This article reevaluates the political dimension of the work of Mesmer, showing the involvement of the founder of animal magnetism in the conflicts of his time. The first part of the article is devoted to his action during the Revolution. During his stay in the Austrian capital between 1790 and 1793, Mesmer played an important role in the ‘jacobin plot’ of Vienna. His return to Paris in 1798 marked his return to the political scene. Mesmer attempted at this time, without any success, to make his conceptions known to the public not only his doctrine of animal magnetism, but also his theories about the nature of man and organization of society. These ideas were finally published in German translation in 1814, and greeted with general indifference. The second part of the article, focusing on the period before the Revolution, examines the genesis of Mesmer’s political and moral ideas; these were developed in stages, even if his doctrine of animal magnetism still appeared confined to the medical sphere. Born within the framework of Viennese medicine, influenced by enlightened despotism, Mesmer’s ideas took a critical turn during his stay in Paris, when animal magnetism became a public passion. It was then that the unifying theme of harmony developed as an essential part of the doctrine of animal magnetism. Finally, the last part of the article investigates the precise content of Mesmer’s moral and political theories, as these were expressed first in the lessons of 1784, then expanded in his later publications.

**Keywords** : Mesmer, Animal magnetism, Vienna, Darnton, Bergasse

...
work *Mental Healers: Mesmer, Eddy, Freud*, published in 1931, Stephan Zweig thus compared Mesmer to Christopher Columbus. He too, without intending to or understanding it, had discovered a new continent: that of the subconscious mind\(^1\). It was in fact the precursor of psychoanalysis, psychodynamics and psychotherapy that mainly drew the attention of historians who studied Mesmer during the 20\(^{th}\) century. The question that they asked themselves, from a biographical point of view, was how to adjust a complex, contradictory and sometimes disconcerting historical figure to this role assigned to him. For Frank Pattie, who wrote what is undoubtedly the most comprehensive biography, Mesmer was little more than a charlatan, and it was almost in spite of himself that he opened up the way to the study of psychic phenomena\(^2\); for Henri Ellenberger, on the other hand, Mesmer had the unusual merit of approaching as a physician, through a ground-breaking departure, phenomena considered until that time as being concerned with the supernatural\(^3\).

Whatever the point of view, this retrospective approach, involving an *a posteriori* evaluation of the figure of Mesmer and his work, barely lends itself to historical contextualisation. Because of this, it has only been carried out in a serious manner from the limited angle of scholarship by historians who were aiming, above all, to specify certain biographical details\(^4\). Although animal magnetism has also, more generally, been the subject of several cultural history studies, these have only looked at the 19th century and have therefore only marginally considered the figure of Mesmer himself. In this study we will use the important work of Anneliese Ego, published in 1991, as well as certain articles from the collective work *Mesmer et mesmérismes*, published in 2015\(^5\).

Continuing with the project of putting animal magnetism into context, as we find it in this latter work, in this article, I will look at its political

---

(1) Zweig takes this metaphor from the book by the historian of alternative medicine, Rudolf Tischner, *Franz Anton Mesmer: Leben, Werk, Wirkungen*, Munich, Verlag der Münchner Drucke, 1928, by which he was greatly inspired in writing his essay.


dimension starting with the figure and the work of Mesmer himself. As he was active between 1775 and 1815, in other words during a time of great political upheaval, such an approach does indeed seem to be necessary. However, it has so far been completely neglected. It is true that Robert Darnton’s work *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, published in 1968, deals precisely with the question of the political significance of mesmerism. However, while it discusses Mesmer’s struggle against the academic institutions, which he calls his "anti-establishment" attitude, the author mainly concentrates on the "radical political theory" of some of his disciples, without paying much attention to the master. In fact, the idea that we generally receive of Mesmer’s personality is that "of a completely apolitical nature and keeping especially clear of political conflicts", according to the formula of Karl Bittel, one of his best biographers.

Is there therefore nothing to say about the political ideas and commitment of the founder of animal magnetism? We will see that this is not the case and that Karl Bittel himself undoubtedly wrote in 1941 the opposite of what he really thought. To believe this, we simply have to look at Mesmer’s last work, published one year before his death, in 1814, with the title *Mesmerismus, oder System der Wechselwirkungen* (Mesmerism or system of influences). Under the title "Morality", we find texts on the organization of society, legislation and government, education, justice and worship, as well as a draft constitution, which indisputably show that Mesmer had fixed political ideas, closely linked to his theory of animal magnetism and his moral philosophy. Nonetheless, they have only rarely attracted the attention of his biographers and the commentators on his work.

---


(8) Karl Bittel (1892-1969) was a communist militant and historian who was arrested by the Gestapo in 1934 and then placed under police surveillance. It was during this period that he prepared and wrote his study of Mesmer, which was published in 1941. While he demonstrated a circumstantial "apoliticism" at the time, he was nonetheless the first one to point out Mesmer’s involvement in the Jacobin conspiracy of Vienna. After the war, Bittel went to live in the German Democratic Republic where he had an important career as an official historian.


(10) See mainly Frank A. Pattie, *op. cit.*, who gives a useful summary of the book, without any commentary. The article by Martin Blankenburg, "F. A. Mesmer, Aufklärer und Citoyen", in
The purpose of this article will therefore be to analyze Mesmer’s political and moral ideas and explain their origin. To do this, we will have to re-examine his work and his career from a political point of view. Because while his political thinking, as drawn from the texts, is obviously dependent on the context in which they were written, on the eve of and during the revolution, its source can also be found in the certainties acquired and the experiences encountered since his first footsteps in Swabia, Bavaria and Austria. The difficulty is that Mesmer, because he knew that he was on dangerous ground, nearly always moved forwards in disguise. The historian is therefore reduced to making conjectures. This applies both to what constitutes the basis of his doctrine and to certain important episodes in his life. However, it seems possible to remove at least some of the mystery, by putting his actions into context. What seemed to be mistaken or paradoxical thus takes on a clearer meaning. This, at least, is what I hope to demonstrate here.

Mesmer during the Revolution

When the Revolution broke out, in July 1789, Mesmer had disappeared from the scene almost four years earlier. Considered by the government as undesirable, he left Paris in May 1785, barely a year after the official condemnation of his doctrine. Animal magnetism then seems to have fallen out of fashion and its supporters were divided. Mesmer spent some time in England, undertook a tour of France, which took him to Grenoble, Toulon, Toulouse and Bordeaux, went to Germany and Switzerland, returned to Paris and eventually ended up in the place he was born, the Prince-Bishopric of Constance, peacefully enjoying the fortune that he had made in France. It was no doubt there that he learned of the events in Paris and where he started to write his treatise on morality, to which we will return in the latter part of this article.

Return to Vienna

We do not know how Mesmer reacted to the start of the Revolution, some of the main protagonists of which he was acquainted with. What is certain is that not long afterwards he returned to Vienna, where he had to settle the inheritance left by his wife, who had died on 15 May

1790\textsuperscript{11}. After twelve years abroad, he found himself back in a familiar world. While he was discreet, as he was everywhere he went, he did not live in isolation. He thus struck up a close friendship with an officer, Kajetan Gilowsky von Urazova, whose family was closely related to that of Mozart. Gilowsky was an enthusiastic supporter of his theories on magnetism. He was also someone who took an interest in the Revolution, and the discussions between the two men quickly took a political turn.

Mesmer had arrived in Vienna at a crucial moment. The absolutist reforms hurriedly brought in by Joseph II were being met with increasing resistance throughout the Empire, just as France itself was undergoing a political upheaval. The aristocracy feared for its privileges, the Church complained about secularization measures and the States of the Empire were worried about their freedoms. The death of the Emperor, after a short illness, on 20 February 1790, marked the beginning of a period of uncertainty. Joseph’s successor, Leopold II, had distinguished himself by his open mind in Tuscany and seemed to have decided to move imperial policy in a more liberal direction. Events in France served as a warning to him. He distrusted the émigrés and rejoiced when Louis XVI swore an oath to the constitution in September 1791. However, he was isolated in Vienna and could only rely on a few secret advisers for his projects, one of whom, Andreas Riedel, was a close friend of Gilowsky\textsuperscript{12}.

