Introduction

Despite the centrality of rationalist thought in shaping modernity in the so-called Western cultures, it is in their midst that a movement known as Modern Spiritualism took form. A movement at once religious and secular, Modern Spiritualism proposed the recognition and systematisation of the relations between humans and spirits. Since its inception, such systematisation has been marked by complex political, historical, and social dispositions that not only engendered distinct religious fields, but also inscribed the very social and cultural dynamics of particular groups.

The origin of this movement is attributed to the communication between the twelve- and fifteen-year-old sisters Katie and Margaret Fox and spirits in Hydesville, New York. The Fox sisters, born to a Presbyterian family, devised a code of raps on doors and tables to communicate with spirits that haunted their home. They quickly became well-known in the United States, travelling through the country to demonstrate their extraordinary powers of communication. As early as 1854, an estimated three million people had become adepts of Modern Spiritualism. In 1842, a mission spread the news to the Old Continent as Modern Spiritualists travelled to Scotland and England (Aubrée and Laplantine 2009).

The European salons were thus introduced to the phenomenon of levitating tables, which for a while was the object of curiosity and entertainment of the elite. In France, such a phenomenon drew the attention of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, a pedagogue who would come to be known as Allan Kardec, the ‘codifier’ of Spiritism. Spiritism was developed as a scientific-philosophic-religious system in which the relations between the visible world of humans and the invisible world of spirits could finally be systematised following the rationalist and scientific conceptions that ruled nineteenth-century Europe. Kardec coined the term Spiritism in order to differentiate his new doctrine from the wider Spiritualist movement then under development in the United States and Europe. He defined it as “a science dealing with the nature, origin and destiny of the Spirits, and with their relation with the corporeal world”
The books written by Kardec, based upon his communication with the spirits, quickly reached other European countries. Later, they crossed the Atlantic to the European colonies, where they achieved great popularity with some members of the local elites, among whom were many Europeans, as was the case in Brazil.

Spiritism is anchored on a few central religious and philosophical postulates. The belief in immortality and in the evolution of the spirit is a basic premise of the doctrine. According to Kardec, God created all spirits, imperfect and alike, and all were granted the freedom of will to make the necessary choices for their spiritual evolution towards moral perfection. Reincarnation is understood to be the natural path towards such a goal. The actions taken and choices made during the (incarnate) life of a spirit not only contribute to moral growth and, consequently, evolution, but also determine the probations and expiations the spirit has to undergo in each reincarnation. Kardec thus named this universal system of ethical retribution a “law of cause and effect.” According to this law, the condition of our current life is the outcome of our acts in previous lives. Nonetheless, the notion of free will resurfaces in the idea that a spirit can also choose the conditions of life during a particular incarnation in order to more rapidly achieve perfection or the expiation of errors and mistakes committed during past lives.

In addition to reincarnation and karma, mediumship is a central element of Spiritism. Mediumship is the means of communication between incarnated and disincarnated spirits, and those who are able to develop this ability to its full potential are called ‘mediums’. Another basic principle of Spiritism is the practice of charity, which constitutes the fundamental means of spiritual evolution. Incarnate and disincarnate spirits can improve themselves through charitable acts and brotherly love, principles closely linked to Christian moral values. These principles are clearly expressed in Kardec’s well-known saying that “there shall be no salvation without charity.”

We do not seek here to offer a historical account of French Spiritism (for that, see Aubrée and Laplantine 2009; and Monroe’s chapter in this volume), but rather to focus on the expansion of this doctrine in Brazil, attending to the particularities of its development there, where it is marked by a strong emphasis on its therapeutic applications. We thus hope to introduce the therapeutic dimension of Spiritism that, while only slightly developed under Allan Kardec’s and French codification, gained strength in Brazil and distinctively marked Brazilian Spiritist practice, at the same time engendering a field of disputes involving the State, the medical establishment, and various religious groups.