
Reviewed by Kathryn Troy (Suffolk County Community College, Farmingdale State College, Pace University, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (May, 2023)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Efram Sera-Shriar's work *Psychic Investigators: Anthropology, Modern Spiritualism, and Credible Witnessing in the Late Victorian Age* represents the necessary next steps in the study of Spiritualism, namely, to begin identifying its pervasiveness and influence in key cultural, religious, and scientific sectors of Western society rather than relegating it to the margins of the long nineteenth century. Sera-Shriar is clever to organize his chapters by focusing on individual anthropologists and how Spiritualism influenced their methods and standards regarding evidence collection and witnessing. This framework provides a pathway to deep, insightful analysis and, intentionally or otherwise, mirrors the focus that works dedicated to Spiritualism have adopted as they gravitate toward the individualized nature of mediumship.

Where Sera-Shriar's work falters is in acknowledging and addressing the Spiritualist movement as both a science and as a *religion*, in the purest definition of the term. To single out and dismiss Spiritualism as an illegitimate religion that no "sensible person" would adhere to because of a handful—even a large handful—of practitioners who pursued their own gain under the guise of religion is something I find, to borrow a word from this book's introduction, "absurd" (p. 4). The language used to define Spiritualism in this text also reveals a key misunderstanding. Spiritualism is not a historical relic—a dead religion. Like many other nontraditional belief systems—Druidry and Wicca come to mind—Spiritualism may not be at the height of its popularity, but it is a vibrant, *current* religion, with millions of devoted followers. Eliding or dismissing that fact out of hand is troubling. In Sera-Shriar's talk of the Victorian age as one of transformation, there is an attempt to grapple with the religious nature of Spiritualism, but that attempt is unfortunately only skin-deep, and does not engage with Spiritualism as simultaneously a religion and a science on a meaningful level. Doing so was clearly not Sera-Shriar's intention, nor necessarily should it...
have been. It might have been better to leave that off the table entirely and deal only with Spiritualism's scientific elements, while acknowledging the limitations of such parameters.

There is also some circular reasoning at play here. It is true, as Sera-Shriar states, that in order to legitimize themselves to skeptics, Spiritualists engaged in rigorous empirical tests to prove the veracity of their ghostly claims. But Spiritualism is not responsible for developing the empirical method. Nor are Spiritualists responsible for the centrality of empirical proofs to scientific inquiry. Rather, they engaged in the scientific terms of the day, in a broad sense, to lend credence to their own beliefs, engaging with scientists on their own terms. So the point about the influence of Spiritualism on the usage and form of empiricism and evidence gathering, and not the development of empiricism itself, requires more nuance. What made Spiritualists key actors, then, is not what they were doing, per se, but how public their activities were, and how prolific and widely distributed their printed processes and conclusions. Their attempt at scientific transparency, it turns out, was a very present and immediate example for anthropologists to follow, laid at their fingertips.

That is the core of Efram Sera-Shriar's argument, and that particular claim comes off beautifully. For historians, anthropologists, and those who work in social sciences broadly, this volume is an excellent vehicle by which those unfamiliar with the Spiritualist movement can begin to recognize its impact. For those in Spiritualist circles (pun absolutely intended), there is sadly less to appreciate.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech
