

BOOK REVIEW

Los límites de la ciencia: Espiritismo, hipnotismo y el estudio de los fenómenos paranormales (1850–1930) [The limits of science: Spiritism, hypnotism and the study of paranormal phenomena (1850–1930)] edited by Annette Mülberger. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), 2016. 346 pp. ISBN: 978-84-00-10053-7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31275/2018/1331>
Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC-ND

Inspired by a meeting organized with the support of the Societat Catalana d'Història de la Ciència i la Tècnica [Catalan Society of History of Science and Technology] in April 2013, organized by historians Annette Mülberger and Andrea Graus, this anthology of articles addresses the evolution of Spiritualism and the emergence of pioneers of parapsychology (the old psychical research or métapsychique), mediumship studies, and hypnosis/mesmerism, showing how such practices were introduced and disseminated in Spain and in the European media. Annette Mülberger is a historian of science and Professor of the History of Psychology at the Faculty of Psychology of the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona and is director of the Center for the History of Science, President of the European Society for the History of Human Sciences, and is currently coordinating a group that investigates the history of science, medicine, and technology of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. There is also an article about research on Spiritualism in Russia, particularly St. Petersburg, by Dmitri Mendeleev, the creator of the Periodic Table of the Elements.

The book is divided into three parts. After a Prologue under the title “Science, Doctrine, Beliefs and Professionalization,” the first part contains three chapters by Mülberger, who describes the origin of the Spiritualist movement in the episode that had as protagonists the Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate, who listened to raps in their house in Hydesville, New York. Since then, the so-called “new Spiritualism” or Spiritism began to expand strongly, both within and outside American borders. In 1857, the work of a schoolteacher and pedagogist Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), would become the leader and encoder of the Spiritualist movement in France. His work, published under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec, consisted of the transcription of messages through automatic writing of the medium Japhet,

through whom he wrote the Spiritist “pentateuch,” a collection of five writings that became the mandatory reading of the Kardeccian spiritism.

In Chapter II, “Spiritism arrives in Spain: The clash with the Catholic church and the First International Congress,” Mülberger presents the way in which Spiritualism—as in all Western countries—was introduced among families through “table-turning” through which sitters in a séance could “get in touch” with the spiritual world. By then, important figures of the Spanish cultural world, such as Manuel Sanz and Benito (1860–1911), the Count of Torres Solanot (1840–1902), as well as the Spanish medium Amalia Domingo Soler (1835–1909), contributed to the spread of Spiritualism in all of Spain. The First International Spiritualist Congress held in Barcelona in 1888, and the clash of Spiritualism with the Church, produced a conflict of interest to the point that dozens of books on spiritualism were burned in an Act of Faith [Auto de Fe], among others, in a public bonfire organized by the Catholic Church.

In Chapter III, “The investigation of the paranormal,” Mülberger analyzes the different lines of research that arose from a psychic (psi) hypothesis such as the mental activity of the medium but disconnected from discarnate spirits, in order to explore the spiritualist phenomena from a scientific perspective. In the English-speaking literature, these studies were known as psychical research, but in Spain the French literature was well-known as métapsychique, a term coined by the physiologist and Nobel Laureate Charles Richet. In later years the industrialist Jean Meyer and others founded the Institute Métapsychique International in Paris in 1919. Mülberger highlights research studies of the British physicist William Crookes (1823–1913), the psychological theories of F. W. H. Myers (1843–1901) with regard to the “subliminal self,” Pierre Janet’s (1859–1947) studies about mediumship, and studies of materializations in the laboratory by Baron von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929).

In Chapter 4, Andrea Graus presents “Dispelling the spirits: The scientific study of mediumship,” in which she develops the idea that spiritualists should create the necessary conditions to “cultivate” mediums, allowing those sensitive people to develop their mediumship through training, and thus contributing to a secular religion. Spiritualism circles were not composed of spiritual leaders but were deeply democratic, so that all people had the possibility to discover their own “channels of communication with the spiritual world, through automatic writing or speakers mediumship, or other exceptional modalities such as painting or drawing” (pp. 112–113). The Spanish Nobel Prize winner Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1852–1934) also showed a keen interest in the Spiritualism movement. Since 1882, hypnotism had a progressive presence in the Spanish medical community, and in Chapter

5 Ángel González de Pablo addresses the process of scientific legitimization of hypnotism in the context of psychology and mainstream medicine. According to him, Spanish doctors such as Juan Giné y Partagás (1836–1902) and Luis Simarro (1851–1921), contributed very influentially in the publications on hypnotism and played a fundamental role in the consolidation of the study of hypnotism in Spain.

In Chapter 6, “The practice of the Metapsychic: A Marquis investigating clairvoyance,” historian Mónica Ballondre examines the studies of Joaquín José Javier Argamasilla de La Cerda y Bayona, well-known as the Marquis of Santa Cara (1870–1940). He was a Navarrese aristocrat based in Madrid who devoted himself to studying mental experiments on telepathy at home, and published one of the few well-known Spanish books *Un Tanteo en el Misterio [An Estimate in Mystery: Experimental Essays on Somnambulist Lucidity]*, in the 1920s, based on his experiences with his son Joaquín, who was well-known as a psychic and visited New York for an interview and a number of experimental sessions with magician and escape artist Harry Houdini. According to Marquis of Santa Cara, Joaquín was better-known for claiming an ability to see through opaque objects. His father began to make demonstrations of his psychic ability for reading paper sheets tucked inside sealed boxes or guessing the hour of clocks (previously handled) also hidden from sight. Among the audience of these shows was the Spanish writer Valle-Inclan, who was a friend of the Marquis of Santa Cara and became convinced that Joaquín’s powers were real. In Chapter 7, Nicole Edelman argues that the beliefs of the spiritualists established a distinction between a person sensitive to the influence of the spirits and the sleepwalker who acts under the influence of his own spirit (spiritualistic vs. animistic theories).

In the Epilogue, Mülberger recognizes that the history of this articulation “science and spiritism” requires an interpretation that forces us to situate ourselves in the history of scientific thought of the time in agreement with other Latin American authors who also found similar data in their own historical studies, such as those carried out in Argentina (Gimeno, Corbetta, & Savall 2013, Quereilhac 2016, Parra 1995), Chile (Vicuña 2006), or México (Leyva 2005).

The Limits of Science ends with an “Appendix” that includes a definition



of the concepts usually named in psychic research, metapsychics, and parapsychology, and a list of References.

—ALEJANDRO PARRA

Instituto de Psicología Paranormal, Buenos Aires, Argentina

rapp@fibertel.com.ar

References Cited

- Gimeno, J., Corbetta, J. M., & Savall, F. (2013). *Cuando hablan los espíritus: Historias del movimiento kardeciano en la Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Antigua.
- Leyva, J. M. (2005). *El ocaso de los espíritus: El espiritismo en México en el siglo XIX*. Mexico: Nexos Sociedad, Ciencia y Literatura.
- Quereilhac, S. (2016). *Cuando la ciencia despertaba fantasías: Prensa, literatura y ocultismo en la Argentina de entresiglos*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI.
- Parra, A. (1995). Research aspects and social situation of the parapsychology in Argentina: Brief history and future possibilities. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 60:214–228.
- Vicuña, M. (2006). *Voces de ultratumba: Historia del espiritismo en Chile*. Santiago, Chile: Taurus.