Andreas Riedel had taught mathematics to Franz and Ferdinand, the two eldest sons of the Grand-Duke of Tuscany. After a long stay in Florence, he returned to Vienna in 1790, when Leopold succeeded his brother Joseph II, and he continued to see the new Emperor, whose political views he shared in full, on a regular basis. Gilowsky, encouraged by Mesmer, wished to introduce this well-connected friend to him. Reidel, despite some initial reluctance, decided to meet Mesmer, whom he hoped would also examine his daughter, afflicted by a nervous fever. The first meeting took place in November 1791. In turn, Riedel became enthusiastic about Mesmer, who

\textsuperscript{11} We do not know the exact date of his return to Vienna. According to Karl Bittel (op. cit., p. 132), who does not give his sources, it was in July 1791, but much more likely it was one year earlier, maybe even before the death of his wife.

\textsuperscript{12} Our knowledge about Mesmer’s stay in Vienna during the Revolution comes mainly from the police reports and cross-examinations conducted in Vienna (vertraulichen Akten der Hofkommission in Hochverratsangelegenheiten, AT-OeStA/HHSTA 9-1). These documents have been analyzed in relation to Mesmer by Joseph Ludolph Wohleb, "Franz Anton Mesmer. Biographisches Sachstandsbericht", art. cit. p. 73-88, Karl Bittel, op. cit., p. 131-137, and Alfred Körner, Andreas Riedel. Ein politisches Schicksal in Zeitalter der Französischen Revolution, Cologne, Walter Kleikamp, 1969, p. 127-134. Regarding the confession of Wohleb, it was Bittel who first drew attention to Mesmer’s involvement in these cross-examinations.
cared for his daughter until she was completely recovered. Indeed, Riedel sought to become a magnetiser himself. Almost every evening, he went to the Landstrasse in the company of Gilowsky.

The discussions in Mesmer’s salon were about all kinds of subjects, including the political situation in France. The Journal de Paris was read there. Above all, there was discussion of the French constitution. In fact, the question of the constitution was the order of the day. The French constitution had been definitively adopted and approved by Louis XVI in September 1791. In Austria, the Emperor Léopold, who had already planned to establish a constitutional system when he was Grand-Duke of Tuscany, asked his advisers to prepare draft versions. Andreas Riedel was given the task of proposing a text. The death of Leopold and his son Francis II’s accession to the throne, followed by France declaring war on Austria, on 20 April 1792, completely changed the situation for Riedel and for Mesmer. Weak and indecisive, the new Emperor, who did not share his father’s liberal convictions, quickly fell under the influence of ministers and advisers who wished to call a halt to the reforms. His former mathematics teacher, Andreas Riedel, whom he detested, thus fell out of favour.

Mesmer decided shortly afterwards to depart, possibly to settle his affairs in Paris. He left Vienna on 7 June 1792. We know that he was back in his native land by September. His absence from the Austrian capital had lasted for more than a year. We know nothing about why he reappeared there on 14 September 1793. His Viennese friends were the first to be surprised. Mesmer returned to his life on the Landstrasse, meeting up with Gilowsky and Riedel, who were more entranced than ever with him and his ideas. Riedel asked the painter Weickert to paint

(13) Cross-examination of Gilowsky on 30 July 1794: "At the time I used to go with him (Riedel) almost every day of the week to Mesmer’s house in the evening until nine o’clock. We mainly talked about magnetism, but also about the situation of the French nation as Mesmer had learned to understand it, and we also read the Journal de Paris which was authorized at the time. However, Mesmer left on a journey when the war broke out.” (cited by J. L. WOHLTB, art. cit., p. 86-87; see also A. KÖRNER, op. cit., p. 128).

(14) Mesmer might have spent the summer in Paris, then left after the September massacres. However, at present we have no proof of this. Pierre Foissac claimed, on the strength of what he was told by Doctor Aubry, one of the closest disciples and friends of Mesmer, that the latter was present at Bailly’s execution (Pierre FOISSAC, Rapports et discussions de l’Académie royale des sciences sur le magnétisme animal recuillis par un sténographe et publiés avec des notes explicatives, Paris, 1832, p. 226, note 1). The anecdote was reproduced by numerous biographers. In reality, Mesmer was still in Vienna when Bailly was executed. Another biographer of Mesmer, Jean Vinchon, states, without indicating any source, that Mesmer had returned to Paris in 1792 to sell his house (see his biographical entry in Franz A. MESMER, Le Magnétisme animal, œuvres publiées par R. Amadou, Paris, Payot, 1971, p. 24).
a portrait of the man that he called *Prometheus* from that time and had it placed in his salon. The political discussions also resumed, just like a year earlier. However, at that time, the situation was no longer completely the same. Austria was at war with France, which had been declared a Republic the year before. The spectre of the Revolution haunted the new Emperor, especially after Louis XVI had been condemned to death and executed. A ministry of police (*Polizeihofstelle*) was created in Vienna in January. Its mission was to repress any form of agitation and discord. Civil servants were spied on, cafés were placed under surveillance, clubs were prohibited and publications were censored. Anything that came from France, involving people, ideas, newspapers, was particularly targeted. On his arrival in Vienna, Mesmer was himself placed under surveillance.

**The Jacobin conspiracy of Vienna**

While the regime was immersed in a reactionary policy, Mesmer’s Viennese friends had become radicalised during his absence. A few trusted people now met at a kind of political salon at Riedel’s home, to discuss the current situation. They were civil servants, soldiers and teachers, all opposed to the war with France and in favour of constitutional reforms. Among the new arrivals was an officer, Franz Hebenstreit, who stood out due to his virulence and radical ideas. He proclaimed, in stentorian tones, both his sans-culottism and his aversion to property, the source, in his opinion, of every evil. Riedel immediately developed an enthusiasm for Herbenstreit, just as he had for Mesmer. He admired the author of the poem "Homo Hominibus" composed in Latin verse, and he asked Weinkert to paint a portrait of the man that he now called *Homo*, in order to hang it in his salon next to *Prometheus*.

Obviously, Riedel took Hebenstreit to the Landstrasse. However, between Hebenstreit and Mesmer there was no affinity. In Hebenstreit’s opinion, as he told Riedel, "Mesmer only thinks about his fortune, he likes talking and seeing people", but could not provide any help with their plan. Mesmer, meanwhile, was frightened by Hebenstreit’s verbal violence.

and did not want to hear any talk of sharing wealth. When Riedel was questioned, he denied having wished to convert Mesmer to Hebenstreit’s ideas and claimed that their quarrel amused him, "because one cannot imagine anything funnier". In fact, Mesmer had never taken part in the subversive plans of his Viennese friends, but he would certainly have been aware of them. Riedel and Hebenstreit even considered at one time entrusting him with an important mission: that of going to Paris to give the Committee of Public Safety the plans for a war machine invented by Hebenstreit. Having understood that they would not get anywhere with him, because Mesmer seems to have never intended to go to Paris, they gave up the idea. In the end, other emissaries would take plans for the machine to France the following year.

