

BOOK REVIEW

The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences by Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm. University of Chicago Press, 2017, 411 pp. ISBN 978-0226403366.

REVIEWED BY DMITRI CERBONCINI FERNANDES AND ALEXANDER MOREIRA-ALMEIDA

NUPES—Research Center in Spirituality and Health, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Brazil

dmitri.fernandes@ufjf.edu.br

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We live in a contradictory world. Self-proclaimed “skeptics,” as the original meaning itself suggests, should first of all strive for scientific rationality, for reflective and objective distancing in the apprehension of reality, for methodological caution, and for an extensive ability to theoretically and philosophically understand intricate problems. In practice, too often there is entrenchment in dogmatic groups. Inquisitors endowed with an appearance of religious fanaticism, in the worst sense of the term, invest their energies in crusades of attacks against everyone to whom they attribute mistakes, naïvete, or even bad intentions—the universe of those who do not fit in their often restricted, idealized, and naïve views of scientific practice. In those cases, there is hardly a possibility of frank dialogue, or openness to research fields outside preconceptions of what science and philosophy can approach and how they should operate. Researchers who dare to go beyond the limits some people establish for science and rationality can be disqualified as charlatans, backward, true believers, or superstitious.

To substantiate their certainties, such self-proclaimed skeptics often claim to base their approach to science on examples given by highly regarded scientists and philosophers of the past. We speak here of scholars of the stature of Giordano Bruno, Francis Bacon, René

Descartes, Isaac Newton, the Encyclopedists, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Sigmund Freud, James Frazer, the Vienna Circle, Max Weber, etc. Despite their different approaches, we are talking about many of the very founders of modern Western knowledge. The self-proclaimed contemporary “skeptics” claim their inscriptions in the tradition inaugurated by these illustrious intellectual ancestors. They claim to defend with determination such a rationalist tradition against “pseudoscientists” and “mystic-religious” philosophers who, in their opinion, wish to corrupt it through insidious insertions into fields not rightfully belonging to them.

But what if we realized that the “founding fathers” of Western science and rationalism have never corresponded to what skeptics would have liked them to have been? Even worse, what if the methodological, epistemological, and theoretical developments of their discoveries were deeply embedded in the methodology inherited from magic, in activities such as alchemy, in the experiences of spiritualist séances, in mystical knowledge, and in all sorts of paranormal experiences which each of these would-be “disenchanters of the world” were interested in? This is precisely the task assumed by the brilliant, extensive, well-documented, and almost too-ambitious book *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* by Jason Josephson-Storm: To demystify what he calls the “myth of disenchantment,” that is, a truth regime that presupposes a self-representation (at least in Europe and North America) of fully “disenchanted” cultures.

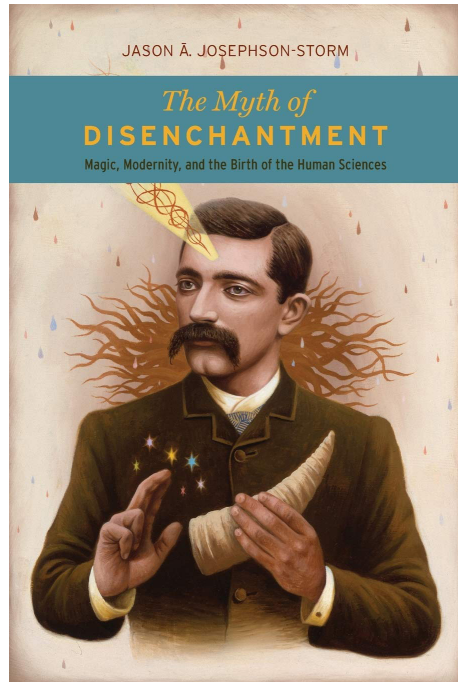
Inscribed in a series of robust studies that emerged in the last decade (Harrison, 2015; Numbers, 2009; Sommer, 2014) are questions about the commonplaces established about the history of science—such as, for example, the supposed “eternal struggles” between faith and reason, religion and science, magic and rationality, myth and reality, etc. Josephson-Storm’s doctoral dissertation, transformed into a book, brings us a vision that is at least disconcerting. The role played by the main heralds noted above with respect to the overlapping between “magic” and the process of Western rationalization is not even close to what we usually learn in college. The compelling demonstration, with abundant documentation (mainly from primary sources) of this fact, is perhaps its greatest merit. His demolition of the Myth of Disenchantment is in line with the provocative and highly cited paper “Secularization, R.I.P.,”

published two decades ago by the sociologist of religion Rodney Stark (1999).

