

ILLUMINATIONS. THE UFO EXPERIENCE AS A PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL EVENT by Eric Ouellet.

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Eric Ouellet has a Ph.D. in sociology and is professor in the Department of Defence Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada, located in the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. He is the Parapsychological Association's liaison officer for Canada. In this book, he has gathered together papers published in parapsychological journals and several years' worth of blogging reflections on and discussions of the links between UFO phenomena and parapsychological research. Having heard about a UFO observation by a family member (not seeing anything himself) when he was a child (p. 5) and having a UFO experience himself in 2010 (pp. 6–7), the sources of his interest are obvious. But the perspective he adopts has never been discussed so extensively.

In his literature review, Ouellet points out (Chapter 2, pp. 25–32) that the boundary between parapsychology and ufology has already been crossed by several authors, such as Carl G. Jung, Allen F. Hynek, Jacques Vallée, Bertrand Méheust, Pierre Viéroudy (aka Pierre Berthault), John Keel, Jerome Clark, Loren Coleman, David Scott Rogo, Jenny Randles, and Berthold Schwartz. The chapter is very interesting but far from exhaustive. Several authors from France that he does not mention have also contributed to this topic: The physician François Favre (1973, 1996) developed Jung's comparison between UFO and ectoplasm; the physicist René Hardy created a research group on paradynamics at the Institut Métapsychique International, and he gathered information on UFO and macro-PK phenomena such as levitation (Evrard, 2010); the chemist Michel Granger (2010) discussed in several articles application of the psi hypothesis to UFOs. Using a different approach, the sociologist Pierre Lagrange (2009) compared, in his doctoral thesis, the sociology of the parasciences with that of ufology, parapsychology, and cryptozoology as main examples.

Thinking that the paranormal is actually the core of the UFO phenomenon (p. 161), Ouellet calls this approach the "parapsychological hypothesis" (Chapter 3, 33–50) because "it is essentially based on ideas, knowledge, models, and findings that are found in the field of scientific parapsychology" (p. 2). But he mainly uses as scientific support the model of pragmatic information (MPI) applied by Walter von Lucadou and Frauke Zahradnik (2004) to RSPK (i.e., poltergeist) phenomena. Paradoxically, this link is motivated by a skeptical stance toward UFO evidence: "Although UFOs are sometimes said to leave traces, no conclusive physical evidence is ever found" (p. 14). Ouellet is mainly interested in the framing of UFO experiences as a mixture of physical and psychological phenomena, of which the "most important material characteristic" (p. 14) is their elusive character.

The MPI application to RSPK phenomena has led to some predictions, but it has hardly been tested since its formulation. The 2004 article is mainly a phenomenological description of the development of RSPK cases in four phases: surprise, displacement, decline, and suppression. The descriptions are based on empirical observations but are mainly assertions based on a weak formalism; that is to say, there are still huge gaps between the mathematical and the literary language used to describe RSPK dynamics. Some aspects

of this article are still very equivocal, and it seems perilous to take it as representative of psi research (and even as representative of this model) which follows multiple lines of inquiry, some of which lead to relevant interpretations of experimental outcomes (Walach, von Lucadou, & Römer, 2014).

Ouellet, however, uses this model as an entry point, as it is based on a systems theory approach and integrates the social dynamics with the whole system under study. He then uses the term “social psi” proposed by parapsychologist Dean Radin (2006, p. 295) to label the collective effects and aftereffects of psi. Social psi also allows the possibility that many people are involved in a spontaneous event, but no particular individual is responsible for it, as is the case for some parapsychological and UFO events. It helps to be able to interpret situations with many witnesses without having to involve any nonhuman entities.

The other chapters are dedicated to the application of the parapsychological hypothesis to many UFO sightings, and especially UFO waves (increases in local UFO sighting reports over a certain period of time): the 1954 French UFO wave (pp. 48–49), the 1952 Washington D.C. UFO wave (Chapter 4, pp. 53–65), the Belgian UFO wave of 1989–1991 (Chapter 5, pp. 67–89), the Rendlesham UFO incident of 1980 (Chapter 6, pp. 91–105), the Canadian UFO wave of 1966–1967 (Chapter 7, pp. 109–132), and the Barney and Betty Hill story (Chapter 8, pp. 133–148).

As parapsychologists do in RSPK cases, Ouellet always attempts to identify the focal person(s), defined as “someone going through some sort of turmoil but who cannot express it for some reason except through psi effects” (p. 45). He has his own parameters for applying this definition to groups and social psi effects (pp. 46–47): (a) The observation system is social; (b) it has geographical proximity; (c) it has chronological proximity; (d) there is a “symbolic relationship” between the system and the events. But these criteria are so loosely defined that they can be applied to almost anything. Then Ouellet only has to find an event that creates social tension, even if it will be felt only many years later. He then uses a hermeneutical argument to link the social event with the anomalous event. Sometimes the argument seems relevant, sometimes less so, but the main problem is that this retrospective method is not falsifiable. The percentage of social events that fit these criteria is just too large to differentiate a synchronicity from a mere coincidence. For example, Ouellet argues that the 1954 French UFO wave, with sighting peaks on October 3 and October 15, occurred simultaneously with the formation of a small group of anticolonial insurgents in Algeria (*Front de Libération Nationale*), a development that was unknown to the French public in October and was not seen as threatening even after the terrorist attacks in November 1954. But Ouellet doesn’t need perfect timing; only “chronological proximity” is required. Finally, he concludes that an unconscious “collective premonition” was the source of the UFO wave (p. 49). This is not an isolated example: Many times Ouellet associates anomalous events with political or social events, which fly under the radar at the time of their occurrence but become parts of the historical record later. This “political sociology” of UFO experiences and alien encounters (Chapter 9, pp. 149–159) is not really convincing. The symbolic perspective, although it remains attractive, gives him too much freedom to approximate a scientific analysis. As he puts it in his conclusion (p. 162):

This approach frees us from the false choice of having to decide if the phenomenon is either subjective or objective, because it appears to actually be both at the same time. It also provides more flexibility in understanding the phenomenon because it allows for the subjective and the objective aspects to influence one another while existing in parallel. By removing this artificial barrier, this false either/or category, a wider perspective can be developed to embrace the full complexity of the phenomenon.

Perhaps adding more constraints to the model and offering testable predictions would improve this methodology.

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