On 17 November 1793, Mesmer was arrested after being denounced, along with his housekeeper, for having expressed scandalous political views that showed he had “no difficulty in displaying principles favourable to the Jacobins”17. Due to lack of proof, he was released on 4 December and sent to the border, in the direction of Switzerland. Some months later, during the night of 23 to 24 July, Riedel, Hebenstreit and Gilowsky were in turn arrested by the Viennese police, along with other supposed accomplices. This time the matter was a lot more serious, because they were accused of having conspired for the arrest of the Emperor and the setting up of a provisional government. The investigation of the so-called “Jacobin plot” lasted for almost a year and led to numerous interrogations. Officers Hebenstreit and Gilowsky were found guilty of high treason by a military court and condemned to death. Gilowsky, Mesmer’s friend, took his own life in prison; Hebenstreit was hanged in a public square. As for the civilians, they were sentenced by an ordinary court to hard labour in a fortress prison. Andreas Riedel was not released until 1809 by the French army. Having settled in Paris, he made contact with Mesmer again to ask him for help.

The fact that the investigation deliberately exaggerated the danger represented by the group surrounding Riedel has been clearly established. However, all historians agree in highlighting the importance of this supposed conspiracy in the history of the Habsburg monarchy, with its brutal repression marking to some extent the end of Josephinism, the Austrian

(17) Karl Bittel, op. cit., p. 135.
version of enlightened despotism. "The Jacobins of Vienna", who dreamt of setting up a constitutional regime in Austria based on the same principles of liberty, equality and fraternity as those of the French Revolution, initially expected support from the Emperor. After the death of Leopold II and the declaration of war on France, they rapidly moved towards much more radical positions, similar to those of the French Jacobins. Riedel and Gilowsky defended the principle of a democratic constitution. Hebenstreit went much further with his "sans-culottism", not hesitating to advocate social revolution and the use of violence. All that we know about Mesmer's leanings comes from what the statements of those accused while under police interrogation, which must be used with caution. From their witness statements that corroborate one another, we nonetheless find that Mesmer rejected Hebenstreit's "communism" and condemned the "sans-culottism" that Riedel appears to have supported at one time. He liked to talk about the constitution of 1791, which would seem to make him a moderate supporter of the Revolution, more similar to the Feuillants and the Fayettistes than the Jacobins.

However, it is likely that after the fall of the monarchy in France, Mesmer himself also changed his thinking. Riedel's testimony is plagued with ambiguities. He said, during his cross-examination, that he never imagined "converting Doctor Mesmer into a sans-culotte", while stating that he "had thought that Hebenstreit might have been able to convert him if he had not bored him rigid with his shouting about it, even though he, Riedel, had, at the same time, good reasons to be convinced otherwise." In any case, in these discussions, Mesmer revealed a genuine awareness of social issues. In answer to Hebenstreit who advocated the equal distribution of wealth, he suggested rather, to reduce inequalities, that childless wealthy people without any heirs should be obliged to adopt several orphans, which would ultimately lead, through inheritance, to a certain levelling out of wealth, an idea that can be found in his manuscripts on morality. In 1813, Riedel reminded Mesmer of his "remarks on the Prügel [caning], on the poverty of the ordinary people when you said that it is bad food, lack of food, and the unhealthy dwellings of the poor that are at the origin of most

(19) At his final dinner with Riedel and Hebenstreit, Mesmer, who had just come out of prison, took up the defence of the monarchical constitution against the opinion of his dinner companions, who were in favour of a democratic government. See A. KÖRNER, op. cit., p. 210.
(21) A. KÖRNER, op. cit., p. 130.
of their ills, over-working, etc. I remember your features when you spoke about these matters, which showed how much you were deeply affected by them”\(^\text{22}\). If this made Mesmer more of a philanthropist than a sans-culotte and a democrat, we can at least say that he understood, albeit not fully approving them, the more radical ideas of his "Jacobin" friends.

**Final stay in Paris**

After his expulsion from Vienna, Mesmer, who was still under suspicion in the eyes of the Austrian authorities, settled in Thurgovia, near Lake Constance, in the village of Wagenhausen. He was granted citizenship of the commune in 1794 and lived there in obscurity for several years. Thurgovia was a bailliwick under the control of eight Swiss cantons and without any political life of its own. In the war between France and Austria, its powerful neighbours, Switzerland declared its neutrality. Mesmer was able to find an uncertain kind of safety there. However, after the Treaty of Campo-Formio, which changed the balance of forces, the French troops crossed the border at the invitation of the Swiss patriots. Thurgovia was occupied in March 1798.

Mesmer seems to have welcomed the event with enthusiasm. In any case, after a ten-year absence, he dreamt of a triumphant return to Paris. After hearing of a plan for the reform of medical studies in France, he immediately sent a “public notice” to his disciple Ségretier, a former deputy in the Legislative Assembly, whom he considered to have good connections. In it, he proposed three measures: the establishment of a training college in the art of healing in order to train health officers and in which his doctrine would be taught; the appointment in each commune of a health officer responsible for taking care of the population free of charge; and the creation of a national religion, which would include the methods of animal magnetism\(^\text{23}\). At the same time, because with Mesmer money matters were never far removed from the discussion of ideas, he wrote to the French chargé d’affaires in Switzerland, Joseph Mengaud, to claim payment of his annuitant’s pension from the French government, which had been affected by the two-thirds bankruptcy\(^\text{24}\). He finally decided to

---

\(^\text{22}\) Letter from Riedel to Mesmer, 13 October 1813, Schiller-Nationalmuseum, Marbach, ms Z 2078.

\(^\text{23}\) Letter from Mesmer to Ségretier, 20 April 1798, accompanied by a "Public notice", *Journal du magnétisme*, vol. 1, 1845, p. 49-56.

\(^\text{24}\) Reply from Mengaud to Mesmer, dated 14 May 1798, and held at the Schiller-Nationalmuseum in Marbach, ms Z 2078.
Franz Anton Mesmer: Magnetiser, moralist and republican

return to Paris in December 1798 to settle his financial problems, but he clearly had wider ambitions.

On his arrival in Paris, Mesmer demanded a chair in a hospice that was to serve as a training college in the healing arts, from the Minister of the Interior François de Neufchâteau, and announced the publication of a book on his methods. It was published in the spring under the title Mémoire de F.A. Mesmer, docteur en médecine, sur ses découvertes. Mesmer also took part in the debate on vaccination. He claimed that smallpox originated in the process of tying the umbilical cord at birth and that inoculation was therefore absolutely useless. He had for many years been experimenting with an alternative method of severing the cord. In September 1800, he published a letter on this subject to Captain Baudin, who was about to depart for the South Seas. While he still expected to see the triumph of his medical theories, Mesmer also took an interest in political and financial matters, asserting himself as a republican.

However, someone who had once aroused so many passions now merely experienced indifference. His book had no resonance. Isolated in Paris, where he had broken ties with most of his former disciples, who were generally hostile to the Revolution, he spent time with just a few loyal friends. He was also in contact with the representatives of the Swiss Republic. On 6 February 1801, he sent the former plenipotentiary Minister in Paris, Gottfried Abraham Jenner, a draft constitution for his adoptive country, "which, rather than indicating the result of a revolutionary impulse or struggle, or a triumphant party, is drawn from nature itself" and "protects the indisputable rights of man in society." It was his last public declaration. After the phase of exaltation that led him to Paris, he fell into a genuine state of despondency. He retired to Versailles, to the home of his friend and student Doctor Würtz, where for two years he moped around. The political

(25) Letter from Mesmer to François de Neufchâteau, 3 Nivôse Year VII (23 December 1798), Journal du magnétisme, vol. 8, 1849, p. 653-655. Subject to approval, Mesmer proposed to lecture on his doctrine and to teach the practice at patients’ bedsides. He made the same attempt with Stapfler, the Minister for Science, Arts, Public Works and Civil Engineering of the Swiss Republic, who sent him a polite refusal. See Bernhard Milt, Franz Anton Mesmer und seine Beziehungen zur Schweiz. Magie und Heilkunde zu Lavaters Zeit, Lehmann, Zürich, 1953, p. 104.

