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Mapping the Imaginaire at the Frontiers of Science: The Quest for Universal Unity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (Review Article)

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Drawing upon the latest studies in the history of parascience, this review article examines the key differences between its main branches at the turn of the twentieth century. Razdyakonov cautions us against presentism in the history of science and considers the motivations of both scientists and those that Heather Wolffram has labeled the "stepchildren of science" in the search for universal principles regulating natural phenomena. Razdyakonov concludes that the degree to which personal values influence an investigators' conclusions may be used as a possible criterion for demarcating the boundary between scientific and parascientific discourses.

Keywords: parascience, history of science, parapsychology, modern spiritualism, occultism.

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Reviewed Books

Janet Oppenheim (1985). *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. — 503 pages.

Heather Wolffram (2009). *The Stepchildren of Science: Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c.1870–1939.* Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. — 342 pages.

Sofie Lachapelle (2011). *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metapsychics in France, 1853–1931.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. — 198 pages.

IN modern historiography the parascientific movements of the nineteenth century are generally examined within two contexts: firstly, in the context of the so-called "Victorian crisis of faith," caused by the development of scientific knowledge, and, secondly, in the context of the institutionalization of science and the professionalization of the scientific community. The first approach—the philosophical-historical—long dominated Western historiography, until, during the 1970s, it was replaced with a sociological approach, with which all the books reviewed here are associated.

The origins of the first approach are rooted in the ideology of the French Enlightenment, subsequently reworked within secularization theory. This modernist viewpoint presupposed the gradual weakening of religious influence and the emerging perception of science and the scientific method as the single means of obtaining reliable information about the world around us. Toward the 1970s, thanks to a religious revival that cast into doubt the irreversibility of the secularization of Western culture, this approach found itself in need of significant correction. Such social phenomena as the spiritualist movement, earlier considered to exemplify a "crisis of faith," began to be examined as a manifestation of one of the stages in the evolution of religion, a stage that possessed its own independent specificities and logic of development. In other words, religion was not weakened but took on new forms, reacting to the rationalization of the world and the scientific and technological challenge of modernity.

The dominant position in the historiography was now occupied by the sociological method, which views parascientific movements in the context of their relationship with the scientific community. Formulated within the flowering of a post-positivist philosophy of science and social constructivism, this approach avoids the use of value judgments, which remain popular particularly among various contemporary Russian authors who treat the subject of "pseudoscience." Shedding light on the mechanism of the formation of scientific authority, the sociological approach greatly facilitated a new response to the problem of how, exactly, educated Europeans of the second half of the nineteenth century defined "science."

In her study, Janet Oppenheim emphasizes that official institutions capable of delivering an unequivocal scientific evaluation of a scientist's activity had not yet been formed by the second half of the nineteenth century. Enumerating various examples that bear witness to the institutionalization of science, she remarks that in the majority of cases not one of these "implies the existence of a single canon of scientific respectability, a single *cursus honorum*, which it would be considered unacceptable to transgress" (Oppenheim 1985: 392). Despite the attacks of the social and academic press, such scientists as William Crookes, Lord Rayleigh, Joseph Thomson, and William Huggins, who took part in "psychic experiments," could simultaneously occupy the post of president of the Royal Society. In this way, the "enemy" embodied in the scientific establishment, which Sir Oliver Lodge designates as "orthodox science," was in many ways defined by "heretical scientists" themselves.

It is unsurprising how close this definition of "orthodox science" is to that which Thomas Kuhn would subsequently call "normal science," and Karl Popper "dogmatism." The construction of an opposition of this sort was absolutely necessary in order to build defensive epistemological boundaries around knowledge that aspired to create a revolution in science. In this regard, we enter into the socially imagined world of "heretical scientists" (self-defining as "heretics" against "dogmatists"), in essence, into the world of "extraordinary science," deprived of any kind of epistemological orientation. We hit upon mechanisms of a similar kind of legitimation when a new religion appears: the old religion is perceived to be "dogmatic," "obsolete," and "displaced," at the same time as the new aims for the "recovery of forgotten knowledge" or the "discovery of new knowledge.

