Neo-Mesmeric Movement

Animal magnetism, the eighteenth century movement that attributed trance states and related phenomena to a physical agent, is often thought to have disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century. In fact such ideas continued to be discussed even into the twentieth century, a late flowering sometimes referred to as 'neo-mesmerism'. This survey describes the movement's main figures and their ideas.

Introduction

Many influences contributed to the development of the mesmerism movement in the eighteenth century. There was a growing interest in in psychic phenomena – particularly those related to healing – and in the writings and activities of Franz Anton Mesmer.1 In his 1779 book *Mémoire sur la Découverte du Magnétisme Animal* (Memoir on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism), Mesmer described a principle he called 'animal magnetism', based on a 'universal fluid' that he maintained could produce all kinds of effects, some of them on the human body. This fluid, he asserted, could be used to cure ailments, a discovery of great importance to medical science and practice, he considered.

The naturalist Joseph-Philippe-François Deleuze took up Mesmer's ideas in his *Histoire Critique du Magnétisme Animal*, stating:

> The magnetic fluid continuously escapes us: It forms an atmosphere around our body ... which ... does not act noticeably on individuals around us; but when our will pushes and directs it moves with all the strength that we impart: It moves like light rays sent out by bodies ablaze'.2

These ideas developed into the movement eventually named mesmerism. Its adherents believed that the trance induced by animal magnetism could not only heal but also produce other phenomena, including loss of sensibility to pain, feats of memory, diagnosis of disease, telepathy and clairvoyance, transferring of the senses and finger-tip perception.3

Some explained mesmeric phenomena without recourse to the concept of animal magnetism, for instance as a result of as expectation and suggestion.4 Particularly influential were the views of James Braid, who acknowledged the mesmerist trance as a 'derangement of the state of the cerebro-spinal centres, and of the circulatory, and respiratory, and muscular systems, induced ... by a fixed stare, absolute repose of body, fixed attention, and suppressed respiration, concomitant with that fixity of attention'5 – but denied that it had to do with any hypothetical magnetic fluid.

Such ideas slowly undermined belief in animal magnetism, as can be seen in late nineteenth-century publications:6 French physician Amédée Dechambre held in the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de Sciences Médicales* that it was not real, and that the true cause of the phenomena was an over-excited imagination.7 Today it is widely held8 that the belief in magnetism had virtually died out, effectively killed

off by Braid.9 This is not the case: while there was certainly a marked decline, it had by no means disappeared.

Neo-Mesmerism in France

Émile Boirac

The neo-mesmeric movement was particularly strong in France. One of its best known representatives was French philosopher Émile Boirac, who had served as chancellor both of the Académie de Grenoble and of the Université de Dijon. Boirac believed in the existence and action of magnetism, which he saw as 'a personal and psychophysical action of the operator, an action emanating from its brain, which is exerted by currents more or less analogous to electrical and magnetic currents'.10

Boirac accepted the influence of suggestion and fixed attention in the production of hypnotic phenomena, but he also believed in magnetic action. He referred to 'biactinism', the agent which transmits to the nerve centres the excitations coming from the periphery and gives birth to the sensations. It is this also which transmits to the muscles the orders of the will, and determines the movements of the exterior organs. It is this, too, which excites and regulates the different vital functions; respiration, circulation, assimilation, and catabolism. But we do not know what constitutes it.11

Boirac12 stated that magnetic action could produce physical effects such as analgesia, anesthesia, muscle contractions, movements of attraction, and sensations (heat, tingling, stiffness). The physical influence, in Boirac's view, could be distinguished from suggestion if the experimenter kept silent, avoided physical contact, and, in a test aimed at producing effects at a distance, for instance, concealed its true purpose from the subject.13

In one test Boirac used magnetic passes and a direct gaze with a sixteen-year-old boy: 'Seated in front of the subject … I slid my right foot slowly over the carpet, the toe pointing toward the subject's left foot. I noticed immediately a slight movement, a sort of tremor, in his foot. Again I slid my right foot, very slowly and without noise; this time the subject's foot glided visibly toward mine. …'14

Summarizing its properties, Boirac said that the magnetic force: varied according to the temperament of the experimenter and the sentitivity of the subject; could be conducted via a copper wire; could be polarized; went out mainly through the fingers, but also from other body parts; and was inhibited by glass.15

Boirac also argued that telepathy was the result of distant magnetic action, considering it unscientific to postulate ideas of non-physicality to account for this phenomenon.