Josephson-Storm brings to light many largely unknown facts about the intellectual biographies of many celebrated leaders of Western Enlightenment and scientific development. These biographical facts were often found in their own writings, but nevertheless were subject to misrepresentation or systematic cleaning by renowned interpreters. To give clarity to this mechanism, the concept of “occult disavowal” (p. 18) is coined by the author.

This is a process that has given a predetermined direction to the ideas espoused by disenchanting interpreters: They projected their own narratives back into the works and lives of the great names of Western thought in a proselytism contrary to magic, paranormal phenomena, and the spiritual element. These interpreters also stressed that the contributions of these leading philosophers and scientists would be part of an explicitly secular and materialist framework and that these leading scientists would have actively contributed to a catechesis against what they believed to belong to the realm of superstition or the supernatural. However, recently found letters, updated information, and other materials have consistently reported the close contact of these respected intellectuals with the “forbidden” spheres of the sacred, spirituality, and the paranormal, revealing a reality and quite different history from that painted by the interpreters.

In addition to bringing these discoveries to light, Josephson-Storm recovers the role played by apparently secondary characters in canonical intellectual history, stressing their importance for the



constitution of the current scientific–philosophical universe. We speak here of “curses” in the official intellectual world, people of the Paracelsus strain, Madame Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, Baron Karl von Prel, Ludwig Klages, Stefan George, and others commonly linked to the fields of mysticism, magic, religion, the occult, and thus usually thought to be opposed to the realm of legitimate science and knowledge. Josephson-Storm abundantly demonstrates how these figures played an active role in the exchange of ideas with the intellectuals celebrated in the academic environment. The forgotten or deliberately hidden contributions of these “magicians” shaped the supposedly “secular” or “disenchanted” intellectual environment that we live in today. They often were the formulators of concepts, findings, and theories that, adapted or concealed, served as a basis for the “legitimate” intellectuals to give rise to the creation and development of modern science and philosophy. Among these concepts, Josephson-Storm launches a bold hypothesis: that what we know as the “disenchantment of the world” is the paradoxical fruit of these same alleged “enchanters,” although this was an unforeseen development.

These unusual encounters and intertwinings of knowledge and resulting experiences between two apparently disparate universes become the background of the pertinent—and ambitious—theoretical questions raised by Josephson-Storm. He builds his research based on three very general questions: 1) Was there really a pattern of development in history that could be called the disenchantment of the world? 2) Was there really a rupture between a time when magic predominated, on the one hand, and another time that saw the product of the world’s disenchantment? 3) Does modernity define a singular period? (p. 17). The answers to these questions, which are not easy to solve, are sought through an evaluation of more than five hundred years of the history of culture and of ideas.

The inculcation of what he calls a “disciplinary norm,” in other words the self-image that the affluent West was building of itself as a rational, disenchanted, modern territory is a long-term historical trend resulting from the participation of several agents. The straitjacket of a very limited and specific version of “rationalism,” which wears well to many self-proclaimed “skeptics,” has an embarrassing history to be told. And it is to its genealogy that Josephson-Storm embarks on his

long undertaking, divided into ten chapters grouped in two parts. In the first part he analyzes many founding fathers of the Enlightenment, followed by the German metaphysicians and the British evolutionary anthropologists of the 19th century. Magicians, alchemists, spiritualists, and esoterics of the same time period are presented and discussed. In the second part he discusses the articulations established by Freud and psychoanalysis, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, the Vienna Circle, and the most famous user of the concept of disenchantment of the world, the sociologist Max Weber, with the “magic” and the “occult” through the hidden characters who shaped their thoughts in the background of history.