(26) Mémoire de F.A. Mesmer, docteur en médecine, sur ses découvertes, Paris, Fuchs, Year VII. The work was republished by a student of Mesmer, Picher-Grandchamp, in 1826.

(27) Lettres de F.A. Mesmer D.M. sur l’origine de la petite vérole et le moyen de la faire cesser, Paris, Imprimerie des sciences et des arts, Fructidor Year VIII. This opuscule contains the letter from Mesmer to Baudin, dated 18 Prairial Year VIII (7 June 1800), and a letter to the writers of the Journal de Paris, which followed the publication in this journal of two critical reviews on 9 Messidor Year VIII (28 June 1800).

situation itself deeply disappointed him. While he undoubtedly gave a favourable welcome to the Coup d’État during Brumaire, he was against "the invasion of dictatorship and arbitrary power", after the expulsion from the Tribunate of republicans such as B.C (Benjamin Constant?) and Charles Ganilh. Mesmer then renounced all his projects. "I continue to vegetate in absolute inaction. All purpose has left me", he wrote in December 1802 to his friend Aubry. Shortly afterwards, he left France for the last time and went to Frauenfeld, in Thurgovia, taking all his papers with him. It was there, shortly before his death, that he received a visit from the young Doctor Wolfart, who would publish a German translation of his manuscripts on morality.

From animal magnetism to universal harmony: a political and medical doctrine

Mesmer’s political thinking, as we know it from his writing, was in fact closely linked to his medical thinking. It associated, as we will see, the idea of magnetic fluid with that of social harmony, the basis of political organization. To understand its origins, we have to go back to the origins of the doctrine of animal magnetism, to the time when Mesmer studied and then practised medicine in Vienna. His leanings were then fully in favour of the enlightened despotism promoted by Maria Theresa and her advisers, as illustrated by his role in the Gassner affair. It was during his time in Paris, as he came up against the official institutions, that he gradually moved towards criticism of ministerial despotism. This change was coupled with a more fundamental transformation of his medical ideas, since he moved in just a few years from a theory of magnetism focused on the physical existence of a magnetic fluid to a much wider vision of the relationships between the harmony of the physical body, the harmony of the social body and universal harmony.

(30) Wellcome Library, London, Ms 7309/5, Letter from Mesmer to Doctor Aubry, 28 Frimaire Year XI (19 December 1802). I am grateful to David Armando for sending this to me.
The invention of animal magnetism

It was while looking after a young female patient staying at his home, Franzeska von Österlin, that Mesmer discovered in Vienna in late 1774 what he called animal magnetism. Experiments with magnetotherapy, using powerful magnets borrowed from the court astronomer Maximilien Hell, started him on this path. Mesmer quickly stated that he did not need magnets to achieve surprising results: "I have magnetized paper, bread, wool, silk, leather, stones, glass, water, different metals, wood, men and dogs, in short, everything that I touched, to the extent that these substances produced the same effects on the patient as a magnet".

Although his experiments with magnets were a decisive factor for Mesmer, his interest in what would later become animal magnetism dates back to his medical dissertation, which he defended in Vienna in 1766. In it, he discussed the influence of the planets on the human body, a theme that appeared to evoke more the astrology than the physics of his time. However, he took care in his dissertation to reject astrology and to position his research under the authority of Newton. He thus studied the action of the gravitational tides exerted by the stars on the earth’s atmosphere and directly inside the body, and their effects on health. As demonstrated by historian Franck Pattie, he merely followed the work of an English Newtonian doctor, Richard Mead. Compared to his thesis of 1766, the really new idea, in 1774, was the (alleged) discovery of a universal fluid circulating between inanimate bodies and acting on living bodies (an action that Mesmer called animal magnetism). By reasoning that might seem circular, he saw the proof of its existence in the possibility of restoring "the flux and reflux" inside the patient’s body by operations not involving any known force, such as electricity or magnetism (physical). After demonstrating this new physical entity, which he would always consider to be his great discovery,
Mesmer immediately abandoned the use of magnets and his references to Newton.

Animal magnetism thus exhibited, right from the start, an ambiguous and even paradoxical nature. On the one hand, its creator seemed to reproduce the ancient theories of Paracelsus and van Helmont, which were denounced by his opponents\(^{(35)}\). On the other, he laid claim to the medicine of his age. Because, far from being on the fringe, Mesmer was a visible physician, a follower of the enlightened principles introduced in Vienna in the mid-18\(^{th}\) century by Gérard van Swieten, a disciple of Hermann Boerhaave\(^{(36)}\). The medicine taught there was based on science and observation, at the patient’s bedside and on the corpse. Prophylactic and hygienic measures were encouraged and inoculation was introduced in 1768. The development of what historiography has classified as the “first school of medicine of Vienna” also took place in the context of the political project of enlightened absolutism\(^{(37)}\). The authority of van Swieten, who was Maria Theresa’s personal physician, extended far beyond the Faculty of Medicine. He reformed the University of Vienna and was in charge of the Imperial Library (\textit{Hofbibliothek}) and the book-censoring commission (\textit{Bücherzensurkommission}). Opposed to the Jesuits and sometimes to the Church authorities, van Swieten led the fight against superstition in all its forms: belief in witchcraft, magic, ghosts and vampires. The established religion itself should not escape control. Limits were imposed on spectacular forms of devotion, such as certain processions and pilgrimages. Exorcisms could only be carried out with the endorsement of the authorities, who distrusted so-called cases of possession. All these measures were in line with regaining control of the clergy, which took place at the initiative of Kaunitz, the first minister of Maria Theresa, with a view to organizing a State Church\(^{(38)}\).

\(^{(35)}\) The term animal magnetism might have been borrowed from the book by Athanasius Kircher, \textit{Magnes sive de Arte Magnetica}, Cologne, J. Kalcoven, 1643. In it, Kircher gives the name \textit{magnetismus animalis} to the magnetism specific to animals. Regarding this possible borrowing, see Ernst BENZ, \textit{Franz Anton Mesmer und die philosophischen Grundlagen des animalischen Magnetismus}, Mayence, Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. 1977.


Mesmer and the Gassner Affair

Mesmer himself appears to have been an enthusiastic supporter of this policy. Three years after the death of his master van Swieten, he came across an opportunity to attack superstition too. A priest from Vorarlberg, Joseph Gassner, was at the time drawing huge crowds with his practice of exorcism. He claimed to be able to heal the sick who were possessed by the devil\(^{(39)}\). After moving in 1774 to Mesmer’s homeland on the shores of Lake Constance, he settled in Regensburg, a Free Imperial City, where patients and the curious converged. His success even stirred up a great debate all over Germany. While his supporters highlighted the success of his cures, his opponents, who belonged to the Enlightenment camp, denounced a fraud behind which many believed they saw the hand of the Jesuits. The authorities, including the ecclesiastical authorities, were as a whole hardly favourable to Gassner. His practice of exorcism appeared to be somewhat unorthodox and the popular movements that it aroused were a cause for concern.

Mesmer intervened in the affair in 1775. After travelling around the Constance area during the summer, where he too added to the number of cures, he appeared in Munich, where he demonstrated before the Academy of Science and in the presence of the Prince-Elector that there was nothing supernatural about Gassner’s successful cases and that they could be explained very simply by animal magnetism, the existence of which he had just discovered\(^{(40)}\). Mesmer’s arrival in Munich was far from being impromptu. It was prepared with the support of the Prince-Bishop of Constance, von Rodt, protector to his family, and with the complicity of the Munich theologian, Ferdinand Sterzinger, a sworn enemy of superstition in general and of Gassner in particular. Mesmer made a strong impression and on 28 November 1775 he was elected as a member of the Academy. The controversy surrounding Gassner died away. Under pressure from the Emperor, he was obliged to retire to a remote parish in March 1776, and was then ordered by the Pope to stop practising his skill.

