

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Parapsychology in France after May 1968: A History of GERP

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Abstract—The Group for the Study and Research of Parapsychology (GERP) (*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherche en Parapsychologie*) was originally composed of psychology undergraduates who, in the context of the period after May 1968, tried to bring into the curriculum a course of parapsychology at the University of Paris X Nanterre. Their failure transformed the group into an association of young researchers with much solidarity, criticizing foreign models and developing a theory-oriented parapsychological cross-disciplinary research in the 1970s and 1980s. The works of François Favre and Pierre Janin, two influential members of GERP, are reviewed as examples. A short presentation is offered of some of their theories. GERP although dormant has not been dissolved, thus this history reveals a recent but underestimated period of French parapsychology and the lineaments of an original research to be deepened.

Keywords: history of French parapsychology—*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches en Parapsychologie* (GERP)—May 1968—theoretical parapsychology—sociology of science—fantastic realism

Parapsychology at the University

In the history of France during the twentieth century, May 1968 stands as the most important social movement. Launched by a revolt of Parisian students, the crisis was at once cultural, social, and political. We can also consider this moment as a caesura in the history of French parapsychology. During the late 1960s, the old and once-esteemed psychical research tradition of the Institut Métapsychique International (IMI), founded and “recognized for public interest” by the French state in 1919, was in the midst of a long period of decline and lacked the necessary funds to revive its activities in response to the interest of a younger generation of scholars. For its part, the literary movement incorporating occult studies named “fantastic realism”, which had been launched by the publication of *Le Matin des Magiciens* (Pauwels & Bergier, 1960) and

sustained in the journal *Planète*, generally remained ambivalent with regard to the *événements* of May and provided little guidance to students interested in the study of the paranormal (Gutierrez, 1998). The fantastic realism movement was highly influential in the way it presented occult but also parascientific subjects to a popular audience. It encouraged many cultural breakthroughs through a change in spiritual and intellectual awareness, preparing in some ways the ideas of the student movement and especially openness to the paranormal. But the disappearance of *Planète* in 1968 effectively signaled the end of the movement.

Given the lack of an established institutional base for the study of parapsychology, a new generation of researchers would take it upon themselves to create the Group for the Study and Research of Parapsychology (*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches en Parapsychologie*, or GERP). The anarchic nature of the organization was well-adapted to the political ideas of the student movement, which seemed to have a naturally given entree to the paranormal and the parapsychological in accordance with the sociological pattern of the "Trickster", put into evidence by Hansen (2001): A chaotic structure in a revolutionary context seems to have more affinity for becoming interested in scientific margins.

The original impetus for the organization had come from psychology undergraduates who, intrigued by the work of the American researcher J. B. Rhine, were quietly encouraged in their interests by Rémy Chauvin, professor of animal behavior at the University of Paris V. The students found more public support for their interest in parapsychology via a national television program featuring the German researcher Hans Bender, from whom they learned more about the current laboratory efforts in parapsychology taking place in Germany. Inspired by the German example, about twenty students at the University of Paris X (Nanterre) created an informal association, called the Group for the Study and Research of Metapsychics (GERM)¹.

Enthusiasm within the two groups was high and goals ambitious. The students' first step was to attempt to bring parapsychology into the curriculum as a subdiscipline of psychology by petitioning their professors to create an officially accredited course. These activists, some still in their teens, were ignorant of the administrative challenges they faced. At the end of more than two years of effort, many would leave the organization demoralized and resentful.

Resistance among the faculty was high. Some professors, influenced by the skeptical literature on parapsychology, considered the field a pseudoscience. Others thought that its introduction into the curriculum would compromise the entire department. A few teachers were, however, curious enough to consent to organizing a series of meetings to consider the question further.

On January 25, 1971, the physicist Henri Marcotte gathered 400 students in one such meeting, but his demonstration, which involved a collective telepathy

experiment, rapidly turned in a farce (personal communication from Favre, June 2007). Since they came to discover scientific parapsychology, the attendees were not ready to proceed directly to personal practice. The lack of distance between Marcotte and the phenomenon of telepathy had discredited his discourse on the objectivity and scientificity of parapsychology. The second opportunity would come in May, with the intervention of Hans Bender, but the audience in this instance was much smaller. Only ten professors out of 54 attended his presentation. Through his professionalism and his humanity, Bender embodied the model researcher in the eyes of the students. Regardless, following the two events, university administrators judged in a meeting in October 1971 that there would be no course in parapsychology. They did concede, however, to provide on a temporary basis a small room for the realization of experiments and to sponsor another public talk on parapsychology, this time by Rémy Chauvin.