Alexandre Baréty

In 1887, physician Alexandre Baréty published a book of over six hundred pages, *Le Magnétisme Animal: Étudié sous le Nom de Force Neurique Rayonnante et Circulante dans ces Propriétes Physiques, Physiologiques et Thérapeutique* (*Animal Magnetism:*

Studied Under the Name of Radiating and Circulating Neuric Force, its Physical, Physiological and Therapeutic Properties). This force was seen as coming from our nervous system, 'which circulates along the nerves or *radiates* out of them … and is susceptible to producing certain sensitive, motor and psychic modifications on other human bodies'.16

In the first half of the book Baréty described observations with an experimental subject, Mlle C; the second contains observations of other subjects. Baréty believed that the human body could project the neuric force via the fingers, eyes and breath. These radiations could be reflected by mirrors and other reflective surfaces, and fragmented if they passed through a prism. The rays had physiological effects, which he was able to demonstrate by causing hyperesthesia and anesthesia on parts of Mlle C's body. The force could induce healing, and affect sensations and mental functions. It could also induce a trance.

Baréty maintained he could influence people through objects that he had charged with this force, such as water, and others such as a sewing needle, paper, water, a table, a flower, and a handkerchief. He also argued that proximity of one person to another could affect the nervous condition of either.17

For Baréty, the force could induce trance and healing, and also affect sensations and mental functions. In Mlle C he said he induced a trance passing one of his hands along her body, which showed anesthesia. Some days later he saw that he 'could produce anaesthesia without trance by passes on different regions of the body, and limited to the region covered by the passes. I could thus anaesthetize a finger, the nose, and ear, one of the eyelids, [and] half of the side of the body'.18 He was also successful in controlling Mlle C's stomach pain.

The force, Baréty wrote, could pass through physical obstacles. On one occasion he tried to neuralize a patient standing about ten centimetres on the other side of a fifty centimetre brick wall: placing his hand close to the wall, pointing in the patient's direction, the patient soon exhibited muscular contractions in a wrist and hand. Baréty had no doubt that the force could be used for healing purposes, and also believed it was related to hysterical disturbances.

Albert de Rochas

In common with others involved in the new mesmerism in France, Albert de Rochas asserted the existence of a fluid that 'circulates along the nerves like electricity circulates along the metallic wires of a telegraphic network'.19 In his 1887 book *Les Forces Non Définies,* de Rochas reported the use of magnets and hand passes to induce trance and other phenomena. He believed the magnetic force had polarity and that muscular contractions could be provoked in the human body by using similar polarities, and reversed by applying opposite polarities.

Probably the best known aspect of de Rochas's work centered on the exteriorization of sensibility, by which he meant the apparent exteriorization of the physical body's tactile impressions located at a short distance from the body, or transferred to objects.20 He used a sensitive participant (A) whose task was to look at a

hypnotized individual (B). Generally, A reported seeing layers of some type of force around B. De Rochas wrote:

> If I, as magnetizer, act on this layer in any way, B feels the same (sensation) as if I acted on his skin, and he does not sense anything or almost anything if I act in any other place than on the layer; he does not feel much if he is acted upon by a person who is not in rapport with the magnetizer.
>
> If I continue magnetization, A. sees forming around B. a series of equidistant layers separated by a space from 6 to 7 centimeters (of width) … and B. does not feel touches, (or) prickings … the sensibility diminishes proportionally to its distance from the body.[21]

Hector Durville

Hector Durville was another active figure in the late French magnetic movement, doing much to publicize it in France. He believed that the magnetic force was polarized, that it could be channeled using magnets, and that it could be used to treat ailments. According to Durville, magnetism was located in the human body, radiating round it like an atmosphere:

> The human body is therefore the seat of particular vibrations which give birth to this agent. These vibrations, which have their characteristic shape, their amplitude, their speed, are communicated gradually to the ambient environment as the undulations produced by a stone falling on the surface of still water. They produce a modification in the molecular vibrations peculiar to the inert bodies and modify their properties … On the human body, they also produce changes in organic activity; and …, under certain conditions, they come across … the sense of sight, in the form of luminous waves.[22]

In 1887, Durville founded the Société Magnétique de France (Magnetic Society of France) appealing to those favorable to magnetism to help establish it in the 'repertoire of natural sciences'.[23] In 1893, he founded the École Pratique de Magnétisme et de Massage (Practical School of Magnetism and Massage), where magnetic theory and practice were taught.[24] His many publications[25] include *Théories & Procédés du Magnétisme*,[26] where he described magnetism as coming from the human body polarized and in wave form. He proposed three laws:

- the human body is polarized, right side positive, left side negative
- polarity is inverted in left handers
- matching poles arouse, contrary poles have a calming effect[27]

Henri Durville

Other French magnetizers continued this tradition, including Hector Durville's son Henri, an organizer of conventions where neo-mesmerism was discussed alongside spiritualism and psychical research.[28] Henri Durville believed the human being is 'a generator and an accumulator' of a magnetic force formed from breathing and nutrients produced by the body,[29] one that has healing properties.

Jules Bernard Luys

Jules Bernard Luys, a distinguished French neurologist, attracted attention with claims that hypnosis altered the nervous forces of bodies, producing what he called 'truly extra-physiological energies, new phenomena, developed in a purely experimental way, which form in the hypnotized subject completely new conditions of life and of perception of the exterior world'.[30] Particularly dramatic claims related to luminous effluvia. Luys wrote:

> Not only do the hypnotized subjects have the attribute of seeing the magneto-electric effluvia which emerge from physical devices... but they can also be adapted to make them recognize the effluvia that emerges from the eyes, ears, nostrils, and the lips of living beings – to distinguish them, those on the right side and those on the left side – putting the blue color on the left and red on the right ...
>
> The hypnotized subject ... can thus be employed as a real living reagent to recognize the differences in the coloration of the effluvia on the left side and those on the right side. In healthy, well men, the irradiated effluvia of the eye and the organs of the senses of the left side are revealed by a very intense blue coloration-those on the right side by a red carmine coloration. The intensity of the emitted effluvia seems to indicate the maximum energy of the nervous forces – indeed:
>
> In hemiplegics – the effluvia irradiated from the eye of the paralyzed side are very weak.
>
> In chronic tabetics (degeretative disease of the spinal cord), very markedly weakened, the intensity of the effluvium is greatly diminished on both sides.
>
> In neuropaths and in the hysterics of both sexes, the red coloration of the effluvia of the right eye becomes violet; this is a diagnostic sign which in certain cases has allowed me to detect states of latent hysteria, the eyes of these subjects appear incapable of going up until they can form a red color. The effluvia of the ears, nostrils and lips persists in their red coloration.[31]

Luys also believed that the effluvia could be detected by photographic plates,[32] indicating their physical nature; he considered this would give scientific endorsement to earlier 'magnetizing fluids' such as Reichenbach's 'Od' and Baréty's 'neuric' force[33] (it was thought at the time that photography could objectify invisible forces.)[34]

Hippolyte Baraduc

Detection by means of photography and instruments was taken up by others. One was French physician Hippolyte Baraduc, author of books such as *La Force Vitale*[35] and *L'Ame Humaine*.[36] In the first book, Baraduc reported the use of the biometer, an instrument for measuring a person's magnetic force by attraction and repulsion in the hands; this allowed for the diagnosis of various nervous conditions. He asserted that the biometric measurements of hypnotizer and subject changed during the hypnotic rapport,[37] revealing the existence of a measurable fluidic body.[38]

In the second book, Baraduc argued that the human soul is luminous: the light is generally invisible, but has a 'quite powerful photo-electrical action that allows the objectification of its manifestation on a sensitive plaque'[39] (he published photos of this phenomenon). He conceived of the soul as the covering of the spirit, while the spirit manifests as light of various types.

