

CHAPTER 16

PSYCHIC ENCHANTMENTS OF THE EDUCATED CLASSES

THE PARANORMAL AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF DISENCHANTMENT

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Science will not remain mute on spiritual and ethical questions for long. Even now, we can see the first stirrings among psychologists and neuroscientists of what may one day become a genuinely rational approach to these matters – one that will bring even the most rarefied mystical experience within the purview of open, scientific inquiry. It is time we realized that we need not be unreasonable to suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy and awe; nor must we renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason.¹

ACADEMICS AGAINST THE STREAM?

In his famous 1999 recantation of the strong secularization thesis, Peter Berger noted that there were really only two exceptions to what he called an ongoing and increasing *desecularization* of the world: European societies west of the old Iron Curtain, and “an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education.”² Parallel to the inversion of secularization theory, scholars of new religious movements started reversing Max Weber’s thesis of the disenchantment of the world as well (*Entzauberung der Welt*), arguing that a process of *re-enchantment* is sweeping through Western culture.³ In 1918 Weber had proclaimed that all “mysterious incalculable forces”

1. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 43.

2. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World”, 10. For closer discussions of secularization and its related terms and theories, see Chapters 11 and 15 of this volume.

3. Weber, “Science as a Vocation”, 155. The term “re-enchantment” appears to have entered academic discourse primarily through some early classics of postmodern criticisms of modern science in the 1980s, particularly Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, and

were being eradicated from the world by science and scientifically based technologies. *Entzauberung* – literally the disappearance of *magic* (*Zauber*)⁴ – signified a new mentality in which modern people believed that anything around them could, in principle, be comprehended rationally, and that no offerings to capricious deities or magical manipulations of occult forces were needed to master the world.

“Magic”, however, failed to disappear. Whether we are talking about self-designated modern magicians coming out of the various currents of occultism and neopaganism, or about that vague and poorly defined set of “occult” and “supernatural” beliefs and practices that somehow will not fit neat categories such as “religion” or “science”, “magic”, in fact, seems to thrive at the heart of high modernity.⁵ Some have even connected the resilience of the “mysterious incalculable forces” to the secularization process itself; according to Christopher Partridge, for example,

the deteriorating/secularized Christian culture is being replaced by a cultic milieu, which is not shaped like sectarian, denominational or ecclesiastical religion. Nor is it principally determined by that “international subculture” identified by Berger, which is “composed of people with a Western-type higher education”. Increasingly, “official” definitions of reality are being challenged by a new subculture

David Ray Griffin, *The Reenchantment of Science*. From there it appears to have spread into the many fields of postmodern scholarship-cum-advocacy of the 1990s, including ecofeminism and deep ecology. For the more analytical use of re-enchantment in scholarship on modern and contemporary religion, see e.g. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*; Woodhead & Heelas, *Religion in Modern Times*; Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West*.

4. A caveat should be expressed at this point, as, in actuality, a distinction was beginning to be made between *Magie* and *Zauber* in German *Religionswissenschaft* in the early 1900s; “magic” would thus refer specifically to “occult” arts and techniques of controlling capricious forces – which made it more “scientific” and also more friendly to “community building”, as an entry on “Magier, Magie” in the widely cited *Realencyklopädie für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche* stated it in 1900. Taken as a whole, Weber’s late work (to which the thesis of *Entzauberung* truly belongs) displays some ambiguity when it comes to the actual relation between *Magie* and *Zauber* (“magic” and “enchantment”), but overall it seems clear that the process of transformation which he referred to as the “disenchantment of the world” did indeed include the disappearance of magical means of controlling the world and achieving salvation. For a discussion, see Breuer, “Magie, Zauber, Entzauberung”, especially 119–20.
5. For the survival of various types of self-designated “Hermetic” ritual magic, drawing on pre- or early modern esoteric sources, see Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”; cf. Aspren, “Magic Naturalized?”; Aspren, *Arguing with Angels*, especially chapter four. As has been made increasingly clear over the last decades, “magic” as an etic category in anthropology and the history of religion is deeply problematic, and based on little substance except an inheritance from centuries of identity politics and religious polemics. See e.g. Styers, *Making Magic*; Pasi, “Magic”; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, chapter three.

of *dissent* and *opposition*. In a sense, we are witnessing a return to a form of magical culture – what I will call “occulture”.⁶

The observation that secularization was giving way to new forms of re-enchanted, magical culture was already made in the early 1970s, during what was perceived as a sudden and intense “occult revival”.⁷ As Partridge makes very clear in Chapter 6 of the present volume, his concept of occulture is much indebted to the “cultic milieu” model originally proposed by Colin Campbell, but with certain significant differences.⁸ One of them is the question of *opposition* and *deviance*: whereas the cultic milieu was largely defined in terms of its opposition to “orthodox” science and religion, “occulture is ordinary”. Even though particular groups, individuals, ideologies and belief systems may be described in terms of deviance from the mainstream, the broader occultural *environment*, as such, is becoming so ordinary as to *engulf* the mainstream. This is particularly emphasized by the place of popular culture in occultural production and dissemination; that is, the formation of a *popular* occulture manifesting itself in widely distributed products of literature, film and music.⁹

The inclusive definition of occultural re-enchancement notwithstanding, an oppositional trait still seems to be lingering when it comes to the question of the academy and higher education. Berger’s observation that an international subculture of people with Western-style academic educations, a globalized intellectual elite with largely secularist worldviews, is an exception to desecularization, is still implicated by current re-enchancement models. Occulture spreads largely through *popular* culture, and its ordinariness manifests primarily by reshaping the religious *vernacular*. Furthermore, we read that the return of this “form of magical culture” means that “official” definitions of reality are being challenged”; the assumedly hegemonic, disenchanted worldview of the highly educated classes is being challenged by re-enchanted alternatives.¹⁰

According to Weber, the modern research university, as it arose during the nineteenth century, had been a driving force of the disenchantment of the world, especially through its extended influence on the engineers reshaping society’s technological infrastructure and the government technocrats rationalizing and engineering its social structure. While new approaches to this domain of social theory emphasize instead the *sacralization* of technology

6. Partridge, *The Re-enchancement of the West*, vol. 1, 40.

7. An early reference in the sociological literature to this “occult revival” in the context of the youth culture born in the late 1960s, see Truzzi, “The Occult Revival as Popular Culture”. For a more systematic discussion of these social phenomena in terms of secularization and typologies of religious organization, see Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization”; Colin Campbell, “The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes”.

