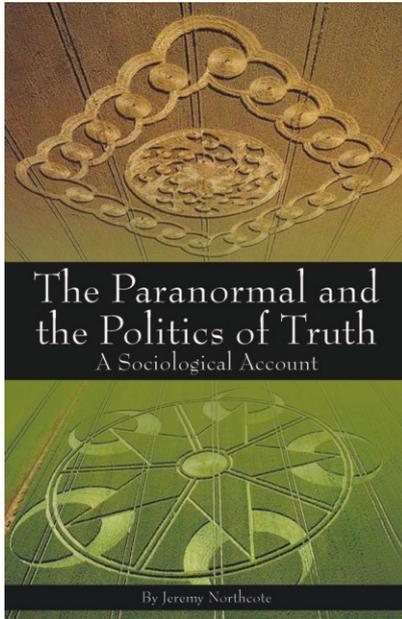


## BOOK REVIEW



Jeremy Northcote

*The Paranormal and the Politics of Truth:  
A Sociological Account* ↗

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*Reviewed by U. Mohrhoff*

*The Paranormal and the Politics of Truth* is a sociological examination of the controversies that surround paranormal topics. It traces their development from the medieval Church's crusade against the occult and the condemnation of pseudoscience by Enlightenment intellectuals to the disputes that constitute the contemporary paranormal debate. As the author shows, this debate is inextricably bound to wider frameworks of thought — canons of “truths” that define reality, ourselves, and our values. Another word for “the tacit assumptions or ‘truths’ that underlie our understanding of self, society, and reality generally” is *discourse*.

Northcote makes no attempt to persuade the reader to accept one version of reality over another. On the contrary, what he hopes to achieve is to assist in nullifying the destructive politics of truth that continually thwarts this debate — or indeed any debate on a controversial topic. (“Politics of truth,” a term coined by Foucault, refers to the discursively based “power” struggles that surround the production of ideas.)

Do strange phenomena abound that have thus far eluded the mainstream intellectuals and authorities who tend to define what is possible and real in our universe? The author does not — and in his rôle as social analyst cannot — pretend to know the answer. What interests him is why there are so many people who claim to know the answer (even though their answers differ widely), and why they tend to defend their viewpoints as vigorously as they do.

The paranormal debate is characterized by intransigency on all sides. Ideological differences between groups are reinforced rather than overcome. Opponents are demonized, seen as moral or social threats to the “proper” order of things. Paranormal proponents are viewed by skeptics as irrational, gullible “believers” who would ultimately bring about the collapse of Rational Society. Christian fundamentalists view the paranormal as Satanic. Some UFO proponents, on the other hand, perceive a danger to humanity from malevolent aliens if their views do not prevail, or a global catastrophe if the warnings of wise, benevolent aliens are not heeded.

Northcote does not rule out “the possibility that there is (at least) some degree of correspondence between truth formulations and some objective reality.” This distinguishes him from sociologists who study beliefs on the supposition that they are determined by social rather than ontological factors. Nevertheless, by putting aside the issue of whether paranormal phenomena exist or not, he effectively takes the position that the disputes over the paranormal are primarily political.

It was not until the seventeenth century that the “official” opposition to the “occult” (as the paranormal was then called) took on the familiar form that we see, more or less, in operation today. In the sixteenth century magic was still *magia naturalis*, i.e., it was considered to be an area of rational, scientific inquiry into the “hidden” workings of nature. The Imagination was seen as linking the subjective world of experience to the objective world of understanding. The “macrocosmic” counterpart to the human imagination, it made it possible for those of pure faith not only to access nature’s hidden realms but also to influence its overt course. Occult practices like divination were not seen as rival forms of knowledge but rather as part of the main body of knowledge itself. This combination of mysticism and science was widespread during the Renaissance, and often went hand-in-hand with emerging scientific views. Ironically, views that are considered scientific today are as likely to have emerged from the mysticism as from the science of that time. Newton’s theory of gravity, for instance, proved too magical for a number of his mechanically-minded contemporaries. Leibniz attacked it for “going back to qualities which are occult.”

