

PANORAMIC VIEWS OF THE HISTORY OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY: A REVIEW OF THREE RECENT BOOKS

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Over the years, a number of published monographs have dealt with particular periods, topics, or perspectives on the history of spiritualism and psychical research. For instance, Braude's (1989) book on nineteenth-century American spiritualism focused on gender and cultural dynamics; Inglis's (1984) review of international parapsychological developments for the first three decades of the twentieth century took the point of view of the psychical researcher interested in the phenomena of the field. Others, such as Gauld (1968), focused on aspects of the work of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) or on individual psychical researchers (e.g., Iannuzzo, 1983) and mediums (e.g., Tietze, 1973).

Aside from these publications, the literature of parapsychology is in great need of general review books that present an overview of the field and are not limited by specific orientations. Such works would be useful both to active researchers and to newcomers to the field because both find it difficult to keep up with over a century of developments. In the past, there have been some useful books fitting this description, such as Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism* (1902) and reviews not intended as formal histories (e.g., Douglas, 1977). Most of the one-volume general histories of psychical research, however, have been published in languages other than English. Examples are Castellan's *La Métapsychique* (1955), Dèttore's *Storia della Parapsicologia* (1976), Fantoni's *Magia y Parapsicología* (1974), and Tischner's *Geschichte der Parapsychologie* (1960). There is a need to update these books or to write new ones that present more current reviews of the developments of the last decades, or that cover areas, periods, and topics neglected by most of the publications just mentioned. The three books reviewed here are the latest contributions to our literature along these lines.

Historia de la Parapsicología by Jon Aizpúrua

Jon Aizpúrua is well known in parts of Latin America for his extensive lectures on moral, conceptual, and philosophical aspects of spiritism. In his *Historia de la Parapsicología* (History of Parapsychology)¹ the account is divided in two parts. The first, "Beliefs, Religions, Philosophies," includes short summaries of ancient beliefs and practices regarding psychic phenomena and the occult, and a discussion of mesmerism, theosophy, and the Rosicrucians. The second part is devoted to parapsychology. This section forms about eighty percent of the book and includes spiritism, spiritualism, and the beginnings and further development of parapsychology. In addition, Aizpúrua includes a chronology of important events in psychical research, a list of presidents of the SPR, and a glossary. An appendix includes essays on aspects of mediumship and spiritism by Gustave Geley and by the author, Aizpúrua.

Aizpúrua starts his discussion with the Fox sisters and Andrew Jackson Davis, and then moves to the work of Allan Kardec. In his view, it was with Kardec's work that "the spiritist doctrine acquired its true theoretical and experimental dimension" (p. 93; this and other translations from the Spanish are mine). The movement is rightly seen as an important factor in the development of parapsychology, particularly in Europe. Unfortunately, Aizpúrua exaggerates Kardec's so-called scientific approach. A look at Kardec's writings in his periodical *Revue Spirite* and in books such as *Le Livre du Médiuims* (1861) makes it clear that he based his moral and philosophical teachings, as well as his "explanations" of phenomena such as apparitions and physical mediumship, on the content of mediumistic communications. By nineteenth-century definitions, such approaches were not scientific and could hardly be called experimental.

There is much of interest in Aizpúrua's account, for he lists, not only the early SPR work and researchers, but also a variety of European figures such as Ernesto Bozzano, Camille Flammarion, Gustave Geley, Cesare Lombroso, and Johann K. F. Zöllner. Several pages are devoted to Charles Richet and to his well-known *Traité de Métapsychique* (1922). This treatise, in Aizpúrua's opinion, "ordered and summarized the existing dispersed information, giving a uniform nomenclature for all supranormal phenomenology within a unifying outline" (pp. 151-152). Richet's treatise was tremendously influential. For a long time, virtually every book on the subject mentioned this work. To this day it is the best known European treatise of its epoch. I agree with Aizpúrua that the *Traité* was influential regarding terminology and classification issues, but this is the

¹*Historia de la Parapsicología* (2nd ed.). Barcelona: Edicomunicación, 1989, Pp. 351, paperback. Illustrated. ISBN 84-7672-261-3.

extent of Richet's "unifying outline." Richet did not provide us with a theoretical framework; in fact, his book was surprisingly atheoretical considering the European tradition of authors such as Geley (1919/1920), Mackenzie (1923), and Myers (1903).

