Psi Research in France

There was significant scholarly interest in psi in France at the start of the nineteenth century and again a century later, although the study of psi has never become as established there as in other countries. This article traces its development, from the early days of 'animal magnetism' to the present day.

Animal Magnetism (1784-1842)

Psi research first appeared in France in the eighteenth century as interest grew in phenomena associated with animal magnetism. According to this idea, promoted by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer, living beings are influenced by a mysterious force or fluid. Mesmer developed the idea as a cure for mental and physical diseases, and this subsequently became the source of numerous currents of psychodynamic research and therapy.

A disciple of Mesmer, Marquis de Puységur, discovered a particular condition he termed 'artificial somnambulism,' a special mental state between waking and sleeping, in which a person might show 'lucidity' regarding matters beyond the limits of normal perception, remembering nothing of what had occurred on returning to normal consciousness. This was termed 'magnetic lucidity' or 'somnambulic lucidity'. The term 'lucidity' is equivalent to the English term clairvoyance; later British and American investigators referred to the 'somnambulic' state as 'trance'.

Clairvoyance was a controversial topic in scientific circles from the pre-Revolutionary period to the late nineteenth century, by which time interest had shifted to hypnotism, in which only some of the phenomena associated with Mesmer's animal magnetism were recognized.1 Many members of the French Academy of Medicine were hostile to the claims of magnetism; following a heated debate in June 1842, the Academy officially banned any further consideration of the subject, against the vehement protests of members who felt the phenomenon of clairvoyance should be given a fair trial. The critics compared animal magnetism to the mathematical problem of 'squaring the circle', to which the Academy of Sciences had similarly closed its doors. This attempt to kill the controversy by official condemnation had no equivalent in North America or other parts of Europe.2 However, official censure did not prevent continued studies of animal magnetism and trance, but merely pushed them to the margins of official science.

Hypnotism (1842-1885)

Numerous efforts to bypass official censure led by the end of the nineteenth century to the limited use of hypnotism in medical practice. In the interim, between the 1840s and 1880s, and even later, hypnotism served as an epistemological model questioning the validity of academic proscriptions. What the Academy claimed as the successful containment of a sulphurous issue actually gave rise to a new discipline, psychology. This, paradoxically, eventually led to a partial

rehabilitation for animal magnetism, with the recognition of the relevance of some its anomalous mental features such as clairvoyance.

The systematic study of trance states, and later of mediumship, led to the institutionalization of a science of the soul: a kind of psychology combined with psi research (the first appearance of the term 'psychology', which in French literally means 'science of the soul', was in a book on ghosts and other paranormal phenomena published in 1588).[3] Many spiritists called themselves psychologists: Allan Kardec's Revue Spirite was subtitled *Journal d'Etudes Psychologiques* (*Journal of Psychological Studies*). The Scientific Society of Psychological Studies, active between 1878 and 1883, was in fact a group of magnetisers and spiritists who had little interest in carrying out real science.

At the outset, psychology and parapsychology shared the same institutions and journals, and in terms of research had common 'psycho-parapsychology' goals. Historian Andreas Sommer notes that 'the intersection between "official" nascent modern psychology and psychical research was, albeit relatively short-lived, nowhere as overt as in France.'[4] Some researchers tried to circumvent the academic prohibition through hypnotism, psychophysiology and psychical research. One was Timothée Puel, a botanist and physician who between 1874 and 1876, published the *Revue de Psychologie Expérimentale* (*Journal of Experimental Psychology*) based on the model of Alexander Aksakof's *Psychische Studien*. It was the first journal of its kind at that time, although mainly devoted to a discussion of psychical research, along with Puel's work on various forms of sleep, trance, and catalepsy. During that period, psi research was mainly carried out independently by investigators such as Agénor de Gasparin, a leading politician, and astronomer Camille Flammarion.

The Psychical and the Psychological (1885-1918)

In 1885 was founded the first French institution devoted both to psychology and parapsychology. The Société de Psychologie Physiologique (Society of Physiological Psychology, SPP) was the first psychological society, and was modelled on the Society for Psychical Research founded in London in 1882. It covered hypnosis and psychical research, also carrying out studies on altered states of consciousness induced by drugs, and on ordinary psychophysiology. The driving forces were physiologist Charles Richet and Polish scientist Julian Ochorowicz; neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot served as president, and psychologist Théodule Ribot and philosopher Paul Janet as vice presidents.

The First International Congress of Physiological Psychology was held in Paris in 1889, organized by SPP members, with a respectable amount of time given to psi research. But this eclectic strategy only partly succeeded, as the attention given to hypnotism and psi topics was opposed by many, especially in Germany.[5] Following the congress, the SPP declined dramatically.

