

***Deaf-mutism and Savagery
Through the Lens of Animal Magnetism
in France during
the Early Nineteenth century***

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The doctrine of animal magnetism at the beginning of the 19th century

Animal magnetism, also known as mesmerism, was introduced and elaborated by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer, who believed an undetectable fluid permeated the whole universe. This invisible natural force, which was possessed by all living beings, could have physical effects, including healing. According to Mesmer, human diseases were caused by the obstructions that this undetectable fluid encountered in sick bodies. Magnetisers could eliminate these obstacles by re-establishing the balance of the fluid within the body through special gestures, called magnetic passes. Once the free circulation was restored, patients would enter a crisis that involved convulsions and an altered state of mind, followed by a second state of perfect physical and mental well-being.

The doctrine of animal magnetism radically changed its foundations in the early nineteenth century. Mesmerism entered a latent phase during the French Revolution, although it returned to become increasingly popular under the First Empire. The central figure of the renewed movement of animal magnetism, starting from 1807, was Mesmer's pupil, Amand Marc Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis of Puységur.¹ Former member of the *Société de l'harmonie universelle*, which was established by Mesmer in Paris, the pupil Puységur criticised his master's theories. In contrast to Mesmer's belief, Puységur was very doubtful of the existence of the universal fluid, which had already been condemned by two scientific commissions in 1784, and he did not believe that crises would be truly necessary to overcome illnesses. The Marquis experienced magnetic passes on a young peasant, named Victor Race, and discovered that he was able to lead the patient into a placid state of unconsciousness. In this state, the patient's personality changed: he used a refined vocabulary, he was able to predict the course of his illness and remarkably was also able to read the magnetiser's thoughts before they were even expressed in words. As he said:

¹ On Puységur's biography, see: PHILIPPE PÉDALAHORE, 'Une vie, une passion: Puységur et le magnétisme animal,' in GEORGES LAPASSADE and PHILIPPE PÉDALAHORE, eds, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire et à l'établissement du magnétisme animal* (Toulouse: Privat, 1986), I–XXIII; JEAN-PIERRE PETER, 'Puységur et l'enfant fou, ou la raison originelle,' in *Un somnambule désordonné? Journal du traitement magnétique du jeune Hébert* (Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1999): 7–81.

Quand il est dans l'état magnétique, ce n'est plus un paysan niais, sachant à peine répondre une phrase, c'est un être que je ne sais pas nommer: je n'ai pas besoin de lui parler; je pense devant lui, et il m'entend, me répond.²

In his opinion, this process was due to the 'volonté, cette faculté suprême de l'homme, qui constitue son essence, et [qui] est encore généralement méconnue dans sa plus belle prérogative, celle d'influer sur la santé'.³ Puysegur named this new state as artificial, or magnetic, somnambulism, and strengthened the emphasis on willpower to cure organic diseases, transforming Mesmer's physical theory into a psychological one.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, physicians and philosophers interpreted magnetic sleep in two different ways: some used metaphysics while others applied a physiological approach that linked somnambulism to a pathology. Magnetisers privileged the former approach while phrenologists, like Franz Joseph Gall, often adopted the latter. Both schools of thought were convinced that the understanding of the laws, connecting the body to the soul, was fundamental. Disciplines, like animal magnetism and phrenology, were targeted by the scientific community because they sustained a relationship between the physical and the moral state but, although the two doctrines faced the same criticisms, they had a few points in common. Both analysed somnambulism, although with different aims and conclusions. Moreover, magnetisers criticised Gall's interpretation of somnambulism as well, asserting the following:

Le docteur Gall prétend que le somnambulisme et le noctambulisme proviennent d'une désorganisation dans les organes. Le noctambulisme, qui est produit par l'activité du songe ou par la force des humeurs, n'est pas en lui-même une maladie, il prouve seulement qu'il en existe une dans la personne qui en est affectée: c'est le combat de la santé contre le mal. [...] Le somnambulisme magnétique est, au contraire, un état de calme et bien-être parfait; tous les somnambules le disent: ils ajoutent aussi qu'il augmente leurs forces, qu'ils sont dans un état bien naturel et bien réglé. [...] Cet ensemble doit nécessairement prouver que cet état, quoiqu'il ressemble un peu au noctambulisme, en diffère beaucoup.⁴

Animal magnetism played a central role in the French medical debate starting from 1813 and was harshly criticised by physicians. These attacks were led to defend the new theoretical and institutional rules on which the scientific community was reorganising itself, marked by the specialisation of knowledge and the criticism against the

² AMAND MARC JACQUES CHASTENET DE PUYSEGUR, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire et à l'établissement du magnétisme animal*, 3th ed. (Paris: Dentu, 1820), 11.

³ AMAND MARC JACQUES CHASTENET DE PUYSEGUR, 'Introduction,' *Annales du magnétisme animal*, no. 1 (1814), III–XI (V).

⁴ LOUIS-ÉTIENNE-HECTOR LE PELETIER D'AUNAY, 'Lettre concernant les opinions du docteur Jean Joseph Gall sur le somnambulisme,' *Archives du magnétisme animal* 5, no. 14 (1822): 117–39 (125).

encyclopedic ideal.⁵ The distinction in the medical field between true professionals and simple amateurs became stronger and more clear-cut to the extent that magnetisers were often depicted as gullible individuals, if not as charlatans. Besides, physicians and naturalists denigrated Puységur's research methods and the ways he used to publicise his discoveries, more than his theories. He was guilty of having tried to gain credit in the eyes of the public opinion, which was not able to evaluate the validity of his research. Moreover, from a methodological point of view, physicians and naturalists criticised the way of measuring artificial somnambulism by direct observation; in their opinion, it was necessary to use an accurate measurement to evaluate the phenomenon objectively. On the other hand, as a contrast to these attacks, Puységur harshly criticised the appropriation of medical power by the scientific elite, who relegated his work outside the boundaries of true science. He interpreted this process as a conscious attempt to move natural science away from democratic judgment and reintroduce the privileges of status and censorship that the French Revolution had cancelled.