Josephson-Storm raises current data that cast doubt on the modern belief that we live in an era in which magic and the sacred have disintegrated amid the wonders of the advent of modernity and the increase in the education of peoples. Contrary to what the defenders of secularism preach, not only “backward” countries live with voodoo, possessions, black magic, spiritual healing, mystical experiences, etc. The most advanced capitalist countries in the world, including the United States, England, and Germany, maintain a high rate (usually the majority of their populations) of belief in spirits, extra-sensorial perception, and in the survival of the soul, with most of their population reporting having already had some form of paranormal experience in their lives. This evidence makes clear that the raising of educational levels does not mean the automatic fall in the belief in the existence of transcendence, as defenders of a vulgar version of the Enlightenment erroneously believe. The occult is present in television series of worldwide success; and literature on magic, angels, and near-death have increased exponentially in recent times (Kripal, 2010). A profusion of different types of “charms” flourishes in every corner.

These indications do not mean that there is no rise in atheism or a marked decline in attendance at churches and in traditional religions, at least in Europe and North America. These two factors combined, apparently proving the thesis of the growing secularization of the world, actually do not mean a conversion to a purely materialistic perspective of life and of the universe. Even in those regions, belief in the paranormal or in a transcendent aspect of reality is held by most people. If we take the entire world population, 84% report having a

religious affiliation (Center, 2012). Based on recent worldwide Gallup polls in 163 nations, Stark (2015) has argued that today “the world is more religious than it has ever been.” Josephson-Storm proposes that secularization even seems to increase enchantment, or at least the belief in an enchanted, supernatural, world (p. 32), a view also somewhat endorsed by Stark (2015) and Kripal (2010). This would be because such beliefs are empirically based on experiences people actually have (p. 34). That is, although many no longer have a set of beliefs and practices guided by a conventional religion, to paraphrase Max Weber, they still have transcendental experiences and other types of relationships with the sacred that are independent of institutionalized religion.

The grand narratives of modernity that consider any belief in the transcendent as debris from past times and superstition, have been overthrown throughout the 20th century. They were replaced by theories that questioned the advent of a progressive reason capable of indefinitely disenchanting the world. Intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Ernst Gellner, George Ritzer, and others kicked off a radical critique that did not spare the Enlightenment, modernity, and capitalism. Such institutions were said to be steeped in the enchanted and irrational artifice at their cores, even as they expressed theories of Cultural Industry, commodity fetishism, and cathedrals of consumption. Late capitalism was nothing more than a return to the realm of enchantment. On the other hand, the subsequent advent of postmodernity and the eruption of related movements, such as the New Age, gave rise to interpretations that framed them as correlated ways of rejecting the Enlightenment and its values. The death of God announced by Nietzsche may have been a valid way to further the escape from the coldness of the world through magical devices. All this converges to the thesis that both modernity and post-modernity formed enchanted periods. The interest in all the themes linked to the paranormal, the supernatural, or the reality of spirits and the survival of the soul after death has never ceased over the past centuries.

Starting his historical analysis with the so-called patriarchs of the Enlightenment—Giordano Bruno, René Descartes, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and the Encyclopedists—Josephson-Storm demonstrates that, behind the development of the thinking for all of them, the same hidden principle reigned: that of magic. And magic not

understood in a restricted definition, but as dynamic and mutant, as defined by those who practiced it in their respective time periods:

What follows will take precisely *not* as given the meaning of magic, religion, or science. This is necessary because the key terms of our analysis had different meanings in different historical moments, and their reoccurrence obscures breaks, discontinuities, and important shifts. Moreover, concepts are partially defined differentially, and current terminology often bears the legacy of lost oppositions. Accordingly, we must pay careful attention to the construction of putative antagonisms (e.g., between myth and enlightenment). (pp. 10–11)

The author shows that the philosophical and scientific elite before the 19th century was basically formed by mystics, religious devouts, and alchemists. The representation that the group of “heroes of the era of Reason” was composed of zealots of mechanistic and secular thought would be a reinterpretation initiated by influential science popularizers of the 19th century, an image that has been constantly nurtured to the present day. A similar analysis has also been recently proposed by the historian of science Andreas Sommer (2016).

