

Parallel Session 13: Lessons in PCST history

**JOAQUÍN GALLO: A MEXICAN POPULARIZER
OF ASTRONOMY (1914-1947)**

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Abstract

We present a report of work in progress of our research in the popularization done by Joaquín Gallo, astronomer and director of the National Observatory in Mexico (OAN) from 1914 to 1947. We focus on one question to guide our research: What was Gallo's motivation for his work in popularization? We find many answers. Gallo did popularization to give Mexican astronomy a wider public recognition and support. He also did it for the public, as there was a demand for information. Finally, he believed this would make Mexico a better nation.

Key words: history, popularization, astronomy

Text

Introduction

The history of science popularization has only recently received serious attention by historians of science. For example, Shapin (1990) discusses science, the public, and the ways they have related through history. He proposes that the study of this activity should complete our panorama of science in society. Cooter and Pumphrey (1994) review previous work and suggest several ways that future research may go. Raichvarg and Jacques (1991) review the history of popularization in France asking the questions: why?, who?, for whom? and how?

The interesting results in this new area, however, come from studies of particular cases. Each casts light on one or more elements that are determinant in a certain place and time. Sheets-Pyenson (1985), for example, makes a distinction between high and low science and then compares low science in periodicals in France and England at the end of the nineteenth century. Lightman (1999) studies the narrative of British popularization in the nineteenth century and finds that natural theology was initially central to this narrative, and was later displaced by a secular discourse.

England, France and the nineteenth century are the most common subjects of this kind of study. Our case is different because it takes place in Mexico, a peripheral country, and in the twentieth century. We study a period of time beginning shortly before Gallo's start as director and ending with his departure from the Observatory. We hope to be able to find the reasons for his popularization, as well as any changes, both qualitative and quantitative.

We have consulted two archives: the *Fondo Joaquín Gallo* contains books, notebooks and many manuscripts for booklets about astronomy. There are also parts of a book, short stories, scripts for radio programs and photographs of the many scientific expeditions that Gallo participated in. The *Fondo Observatorio Astronómico Nacional (AHUNAM-OAN)* spans from around 1870 to 1970 and contains documents of different types related to the OAN.

Gallo's Popularization

Joaquín Gallo was born in Mexico in 1882. He studied geographical engineering and began working at the OAN in 1903. He was director from 1914 until 1947. This period was dominated by instability and limitations for the observatory (Bartolucci, 2000).

From the documents consulted we find that Gallo did the following popularization activities: wrote for the press and for journals, answered letters from the public, gave public lectures and had public observations, wrote pamphlets and gave interviews.

We detect three types of documents in the AHUNAM-OAN related to Gallo's activities as popularizer. First, there are numerous internal documents related to the "open nights" which were held two times a week. These had, in his words, the purpose of "showing a little bit of the cosmos" to the general public. These sessions were interrupted once due to a cut in personnel. The public were neighbors of the OAN as well as people from all over the country.

The second kind of documents are notes to the press written by Gallo between 1919 and 1928. There are three kinds of subjects covered by these notes: news about astronomical discoveries around the world, information about astronomical phenomena observable in Mexico and informative articles about established knowledge. These are the subjects Gallo chose to communicate.

The third kind of document is also the most abundant. We have a great variety of letters from the public spanning from 1927 to 1947. These can be placed into several groups according to the subject of their questions: about the yearbook published by the OAN, related to meteorology, about popular beliefs and about amateur astronomy. In contrast with the second kind of documents, these show the subjects that the public wanted to know about.

Conclusions

In agreement with Kärnfelt's (2003) results, we find that the main reason Gallo did popularization was to promote his discipline in an effort to get more support. At the same time, he believed that communicating science to the people would result in progress for Mexico. And, finally, given the nature of his subject, part of his work was in response to an avid public.

The study of the history of popularization is necessary in order to have a complete image of science in society. For popularizers, it is an important tool for teaching and for the consolidation of the discipline.

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