Mesmer acted in Munich as a perfect Aufklärer. However, the way in which he judged the exorcist set him apart from the other defenders of the Enlightenment. He refused to condemn Gassner. Rather than detecting a

---


swindle that abused the credulity of the sick, Mesmer acknowledged that in fact he had achieved some genuine cures. On this point, he aligned himself with the position of his professor of clinical medicine, the physician Anton de Haen, to whom Maria Theresa had given responsibility for investigating the exorcist. De Haen too refused to deny Gassner’s results. However, because in his opinion there was no natural explanation for certain cures, he concluded that they were the work of the devil and that they should be condemned accordingly. For Mesmer, on the contrary, Gassner’s only error was to believe that he was driving out the devil, when in fact he was unknowingly magnetizing.

Mesmer denounced by his peers

The Gassner case offered Mesmer the opportunity to defend his discovery. The phenomena of witchcraft and possession, in general, were, in his opinion, neither the product of superstition, as claimed by the Aufklärer, nor that of supernatural actions, as confirmed by the Catholic theologians and also supposed by de Haen: they could be explained by completely natural causes, which were those of animal magnetism. Such an argument was able to fit perfectly with the policy of secularisation being carried out at the time by the enlightened despots, as demonstrated by Mesmer’s warm welcome in Munich. It was simply a question of transferring the power of performer of miracles from Churchmen to the magnetizers. Although the idea appealed to some, it immediately came up against a major difficulty: Mesmer himself was denounced by some of his colleagues as an impostor who had merely recycled the speculations of the Paracelsians from the 17th century. The most aggressive of his opponents was the physician Jan Ingenhousz. Originally from Holland, in 1768 he introduced the practice of inoculation into Austria. He benefited from the complete trust of Maria Theresa, whose personal physician he became (Leibarzt).

On his return to the Austrian capital in 1776, Mesmer opened a kind of magnetic clinic at his home, where the following year he welcomed

---

(41) See Anton de HAEN, De miraculis, Paris, Didot, 1776, the entire final chapter of which is dedicated to the Gassner affair. He concludes (p. 208) that "although those who see Gassner as a miracle worker [...] persist in saying that these cures, which it cannot be denied, have not in any way been carried out with the aid of human and natural resources, even though such miracles exceed the virtue of a mere exorcist [...], we repeat that, as these things have not been accomplished by the hand of God, as we have demonstrated, nor by nature, as the panegyrist of Gassner proclaim, we are forced to say that these prodigies are genuine works of the devil".

(42) Frank PATTIE, op. cit, p. 43-45.
a young woman, a pianist protected by the Empress, who was both an excellent musician and blind, Maria Theresia Paradis. Mesmer intended to restore the sight that she had lost at the age of four. Initially, he seemed to have achieved this, attracting the curiosity of the Viennese public, but a scandal broke out when Maria Theresia’s parents questioned the cure. At the start of May, the young woman was taken out of Mesmer’s hands by order of the president of the Faculty of Medicine, von Stö rck, after the intervention, it is said, of the Empress and the Bishop of Vienna, Cardinal Migazzi. For Mesmer, this was a terrible failure. A few months later, on 22 June 1778, he left Vienna for Paris. His enemies spread the rumour that he had been banished. On the contrary, Mesmer asserted that he had left of his own accord, taking with him a letter of introduction from Kaunitz to the Austrian ambassador in Paris, Mercy d’Argenson.

Beyond the personal conflict, the confrontation between Mesmer and Ingenhousz came down to two very different concepts of medicine. Of course, they both shared some common points. They both claimed to be heirs to the reforms of Boerhaave. Claiming rational and enlightened medicine, based on clinical practice and physical science, they rejected both superstition and Galenism, and believed in the project of medicine as a force for improvement, closely associated with the action of the public authorities. However, their differences were at least as significant. Mesmer, trained by de Haen, the great clinician of Vienna, observed patients, touching and personally interacting with them, while Ingenhousz, trained in Leiden and England, practised an impersonal type of hospital medicine, becoming an expert in mass inoculation. Nor did their concept of physics have anything in common. Mesmer’s was purely speculative, his experience being merely limited to observation of patients, while Ingenhousz subscribed to the new experimental physics, based on precise and quantitative measurements.

In fact, the rejection of animal magnetism and its founder reveals the direction taken by Viennese medicine following the disappearance of van Swieten and de Haen. For Mesmer, it still seemed to be possible, at the cost of a re-interpretation, to give credit to ancient beliefs coming from natural

(43) The Paradis affair is one of the most well-known episodes in the life of Mesmer. It was the subject of numerous accounts. See in particular Hermann ULRICH, “Maria Theresia Paradis und Dr Franz Anton Mesmer”, Jahrbuch des Vereines für Geschichte der Stadt Wien, t. 17-18, 1961-1962, p. 149-188.

magic. For the new generation, that of Ingenhousz and des Stoll, it was a question of promoting supervision of the health of the people based on anatomical and clinical medicine, experimental pharmacology and public health. In this systematic project, compliant with the political orientations of Josephinism, there was no place for animal magnetism.

**Universal harmony**

On leaving for Paris, in 1778, Mesmer hoped to obtain the recognition that he had been unable to achieve in Vienna. However, it was not that of the physicians that he was seeking, because the Paris Faculty of Medicine was a stronghold of conservatism: what he wanted was recognition from savants, since his discovery was, first and foremost, he believed, that of a physicist. In short, he wished to repeat the success of Munich, but on a much greater scale. However, his failure was immediate and complete. The academic world of Paris had already been warned by Ingenhousz and his correspondents, so much so that he suffered a complete rebuff from the Académie des sciences and the Société royale de médecine as soon as he arrived. On the other hand, Mesmer gained support that would prove to be decisive: that of the patients and soon afterwards that of the public. From this point of view, Paris, compared to Vienna, was another world: there was an open medical market, where all kinds of players were in competition to provide care, while the monopoly exercised in theory by the Faculty of Medicine was mainly a fiction. Mesmer therefore opened a magnetic practice, attended by growing numbers of patients, attracted by word of mouth.

At the same time that he was attracting patients, animal magnetism was undergoing a complete transformation. At the start, Mesmer emphasized the influence exerted directly by the fluid on the organs of the human body. The role of the therapist would consist of restoring the beneficial effects by guiding it towards the patient. Gradually, however, another theme took on importance in the practice and the doctrine: that of circulation of the fluid not only from celestial bodies to living bodies, but also, and in particular, between the living beings themselves, and mainly between

---

(45) In 1776, Maximilian Stoll succeeded Anton de Haen, Mesmer’s master, in the Chair of Clinical Medicine at Vienna. He would later oppose his former student Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of phrenology.
(46) Regarding Mesmer’s stay in Paris, see our article "Mesmer et la diffusion du magnétisme animal à Paris (1778-1803)" in Bruno Belhoste and Nicole Edelmann (eds), op. cit., p. 21-61.
humans. Animal magnetism thus began to change from being an individual treatment to a collective treatment. The central concept was now that of harmony, which Mesmer had already evoked in his 1766 dissertation, but which he developed above all after 1780.

For him, harmony referred to both the general order of the world – strictly speaking, universal harmony – and the balance between the organs of the body that constitutes health. Here we find the analogy of the microcosm and macrocosm. Music, to which Mesmer gave great importance right from the start, makes universal harmony perceptible and may thereby have therapeutic virtue. However, harmony should also be that of men in society, with Mesmer stating that this meant society as it should be, in other words "the one that results from the relationships that our well-ordered organization should produce"\(^{48}\), and not such as it existed. In practice, the collective dimension of animal magnetism was expressed emblematically in the baquet, introduced into the cure after Mesmer’s arrival in Mesmer, and in the magnetized tree around which the patients gathered.