8. Cf. Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization”; Kaplan & Lööv, *The Cultic Milieu*.

9. Partridge, *The Re-enchancement of the West*, vol. 1, 119–84.

10. *Ibid.*, 40.

and the transformation of the patterns of religion and enchantment in society at large, we also notice that they have kept the black box closed when it comes to disenchantment's *engine*; at the heart of the machine, the wiring, the rising pistons, and spinning cogwheels are assumed to operate pretty much as before. The present chapter takes a peek into the box, to see if there may be ghosts hiding in the machine after all. Could it be that Berger's international subculture of the academically educated is itself touched by the occulture, or even to some extent implicated in its production?

Considered as a sociological term, occulture

refers to the environment within which, and the social processes by which particular meanings relating, typically, to spiritual, esoteric, paranormal and conspiratorial ideas emerge, are disseminated, and become influential in societies and in the lives of individuals.¹¹

Keeping this definition in mind, I will focus on the "paranormal" subset of occulture. Analysing the processes by which paranormal ideas "emerge, are disseminated, and become influential", one cannot avoid discussing certain of those highly educated subcultures which are often seen as agents of secularization and disenchantment. Following the traces of central paranormal concepts and themes, dissecting their discursive formation and tracing their dissemination, we find that occulture in fact has vital nerve centres inside universities and academic subcultures. This becomes particularly clear when viewed in a historical perspective, as we shall see. But there is also evidence that certain paranormal ideas remain part of a vital mode of re-enchantment among what may, perhaps, be seen as the highly educated echelons of contemporary occulture.

The rise in the early twenty-first century of an emphatically secularist "new atheism", which explicitly associates itself with a vision of science and critical thinking, may have widened the apparent chasm between educated subcultures and occulture. It is, however, intriguing to note that one of the "four horsemen of the apocalypse",¹² the neuroscientist Sam Harris, displays a very ambiguous position when we broaden the scope from classic theistic religion to the broader spectrum of occultural and "paracultural" re-enchantment. The author of such contemporary classics of atheism as *The End of Faith* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) also holds "mysticism" and "spirituality" to be compatible in practice with science and rationality, and has even gone far to validate parapsychology as a valuable source of scientific wonder:

There also seems to be a body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phenomena, much of which has been ignored by mainstream

11. Partridge, page XXX of the present volume.

12. The other three being biologist Richard Dawkins, journalist Christopher Hitchens and philosopher Daniel Dennett.

science. The dictum that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” remains a reasonable guide in these areas, but this does not mean that the universe isn’t far stranger than many of us suppose.¹³

While Harris has received severe criticism from fellow atheists, the position he occupies points towards something highly interesting.¹⁴ It seems to suggest that occulture, scientism, secularism, and atheism may intersect in significant ways.

By reviewing the location of the paranormal within broader occulture, this chapter takes the opportunity to shed light on a number of relevant aspects of contemporary esotericism. The first of these, as we have hinted to already, is to trace certain discursive transfers between academic and esoteric subcultures, and assess their importance. In terms of Kocku von Stuckrad’s discursive approach, described elsewhere in this volume, we are interested in processes of the *scientification of knowledge*, as well as the influence of forms of *publicization*.¹⁵ Second, analysing the formation of a “paranormal” discourse, and particularly its *parapsychological* subset, opens up intriguing questions about processes related to what has been called the “secularization of esotericism”, the “disenchantment of magic” and the re-enchantment paradigm.¹⁶ More to the point, I will suggest that the development of a *parapsychological discourse* in the twentieth century should be placed at the intersection of two parallel processes: the disenchantment of esoteric discourse on the one hand, and attempts to re-enchant science on the other. Before delving into these complex questions of interpretation, we should have a closer look at the place of paranormal beliefs among the educated public.

HOW DISENCHANTED ARE THE EDUCATED ELITES? SOME SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF “PARANORMAL BELIEF”

What the polls have to say

The religiosity of scientists is sometimes used as a way to gauge the effects of secularization and disenchantment. Polls typically show that self-reported

13. Harris, *The End of Faith*, 41.

14. For the controversy Harris elicited, see especially Gorenfeld & Harris, “Controversy over Sam Harris’s Atheist Views”.

15. See Chapter 11 of the present volume.

16. The secularization of esotericism and the disenchantment of magic are theoretical constructs that have been suggested by Wouter J. Hanegraaff. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 411–513; Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”.

religious belief and church attendance is significantly lower among scientists than the rest of the population. A recent poll by Pew Research Center, for example, found that whereas 83 per cent of the general American public said they believed in a personal God, only 38 per cent of scientists said the same (with another 18 per cent subscribing to “a universal spirit or higher power”).¹⁷ With another 17 per cent of the scientists professing atheism, and 11 per cent styling themselves as agnostics – against only 2 per cent for each of these categories in the general population – there seem to be at the very least *something* to Berger’s statement on the academic exception to desecularization.¹⁸ Measured in traditional religious beliefs (pretty much on the model of Christian theism), scientists are significantly less “religious” than the rest of the population.¹⁹