The debate among the faculty remained contentious, as reported by the disappointed students in *Revue Métapsychique* (GERP, 1971–1972). According to them, some teachers claimed they had collaborated with Rhine and could now pronounce parapsychology dead because Rhine himself had refuted in print all of his earlier conclusions! Supported by professors Rhine, Musso, Bender, and Chauvin, the proposal drawn up by the students was sent personally to every professor and was generally ignored. Professors remained silent when students challenged them to personally review the experiments that they had conducted at the university on a regular basis since 1970. In addition to replications of Rhine's ESP research, the students had also succeeded in reproducing psi experiments with mice, which Chauvin and Mayer had published under the pseudonyms Duval and Montredon in the *Journal of Parapsychology* (Duval & Montredon, 1968a, 1968b), and for which they received the McDougall Award in 1970. Annoyed at the faculty's response, the students demanded a clear answer.

A small contingent of students traveled to Bender's lab at the Institute of Border Areas of Psychology and Mental Hygiene (IGPP) in Freiburg, Germany, and discovered that research in parapsychology was possible within the institutions of the academy. Inspired by the German example, GERM abandoned the antiquated term "*la métapsychique*," and adopted the more reputable term "parapsychology." As GERP, the organization was recognized as a legal association in July 1971. François Favre, who joined the group that year and soon became its leader, insisted that the vocation of "mental hygiene" (by which he meant something equivalent to the current clinical psychology of exceptional experiences) be directly registered in the statutes of the association as in the German model. According to this model, parapsychology was not reducible to a laboratory-based approach of quantifiable phenomena. The starting point remained the paranormal experiences reported by the population

and their analysis by the humanities. The parapsychologists had a sociological and clinical role to play in disseminating scientific information about these experiences, which could help those who suffered from them. This more human-centered approach, which highlighted the social role of parapsychology, corresponded more with the attitude of GERP researchers.

Through press accounts of these various challenges to the state and university, the association earned notoriety among French students. The question that remained was whether or not its research agenda could take place within the university. According to the report of GERP's members (GERP, 1971–1972:98–99), a petition signed by 183 psychology students (90% of those solicited) indicated that the student population was in favor of creating a one-credit course in parapsychology. However, the president of the administrative council “forgot” to bring with him to the meeting of April 26, 1972, the petition that the students had presented to him. The administration similarly “forgot” to mention this petition and its terms in the official report of the meeting. The efforts of the students were thwarted at each step by an administration that simply postponed the question. It was not until the board meeting of November 1972, after more than two years of student effort that the administration finally responded to their demands. Parapsychology, they concluded, interested no one and did not enter into the framework of the discipline of psychology. The rejection by the Nanterre administration led GERP members to take their demands elsewhere and, indeed, many of these members would be the initiators of elective courses in parapsychology at other French universities and in high schools.² In spite of these small gains, GERP suffered as a result of both its lack of strategic subtlety and the general decline of student idealism after 1968. In fact, only three members of the organization would survive this initial period. In their hands, GERP would move away from direct engagement with the university and focus on developing a theoretical framework for French parapsychology.

The Researchers

In this new phase of activity, GERP abandoned Rhine's experimental paradigm in favor of developing cross-disciplinary approaches to psi phenomena. Around François Favre, who had psychiatric training and chose to dedicate his life to this domain, generations of young researchers would gather, investigating various aspects of parapsychology. These included mental hygiene and psychoanalysis (Nicole Gibrat, Francis Danest, Pascal Le Maléfan, Christian Moreau, Pascale Catala, Johann Mathieu), physics (Pierre Janin, Christian Cabayé, and polytechnicians Michel Duneau, Hervé Gresse, and Georges Nicoulaud), philosophy of sciences (Pascal Michel, Marc Beigbeder), ethnology (Philippe Léna), biology (Guy Béney, Pascal Lemaire), and even

ufology (Pierre Viéroudy, Jacques Vallée, Bertrand Méheust). In the work of these scholars, parapsychology was reconceived as a field in which all scientific disciplines were deemed relevant and in which no single discipline would be sufficient. The approach was successful thanks to the great solidarity among group members, colleagues, and friends, and to the volunteer activities of individuals such as Gisèle Titeux and Janine Rousselier.