The vicissitudes of the supporters of animal magnetism were often indicated with curious anecdotes, highlighting the challenges faced by modern science during its foundation.⁶ In spite of the academic opinion that labelled it as quackery, Puységur's practices had great public success. He led many somnambulant experiences in the aristocratic circles of his time and through the years stated that it was no longer ridiculous in Paris to believe in animal magnetism.⁷ The spreading of artificial somnambulism must be understood as the result derived from the internal pacification process in the French society, following the revolutionary storm. Political and social elites tried to rebuild a sociability, which was rooted in the literary circles of the eighteenth century, through philanthropic activities. Puységur filled the space left by Nollet and its *physique amusante*, taking advantage of the curiosity around natural science that was typical of the previous century.⁸ At the time when the experimental culture and the *cabinet de curiosités* were taking different paths, by establishing the rise of a

⁵ JEAN-LUC CHAPPEY, 'Le magnétisme sous l'Empire, un héritage du mesmérisme?', in BRUNO BELHOSTE and NICOLE EDELMAN, eds, *Mesmer et mesmérismes* (Montreuil: Omniscience, 2015), 81–100, 275–80.

⁶ CHARLES COULSTON GILLISPIE, *Science and Polity in France at the End of the Old Regime* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980). Gillispie presented the academic verdicts against mesmerism as a fight to affirm a clear division between a culture of astonishment and science itself, which was founded on objectivity and calculation. In recent years, many scholars have blurred the boundary between animal magnetism and scientific culture. See: LAWRENCE BROCKLISS and COLIN JONES, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); FRANÇOIS ZANETTI, *L'électricité médicale dans la France des Lumières* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2017). The most complete historiographical analysis on mesmerism is: DAVID ARMANDO and BRUNO BELHOSTE, 'Le mesmérisme entre la fin de l'Ancien Régime et la Révolution: dynamiques sociales et enjeux politiques,' *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 391, no. 1 (January–March 2018): 3–26.

⁷ AMAND MARC JACQUES CHASTENET DE PUYÉGUR, *Les fous, les insensés, les maniaques et les frénétiques ne seraient-ils que des somnambules désordonnés?* (Paris: Dentu, 1812), IV.

⁸ ANTOINE LIETI, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), 260–72.

professional scientific elite, the somnambulatory experiences, which were held in aristocratic circles, reaffirmed the prestige of the observers and the power of results came from the social standing of those witnessing. Puységur was fully aware of the importance of the observers' reliability and always included the reports of his experiences in his books, signed by the patients and witnessed in front of a notary.

However, animal magnetism continued to be a thorny issue, even if many people believed in it. The scientific community depicted animal magnetism as a sort of religion based on an irrational belief.⁹ After Napoleon's fall from power, the comparison pushed the Catholic writers to report the danger that magnetisers represented for customary behaviour, highlighting the risk that they could take sexual advantages over their young female patients.¹⁰ Moreover, the relationship between the physical and the moral state behind Puységur's theory blurred the barrier between science and religion and was feared by the Church. Some writers even condemned artificial somnambulism as a diabolic activity.¹¹ This fact was revealed by the somnambulists themselves, who were thought to possess supernatural faculties during their crises. Many practitioners of animal magnetism were offended by these accusations and pointed out how animal magnetism was promoted for the benefit of mankind and that a dangerous practice was always and only attributable to the magnetiser's nature. They presented themselves as observers of the natural phenomena taking distance from the religious interpretations of artificial somnambulism.¹²

Animal magnetism for the treatment of deaf-mute individuals

Despite the audience's success in his demonstrations, Puységur stopped practising in aristocratic circles. His main purpose, in fact, was for artificial somnambulism, as well as for the powers of the somnambulist, to achieve academic recognition. In this perspective, the Marquis collaborated with the magnetiser Joseph Philippe François Deleuze, who was an assistant naturalist and librarian of the *Muséum d'histoire naturelle* in Paris. Deleuze introduced him to his colleagues, but Puységur's demonstrations of the phenomenon did not overcome the prejudice of scientists.¹³ As a consequence, the

⁹ ANTOINE-FRANÇOIS JENIN DE MONTEGRE, *Du magnétisme animal et ses partisans, ou Recueil de pièces importantes sur cet objet, précédé des observations récemment publiées* (Paris: Colas, 1812), 17.

¹⁰ DAVID ARMANDO, 'Scienza, demonolatria o impostura ereticale? Il Sant'Uffizio romano e la questione del magnetismo animale,' *Giornale di storia* 2 (2009), http://www.giornaledistoria.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Content20091105_ArmandoScienzademonolatriaioimposturaereticaledef.pdf; LINDSAY BLAKE WILSON, *Women and Medicine in the French Enlightenment. The debate over maladies des femmes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

¹¹ DAVID ARMANDO, 'Des sorciers au mesmérisme: L'abbé Jean-Baptiste Fiard (1736–1818) et la théorie du complot,' *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 126, no. 1 (2014): 43–58, <http://mefrim.revues.org/1751>.