The work of J. B. Rhine and associates appears in a section about quantitative parapsychology. Aizpúrua argues that Rhine's life work gave us much more than experimental evidence for the existence of the phenomena he studied; Rhine's legacy includes a view of parapsychology as a natural science, as opposed to the study of the supernatural. In addition, his work emphasized that the phenomena in question were not pathological and that they were independent of time and space.

Aizpúrua also discusses developments related to particular phenomena and claims, such as poltergeists, tape-recorded voices, psi in animals and plants, healing, Kirlian photography, OBEs, and reincarnation-type cases.

This account of parapsychology will be especially useful to Spanish-speaking readers who have difficulty obtaining many of the primary sources of the materials mentioned in this book. Unfortunately, Aizpúrua is not always a reliable guide, for a variety of reasons: for example, his discussions of Blavatsky and the Fox sisters, as well as the work of Backster, appear with no qualifications at all. He has confused two of Rhine's books (p. 165), given the wrong dates of the founding of a journal (p. 152), and claimed that Janet discussed "superior" aspects of the subconscious in relation to hypnosis (p. 123), among other misstatements.

There are also many exaggerations and misleading generalizations. One is his view that survival research is a main research area in modern times. Others are his comments about the progress and acceptance of the field by science at large: He presents the acceptance of the Parapsychological Association into the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969 as an example of "formal recognition . . . of . . . the legitimacy of parapsychological studies and the reality of the psi function, as one of the elements forming human nature" (p. 167). Actually, the acceptance was less than unanimous and certainly does not represent acceptance at large nor attitudes toward the validity of parapsychology's findings, and even less of their place in human nature. This example, and others throughout the book, suggest that the author is not familiar in detail with many of the topics he writes about.

Parapsychology: A Concise History by John Beloff

The opposite is the case with John Beloff's *Parapsychology: A Concise History*.² Beloff, well known in the field mainly for his conceptual contributions and for his position as the editor of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, presents in this work a well-written account of parapsychology's historical development.

After an initial prologue that focuses on magic and romanticism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Beloff divides his subject matter into chapters that cover mesmerism, spiritualism, and later developments up to recent times.

According to Beloff, the importance of mesmerism for parapsychology lies mainly in "the activities associated with certain gifted individuals who, in the somnambulistic state, displayed a capacity for extrasensory perception" (p. 17). To illustrate this point, he discusses such gifted subjects as Victor Race, Emma L., and Alexis and Adolphe Didier. He also gives attention to researchers, including such well-known names as the Marquis de Puységur, Alexandre Bertrand, J. P. Deleuze, and John Elliotson. Beloff comments that the "mesmerists were sadly mistaken in adhering" to the concept "of a mysterious energy or fluid" (p. 36) as defended by Mesmer and by many others. What Beloff does not seem to recognize is the impact of the mesmeric movement on the development of an important tradition concerning the concepts of force that permeate psychical research, especially in continental Europe during the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth (Montandon, 1927). Mesmerism did not originate this concept, but it represented a modern codification of it and publicized the idea, one that was present in the early nineteenth-century literature of spiritualism and psychical research reviewed by Podmore (1902). The concept was a prominent one in later theoretical speculations and researches on physical phenomena such as those done by Joseph Maxwell, Enrico Morselli, Julian Ochorowicz, Albert de Rochas, and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing.

Beloff's discussion of spiritualism follows familiar grounds in that it emphasizes the performances and studies of well-known mediums and researchers like D. D. Home and William Crookes. Beloff argues that spiritualism's influence on parapsychology is twofold: "First, it revived the age-old question of a life after death in an empirically testable form. Secondly, from the seance room there issued a steady stream of puzzling phenomena . . . which . . . cried out for impartial investigations" (p. 38). In other words, a good portion of the phenomena and concepts of

²*Parapsychology: A Concise History*. London: Athlone Press, 1993. Pp. i-xiv + 330. \$32.00 (hardback), \$11.95 (paperback). ISBN 0-485-12096-8.

psychical research were adopted from spiritualism, although there was a clear attempt to focus on more reliable research methods than those pursued by the average spiritualist. These are important considerations if we want to understand how the agendas of parapsychology have been constructed from a blend of such factors as religious and philosophical movements, among many other social forces.