Two researchers were particularly active: Favre excelled in the cultural fields, and Janin in the natural sciences. Favre began by creating a historical account that reconstructed the genealogy of western parapsychology (Favre, 1975, 1976). After concluding this chronological account, he created a geographical analysis by compiling data from 450 surveys of world beliefs (Favre, 1988). He also became an expert on ectoplasm materialization studies (Favre, 1973), which he described in a complementarist perspective as a “materialized dream”.³ He then made a link between UFO and psi apparitions (Favre, 1996), at the origin of a close debate of parapsychologists and ufologists (such as Vallée, Viéroudy, and Méheust). He was also a specialist on onirism, i.e. issues related to dream functioning (Favre, 1998). As a prolific theorist, Favre elaborated a model, regrettably overlooked in other fields, that attempted to resolve by a complementarist logic the paradoxes of psi with regard to time (Favre, 1982), and also psychosomatic phenomena (Favre, 1995). He challenged all those who claimed the title of “parapsychologist” to engage in debate, but the complexity of his theoretical model and the aggressive nature of his exchanges discouraged many of his potential interlocutors.⁴ Favre would, in many ways, remain a “sixty-eighter” in the insistent nature of his idealism.

Pierre Janin was a brilliant engineer and also a holder of a degree in philosophy when he came to Professor Rémy Chauvin’s animal behavior laboratory in 1969 to study parapsychology. He performed PK experiments with larvae which he subsequently presented to Rhine in the summer of 1969.⁵ He dedicated eight hours per day to parapsychology, treating it as his profession even though he was not paid. This commitment allowed him to become an expert in the parapsychological literature and to acquire an international reputation. Janin’s spirit of dedication and sacrifice resembled those of the activists of 1968, with parapsychology serving as another way of changing the world, in this case at the metaphysical level. This motivation is clear in Janin’s major theoretical article entitled “New Perspectives on the Relations between the Psyche and the Cosmos” (Janin, 1973). Sent to Helmut Schmidt, this text would inspire the first experiments on retro-PK. This article contained the germ of Janin’s entire research agenda—to approach randomness as a psychophysical phenomena, i.e. that it is not absurd but meaningful physical coincidences under the mental influence of a living individual or group (the so-called “neo-animistic theory” with regard to the place of mind in nature); and to

test traditional mantics (based on interpretation of chaotic forms) in comparison with modern diagnostic methods.

The first part of this program was pursued in retro-PK experiments sponsored by the Parapsychology Foundation in New York City (Janin, 1976). These were less sophisticated and convincing than those of Schmidt, but were important in developing the *tychoscope*, a randomly moving robot designed to test if PK was like a subjective relationship with an object, as if both the subject and the object could unite in a dyad (Janin, 1977). The first copy was conceived in June, 1975, and 24 copies were available in 1981. For this project, Janin again benefited from a grant from the Parapsychology Foundation, but also from other important financial resources, most notably the famous French industrialist Ambroise Roux. These experiments on “the nature of randomness” didn’t confirm Janin’s neo-animistic conceptions (1975), but his device would play a crucial part in René Péoc’h’s experiments (1986) in which the random movements of the tychoscope were “imprinted” by baby chicks. Janin would also conduct, with less support from his colleagues, experiments designed to extend the ideas of C. G. Jung by comparing the traditional mantic of astrology with psychiatric diagnosis (Janin, 1976). Janin was the only member of GERP⁶ who was this active in experimentation, which he would justify as a necessary complement to the theoretical approaches emphasized by his fellows (Janin, 1979).

The general conviction of GERP, however, was that parapsychologists had already produced too much data, and that it was now a question of analyzing, synthesizing, and explaining them in a critical way. Many felt that it was useless to repeat the same proof-oriented psi experiments over and over again. If no scientific consensus had emerged after decades of paranormal research, thousands of supplementary experiments with Zener cards were unlikely to contribute to one in the present. As for the experiments on the conditions of the occurrence of psi, they were attributed to experimenter effects and only confirmed the theoretical presuppositions or the inner worldview of the experimenter.