Throughout the book, Storm presents his argument that a cleansed history concealed intellectual aspects linked to magic, spiritualism, mysticism, and the sacred in general, a denial operating successfully over time. An illustrative example is provided from Bacon, regarded as the “father” of experimental knowledge: “Knowledge is power” (from Bacon’s 1597 *Meditationes Sacrae*), which is used by Horkheimer and Adorno to unveil the meaning that knowledge took in the early days of the Enlightenment (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). For them, the de-spiritualization of nature, the calculation, the mechanical and rationalizing model of a science serving the established power finds in Bacon one of its main sources. Josephson-Storm, using on Bacon’s own writings, reveals to us that the original meaning of this phrase had little to do with the conclusions of Horkheimer and Adorno. For Bacon, it was a matter of equating the power of God with knowledge (p. 47). This is in keeping with the fact that Bacon saw himself much more as “as an alchemist with a prophetic mission” (p. 45) than as a disenchanter of the world ready to erect a mechanistic model of explanation. Rather, it

was a question of finding a method that would lead him to the creation of purified magic, which would be “a pragmatic, or instrumentalist, form of natural philosophy” (p. 46). Natural philosophy, distorted by scholasticism, in Bacon’s view had to be restored to its beginnings for the authenticity of true magic to surface, giving rise to its subjection to public scrutiny in a methodical manner. Here are the principles of experimentalist philosophy at its hidden root: that of the foundation of rational and publicly controlled magic.

Interesting and noteworthy are also the genealogy and transformations in the use of the term “superstition,” as a means of attacking and legitimizing specific groups. Throughout power struggles in history, the word superstition has assumed different (and often opposing) meanings as a target to be attacked and devalued. As traced by Josephson-Storm, it first appeared in the 13th century as opposite to true religion, as used by Thomas Aquinas in the sense of “[. . .] offering ‘divine worship either to whom it ought not, or in a manner it ought not’” (p. 47). In the 16th century, Catholics still used it to refer to a “misdirected worship,” especially witchcraft. Protestants, on the other hand, used the word “superstition” to attack Catholic beliefs and practices. In the 18th century, the oppositional structure of the true-religion-versus-superstition binary began to shift into that of science versus superstition. At that moment, according to Joseph-Storm, “Scientists inherited the theologians’ list of superstitions, and indeed both groups often attacked the same paradigmatic superstitions, such as astrology, magic, and spirits” (p. 49). It was only in the 19th century that the binomial that opposed science versus religion would prevail, especially on the part of historians such as Jacob Burckhardt, thus relegating religion to the gray and illegitimate region of superstition. It is at this moment that the concept of science with its unitary meaning also emerges, close to what we know today, something linked to the progress of knowledge.

The major thesis of the book is that “modernity is a myth,” first because “the term modernity is itself vague” (p. 306); and, second, because if modernity is understood as disenchantment of the world, as embracing a materialistic and mechanistic worldview, it has never happened—neither in the “developed” Western general population nor among intellectuals. “The struggle between ‘the Enlightenment’ and

‘counter-Enlightenment’ is mainly a twentieth-century myth, projected backward” (p. 311).

Joining threads of apparently disconnected aspects of the history of philosophy, Josephson-Storm unravels the tacit articulation between different moments and intellectual movements over time. In the German idealism of Mendelssohn, Fichte, Herder, Jacobi, Schiller, Schlegel, Kant, Hegel, Stirner, and Novalis, he finds the roots of the regret of the loss of myth, as well as the discussion that arises about pantheism and its ethical consequences (nihilism) and epistemology (the rise of mechanistic explanations), the disenchantment of the world, alienation, and, of course, the later death of God. In the elements that shaped what we know as modernity, the dawn of rationalism emerges amid this small circle of German rationalists. What almost no one says is that the works of mystics such as Jakob Böhme and Emanuel Swedenborg were commonly debated among them, serving as paths to be opened even when some were opposed to others in philosophical terms (p. 81). Schiller’s vitalist philosophy, for example, which rejected the mechanistic model of clockwork in favor of a dynamic dialectic, which resulted in a superior synthesis, is indebted to debates promoted by the esoterics and spiritualists by which he and so many others were explicitly inspired.