A top priority on the Enlightenment agenda was to demote the Imagination. Among the first to insist that its “microcosmic” counterpart should not play a leading role in attempts to understand the objective world, was Descartes.<sup>1</sup> Soon enough, however, occult ideas found new support bases, not only in specific circles but amongst the general populace. For the most part this was a reaction to science’s banishment of the Imagina-

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<sup>1</sup> I wonder what he would have made of these well-known statements by Einstein:

I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. (“What Life Means to Einstein,” interview by G.S. Viereck, *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929)

The supreme task of the physicist is to arrive at those universal elementary laws from which the cosmos can be built up by pure deduction. There is no logical path to these laws; only intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding of experience, can reach them. (“Principles of Research,” address to the Physical Society, Berlin, on the occasion of Max Planck’s sixtieth birthday, 1918)

tion, but support also came from intellectuals keen to find a “home” for occult phenomena within science. Northcote’s account of the period between then and now is illuminating, but the crux is that

the general discursive configuration that characterises the contemporary debate was, more or less, set in place by the seventeenth century. By this time. . . the basic divisions between what were considered valid perceptions of reality and what were not had been more or less established, and the stage was set for ideological disputes over these divisions that have endured to the present day.

To help appreciate the arbitrary nature of these divisions, Northcote points out that many phenomena that are today taken for granted were once rejected as ludicrous (e.g., rocks falling from the sky<sup>2</sup>), and many established scientific “facts” of past eras have since fallen by the wayside. As sociologists Barry Barnes and Donald MacKenzie remark, “[s]cience is both a major source of rejected knowledge and the main instrument of its rejection.”

Northcote does not think that hegemonic motives were the principal factor in the opposition to occult ideas. The Church’s demonization of the occult coincided with changing *ontological* considerations as well as a changing epistemological view of the imagination. To the degree that hegemonic motives were a factor, this was related to the ontological importance that the Church attached to its power to combat the Devil. Likewise, the Skeptics’ rejection seems to have been more an effort to expunge the occult element within its own ranks and within the wider social fabric for the sake of preserving the “proper order of things” than an effort to stamp out hegemonic rivals.

The only instances where research on alleged paranormal phenomena have been tolerated by scientists (but only *just* tolerated, Northcote adds) is where repeatability has been seen to be rigorously observed. Yet it may well be — in fact, it seems to me overwhelmingly likely — that the repeatable aspect of the paranormal is merely the tip of an iceberg. If there is more to reality than what is amenable to the accepted methods of scientific investigation, this means that most paranormal phenomena — and probably the most interesting and important ones — are beyond the ken of science. According to their own accounts, many paranormal proponents have come to believe in the reality of the paranormal on the basis of experiences they regard as defying mainstream views about the nature of reality, and many of these experiences may have been essentially singular or *sui generis*.

Northcote is however skeptical of such accounts. He examines a variety both of “emic” (insider) explanations and of “etic” (outsider) explanations (psychological, socio-structural, and socialization accounts) and discounts them one by one as the real or main reason why people get involved in the paranormal debate. He cites instead

the emergence of new discourses that not only lead people to place importance on certain needs and desires of the Self, but also to feel that established “truths” are not addressing those needs. Overall, I see the situation more in terms of a discursively based clash between established discourses and newly emerging ones (such as feminism, democratisation and postmodern orientations) that have thrown the legitimacy of estab-

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<sup>2</sup> Today we call them “meteorites.”

lished perspectives into doubt and, in turn, have increased the legitimacy of paranormal ideas. . . [M]any people come to see paranormal-related positions as legitimate because of the way such positions are seen to “make sense” of reality by resolving certain incompatibilities between disparate discursive influences.

Another important factor is “interpretative drift,” whereby a position comes to increasingly appear more logical and valid. Its net effect is that

participants come to hold a sense of duty to promote and defend their positions to detractors. What may have been initially viewed as a mere intellectual disagreement over the existence of paranormal phenomena is now seen as a fundamental challenge to the proper order of things with potentially dire consequences. From their point of view, people must “wake up”, or else aliens will destroy us (so say some UFO proponents), Satan will consume us (the view of Christian fundamentalists), or society will degenerate from the tide of nonsense beliefs (as many Skeptics hold).

Incommensurability — a condition that prevails when people are unable to comprehend the rationale of another’s point of view because that view is so fundamentally different from their own — is another factor that Northcote discounts as playing a primary rôle. Conflict within the paranormal scene results from a lack of desire to seek mutual understanding rather than a basic inability to achieve such understanding.

I would suggest, in fact, that paranormal disagreements are perpetuated, not so much because participants are incapable of understanding their opponent’s position (although this certainly can play some part, particularly in the rationales used by different sides in defining their standards of evidence), but rather, because one or both parties refuse to consider the merits of their opponent’s position.

