

Historians of Science Explore Psychological Research

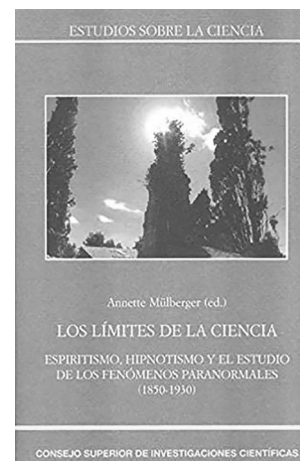
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A Review of
Los Límites de la Ciencia: Espiritismo, Hipnotismo y el Estudio de los Fenómenos Paranormales (1850-1930)
[The Limits of Science: Spiritism, Hypnotism, and the Study of Paranormal Phenomena],
edited by Annette Mülberger.

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In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the history of psychological research. Some of this work has not only documented the interaction of psychological research with other fields, but has done much to argue that attention to psychic phenomena assisted the development of the concept of the unconscious mind. Examples include Adam Crabtree's *From Mesmer to Freud* (1993) and Régine Plas's *Naissance d'une Science Humaine* (2000). The recent historiography on the topic, some of which touches on aspects other than the unconscious, includes papers published in 2012 in an issue of *History of the Human Sciences* entitled "Relations Between Psychological Research and Academic Psychology in Europe, the USA and Japan" (Young, 2012), in a special section of papers published in *Studies in History and Philosophy of the Biological and Biomedical Sciences* in 2014 entitled "Psychical Research in the History of Science and Medicine" (Sommers, 2014), and in various contributions to the "Classic Text" section of *History of Psychiatry* (e.g., Alvarado & Biondi, 2017). Furthermore, others have explored aspects of the rejection of psychological research by psychologists (e.g., Sommers, 2012), work that reminds us of the negative views of scientists about psychological research, as well as of the strategies that assist some groups in shaping both the content and identity of scientific fields via various forms of rejection, something generally known as boundary work.

In addition, some of this new work has expanded our scope beyond the usual Anglo-American



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contexts. We are seeing more historical research about developments in such varied countries as Italy (Alvarado & Biondi, 2017), France (Plas, 2000), Japan (Takasuna, 2012) and Germany (Wolfram, 2009).

The collection of articles reviewed here, published in Madrid, follows the above mentioned trends to some extent. That the topic of this specialized work was considered important in Spain is suggested by the fact that its publisher is a prominent institution in Spain, the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (Superior Council of Scientific Research; referred to in English as the National Research Council). This is the largest Spanish government institution dedicated to the development and promotion of scientific and technological developments.

Los Límites de la Ciencia: Espiritismo, Hipnotismo y el Estudio de los Fenómenos Paranormales (1850–1930) [The Limits of Science: Spiritism, Hypnotism, and the Study of Paranormal Phenomena (1850–1930)] is edited by Annette Mülberger, a historian of psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, who, in addition to psychical research, has conducted work on the history of mental testing in Spain. She states that the purpose of this work, published in Spanish, and with much information about developments in Spain, is to obtain a “greater knowledge and a better understanding of the intentions and beliefs defended in a different time period as ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ by some groups of people” (p. 17). The point here is not to approve nor condemn psychic studies and beliefs, but to attempt to understand their historical context, and the motivations of the individuals involved.

Summarizing her approach, and that of those mentioned in the first paragraph of this review, Mülberger states that new perspectives in the history of science have allowed for more flexible views about what is scientific, and what is valid knowledge. The work discussed, she states, shows various conceptual frameworks and relationship to social and political issues.

After an introduction by the editor, the book is divided in three sections. The first one, “From Spiritism to Parapsychology,” has three chapters written by Mülberger about the beginnings of Spiritism, its arrival to Spain, and research into psychic phenomena. The chapters present a good introduction to the topic, including the obligatory references to the Fox Sisters, and other mediums such as D.D. Home, not to mention the contributions of individuals such as Allan Kardec. Interestingly, much attention is given to Kardec, who was very influential in Spain. Like other writers in different contexts, Mülberger sees Spiritism as providing empirical facts that take the place of faith about spiritual truths, what she refers to as the “democratization of the epistemological power conferred to each communication with the beyond” (p. 53). In addition, she writes that Kardec “liberated Christians from the yoke of hell, enlarging at the same time the vital experience of people beyond the limits of organic life on planet Earth (pp. 52–53).