¹² JOSEPH PHILIPPE FRANÇOIS DELEUZE, 'Réponse aux objections contre le magnétisme,' *Annales du magnétisme animal* 46 (1816): 151–92.

¹³ CHAPPEY, 'Le magnétisme sous l'Empire,' 84–85.

Marquis switched to new experiences, applying animal magnetism for the treatment of deaf-mute individuals with the aim of making his demonstrations irrefutable. As he asserted: 'Pour parvenir à ce but, il n'est qu'un seul moyen, c'est de chercher des sujets d'expériences tellement passifs des phénomènes magnétiques qu'ils devront manifester, qu'on ne puisse les soupçonner d'y avoir coopéré'.¹⁴ Puysegur's choice was not dictated by chance. Deleuze was a member of the administrative board of the Philanthropic Society in Paris and collaborated, side by side, with the most important and influential personalities under the Empire and Restoration period; he described the Marquis as a philanthropist, eager to improve the lives of the unfortunates and most neglected by the society through this new tool of charity.

In 1812, Puysegur came into contact with Roch-Ambroise Cucurron, known as Sicard, the director of the Parisian Institute For Deaf-Mutes and proposed him to stay in the Institute for six weeks, disguised as an ordinary physician.¹⁵ He was firmly convinced that his experiences on Sicard's pupils would succeed and was willing to run a public retraction if he failed, as quoted below:

Eh bien, si dans cet état [somnambulique] je ne les fais pas agir, marcher, prendre ce que bon me semblera, ou me répondre par écrit à toutes les questions que je leur ferai, relatives à leur bien-être et à leur santé, non pas en leur parlant, puisqu'ils ne m'entendraient pas, mais par l'impulsion mentale seule de ma volonté, que l'on décide qu'il n'y a ni aimant ni magnétisme dans l'homme, et je signerai même, à l'appui de cette décision, que depuis plus de trente ans que j'en affirme et publie l'existence, je n'ai été qu'un apôtre d'erreur, d'illusion et de mensonge.¹⁶

Sicard was open to these tests, although the collaboration never began. Puysegur blamed the failure of this unfortunate circumstance to a political conjuncture and to a number of adverse events and tried to renew this venture in 1817. The circumstances evoked by Puysegur were probably related to the scandal, which involved Antoine Fabre d'Olivet. In 1811, he claimed to have healed Rodolphe Grivel, a former deaf-and-dumb pupil of Sicard. The following year he intended to repeat the experience, spreading the news through the newspapers. This move put the administrative authorities into alert, which set up a commission to evaluate Grivel's treatment. The verdict was merciless. It stated that Grivel was not completely deaf, hence the treatment was useless, and Fabre d'Olivet was accused of illegal medical practice.¹⁷

¹⁴ AMAND MARC JACQUES CHASTENET DE PUYSEGUR, 'Mémoire sur la puissance de la volonté,' *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 1, no. 1 (1817), 25–44 (41).

¹⁵ Between 1811 and 1812, Puysegur visited also Philippe Pinel, the famous inventor of the *traitement moral*, who invited the Marquis to the Salpêtrière hospital to carry out experiences concerning the magnetic influence upon the sectioned patients. However, he refused to take an official stand regarding artificial somnambulism in front of the authorities. See PUYSEGUR, *Les fous*, 81.

¹⁶ PUYSEGUR, 'Mémoire sur la puissance de la volonté,' 43.

¹⁷ LEON CELLIER, *Fabre d'Olivet: une contribution à l'étude des aspects religieux du romantisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1953), 162–71. On the relationships between d'Olivet and animal magnetism, see: CELLIER, *Fabre d'Olivet*, 179–

Notwithstanding, although only occasional experiments were set up, a number of magnetisers did not abandon Puységur's project. In 1814, Puységur's nephew, Louis-Étienne-Hector Le Peletier, Count d'Aunay, magnetised a thirteen-year-old student of Sicard, who fell instantly in somnambulism. However, the experience was disappointing: the young deaf-mute was not able to read or write, nor did he show the ability to read Le Peletiers's mind, and the magnetiser did not gain useful information from the experience.¹⁸ By contrast, in 1816, the magnetisers in Stockholm announced that the experiment: 'consistant à se faire entendre mentalement de tous ceux d'entre eux [the deaf-mute individuals] qu'[on] aurait préalablement mis en somnambulisme magnétique, se trouve avoir été pleinement effectuée par le comte de Lævenhielm'.¹⁹

The experiments conducted with deaf-mute individuals split the magnetist front and theoretical dispute on the nature of somnambulatory processes into two schools of thought. As Étienne Félix d'Henin de Cuvillers, the editor of the review *Archives du magnétisme animal*, commented:

Que des gasconnades n'aie-je pas encore entendues et lues de la part de plusieurs magnétistes qui, pour prouver l'existence réelle du fluide magnétique animal, sans la coopération de l'imagination, ont avancé avec assurance qu'ils pourraient faire obéir, mouvoir et agir un aveugle sourd et muet de naissance, par un simple acte de volonté?²⁰

This reply showed that, on the one hand, a number of magnetisers assumed the existence of a fluid, which was the vector for willpower; on the other hand, others ascribed the effect to the mere power of imagination.²¹ However, d'Henin de Cuvillers declared above all the inadequacy of these experiences. Their success was based on the interpretation of the gestures, or smiles, made by the deaf-mute subjects. This was the main proof that they could mentally communicate without hearing. Therefore, the absence of Deleuze in this debate is not at all surprising. He was a philanthropist, but he was also a fervent rationalist. He could not accept these explanations no more than he could accept the theories, connecting animal magnetism to religion.