Recognition by the masses, whether that of patients or society, went hand-in-hand with another turning point: that of political and medical positioning. In Vienna, where he occupied an enviable position, Mesmer had mainly sought the support of the authorities. In Paris, a place with which he was unfamiliar and where his position was much more precarious, he was undecided for a long time about which way to proceed. On the one hand, he fitted easily into the nascent liberal society, by placing himself in the Parisian medical market and by acting very early in the public arena, either directly or through his followers. On the other, in view of the fact that he did not have the approval of the official medical and academic institutions, he aimed to maintain support in high places, not hesitating to approach the minister, Maurepas and Marie-Antoinette in person, as if he still believed in the model of enlightened despotism. His refusal in 1782 to accept the conditions offered by the government to finance him marks, from this point of view, a decisive change of direction. In a letter addressed to the Queen on 29 March and published shortly afterwards, he announced his intention to leave France (which he immediately withdrew), stating "that while there are many circumstances in which kings must guide the opinion of the people, there are still many more in which public opinion prevails

\(^{48}\) [Franz Anton MESMER et Nicolas BERGASSE], *Théorie du monde et des êtres organisées*, s.l., s.n., 1784, n° 135.
over that of kings\textsuperscript{49}. Joining the rising tide of opponents of administrative and corporate arbitrariness, he therefore determined from them on to rely on the enlightened public for the imposition of his doctrine.

Advised by his new friends, the lawyer, Bergasse, and the banker, Kornmann, a year later Mesmer filed a subscription project for 240,000 livres with a Paris notary. The name that he chose for the subscriber society, the Société de l’Harmonie universelle, marked the philosophical and medical nature of the project. It was less a case of referring to freemasonry, as has sometimes been suggested, than to a doctrine of affinities recycling the old theories of sympathetic magnetism, but based, as we will see, on entirely different foundations. Mesmer undertook to give a complete course on animal magnetism. The success rapidly exceeded expectations: two hundred people subscribed in just a few months, including some important figures from the court and the city. The government, which was beginning to be concerned, decided to allocate the work of leading an investigation to two official commissions. Their verdict was delivered in August 1784 and it was not open to appeal: magnetic fluid did not exist and the so-called cures were merely the fruit of the imagination of the patients. After this condemnation, the battle of opinion between the supporters and opponents of animal magnetism ended with the defeat of Mesmer’s camp and his departure in May 1785.

With the Société de l’Harmonie universelle, Mesmer earned a fortune, thanks to the subscriptions. At the same time, he stirred up the anger of the official authorities and, perhaps more seriously, he quickly lost the support of many of his followers. Until that date, he was able to be vague about the outlines and content of his doctrine, to the extent that many accused him of wishing to keep it secret. This time, he had to explain himself, which he did with some reluctance. Many of those who listened to him were shocked by the materialist and sensualist theories that he presented to the Société de l’Harmonie\textsuperscript{50}. Very soon, some of them distanced themselves from the master, proposing their own interpretation of animal magnetism. This was the case with his new adviser, Nicolas Bergasse, who almost immediately advanced a Newtonian and Rousseauist version of the doctrine, very different from that of Mesmer, but it was also the case of the Marquis de Puységur, who refocused it on the phenomenon

\textsuperscript{49} Franz Anton Mesmer, Précis historique des faits relatifs au magnétisme-animal jusques en avril 1781, op. cit., p. 219.

\textsuperscript{50} We do not know if Mesmer himself gave the lectures. It would appear that they were written and presented in his presence by various speakers, the main one being Nicolas Bergasse.
of magnetic somnambulism. They both rejected Mesmer’s materialism in favour of a spiritualist interpretation of magnetic phenomena. Other followers resolutely turned towards the supernatural. Caught between condemnation by scholars and what he considered to be a distortion of his doctrine, Mesmer finally decided to retire. Until his reappearance in Vienna, in 1790, he travelled and lived a quiet life.

The morality and the politics of Mesmer

By transforming animal magnetism into a public enthusiasm, Mesmer changed its nature. His doctrine had divided the medical world and it would now mobilise opinion, thereby taking a political turn. In his study on mesmerism, Robert Darnton gave a good demonstration of this phenomenon, but, by choosing to concentrate on the faction surrounding Bergasse and Kornmann, he left aside the case of Mesmer, which is just as significant. It is true that the latter, after the condemnation of his doctrine, remained apart from political combat itself. His status as a foreigner prohibited him from clearly taking up any position, while the government had ordered him to be quiet and go away. However, far from remaining solely in the world of medicine, Mesmer considerably expanded the scope of his doctrine, by turning it into both a physical and moral theory of universal harmony.

The shift already appeared very clearly in the lectures that he gave to his students in 1784. No longer merely providing a list of "proposals" as before, in them he explained the action of the magnetic fluid, the role of the sensations, and the cause of illnesses, as well as the nature of human development, which he related to education and life in society. His ideas were further specified in his later writings, whether his Mémoire sur ses découvertes, published in 1799, or his writings on morality, published and translated into German in the Mesmerismus of 1814, and finally published in French in the Journal du magnétisme between 1846 and 1848. Mesmer explained them with precision and clarity, but also with a great dryness.

(51) See the twenty-seven proposals published at the end of his Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal, Paris, Didot, 1779, p. 74-85.
(52) The teaching of Mesmer is reproduced in the Théorie du monde et des êtres organisés, op. cit., written, it seems, by Nicolas Bergasse based on a manuscript by the master and distributed to subscribers only (the work, which is very rare, is available on Gallica: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k107858b?rk=21459;2), as well as in the Aphorismes de Mesmer, an unauthorized edition of his lectures published by Caulet de Vaumorel. Both texts appeared in autumn 1784. The Aphorismes were widely distributed, republished several times, and also translated into German.
of expression, without really developing them or mentioning his sources of inspiration: the contrast with the emphatic and overblown style of his disciple Nicolas Bergasse was complete.

**The 1784 lectures: a theory of humanity**

The framework in which Mesmer set his doctrine, as he presented it to his disciples in 1784, was that of sensuallist materialism\(^{54}\). While there was an uncreated principle, God, there were, he said, only two principles created in nature and humanity: matter and movement. The world was also completely filled with matter in movement, or universal fluid, directed according to currents, and this universal fluid constituted the general agent by which all bodies influenced one another. The vital principle that characterized living bodies was itself only a part of the universal fluid and it was also subject to the influences of the celestial bodies and the Earth, as well as the particular surrounding bodies. This reciprocal influence, subject to variations, or flux and reflux, formed what Mesmer very generally called magnetism. It was its regular action that characterized universal harmony. As for humanity, it was endowed, like all living beings, with an organization, the correct operation, or state of harmony of which, also designated health. This could be damaged or restored by the effects of flux and reflux of the current that penetrating the body and acts on its organization. These were the effects at the root of the therapeutic processes of animal magnetism.

Mesmer then developed a sensualist theory of knowledge in his lectures. Feeling was a general property of organized bodies designating the ability to receive impressions, while thinking was reduced to comparing, combining, modifying and organizing sensations. The point to be emphasized here was the existence, alongside the five external organs, of an internal sense, in relation to the universe as a whole, which Mesmer called instinct. Instinct was the ability to feel within universal harmony the relationship that beings and events had with the conservation of each individual. Mesmer did not hesitate to oppose reason to instinct: while reason was artificial and specific to each individual, instinct, which was


(54) In this sub-section, we will mainly rely on the *Théorie du monde et des êtres organisés* and on the *Aphorismes de Mesmer* (see note 52). We find the same concepts explained, often with the same words, in the later works of Mesmer (*Mémoire sur ses découvertes* from 1799 and *Mesmerismus* from 1814).
an effect of harmony, was in nature and common to all. This is why individuals could rely on it for their actions and feelings. The power of instinct could explain, according to Mesmer, the apparently extraordinary phenomena of magnetic somnambulism and clairvoyance. However, its use in treatment could be dangerous and should not in any case replace the controlled action of animal magnetism.