Following spiritualism, Beloff discusses the "first fruits" of psychical research, the founding and early work of the SPR in London. He discusses such aspects of the Society as its personnel (e.g., Sidgwick, Myers), its research program (e.g., thought-transference), and its publications (e.g., the *Proceedings* of the Society and *Phantasms of the Living*). In addition, Beloff includes sections about thought-transference studies that illuminate the controversies of the times—fraud, for instance. A noteworthy omission is the failure to recognize the importance of the concept of the subliminal mind in the research and theoretical writings of many SPR members, mainly Myers and Gurney. But overall, this chapter is a good general introduction to a topic difficult to review in a few pages.

A chapter entitled "The Expansion of Psychical Research" covers the work of other organizations and individuals, especially in Europe. The trends of these times, roughly the 1900s to the 1920s, are "the spectacular nature of the phenomena in question, their dependence on particular gifted individuals, the exploratory or free-wheeling nature of the tests devised to study the phenomena and, finally, the recurrent difficulty of ever reaching an agreed conclusion even within the psychical research community" (p. 95). Some of the work described in this way was that conducted with physical mediums such as Eusapia Palladino (discussed in an appendix), Kathleen Goligher, Franek Kluski, Marthe Béraud, Rudi Schneider, and Margery. Beloff has been able to cover many of the important aspects of the careers of these mediums in a short space. His discussion of Margery, however, minimizes too much the role of fraud and collusion, as seen in the way the thumb print affair is discussed and in the omission of other negative details discovered by Tietze (1973).

In the following chapter, Beloff describes the "Rhine revolution." He acknowledges that there were early experiments before Rhine, and argues that two main factors account for the late systematic development of experimentation in the field. One was the lack of statistical procedures during the early stages of the field. Another was the "lack of an academic base without which the laborious systematic research that was needed was unlikely to be cultivated" (p. 126). This is closely related to the issue of parapsychology's professionalization and its departure from the previous and still existing amateur approach to the field. I would also argue that Rhine's approach flourished because experimental psychology itself had been going through a series of methodological developments

that involved such issues as changes in criteria of type of experimental subjects used in studies and in the use of data, that is, the combination of scores from a variety of individuals (Danzinger, 1990).

Beloff considers that Rhine's work was guided by three main objectives, none of which were achieved. One was the development of a progressive research program. The others were to gain academic status for the field and to demonstrate the general distribution of psychic abilities. Nonetheless, this work changed the field. Its experimental approach "established what henceforth became the dominant approach to the study of putatively paranormal abilities" (p. 150).

The last chapter of the book covers developments for the period approximately from the 1950s to the 1990s. There is a section on experimental parapsychology that has subsections about work conducted in different countries, free-response work such as the Maimonides dream studies, ganzfeld and remote-viewing studies, micro-PK studies, and some of the bio-PK experiments. There are also sections on modern gifted subjects like Nina Kulagina and Uri Geller, on survival-related work such as that conducted on near-death experiences and reincarnation, and a section on concepts and theories. In an epilogue, Beloff discusses his ideas about, and hopes for, the future of the field.

He certainly had to limit his coverage of the field in order to produce a concise history. This may explain omissions such as the discussions of theoretical concepts like "psychic" forces in European research and the subliminal mind in the SPR work. But even considering the constraints of space, the book is highly recommended for the clear and systematic presentation of its subject matter. I wish I had had it available for the last eight years or more when I have lectured and recommended readings to students on the history of parapsychology.

Nonetheless, I have some other minor disagreements with Beloff. He states that the first ganzfeld experiment was done by Honorton and Harper (p. 166) and that, compared with Nina Kulagina, the old physical mediums produced their phenomena with ease, with no apparent ill effects from physiological changes (p. 186). In fact, the use of the ganzfeld in parapsychology seems to have been one of those simultaneous developments that cannot be attributed to one individual in particular (Braud, 1982). It appears to me also that some of Kulagina's physiological changes during PK and her negative aftereffects are similar to those of Palladino and other physical mediums (Alvarado, 1978).

On a different topic, I would like to qualify Beloff's comments regarding the observation that "by common consent, the English and American researchers have been in the forefront" (p. xii). It is true that the Anglo-American communities have been in a position of leadership and that recent methodological developments have come mainly from

the United States. But the definition of *forefront* is not the same in all historical periods or for all areas of the field. For example, the late Brian Inglis (1984) has argued that Europeans, such as the French, were more advanced regarding physical mediumship than British researchers for the first two decades of this century. Also, the study of instrumental detection of "human radiations" was more common in Europe than in the Anglo-American world (Montandon, 1927). I find the theoretical work of European scholars Geley (1919/1920), Lebiedzinski (1924), and Mackenzie (1923), for instance, to be more stimulating in some areas than that prevalent in Britain and the United States for the same periods. In summary, it is important to consider the context of each time period and of each area of the field even if our present situation points toward different patterns.

