Parapsychology on the Couch: The Psychology of Occult Belief in Germany

Introduction

In the wake of the 1925 Rudloff–Moll trial, during which the struggle between parapsychologists and their critics to mould the scientific and public responses to occultism had centred on issues of expertise and authority, Albert Hellwig reflected that the proceedings had done little to clarify the question of the reality of occult phenomena, simply casting light on the psychology of certain occult researchers.\(^1\) The insistence of the Berlin occultists, Dr Schröder, Dr Schwab and Dr Sünner, for example, on the veracity of Frau Vollhardt’s apports, in spite of compelling evidence to the contrary, served only to convince their adversaries of the pathology of their thought processes as they concerned occult phenomena. Hellwig’s observation of the parapsychological psyche, as manifested during this trial, persuaded him of the necessity of a psychological study not only of occult research, as a means of determining the multiple sources of sensory and intellectual error within this field, but also of occult researchers, both individually and in the collective. He wrote:

All of us who have been critically engaged with occult problems will have experienced that the main difficulty therein lies in that here is a totally different measure than in scientific investigation of other types, everything stands or falls with trust in the personality of the experimenter. Experience shows unfortunately only too often, that even men, from whom one perhaps should not expect it, make bad mistakes without the slightest awareness, as soon as it comes to observation or experiments of an occult kind. The subjective conviction of a researcher stands not seldom in inverse relation to the reliability of their objective principles. It is therefore one of the most important tasks of critical occultism to establish the necessary basis for a psychology of occult research in general and a psychology of the individual occult researchers in particular.\(^2\)

Despite Hellwig’s claims that such psychological assessments need not deteriorate into personal attacks, their purpose being to help evaluate
parapsychologists’ work, the emergence of a psychology of occult belief in Germany served primarily to pathologise and discredit parapsychology and its practitioners.

This chapter attempts to track the emergence of a psychology of occult belief in the German context during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that the growing emphasis placed on the psychological preconditions for occult belief by academic psychologists represented an attempt to discredit a group that threatened the credibility of their new science. It contends, furthermore, that the failure of psychologists to adequately explain belief in all forms of paranormal phenomena in terms of either fraud or natural causes led to the development of three distinct, but complementary approaches to this problem. The first focused on the intellectual and sensory errors responsible for occult convictions, borrowing heavily from psycho-physics to develop a new sub-discipline known as the psychology of deception and belief. The second utilised the mass psychology of Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931) in order to explain, on the one hand, the positive testimony for the paranormal offered by a number of Germany’s most respected cultural and intellectual luminaries and, on the other, the apparently contagious nature of occult belief. The third was a psychoanalytic approach, often used in conjunction with the second, which focused on deep-seated complexes and neurotic predispositions as a means of explaining both parapsychologists’ stubborn belief in the occult and their persuasive power over others. Intended to bolster their jurisdictional claims, psychologists’ transformation of psychical researchers and parapsychologists from intellectual rivals into objects of psychological inquiry, served ultimately to pathologise occult belief, making literal the pathology metaphor. Not to be outdone, however, parapsychologists performed their own analyses, diagnosing their opponents with a pathological inability to acknowledge the occult. Unable to come to grips with the paranormal on phenomenological terms, this chapter argues, both of these groups chose to combat their opponents’ competing knowledge claims with accusations of mental instability.

Psychological societies and experimental psychology

In Germany, the emergence of a psychology of occult belief was intimately connected with the efforts of experimental psychologists to distinguish their nascent science from the study of the paranormal. During the late nineteenth century, as we have seen, there appeared in German cities, including Berlin, Munich and Leipzig, a number of psychological societies dedicated to the experimental study of occult phenomena. These groups, which sought to combat a materialistic view of the mind through an exploration of hypnosis and thought-transference, routinely referred to their