A similar trend can be observed in the journals where psi research was discussed. During a short period of approximately ten years the *Revue de Philosophie de la France et de l'Etranger*, edited by Théodule Ribot, published articles on all kinds of psychology. One was Richet's pioneering paper 'La Suggestion Mentale' on the application of statistics in the human sciences, applied in an experiment on

clairvoyance (‘lucidité). It was there as well that the young Pierre Janet, later a leading psychologist, published his first experimental reports on ‘hypnosis at distance’ with the trance psychic Léonie Leboulanger, following a presentation at the SPP in October 1885. This in turn was followed by a series of works discussing telepathy and clairvoyance. But the publication of scholarly papers open to the existence of psi also declined after the 1889 congress.

In 1891, psi research again gained an open forum with the founding of a specialist journal by Richet and the ophthalmologist Xavier Dariex, the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques*. This was conceived by Richet as ‘a fair balance between the credulity of spiritist journals and the blind ignorance of the collections of official psychology’.6 The *Annales* welcomed testimonies and experiments from everywhere, while eschewing theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, like all journals devoted to psychical research the *Annales* was read only by a few enthusiasts and failed to reach the same readership as the *Revue Philosophique*.7 The growing gap increased the isolation of parapsychological topics from mainstream psychology.

In France, Pierre Janet made a similar turnaround. He omitted discussion of his own psi experiments in his doctoral thesis on psychological automatism, and on the advice of Charcot kept a distance from paranormal claims. Apparently intent on erasing his former image as a psi research pioneer he even became a champion of scepticism, claiming for example that all mediumship was pathological and attempting to relegate magnetists and spiritists to the pre-history of psychology. Janet’s arguments helped establish a growing demarcation between psychology and parapsychology. His brilliant academic career became inseparable from his role as a ‘gatekeeper’ of psychology; some of his pupils as Henri Piéron followed the same sceptical path.

Janet was the main organizer of the Fourth International Congress of Psychology, held again in Paris in 1900. Despite its limited openness to hypnotism and related issues, this fourth international congress made the existence of an internal border within psychology obvious. Psychic wonders were no longer the problem of psychology as a whole but only of a subsection.

This congress also saw the launching of the Institut Psychique International, soon to be renamed Institut Général Psychologique (IGP), headed by Janet and Richet. The IGP was strongly supported by elite scientists and became the major private society for the study of mind.8 However, Janet quickly moved to ‘correct’ the IGP’s agenda to make it more ‘psychological’,9 for instance replacing ‘psychical’ with ‘psychological’ in the name of the organisation and its bulletin. This was opposed by psi research proponents, who called for the creation of a genuine society for psychical research.

Nevertheless, the IGP included a subdivision concerned with psi phenomena as a specialism, and its relevance to a larger understanding of mind and its role in nature, including animals, social groups, criminals, and suchlike. This was named the Groupe d’Etude des Phénomènes Psychiques (Group for the Study of Psychical phenomena - GEPP); eminent members included Arsène d’Arsonval, Nobel laureate Pierre Curie, Jules Courtier, Louis Favre, and Serge Yourievitch. Among several careful studies was a masterly investigation of the medium Eusapia Palladino.10

However, this openness was opposed by psychologists concerned with the study of mental functions along the lines of physiology and psychopathology, and later caused the IGP to be increasingly sidelined. In the history of French psychology it is almost totally neglected.

However difficult it might be, Richet believed that the study of psi phenomena should be integrated with psychology. Indeed, at the international psychology congresses of 1892 and 1905 he asserted that psi research was the future of psychology, the field in which psychology would make major discoveries about the nature of mind. But he became disillusioned by the opposition and abandoned the project, instead focusing on psi research – what he termed 'metapsychics' in his 1905 presidential address to the Society for Psychical Research – as an autonomous discipline.

This new approach quickly ran into problems, following the publication of Richet's experiments with the materializing medium Marthe Béraud. Press articles appeared falsely claiming that Richet had stated he believed in ghosts (he gave no such interviews and made no such statements).[11] Colleagues were approached to comment on the case on the basis of incomplete or false information. The outcome was that the scientific community was forced to take position against this 'return of obscurantist superstitions', and the scandal tended to discredit Richet and psi research.

However, thanks to Richet's scientific reputation as a pioneering physiologist – he was the 1913 Nobel Laureate in Physiology/Medicine – and the good reputation of his supporters, the breach was not total, and there remained a partial overlap between psychology and psi research for the next two decades. The rejection was implicit and primarily non-official, expressed through the press or behind the scenes of journals and organizations. Nevertheless, historians have tended to refer to Richet only as a psi advocate, overlooking his prominent role as a pioneer of French psychology. In continuing to do so today, they reinforece the demarcation established by Richet between psychology and psi research.