The belief or disbelief in a theistic God, however, says nothing about re-enchantment and occulture. The academically trained may be low on this type of religiosity, but not necessarily on “paranormal beliefs”. Judging from other available polls, some paranormal beliefs even seem to correspond *positively* with higher education. A Gallup poll conducted in 2001 indicated a general increase among the American public in paranormal beliefs since 1990. Among the types of belief polled for were ghosts, haunted houses, demonic possession, astrology and extraterrestrial visitors, but also typically parapsychological phenomena, namely extra-sensory perception (ESP), clairvoyance and telepathy. Excluding the more problematic category of “psychic or spiritual healing or the power of the human mind to heal the body”, ESP was by far the most widespread paranormal belief in the American population in 2001, with a total of 50 per cent expressing belief, and another 20 per cent saying they were not sure (only 27 per cent rejected the possibility of ESP).²⁰ By comparison, belief

17. Pew Research Center, “Scientists and Belief”.

18. We can also note that Berger qualified his statement by pointing out that it is particularly those with educations in the *humanities and social sciences* who tend to be more “secularized”. This too is based on good evidence, as social scientists, particularly psychologists and anthropologists, consistently report less religious belief and more explicit rejection of religion than their colleagues in the natural sciences. This was one of the strong findings of the Carnegie Commission’s important 1969 Survey of American Academics. See Stark *et al.*, “Religion, Science, and Rationality”, 436.

19. Despite these findings, which are remarkably stable since the first such poll was carried out in 1914 by the psychologist James Leuba, certain fierce enemies of the secularization thesis have been able to turn these statistics into a case *against* secularization. This is particularly clear with Rodney Stark and his fellow supporters of rational choice theory, who seem to argue that the relatively stable 40 per cent of theistic scientists is much higher than what secularization theorists should be comfortable with. They also make much out of the fact that the “hard sciences” are more religious than the “soft” ones, turning the point into a rather tendentious correlation with what is the more “scientific” position. See e.g. Stark *et al.*, “Religion, Science, and Rationality”, 436; Stark, “Secularization, RIP”, 264–6.

20. I have chosen to leave out the data for belief in “psychic or spiritual healing”, due to the extremely inclusive way in which this “power” was defined in the poll. Essentially, even the

in ghosts was expressed by 38 per cent, astrology by 28 per cent and reincarnation by 25 per cent of the total sample.²¹

As will be seen in the next section of this chapter, the term “extra-sensory perception” was coined by the founders of American experimental parapsychology in the 1930s, and it is, strictly speaking, an umbrella term for the parapsychological phenomena of anomalous perception. While there is no reason to suspect the general respondent of the Gallup polls to know all the niceties of parapsychological technical vocabulary, it is not surprising to find that both telepathy and clairvoyance score lower than general ESP, a class of which they are (technically speaking) subsets. Nevertheless, at 36 per cent (telepathy) and 32 per cent (clairvoyance) asserting belief in them, these are still very wide-spread paranormal beliefs on their own. A similar study from 2005 confirms this general picture: leaving out beliefs that are clearly rooted in “traditional” religious worldviews, ESP is the number one paranormal phenomenon Americans believe in.²²

Non-denominational paranormal beliefs are in other words widespread; this much we would already expect from their being part of the pop-occultural mainstream. But the Gallup statistics from 2001 have the additional advantage of being broken down by demographical factors, including educational level. This gives us a way to assess one major question: just how disenchanting are the educated elites?

Keeping the polls of the religious beliefs of scientists cited above firmly in mind, one would expect beliefs clearly connected to traditional religious communities and mythological frameworks to decrease somewhat with educational level. Indeed the general tendency seems to be that less ambiguously “supernatural” beliefs, such as the belief in ghosts, haunted houses and communication with the dead, but also belief in astrology and extraterrestrial visits to Earth, generally decrease as the educational level increases from high school level towards college graduate and post-graduate level. Some interesting differences surface when we compare these generally quite heavily mythologized elements with less embedded parapsychological ones. Table 16.1 shows the distribution of belief in the three core parapsychological phenomena included in the poll (ESP, telepathy and clairvoyance), and one element more typically associated with traditional church religion (“that people on this earth are sometimes possessed by the devil”). I have also included the

medical doctor who, with basis in countless controlled medical trials considers the placebo effect to be a well-documented effect of self-healing would qualify as having a “paranormal belief”. However, belief in the reality of placebos should hardly classify as paranormal in this context.

21. For all the numbers, see Newport & Strausberg, “Americans’ Belief in Psychic and Paranormal Phenomena Is up Over Last Decade”.
22. This means leaving out “demonic possession”, which was more widespread than ESP in the 2005 poll (but, somewhat curiously, far from it in 2001). For the 2005 data, see David W. Moore, “Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal”.

Table 16.1 Distribution of belief in three parapsychological beliefs and one “traditionally religious” belief over educational factors and self-reported importance of religion.

| Belief | Education | | | | Importance of religion | | | Total |
|--------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------|
| | Post-graduate only | College graduate only | Some college | High school or less | Very important | Fairly important | Not very important | |
| Possession | 32 | 35 | 41 | 46 | 55 | 28 | 14 | 41 |
| ESP | 52 | 53 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 48 | 48 | 50 |
| Telepathy | 41 | 38 | 36 | 35 | 35 | 37 | 41 | 36 |
| Clairvoyance | 29 | 27 | 34 | 34 | 32 | 33 | 32 | 32 |

Note: Data show percentage of respondents confirming belief.

Source: Newport & Strausberg, “Americans’ Belief in Psychic and Paranormal Phenomena Is up Over Last Decade”.

distribution over two demographical factors (namely educational level and the level of importance the respondent attributed to religion).

