed to the design and construction of devices to measure fluids, including Antonio Cortés Guerrero, Marcelino Blanco and Juan Olivero. During this period, magnetologists not only expanded their ideas to other provinces (for example, Pedro Frontera created the ‘Peace and Union’ Magnetological Society in Carlos Casares city in 1906, and there were other groups in La Plata and Rosario). They also maintained fluid discussions with other Latin American magnetizers, for example Tomas Ríos González in Chile, an esoteric publisher and bookseller from Valparaíso, who edited the *Revista de Estudios Psíquicos* (Ríos González, 1914).

Between 1922 and 1925, in order to avoid sanctioning by the authorities for the illegal exercise of medicine, magnetologists developed the concept of ‘biopsychism’ to replace magnetology, mainly due to the influence of the concept of ‘psychic force’, developed by British and French psychic researchers. Angela Elgorreaga, a spiritualist writer, and Marcelino Blanco, who practised his magnetic therapies on patients at Rawson Hospital, both obtained provisional certification as ‘Suitable in Biopsychism’ (Anon., 1924). One of the most renowned magnetologists in this group was Manuel Frascara (1857–1920), an immigrant from Genoa. He was a member of the Constancia Society and an Argentine branch (called ‘Light’) of the Theosophical Society, and he used to visit the homes of patients to ‘irradiate vital fluid for the treatment of diseases’ (de León, 1907). Magnetologists endured medical hostility, which oscillated between contempt for their ‘mysterious fluids’ and respect for a hitherto unknown but promising phenomenon for the practice of medicine

and the treatment of nervous diseases; their therapies were seen as practices employed by a handful of spiritualists testing the validity of their techniques. For example, Vandevelde included customer appreciation testimonials in advertisements for his magnets in the magazine *Caras y Caretas* (see also his autobiography in Vandevelde, 1938: 134). This was quite common in the health market at the end of the nineteenth century, among qualified doctors, healers and apothecaries, as well as sellers of potions, concoctions and other products (see Dahhur, 2022).

## Magnetological instruments

For various periods, some spiritualist societies rented out their halls for conferences and experiments, although magnetology came to have its own rather itinerant headquarters (usually the house of one of its members). These properties consisted of a library, a chemistry laboratory and a physics cabinet (with devices to measure the fluids of mediums and magnetizers), as well as a printing press for propaganda purposes; they produced brochures and magazines, similar in style to those of their European counterparts with whom they maintained a postal exchange. This emergent magnetology of Kardecism assumed the stronger influence of Kardecism spiritualism; for example, Mariño, the main leader of the movement, was influential in the development of magnetology as an instrument for the experimental verification of mediumship, although some magnetologists – Rebaudi included – gradually sought to avoid the doctrinal favouritism of the Kardecist movement (see Mariño, 1934/1963: 128–134; see also Rebaudi, 1924: 1–18).

As positivists, the magnetologists measured vital radiations and built various devices, some of which they brought from Europe or designed themselves; they acquired and used measuring devices and translated journal articles (mainly from the French). As the spiritualists expected, the purpose was also to demonstrate that the idea of an invisible radiation served as a key element in the treatment of illnesses, both physical and mental. Indeed, the main interest of Rebaudi and his collaborators was in line with the idea of a ‘vitalizing’ radiation rather than a mere act of suggestion, as advocated by medical proponents of hypnosis. In fact, Rebaudi received the support of several of the main representatives of French psychic research such as Charles Richet, Enrico Morselli and Emile Boirac (who were corresponding members of the ‘Magnetológica’ at the beginning of the 1910s), and this gave moral and scientific authority to its members. Rebaudi received letters and short notes that were reproduced in the *Revista de Metapsíquica Experimental*. He achieved international recognition, with some of his books being reprinted in Madrid by Biblioteca ‘La Irradiación’ and cited by other European authors (see Montandon, 1927: 134). Thus, the spiritualists appropriated magnetism as a tool to demonstrate the effectiveness of mediumship; for example, the medium Antonio Castilla (1853–1900) of the Constancia Society claimed to incorporate a spirit guide called the ‘spirit of magnetism’, who gave advice on naturism and homeopathy.