The magnetisers argued more and more often that a physiological approach

81. Moreover, even Napoleon opposed Puységur's theories denouncing the Marquis as a charlatan. See EMMANUEL DE LAS CASES, *Mémorial de Saint-Helène, ou Journal où se trouve consigné, jour par jour, ce qu'a dit et fait Napoleon durant dix-huit mois* (Bruxelles: Remy, 1824), 76.

¹⁸ LE PELETIER D'AUNAY, 'Lettre concernant les opinions du docteur Jean Joseph Gall,' 131–32.

¹⁹ [GUSTAVE] DE LÆVENHIELM, 'Récit du traitement de M.lle de S*** commencé à Stockholm en juin 1816,' *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 5, no. 15 (1818): 228–40 (240). On the diffusion of animal magnetism in Northern Europe, see HENRIK BOGDAN and OLAV HAMMER, eds, *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2016), 264–91.

²⁰ ÉTIENNE FÉLIX D'HÉNIN DE CUVILLERS, 'Quatrième article des notices, extraits et analyses de l'ouvrage intitulé des Modes accidentels de nos perceptions,' *Archives du magnétisme animal* 6, no. 16 (1822): 25–91 (72–73).

²¹ On the theoretical controversy between psychofluidists and imaginationists, see: BERTRAND MEHEUST, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, vol. 1, *Le défi du magnétisme animal* (Le Plessis-Robinson: Institut Synthélabo, 1998), 334–44.

would have been necessary to describe experiences concerning deaf-mute people. This would have allowed the understanding of both the origins of the five (ordinary) senses and of the somnambulant one. Count Sigismund Ehrenreich Johann von Redern, a former business associate of Saint-Simon, wrote that it would have been interesting to put in somnambulism ‘des aveugles et des sourds de naissance, afin d’avoir des idées plus exactes sur cet état singulier [...] qui n’est autre chose qu’un mode de perception différent de ceux de l’état de veille’.²² Redern’s reasoning was rooted in the German world where mesmerism had become an academic subject and was practiced under the control of the medical authorities. German physiologists argued that animal magnetism worked on the ganglia system, which was regarded as the location of the soul in the body. The ganglia system, thus, allowed the execution of all the activities performed involuntarily when humans were awake, a kind of primordial life, which also endured during sleep.²³ Artificial somnambulism connected all the perceptions of the awoken state with this ancient instinct that mankind had forgotten. In fact, as he suggested: ‘Ce mode de perception est probablement la manifestation ou le développement d’une forme primitive inhérente à l’essence de la nature humaine, dont le cinq sens ne sont que des modifications’.²⁴

From deaf-mute individuals to savages

The juxtaposition between a primitive world and the world of deaf-mutes was not an original idea by Redern. It was the result of the eighteenth-century debate concerning the origins of language and knowledge. Philosophers did not have the possibility to directly study individuals in their rudest and most early state of development and often speculated that mankind had relied upon some form of sign language before starting to speak.²⁵ In this light, deaf-mute individuals were linked with the beginning of

²² SIGISMOND EHRENREICH JOHANN VON REDERN, *Des modes accidentels de nos perceptions, ou Examen sommaire des modifications que des circonstances particulières apportent à l’exercice de nos facultés et à la perception des objets extérieurs*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Mongie aîné, 1818), 54. Although magnetisers were conscious of the relevance of the blind, they did not invest in further research. Probably, they did not want to bring back negative memories concerning the treatment of the blind piano player Maria Theresia Von Paradis, which was performed by Mesmer in Wien in 1775 and which created a scandal to the extent of forcing Mesmer to leave the city. See BRUNO BELHOSTE, ‘Mesmer et la diffusion du magnétisme animal à Paris, 1778–1803,’ in BRUNO BELHOSTE and NICOLE EDELMAN, eds, *Mesmer et mesmérismes* (Montreuil: Omniscience, 2015), 21–61, 253–68 (22).

²³ See ANTOINE FAIVRE, ‘Éloquence magnétique, ou descriptions des mondes de l’au-delà explorés par le magnétisme animal: au carrefour de la Naturphilosophie romantique et de la théosophie chrétienne (première moitié du XIX siècle),’ *Aries* 8 (2008) : 191–228 <https://doi.org/10.1163/156798908X327339>; LUIS MONTIEL, ‘Une révolution manquée: le magnétisme animal dans la médecine du romantisme allemand,’ *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 38, no. 1 (2009) : 61–77, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rh19.3870>.

²⁴ REDERN, *Des modes accidentels*, 57.

²⁵ DOUGLAS C. BAYNTON, ‘Savages and Deaf-Mutes. Evolutionary Theory and the Campaign Against Sign Language in the Nineteenth Century,’ in JOHN VICKREY VAN CLEVE, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled. Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993), 92–112; BRIGITTE WELTMAN-ARON, *On Other Grounds. Landscape Gardening and Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001), 98–104.

spoken language and sign language was thus seen as a connection between animals and humans. Furthermore, some thinkers compared deaf-mutes to monkeys; in both cases, the language used was composed of inarticulate shrieks and gestures.²⁶ In France, the establishment by the abbot Charles-Michel de l'Épée of the first school for congenital deaf-mute individuals marked a major turning point, allowing the deaf-and-dumb individuals to gradually gain access to the civilised society.²⁷ The cornerstone of the abbot's project was the development of the French gesture language, which allowed these subjects to escape isolation and his experiences demonstrated that deaf-mutes not only understood the value of words but could also acquire abstract and complex notions.

