

**Bertrand Méheust's Work in Progress:
“...from the ecology of anomalous experiences, to a political ecology”**

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Introduction

Bertrand Méheust was born in 1947, is a retired professor of philosophy, and a member of the Institut Métapsychique International [International Metapsychic Institute]. The IMI is France's largest parapsychology research organisation and was founded in 1919. Méheust's intellectual itinerary encompasses the study of religious experience and ecology and he is a specialist in “the epistemology of the taboos of knowledge” (Méheust & Lagrange, 2019). As a student of philosophy, his first research was focused on William James while the prevailing convention among his colleagues at the time was to concentrate on authors dealing with structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. His primary interest was in philosophies of nature, as opposed to those of the city, with the essential idea that “we can only understand Man if we replace him within a cosmic reality” (Méheust & Evrard, 2007). Close to nature during his childhood and a keen observer of people and their institutions as an adult (Méheust, 2014, p. 165), his intellectual journey has led him from the study of anomalous experiences in ufology and parapsychology to the study of political ecology.

Méheust's Anomalistic Work

Ufology Studies

Bertrand Méheust earned his reputation from an original work in 1978 entitled: *Science-fiction et Soucoupes Volantes: une réalité mythicophysique* [Science Fiction and Flying Saucers: a mythophysical reality]. Drawing on a particularly rich corpus, he identified parallels between, on the one hand, reported observations of flying saucers and encounters with extraterrestrials; and on the other, the science fiction literature published prior to 1947. Stories from that period predate certain cultural and scientific aspects of ufology that coalesced into the forms we know today. His study addresses several

reductionist and non-reductionist hypotheses in an attempt to explain this coincidence, while acknowledging that he does not fully succeed. The book leaves the riddle open: myths have *both* cultural and natural facets.

The twentieth century saw the birth of a contemporary myth - that of flying saucers. But this myth cannot be reduced to the direct effect of a preceding imaginary culture because it was constructed from individual, or what Boccara (1989) has called mythical, experiences. Michel Boccara was the anthropologist with whom Méheust worked as an associate member of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, as documented by Méheust, Rabeyron & Zafiropoulos (2004).

Méheust's first book in 1978 was a bestseller because it not only brought a scholarly and intellectual approach to a generally marginalised phenomenon, but was also published by the respected Parisian publisher Mercure de France. The author continued along this path in a vain attempt to rally researchers, and from the human sciences and ethnology in particular (Méheust, 1985; 1992), for a study of what he called ufological experiences, and including alien abduction encounters. He recently returned to the challenges and conclusions of this line of research in the preface to a reprint of his original work (Méheust, 2020).

The History of Mesmerism and Psychical Research

Following a foray into territory combining philosophy, ethnology, and folklore, Méheust patiently constructed another object of study: the history of animal magnetism, hypnosis, and psychical research. The transition between these themes occurred through various personal encounters, including the important influence of Aimé Michel (1919-1992) whom Méheust has referred to as his master. This scientific writer, largely unrecognised outside France, contributed to the fantastic realism movement through his ability to deal with anomalistic as well as current scientific questions, in particular the mysteries of the animal world (see Méheust, 2008). Michel contributed to parapsychological research from 1953 onward and wrote a book in 1973 summarising the work of Thurston (1952) on the wonders associated with saints and mystics. The shift between ufology, ecology, parapsychology, and ascetic and mystical phenomenology, comprised part of Aimé Michel's corpus.

The historical study undertaken by Méheust spanned 18 years up until the completion of his sociology thesis in 1997, which was published the following year. Unlike other historiographies (Ellenberger, 1970), Méheust has emphasised the conflict between the views of Man and the world, pitting proponents of the psyche's marvellous phenomena against the disparagers. He finds it symptomatic that the violence of this

epistemic conflict was expunged from the official record, a prelude to its subsequent banishment from debate when academic mores became more policed (Méheust, 2012, p. 119).

Far from supporting the rationalist conclusions that had retrospectively passed judgement on the apparent lack of interest in these spiritual movements, and which had placed the assumed impossibility of psychic phenomena at the very centre of the rationalist programme, Méheust instead documented barely-known elements of the controversies prevailing during that bygone era, when lucidity, deep trance, and the influence of spirit upon matter were first seriously investigated.

The successive and approximate verdicts which dismissed these phenomena in order to support the dominant Western worldview were promulgated under conditions of relatively balanced ideological and institutional competition. Thus, the question of the reality of animal magnetism phenomena had divided the elites, in particular the French Academy of Medicine at the beginning of the nineteenth century and before the subject was officially dismissed. Méheust systematically dissected the “discourse of the victors,” which had effectively disfigured the narrative of these historical currents. In so doing, he reopened the issue and awakened the old controversies, creating numerous hostilities with his contemporaries (Charuty, 2001; Méheust & Mancini, 2002).