Belief in demonic possession has a clear negative correlation with higher education: whereas 46 per cent of those with only high school or less believed that the devil could sometimes possess human beings, the percentage decreases steadily as we move to demographical groups with college educations. One may perhaps still be surprised to find that *every third* American with post-graduate education believes in demonic possession; however, possession is a standard part of American evangelical Christianity, and is not uncommon among Catholics or mainline Protestants either.²³

It seems that the “international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education”, also outside of the more restrictive class of “scientists”, are increasingly less likely to entertain the “traditional” supernatural enchantments than the rest of the population is. What, then, about parapsychological beliefs? As we see in Table 16.1, belief in ESP is relatively stable around 50 per cent of the population for all educational groups, with the higher levels of education (college and post-graduate) actually scoring slightly *higher* than those with no education beyond high school. For telepathy, this tendency is even more marked, with a steady increase from 35 per cent of those with high school or less education, to a full 41 per cent of those with post-graduate educations expressing that telepathy is real. Belief in clairvoyance is also relatively stable, but more ambiguous in its relation to education; while college graduates generally are a few per cent less likely to believe than those with no college, post-graduates score higher than those with only graduate level college education.

Besides the question of education, the importance attributed to religion by these respondents also gives us some valuable pointers. With possession

23. See e.g. Cuneo, *American Exorcism*.

the correlation with religious belief seems to be essential, as only 14 per cent of those who do not think religion is important believe in it. This is not the case for parapsychological beliefs. For ESP and clairvoyance, the importance attached to religion does not seem to predict belief: people are about as likely to believe in ESP whether they find religion important or not. For telepathy (which also correlated positively with education) we even notice a *negative* correlation with the expressed importance of religion, with 41 per cent of those expressing little interest in religion believing in telepathy, against 36 per cent in the general population. Thus we note with some interest that two criteria tend to increase likelihood of belief in telepathy, namely a high education and an expressed low interest in “religion”.

Interpretations and problems

These findings have not gone completely unnoticed by sociologists and psychologists interested in paranormal beliefs and religion. Paranormal beliefs are, as we have seen already, often subdivided into “religious” and “classic” types, where the first denotes elements that are “central to traditional Christian doctrine”, whereas the latter are “commonly associated with the supernatural or the occult”²⁴ These two groups of paranormal belief correlate differently with social factors; while the “religious” type seems much more common among marginal groups and correlates with lower education and socio-economic status, the “classic” lacks any such pattern.²⁵ In short, while relative *deprivation* largely correlates with the religious type, it does not help predict “classic paranormal beliefs”.

Related to the deprivation theory is the idea that belief in the paranormal and in “pseudosciences” is simply a matter of scientific illiteracy. If people know more about science, they will tend to believe less in the paranormal. Again, the data we have examined above do not support this interpretation. This has caused some concern for educationalists. For example, Massimo Pigliucci observed in the *McGill Journal of Education* in 2007 that

scientists and science educators often assume that a major reason so many people believe in pseudoscience is that they do not know enough science. However, although the latter is an accurate empirical observation (most people do not know much about science), it does not follow that scientific illiteracy is the cause of widespread belief in all sorts of paranormal phenomena. If lack of scientific knowledge is not the root cause, then more science education will not necessarily solve, or even ameliorate, the problem.²⁶

24. Rice, “Believe It Or Not”, 96–7.

25. *Ibid.*, 96; cf. Goode, *Paranormal Beliefs*.

26. Pigliucci, “The Evolution–Creation Wars”, 291.

Pigliucci also takes note of the difference between the “religious” and “non-religious” based types of paranormal belief, and the discrepancy in how they relate to science education, suggesting that “This means factors other than just the general degree of education are at play.”²⁷ From an educational perspective, Pigliucci argues that the resilience of paranormal beliefs (he is particularly disturbed by the fact that “one in every four or five of the most educated people in the most prosperous country in the world” believes in demonic possession) among the educated classes means that something is wrong with the educational system itself. Based on his own surveys Pigliucci observes that science majors are much more likely to believe in paranormal phenomena than majors in psychology and philosophy, a difference which he attributes to differences in educational strategies. While philosophy and psychology majors “actually take courses on the scientific method and on critical thinking”,

science majors are seldom exposed to that sort of course, and spend most of their initial scientific education in large classrooms where a professor whom they can barely see from across a large lecture hall inundates them with a flood of disconnected facts that they are supposed to remember in order to pass the test.²⁸

In short, could it be that the amount of science education says little about *critical thinking skills*, and that one should expect this ability rather than knowledge of “facts” to be the antidote of paranormal belief?

This is another empirical matter, but one that Pigliucci did not actually test. Sociologist Erich Goode, however, has designed and conducted some preliminary trials to check precisely this kind of correlation. Making the now-familiar distinction between paranormal phenomena with a “religious lineage” and those with no such clear connection, Goode tested the correlation of belief in each category with science literacy (i.e. knowledge of “facts”), but also with proneness to use intuitive but rationally invalid cognitive heuristics, versus the use of scientifically valid reasoning.²⁹ Consistent with the earlier studies, believers in phenomena clearly embedded in religious history were likely to know less about science, and were also more prone to cognitive biases and invalid heuristics. In other words, “religious paranormal belief” corresponded with scientific illiteracy, and a poor understanding of how science (ideally) works. More intriguing, however, Goode could find no such correlation for the “non-religious” paranormal group. In fact, contrary to Pigliucci’s prediction, Goode concluded that “non-religious paranormalists know about as much science, *and reason as scientifically*, as persons who reject the validity

27. *Ibid.*, 291.

28. *Ibid.*, 294.

29. Goode, “Education, Scientific Knowledge, and Belief in the Paranormal”, 26–7.

of paranormal or extrascientific forces”³⁰ It would seem, then, that a decent understanding of scientific method and critical thinking is yet another factor which fails to predict the belief or disbelief in the paranormal.