An in-depth evaluation of this issue requires a more detailed examination of psychical research developments in specific countries, something that is not possible in general overviews such as Beloff's. We need books about individual non-English-language countries like the one about Italy written by Massimo Biondi.

Tavoli e Medium: Storia dello Spiritismo in Italia by Massimo Biondi

Biondi is one of Italy's new generations of parapsychologists. He has become known for his interest in spontaneous cases, as seen in his recent publications reanalyzing previously published poltergeist cases. His book *Tavoli e Medium: Storia dello Spiritismo in Italia* (Tables and Mediums: A History of Spiritism in Italy)³ starts with the development and spread of spiritism in Italy during the 1850s and 1860s, a topic which he discusses in his first two chapters. Although Biondi says little about the Italian mesmeric movement, he does not completely ignore the topic. He writes: "Mesmerism founded some schools of thought. . . . Its greatest exponents were divided regarding contrasting interpretations about the origin and nature of the mysterious 'fluid' with which the somnambulists were put to sleep. . . ." (p. 14; this, and other translations from the Italian, are mine). This fluidic tradition, mentioned before in my summary of Beloff's discussion of mesmerism, was used by some in Italy to explain psychic phenomena. Biondi discusses a case in point—that of physician Giuseppe Terzaghi, who in 1853 published a book about a motor power to explain table turning.

The spread of all these ideas and practices was influenced by factors such as the visit of the medium D. D. Home and the emergence of Allan

³*Tavoli e Medium: Storia dello Spiritismo in Italia*. Rome: Gremese Editore, 1988. Pp. 206, paperback. Illustrated. ISBN 88-7605-332-8.

Kardec's doctrine of spiritism in Italy. Biondi's discussion of the spread of Kardec's ideas supports Aizpúrua's assessment of the importance of Kardec's writings in Europe. Among other developments Biondi mentions is the founding of the influential journal *Annali dello Spiritismo* (1864), edited by Enrico Dalmazzo. In addition, Biondi discusses political and religious factors involved in the reception and spread of spiritism. He devotes a whole chapter to Catholicism and spiritism, including how a leading Catholic review, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, consistently attacked the topic, making it look like the latest folly of the times.

Biondi summarizes the work and other involvement in these affairs by a variety of figures. They include Giovanni Damiani, Ernesto Volpi, and Ercole Chiaia, all supporters of the authenticity of psychic phenomena and defenders of the spirit hypothesis, and skeptic Eugenio Torelli Viollier's attacks against the subject in the press. The positivistic and medical approach to the topic is represented by Cesare Lombroso, among others. In addition, considerable space is given to the career of a medium sponsored by Chiaia, the famous Eusapia Palladino. From the discussion it is clear that Palladino was of key importance for the development of Italian psychical research. Although Biondi discusses some familiar episodes of Palladino's career, such as Lombroso's involvement with the medium and his subsequent conversion, he also presents fascinating accounts and summaries of discussions about her by individuals unknown to many of us outside Italy. This includes physician Leonardo Bianchi's characterization of the medium as a hysteric, and journalist Roberto Bracco's description of her character and phenomena. Biondi shows that Palladino provided the opportunity in Italy to develop ideas about the nature of mediumship and the implementation of methodology involved in the scientific study of physical mediumship. An important episode in this regard is Biondi's discussion of the 1892 studies of Palladino at Milan that included Italians such as Giorgio Finzi and Giuseppe Gerosa, and foreigners such as Alexander Aksakov and Charles Richet. The implicit idea developed here by Biondi, and one that I have argued elsewhere (Alvarado, 1993), is that Palladino focused the attention and the imagination of researchers and others in a way that provided the necessary social context for the development of psychical research as a discipline.