The book *Somnambulisme et Médiurnité* [*Somnambulism and Mediumship*] written by Méheust in 1999 is considered an essential and fundamental work by French parapsychologists. Untranslated, it received little response abroad with the exception of an analysis by Jeffrey Kripal (2010), the philosopher of religion who designated Méheust “an author of the impossible” alongside Myers, Fort, and Vallée. Méheust joined the IMI on 26th March 2000 and was frequently one of its spokespersons.

He published numerous works on matters relating to the history, philosophy, and anthropology of parapsychology,¹ which included: examinations of the famous 19th-century seer Alexis Didier (Méheust, 2003); prejudices against metapsychics (Méheust, 2004); extra-sensory perception in general (Méheust, 2005); paranormal phenomena associated with the S.S. Titanic (Méheust, 2006); and comparative metagnomy (Méheust, 2011), a hermeneutical method he introduced to analyse the trajectories and performances of the subjects of paranormal and religious experience from antiquity to the era of psychical research and through to our contemporary period. He also applied this analytical method to the miracles of Jesus in a work we shall examine as belonging to his period of reflection upon ecological themes.

¹ Méheust (2014, p. 164) makes a distinction between metapsychics, “which proposes the study of qualitative phenomena, captured in their biotope,” and parapsychology, which seeks to study quantitative phenomena in the rarefied setting of the laboratory.

Political Ecology Work

Ecology and Political Obstacles

Méheust's first essay on political ecology in 2009 is entitled *La Politique de l'Oxymore: comment ceux qui nous gouvernent nous masquent la réalité du monde* [*The Politics of the Oxymoron: how those who govern us mask the reality of the world*]. The oxymoron is a figure of speech combining two words of contradictory or incompatible meaning: its effect is to temporarily fascinate and paralyse the reasoning mind. In the political context it becomes a technique for inhibiting the free flow of thought among critical opponents of policy, and for examples we might choose: sustainable development; rational farming; free market regulation; ethical capitalism; social distancing; and asymptomatic disease [dis-ease]. Consequently, rather than flatly denying the major challenges of the ecological crisis, a section of the political world is able to raise an even more powerful defence: the idea of a possible compatibility between society as it currently functions and the protection of the biosphere.

Alongside his political criticism, Méheust invites us to reflect on the internal regulatory processes that allow a social system to “persevere in its being.” Using several examples, he shows how a transformation yearned for by some only ever really occurs when the system reaches a state so far from equilibrium as to compel change from without. This form of “methodical pessimism” states and observes that no “mental universe” ever gives up on its own but always prefers to try and reframe, in a diluted and harmless form, the anomaly which has destabilised it. Hence the hypothesis of a privileged use of the oxymoron by reactionaries.

From the beginning of his book Méheust (2009, pp. 21-26) draws upon his work on the history of Mesmerism to demonstrate how the vilified practice of animal magnetism - initially intellectually contested then eventually officially outlawed - suddenly reappeared in watered-down form under the name of hypnotism. By the end of the 19th century it had even become the dominant paradigm in sciences of the mind. In an analogous way ecology was abruptly restored “by a capitalist and financial system which had first crushed it with its contempt” (Méheust, 2009, p. 22).

The difference between these two cases is presented as one of urgency: “If we want to, we can live without paranormal phenomena, but we cannot continue the current march forward without perishing” (Méheust, 2009, pp. 23-24). He nevertheless introduces a subject for reflection, though not fully developing it at that time: “The proponents of Mesmerism are also occasionally the precursors of ecology, and there is a deep affinity

between an ecology of the spirit sketched out by the theorists of Mesmerism and ecology in the sense in which we understand it today” (Méheust, 2009, p. 24).

Given the success of the book, Méheust republished it five years later with a new afterword, entitled: *Le Cosmique et la Cité: regard rétrospectif sur un parcours atypique* [*The Cosmic and the City: a retrospective look at an unusual journey*]. It explains the importance of the personal element in the shaping of ecological thinking, including that of his own: “The weakening of carnal contact with nature leads to a progressive acceptance, through trivialisation and indifference, of what would have been perceived before as unbearable” (Méheust, 2014, p. 167).