At the close of the eighteenth-century, the French Revolution made the education of deaf-mutes a political necessity since learning to communicate made them proper citizens. In addition, sensualist theories spread the belief that physics and moral characteristics were not only influenced by the environmental milieu, but also by the political and cultural institutions. Pierre-Louis Prieur de la Marne clearly expressed the need of educating deaf-mutes, demanding, at the same time, special protection for the Parisian Institute for Deaf-Mutes. The status of deaf-mutes was equated with that of savages during the first stages of progress towards civilisation.²⁸ In fact, as he stated: 'Les individus, frappés de ce double malheur, peuvent à peine être distingués de l'homme sauvage, et sont toujours étrangers à la société. [...] Tous les avantages de la civilisation sont perdus pour eux'.²⁹ According to Condillac, whose philosophy gained a prominent role after Robespierre's downfall, every development of science, no matter the sphere of interest and knowledge, depended on the perfection of its language. Thus, the role of gesture in the acquisition and development of a language was rediscovered as a topic of general interest among contemporary scholars and, above all, among those who enjoyed the *Idéologie* in the following years.³⁰

Magnetists appeared to be at the margin of the debate, although they tried to enjoy it. Their contribution stressed the concept, which linked the primitive populations with the dawn of civilisation, arguing that savages were living vestiges of

²⁶ CLAUDE BLANCKAERT, 'La perfectibilité, sous conditions? Éducation d'espèce, flexibilité d'organisation et échelle d'aptitude morale en anthropologie (1750–1820),' in BERTRAND BINOCHE, ed., *L'homme perfectible* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2004), 114–44 (120–21). Also Puysegur compared deaf-mute individuals and animals. See PUYSEGUR, 'Mémoire sur la puissance de la volonté,' 42.

²⁷ MARYSE BEZAGU-DELUY, *L'Abbé de l'Épée. Instituteur gratuit des sourds et muets, 1712-1789* (Paris: Seghers, 1990); FRANÇOIS BUTON, *L'administration des faveurs. L'État, les sourds et les aveugles 1789–1885* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 29–47; EMMET KENNEDY, *Abbé Sicard's Deaf Education. Empowering the Mute, 1785–1820* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

²⁸ BUTON, *L'administration des faveurs*, 48–65; JEAN-LUC CHAPPEY, *Sauvagerie et civilisation. Une histoire politique de Victor de l'Aveyron* (Paris: Fayard, 2017), 28–35, 80–89.

²⁹ PIERRE-LOUIS PRIEUR, *Rapport sur l'établissement des sourds-muets fait à l'Assemblée nationale* (Paris: Imprimerie des sourds-muets, 1791), 6.

³⁰ SOPHIA ROSENFELD, *A Revolution in Language. The Problems of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 181–226.

ancient history. The supporters of animal magnetism gave new impetus to the historical research concerning the predecessor of Mesmer and dating back to the end of the eighteenth century. The commissions of 1784 had accused Mesmer of resurrecting the creative power of Renaissance imagination covertly accusing him of plagiarism. By contrast, magnetists reversed the accusation, discovering an affiliation to ancient knowledge. The main supporter of this theory was d'Henin de Cuvillers, but even Deleuze, who was extremely cautious when opening to something that could damage the scientific status of animal magnetism, wrote an essay on the force of imagination, such as that theorised by the Flemish physician Van Helmont.³¹ D'Henin de Cuvillers stated that there was: 'Nul doute [...] que le Magnétisme animal, par la raison seule qu'il est inhérent à l'existence de tous les corps organisés, ne se soit à toutes les époques des temps antérieurs, passivement et involontairement manifesté'.³² Furthermore, the role of savages gained more importance as it became interwoven with the debates on the question of the origins of magnetic knowledge, as is clearly described below:

Il est à croire que les pratiques du magnétisme animal entraînent pour beaucoup dans la manière de guérir. Les anciens monuments paraissent se réunir pour nous le confirmer. Il en était alors comme aujourd'hui chez tous les peuples sauvages. Leur médecine est tout-à-fait magnétique. Les frictions, les insufflations, les gestes de toute espèce sont employés dans toutes leurs maladies, [...] accompagnés d'une volonté ferme de guérir; il n'est pas étonnant qu'ils réussissent souvent.³³

Most of the magnetisers' theories relied upon the work of Antoine Court de Gébelin whose commitment to Mesmer is well known. At the end of the eighteenth century, his *Le Monde primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne* enjoyed a high reputation and was compared to Rousseau's literary works.³⁴ Court de Gébelin's purpose was to discover the ancient world through the human institutions of the modern era.

³¹ JOSEPH PHILIPPE FRANÇOIS DELEUZE, 'Sur l'opinion de Van Helmont sur la cause, la nature et les effets du magnétisme,' *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 1, no. 1 (1817): 45–79; JOSEPH PHILIPPE FRANÇOIS DELEUZE, 'Sur l'opinion de Van Helmont sur la cause, la nature et les effets du magnétisme,' *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 2, no. 6 (1817): 189–227.

³² ÉTIENNE FELIX D'HENIN DE CUVILLERS and AMAND MARC JACQUES CHASTENET DE PUYSEGUR, review of *Traitement d'Étienne Koroboff pour un rhumatisme chronique, accompagné des symptômes de paralysie*, by Panin, *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 5, no. 15 (1818): 253–60 (254–55).

³³ 'Recherches sur les notions que les anciens ont eus du somnambulisme,' *Annales du magnétisme animal*, no. 22 (1815): 157–92 (157).