While the prominence of paranormal ideas among highly educated people must be considered well-documented, there are as of yet no good, unambiguous social scientific explanations of why this is the case. In addition to the factors I have discussed above, psychologists have tried to find correlations between paranormal belief and personality factors. For example, schizotypy and fantasy proneness are among the personality factors that have been suggested as strong correlates for reporting paranormal experiences, and for the wider category who report *belief in* various paranormal phenomena and abilities.³¹

While factors such as these could help explain why one would expect paranormal beliefs of *one sort or another* to remain more or less constant in a population at large (given that personality types are more or less constant), they are less helpful for explaining the explicit *form* of beliefs that are held, and their distribution among different segments of a population. For these questions, social and cultural factors may be much more relevant. In the rest of this chapter I will situate the findings we have looked at in the context of broader historical and cultural processes. This means asking rather different questions than those considered in sociological and psychological studies. From looking at the distribution and correlations of “belief in ESP”, we have to focus attention on the qualitative cultural *shape* of parapsychological beliefs. How were concepts such as telepathy and ESP formed in the first place? Could it be that the socio-cultural conditions of their formation shaped them in such a way as to be particularly well suited as articles of belief for the educated classes? What does the networks and channels of dissemination and cultural diffusion of parapsychological beliefs tell us? Asking these questions also gives opportunity to revisit some issues over disenchantment, re-enchantment, and “secularized esotericism”, and relate these historically to the emergence of occulture.

ACADEMICS AS CO-PRODUCERS OF OCCULTURAL KNOWLEDGE: PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND THE NATURALIZATION OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Psychical research and parapsychology: the professional dimension

The book *Extra-sensory Perception*, published in 1934, has been described as the foundational work for modern experimental parapsychology, and its

30. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

31. See e.g. Parra, “Seeing and Feeling Ghosts”; Hergovich & Arandazi, “Scores for Schizotypy and Five Factor Model of a Sample of Distant Healers”; Wiseman & Watt, “Belief in Psychic Ability and the Misattribution Thesis”.

author, Joseph Banks Rhine (1895–1980), as the father of the discipline.³² Rhine was originally trained as a botanist; however, after encountering a whole series of questions that seemed to relate equally to religion as to science, he and his wife Louisa (also a botanist) decided to shift careers. Coming across the vitalistic philosophy of Henri Bergson (which was getting immensely popular in the US), and having their fascination with spiritualism sparked by one of its most famous missionaries, Arthur Conan Doyle, the couple turned to *psychical research* – the prospective scientific study of spiritualism and other (mental and physical) phenomena considered to be “supernormal”. In 1927 Louisa and J. B. Rhine followed the British psychologist and former president of the American Society for Psychical Research, William McDougall (1871–1938), to Duke University. McDougall, who was himself well known for his vitalistic theories of life and mind, his attack on behaviourism, as well as his defence of Lamarckian evolution and eugenic policies (including racial ones), had been professor of psychology at Harvard University since 1920 (the chair previously held by another famous psychical researcher, William James). By relocating to Duke, McDougall became head of a new psychology department, and had the liberty to conduct research in his greatest areas of interest, including experimental psychical research. Rhine soon became his foremost research assistance in this area. Seven years later, Rhine’s book made headlines in the United States and beyond: not only had the research team at Duke transformed psychical research to an experimental, laboratory oriented discipline of research, but they also claimed to have found evidence for a number of technically named “psychic” abilities, going under the general heading of “ESP”.

The contemporary notion of ESP and its related parapsychological phenomena can in the first instance be traced back to a cultural encounter in the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, occultism and spiritualism experienced a revival after World War I, bringing attention to a host of “paranormal” phenomena. On the other, a controversial scientific discourse was developing and spreading in psychology and biology, focusing on problems related to vitalism and organicism, as opposed to reductionistic materialism and mechanism. In the context of psychical research, these two impulses temporarily met over questions of *disenchantment*: Is a worldview completely stripped of “mysterious incalculable forces” able to grasp all the phenomena of the world in which we live? Less of an unstoppable, irreversible *process* at the heart of modernity, disenchantment was rather a serious intellectual *problem* that scientists, philosophers and educated laymen were struggling with. As several historians of science have pointed out, fierce debates about reductionism, determinism/indeterminacy, vitalism and even causality raged across disciplines

32. See especially Mauskopf & McVaugh, *The Elusive Science*, 102–30. Cf. Aspren, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”.

from physics to biology during the interwar period.³³ The professionalization of parapsychology not only coincided historically with these debates, but its main protagonists made explicit links to relevant concerns in these bordering disciplines.³⁴

The problem of disenchantment has a longer history internally in psychical research. The first systematic, organized attempts to create a scientific discipline out of a field of knowledge typically associated with the occult and supernatural under this heading took place in late Victorian England.³⁵ The establishment of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882 brought together a group of scientists, philosophers and other scholars, organized on the model of the scientific society or club, striving towards serious recognition by other scientific communities and professional societies.³⁶ The attempt to establish a discipline for this kind of research attests, on the one hand, to the presence of a whole range of esoteric religious practices in the Victorian “occult revival”, especially spiritualism.³⁷ On the other hand, organized psychical research also bears testimony to the high authority of the scientific project around the turn of the nineteenth century. Psychical research was thus born from an encounter between the scientism of Victorian scientific naturalism, and the worldview, practices, and rhetorical claims of spiritualists, occultists, and some liberal Christian reformers.³⁸ This nexus gave rise to a discourse in which the invocation of scientific authority remained the primary legitimizing strategy, or, as Alex Owen writes concerning late-Victorian occultism in general, a discourse “undermining scientific naturalism as a worldview”, while at the same time co-opting “the language of science” and staking “a strong claim to rationality”.³⁹

For the early psychical researchers, however, much more was at stake than merely claiming “the language of science”. The organization itself consisted of some of the most reputed scientists of the day, including later Nobel laureates Lord Rayleigh, J. J. Thomson, and Charles Richet, later Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, and many other professors, journalists, editors and notables of British

33. See e.g. Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science*; Forman, “Weimar Culture, Causality, and Quantum Theory, 1918–1927”; Allen, “Mechanism, Vitalism and Organicism in Late Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Biology”; Wolfram, “Supernormal Biology”.

34. See Asprem, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”, 135–9.

35. For some precursors and parallel developments in nineteenth century Germany, see e.g. Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*; Wolfram, *The Stepchildren of Science*.