He then returns to articulating his combined interest in paranormal and ecological matters: “Far from being mutually exclusive, these two interests are profoundly linked, not only in my mind but for the tradition that carried them” (p. 170). He goes on to identify the utopian socialist movement in particular, which has drawn on sources from esotericism, mysticism, Mesmerism, and certain currents within Christianity. He then propounds the paradigm of *cosmic solidarity* which, in rejecting the mechanistic paradigm, offers a vision of the world closer to the German *Naturphilosophie* according to which everything in the world is interconnected. This novel view of the universe is notably influenced the political thinking of Jean Jaurès, the great French socialist who, according to Méheust, “concluded his philosophy thesis with the grandiose view of universal entanglement revealed by progress in the psychical sciences” (p. 172).

In his prologue, Méheust centres his combined historical research and ecological enquiry around the general question of “how societies succeed in ‘managing’ events, changes, new knowledge and practices that seem to compromise their economy (in the very general sense of the term)” (p. 174). Mesmerism is assimilated with an “epistemological aggression” opening a 150-year conflict whose challenge was none other than “to redefine the structure of the human personality for the times to come” (p. 174). This is an essential point in Méheust's theory: the “plasticity of the psyche” (Mancini, 2006) that allows man to constantly recreate himself.

The image man has of himself therefore has palpable consequences for reality. According to Méheust, the philosopher who does most to highlight this idea is Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) with his theory of creative imagination. And so for Méheust, this author “reconciles the cosmic and the City” by showing how the worldview of a social group, in its *describing-building* of human and non-human characteristics, plays a full part in actual and tangible achievements (2014, p. 177).

The essential quality of a great philosophy like Castoriadis’ is its capacity to encompass “the cosmic, nature, and the sciences” and to “deal with the human being only when placed within the whole” (p. 178). Nowadays, it is as rare to find political

thinkers concerned with the epistemic and ontological aspects of anomalous experience as it is to find anomalists discussing the influence of political factors on their own area of study.

Social Metamorphoses and the Sacred

In between the two editions of *La Politique de l'Oxymore* (2012), Méheust wrote another essay that failed to find an audience, in part because of its provocative and ambiguous title: 'La Nostalgie de l'Occupation: peut-on encore se rebeller contre les nouvelles formes d'asservissement?' ['Nostalgia for the Occupation: are we still able to rebel against new forms of slavery?'] The main argument of the essay consists in showing the difficulty society has in coping with ecological disaster by comparing the situation with resistance to Nazi imperialism, specifically Germany's occupation of France between 1940 and 1944. This period was subject of a "strange fascination" (p. 9) that was returned to in other discourses to become the prototype of absolute horror in his analyses of how folk successfully organised themselves to resist and rebel against Nazi crimes. But why have people not succeeded in resisting an even greater crime - assuming it is comparable - affecting humanity as a whole, and more besides: namely, the current ecocide? Méheust analyses the taboo that prevents a comparison of today's political leaders, whom he considers accomplices to the ecocide, with yesterday's Nazi leaders (p. 20). Viewed in the short term the comparison seems invalid but appears more reasonable with the adoption of a different time scale:

The deadly violence that the Nazis unleashed on Europe was unprecedented in history, but it was brief because it was suicidal. The delayed violence that neocapitalism exerts on the entire planet unfolds on another spatial and temporal scale. It is a 'slow invasion,' a 'soft apocalypse,' the worst of which remains invisible and nothing seems to be able to stop it, except the self-destruction of the system. Its banal, diluted, delayed character, the legal and smiling masks under which it camouflages its propagation, all this makes it almost imperceptible to the majority of humans (p. 22).

Thus, in its current guise, there is no evil *per se* responsible for ecocide - and neither formally designated enemies nor uniforms to rebel against - because the existential threat is filtered through a veil of comfort and disinformation. Consequently, the solidarity of opposition is weaker and the prospect of a worldwide transformation, a revolutionary

disruption which might reverse the present biocidal trend, is all the less likely. The irony is our ability to passively watch this catastrophe unfold before our very eyes:

The dominant feature of our time is the powerlessness of knowledge and even its apparent uselessness. Never has humanity headed for a catastrophe of such magnitude and never has it had so much information about what is going on (p. 56).

Méheust goes on to provide examples from the history of parapsychology - pages 76-77 compare Mesmerism to “a ‘pocket of resistance’ which has enabled the resurgence and development of forms of experience banished by the accredited vision of man and the world”; and they identify traditional “‘biotopes’ favourable to the expression of very deep forms of trance and in which skills and practices relating to these states of consciousness have been maintained” and which facilitate the manifestation of strange powers.