³⁴ ANNE-MARIE MERCIER-FAIVRE, 'Le Monde primitif d'Antoine Court de Gébelin, ou le rêve d'une encyclopédie solitaire,' *Dix-huitième siècle* 24 (1992): 353–66, <https://doi.org/10.3406/dhs.1992.1880>; ANNE-MARIE MERCIER-FAIVRE, *Un supplément à l'Encyclopédie: le Monde primitif de Court de Gébelin*, (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999); ANNE-MARIE MERCIER-FAIVRE, 'Le Monde primitif (1773-1782) de Court de Gébelin. À la recherche des savoirs perdus,' in FRANÇOISE LE BORGNE, ODILE PARSIS-BARUBE, and NATHALIE VUILLEMIN, eds, *Les Savoirs des barbares, des primitifs et des sauvages. Lectures de l'Autre aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018), 119–34. See also: BLANCKAERT, 'La perfectibilité, sous conditions?,' 118–20.

Languages were the pivotal element of this reconstruction allowing to retrace the development of science, art, and political institutions. As he stated: ‘tout ce qui nous environne nous présente des arts, des lois, des mœurs qui ont commencé avec nos besoins, que de nouveaux besoins ont perfectionnés, et qui [...] ont leur racines dans l’antiquité la plus reculée’.³⁵ The anthropological method of Court de Gébelin was essentially comparative; the different human societies were associated to pinpoint the common elements in the development of mankind. Animal magnetism was one of these constants. As he asserted:

Les influences du magnétisme animal se firent sentir certainement aux premières sociétés: quoiqu’elles n’en aient pas connu la cause, et qu’elles n’aient pas pu la raisonner, elles n’en ont pas moins joui, et c’est à ces influences que les générations primitives durent ces jours longs et heureux si vantés dans l’Histoire et dont jusqu’ici nous ne savions que penser. En effet, la Nature étant alors dans son Printemps, et les générations n’étant pas encore dégradées [...], cet agent admirable produisait des effets plus assurés, plus constants, plus sensibles. [...] Lorsqu’on en eût oublié l’origine [...] ces effets ne furent connus que par une tradition affaiblie et dégradée.³⁶

The action of animal magnetism was stronger in the primitive era, fading the more the distance increased from the dawn of civilisation. Robert Darnton showed how this belief was spread among the adepts of mesmerism in the years before the French Revolution and how some of them sustained to be able to alter morality by acting on the health of the individual to regenerate society itself.³⁷ Guillaume Kornmann, banker and member of the *Société de l’harmonie universelle*, offered his son to be the prototype of a ‘génération hardie, vigoureuse, et qui connaîtrait pas d’autre lois pour se conserver que celle de la Nature’, able to reverse the French political system.³⁸ Certainly, as is shown by the deaf-mutes’ debate, many magnetisers believed that the first level of knowledge was linked to the sense of touch, considered as the main tool of primitive men, as described below:

[Par les mains] l’homme se met en rapport avec les objets extérieures; par elles il peut remplacer les organes des sens dont il sera privé; par elles il sonde à toute heure les profondeurs de la nature: de même que l’organe de la parole est de toute nécessité à l’homme dans le développements de ses idées purement spéculatives, de même, dans

³⁵ ANTOINE COURT DE GEBELIN, *Monde primitif analysé et comparé avec le monde moderne, considéré dans son génie allégorique et dans les allégories auxquelles conduisit ce génie*, vol. 1 (Paris: chez l’auteur, 1773), 4.

³⁶ ANTOINE COURT DE GEBELIN, *Lettre de l’auteur du Monde primitif à Messieurs ses souscripteurs sur le magnétisme animal* (Paris: chez Gastellier, 1784), 46.

³⁷ ROBERT DARNTON, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). See BRUNO BELHOSTE, ‘Franz Anton Mesmer: magnétiseur, moraliste et républicain,’ *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 391, no. 1 (2018): 27–56.

³⁸ NICOLAS BERGASSE, *Lettre d’un médecin de la Faculté de Paris à un médecin du Collège de Londres; ouvrage dans lequel on prouve contre Mesmer que le magnétisme animal n’existe pas* (La Haye: n.p., 1781), 263. See DARNTON, *Mesmerism*, 120–25.

tout effet matériel [...] l'action des mains est de nécessité absolue.³⁹

Thus, it was not surprising that they discovered animal magnetism and developed some rudimentary treatments.

Under the Empire and the Restoration, the primitivism of Court de Gébelin began to be questioned, but magnetisers kept the link between man's most early state and animal magnetism, equating primitive men with savages. Magnetisers abandoned the political perspective, only focusing on the advantages that the observation of the savages' conduct of life could have on the process of validation of animal magnetism. According to the magnetists of the early eighteenth century, the primitive populations discovered their magnetic abilities, but they only had a limited comprehension of the phenomenon itself. They were always a step behind contemporary Europeans because their critical reasoning had still not developed enough. As Le Peletier wrote, in Louisiana, the savages performed magnetic healing without even being fully aware of it.⁴⁰ As he reported, a merchant traveller witnessed a magnetic treatment in the middle of the forest where one of the bearers was bitten by a venomous snake. His comrades made him lie down on animal skins and started to use archaic magnetic passes on his leg blocking the action of the poison. Le Peletier argued that, although the contribution of European scientific knowledge was necessary to understand animal magnetism, its use by the autochthonous populations was proof of its existence.