At the roots of the conflict lies the moral dimension. Participants in the debate are influenced by discourses that define a demonized “Other,” who is seen to pose a threat to the proper order of things. Ideals should be kept “pure” from erroneous ideas: science is a pure form of inquiry that should not be infected by pseudoscientific “rubbish,” Christianity constitutes a pure path that should not be polluted by occult ideas, and so on. Participants are primed to see their opponents not only as irrational but also as immoral. The imposition of one’s ideals upon another thus comes to be regarded as a morally responsible act, and participants come to feel a humanitarian responsibility to help others understand the truth (as they see it). For the same reason,

participants may not see it in their best interests to acknowledge that they have anything in common with their opponents. On the contrary, for rhetorical reasons, there is a tendency for participants to want to divorce themselves as much as possible from opponents as part of a strategy of demonisation. Once a fellow participant has been identified as subscribing to a certain ideological camp, the content of what they actually say becomes immaterial. . .

All of this “justifies” such particular strategies as status degradation (depriving the opponent of the authority to speak on what is and is not real in the universe), disruption of an opponent’s means of communication (preventing access to the media, educational institutions, etc.), eliciting a confession of error, character assassination, straw-man arguments, *ad hominem* attacks, ridicule, and labeling. The labels may be employed mutually (cultist, fundamentalist, subversive, etc.) or based on dichotomies such as disinterested/commercial, spiritual/material, holistic/mechanistic, rational/irrational,

scientific/religious, frontier/backwater, future-oriented/past-oriented, open-minded/close-minded, and so on. Such labels, Northcote observes, are not used merely as rhetorical devices to portray oneself in a positive light and one's opponent in an unfavorable light, for participants can be quite sincere in the labels they apply to themselves and their opponents and perceive them to be factually based.

In spite of the author's genuine impartiality to the parties involved in the paranormal debate, it's academia that comes out with the most egg on its face.

Generally, academics wanting to protect academia from the "incursion" of paranormal-related ideas employ a largely ideological strategy, needing only to promote the view that such ideas are pseudoscientific and consequently have no place in academia. The aspiring graduate, keen to impress their supervisor, other faculty members and the all-important thesis examiners, is readily amenable to internalising this point of view and, later, promoting it to others. This perspective, to be sure, is largely tacit in nature, rather than one that it is directly communicated. Students develop a sense of the kinds of formulations that are acceptable in their field and of those that are not, by virtue of taking note of the prevailing perspectives that are recognised as authoritative. This results in an inter-generational cycle of Skeptical ideological reproduction in academia, which is normally sufficient to keep paranormal ideas at bay.

On the occasions when paranormal ideas have infiltrated academia, particularly its "upper rungs," more direct action has resulted.

Perhaps the incident that gained the most international publicity in terms of academia's concern about staff members holding unorthodox, paranormal-related views was the review of late Harvard Professor of Psychiatry, John Mack, by his own department, the Harvard Medical School. The review of Mack's professional academic activities followed the publishing of his book, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (1994). In that book, Mack presents a number of case studies of people claiming to have been abducted by aliens, and contends that their experiences do not appear to be hallucinatory or delusional.

Mack himself wrote that

Language traditionally applied to political betrayal and religious heresy... has sometimes greeted my writings, suggesting that something more than scientific discourse is taking place. These reactions have of course been mild compared with the fate of Renaissance figures whose observations challenged the prevailing authority of their time, but their seeming emotionality has made me appreciate that the way we construct reality is politically as well as scientifically determined.

Sociologist Paul Allison reports that 53 members of the Parapsychology Association claim to have suffered discrimination because of their interest in parapsychology. David Hess has (in his own words) "gathered many horror stories from parapsychologists, psychologists, and other scientists who have attempted to do ESP research in academic settings and, as a result, have had their careers ruined by skeptical colleagues." There is also an immense challenge faced by academics advocating pro-paranormal ideas in terms of having their work published in academic journals. Even those journal editors willing to take the bold step of including pro-paranormal papers face an up-hill challenge. A skeptical treatment of the paranormal subject, on the other hand, has generally been welcomed by academia, and introductory academic text books are a prime means of disseminating gatekeeper perspectives.