Méheust extracted the biological concept of the biotope from the work of the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (1995; 1998) who had employed it in the social sciences to designate a local manifestation of a human phenomenon fuelled by a set of constraining and facilitating factors: for example, “transient mental illnesses” epidemically affecting a given socio-cultural space. Méheust (2012, p. 77) adopts the notions of pockets of resistance and biotopes because of their tendency to disappear and so draws an analogy with the difficulty of finding good mediums with which to pursue psychical research - a singularly novel form, one is inclined to think, of declining biodiversity.

As this work was written around the time of the Arab Spring of 2011, Méheust saw a slightly more optimistic solution based on these examples of social revolution. His interest was in the power of those moments of collective turmoil leading to the collapse of political systems, in this case dictatorships. For him, certain essential ingredients of these successful challenges are lacking in democracies because the “temperature” of revolt is cleverly cooled down by numerous defusing processes stemming from rational governance (p. 91). Hence the decisive importance of the critical thresholds through which social life cyclically passes: “It is in these moments of particular intensity that supernatural beings re-emerge, that are invented or reinvented ritual gestures” (Méheust, 2015, p. 355) This peaceful political modality has ecological consequences:

[...] rational governance, by perpetuating a way of life dangerous for the biosphere, always makes flashbacks and/or bifurcations difficult. By preventing the critical temperature which allows the overhaul of deep structures from being reached, or at least by delaying the critical thresholds, it exempts our society from

questioning itself and allows it to always postpone the decisions that are necessary (Méheust, 2012, p. 93).

Among the “inhibitory devices” protecting society from anything that might change its trajectory, he lists on pages 95-96:

Globalisation, comfort pressure, ever greater dependence on technical macrosystems, the mechanism of credit and debt, the formatting of minds by advertising propaganda, the “strategy of chaos”, the coercive use of crises, communication techniques such as systematic recourse to oxymorons, the rise of individualism and consumerism, the “dictatorship of immediacy”, the enormous inertia of the system, international economic competition, and the ever-increasing power of surveillance and control.

He is not in favour of voluntary violence but notes that the renouncement of reasoned and proportionate counter-violence, especially more or less illegal action not involving physical violence against people, paves the way to abuses of power (p. 124).

By listing these different aspects the chapter ends up being as surprising as it is essential. Exploring the theme of “the Societal Big Bang and the Sacred,” on pages 125-144, Méheust analyses the “sociomorphic” virtue of those moments of collective overheating using the metaphor of a melting point. But he then goes beyond the political problem to consider these social phenomena from a more encompassing point of view by relating them to the problem of the sacred.

Here ecologists are divided in their analysis of how crises of civilisation correlate with crises of ecology: some think it futile to hope that traditional secular values will be sufficient to release humanity from its deadlock. Instead they theorise that a return to the heteronomic form of an immanent and transcendent signifying-cosmos might stymie the devastating forces threatening to sweep us away. Others still cling to the old atheist and autonomist conception of democracy (p. 129).

On page 130 Méheust employs the special meaning of sacredness proposed by the sociologist Émile Durkheim at the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus views it as “a perennial and founding dimension of human experience” that is irreducible to religions. Durkheim (1913) had argued that this experience of the sacred is not purely illusory but is brought about by forces that have the capacity to change the world. And so for Méheust (2012, p. 132) a collective effervescence plays a crucial role: “a human group does not really become a society until it has gone through these moments of effervescence which constitute its true ‘baptism.’” However, one obstacle is that this

collective effervescence “cannot be ordained” (p. 199). In summary, Durkheim had considered the sacred a matrix of the social bond and “a source of power upon which societies can draw in order to maintain and transform both themselves and the world, and which we can cyclically observe throughout human history at moments of high intensity” (see Méheust, 2012, p. 133). Méheust refers here to messianic liberation movements and associates the political dimension with religious exaltation, a theme explored in books viewing Jesus as a thaumaturge (Méheust, 2015; Ellenberger, 1978).

An interesting aspect of this sociological approach is that it does not reject the study of individual experiences. Durkheim had even made individual momentary and psychological experiences a phase in a system: “It is the pressure of collective thought on the individual which generates the moments of exaltation by which he becomes creative, just as it is the creative moment of the individual which ‘recharges’ and restructures collective thought” (see Méheust, 2012, p. 135). This systemic unity of the individual and the collective is called *coalescence* and serves to link an individual’s experience of the sacred with the community they are a part of and help to shape.