Other French experiments claimed to demonstrate the existence of a vital force: Louis Darget's use of photographic plates, Gaston Durville's studies of antiseptic effects, and Paul Joire's experiments with the sthenometer, a needle enclosed in glass.[40]

Other defenders of magnetism in France included Bertholet,[41] Bonnaymé de la Flachere,[42] Bourru & Burot,[43] Chazarain & Declé,[44] G Durville,[45] Gasc-Desfossés,[46] Liébeault,[47] Moutin,[48] and Piobb.[49] (Liebeault called it 'zoomagnetism,' but later changed his mind about the existence of a magnetic principle.[50])

A descendant of magnetism ideas was a belief in the influence of metals (metalloscopy) or magnets.[51] Magnets were also associated with the capacity to channel animal magnetism by Mesmer and others. They were used later in the century, notably at the Salpêtrière hospital, where it was found they could cause symptoms such as paralysis to transfer from one side of the body to the other.[52] It was suggested that a magnet 'acts like a faint electric current on the nervous system, and produces a continuous peripheral excitement' on the patient's nervous system;[53] hysterics and highly hypnotizable individuals were thought to be particularly susceptible. It was even claimed that transfers could take place from one person to another:[54] one account describes the transfer of mental states using a magnetized iron crown.[55] Stricly speaking, this was not held to be magnetic action, but it belonged to the same family of beliefs in unorthodox forces and their effect on the nervous system. (For reviews of transfer phenomena see Gauld[56] and Harrington.[57])

Neo-Mesmerism in Other Countries

Ideas about magnetism can also be found in countries other than France. The topic was discussed by Sidney Alrutz, Edmund Gurney, and Paolo Visani Scozzi, from Sweden, England, and Italy, respectively.[58] In Germany, ophthalmologist Rudolf Tischner[59] defended the physical reality of the exteriorization of sensibility. Another German, philosopher Carl du Prel, equated Reichenbach's concept of Od with animal magnetism, seeing it as the 'key' concept to explain magic.[60] Du Prel wrote:

> We must conclude that od is the conductor of the vital force and of consciousness, that it is the intimate essence of man, or that it is intimately related to it. The intimate essence of man can thus get in rapport with the intimate essence of things and with other men, without the intermediary of bodily organs, and without being limited by distance. This is precisely what we call magic. The physical man does not produce the magical effects, his animal-magnetic radiations act alone. Completely externalized, they form the astral body.[61]

Du Prel believed that suggestion alone could not explain organic effects, but rather than it mobilized magnetic action to accomplish the task.

Suggestion in itself is not a force, but a physical lever, putting into action an animal-magnetic odic current, which is directed in normal and healthy life by the unconscious will, it is the same in suggestion by the conscious will.

In normal life this current involuntarily regulates the whole vital system; in suggestion, it performs a unique task, prescribed to it, of an organic or psychical nature.62

The Polish philosopher and psychologist Julian Ochorowicz also belonged to this movement, proposing a 'psycho-physical transmission' to explain observations of different results from one hypnotizer to another. Ochorowicz postulated that this factor was behind the phenomena of mental suggestion with a hypnotized individual, 63 which was 'the action upon the subject of a centre of radiation from without… and an adjustment in conformity with the dynamic nature of that centre … effected little by little'.64

Influence on a subject, Ochorowicz stated, showed 'that a certain vibratory tonic movement peculiar to a given organism is propagated beyond its periphery, and can influence the subject so definitively, so palpably, that there is a real action'.65

> 1. Sometimes the magnetized subject discerns the presence of his magnetizer independently of the ordinary sensations. His touch he distinguishes from that of others—distinguishes it even though it be applied by means of an inert body (a rod, for instance), which of itself cannot influence him differently. If, therefore, the subject distinguishes his magnetizer's touch as well through a rod as directly, it must be that there exists a molecular current of some sort peculiar to the organism of the magnetizer, and which indicates his presence in much the same way that a galvanic current, through the intermediation of a wire in contact with us, indicates the presence of a pile. The objection that most subjects feel nothing of this action is of no weight, for so, too, with a current from a weak galvanic element we shall feel nothing, while the magnetic needle will clearly prove its presence, and with a current weaker still, from a telephone or from a frog, the magnetic needle will show no result whatever: an exceptionally sensitive galvanometer would be necessary in such a case …
>
> 2. We can obtain marked results of a therapeutic kind by acting without contact and unbeknown to the patients operated upon, sleeping children, for example. Hence, there is an inductive action that overpasses the superficies of the body.
>
> 3. We find marked differences in the so-called magnetic action of different persons—differences not to be explained by moral action. One hand acts differently from another hand. Hence, there is a physical action, and a *personal* physical action.66

Authors in the United States who published popular 'how-to' books about magnetizing include William Walker Atkinson and Edmund Shaftesbury (pseudonym of Albert Webster Edgerly).67 In his *Cultivation of Personal Magnetism in Seven Progressive Steps* Shaftesbury referred to an 'electro-magnetic influence of

a vibrating character capable of traveling great distances and controlling any form of life'.[68]

Scholarly Perspectives

A recent overview states: 'Hypnosis had not replaced mesmerism at the end of the nineteenth century, but still existed alongside it'.[69]

As with early mesmerism, the neo-mesmeric movement received much criticism. Many authors questioned the existence of magnetic fluid,[70] while the effects of magnetism were attributed to suggestion and expectation, in critiques of Boirac and Baréty, for instance.[71] Similar objections were raised against claims of transfer phenomena.[72]

Authors sympathetic to magnetism complained of the insistence of most physicians that it was a 'chimera' and that magnetizers were 'mad, hallucinators, fools, and crooks'.[73] One called for a rapprochment, believing that unorthodox approaches also had something to contribute.[74]

However, it can be argued that the magnetic tradition evolved into the model of nervous and psychic forces that was later adopted by spiritualism and psychical research to explain physical mediumship and other phenomena (reviewed elsewhere).[75] Similar beliefs exist today under other names and in other contexts.[76]

In his 1967 book *Histoire de l'Hypnose en France*, Barrucand is scathing about the late mesmerists, whom he lists under the heading 'Some Names Justly Forgotten Today'.[77] The topic has also been critically reviewed by Crabtree,[78] Dingwall,[79] Gauld,[80] and Plas.[81] Luys in particular has been the target of criticism, considered at best a notably extravagant aspect of the movement,[82] at worst, credulous and even a charlatan.[83]

Other discussions have been published by Harrington,[84] also Alvarado,[85] who besides summarizing the critiques presents a more nuanced perspective:

> While their ideas were not widely accepted at the time, and may seem to many today to be methodologically weak, this does not mean that they were the work of cranks, or that they should be treated with disdain. ... Such ideas were part of the history of attempts to understand hypnosis, interacting in many ways with other developments that became part of the accepted canon.
>
> Following the interest historians of science have in rejected practices such as alchemy and phrenology, and in constructs, such as the ether and phlogiston, a proper history of hypnosis should not be made only of past work and ideas that resemble the present. Studying the work of such men as Baréty, Boirac and Ochorowicz illuminates the context in which Charcot, Bernheim and others worked to develop their ideas. In a wider context, re-examining such ideas is helpful to understand the development of science itself.[86]