In the chapter about Spain we are introduced to several figures that are little known in the English speaking world. This includes philosopher Manuel Sanz y Benito, Viscount Antonio de Torres Solanot y Casas, and writer Amalia Domingo Soler, who did much to popularize, defend and organize Spiritism in Spain. An interesting example was Domingo Soler’s *El Espiritismo Refutando los Errores del Catolicismo Romano* (1880), mainly a defense from religious attacks. This writer stated that the phenomena produced by spirits followed natural laws, and that many critiques showed ignorance about the topic. She emphasized that the acceptance of the manifestations of spirits did not imply that the movement

considered everything described as marvelous, or tried to confirm it, nor “that it is the defender of all dreamers, of all utopias, of all systematic eccentricities, of all the romances and miraculous legends. It is necessary to know it little to consider it so” (Domingo Soler, 1880, p. 12).

The third chapter about research includes table turning, William Crookes, some of the early work of members of the Society for Psychical Research, the ideas of Frederic W.H. Myers and Pierre Janet about mediumship, studies of medium Eusapia Palladino, work conducted in France by Charles Richet and others, and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing’s materialization research. The chapter is a good summary of a great amount of research and theory. I assume that the reason that some things are not mentioned is to keep the chapter short. For example, in the section about Myers and Janet, how Janet was influenced by Myers was not mentioned. In his book *L’Automatisme Psychologique*, Janet (1889) discussed dissociation and argued that this mental process was important in mediumship. He cited Myers repeatedly to support his points with cases and specific manifestation drawn from Myers’s articles (Janet, 1889, pp. 78, 122, 393, 394, 402, 405). Janet actually wrote that Myers was “the author who has contributed the most to develop the scientific study of spiritistic phenomena” (Janet, 1889, p. 403).

This episode is important because it not only illustrates the influence of psychical research on psychology, but also presents an example of selective influence. In this case Janet, as was the case as well with Alfred Binet (1892), admitted the value of some of Myers’s observations (summarized here, Myers, 1903), but not his beliefs in telepathy or the supernatural in general. So while some of Myers’s observations regarding the subliminal self were accepted to support the existence of unconscious processes, they were stripped of the full context of Myers’s ideas in which supernatural meant “a faculty or phenomenon which goes beyond the level of ordinary experience, in the direction of evolution, or as pertaining to a transcendental world” (Myers, 1903, Vol. 1, p. xxii).

The second section of the book is “The Practice of Mediumship, Hypnosis, and Clairvoyance in Spain.” Its first chapter, “‘To Chase Away Spirits:’ The Scientific Study of *Mediumship*,” is by Andrea Graus. She argues that during the late Nineteenth-Century various scientists appropriated mediumship by separating it from spirit agency. Mediums were considered the “producing agent” of phenomena, something that led to a new view of the medium as an experimental subject (although it should be kept in mind that living agency was discussed as well before the period emphasized by Graus; see Alvarado, Nahm, & Sommer, 2012). This interest involved the “hope of finding extraordinary latent faculties in man” (p. 138), and the hope that mediumship would serve as a lesson for science in general, and for psychology in particular. Graus briefly mentions the interest in this perspective in Spain among such physicians as Víctor Melcior i Farré, Manuel Otero Acevedo (who eventually accepted the possibility of discarnate agency), and astronomer Josep Comas i Solà.

As I have argued before (Alvarado, 2014), discussions of the powers of the living medium were frequent in international psychical research circles. The writings of Théodore Flournoy, Charles Richet, Enrico Morselli, Frank Podmore, and Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich, among many others, are evidence of this. But there were others who defended discarnate agency (e.g., Oliver J. Lodge), and who changed their position from living to discarnate agency (e.g., Richard Hodgson). All of this work, as Graus said about Spain, indicated to most of the international community of psychical researchers that mediumship had to be accounted for by more than fraud, dissociation and other conventional explanations.

In the next chapter the focus changes in a paper by Ángel González de Pablo about hypnosis in Spain, “Consolidate, Colonize, Exclude: Strategies of Legitimation of Medical Hypnosis.” The point of the article is to discuss the boundary work to obtain “epistemic identity for a branch of science (here, hypnosis) and epistemic authority over her by the specialists (here, physicians hypnotists), that become in this way capable of impeding anyone else to intrude in their field” (p. 164). The devices of social control discussed by the author are consolidation (integration into medical practice in terms of expertise in theory, techniques, and therapeutic applications), colonization (non-medical applications of hypnosis, such as those in judicial and educational contexts), and exclusion (or the expulsion of some topics).

The strategy of expulsion, or rejection, was mainly used against what some perceived to be illegitimate applications of hypnosis, including those related to Spiritism and metapsychics. “Its purpose,” writes González de Pablo, “consisted in ‘cleaning up’ hypnosis, that is, to purge it of any type of ‘impurity’ that casted a shadow over its scientific validity” (p. 183) so as to keep out what was perceived to be undesirable from medicine and from other areas of knowledge.