A final essential point is the impact, in terms of innovation, of individual experiences of the sacred. On page 137 Méheust integrates the ideas of Max Weber (1964), for whom the abnormal experiences of certain exceptional characters were the source of social innovation. Such individuals were the bearers of charisms or charismata, the strange energy emanating from certain individuals and capable of transforming their social environment. “In a revolutionary and sovereign way,” writes Weber, “the power of charism transmutes all values and breaks all inherited rules and norms” (see Moscovici, 1988). In a footnote, and referring for the first time to George Hansen’s book on the Trickster, Méheust (2012, p. 138) underlines the parapsychological dimension of the abnormal experiences and charisms which are at the root of social metamorphoses. This dimension had particularly been overlooked by commentators on Weber, although it is actually quite explicit in his texts.

In short, in its individual and collective dimensions, the sacred is part of the equation of the political ecology portrayed by Méheust. He has more confidence in it than in technical, political, or violent means of derailing the ecocidal course. However, Méheust’s account lacks details of the processes involved and, in the last chapters of the book, returns to political factors such as the General Strike, where it is considered as a political myth with “driving force.”

Back to Metapsychics

In 2015 book *Jésus Thaumaturge: enquête sur l'homme et ses miracles* [*Jesus the Thaumaturge: investigating the man and his miracles*], Méheust takes a metapsychic perspective on the apparent miracles attributed to Jesus. While disputing the official dating of the canonical Gospels, he nevertheless relies on them in the belief that certain of their constituent elements show they can be attributed to contemporary witnesses of the phenomena reported. Adopting the comparative *metagnomy* method, Méheust shows how Jesus is similar to other subjects of paranormal and religious experience, including his possession of trickster-like character traits; yet he also reveals himself to be different in other respects, such as his rare recourse to altered states of consciousness. In short, Méheust approaches Jesus as a *kratophany*, or manifestation of a power, rather than as a *hierophany* or manifestation of the sacred (van der Leeuw, 1948), in an account that more plausibly explains the birth of the Christian movement.

The short twenty-second chapter, entitled: *Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, George Hansen: Psi and Societal Big Bangs*, (Méheust, 2015, pp. 355-359), connects his investigation of Jesus with the theme of political ecology. How might we explain a massive historical process like Christianity as resulting from the power of a thaumaturge? Yet it is Max Weber's central thesis that the individual and his paranormal experience are the true source of social innovation. Parapsychological, mystical, and political dimensions emerge simultaneously as a complex whole and become inseparable: "We see something new spring up and establish intense and unprecedented relationships, which will subsequently cool and freeze" (Méheust, 2015, p. 357).

To account for these "societal Big Bangs," Moscovici (1988) used the metaphor of *singularities*, which in physics are nodes where the prevailing laws of a system are superseded with the emergence of new ones. Psi lends itself particularly well to this concept of transformation and implies that an entire collective universe may be generated from a singularity. Méheust strengthens his conceptual field by speaking now of a *social-metamorphic* process:

When tension in a social group reaches an optimal level, we regularly see bearers of charisms who appear to be capable of triggering the social-metamorphic process. In certain mythologies, this character is called the Trickster (Méheust, 2015, p. 358).

Méheust integrates Hansen's theory to make Jesus a typical incarnation of the trickster figure and an anti-structuralist par excellence, while construing “the Jesus event” as a textbook case (p. 358-359).

An interesting point of fact is that the very parameters of the system in which subjects of paranormal and religious experience evolve actually condition the possibility of the phenomena's occurrence. By citing Guy Lyon Playfair (1987, p. 310) in connection with Uri Geller, Méheust (2015, p. 270) adopts the idea that it is during chaotic conditions that the thaumaturge is able to shake up daily reality and replace it with his own. This return to the power of an individual allows us to remain in touch with sociological analysis while preserving the essential principle of a *systemic unity of the individual and collective*.

In 2018 Méheust published his first novel: *La Conversion de Guillaume Portail : comment l'homme le plus riche du monde s'en est pris au capitalisme* [The Conversion of Guillaume Portail: how the richest man in the world attacked capitalism]. The story's central theme is of a political ecology which has met with some local success in France owing to a Franco-American billionaire who strategically devotes his entire fortune to applying the most effective solutions to ecological problems. Parapsychology and the sacred are brought together again because the hero's “conversion” is linked to a clairvoyance session performed under the auspices of an avatar of the IMI. The proposed solution nevertheless remains marked by the struggle of money against money, with only a marginal function for the sacred and the anomalous.

Some passages of the book, for example ‘Conclave 11,’ take on the appearance of an essay. Pages 148-150 explain how the connection between parapsychology and ecology is formed through two mirrored concepts: on the one hand, the “solidarity of the living,” which is the central fact of ecological reflection; and on the other, a “cosmic entanglement” as highlighted by parapsychology. Combined, these twin concepts become the notion of a “cosmic solidarity” revealed through progress in metapsychics. Cosmic solidarity had been present in Victor Hugo's vision of the world and society and also appeared in the political thinking of Jean Jaurès (1892) while finishing his philosophical thesis on the grandiose scheme of universal entanglement (see below: unpublished essay).