In one way or another, the three books under review here all broach the question of how, while framing a repressive external authority, the

representatives of different parascientific movements framed themselves. Members of the parascientific community such as Frank Podmore, for instance, endeavored to construct their own identity through introducing theoretical and historical analogues with "heretical scientists" of the past: the tradition of comparison with Franz Mesmer, for instance, comes precisely from this strategy. They were, furthermore, aided by the public, who watched the confrontations between the "scientific Leviathan" and the lone fighters for "scientific truth" and "freedom" with great interest. Thus the majority of scientists, invoking both religious and scientific considerations, argued against the parascientific movements, and the press continuously relegated "heretical scientists" to a separate "marginal" status.

It was at precisely this time that a defensive scientific discourse supported by the conservatively minded representatives of the scientific community started to develop. Within the frame of this discourse all parascientific movements began to be pushed toward the same periphery: they received the designation "pseudoscience," and no attempt was made to differentiate between them. Attentive historical research, such as the studies under review, shows the necessity of such differentiation, insofar as different groups constructed their relationship with the scientific community in different ways and chose their own strategies of behavior and "confrontation" with "scientific authoritarianism." The differences in these constructions generally resulted from the *a priori* attitudes of the various representatives of the parascientific movements as to what should provide the basis of scientific knowledge.

The first group, which we can designate "normative," consisted of people for whom the norms and ideals of scientific knowledge continued to possess unquestionable authority. They were convinced that their activities were scientific in the strictest sense of the word. They blamed the absence of any support from the scientific community on its conservatism and often pointed out how other scientists, later accepted and elevated to the pinnacle of the academic establishment, had themselves faced such ostracism.

The most important achievement, perhaps, of Sofie Lachapelle's latest study is her understanding of why this first group, in which she places, for example, parapsychologists, did not succeed. The ambiguity of their position lay in the fact that, on the one hand, they wished to be accepted as official members of the scientific establishment, yet, on the other, they constantly remarked upon the conservatism and limitations of science, underlining their distinct and progressive char-

acter (Lachapelle 2011: 141). For this reason the scientific community, despite the best efforts of the parapsychologists, continued to associate them with spiritualists and occultists, and in so doing placed them beyond the bounds of science.

The second group consisted of "innovators," for whom scientific methodology was not an ideal model. They aimed to reveal a new area of research to which old methods of cognition were inapplicable. The knowledge that they endeavored to procure would facilitate a change in the methodology of cognition as a whole, which would ultimately lead to the formation of a single synthetic view of the world, capable of overcoming the separation of science from religion, reason from faith.

Although an attentive examination of the material reveals a certain artificiality to such a division, the distinction is nevertheless necessary in order to define the limits of two poles that ultimately pursued the same goal—that is, the achievement of integral human unity. If the first group suggested that this should be done on the basis of science, while including significant religious ideas within the scientific field, the second, in contrast, aimed for a new synthesis and a language that was capable of transcending the gulf that had emerged between religion and science. The two groups polemicized with each other both face-to-face and in print. The first endeavored to disassociate themselves from the second in order to gain acknowledgement from the scientific community; the second, in contrast, accused the first of excessive "scientism," "materialism" and "subjectivity."

As Janet Oppenheim admirably summarizes, the principal leitmotif of the philosophical polemic that developed around science in the second half of the nineteenth century was the aim "always to find the slippery 'triangular rock' or the 'first substance' of nature" (Oppenheim 1985: 396). The debate centered upon the search for a fundamental theory, capable of overcoming all modernist contradictions and achieving the ideal unity to which modern science had dedicated itself. The pursuit of this ideal in essence united the representatives of the scientific community and their critics, although they progressed toward its achievement along very different paths and left their own distinct imprints on history.

Distinguishing among separate parascientific groups presents itself as an independent scholarly problem, and each of the researchers under review here attempts to resolve it in their own way. The first division is usually made between parascientific groups and groups that have no desire to achieve scientific recognition, for example, healers, conjurors and mesmerizers of various kinds, who assert that they

possess supernatural powers. Parascientific movements expended no small effort in disassociating themselves from these groups, principally because they discredited their own practices, for instance that of hypnosis, employing it for public entertainment. Viewing the activities of such practitioners as essentially positive, insofar as they introduced the public to new phenomena, and appraising modern scientific methods as obsolete, such investigators as Albert Moll aimed to render suggestion and hypnosis legitimate parts of scientific discourse (Wolffram 2009).