Some Theoretical Postulates

In spite of several attempts, the members of GERP failed to reach a theoretical consensus on what psi was (Michel, Favre, Janin, Beney, & Hemmerlin, 1986). Nevertheless, following fruitful debates on all the facets of psi phenomena, some general propositions were offered. These propositions were diffused in journals to the wide or restricted public,⁷ by numerous courses and lectures in Paris, by several conferences,⁸ and by the Federation of Parapsychological and Psychotronic Research Groups (Fédération des Organismes de Recherche en Parapsychologie et Psychotronique, FOREPP). The latter group was founded

in 1975 and intellectually dominated by GERP even though its aim was to encourage the activities of provincial groups. FOREPP tried in particular to bring practitioners of the paranormal (psychics, healers, dowsers, etc.) into a dialogue with scientists. The conflict between research and commercial activity, however, revealed itself to be insoluble. In spite of these efforts to publicize their ideas, GERP's theoretical constructs remained largely unknown to parapsychologists internationally. The refusal of the Rhinian experimental paradigm was upheld by the majority of the group's members in favor of cross-disciplinary approaches. The group's basic theoretical precepts included:

The experimenter effect is predominant: In any psi experiment, one cannot really distinguish the influences of the subject from those of the experimenter.

Psi phenomena are homogeneous: All psi phenomena can be encompassed by a single explanation.

ESP is auto-premonition (Favre, 1982): One can reduce all paranormal acquisition of information to the premonition of the feedback which will allow verification of this acquisition.

Every instance of PK is a retro-PK (Janin, 1973): Because quantum physics had shown that there are undetermined processes at the source of all physical events, PK could influence these processes without breaking thermodynamics laws, and then PK in the present can be reduced in theory to a PK in the past.

Synchronicity's model: Psi events cannot be described as causal transmissions of energy, but rather as "significant coincidences". For many years, several members of GERP followed guidelines drawn by Jung and Pauli, before trying to exceed them.

Psi implies a psychophysical complementarity: The psyche is irreducible to physics, and vice versa. Interpretations of psi phenomena only by physics or only by psychology are excluded from consideration. Numerous researchers lie nevertheless in this imbalance, becoming the propagators of physicalist myths of psi (Duneau, 1979, 1980). The complementarist approach of psi is supported by Stéphane Lupasco's non-Aristotelian logic of the contradictory, which goes beyond mind-matter dualism and does not deny parapsychological implications (cf. the last pages of Lupasco, 1979; and the thesis of his pupil and member of GERP, Beigbeder, 1977).

The challenges of proving psi in animals: Animal (or vegetal) psi cannot be distinguished from the psi phenomenon produced by human

experimenters. This theoretical principle would mark the opposition of GERP members against the empirical deductions of Rémy Chauvin and his pupil René Péoc'h. The French research tradition on animal or vegetal psi was criticized on this basis: Because we can never exclude a human PK following the conscious or unconscious motives of the experimenter, it is not fair to attach biological and materialist preconceptions on these data, suggesting that there are psi sources other than humans.

The anti-scientific aspects of parapsychology: Parapsychology is explicitly scientific in its methods, but psi itself is impervious to cumulative scientific investigation. Psi produces a subversion of scientific investigation by its elusiveness, i.e. its tendency not to be exactly reproducible in an identical manner. This can be understood as an anti-scientific property. One finds here similarities with the occultist Robert Amadou, who had already stirred up ill feeling in the French parapsychological community in the 1950s. Amadou (1954) had harshly criticized the old parapsychology that didn't use the rigorous methods of Rhine but finally explained paranormal phenomena by occult or mystical theories.

The mythogenic part of psi: Psi is a major generator of myths, which are latent but radical subversions of daily materialist references. It thus obliges one to stand back, like an anthropologist, with regard to conceptions of what is "paranormal". Like the diabolic, spiritualist, and extraterrestrial hypotheses in human cultures, the hypothesis of psi-gifted subjects (like supermen or mutants) extends the function of myth within a culture influenced by science.

Psi and finality in evolution: Psi suggests reintroducing the hypothesis of neo-Lamarckian process in biological evolution. One example presented by Favre (2004) involved statistics of the postwar population in which the net increase of male births was significant. Favre speculated that this demographic pattern was produced in response to the need to replace the male population lost to the war. This fact, known by all the sociologists, remained unexplained by biology and could, he argued, imply a psi process.