Golden Age of Psi Research (1919-1935)

The outbreak of war in 1914 limited the opportunity for research, but at the same time the massive loss of life tended to promote public belief in spirit survival and related paranormal phenomena. By chance, the war also brought together a number of individuals keen to give new vigour to psi research. In 1919, the Institut Métapsychique International (IMI) was founded as a private research foundation devoted to the subject. This foundation was mainly the project of spiritist followers of Allan Kardec, individuals like Gabriel Delanne who were convinced that their beliefs should be based on scientific evidence but had been disappointed by the marginalization of psi research in the IGP and wished to be free of the need to cooperate with academic psychologists.

Richet joined the IMI project, initially only as an honorary president. The first president was Rocco Santoliquido, an Italian physician and politician who was introduced to spiritism through his family. The first director was the physician Gustave Geley, a former spiritist who showed skill in experimental research with

mediums. The IMI was funded by Jean Meyer, a successful wine merchant who devoted part of his wealth to revive Kardecian spiritism. Thanks to his largess, the IMI could afford to pay a secretary and director, and experiment with mediums from all over Europe. It occupied an entire building with a well-equipped laboratory, conference room and library. The institute immediately obtained the status of public utility, giving it public recognition. Its founding was welcomed abroad, and there followed numerous collaborations with foreign researchers and subjects.

In the 1920s, psi research flourished on both scientific and cultural levels (it helped to stimulate the surrealism movement in the arts, for instance).12 But its results, published in its Revue Métapsychique, were mainly discussed in the press and not in academic journals. The public still had trouble distinguishing between spiritism and the scientific aspiration of psi research.

Some major works were done at that time, both on physical and mental phenomena of mediumship, and on psychological and physiological theories of mediumship and multiple personalities. Next to Richet and Geley, some of the main researchers were René Warcollier, René Sudre and Eugène Osty. Famous experiments were carried out between 1919 and 1924 with Franek Kluski, a Polish materializing medium, in which were obtained plaster moulds said to be of ectoplasmic hands of spirits who had briefly taken physical form. Other results were obtained in controlled conditions with the séance mediums Jan Guzyk (also known in France as Jean Guzik) and Marthe Béraud under the pseudonym Eva C.

In 1922 and 1923, academic committees led by Henri Piéron performed experiments with Guzyk and Béraud in the Sorbonne. They claimed to have exposed them as frauds, despite a lack of evidence. To try to settle this controversy, the IMI's second director Eugène Osty collaborated with physicists and engineers to develop an automatic device that could instantaneously record any anomalous movement occurring in total darkness. This device helped both to expose cheating, as with the fraudulent medium Stanislawa Popielska, and also to confirm the presence of a genuine anomaly, as in the case of the medium Rudi Schneider.

With regard to mental phenomena, research was carried out with Stephan Ossowiecki, Ludwig Kahn, Pascal Forthuny, Jeanne Laplace, Mme Morel, Olga Kahl, and others. Osty studied 'inspired artists' like Augustin Lesage, Marguerite Burnat-Provins, Marijan Gruzewski, and also savants capable of prodigious feats of memory and calculation: Louis Fleury, Inaudi, Romanof and Osaka.

Osty's research program employed a comparative methodology based on a psychology of 'paranormal knowledge' (metagnomy).13 Warcollier developed research on long-distance telepathy with a group of unselected participants who met weekly. Sudre developed an integrative theoretical framework based on psychodynamic models created by Frederic Myers, Théodore Flournoy, William James, and Pierre Janet, discussing connections between metagnomy and altered states of consciousness ; he later extended this to explore the relation between psi research and all other sciences. Charles Richet tried to synthesize the main trends and results of this new science in his *Traité de Métapsychique* (Thirty Years of Psychical Research) published in 1922.

A high point of the IMI's existence was the Third International Congress of Psychical Research, which it organized in Paris in 1927. However, Eugène Osty was concerned about the quality of the speakers. In a bid to professionalize the field and improve standards, in 1928 he teamed up with Rocco Santoliquido to found the Centre Permanent de Conférences et Congrès Internationaux de Recherches Psychiques, which relied mainly on academics rather than on amateur field investigators. The venture was shortlived: Santoliquido died in 1930 and the Centre was dissolved.

With the death of its financial sponsor Jean Meyer in 1931, the IMI lost its main source of funds and from then on suffered from low resources. To try to meet this challenge it developed a popular approach, addressing the public directly by means of lectures, courses, experiments and popular writings, which tended to overshadow its previous scholarly approach. The institute still attracted few high-ranking scientists and intellectuals, such as Gabriel Marcel, but most of the (French) academics and professional researchers who collaborated with it remained anonymous. The IMI has survived as the expert centre for psi research in France, but has a low membership and carries out relatively little research.