Parapsychology might demonstrate the empirical basis of this solidarity if more credit were given to an anthropological view compatible with the ecological question. In addition, says Méheust (2018, p. 150), supporters of ecology and supporters of parapsychology have several opponents in common - a sure sign of their convergence.

The Essay on Jean Jaurès

The French politician Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) had a lesser known occupation as a metaphysical philosopher, which Méheust rehabilitates in an as yet unpublished essay, entitled: *Jaurès Trois Fois Assassiné* [Jaurès killed three times]. Jaurès' thinking used parapsychology to establish a cosmic vision of humanity that was to guide his political action. According to Méheust, Jaurès' use of certain notions makes him "one of the fathers of deep ecology," who had laid its philosophical foundations.

An important notion in his philosophy is *universal interpenetration*: the idea of there being no absolute vacuum separating objects and human beings, with everything being linked by a common substance. Everything is intertwined, entangled, interpenetrated: everything exists within all. To this principle Jaurès added *universal animation*, the idea of the world as a living creature, which led him to his biological and evolutionary pantheism.

The philosopher Charles Rappoport (1915) augmented these principles with *cosmic or universal solidarity*, concluding that the universe was "a kind of cosmic democracy where everything is organically linked, where everything stands together and where everything supports and makes everything live" (Rappoport, 1915, pp. 317-318). Méheust detects a thematic community with certain esoteric thinking, in particular Paracelsus' Christian esotericism which sought to reorganise human relationships by bringing them into harmony with cosmic solidarity. Paracelsus made several political proposals which Méheust associates with communism.

But for the sake of demonstration Jaurès made explicit reference to the data of psychical research, most notably in the final chapter of his thesis:

[These phenomena] attest to the fact that there are extraordinary and unknown powers in man, which are zero or almost in their normal state, but which manifest themselves in certain states which we call abnormal. There is in us an unknown ego which can exert a direct action on the matter, lift by an energetic will a foreign body as if it were its own body, pierce with the gaze the opacity of an obstacle and collect from a distance across space the unexpressed thought of another self. One wonders if there are not yet the obscure elements of a new progress of consciousness and life on our planet (Jaurès, 1892, pp. 415-416)

Jaurès enlists psychic science to prove universal interconnection and thereby give a cosmic foundation to his conception of solidarity, with the brain playing an important role beyond being a mere organic envelope isolated from the world. Alluding to the aspect of psychic life known as "the paranormal," he assumes the brain to be perpetually involved

and integrant with the known world in a “continual and subtle exchange of secret activity.” By drawing metaphysical conclusions from this principle, he deduces an ecological vision whereby each finite being is reinstated within a living unity:

Thus, the human brains and the earth, by descent and by harmony, form one system or, at least, a beginning of system and organisation. And if these brains, developing their magnetic action and their lucidity, manage to grasp, even in the unknown depths of the earth, the thrill of all the forces by mixing the energy of their will and the light of their thought, they will be really the brains of the earth. In addition, if all these human brains communicate with each other effortlessly, if they easily put in common, without being confused, their thoughts, their emotions, their decisions through the all burning space of spiritual life, the conscious life of earth will not be localized in a very small cerebral organ; but, just as the earth is enveloped by an atmosphere of life, it will be enveloped by an atmosphere of thought, which, penetrating into its depths, will communicate consciousness with all its forces and will truly create the living unity of the planet (Jaurès, 1892, pp. 418-419).

The political views of this left-wing leader were therefore fuelled by his metaphysical attempt to “place man in the immense cosmic environment.” Although he did not have a direct influence on ecologists, he is described by Méheust as a *proto-ecological* thinker through whom the ecological movement was rejuvenated.

Paradoxically, Jaurès’ conclusions seem particularly spiritual considering he had constructed an applied critique of the religious worldview. As revealed in Méheust’s unpublished essay, this had followed a process whereby “a little science took us away from religion, but a lot of science will bring us back to it.” Jaurès condemned the betrayals of the Church and dreamed of going beyond the established religious forms to create a new cosmic religion based on a knowledge of Nature and perceived as the embodiment of the divine. Méheust's study is the first attempt to reconstruct the complete philosophy of Jaurès from his scattered texts after having articulated connections between ecology, the paranormal, and the sacred.

A Tentative Synthesis

Toward a Mythical Liberation Movement?