Magnetologists advocated demonstrating that magnetism served as a genuine and efficacious force, as long as practitioners engaged in rigorously ethical training to distinguish themselves from those healers who invoked magnetism for hard-fought anti-hygienic practices. Argentinian magnetologists formed a strategic alliance with prominent European scientists who, although initially sceptical, eventually became staunch supporters of spiritualism. Also, at the local level, intellectuals from a spectrum of interests – such as Deputy Alejandro Sorondo, writer Leopoldo Lugones, and many politicians, such as Rafael Hernández and Felipe Senillosa – offered moral support and a defence of magnetological practices (Quereilhac, 2016: 210). All these technological marvels were heralded in the newspapers as scientific achievements in an era of technological progress, adding to the idea of opening up a whole new field consistent with other advances. These included: the application of Roentgen’s ‘X-rays’; the phonograph and wireless telegraphy; Becquerel’s rays;



the ‘waves’ of the telegraph, electricity and radioactivity; the ‘N’ rays of Prosper-René Blondlot and Marc Antoine Charpentier; the ‘radioactivity’ reported by Pierre and Marie [Skłodowska] Curie; infrared rays (thanks to spectroscopy); ultraviolet rays found by Marie Alfred Cornu; and the refrangibility of sunlight discovered by Joseph von Fraunhofer.

These ideas had a profound impact on the concepts and practices of Spiritism, because, by connecting science and technology with Spiritism, a link was also drawn between the physical and the spiritual worlds, closing any gap between them. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, Rebaudi and Vandavelde insisted on connecting the properties of physics with the sleepwalking sensitivity of mediums (Rebaudi, 1896). The use of technology to contact the deceased or to process information received from the spirit realm became a crucial test of their practices. Despite the many approaches that were created to experiment in a positive way, there was a general consensus on the need for a medium as a ‘negotiator’ between the two fields. Even with complex technologies developed especially for spiritual communication, a human medium was required, whose influence served to activate the device and keep it moving (Gasparini, 2012: 23). In addition, the hybridizations between spiritual forces were compatible with the social theories of Gustave Le Bon, the principles of physiology of Henri-Étienne Beaunis, and the hypnosis and suggestion experiments of Jules Bernard Luys, Julien Ochorowicz and Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault, published in *Annales de Psychiatrie et d’Hypnologie*, the leading hypnosis journal of the time.

Analogous to hydrotherapy and electrical treatments, magnetologists presumed that their procedures would serve as an elixir for medical and anaesthetic practices. Examples were: the application of ‘magnetological salt’ (uranyl acetate) to treat various conditions; the use of metals (such as magnets and tuning forks) to induce sleep through ‘passes’ (now well known as the ‘laying-on of hands’); and the impact of looking at water, which for Rebaudi was a conductor of magnetic fluid. According to the vitalist perspective, the body was a place wherein the spirit dwelled – that is, it was a force that emanated from the human body. To put these ideas to the test, magnetologists performed all kinds of tests for a wide range of purposes, for example, ‘double vision’ (object reading or psychometry), remote vision (clairvoyance), and the transposition of the senses (transferring the sensitivity of an object to a hypnotized person). Magnetic treatments were applied to a long list of pathologies, as magnetologists believed that the fluid was transmissible, rechargeable over and over again in objects (such as metals and water), and its main property was to produce physiological effects such as sleep or sleep paralysis of a limb (Rebaudi, 1902: 133). These procedures anticipated the study of nervous and hypochondriac disorders, nymphomania (defined by Rebaudi as ‘uterine fury and exaggerated desire’ in women), and the treatment of nervous delusions (Rebaudi, 1896: 12).