After man as an individual, Mesmer considered man in society as the starting point for his works on morality\(^5\). Actions were determined by reasons, i.e. by representations of their effects. However, these effects came down to two kinds: pleasure and pain. Mesmer put forward as a principle that it is always better to be led by the attraction of pleasure than by the consideration of pain. Thus, a man determined solely by the fear of pain would inevitably be ill. In the light of this, "the duties of man with respect to society are to conform his actions to the rule of society\(^5\)\(^6\), which is harmony. This is the reason why Mesmer gave primary importance to education, and first and foremost to the education of children.

In primary education, the child should have "complete freedom to make every effort and every attempt possible\(^5\)\(^7\), because it was necessary to "abandon him to the action of the universal fluid and the general and particular influences of the beings that coexist with him\(^5\)\(^8\). He would thus find in his own way the order in which it is advisable for him to develop "and will begin, without the need for instruction and solely by the instinct that guides him, to be in harmony with everything that moves, takes action and develops with him\(^5\)\(^9\). Mesmer associated the theme of language with that of education. He insisted on the importance of natural language, i.e. the voice, facial expressions and gestures, which he distinguished from conventional language, which consisted of words and with which conventional writing was associated. The conventional language of a people made it possible, in his opinion, to judge their degree of civilisation: "any language that has a lot of abstract forms and few words to express simple feelings indisputably belongs to a people who have passed through the entire range of customs and who are reaching the final degree of depravity\(^5\)\(^0\).

\(^{55}\) Théorie du Monde, op. cit., n° 143.
\(^{56}\) Ibid., n° 145.
\(^{57}\) Ibid., n° 139.
\(^{58}\) Ibid. n° 138.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., n° 139.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., n° 142.
A treatise on morality and politics

The lectures given by Mesmer in 1784 merely drew the outlines of a theory of morality that he was only to develop after his withdrawal from public life. The texts that he then wrote would only be published after the Revolution. Everything leads us to believe, however, that Mesmer had been working on them for a long time. In any case, there was no question about the continuity between the contents of his 1784 lectures and those of his later manuscripts, which were to some extent an extension of them. It is also possible that the essence was already contained in the memoir, which remained unpublished, that Mesmer deposited in the archives of the Société de l’Harmonie universelle on 1st July 1785. The importance given to legislation would nonetheless appear to indicate, at least for certain parts of it, a process of composition after June 1789. Since it is also certain that Mesmer had his manuscripts on morality to hand in 1790, and took them with him to Vienna, they could have been written right at the start of the Revolution. Finally, we find in the manuscripts published in the Journal du magnétisme a note entitled "final reflection", which we can date to the spring of 1802. In it, as we have seen, Mesmer denounces the dismissal of several members of the Tribunate, adding, in disillusioned fashion: "This is the event that forces the cutting short of every project, of every of establishing a public spirit and a national standard in France". From these few traces, it follows that the political texts published in the Journal du magnétisme between 1846 and 1848, and which were used for the publication of the Mesmerismus, were written by Mesmer between 1785 and 1802 at the latest.

As we have seen, the theory of man explained by Mesmer falls very clearly within the tradition of sensualism. The role attributed to the sixth sense may evoke, despite a number of differences, the theory of the internal sense (including the sense of harmony and the moral sense) of Shaftesbury.

(61) We are only aware of the existence of this unpublished memoir due to Nicolas Bergasse, who decided to reply to it in order to refute it. See Supplément aux Observations de M. Bergasse, ou Règlements des Sociétés de l’Harmonie universelle, adoptés par la Société de l’Harmonie de France, dans l’Assemblée générale tenue à Paris le 12 mai 1785. Avec des Notes pour servir à l’intelligence du texte, s.l., s.n., [1785], p. 27, note 2. We also note that the "Devises des Sociétés de l’Harmonie", published in the Système raisonné du magnétisme universel d’après les principes de M. Mesmer... par la Société de l’Harmonie d’Ostende, Paris, Gasteliers, 1786, p. 86, and reproduced by Robert Darnton, Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France, op. cit., p. 187, already mentioned, in a few words, the main themes dealt with by Mesmer in this treatise on morality.

(62) See A. Körner, op. cit. p. 128. Gilowsky translated passages of this for Riedel, before the latter even made Mesmer’s acquaintance.

and Hutchinson, who were highly influential in Europe, as in Great Britain, during the 18th century. We also find in the ideas of Mesmer the echo of the materialist theories of Helvetius and Baron d’Holbach, and, of course, those of Rousseau\(^6\). When and how Mesmer became familiar with these writers, we do not know at all. Having been educated in philosophy, it may have happened very early, but it is more likely that his moral and political ideas were defined during his stay in Paris. Mesmer, who did not leave a library on his death, does not appear to have been a great reader. On the other hand, although not a man of the \textit{salon}, he did like conversation. Here, we will look, among the encounters that may have had a direct influence on his moral and political ideas, at those with the parliamentarians Duport, to whom he was very close, and Servan, with whom he lived for several months.

Mesmer’s moral theory was general and systematic. The principles on which it was based, which were the conservation of the individual and the generation or propagation of the species, were universal principles, because, he wrote, the nature of man was "one and invariable in all times and in all places"\(^6\). These were the principles that constituted the real reasons, or aims, of the actions of men. In this morality of self-interest, the main problem was to enable everyone to achieve their aims, which was the definition of happiness, without harming that of others. The solution was the one that Mesmer had already proposed in 1784: it bore the name \textit{harmony}. Through its mechanism, man is linked to the universe. Initially passive, he becomes active solely by the effect of his organization. At the same time, man is destined to live in society. For these reasons, individual health, or harmony between the organs, the organization of society, or harmony between men, and the natural order, or universal harmony, are closely associated in the definition of happiness: this consists, in short, of bringing man as an individual and man in society into harmony with nature.

In relation to his 1784 lectures, Mesmer added another fundamental principle to his theory of man: that of individual freedom. Freedom, he

\(^{64}\) According to the belated account from his disciple Picher-Grandchamp, Mesmer stated that his purpose in coming to France was to heal J.-J. Rousseau: "I believed for some time, he told us, from reading his work, that he had a serious disorder of the liver, which may have contributed somewhat to inflaming his temper; however, his absence and various other circumstances were to constitute insurmountable obstacles to the execution of my plan" (letter from Picher-Grandchamp to Judel, published in \textit{L’Hermès. Journal du magnétisme animal}, 1829, p. 270).

emphasized, was as necessary to happiness as health was, because to enjoy it was to have, independently of any other, the means to become happy. The question of freedom introduced a political dimension into morality, which had been absent from the explanation of 1784. Natural freedom is a process: "man begins by existing in a state of absolute dependence" and he only acquires independence gradually, at the same time as he becomes linked to an order established by society to which he has to transfer a portion of the freedom that he has. This transfer, said Mesmer, is not a sacrifice of freedom for the individual, because it takes place "on the sole condition that it [society] will contribute to his happiness". This leads to the fundamental concepts of sovereignty, property and safety. Without taking on contractual theory, Mesmer acknowledged the existence of a "social pact", which was "a tacit and primitive action", by which the general will was constituted. As the natural or primitive society was the society of the family, only the head of the family was a citizen. Among citizens, Mesmer made a further distinction between the possessors of part of the homeland, who were the "natural citizens", and the others, who were the "adoptive citizens".

**Education and justice**

Like Rousseau, Mesmer attributed an essential role to the first moments of life. This was an aspect that had already attracted his attention in his 1784 lectures and which he developed at greater length in his writings on morality. "The first few minutes of existence of the child are destined to outline the rudiments and to form the mould of the future citizen. Generation, as well as education, will therefore by the most essential objects for the happiness of civil society". This is why Mesmer put forward the idea, novel in his day, of the proclamation of the rights of the child. They were natural rights: they concerned perinatal and paediatric care, which involved both the mother and the child (for example, the right to be nursed by the mother) – which led to his interest in the question of tying the umbilical cord in connection with the debate over vaccination –, and education, which consisted both of the development and improvement of the child’s abilities and the harmony of their customs with the rule of society.