Jean Poirier (1949) gave the name “mythical liberation movements” to the resurgence of collective imagination among defeated or subjugated people and it was developed by psychiatry historian Henri Ellenberger (1978) to combine social and paranormal revolt. Indeed, among such peoples living in a state of tension, “prophets may arise to revive these myths, proclaim them in a rejuvenated form, update them, arousing a collective enthusiasm whose consequences will be unpredictable” (Ellenberger, 1995, p. 449). He used the concept to collectively name the so-called *nativist*, *messianist*, *millenarian*, *mystical renovation*, and *revitalisation* movements.

Characteristics associated with these groups overlap with those of the anti-structural systems described by Hansen (2001) and environments depicted by Rudolf Otto (1995) as charismatic:

- ◆ **Psychological characteristics:** interest in the unusual and the wonderful; increased impressionability; a lack of objectivity and “distance” toward people and events; a tendency to see “signs” and “symbols” everywhere.
- ◆ **Social characteristics:** ease of migration, constitution of groups, horizontality of relations, and mistrust of people outside the group.
- ◆ **Institutional characteristics:** existence of a shaman, magician, prophet, etc., who is distinguished by something excessive or eccentric in his ideas and piety; by a certain attitude of defiance, a “madness,” which exasperates his adversaries and arouses their contempt or their hatred, but in which the faithful see proof of his vocation.
- ◆ **Parapsychological characteristics:** testimonies of miraculous healings, prophecies, and visions.

The liberational myth crystallises agitation initially infused within a small, “calm and harmless” group of people, while the “movement” phase proper is associated with a brutal split between the faithful and the unbelievers. Ellenberger (1995, p. 456) describes two possible outcomes: “either the transformation of the ‘movement’ into an ‘institution’

fixed with its organization and its rites, or a sudden catastrophe which breaks the group and disperses its members.”

In his description of these movements, Ellenberger gives no credit to the reality of parapsychological phenomena. He does not enter into the paradigm explored by Méheust via ufology and parapsychology, and by which myths have both cultural and natural facets. What may appear as “mythical” within this ethnopsychiatric reading remains dependent on a certain worldview that misses the vitality of these myths - myths which are truly embodied by miracles arousing cohesion within the movement.

Ellenberger nevertheless notes the conjunction of three factors: the activity of charisma-bearing individuals, a social effervescence, and systemic transformation. But while Ellenberger confines these reduced factors to conjectures upon the marginal movements of oppressed peoples, Méheust’s work, based on that of Durkheim and Weber, generalises them to actual social revolutions.

From the Ecology of Anomalous Experiences to Political Ecology

A recent collectively written book edited by the anthropologist Jack Hunter, *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), developed links between ecology and parapsychology. The field of ecology, defined as the study of the relationship between living organisms and their physical environment, is a relatively new area of scientific research. One of its major concepts is that of the ecosystem, whereby all its elements are connected and related through networks of reciprocal exchange.

The most obvious intersection between ecology and parapsychology is the commonly reported after-effect of several different types of exceptional experience involving such things as near-death experiences, alien abduction, and psychedelic *trips*. In these the experiencer often comes away from their encounter with an enhanced sense of connection to their environment and the world around them (Ring & Elsassner-Valarino, 2006; Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). The study of this rising “ecological consciousness” reveals another promising aspect of these experiences: a potential for individual transformation.

However, as Hunter has suggested, we should not examine parallels between ecology and parapsychology merely for the sake of exploring interesting intersections, “but for the essential task of contributing towards a much broader – *necessary* – change of perspective concerning our relationship to the living planet” (Hunter, 2019, p. 3). As such, it is particularly relevant to combine, as Méheust does, the study of sociology and politics in order to reveal the full dimensions of the intersection between parapsychology and

ecology. The links examined by Méheust can be summarised and combined to provide a primary descriptive level of organisation along the following lines:

- ◆ The concept of an ecosystem, central to ecology, may be extended to the cosmic level since parapsychology demonstrates the possibility of non-local entanglement between all living systems and their physical environments.
- ◆ Ecology may be integrated with parapsychology because it is a transdisciplinary science, while parapsychology suggests ecology should integrate the concept of non-local entanglement with its observational and theoretical field.
- ◆ Psi may be understood in terms of a singularity where the usual laws of Nature are subverted, thereby revealing the existence of laws other than those governing material interactions alone.
- ◆ The favourable context for psi possesses the anti-structural characteristics described by the Hansen's Trickster theory. This can be seen both at the level of group dynamics (biotope) and among the bearers of charisma.
- ◆ Psi should not be understood in terms of stable and reliable signals generating and affecting powerful systems, but rather as an unstable and elusive process promoting transformation of a system and those other systems with which it communes. This definition corresponds with the Model of Pragmatic Information (MPI) defined by Walter von Lucadou (2015).