36. For the foundation and early history of the SPR, see Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research*; Oppenheim, *The Other World*; Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion*; cf. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*.

37. The relation between spiritualism and psychical research is the main focus of Oppenheim, *The Other World*.

38. Cf. Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion*.

39. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 13.

intellectual life. In other words, and this is important for our present concerns: psychical research was, at the outset, *an elite phenomenon*. In fact, although it has become the habit among many contemporary esotericists, New Agers, and even parapsychologists to claim that paranormal phenomena would have been accepted as fact had it not been for the repression of “narrow-minded” academic elites, it is tempting to say that something of the opposite is true: at the turn of the nineteenth century it was precisely parts of the academic elite that elevated certain paranormal phenomena to a degree of acceptability among the public. The claim to scientific legitimacy for the paranormal was born in academic elite circles.

The latter is more than a trivial point. From a historical and scientific perspective, the question is not so much why “paranormal phenomena” have not become part of the scientific canon, but rather why the claim to scientific status of some of these phenomena has been as resilient as it has. Borrowing from actor-network theory and the sociology of science more broadly, it is tempting to make the case that the social and cultural resources the SPR pooled together were crucial for establishing credibility and legitimacy for its pursuit of psychical research.⁴⁰ Even if many of the biggest scientific celebrities of the society were less active members, and some surely belonged to its sceptical wing, sporting their names on the membership list provided the SPR with scientific-cultural legitimacy which made psychical research impossible to neglect for the educated public. Another social reason, or perhaps rather precondition, for the SPR’s initial success was that it wielded a swift and efficient “boundary-work” towards spiritualist and occultist communities.⁴¹ This made it possible to dissociate the “scientific” and “reputable” psychical research from “muddle-headed occultism”, and claim the occult phenomena as part of legitimate science.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the kind of cultural legitimacy which psychical research had managed to establish largely disintegrated with the death of the leading members who had tied it all together, especially Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers and William James. This may be read as a collapse of the “actor-network” that the SPR had assembled; the ensuing generational shift also led to a reorientation of the society towards spiritualism, which may be read as a collapse of their boundary-work. As a result, SPR groups of the early twentieth century tended to break up over a pro-spiritualist/pro-science divide. Modern experimental parapsychology, in turn, grew out of the pro-science wing of the SPR milieu, of which William McDougall was a front figure.⁴²

40. I have outlined this argument in somewhat larger detail in Asprem, “Parapsychology”; Asprem, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”. A similar approach is developed in Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*.

41. For the concept of “boundary-work”, see Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science”; Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science*; cf. the broader approach developed in Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 145–6.

42. E.g. Asprem, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”.

To summarize the central point of this section: “paranormal” phenomena connected to extraordinary mental and perceptive abilities such as ESP, telepathy and clairvoyance, were lifted out of (“disembedded” from) occultism, spiritualism, and vernacular religiosity by a group of highly educated intellectuals, led by academics and scientists, in the name of “psychical research”. Through the transition to parapsychology, the phenomena in question were repackaged and reformed, given technical designations, and supported with reference to experiment, evidence, and philosophical arguments. Furthermore, attempts were made to connect them to central contemporary problems in reputable scientific disciplines, especially biology, psychology, and physics. Reconnecting them to a discourse on religion and spirituality, parapsychological concepts were already packaged as standard elements of a prospective “scientific religion” for intellectuals. The hope that psychical research would help create a future scientific religion was indeed explicitly stated by one of the SPR’s founder, Frederick Myers, and one finds similar traits in the popular and public writings of the pioneers of experimental parapsychology as well, including McDougall and Rhine.⁴³

Disenchantment, re-enchantment, and the naturalization of the supernatural

In his important *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996), Wouter J. Hanegraaff described the post-war religious development of New Age as an expression of a broader “secularization of esotericism”, a process that he linked to the Weberian notion of disenchantment: Ideas that have been connected with the esoteric discourses of the Renaissance have gone through a reinterpretation in light of a “disenchanted” culture that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment.⁴⁴ With reference to this process, Hanegraaff defined “occultism” as “all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.”⁴⁵ This definition

43. For Myers’ views on psychical research, science, and religion, see Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, 104–133; for McDougall’s linking of psychical research to religion, see Asprem, “A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxies”, 135–9; for parapsychology more generally, see Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 76–85.

44. For the whole argument, which is a lot more complex than can be shown from one sentence, see Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 411–513. Also cf. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”.

45. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 422 (emphasis omitted). Note that this definition differs markedly from other common definitions of occultism in the literature. Essentially, for Hanegraaff occultism is a *type* of esoteric discourse under specific developmental conditions and encompasses a broad range of subjects, groups and currents. A more historically specific usage is also common, by which occultism refers to nineteenth-century attempts to revive Renaissance occult philosophy and magic, particularly in France, and later in England. For this usage, see e.g. Pasi, “Occultism”.

carries within it an interesting distinction. The field of “occultism” consists *not only* of “disenchanted esotericists”, but also of those interested outsiders who seek to make sense of claims that have been connected to the field of the esoteric, *in disenchanted terms*. This, in fact, gives a rationale for including all those academics and intellectuals, both the sympathetic and the sceptically minded, who sought to explain the phenomena of spiritualism with recourse to physical theories, or psychological models, as part of a broader discourse of “occultism”.

