

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02695-7 - William James, Sciences of Mind, and Anti-Imperial Discourse

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Excerpt

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Between the Child's Mind and the Ghost: Scientific Objects and the Contours of Colonial Authority

The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in. There is no point of view absolutely public and universal. Private and uncommunicable perceptions always remain over, and the worst of it is that those who look for them from the outside never know *where*. The practical consequence of such a philosophy is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality, – is, at any rate, an outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant. These phrases are so familiar that they sound now rather dead in our ears. Once they had a passionate inner meaning. Such a passionate inner meaning they may easily acquire again if the pretension of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions *vi et armis* upon Orientals should meet with a resistance as obdurate as so far it has been gallant and spirited. Religiously and philosophically, our ancient national doctrine of live and let live may prove to have a far deeper meaning than our people now seem to imagine it to possess.

– William James¹

William James (1840–1910),² lecturer and professor at Harvard University for more than thirty years, is well recognized today for writing across a wide range of disciplines, including theology, psychology, philosophy, education, psychoanalytics, physiology, medicine, and psychical research/parapsychology. Difficult to classify and perennially so it seems, James reputedly joked: “The first lecture on psychology I ever heard being the first I ever gave”³ – a signpost toward the less-than-formal boundaries that existed in the 1870s and an index of the novelty of sciences of mind and their vocabularies. He has now become an iconic and enigmatic figure in the United States, probably most commonly associated with the popularization of the terms *stream of consciousness*, *self-esteem*, and *pragmatism* (coined by, and later departed from by, Charles Peirce). Less recognized is his vociferous participation in the Anti-Imperialism League. The organization was founded in 1898 to protest the invasion of Cuba and the

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Philippines, as well as foreign policy in Puerto Rico. Andrew Carnegie, Mark Twain, and 50,000 other Americans joined in its first few years. James allegedly stated in regard to what Hannah Tavares has called “the forgotten war”⁴: “God damn the US for its vile conduct in the Philippine Isles!”⁵

Virtually neglected beyond this in James’ enormous oeuvre is his 1899 volume, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (original punctuation), in which he writes into the preface an opening plea to live and let live in regard to the Philippine invasion and points throughout toward the America he would like to see instead. The book was based on a series of lectures delivered from 1892 onward across many states. It was very successful when published as a volume with several additional essays, and was reissued up to forty times by 1929. It was utilized in higher education courses, and became the single most popular teacher education text in the first decades of the twentieth century as judged by reprints.⁶ It remains almost completely unknown and unstudied in mainstream education today, including history of education.⁷

Beyond his less-studied impact on teacher education at the start of the twentieth century lies James’ underappreciated work in psychical research. It was not until the 1960s that his significant contribution to what is now called parapsychology was made available outside of a visit to the archives at Harvard University and to the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) in New York City. James was a founding member of the ASPR, established initially as an offshoot of the Cambridge University–based Society for Psychical Research (SPR).⁸ In the mid-1980s, more of his writings on psychical research were compiled, including his Lowell lectures (reconstituted by Eugene Taylor and published as *William James on Exceptional Mental States*), as well as his analysis of a provocative series of transcripts that were produced via the most famous medium in the United States at the time, Leonora Piper.

Piper, discovered through Alice James’ (William’s wife) mother’s social circle and brought to William’s attention in the 1880s, was eventually paid a retainer by the ASPR for the utilization of her skills. She became a point of study for decades and was referred to quite objectifyingly on occasion as the Piper-organism. When one of James’ closest friends and secretary of the ASPR, Richard Hodgson, was purportedly being channeled through Piper after his sudden passing over in 1905, James took up the task of analyzing the transcripts from the sittings, some of which he and Alice had attended. Even with their publication by Harvard University Press in the mid-1980s, little attention has been paid to James’ analysis of the transcripts by scholars in psychology, anthropology, law (Hodgson’s specialty), psychoanalysis, or education.⁹ The last is of interest not simply because the discipline of education has historically