Depictions of these devices enjoyed wide circulation from the 1890s to the 1910s, largely due to the growth of popular science but also thanks to the work of esotericists such as Eliphas Lévi (the pseudonym of Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–75) and ‘Madame Blavatsky’ (the pseudonym of Helena Petrovna von Hahn Blavatskaya, 1831–91), the founder of the Theosophical Society. Both were critical analysts who, from their own perspectives, looked at advances in medicine, biology, psychology and physics as though each scientific discovery were a modern confirmation of the cosmological knowledge and wisdom of ancient cultures. They argued that the scientific paradigms of modernity, such as the ether theory in Victorian physics or the theories of vitalism and neo-Lamarckism in biology, fitted into the esoteric tradition, which understood that the universe was composed of a complex of intersecting energies and overlapping forces that linked the material world with higher (or more evolved) and subtle life-sustaining planes of existence (Levi, 1864/1951; see also Aspren, 2011).

This rapid succession of advances was decisive for the generation of scientific and cultural representations of an invisible universe beyond the reach of ordinary perception, but which now

seemed to be within the reach of the instruments and procedures of technologically mediated observation. New methods of scientific visualization involving the use of equipment such as Crookes tubes, fluorescent screens, precisely timed electrical charges, and state-of-the-art photographic apparatus were at the heart of an emerging theory of knowledge and cultural framework known as *vibrational modernism*. This highlighted concern and imaginative engagement with new forms of radiation beyond the spectrum of visible light, the nature of which remained a matter of debate as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth. Vibration ideas were central to some of the major developments in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century science and, to a large extent, in art. The scientific study of vibrations introduced a new understanding of space, matter, energy and perception, providing logic of its own from the transmission of thoughts through telepathy to the ectoplasm of mediums. The idea that the universe was pervaded by an invisible ‘aether’ supported the idea that all phenomena, including sound, light and even matter itself, consisted of vibrations of varying frequencies (Enns and Trower, 2013: 77–97). The interface of spiritualism and technology, or spirit photography, was a subject in which many spiritualists showed an interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Stolow, 2009; Wojcik, 2009).

Argentinian spiritualists started a ‘campaign’ in favour of magnetology with a dual purpose: on the one hand, to combat the practices by healers and exhibitionists in theatres that distorted its application, and on the other hand, to offer to treat those who could not pay for it, especially those in low-income sectors. They were thus emulating the Christian principles of Kardecism, and thereby avoiding controversies with the medical establishment which had warned of problems; quackery was attacked by the Hygienist movement via the printing press, the closing of relevant establishments, and the forced asylum hospitalization of its practitioners (Dahhur, 2020; Fernández, 1996: 232; Vallejo and Dahhur, 2021). Rebaudi was convinced that this ‘odic’ force was measurable by two types of sensitive devices as ‘physical’ evidence of vital radiation: the movement of needles and the use of photographs (Amadou, 1953; Reichenbach, 1851: vi–vii). Needle or pendulum methods, such as Abad Fortin’s ‘Magnetometer’, Paul Joire’s ‘Sthenometer’, Julian Ochorowicz’s ‘Hypnoscope’ and Henri Durville’s ‘Sensitivimeter’, among other devices, presumed that animal magnetism had a certain correspondence with physical magnetism and consequently could be measured by means of force mechanisms.

For example, following Joire, Rebaudi proposed that the nervous force was externalized towards the device, causing movements of the needle under glass. The right hand produced higher needle deflections than the left hand, but some medical conditions, such as neurasthenia (mental fatigue or exhaustion) could reverse this pattern; for example, hysterics showed lower readings on the left hand (Joire, 1905, 1907). The biometer, created by the French physician Hypolyte Baraduc in 1893, consisted of a glass vial containing a needle suspended from a thread. The needle rotated on a circular surface with numbers (like a clock) that allowed it to obtain readings corresponding to the deviations of the movement of the needle. When a magnetizer brought his hands closer to the instrument, the right hand would attract the needle, while the left would repel it. The movements of the needle showed that each person had a particular ‘biometric formula’, consisting of the expression of his or her vital state. This formula, which consists of combinations of attraction and repulsion of the right and left hands, could change according to different states, dispositions and medical conditions.

