

HEATHER WOLFFRAM, *The Stepchildren of Science. Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c.1870–1939*. Amsterdam and New York: Ropodi, 2009. Pp. 342. ISBN 978-90-420-2728-2. £70.00 (hardback).

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The relationship between science and its ‘occult’ siblings is a strange thing. On the one hand, we find that surprisingly many scientific icons, ranging from Galton, the Curies and Einstein to Gödel, Heisenberg and Pauli, entertained a more than just fleeting interest in ‘things that go bump in the night’. While some took telepathy and psychokinesis seriously at least as hypothetical scientific anomalies worth investigating, others unflinchingly (though rarely publicly) embraced them as facts of nature. On the other hand, we find much more visible and rather passionate proclamations

to the contrary by other, also eminent, intellectual figures, and particularly popularizers of science, such as Tyndall, Carpenter and Huxley or, today, Dawkins, preaching the robust boundaries between science and anything else less worthy of our worship. The ongoing polarization of science and its popular anti-figures, and seemingly irreconcilable positions of philosophers of science around the demarcation of parapsychology, are no less apt to make you scratch your head over the question of authority in science than over the ontological status of the debated phenomena themselves.

To appreciate some of these difficulties, and to gain insights into processes by which legitimacy claims of unorthodox research questions have been negotiated over time, it can be exceedingly instructive to study historical protagonists that have put their academic credentials at stake to find out what, if anything, is behind the smoke. Focusing on the doyen of early twentieth-century German parapsychology, the Munich physician Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *The Stepchildren of Science* provides an admirably balanced account of attempts by parapsychologists in imperial and interwar Germany to lend scientific credibility to their controversial investigations. Although the issue of scientific methodology is touched upon, readers interested in the actual science the deviant researchers based their claims upon will miss detailed accounts of methods and apparatuses devised and used by Schrenck-Notzing, Fritz Grunewald and others. The considerable merits of Wolfram's study, employing the methodological tools of intellectual and cultural history, and highlighting place and conflict as objects of analysis, lie elsewhere.

*The Stepchildren of Science* is the first historical monograph on psychical research that explicitly frames historical disputes around the controversial discipline in terms of Gierzynean boundary-work. Rather than limiting her analysis to the way scientific and medical orthodoxy protected professional and epistemological territories, Wolfram also discusses boundary-work conducted by the deviant scientists themselves. For instance, she shows how Schrenck-Notzing and others actively distanced their work from spiritualism and other belief systems by stressing the empirical character of their investigations, and—like their own critics—by publicly warning of perceived dangers of occultism for modern culture and civilization. By applying a boundary-work perspective to multiple fronts, and by discussing epistemological and political conflicts among parapsychologists, Wolfram's study results in a finer-grained picture of the controversial discipline in Germany than it has hitherto been possible to produce.

By studying aspects of the empirical practice of parapsychology in the laboratory and surrounding epistemological disputes in the courtroom, Wolfram efficiently utilizes place as one of two main foci of her analysis. Regarding the second analytical angle, conflict, the account might have been more penetrating. When it is stated, for instance, that both parapsychologists and their opponents 'attempted to portray their adversaries as intellectually or morally inferior, pointing to the overwhelming evidence for their position and against that of their opponents' (p. 247), such a diplomatic framing of the heated controversies, abstaining from scrutinizing these claims on both sides, doubtlessly facilitates a refreshing non-polarizing perspective yielding novel insights not available otherwise. However, while laudably maintaining a professional distance from parapsychology, the critical thrust of the book is somewhat asymmetrical. Criticism of the critics is almost absent, and unlike sociological studies of modern parapsychology mentioned in the introduction, *Stepchildren* steers clear of identifying problematic strategies employed by influential debunkers, which, if applied to orthodox fields of research, would have catapulted the critics out of their jobs.

In fact, the aggressive and evangelistic polemics of self-styled guardians of rationality, such as the Berlin physician Albert Moll (Schrenck-Notzing's former comrade-in-arms in hypnotism and sexology), the Potsdam district court director Albert Hellwig, and the young Munich psychiatrist Mathilde Kemnitz, suggest that what was at stake was more than just intellectual disagreement or interests of professionalization. A point that would have merited some discussion was the very

readiness with which claims by these extremists were promulgated through both popular and academic channels of information in Germany and elsewhere, thus crafting a problematic standard view of parapsychology that still underlies its historiography. Hitherto, historians have been remarkably uncritical of breathtakingly superficial characterizations of ‘the’ parapsychologists (in and outside Germany) and other deviant scientists as hapless victims of a will to believe, or equally sweeping claims regarding diverse beliefs in ‘the occult’ as a necessary condition for the emergence of Nazism. Countering such simplistic explanations, *Stepchildren* offers striking evidence for a considerable epistemological pluralism within interwar German parapsychology and, complementing Corinna Treitel’s *A Science for the Soul* (2004), provides further insights into the Nazis’ ambivalent stance towards it. However, neither study addresses the important question why it was possible for the historiography of parapsychology to be dominated by profoundly problematic generalizations in the first place.

The latter minor and rather unspecific concern aside, the study might unwittingly suffer from a questionable assumption underlying its analytical structure. According to *Stepchildren*, Schrenck-Notzing and other German parapsychologists had largely viewed and attempted to establish their discipline as an actual border science, alongside but separate from psychology (as the prefix ‘para-’ suggests), from the very start. A look at activities up to about 1910, particularly against a wider international backdrop, renders this presumption problematic, for the involvement of English, French and German psychical researchers in the early International Congresses of Psychology; their contributions of methodological, conceptual and empirical innovations to nascent psychology; and especially attempts by the founder of American psychology, William James, to accommodate psychical research into the fledgling science, demand qualification of the assumption that early German psychical researchers never intended their field to become part of academic psychology. Similarly, some explanation is needed of why early German psychical research societies in Munich and Berlin named themselves *psychologische Gesellschaften* (particularly since the term *Parapsychologie* – as Wolfram shows – had been around since the late 1880s but became widely adopted in the late 1920s only), at a time when psychology was just obtaining a more or less robust academic foothold.

However, this caveat notwithstanding, I recommend *The Stepchildren of Science* as indispensable for a differentiated historical comprehension of scientific investigations of the ‘occult’ as a cultural phenomenon. Any future historical account of imperial psychical research and interwar parapsychology in Germany will have to respond to Wolfram’s important findings highlighting the epistemic pluralism inherent in the controversial disciplines.

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