Meyer's death, and the beginning of the IMI's decline, coincided with the founding of the Union Rationaliste (Rationalist Union), the first group to be entirely devoted to critiquing pseudo-science. This was widely supported by mainstream scientists, including psychologist Henri Piéron, and grew rapidly, gaining more than 2000 members in two years. The group is the fore-runner of many similar groups founded after World War II, enhancing the boundary between scientific psychology and psi research. As has come to be the norm in sceptical discourse, it considered psi research on the same level related topics such as astrology, chiromancy, hypnotism, and psychoanalysis; did little research, mostly on marginal aspects like astrology or dowsing; persistently misinformed the public about the state of research; and used ad hominem approaches to discredit psi proponents.[14] Its activities made it ever more difficult in France to simultaneously pursue an academic career and research border areas. The advantage to its supporters was that it helped protect the autonomy of psychology, which by denouncing pseudo-science became more strongly integrated as part of the academic community.

Parapsychology Marginalized (Post-1935)

With the death of leading researchers such as Richet and Osty, and of supporters such as the internationally renowned philosopher Henri Bergson, psi research declined in France. By the end of World War II it had become virtually a taboo science, too subversive to be discussed at academic level.

The 1960s saw the launch of the Fantastic Realism movement, with the publication by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier of Le Matin des Magiciens (The Morning of the Magicians) in 1960 and the journal Planète, which produced 41 issues over seven years from 1961. The movement was interested in frontier areas: super-powers, forgotten civilizations, extraterrestrial civilizations, and heterodox sciences such as parapsychology; other subjects included fantastic literature,

sexuality and eroticism, and social issues. The aim was to awaken the curiosity of the public and encourage it not to blindly accept given dogmas.

Both the book and the journal enjoyed huge and quick success, and this in turn aroused controversy. The Union Rationaliste denounced Fantastic Realism as an intellectual imposture, unsuitable for academic discussion.15 This was at least partly justified: along with striking errors its literature mixed up verified information with fictional inventions, creating confusion. Mainstream scientists who published researches in this area, such as the biologist Rémy Chauvin and physicist Olivier Costa de Beauregard, preferred to disguise their interest by using pseudonyms.

The Fantastic Realism movement is said to have contributed to the cultural conflicts that erupted in May 1968, the most important social movement in France in the second half of the 20th century.16 It also paved the way for a growing interest in parapsychology in French universities. Refused permission to study the subject, a group of psychology students at the University of Nanterre (Paris X) created in 1971 a transdisciplinary association, the Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches en Parapsychologie (Parapsychology Research and Study Group, GERP).

Rémy Chauvin played a major role in launching this group, which was more an intellectual forum than an organization devoted to experimental research. From 1972 to 1975, Chauvin clandestinely taught courses on parapsychology methodologies at the IMI, but the GERP members followed their own paths, far from the Rhinean paradigm. Some of them subsequently abandoned the subject in order to follow careers in mainstream science and academia, but they were nevertheless a strong influence on a generation of researchers.

In the post-war period, many parapsychological groups sprang up although none achieved permanence. Most had a mixed membership of both scholars and laypeople, and remained marginal, regardless of the quality of their work. Few addressed the totality of psi phenomena, preferring to focus on one or other kind of experience or aspect of experimental research. Often they developed an alliance with related fields like psychoanalysis, esotericism, occultism, and psychotronics, and this could lead to confusion. In the 1970s, attempts by GERP to unite these groups failed because they were too loosely structured.

In the present day, in France as elsewhere, serious psi research has become practically invisible, leaving the public at the mercy of pseudo-scientific discourses (pro or contra) that spread misinformation and cause misunderstandings about the work that has been achieved. Historically, however, genuine scientific interest in psi research can be seen to have occurred periodically, and there are signs that this could be about to happen once again.

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- 1. See Méheust (1999).
- 2. Edelman (2007), 82.
- 3. Taillepied (1588).
- 4. Sommer (2013), 11.
- 5. Sidgwick (1892), 284.
- 6. Richet (1922), 37.
- 7. See Alvarado & Evrard (2012; 2013).
- 8. See Brower (2010).
- 9. Plas (2000), 148.
- 10. See Courtier (1908).
- 11. Evrard (2016), chapter 5.
- 12. See Méheust, 1999.
- 13. See Méheust, 2011, for a similar work of comparative metagnomy.
- 14. See Méheust (2004).
- 15. Galifret (1965).
- 16. See Renard (1996).

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