A second distinction is made between spiritualists, who subscribed to the so-called "spiritual hypothesis," and "independent scientists"/"agnostics," who aimed to emulate science in everything, inclining, for example, toward explanations of "spiritualist phenomena" as hallucinations and hypnosis. The most characteristic and minutely presented example of disagreement between these two groups is the abandonment of the Society for Psychical Research in 1887 by a group of spiritualists who were dissatisfied with the overly cautious explanation by members of the Society of the "wonders" performed by the famous medium William Eglinton (Oppenheim 1985: 140). The incompatibility of these groups was founded upon a question of faith; while the "agnostics" refused to the last to admit the validity of the "spiritual hypothesis," the spiritualists accepted it unequivocally and found that the doubts of the agnostics simply provided grist for the mill of the materialists.

Another well-known distinction was made within the spiritualist movement itself, which is generally divided into two principal groups: Christian and anti-Christian. If the first considered spiritual experiences to be a viable response to the challenge of materialist science and a means of defending certain principles of Christian faith (for instance, the belief in the continued existence of the soul after death), the second were convinced that spiritualism could serve the cause of creating a single, universal religion, overcoming the differences between different religious systems. Naturally, the central credo of anti-Christian spiritualism was considered to be the idea of "progress," in pursuit of which its followers were prepared to subvert other authorities, starting with the divinity of Christ and ending with the sanctity of the Old and New Testaments. At the same time, as Janet Oppenheim shows, "to talk about the irreconcilable enmity of these two groups would be wrong" (Oppenheim 1985: 105), in relation to which she justifiably suggests a revision of the epithet "anti-Christian." Ultimately the so-called "anti-Christian" spiritualists possessed their own positive

program and shared the key ideal of the Victorian epoch—the search for a universal unity—with their "Christian" counterparts.

Another distinction made by all the researchers under review here is that between the spiritualist and the occultist movements. The occultist movement was principally oriented towards the search for "ancient knowledge," which was expected to lay the foundations for "the science of the future." Magic was viewed as a unique "ancient science," as yet unstudied by modern scientific methods that were limited by a series of metaphysical convictions, principal among which was the teaching of materialism. In contrast to the spiritualists, the occultists looked backward more often than forward and valued tradition above progress, yet, like the spiritualists, they rejected the contemporary world that surrounded them, religious authorities in particular. Lachapelle introduces a comparison between occultism and spiritualism based on that made in a book by Gerard Encausse (Papus). She convincingly shows that, in comparison with the spiritualists, the occultists strove to develop a stronger aura of science around their convictions, progressing from everyday language to the man-made language of science (Lachapelle 2011: 49–51).

Yet another by no means insignificant distinction arose from the development of psychology, particularly from investigations into human consciousness. One of the most pressing questions of the day was that of the relationship between psychology and physiology, consciousness and the body—in particular the question of whether the former is derived from the latter. Many spiritualists actively spoke against the idea first proposed by the physiologist William Carpenter of explaining "spiritualist phenomena" through the "ideomotor effect" and the "unconscious activity of the brain," which represented a rejection of the "spiritual hypothesis" that brought Carpenter into a polemic with those who considered it proven. On the other hand, a proportion of researchers insisted that phenomena linked with spiritualism could be successfully "psychologically explained with the help of the idea of suggestion or as witness to the hidden powers of reason" (Wolffram 2009: 42). One of the most striking examples of the conflict between adherents of these approaches, the so-called "animists" and spiritualists, can be found in the polemic between Eduard von Hartmann and Alexander Aksakov.

It is necessary to note that at the turn of the twentieth century it was impossible within the scientific psychological community to differentiate between psychologists proper and those researchers that "orthodox science" considered to be peripheral to scientific life. Such

clear psychological luminaries as Charles Richet, Hippolyte Bernheim, Cesare Lombroso, Theodore Flournoy, William James and Sigmund Freud worked within the Society for Psychical Research. At the same time several psychologists, such as Wilhelm Wundt, fearing for the respectable status of their own scientific direction, spoke against those groups of researchers not accepted by science, especially if they applied the designation of "experimental psychology" to their efforts (Wolffram 2009: 265). Ultimately, parapsychologists themselves became objects of investigation for various subfields within psychology, beginning with the psychology of deception and ending with the psychology of the crowd.