From this first descriptive level we may reinterpret the dynamics of social revolution by combining parapsychology and political sociology to construct the account below:

- ◆ Social effervescence and the energetic metaphor of overheating systems describe subtle connections between a system's separate elements and which prepare it for transformation. Although we cannot objectively quantify this effervescence, we may easily identify the various mechanisms inhibiting and preventing it from reaching a critical threshold.

- ◆ Within these dynamics, there is systemic unity or coalescence between the individual and the collective: in other words, a correlation between local variables comprising a portion of the system and global variables describing the system as a whole.
- ◆ Charisma, myth, the sacred, and the paranormal are all invoked as essential dimensions of the process of kratophany and the manifestation of magical power but they differ from the institutional religious dimensions which subsequently succeed them in a hierophany that manifests in the form of religious structure.

During the present time when the most important anticipated social revolution is the one which would make it possible for humanity to resist the current ecocide, these different elements might combine in the following way:

- ◆ Parapsychology facilitates a liberating myth centring around a cosmic solidarity where everything in the world is interconnected, as is already evident at the level of individual paranormal experience. Ideas developed in the circles of animal magnetism fed social utopias in the nineteenth century that centred on the notion of solidarity. More recently, Nelson (2019) concluded that we are all interconnected following his Global Consciousness Project: this was a unique holistic experimental approach to psi, which conducted a 20-year scientific collaboration between researchers recording the effects of mass consciousness in response to major global events. So broad a perspective, and reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere and Lovelock's Gaïa hypotheses, surely invites us to ask: Should we finally consider psychic experience within its terrestrial ecosystem? The question is complicated by the disinclination of parapsychology as a scientific discipline to discuss religious, political, and social aspects of its subject matter.
- ◆ Bearers of charisma might play essential roles in the ecological transition by restoring the dimension of the sacred which has been removed from certain ecological currents because they are seen as a distraction from more concrete action (Jensen, Lier & McBay, 2018). The trickster-like characteristics of charisma bearers are a means of identifying them and understanding the ways they polarise and split social groups into followers

and critics.

- ◆ There is no mundane solution to the ecological crisis that could save the sacred dimension. It is not sufficient merely to change the attitude of human beings toward nature, but to enter into a new vision where humankind supports the transition. Parapsychology, with its cosmic entanglement, offers a subversive vision of the relationship between human beings and their environment which would be fully compatible with a more harmonious participation within our ecosystem: that is, a meeting of the cosmic and the city.
- ◆ One of the most important obstacles identified by Méheust is the rearguard action of a “structuring” ecology employing the “sustainable development” oxymoron, which is presented as being compatible with current policies and scientific progress. But the expected changes can only really come through a “societal Big Bang” involving a transient “anti-structuring” device.

Conclusion

Throughout his entire corpus, Méheust establishes a new *rapprochement* between ecology and anomalistics revolving around a “socio-metamorphosis” combining the political, sociological and parapsychological. From past examples, Méheust anticipates the return of a myth that would activate, or even permit, rebellion against our current inaction in the face of ecological crisis. This myth of “cosmic solidarity,” which combines the facts of ecology and parapsychology, offers an alternative version to the usual myths, which generally produce transcendent heteronomies of gods, spirits, and the supernatural. The myth of cosmic solidarity where “everything in the world is connected” refers to an immanence: as such, the paranormal is not supernatural, but is intrinsic to the vitality of the Earth and thus affirms that it is living human beings themselves who individually and collectively transform their world.

Méheust's multifaceted work is an engaging topic because it fertilises several often unexplored areas of thought: Beginning from parapsychology and ufology, what philosophical, ecological, political, sociological, and theological reflections can we produce? Since these fields still carry the stigma of being inferior sciences, if indeed they are admitted to be sciences at all by the more conventionally minded, they have not received the attention they deserve (Kripal, 2010; Hunter, 2019). However, rethinking

Jesus, rehabilitating Jaurès, constructing the planet's future – all such things might require us to take these more marginal routes.

One could argue that it is too early to draw conclusions from anomalous data owing to insufficient evidence. Yet Méheust (1999) opts for the principle of looking into the conceptual rearrangements to which these facts direct us when we admit, if only as a hypothesis, to their partial reality: “In my opinion, they are stronger than we say, and part of the fragility that we lend them comes from the desire that we have not to accept them as real” (Méheust & Evrard, 2007). It is the task of philosophy and anthropology “to make constructions, hypotheses, which go beyond reality to think otherwise” (*Idem*).

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