Animal magnetism in the travel literature

The connection between savagery and animal magnetism was not exclusive to magnetists as it was also mentioned in the travel literature.⁴¹ While magnetists highlighted the temporal distance from the primitive populations, travellers, instead, focused on the spatial gap with them. Alexander von Humboldt claimed that the Caribbean *marirris* were the most renowned among all 'prêtres, jongleurs et médecins à la fois. [...] Les remèdes qu'ils emploient [...] sont accompagnés d'imposition de mains, et de quelques gestes ou pratiques mystérieuses qui paraissent tenir aux procédés les plus anciennement connus du magnétisme animal'.⁴² Humboldt's

³⁹ JEREMIAS RUDOLF LICHTENSTÄDT, 'Commentaires et réflexions sur le magnétisme animal,' *Bibliothèque du magnétisme animal* 7, no. 20 (1819): 93–115 (99–100).

⁴⁰ LOUIS-ÉTIENNE-HECTOR LE PELETIER D'AUNAY, 'Lettre au Rédacteur des Archives du magnétisme animal concernant la manière dont les sauvages de la Louisiane opèrent des cures remarquables par les frictions,' *Archives du magnétisme animal* 4, no. 11 (1822): 177–82.

⁴¹ I am not aware of studies showing the link between animal magnetism and travel literature. Unlike the influence of animal magnetism on the romantic writers, to the best of my knowledge, this topic has not been investigated by historians yet. See ERNST LEONARDY et al., *Traces du mesmérisme dans les littératures européennes du XIXe siècle: actes du colloque international organisé les 9 et 10 novembre 1999* (Bruxelles: Publications des Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 2001); MARIA TATAR, *Spellbound: studies on mesmerism and literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); ALISON WINTER, *Mesmerized. Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁴² ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT, *Voyage aux régions équinoxiales du nouveau continent, fait en 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, 1803 et 1804* (Paris: Schoell, 1814–21), vol. 3, 21.

assumptions were based on the report of the mission conducted by Antoine-Hyacinthe-Anne de Chastenet de Puységur in Saint-Domingue in 1784.⁴³ Puységur's middle brother was a French navy officer and a esteemed cartographer and, during the expedition, he established a mesmeric hospital in Le Cap Français, which became the subject of intense debate among colonists and was shut down shortly after Puységur's departure.⁴⁴

By contrast, the abbot Jérôme Richard reported of magnetic practices in China, Egypt, South East Asia and especially in the *Îles de la Société*, now known as Polynesia. The abbot's work is particularly interesting because he borrowed some topics, typical of animal magnetism, and used them reversing their meaning against the followers of the magnetic doctrine. For instance, it was a popular idea among magnetisers that 'la pratique de masser, qui a lieu dans les îles de la mer du Sud, et qui produit [...] un sommeil si agréable' was nothing less than a magnetic treatment.⁴⁵ Richard agreed with this comparison but argued that savages performed animal magnetism because they obtained a lascivious pleasure by way of the massage. In Tahiti, it was men who benefitted from the massage 'de ces jolies Taïtiennes, qui leur communiquent la chaleur douce qui circulait en elles', while in Europe the patients were often young and emotional women.⁴⁶ Moreover, Richard agreed with Puységur concerning the fear of physicians for the choice of patients to use magnetic treatments to heal their illnesses. The Marquis of Puységur reported that somnambulists often praised the soft method of herbal medicine and animal magnetism, as opposed to the aggressiveness of ordinary medicine. By contrast, the abbot saw in the savages' fear of doctors a proof of their backwardness caused by their limited intellectual abilities and took the opportunity to criticise Court de Gébelin's defense of animal magnetism.⁴⁷

Humboldt and Richard interpreted animal magnetism practices as a demonstration of the inferiority of savages and, especially in Richard's writings, these populations were described as animals controlled by lust and irrationality. Abbot's book was not a result of direct observation, but a long and detailed account of the travel literature that had been previously published. He was arrested under the Reign of Terror and wrote his manuscript in jail. During his imprisonment, he reflected on

⁴³ HUMBOLDT, *Voyage aux régions*, vol. 3, 481.

⁴⁴ On the diffusion of mesmerism in Saint-Domingue, see: BERNARD GAINOT, 'Des baquets sous les tropiques. À propos de la diffusion du magnétisme animal à Saint-Domingue en 1784,' *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 391, no. 1 (2018): 81–104; FRANÇOIS REGOURD, 'Mesmerism in Saint-Domingue,' in JAMES DELBOURGO and NICHOLAS DEW, eds, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (New York–London: Routledge, 2008), 311–32.

⁴⁵ 'Recherches sur les notions que les anciens ont eus du somnambulisme,' 158.

⁴⁶ JEROME RICHARD, *Voyages chez les peuples sauvages, ou l'Homme de la nature: histoire morale des peuples sauvages des deux continens, et des naturels des Isles de la mer du Sud* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1808, 2edn), vol. 2, 271. See WILSON, *Women and Medicine in the French Enlightenment*.

⁴⁷ RICHARD, *Voyages chez les peuples sauvages*, vol. 2, 273–74.