In fact, psychic phenomena were frequently discussed in the Nineteenth-Century literature of hypnosis, the period emphasized by the author of this chapter. Some individuals involved during this period in the use of hypnosis to produce psychic phenomena were Émile Boirac, Albert de Rochas, Paul Joire, Ambroise August Liébeault, Jules Bernard Luys, Julian Ochorowicz, and Charles Richet, not to mention the work of Pierre Janet and others regarding the telepathic induction of trance (for an overview, see Crabtree, 1993). Psychic phenomena were included in various hypnosis textbooks, including some authored by skeptical authors. An example of the latter was George Gilles de la Tourette (1889), who in *L’Hypnotisme et les États Analogues au Point de Vue Médico-Légal*, stated he did not believe in the transmission of thought because, to date, there had been no controlled demonstrations of the phenomenon. González de Pablo discusses Spanish physicians, some of who denied, while others defended, the reality of thought-transference in hypnosis. One case in point illustrating the latter was Abdón Sánchez Herrero.

The last chapter in this section, “The Practice of Metapsychics: A Marquis Investigating Clairvoyance,” is authored by Mónica Balltandre. This is a study of clairvoyance experiments conducted by the Marquis of Santa Cara (Joaquín José Javier Argamasilla de La Cerda y Bayona). In his book *Un Tanteo en el Misterio*, Santa Cara (n.d.) reported clairvoyance experiments that he thought enlarged psychology by proving that knowledge could be acquired by human beings beyond their senses. He wrote that metapsychics had shown the existence of levels of thought which indicated the “antecedence of a dynamic spiritual principle as a permanent root of the Individual and an unchanging axis of the evolutionary process of the being” (Santa Cara, n.d., p. 270). Balltandre’s chapter is a case study of psychic investigations drawing on the concepts of the unconscious mind, physical radiation, and spirituality. As stated by Balltandre:

Santa Cara thought that the final nature both of beings and physical reality was a spiritual one . . . [In his view] the physics studies of his time showed that the world was spiritual. He construed that the conception of matter was becoming spiritualized thanks to the new scientific theories, which explained it by means of energy and radioactivity (pp. 223–224).

The third part of the book, "Foresight and Spiritism in Europe and Russia," expands on the previous emphasis on the Spanish context. It includes two chapters translated from French and English. The first, authored by Nicole Edelman, is "Foresight in Occidental Europe (1900–1939)," and explores psychic sensitivity in relation to various topics such as psychoanalysis, astrology, and the media. The second one, "Russian Spiritism: Science and Public Knowledge," is by Michel D. Gordin. He discusses controversy, and the participation of scientific and non-scientific voices in a commission formed in Russia to study mediumship, which involved the chemist Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeléyev.

The book ends with general reflections by Mülberger. In addition, it has two appendices, one with poetry by Amalia Domingo Soler, and another with a glossary of, mainly, psychic terms.

On occasion I felt the book needed more information about specific topics. For example, it is stated that physician Otero Acevedo was not a spiritist, but that he believed that the phenomena presented proof of survival of death (p. 140). This, I think, deserved more discussion. Similarly, a brief reference to psychic concepts of force (pp. 142, 207–208) could have received more discussion, maybe in the chapters of the first section of the book, to establish the rich conceptual tradition and long history of attempts to explain telepathy, as well as mediumship, in terms of human radiations of different sorts. Similarly, Myers's ideas of the subliminal self are mentioned throughout the book (pp. 108, 151, 205), but I feel that, considering their influence, they could have been discussed in more detail.

Overall, the essays presented here are a welcome addition to the modern historiography of the topics in question. It is particularly interesting to see how these studies have developed in Spain, and how there are so many similarities with developments from other countries in such varied things as the debates to banish the topic from science, the various theoretical emphases of psychical researchers in terms of the issue of discarnate agency, and the use of ideas from psychology (the unconscious) and physics (the ether, radiations of various sorts). One hopes that this volume, and other recent work (e.g., Wolfram, 2009), will help to bring an expansion of studies focusing on other countries and cultures, such as those in Asia and in Latin America.

It is also of interest to see the attitude of the historians writing in this anthology, who treat students of psychic phenomena without dismissal, as serious and dedicated explorers. This is evident in one of Mülberger's final comments. In her view the work of psychical researchers cannot be understood without considering

the intense enthusiasm they felt for the scientific, psychological and moral implications implied in the fact of discovering unknown intellectual capacities, occult physical forces or subliminal mental activity. If the physical sciences and technology could accomplish great achievements . . . why was it not possible to discover a new psychic dimension or unknown mental capacities? (p. 292).

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