Deepening his argument, Josephson-Storm presents a rich analysis of the development of the theories of 19th-century scientists, such as the evolutionary anthropologists Edward Tylor, James Frazer, and Andrew Lang, and the philologist Max Müller, who contributed to substantiating what was conventionally called the “science of religion” or comparative studies of religion, magic, science, and folklore. He reveals that such scholars have had an intense intellectual exchange with mystics and esoterics, such as Eliphas Levy, Aleister Crowley, and Madame Blavatsky, contributors whose theories and impact are usually erased by conventional historians of Western thought. The very notion of comparative studies of religion originated from the attempt to carry out a pioneering synthesis of the sacred by such spiritualists of the 19th century, who sought to reveal through the comparison between different religions, beliefs, and rites the same hidden essence within all manifestations of the sacred around the world.

We must remember that spiritualism was one of the largest

transnational movements of the 19th century. Therefore, its importance and its discussions reverberated far beyond the specific terrain of the sacred, so much so that almost all these spiritualist and occult advances tried to serve as mediation, and often as a practical and theoretical resolution to eventual conflicts between religion, science, and philosophy. Along with the birth of sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, research, and inquiries that dealt with spirits, ghosts and all kinds of paranormal experiences were often considered viable and pertinent. Such movements exchanged methods, language, themes, and problems with what was conventionally called institutionalized or “legitimate” science.

The second part of the book begins with the following question: When did scholars begin to suppress—or to repress—their interests in the occult? Josephson-Storm claims “. . . they did so much later and more sporadically than is conventionally supposed and that much of the cleanup has been retroactive” (p. 181). To address this question, he explores the example of the “father” of psychoanalysis and his socio-historical environment. Sigmund Freud acknowledges his debt to “that brilliant mystic du Prel” (p. 179) in the development of his theory of “the unconscious,” a word used and analyzed by the spiritualist Baron Karl von Prel fifteen years before Freud. In addition to being an admirer of von Prel, Freud attended spiritualist sessions, believed in telepathy, was a member of the British Society for Psychical Research, and encouraged Carl Jung and Sándor Ferenczi to scrutinize the universe of the occult. However, in order to protect psychoanalysis’ scientific respectability, and under the strong advice of his biographer and friend Ernst Jones, he concealed those interests. In this way, Freud became an engaged and normative defender of disenchantment. Provocatively, Josephson-Storm “psychoanalyzes” Freud, suggesting that the superego, represented by introjected society values, made him repress his own beliefs in favor of an identification with the authority that had been gestating: that of disenchantment as an episteme within the scientific milieu at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

Then Josephson-Storm brings us the case of the philosophers, artists, and mystical poets who orbited around Ludwig Klages, his Cosmic Circle. They maintained close contacts with the intellectuals of the so-called Frankfurt School, especially with Walter Benjamin,

whose works focused directly on the thoughts of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, according to a refined analysis of the work of the forgotten, but not unimportant, Ludwig Klages. The School's central theses, such as the radical critique of instrumental reason, and its inevitable consequences, such as the impulse for domination and the domestication of nature, find their source in the works of the referenced German mystics, long before they surfaced in the famous writings of *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Through the concept of logocentrism by Klages, the disenchantment of the world was not only explicitly thematized, but was also a consequence of his theory of commodity fetishism. From Benjamin, to Bataille, Habermas, and Derrida, these theses and contributions were adopted.

But perhaps it is in dealing with the most famous skeptical and materialistic philosophers of the 20th century, whom no one would ever imagine flirting with the occult, that Josephson-Storm's thesis surprises us: the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. More specifically, Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, and Hans Hahn, the most leftist members of the group. Nurturing the same contempt for metaphysics, theology, and religious thought that characterized the other members of the group, they tried to develop a scientifically "corrected" Marxism, which eliminated metaphysics—an element seen as an illusion in the service of the bourgeoisie by Neurath, for example. They were accused by Martin Heidegger of being directly responsible for the process of divinization of the world. This was not enough, however, to fully remove these philosophers from interest in the fields of magic, spiritualism, and parapsychology.

The immersion in areas of spiritualist and paranormal research or even in pagan circles marked the lives of some of them, such as the mathematician Hans Hahn and Rudolf Carnap, who joined in these endeavors with other famous scientists, such as the mathematician Kurt Gödel. Vienna was lavish in its interest in the paranormal—so says Freud! It is argued that the fixed demarcation of rigid boundaries between rational and irrational, science and magic, etc., are exceedingly difficult to defend.