Carlos S Alvarado

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. For overviews of mesmerism, see Crabtree (1993); Gauld (1992); Méheust (1999).
- 2. Deleuze (1813) vol. 1, 89.
- 3. Examples include Deleuze (1813); Du Potet (1863); Esdaile (1852); and Tardy de Montravel (1785). For lists of the mesmeric literature see Alvarado (2008); Crabtree (1993); and Gauld (1992).
- 4. e.g. Franklin et al. (1784/1970); Hénin de Cuvillers (1820).
- 5. Braid (1843), 19.
- 6. e.g. Bernheim (1891); Binet & Féré (1887); Gilles de la Tourette (1887).
- 7. Dechambre (1873).
- 8. e.g. Forrest (2000); Murphy & Kovach (1972); Riskin (1994); Shor (1979).
- 9. Bottey (1884), i.
- 10. Boirac (1895), 60.
- 11. Boirac (1917/ n.d.), 158.
- 12. Boirac (1912/1917), 146-48
- 13. Boirac (1917/n.d.), 60.
- 14. Boirac (1917/n.d.), 165-66.
- 15. Boirac (1912/1917, 146-48.
- 16. Baréty (1887), xii.
- 17. Baréty (1887), 234.
- 18. Baréty (1887), 211.
- 19. de Rochas (1899), 60.
- 20. de Rochas (1899).
- 21. de Rochas (1899), 56.
- 22. Durville (1895b), 162.
- 23. Anonymous (1887), 165.
- 24. Durville & Jagot (n.d.), 450.
- 25. e.g. 1895a (n.d).
- 26. (n.d).
- 27. Durville (n.d.), 267.
- 28. e.g. Durville, (n.d.).
- 29. Durville (1920), 275.
- 30. Luys (1890), 14.
- 31. Luys (1892), 321-22.
- 32. Luys & David (1897).
- 33. Luys & David, 1897, 517.
- 34. See the reviews of Chéroux (2005); Girod (1912); and Santini (n.d).
- 35. Baraduc (1893b).
- 36. Baraduc (1896).
- 37. Baraduc (1893a), 44.
- 38. Baraduc (1893a), 44.
- 39. Baraduc (1896), 51.
- 40. Darget (1909); Durville (1913; Joire (1905).

- 41. Bertholet (1927).
- 42. Bonnaymé de la Flachere (1917).
- 43. Bourru & Burot (1887).
- 44. Chazarain & Declé (1886).
- 45. Durville (1911).
- 46. Gasc-Desfossés (1907).
- 47. Liébeault (1883).
- 48. Moutin (1920).
- 49. Piobb (1912).
- 50. Liébeault (1891).
- 51. e.g., Charcot, Luys, & Dumontpallier (1877, 1878).
- 52. Binet & Féré (1885, 1887).
- 53. Binet & Féré (1887), 262.
- 54. Babinski (1886).
- 55. Luys & Encausse (1890).
- 56. Gauld (1992).
- 57. Harrington (1988).
- 58. Alrutz (1921); Gurney (1888); Visani Scozzi (1901).
- 59. Tischner (1924).
- 60. du Prel (1899/1907–1908), vol. 1, chapter 3.
- 61. Du Prel (1899/1907–1908), vol. 1, 68.
- 62. Du Prel, 1899/1907–1908), vol. 1, 16.
- 63. Ochorowicz (1887/1891), 348.
- 64. Ochorowicz (1887/1891), 273-74.
- 65. Ochorowicz (1887/1891), 223.
- 66. Ochorowicz (1887/1891), 328-29.
- 67. Atkinson (1901); Shaftesbury (1925).
- 68. Shaftesbury (1925), 38.
- 69. Pintar & Lynn (2008), 91.
- 70. See e.g. Bernheim (1884); Binet & Féré (1887); Gilles de la Tourette (1887).
- 71. Janet (1888); Leaf (1895).
- 72. Bernheim (1885).
- 73. Durville & Jagot (n.d.), 456.
- 74. Coué (n.d.)
- 75. Alvarado (2006, 2016).
- 76. See, for example, Movaffaghi & Farsi (2009), and Nelson & Schwartz (2005).
- 77. Barrucand (1967), 157.
- 78. Crabtree (1993).
- 79. Dingwall (1967–1968).
- 80. Gauld (1992).
- 81. Plas (2000).
- 82. Gauld (1992), 34-36.
- 83. Plas (2000), 57.
- 84. Harrington (1988).
- 85. Alvarado (2009a, 2009b).
- 86. Alvarado (2009b), 85.