The ambivalence of sheep-goat in the same subject (Janin, 1973): A classical distinction is made in parapsychology between "sheep"—those who were confident about the reality of psi—and "goats"—for those who doubted its existence or its pertinence in the context of a test. But, for GERP's members, there are not on one side sheep and

on the other side goats: Every individual contains in himself his own sheep and his own goat. In this subjective contradiction, only one of the terms is consciously expressed (the psi wish), the other remains unexpressed but nevertheless effective, as “psi missing” shows.

Historical aspect of psi: There are no psi effects but only psi events (“psiphanies”), at the crossroads of history and science. Therefore, the historical approach has great importance in parapsychology, serving as it does as a means of struggling against the naive progressivism of parapsychologists who believe themselves to be looking forward while ignoring the controversies of the past.

Common and rare psi: According to François Favre, some common psychic processes work as “common” psi: memory, rational forecast, intentionality, etc. “*Make a remote movement of a table or a voluntarily movement of your own hand, it is exactly the same scientific issue,*” said Gasparin (1854/1888:125–126). It is thus necessary to consider the so-called paranormal phenomena as extremities of a continuum of process at work everywhere. “Paranormal” events are just *rare* events which reveal, on a large scale, our ignorance of the mechanism of some fundamental but *frequent* phenomena (mind–body relationship, intentionality, the nature of time and space, etc.). In this sense, Favre (2002) reinterpreted Benjamin Libet’s experiments on the cerebral effect of decisionmaking as the reproducible proof of common retro-PK.

These propositions while innovative for this period also have some recognizable sources. There is notably C. G. Jung’s work, then marginalized by the French psychoanalysts, but rehabilitated thanks to the seminal work of Henri Ellenberger (1970). More important still is the scientific essayist René Sudre (lived 1880–1968) (Evrard, 2009), whose work sought to reconcile the subjective and objective aspects of the metapsychics. The extension of psi investigation in a general study of nature was suggested by his book *The New Enigma of the Universe* (Sudre, 1943), in which Sudre brilliantly discusses the biggest scientific questions of the twentieth century. His encyclopedic discussion brings the reader to the following conclusion: that in every discipline enigmas persist that constitute ruptures in the fabric of knowledge and through which metapsychical questions come rushing in. Sudre argued that the goal of the psychical researcher must be to look at these questions that psychical research shares in common with the other sciences and then to widen these points of contact to the benefit of scientific understanding in general. This is very much the direction that the cross-disciplinary and anti-establishment vocations of the GERP members went.

Epilogue

In spite of what our historical account might suggest, GERP still remains in existence. While family and professional concerns have led to a dispersal of its members, most continue to pursue their isolated researches. Only a hard core of eternal students persisted. Some made successful careers as scholars at the academic level. Michel Duneau, for instance, worked as a research supervisor in physical theory at the National Centre for Scientific Research. While their ideas were not dissimilar from some of their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe, GERP had little influence abroad. The aim of this group evolved dramatically from its early days. Initially inspired by foreign examples in its efforts to impose parapsychology on the University, GERP would adopt a more strictly theoretical orientation in its efforts to bring parapsychology into a productive relationship with French traditions of inquiry. The boldness of GERP came in trying to reconceptualize psi in terms offered by other disciplines and to minimize the importance of the superficial conceptions of ESP and PK emphasized by the American approach. This boldness was a natural extension of the general cultural and intellectual ferment out of which French parapsychology would draw new life.

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Notes

- ¹ Information about the first years of GERM/GERP was collected in an anonymous article (GERP, 1971–1972) and through numerous discussions with François Favre.
- ² In Paris VII (1973–1976), Tours (1976), HEC (1978–1981, 1983–1984), Supélec (1980–1982), and Angers (1989–1990).
- ³ Favre also worked on two anthologies, on apparitions (Favre, 1978a) and on ectoplasms (Favre, 1978b), which had large public success, but for which the publisher did not pay him one coin.
- ⁴ We can consult his articles and discussions at <http://www.sciencesphilo.fr/>
- ⁵ These experiments were published under a pen name (Metta, 1972), following the advice of Chauvin.
- ⁶ After failures in his experimental results, Janin resigned and chose a therapist's career to be able to at least "help locally".
- ⁷ The journal *Parapsychologie* was sold in kiosks, and 26 issues were published in an irregular way from 1971 until 1989. The *Bulletin psitt* addressed especially "psiphiles" in 47 issues that appeared from February 1982 until June 1986.
- ⁸ Proceedings of these conferences were published in book collections (Collectif, 1976, Favre, 1992) of high standard, reporting discussions between lecturers and the public.

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