Finally, Josephson-Storm, through scrutiny of the Max Weber case, crowns his argument and clarifies once and for all the question that permeates the book: the concept of the disenchantment of the

world. Once again it is surprising what he reveals in biographical terms: the deep involvement of Max Weber, the most famous user of the world's disenchantment concept, with the enchanted spheres of magic and mysticism. The preponderance of these aspects in the internal organization of Weber's theory is also shown by the author. The virtually unknown experience of Weber's in the community of the heterodox psychoanalyst Otto Gross, on Monte Verità ("Mount Truth" in Switzerland with its many utopian communities during the 20th century), and his contacts with the mystic poet Stefan George yielded more than the reader might have imagined. On the one hand, his plunge into a world full of enchantments and magic in 1913 provided Weber with the elements for the development of its opposite: the concept of disenchantment of the world, glimpsed in his work shortly after his return from such an environment. On the other hand, Weber's well-known neurasthenia, which prevented him from writing and teaching for many years, endowed him with a new sensitivity, attracting his attention to the work of the charismatic poet Stefan George, with whom he became close—and from then on he developed the sociological concept of charisma, which became central to his work.

Weber's pessimism and his criticism of what would become alienated modernity may find its roots hidden in the mystic Ludwig Klages, much more than in the celebrated influence Nietzsche exercised over him. Weber confessed (in an unknown continuation of a letter he wrote to Ferdinand Tönnies, different from what appears in the biography written by his widow) that he has never been anti-religious or irreligious. On the contrary, the documentation said that he felt like a mystic, to the amazement of many. A new view, then, emerges not only of the concept of disenchantment of Weber's world, but also of all of his theory. Josephson-Storm defends Max Weber trying to suture the modern gap between magic and rationality, choosing mysticism as a kind of prophylaxis to this disenchanted world.

After all, Joseph-Storm demonstrates that Max Weber's concept of disenchantment of the world can live very well with the permanence of magic in this world. Rationalization does not necessarily imply an extinction of the sacred, the mystical, and spiritual experiences. Such practices would be endowed with relative autonomy, such as economic, religious, legal, etc., and would continue to be perpetuated, especially

at the individual level. The main consequence of this observation is that the myth of modernity, which encompasses the myth of the disenchantment of the world as one of its central products, cannot be sustained. The concept of modernity is broad, taking into account all the phenomena it intends to describe, and if that means a rational explanation that covers the domination of nature and the disappearance of magic, it is wrong-headed. And so Josephson-Storm has answered a clear no to the three questions posed at the beginning of this work, about whether there was a clear development of the disenchantment of the world, a set time when magic vanished, and a set time when modernity started.

Of course, a book of this intellectual size, with such ambition, would leave flanks open to several criticisms. From a methodological point of view, the fact that the author relied only on a kind of traditional history of ideas is noteworthy. That is to say, it left aside what a materialist analysis, carried out through a sociology of intellectuals in the manner of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, could render from the diverse unpublished biographical information brought to the fore by various intellectuals and their socio-historical contexts. An example would be the establishment of poles of force in the dispute for truths, which are clear in the book, but not theoretically worked out in this way.

It is also noteworthy that the author has made little use of the analysis of the paranormal events themselves, emphasizing more the narratives that have been raised around the events and their epoch. Perhaps by providing us stronger materiality for the phenomena behind the narratives, his own argument would become clearer. Some assertions, on the other hand, are generalized and not very defensible, such as “The tyranny of reason or instrumental rationality never occurred. We are not stranded in the ‘desolate time of the world’s night’, forced to scan the horizon for glimmers of the messianic dawn. [. . .] We are already free.” (p. 314). This statement is more the expressed will of the author, to which we may be bound, but which, unfortunately, is not a verifiable fact in our societies. And finally, a gap: The book misses the contributions of spiritualism and psychical research for the debate on science/rationality and the occult/spiritual in 19th-century France, England, Italy, and the US, which brought together several well-known and influent intellectuals, such as William Crookes, Ernesto

Bozzano, Gabriel Delanne, Camille Flammarion, George Sand, and Victor Hugo, among others. Of the few criticisms raised, however, we are sure that they do not in any way diminish Joseph-Storm's brilliance and vast contributions to several fields, including those of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, critical theory, studies on religion, etc. This is, without a doubt, a necessary book for anyone who wants to delve into any of these branches of knowledge.

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