The appearance of "parapsychology" (a concept introduced by Max Dessoir in 1889) is examined by Heather Wolffram as a part of a "purification" process, a separation of representatives of "pseudoscience" from their forerunners, that is occultists and spiritualists, as they endeavored to conform strictly to the norms and rules of the scientific community (Wallis 1985: 585–601). One of the most meaningful and notable ways in which such a purification was achieved was through the organization of separate locations for experiments, specially equipped laboratories, among which the laboratory of the German researcher Albert von Schrenck-Notzing gained the most fame. Her analysis of the specifics of this purification effort leads Wolffram to a paradoxical conclusion: despite the undertaking of experiments in specialized locations outfitted with scientific equipment, it was necessary for parapsychologists to take the demands of a medium into consideration, and in this way they could not approach him or her as an authentic "object" of an experiment. Ultimately, parapsychology found itself in a situation where it was unable to "shake off its spiritual past, and to rid itself of its dependence on authority" (Wolffram 2009: 175).

A separate merit of the works under review is their attempt to explore the variety of parascientific movements that existed at the turn of the twentieth century in a historical perspective. The teachings of these movements reacted sensitively to both the changes in the epistemological orientation of science and to the general transformation of culture at the start of the twentieth century. The clearest example of such a "response" is provided by the works of the German parapsychologists of the 1930s, in particular, Traugott Oesterreich and Hans Driesch, who, distancing themselves from the latest discoveries in physics and biology, attempted to create a new "holistic science," capable of transcending the "mechanistic" and "materialistic" basis of Western culture.

Analyzing the reaction of the Protestant and Catholic Churches toward the theory and practice of German parapsychology, Wolffram notes that in contrast to "folk occultism" and "spiritualism," from which traditional Christian Churches abruptly broke away, parascientific movements were viewed by these Churches as a means of strengthening religion in an age dominated by science. The fact that parapsychologists (in contrast to occult teachings and spiritualism) did not, at first glance, lay claim to the discovery of religious truths of one kind or another, facilitated the appearance of such attitudes. Some Christian thinkers believed that parapsychologists would be able to explain such phenomena as stigmata or even resurrection, challenging their widespread explanation as allegories, devoid of any relationship to reality (Wolffram 2009: 218). In their opinion, parascience, which renounced the aim of discovering a holistic worldview, would become a natural partner of religion, aiming to provide a scientific explanation for phenomena discussed in religious texts.

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The history of science, like any other history, cannot be removed from the complex cultural context of its development. The latest research convincingly evinces the existence of a relationship between the scientific achievements of academics and their marginal "spiritualist" experiments (Noakes 2004 and Raia 2007). At the same time, it remains absolutely clear that science as an intellectual undertaking is minimally conditioned by the influence of more specific historical factors.

The variety of different parascientific groups examined in the books reviewed here clearly demonstrates the varying degrees of interrelationship that existed between scientific and philosophical ideas in the doctrines of parascientific movements. The scientific investigations of spiritualists and occultists, "metapsychics" and parapsychologists were conditioned by their value judgments—by their religious, or, in contrast, anti-religious views, which from the start inspired their experiments and research. The clearest example of such a phenomenon is provided by the German Psychological Society, which split in two directions in 1889—the mystical, with Carl Du Prel at its head, which adopted as its goal the creation of a "transcendental psychology" that would construct a comprehensive worldview, and the empirical, led by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, which endeavored to create an "experimental psychology," completely freed from the dictates of physiology (Wolffram 2009: 68).

Remembering the principle of symmetry, it is worth noting clearly that value judgments were manifest in the works of scientists whose achievements were accepted by the official scientific community, and these judgments, perhaps, exerted concrete influence on their discoveries. Thus it would be correct to discuss the degree of interrelationship between the scientific ideas of researchers and their value judgments, and it is productive to view this degree as one of the criteria for the demarcation of authentic scientific knowledge that is minimally influenced by historical context, and the knowledge acquired by the "stepchildren of science."

"Parascience" as a phenomenon constructs itself on the border between the inductive scientific method—from which it aims to distance itself, considering it reductionist and narrow—and a wide, holistic "worldview," which it aims to achieve using the experimental method to prove its validity. The significant internal contradiction that existed between scientific methodology and the universalist goal of scientific research became the fundamental reason for the displacement of various parascientific groups during the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century toward the periphery of the scientific life of Western Europe.

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