---

(68) "Basic ideas on morality", preface, *ibid.*, p. 34.
Mesmer detailed the objects of education, which he distinguished from instruction, and insisted on the need to avoid any premature instruction and to train the child in a society of children (the expression was already present in his 1784 lectures): until the age of nine, children would thus always be together and in the open air as much as possible; they would begin by cultivating natural language, i.e. expression by voice and gesture, and natural writing, i.e. drawing. Mesmer emphasized the importance "for the harmony of society" of inspiring a love of justice and the social virtues in them from an early age and cultivating in them "an awareness of and interest in others", including animals. The aim was to make them feel at all times "this rule of nature founded on the eternal law of balance: Do not do to others what you do not wish them to do to you". Because they should reach this on their own, children should be placed "in circumstances and situations in which they are likely to commit faults, so that they can learn that nothing can replace the good and bad effects of their actions".

In his treatise, Mesmer also gave great importance to criminal law. This was connected with the principle of universal harmony: it was simply a question of restoring the general balance when it had been disrupted by a wrong action. Criminal justice therefore only existed for the purpose of remedy and protection. As for the punishment itself, it had no purpose, but only existed as a remedy, or means of correction. It should therefore make it possible to render the guilty person a better one and to bring them back into society. Mesmer therefore rejected the death penalty, but also banishment, life sentences and any other punishment that could damage the prisoner’s health. Consequently, he considered that the maximum length of a sentence should be five years. He demanded that prisons, or houses of correction, should be run with a view to improving prisoners and returning them to society. If the means of correction were insufficient, the prisoner should then be considered as a sick person and remedies should be sought in medicine. Mesmer thus fully subscribed to the tradition of rational criminal law. His convictions might have dated from his early days in Vienna, where the theories of Beccaria, and Sonnenfels, resonated widely. In Paris, his disciple and friend, Adrien Duport, echoing his ideas, was one

(69) "Basic ideas on morality", § 4: Education, ibid., p. 257.
(70) Ibid., p. 256.
(72) Torture was abolished in Austria in 1776 and the death sentence in 1787. See B. STOLLBERG-RILINGER, Maria Theresia, op. cit., p. 715-726.
of the most eloquent opponents of the death sentence under the Constituent Assembly\textsuperscript{73}.

**Legislation, taxes and civil religion**

While it is difficult to date Mesmer’s texts on education and law, it seems clear that those on legislation, taxes and civil religion were written during the Revolution, and the later ones under the Consulate. For Mesmer, the Republic was founded on the principles of nature. Legislation itself was merely the rule of freedom and an extension of education. A people are free, he wrote, when they have the power to make the laws themselves and choose those who will execute them. Because authority in society is of necessity based on the sovereignty of the people, they should be able to assemble freely to express and agree on the wishes of their members regarding the common interest. Nonetheless, Mesmer limited this right to those he called "citizens with reasoned intent". Children were excluded, along with women, servants and men in a state of dementia\textsuperscript{74}.

Mesmer dedicated significant developments to the question of taxes and finances, in which, as a recipient of an income from the French government, he took a very special interest during the Revolution. He proposed two taxes, a land tax, payable on property, and a personal contribution, or tax on usage, i.e. income tax. The importance of tax lay, in his opinion, in its role of contributing to the public finances, but also, and maybe above all, in its effects on inequalities of wealth: if tax was payable solely by the wealthy, "the most numerous and most useful class of men will live happily, and all the people, coming closer to equality, will enjoy the most perfect freedom"\textsuperscript{75}. Mesmer also proposed, to avoid the concentration of wealth, some measures on the division of inheritances, which he presented, during his stay in Vienna, in opposition to Hebenstreit’s communism. As for the public debt, he suggested representing it by a single type of negotiable paper, bearing 3% interest per year and reimbursable from a Caisse nationale d’escompte.

It was through religious festivals that Mesmer approached the question of civil religion. His proposals, which were similar to those of a number of writers, including those of the Theophilanthropists, showed

\footnotesize


\textsuperscript{(75)} "Basic ideas on morality"§ 11: Finance, *Journal du magnétisme*, vol. 6, 1848, p. 264.
little originality." Mesmer proposed republican festivals dedicated to the worship of the Supreme Being. The most noteworthy point is the importance that he gives to the sun. "It is in this star that we feel the idea of the Supreme Being come to life: this is what in the eyes of all peoples represents its perfections in the most obvious manner." In summertime, the ten-day ceremony would provide for young people’s games, about which Mesmer gave some details. In the notice that he sent to Sécretier in April 1798, he also proposed including in national worship "certain procedures that will be indicated for preventing illnesses, for tackling the circumstances that cause them and for consolidating health, in short for restoring and confirming harmony in the physical and moral economy of man". "It would undoubtedly be – he added – the object most worthy of being related to the creator of nature, in order to thereby dedicate the devotion of admiration and gratitude to him."

Mesmer’s writings on morality and politics, published many years later, went practically unnoticed. In terms of reception, they are therefore of little interest. Furthermore, even the biographers of the founder of animal magnetism have paid little attention to them. Should we therefore also ignore them? Evidently not. In fact, taking them into consideration clarifies all Mesmer’s work and actions, in which they reveal the political dimension. This was not lacking during his Viennese period, when he invented his animal magnetism, as demonstrated by his role in the Gassner affair. However, it was during his time in Paris that it really assumed importance. His close relations with the Viennese "Jacobins", Gilowsky, Riedel and Hebenstreit, therefore owe nothing to chance. If Mesmer was a declared supporter of the Revolution, this was based on a deep conviction. Having initially more of a moderate in the style of his friend, Duport, after 1792 he moved towards a pronounced republicanism, which was expressed in his ideas on legislation and his plans for a constitution.

Mesmer’s republicanism was based entirely on his theory of harmony, which he taught in his lectures at the Société de l’Harmonie universelle in 1784 and developed in his later writings, which remained unpublished for many years. While this theory was an extension of the medical doctrine of

(76) See Albert Mathiez, La théophilanthropie et le culte décadaire, 1796-1801. Essai sur l’histoire religieuse de la Révolution, Paris, F. Alcan, 1904. Mathiez ignored Mesmer’s project.
(77) "Basic ideas on morality", § 10: Republican festivals, Journal du magnétisme, vol. 6, 1848, p. 162.
animal magnetism, as drafted before his arrival in Paris, it was distinguished from it by its nature that was both comprehensive and collective. However, the historians who have highlighted the political importance of mesmerism on the eve of the Revolution, beginning with Robert Darnton, have indeed demonstrated the central role of this theory and its influence on people’s minds, but without actually attributing it to Mesmer himself, who is generally considered to have been apolitical. Of course, it was not absurd to place the emphasis on Nicolas Bergasse and his group, renamed the "radical tendency of mesmerism", in view of his role at the start of the Revolution, rather than Mesmer, who remained outside the political arena. However, apart from the fact that Bergasse himself quickly turned towards the Counter-Revolution, this amounted to neglecting other mesmerists, who were also committed, and in a more significant manner, to the Revolution. Finally, to forget Mesmer himself, who was the leader of the faction, is to completely ignore the profound theoretical differences, on magnetism, somnambulism and the nature of harmony, which led, at least as much as the questions of power and money, to the division between mesmerists and to different, even opposing, commitments during the Revolution.

Bruno Belhoste
University of Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne –
Institute of Modern and Contemporary History - UMR 8066
bruno.belhoste@univ-paris1.fr

(79) See, in this issue, the article by David Armando.