What does it mean to make sense of the esoteric in disenchanted terms? Hanegraaff’s analysis, which has focused on the reinterpretation of esoteric thought by self-professed esotericists, finds one crucial tendency to be that elements such as the supposition of a living nature, the mediation of higher knowledge, and the a-causal correspondences between things in the universe have been replaced by “disenchanted” alternatives where pseudo-mechanical and pseudo-materialistic interpretations have become the norm.⁴⁶ Where the Renaissance magus understood ritual efficacy in terms of interaction with the *anima mundi* or the intercession of spiritual entities of various kinds, the modern “disenchanted” magician would instead refer to “energies” or “forces” working through subtle but essentially causal principles (often in explicit analogy with electricity, magnetism, and, increasingly in the twentieth century, quantum mechanics), or through “psychologized” understandings of mediating entities.⁴⁷ These tendencies belong to the first part of Hanegraaff’s definition of occultism, namely the “attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world”. If we go on to consider the second part, the attempts “by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world”, we open the door to a much wider range of interpretational strategies. One major difference is that while the esotericists will generally tend to take for granted that phenomena connected with the esoteric are actually *real*, in some significant and irreducible sense, the “general public” is not necessarily constrained by any such ontological presuppositions. Thus we might find fully and truly disenchanted perspectives, which flat out *deny* the mysterious incalculable forces which esotericists, through “terminological scientism” and “rhetorics of rationality”, redefine in “disenchanted terms”. Instead, the *claims* about such forces may be accounted for in terms of well-known, ordinary phenomena that may, at the most sceptical end of the spectrum at least, include illusions, psychopathology, trickery or lies.⁴⁸

46. This difference is of course based on Antoine Faivre’s description of the “esoteric form of thought” as consisting of four intrinsic characteristics plus two non-intrinsic ones. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10–15. See especially Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”.

47. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World”, 361–9; cf. Asprem, “Magic Naturalized?”; Asprem, *Arguing with Angels*, chapter four.

48. For “terminological scientism”, see Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*.

The production of various disenchanted perspectives on esoteric discourse should be viewed in the context of a broader discourse on *the naturalization of the supernatural*.⁴⁹ An explicitly naturalistic stance grew popular during the professionalization of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, and this development is indispensable to understanding some of the philosophical thrust behind psychical research.⁵⁰ Naturalism is, however, a flexible and broad concept, both philosophically and as a cultural–historical phenomenon.⁵¹ In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a debate over “scientific naturalism” and the place of the supernatural was at the heart of what was being perceived as a widening conflict between science and religion; this is well illustrated by the “agnosticism debate”, of which Thomas Henry Huxley was the main protagonist and provocateur.⁵²

The naturalization of the supernatural took a wide variety of forms. Although all are sceptical to traditional concepts of the “supernatural”, their orders of explanation may differ radically.⁵³ On the sceptical wing, the psychiatrist Henry Maudsley’s *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings* (1886) illustrates a completely disenchanted perspective. Maudsley concluded that claims about the supernatural could be accounted for by humans’ inherent tendencies towards “malobservation and misinterpretation of nature”, sometimes coupled with genuine psychological disturbances including hallucinations and hysteria.⁵⁴ Maudsley illustrates a point that was crucial to Huxley’s notion of agnosticism, namely that one should always start to look for explanations of seemingly inexplicable occurrences (and claims of such) among mechanisms that we *do* know something about. In Maudsley’s case, secure ground was found in our established knowledge of the human mind, particularly its weaknesses.

Psychical researchers were also part of this naturalizing tendency, but instead of reducing away the phenomena, they focused on finding room for them within a naturalistic worldview. Much of the intellectual effort to redefine the supernatural in the context of the SPR was carried out by Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901). Myers composed a whole regime of neologisms to

49. This term is borrowed from the title of an early first historical work on psychical research, written by a sceptical insider: Podmore, *The Naturalisation of the Supernatural*.

50. See, e.g., Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion*, 8–37; Frank Miller Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, 131–50, 171–200; Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism*.

51. For the cultural flexibility of naturalism in relation to “the supernatural” see e.g. Noakes, “Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain”; for reflections over the meaning of naturalism(s) as a position on science and metaphysics in modern philosophy, see e.g. De Caro & Macarthur, *Naturalism in Question*; Flanagan, “Varieties of Naturalism”.

52. See e.g. Huxley *et al.*, *Christianity and Agnosticism*; Ward, *Naturalism and Agnosticism*.

53. This point is made clear with regard to spiritualism by Noakes, “Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain”.

54. Maudsley, *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings*, 354.

serve as technical terminology for the prospective discipline, most of which are listed in the glossary accompanying his posthumously published *Human Personality* (1903). Among the most enduring ones was the concept of “telepathy”, designed as a technical term to replace the word “thought transference”, which was associated with folk beliefs and sideshow tricks.⁵⁵

Furthermore illustrating the naturalistic strategy of psychical research, Myers introduced the word “supernormal” to replace the problematic “supernatural”. While the supernatural implied a contrariety with nature and natural law which was quite unacceptable for the scientifically minded, the supernormal referred merely to a deviance from “normality”:

The word supernatural is open to grave objections; it assumes that there is something outside nature, and it has become associated with arbitrary interference with law. Now there is no reason to suppose that the psychical phenomena with which we deal are less a part of nature, or less subject to fixed and definite law, than any other phenomena.⁵⁶

This new scheme of definitions attempted to ground the many “supernormal” phenomena within a naturalistic discourse, making them capable in principle of being taken seriously by educated people and scientists. Telepathy, Myers’s most successful neologism, was inscribed at the core of this project. After its first appearance in the 1880s, it saw a number of naturalistic and quasi-disenchanted interpretations, from an effect of “brainwaves” in electromagnetic fields (a theory first championed by the physicist Oliver Lodge, a pioneer of radio technology), to the exertion of obscure “metetherial” powers of the “subliminal self” (Myers’s own later theory).⁵⁷ In general we could divide the naturalistic explanatory models of psychical research into three major types, on a continuum from the less to the more “disenchanted”: some (notably Alfred Russel Wallace, co-inventor of the Darwinian selection theory of evolution) leaned towards spiritualism and wanted to open up naturalism to such a wide extent as to accommodate the actual, real existence of disembodied spirits; others, often termed “animists” (McDougall was a strong proponent of this position), did not believe in spirits, but instead attributed spiritualistic phenomena to capricious powers of the human organism, often connected to a theory of vitalistic, non-mechanistic biology; finally, a more disenchanted option was to focus on a few core “effects”, such as telepathy, and look for mechanistic theories of them, usually in terms of electromagnetic fields or waves.⁵⁸

55. Myers, *Human Personality*, vol. 1, xiii–xxii.

56. *Ibid.*, xxii.