In the last three chapters, Biondi discusses work conducted with other mediums and with spontaneous poltergeist occurrences. Some of the mediums were associated with physical effects—Augusto Politi and Linda Gazzera, for instance. Regarding researchers, there is brief mention of the work of Giovanni Battista Ermacora, Enrico Morselli, Cesare Lombroso, and the publishing and organizing of Angelo Marzorati, who was instrumental in the publishing and editing of the periodical *Luce e*

Ombra in 1901. Some pages are devoted to a figure whom Biondi describes as "a naturalist for spiritism," the influential and outspoken Ernesto Bozzano. Bozzano was known for his systematic literature reviews designed to defend, not only the reality of psychic phenomena, but also the reality of survival of death and of discarnate actions on the physical world. Bozzano "was convinced that there existed in all men an immaterial psychic component that was gifted with powers superior to the normal ones, related to the body for all of the duration of terrene life" (p. 167), but capable of surviving bodily death. He used a "naturalistic" method in which orders and classes of phenomena were said to exist, a perspective that has been discussed in further detail by Iannuzzo (1983).

Biondi's final evaluation of Italian psychical research is not a positive one. In his words: "With the end of the century the historical weight of the spiritist movement continued to attenuate. . . . If we except . . . the figure of Palladino . . . and Bozzano, . . . Italian spiritism and metaphysics were in a marginal position, in the extreme corner of the 'empire' formed by the French and English at the end of the 1930s and in the United States at that moment" (p. 198).

In Biondi's view, the work of Lombroso, Morselli, and Bozzano did not generate followers. Similarly, he sees William Mackenzie's work as remaining in the margins of Italian psychical research. Researchers in the 1930s and later are characterized as lacking a particular style or originality. They are seen as followers of foreign leads: "Murphy and Rhine, in America, Osty and Richet, in France" (p. 197).

While granting Biondi's main point, I think I may argue that Italian psychical research has not been as marginal as he presents it. To defend either position, we need a detailed study of the reception of Italian work inside and outside Italy. No one has conducted either, but I would argue that there are indications that some of the Italian work has been influential outside Italy. I have briefly argued this for Bozzano elsewhere (Alvarado, 1987). It seems to me that Lombroso and Ferdinando Cazzamalli have received much attention outside Italy, to judge from citations in a variety of works. Clearly there is need for more research devoted to aspects such as citation patterns of Italian research in the international community.

Biondi's book is an excellent overview of Italian developments in our field. For this reason, I wish he had included detailed bibliographical references for his citations and for the mention of a variety of events. The lack of such a resource has hindered me in obtaining more information about a variety of topics. In addition, I wish he had discussed some topics in more detail. This includes the Italian mesmeric and hypnosis literature on psychic phenomena (Leppo, 1968), as well as the ideas of mediumship expressed by Morselli in his *Psicologia e "Spiritismo"*

(1908), and Mackenzie's theoretical concepts and classification of psychic phenomena in his treatise *Metapsichica Moderna* (1923). But these are personal preferences that in no way detract from the emphases Biondi has given to his discussion of Italian psychical research.

Overall, these three books will be useful to those wanting to obtain a general perspective of the historical periods, phenomena, and personalities of parapsychology. Aizpúrua's book has several problems and lacks the insider's knowledge and better organization of Beloff's book. They also differ in that Aizpúrua clearly has spiritist leanings not shared by Beloff. Nonetheless, both are similar in that they are convinced of—or are favorably disposed to—the reality of most of the phenomena they write about. In contrast, Biondi's book is different from the other two, not only because it focuses on one country, but because it is more neutral toward the existence of psychic phenomena and because it pays attention to some of the social, cultural, and intellectual aspects of spiritism and psychical research in Italy.

Parapsychology is in need of more overview books like these. For example, much could be written about developments in Asian, European, and South American countries, and it could include studies of the life and work of particular researchers such as Canavesio in Argentina, Fukurai in Japan, and Geley in France. I hope that Biondi will extend his coverage of Italian developments up to recent times, including the work of individuals such as Cassoli, De Boni, and Servadio, among others. But we also need general histories of particular topics. They may include theoretical concepts such as the relationship between dissociative processes and psychic claims, and particular phenomena or claims such as mediumship. Regarding the latter, I hope that Beloff will expand some of the sections of his history about mental and physical mediumship in book-length form.

Increased knowledge and a better understanding of our history and our literature will help us to transcend our current emphasis on specialization and obtain more holistic and panoramic views of parapsychology by realizing the complexity, variety, and richness of its literature—one that goes beyond national boundaries and current concerns.

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