French people's behavioural trajectory, comparing it with the one of savages. Once he was free, he published his reflections in order to show the French the wild nature that had misguided them during the previous years. In the introduction of his book, the editor stated his refusal to learn how to live from the savages. The inhabitants of the Antipodes became the figures through which to interpret the French political situation, condemning the Reign of Terror and, by metonymy, the whole revolutionary process. As he stated, among savages:

L'homme n'est plus homme, et qu'il vient de se placer au rang des bêtes les plus féroces, avec lesquels il est toujours en guerre. Or quel est, parmi les êtres de la société, l'infortuné qui pourrait envier une pareille existence? Malheur à celui qui a conçu ce coupable désir! Mais malheur au gouvernement tyrannique qui force le citoyen à former ce vœu coupable.⁴⁸

As historians have shown, the attention paid to the savage populations could be considered a central principle of eighteenth-century thought.⁴⁹ However, the European vision of the Other was deformed *a priori* by two ideological myths: the myth of the noble savage and the myth of the ignoble savage. These two opposing concepts coexisted during the period of Enlightenment, although the myth of the ignoble savage had a tendency to dominate at the expense of the appreciation of the natural state. Thus, philosophers ranked the different populations they encountered in the world in accordance with the distance they expressed from the state of perfection towards which civilisation enabled mankind to progress. However, when it comes to details about the individual cultures, there was not a single school of thought from which to draw inspiration.⁵⁰ In France, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the debate concerning Victor of Aveyron, a feral child who was found at the age of around twelve into the woods, led thinkers place the issue of savagery, once again, at the core of their discussion.⁵¹ Feral children were equated with savages and, for a short time, doctors argued that they were able to fill the gap that separated them from civilised people, but the failure of these experiments proved the existence of a fracture between the civilised and the savage populations. The inferiority of the latter became a biological datum defining an unalterable hierarchical classification of human beings, which justified the revival of pro-slavery politics and prevented any further reassessment of their image.

⁴⁸ FRANÇOIS BABIE DE MERCENAY, 'Avis de l'éditeur,' in *Voyages chez les peuples sauvages, ou l'Homme de la nature: histoire morale des peuples sauvages des deux continents, et des naturels des Isles de la mer du Sud* (Paris: Laurens aîné, 1808, 2edn), vol. 1, vii–viii.

⁴⁹ For a general account see: OLIVE PATRICIA DICKASON, *Le mythe du sauvage* (Paris: Lebaud, 1995); SERGIO LANDUCCI, *I filosofi e selvaggi* (Torino: Einaudi, 2014).

⁵⁰ RONALD L. MEEK, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 131–76; HENRY VYVERBERG, *Human Nature, Cultural Diversity and the French Enlightenment* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵¹ CHAPPEY, *Sauvagerie et civilisation*, 165–90, 209–25.

Conclusions

The tendency of historiography concerning animal magnetism in the nineteenth century has often been to replace it in long-term analysis. The validity of this approach is indisputable and has highlighted several fundamental aspects behind the understanding of the challenges that arise from its study. However, artificial somnambulism did not only highlight the difficulties in accepting the emergence of the psychological unconscious but it also did not confine itself to a mere revival of the Renaissance magic in a world that was ruled by a deterministic concept of the world and the natural phenomenon.⁵² Although the hostility of the scientific community, which continued for the whole nineteenth century, was a pivotal element in these studies, other patterns concerning the supporters of animal magnetism in the 1810s could be difficult to integrate into such a historical approach. Most of these debates became obsolete and were already forgotten in the following decade when mesmeric cures entered the hospitals.

In the span of the time analysed, the specificity of the animal magnetism debate was the existence of many different approaches, which varied from magnetiser to magnetiser, to obtain the legitimisation of their knowledge. This situation was mainly the result of the deep theoretical reorganisation that the movement of animal magnetism went through, following the French Revolution and Mesmer's departure. Secondly, Puységur's leadership only relied upon his reputation. Even if Puységur and Deleuze created the *Société du Magnétisme* in 1815, other magnetisers could freely explore different paths. The emphasis put on the faculty to read the mind showed by many somnambulists as a way to integrate deaf-mutes into the society did not reach a broad consensus within the magnetic community. So far as I am aware, in France, Puységur's nephew was the only magnetiser who consistently spent a certain amount of effort in this direction.

Conversely, many magnetisers found the juxtaposition between deaf-mutes and savages an interesting topic, since it embraced their survey on the traces of animal magnetism in ancient times. Even if unheard, they joined the debate on the origins of language and knowledge, arguing that the magnetic abilities showed by the primitive populations were the proof of the existence of the phenomenon itself. This ancient knowledge was lost among civilised people and, at least, savages could score some points over contemporary Europeans. However, to understand animal magnetism and make it useful for mankind, the contribution of the Europeans was fundamental because 'la découverte d'un magnétisme dans l'homme [devra] répandre un jour de grandes lumières sur toutes les croyances et sur toutes les superstitions antiques et populaires'.⁵³

⁵² See JACQUELINE CARROY, *Hypnose, suggestion et psychologie. L'invention de sujets* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991); MEHEUST, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité*, vol. 1, 340.

⁵³ D'HENIN DE CUVILLERS and PUYSEGUR, review of *Traitement d'Étienne Koroboff*, 255.

These theses were ignored outside the sphere of the magnetic movement, but the connection between animal magnetism and the savage populations persisted in the travel literature. Travellers rejected that animal magnetism was good for human health, considering it only as a demonstration of cultural backwardness. At the end of the 1810s, the significance of the manifestations of animal magnetism among savages started to be questioned also by the magnetisers, who claimed that a clinical approach would be the only method capable of explaining the mechanics of artificial somnambulism. The somnambolic state was considered ‘sans motifs suffisants comme un état de perfection ou pureté particulière’, and the emancipatory function of animal magnetism, sustained by Puységur, was definitely set aside.⁵⁴ It was no longer a question of educating individuals, but rather of caring for them and understanding their extraordinary abilities.

⁵⁴ REDERN, *Des modes accidentels*, 54.