57. For a discussion, see e.g. Asprem, “Parapsychology”, 640–43; cf. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*.

58. For a similar exploration of the varieties of naturalistic strategies to spiritualism, see Noakes, “Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain”.

FROM LABORATORY TO MAINSTREAM: CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE PARANORMAL IN OCCULTURE

I argue that psychical research and its professionalized daughter, parapsychology, have offered a uniquely naturalistic mode of enchantment. By moving certain of the claims and phenomena associated with religious and esoteric discourses into the laboratory, while at the same time taking them seriously and attempting to ground them within a worldview that is *naturalistic* but not necessarily *disenchanted*, parapsychology has engaged in what may be described, with an apt term borrowed from Roy Wallis, as a scientific *sanitization* of these claims.⁵⁹ The claims are dissociated from their “traditional” and mythological frameworks, and re-embedded in new, “rational” frames of reference and legitimizing structures. The result is a *scientistic detraditionalization*, along the lines of von Stuckrad’s process of the *scientification of knowledge*. Meanwhile resisting the complete reduction of the phenomena to ordinary and well-understood mechanisms, such as psychopathology, trickery, cognitive biases and self-delusions, some of the mystery is still retained. This has made the detraditionalized and repackaged paranormal particularly well-suited for projects to re-enchant science itself, typically by insisting on a new “scientific revolution” or “paradigm shift.”⁶⁰

Having now argued that groups of academics, scientists and other highly educated persons have been at the heart of this process, it is time to turn again to the relation with a much broader and popular occulture. “Psychical” or parapsychological elements have been fed into the fledgling occulture about as far back as it makes sense to trace it. Partridge has been cautious with delineating the occulture historically, but as a re-enchanted mainstream, it arguably refers mainly to developments of the late twentieth century to the present. One might, however, identify a “proto-occulture” in the interface between, say, occultism, spiritualism, mesmerism, psychical research and popular culture already in the nineteenth century. Particularly towards the end of the century, psychic phenomena were stock elements of speculative fiction, including the late Victorian gothic and science fiction genres.⁶¹ In the twentieth century the relation has renewed and intensified as the discourse on psychic abilities has changed and new media technologies come into use. With the popularity boom of spiritualism from World War I and into the 1920s, psychical research garnered much attention; the popular lecture tours of people like Oliver Lodge and Arthur Conan Doyle, and the popular writings of someone like

59. See Wallis, “Science and Pseudo-Science”; cf. Hess, *Science in the New Age*.

60. For an analysis of such calls as discursive strategies in a religio-scientific field, see Asprem, “Parapsychology”, 656; cf. Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 79–81.

61. See e.g. Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines*, especially 28–62, 169–200; Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 181–213.

Hereward Carrington brought the sanitized discourse on psychic phenomena to a large number of people.⁶² In the 1930s, Joseph Banks Rhine showed himself to be not only an innovative psychical researcher but also a very deft publicizer. Working with book clubs, his popular writings on ESP reached a broad public; in the early days of mass-media communication, he also made frequent appearances on radio shows, even featuring weekly ESP tests live from the studio.⁶³ The characteristic “Zener cards” used in his paradigmatic experiments published in *Extra-sensory Perception* were soon mass-produced and sold commercially. By the end of the decade, Rhine’s new parapsychology was known all over the US, and his new terminology – ESP, psychokinesis, precognition – was gaining currency. The criticism and serious doubts about his results which were rapidly piling up in the psychological literature could do nothing to stop the growing notion in the public, advanced by the massive popularization of parapsychology, that this was scientifically legitimate knowledge.⁶⁴ In the years following World War II, the interest in what was increasingly being referred to as “psi” started to filter into new forms of popular culture, even giving rise to the “psi-fi” subgenre within pulp science fiction.⁶⁵

This is where our story of the parapsychological naturalization of the supernatural comes together again with modern occulture. The sanitized discourse on the paranormal has made a significant impact on popular cultural productions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, especially in film and television. As such, they are inscribed centrally in a mode of knowledge transmission (linked with what von Stuckrad elsewhere in this volume defines as transformations in “publicization”) which is entirely typical for contemporary occulture: the boundary between entertainment and religious expression and consumption gets blurred, and popular culture becomes a scene for re-enchantments.

The main point here is that ideas mediated through the paranormal subgenre of popular occulture – what David J. Hess has termed the “paraculture” – have their origin in the struggles of psychical researchers and parapsychologists to make such phenomena scientifically legitimate. This, I suggest, has given the ideas a cultural shape which make them particularly attractive to

62. Among Carrington’s many and influential books in this field we might mention *The Coming Science; Personal Experiences in Spiritualism*; and his books about the medium Eusapia Palladino, e.g. *Eusapia Palladino and Her Phenomena*. The American author Upton Sinclair wrote another influential popular book on psychical research based on telepathic experiments with his wife in 1930, *Mental Radio*. This book has additional significance in that it came with a foreword by Albert Einstein.

63. Mauskopf & McVaugh, *The Elusive Science*, 160–63, 256. Rhine’s first popular book on parapsychology and ESP was published in 1937. See Rhine, *New Frontiers of the Mind*.

64. For an overview of the critical responses, see e.g. Mauskopf & McVaugh, “The Controversy over Statistics in Parapsychology 1934–1938”; cf. Aspren, “Parapsychology”, 654–5.

65. See e.g. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*; cf. Hess, *Science in the New Age*, 120–41.

people with higher education. As such, if the contemporary religious landscape is being formed into a broad occultural landscape, and if this occulture, furthermore, is connected with the withering away of “traditional” church religion, we should not be too surprised to find that the sanitized paranormal dimension of it is particularly popular among the more highly educated participants in occulture.