Northcote thinks that, in spite of the deeply political nature of the barriers that exist, there would be a “potential for the debate to serve as a site for a more positive dialogue” if “certain discursive changes were to occur — changes that might not only improve dialogue in the paranormal debate itself, but in society at large.” A positive dialogue would be productive, civil, and democratic in nature. To identify the factors that led to the measured success of an exchange that took place in the mid-1980s between Ray Hyman (a prominent CSICOP committee member) and Charles Honorton (a leading parapsychologist), Northcote examines the case in some detail. One of the recurring questions in this debate was (as told by Susan Blackmore):

Okay you Skeptics, you say this is not good enough, well how good has it got to be? If you lay down how good it has got to be, and then we do that, and then we get results, will you then say, Now you believe it.” . . . He [Honorton] successfully pushed them into that corner. What happened was that Honorton came up with the auto-Ganzfeld.

The invention of the auto-Ganzfeld device was widely hailed as a productive result of the Hyman-Honorton debate, because it was based on a mutually agreed-upon set of conditions aimed at producing a reliable experimental outcome. However, despite the success of the experiments in producing results that were, as Hyman himself later admitted, “highly significant,” Skeptics (including Hyman) did not believe that the results necessarily demonstrated the existence of psi. What this demonstrates to me is the intransigence of the Skeptics rather than the possibility of a more positive dialogue. As Charles Whitehead wrote,<sup>3</sup>

A study of ‘elite scientists’ revealed that evidence has no effect on belief or disbelief in paranormal phenomena. No matter how thorough your controls or how many zeros you have in front of your p value, disbelievers still demand ‘better proof’. So Thomas Kuhn didn’t go far enough. Scientists do not simply fail to treat anomalies as counter-instances; they deny their very existence. Anomalies tend to get swept under the carpet until there are so many of them that the furniture starts to fall over.

Northcote suggests that “if a definitive, empirical demonstration of the existence of paranormal phenomena occurred that resulted in paranormal ideas no longer being seen as a “pseudoscientific” threat to conventional science. . . then perhaps many Skeptics would come to view a dialogue on paranormal ideas as potentially productive.” For a couple reasons previously mentioned, I believe that the chances for this to happen are close to nil.

The author regards “those interests that encourage a genuine commitment to the ideals of civility and inclusiveness” as particularly effective in terms of bringing about a lasting improvement in the quality of dialogue. “The only problem is that most participants tend to make an exception when it comes to applying such ideals to opponents, because they are not seen to be amenable to such ideal forms of dialogue.” So much for the chance of a lasting improvement in the quality of dialogue.

This brings us to the author’s final proposal, which is that in order to produce a more

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<sup>3</sup> C. Whitehead, Everything I Believe Might Be a Delusion. Whoa! Tucson 2004: Ten years on, and are we any nearer to a Science of Consciousness? *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11 (12), 2004, 68–88.

positive dialogue, “it is the doxic assumptions themselves that would need to undergo change.” Following Bourdieu, Northcote refers to the unquestioned aspects of knowledge as “doxic,” in contrast with disputed knowledge, which is either “orthodox” or “heterodox.”

I would go so far as to argue, in fact, that the very debate itself is constituted by unquestioned doxic assumptions, such as the distinction between matter and spirit, between apprehension and imagination, and between rationality and irrationality. Doxic truths are largely responsible for motivating participants to debate their ideas in the first place, and they also play a role in determining which ideas are open to question and even the way those ideas are debated.

While participants tend to cite “doxic” assumptions as lying at the heart of their opponents’ positions (but seldom their own), neither paranormal proponents nor Skeptics question the possibility that the material-spiritual dichotomy could be a spurious one to start with, or that such concepts might be mere artefacts of language. This is where postmodern discourse might prove useful. Whereas the more radical proponents of postmodernism might see postmodernism’s effect in terms of a complete dissolution of truths, Northcote argues that in order to have a positive influence on the quality of dialogue in the paranormal debate, postmodernism would need to have only a moderating effect in casting doubt on the validity of positions. It might make participants more uncertain whether their opponents are in error and, conversely, whether their own ideas are unquestionably valid. Unfortunately, one element that participants in the debate share is opposition to the tenets of postmodernism.

While the focus of *The Paranormal and the Politics Truth* is on the paranormal debate, the ideas put forward obviously apply to a wider range of truth-making processes. I can only agree with the author that his findings are “relevant to the processes that underlie all knowledge construction and dissemination in Western society.” One surprising effect this book had on me personally was that, although most of the arguments presented seemed more or less self-evident, I nevertheless ended up with changed priorities and a fresh perception of, well — the politics of truth.