Mesmerism
In Enlightenment France

Franz Anton Mesmer

- 1734-1815 Austrian Physician (friend of Mozart)
- 1766: Dissertation at the University of Vienna contended that there was a superfine, invisible fluid that pervaded all of nature, including the human body.
- The continual flow of this fluid throughout the universe accounted for forces such as gravity and magnetism, and affected human health.
- (Remember: Newton established how gravity functions as a constant, not what it is.) Mesmer argued that the planets could not exist in a vacuum.
- Obstruction to this flow was a prime cause of disease.

Some other ‘Discoveries’

- One common location for blockages was the upper abdomen, or “hypochondria.”
- Women seemed more susceptible to blockages than men.
- “Mesmerized” (charged) rods, tubs, trees, water, and other objects could be used to channel the flow of the fluid.
- Lining people up in chains, either through physical touch, or by having them all touch a rope (without knots) could increase the flow of the fluid and force through the blockages in bodies.
- The most effective tool for channeling fluid was often the “Mesmeric Tub” – a large wooden tub with iron rods protruding that served as a reservoir of fluid.
- 1778 -- The Austrian medical community declared him to be a “quack” and he left, taking his practice to Paris.

W hat is M esmerism? Some A nswers:

- It has gone down in history as a catchword for “shams” and “side-show tricks.”
- A form of hypnosis?
- A theory sold by one of the greatest quacks of all time.
- A form of “failed science.” A genuine theory that seemed to be the key to health, but which led nowhere.
- Also:
  - A medical trend in Enlightenment France that drew many adherents from the intellectual elites and the educated middle class.
  - An example of how a literate society deals with scientific theory, controversy, and “proof.”
  - A unique insight into how different theories compete to be “science.”

The Progress of M esmerism

- “Animal Magnetism:” In animal life, including humans, the mesmeric fluid functioned according to the laws of magnetism.
- Since disease was essentially the result of clogs and obstructions to the flow of the fluid, magnets could be used to restore health, if applied correctly.
- 1775 -- After witnessing a faith healer in Germany, Mesmer was convinced that what he had seen was the man manipulating the flow of fluid without the aid of magnets. He began developing the theory.
- He “discovered” that he could direct and control the flow of fluid through touch and through eye contact.

The French Connection:

- In Paris he received a warm welcome from many who wanted to know more about his discoveries, but not from the established medical community.
- Was this the result of professional jealousy or of legitimate concern on the part of the medical professors of Paris?
- Paris was split over this question. Some of the medical faculty defected to Mesmer, along with a significant number of medical students, who saw the conflict as the older generation trying to resist progress.
- The mesmerists developed their own medical society and had an extensive list of patients.
- It was not uncommon for the side effects of having obstructions removed to be profound: seizures, fainting, trances, and wild screaming could all be part of the process.
- For those who got out of hand there was a padded “recovery room” nearby.
- The mesmeric fluid flowed throughout the cosmos, connecting all things. As such, the influence of the stars and planets reemerged as an aspect of health.
- Sympathetic magic was back -- Mesmer himself wore a lavender robe with symbols of the moon, stars and planets.
- The proper mood and music could also affect the flow of fluid, so the mesmeric parlors were set up for both.
Why was this so Popular among the French?

• Enlightenment France regarded itself (and was regarded by others) as the cutting edge of scientific information and the exchange of ideas.
• New developments in natural philosophy, even more than in politics, religion, and art and literature, were considered to be the very stuff of “Enlightenment.”
• Paris had become a clearinghouse for new discoveries.
• This was a very turbulent time: If the theories of the Newtons, Linnaeus’, and Lavoisiers advanced method in legitimate directions, they were not the only contenders and there were plenty of alternatives to what we now regard as science which appeared to be every bit as legitimate.
• By our standards, some really strange things passed for the new direction of ‘science’ in Enlightenment France:
Who were the Mesmerists?

- Mesmer had attracted a wide section of the Parisian, and eventually the French, population.
- Those who sought him out as a teacher of the “new methods,” tended to be upper class intellectual elites in French society.
- The patients tended to be from the leisure classes as well.
- A “charity tub” was set out on certain days so that the poor could have the benefits of the cosmic fluid as well.
- (This was not much used, as far as we know -- at least for the purpose intended.)
- A list of prominent mesmerists prior to the French Revolution reads like a “who’s who” of major figures in the Revolution.
- Publication and distribution records from the time make it clear that prior to the Revolution mesmerism far outstripped political theory as the “hot topic.”
- What does this say about the perspectives of the Revolutionaries?
- (Good question -- read Darnton.)

The Demise of Mesmerism (?)

- It may well be said that the critics of mesmerism, mainly the established medical community of Paris, had their own issues:
- Mainline medicine was still practiced according to humoral theory. (Which leeches do we use and when? When should mercury be applied? Etc.) Surgery was no more advanced.
- Regardless of whether mesmerism cured anything, the survival rate of his patients was much higher.
- Nevertheless, the claims of mesmerism could be subjected to empirical examination.
- In 1784 a royal commission was set up to do just that. (The commission included Lavoisier and an American visitor, Benjamin Franklin.
- The tests demonstrated that much of the mesmeric effect rested upon the power of suggestion.
- The report of the commission denounced mesmerism as a sham.

Mesmerism: Concluded:

- The report of the royal commission did not end the practice of mesmerism in France, the Revolution did. The report appeared as another high handed attempt to discredit the new science.
- Mesmerism moved across the channel, morphed a bit, and had a significant following in Victorian Britain.
- Several interesting points arise from considering mesmerism:
  - The image of the “persecuted defender of Scientific Truth” is well established in the Enlightenment.
  - There was plenty of disagreement about what made something “scientific,” or legitimate.
  - It is informative to note what was taken seriously and what was ridiculed in France at the time (and why.)
- It is interesting to consider the effect of mesmerism on the French Revolution.
- What makes one a “Charlatan” then or now? What separates “real” medicine from its alternatives?