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LETTERS FROM THE PUBLIC: A PORTRAIT OF POPULAR ASTRONOMY IN MEXICO (1918–1947)

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RESUMEN

Las cartas que recibió Joaquín Gallo en el periodo en que fue director del Observatorio Astronómico Nacional (OAN) nos muestran atisbos de la astronomía presente en la cultura mexicana en la primera mitad del siglo XX. Una revisión de los intereses y motivaciones de los autores de estas cartas produce un retrato de los mexicanos interesados en la astronomía.

ABSTRACT

The letters that Joaquín Gallo received while he was director of the National Astronomical Observatory (OAN) allow us glimpses of astronomy in Mexican popular culture in the first half of the 20th century. An examination of the interests and motivations of the authors of these letters produces a portrait of the Mexicans interested in astronomy.

Key Words: history and philosophy of astronomy

1. INTRODUCTION

In previous essays (Biro 2010; Biro & Mateos 2011) we reported studies of the history of the Mexican National Astronomical Observatory (OAN) from the point of view of the communication of science (Secord 2004). We concentrated on the period from 1915 to 1946, when the geographical engineer Joaquín Gallo was director, and found that Gallo undertook a wide variety of popularization such as giving conferences, writing articles and receiving people at the OAN for observations. In several documents he wrote that his motivation for this activity was to instruct the people and thus aid in the nation's progress. After analyzing the situation of the Observatory and its context in that period, we concluded that another very important motivation was obtaining validation and eventually support for the OAN from different parts of society.

In this essay I will concentrate on popular astronomy. I will start out with a very simple definition of popular culture as that which does not arise within the community of experts (Kaplan 1984); in this case, professional astronomers. My objective is to find out more about the Mexican public that communicated with Gallo; to know their interests and motivations.

In his dealings with the public, Gallo responded to numerous letters. Unlike his other popularization activities, in this case it was the public who initiated the communication, and thus the letters reflect their point of view. I have used the 400 letters that Gallo received between 1918 and 1947 which have been preserved in the Fondo Observatorio Astronómico Nacional. I discarded 230 letters because they are requests for very specific data from geographical engineers or printers making calendars. By paying close attention to the authors of the remaining letters, I find that these can be binned into three groups: amateurs (129 letters), poachers (23) and representatives of folk knowledge (18). Interesting portraits of them emerge by asking three questions of each group: what do they know, what do they want, and what is their attitude.

2. POPULAR ASTRONOMY

The authors of the first group of letters are amateur astronomers (Chapman 1998; Lankford 1981). In their brief and concise letters they say they have read some information in newspapers and books and obtained more by observing the sky at night. They frequently state that they want to own a telescope, know how to use it, and get information about the heavenly bodies. In general they are very receptive to Gallo's comments and suggestions. It seems that they want to imitate him, and perhaps to participate in the production of astronomical knowledge.

I have used the term poachers for the authors of the second group following Michel de Certeau (2002). The term is not meant to be derogatory, but simply to highlight the fact that they snatch bits of information from a wide variety of sources and paste them together into theories about the cosmos. In their

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