The second type was the so-called ‘magnetography’ and ‘transcendental photography’. Photographic instruments also performed a variety of functions: representing, detecting, measuring, archiving and extending the range of the visible to produce new types of observables. These hybrid functions shaped the use of photography in a wide range of social and cultural areas, most notably in incorporating the photographic apparatus into scientific visualization work. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the camera has been used as a suitable medium for scientifically minded

observers, replacing the subjective vision of the human eye with a mechanical device that documents the visible and even the normally invisible (see Harvey, 2010; see also Jolly, 2006). It was thought that photography might also be used to visualize invisible human radiation, because some photographers had popularized ‘thought-photography’ and tried to capture spirits present around the audience. Such transcendental photographs consisted of faces of deceased relatives captured, either during mediumistic séances, often accompanied by flashes, shadows, or lines of light streaking through the medium and attendees, or in a photographic studio, sometimes in the presence of the medium, reflecting their emotional states and health.

Such ‘indirect evidence’ was a photographic image obtained incidentally in spiritist sessions, either photographic ones or sessions *without* the stated intention of photographing spirits, but including ‘extras’, for example, faces or complete images of already deceased beings (animals or humans) invisible at the time of taking the photograph, but present once the image was developed (see, for example, Cheroux et al., 2005; Kaplan, 2008). To some extent, the visual culture of photography opened up for spiritualists new frontiers of possibilities for the imagination. For example, X-rays could align with clairvoyance insofar as its reality was located *beyond* the spectrum of visible light, as long as one had access to the instrument or special powers. So, if it was possible to capture images through opaque bodies, it should be possible to see at a distance or know the events of the future. Spiritualists and other esotericists shared the idea that clairvoyants and mediums were distinguished by their perceptive faculties and possessed unique biological equipment analogous to scientific visualization equipment, such as Crookes tubes, high-speed camera shutters and orthochromatic photographic plates not sensitive to visible light. They also understood that X-radiation pointed to a new frontier of ‘penetrating’ visualization (Stolow, 2016). For both spiritualists and esotericists, photography in particular seemed key to making the invisible visible, although some Theosophists, such as Charles Leadbeater and Annie Besant, were hesitant to endorse photography as a viable tool of esoteric revelation. They preferred to continue to trust their natural powers of clairvoyance; spiritualists, on the other hand, saw an opportunity to produce visible and positive evidence confirming the visible manifestation of the spirit (see, for example, Besant and Leadbeater, 1909).

If photographs were a guarantee of objective truth, magnetographs were the impressions of the invisible radiations of the medium or the magnetizer. To this end, the palms of the hands were used to demonstrate the effect of ‘fluidization’. The medium remained for an exposure time of 4 to 20 minutes on photosensitive plates the size of a shoebox, a few centimetres away, bathed in a chemical solution of ferrous sulphate to obtain images of the magnetic fluid: the larger the impression of the plate, the better was the fluidization for the treatment of the patients or for measuring the sensitivity of the medium (usually, the images were white and grey nebulae on a black background). Similar ideas were held in Spain and Argentina (Ardanuy and Csefkó, 2018; Corbetta and Savall, 2017).

A pioneer in this technique was the Frenchman Louis Darget (1847–1923), who obtained ‘effluviographies’, or images of the fluid around hands, fingers and feet without exposure to light. The images reflected the moral state of the person, as well as his or her emotional state and health. Although magnetology gained interest among Argentinian spiritualists, some magnetologists began to show distinctions that soon became evident. For example, Vandavelde exhibited his certificates and the photographs of people he had cured; Rebaudi, on the other hand, sought greater medical recognition for magnetism to avoid the sanctions of hygienism. Vandavelde not only adapted various devices for his magnetological practice (e.g. the ‘Mindmeter’, which was his own creation), but also imported others from Paris, even up to the 1920s, when he treated patients in his office. In fact, in a correspondence with the Spanish spiritualist Victor Melcior y Farré (1860–1929), Rebaudi expressed his enthusiasm for the creation of a future Instituto Psicomagnético

advocating for mediums to receive magnetic treatment in spiritualist clinics, because it was felt that mediums needed to be purified, retrained and protected from external influences. Rebaudi himself never practised magnetism as a profession, 'nor have I ever received a single penny for my cures', he said (Conforte and Vallejo, 2016: 261). He considered he was a positive spiritist, but the Kardecists attributed mediumistic powers to him. Rebaudi got angry every time he was accused of being a medium, according to Bernabé Morera (1933), since that term had been adopted by *religious* spiritists to differentiate themselves from *experimental* ones. For example, in 1914, Rebaudi translated and published in Spanish the work *Vida de Jesús*, a text revealed through an anonymous French medium in 1885 ('Signora X'), who said she had received it directly from Jesus of Nazareth, a claim that caused discomfort even within the spiritist sphere (Rebaudi, 1911/1914).

In sum, although hypnosis theorists belittled the existence of fluids, reducing magnetologists to believers in 'forces' without sustainable scientific evidence, magnetologists carried out clinical practices, blind tests and measurements, using devices calibrated to measure such forces. In addition, the convergences and differences between hypnosis and magnetism for the treatment of nervous diseases were relevant when validating the nature, intensity and materiality of the fluids that impregnated the morality of the Spiritism. In fact, although some magnetologists came to perform in theatres and public halls (rarely under the control of doctors), others did so under the protection of spiritualist societies, such as *Constancia* and *La Fraternidad*, incorporating magnetology cabinets that offered healing services with the purpose of 'protecting' the medium before the start of a session. But the frontier that separated magnetologists from healers was often quite blurred; for example, in the 1890s, the healer Mariano Perdiel, who was accused of the illegal practice of medicine by the National Department of Hygiene, was quite popular and used the same expressions as magnetologists did for their treatments (Anon., 1891; Senillosa, 1891 (Vol. 1): 232). Another similar case was that of the medium Francisco Blinkorn, recognized for treating patients through passes to 'dissolve tumours', and Rebaudi examined several of his cases.

## The decline of magnetism

Magnetic practices survived until the end of the 1920s, but their popularity progressively diminished as the sanctions against hygienists became harsher and the practices became discredited. While these practices have been progressively adopted as part of mediumship by the majority of the members of Kardecist societies even today, there has been an increasing lack of interest in their research. To a large extent, the Metapsychic Institute functioned due to the cooperation of the Spiritist Society, *La Fraternidad*, whose materials were preserved. In 1918, the socialist Domingo Gentile (1896–1971) – a member of the Spiritist society 'La Esperanza del Porvenir' and editor of the *Fiat Lux* newspaper in Santa Rosa, La Pampa province – proposed a project to create a Faculty of Magnetology with financial support from the *Constancia* Society and the approval of the Faculty of Magnetology in Paris, to be directed by Durville. Even the Argentinian spiritualists supported the project, but Rebaudi rejected it, in part because he was disappointed that magnetology had been appropriated by many healers and charlatans. He also often complained that magnetology was viewed with suspicion by hygienists from the National Council of Hygiene who distrusted his theories, which is why he decided to abandon his attempt to legislate the practice (Rebaudi, 1918).

Despite the efforts of magnetologists to shed light on the experiences and techniques that emerged from a rationalist and positivist narrative, spiritualism sought a final solution to the intersection of theories that were subjectively crossed by empiricism embodied in the figure of the medium. Although spiritualist societies were seen as 'cults' or 'strange and closed' groups, there was, nonetheless, greater commitment in their social lives and those of their protagonists. However, they gradually lost their charm because of their quixotic way of defending their principles, in

contrast with the mediums who were seen as agents of disturbance to the sanitary practices of a metropolis. Members of the spiritualist societies planned a strategic promulgation of their doctrine to confront their main antagonists, rather than continue discussions with the cultural representatives of their time.

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