rushed to canonize “dead white men” from high-status institutions in order to gain distinction as a discrete field, but more so because of how James defined the location of such investigations a year before he himself passed over. He found the term psychic to be a “rather ridiculous name” for phenomena that included “ghosts, and clairvoyances, and raps and messages from spirits” and “physicalist” kinds, such as “movements of matter without contact, lights, hands and faces ‘materialized,’ etc.” found, for example, at séances. It also included phenomena such as “‘telepathy,’” “‘mediumistic phenomena,’” and “‘rappings, apparitions, poltergeists, spirit photographs and materializations.’” The branch of study to which these belonged? Education: “‘Psychics’ form indeed a special branch of education, in which experts are only gradually becoming developed. The phenomena are as massive and wide-spread as anything in Nature.”¹⁰

Together, the above examples point to the lesser-knowns, silences, and delays around the figure of William James and incite consideration not so much of his place within contemporary social sciences,¹¹ but rather of the character, contours, and limits of such sciences’ formation. A plethora of concepts James dwelled on, including *consciousness*, *association*, *substitution*, *automatism*, *focus*, and *margin*, could be called up to theorize this phenomenon of selective memory and cultural forgetting that such lesser-knowns, silences, and delays suggest. To be sure, his works open onto many questions that have reappeared in twenty-first-century guise and that now cross humanities and social science disciplines. These include, among other possibilities, questions concerning the nature of the human, the multiplicity of available theories, the complexity of relations between nations, how mind works – if there is such a thing – and what the limits of knowability might be. Such questions are simultaneously broader than the Jamesian oeuvre and treated in very nuanced and rigorous ways within it. In asking what reapproaching the works of William James could have to offer, then, it is important to realize the extent to which he could make a contribution to contemporary disciplinary debates (possibilities) and to rethink what the lesser-knowns, silences, and delays around his activities and contributions might suggest about the (non)legitimation of imaginal domains (limits), especially in sciences of mind.

Topical questions of the twenty-first century can thus be rethought via the questions that James took up. In particular, when “new” and “old” collide through reapproaching James, the implications of a presumed onto-epistemological compass can be unpacked, its new regionalisms and slippage. Here, emergent sciences of mind seem to be a particularly important site to revisit, not only because mind is so repeatedly and commonsensically assumed to exist across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, but mind also becomes elevated as an administrative platform and plane of composition

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in institutional life – a site of sought-after unity in human engineering and a site of disqualification. Mind theory, and all the complex assumptions this included, which posited body as a slate, as a surface, and as a physical envelope, operated to link the inclusion/exclusion of nation-building projects, historical insults and injuries that had already divided populations, and hopes for a different future.

The social study of science (and technology) in the twenty-first century has concentrated almost exclusively, however, on “big things” that move, on the inventions and events that assisted in nation-building and strategies of colony establishment – transportation, war, weapons, capital, machinery. The microphysics of object-formation via forms of expertise that emerged *through* the social sciences has been relatively neglected. One cost of this neglect has been to ignore how the criticisms leveled at biophysical science, medicine, and technology projects have nonetheless been involved in another kind of science – social science – and its investment in legitimating particular rituals, topics, orientations, and events, including the nature and limits of critique.

The relative lack of attention to specific aspects of the Jamesian oeuvre in the social sciences, to social sciences as disciplines in science and technology studies, and to James’ position on imperialism in postcolonial studies suggests something, then, about borders – geopolitical, epistemological, disciplinary, and subjective. Those who take seriously the enormous and varied oeuvre, particularly his (shifting) principles of psychology, philosophy, and science, seem unconcerned with postcolonial studies. Those who take postcolonial studies seriously seem unconcerned with James, despite his participation in the Anti-Imperialism League. Such positionings and reactions beg the question: What does this tell us about the history, structure, and contemporary organization of desires and disciplines, of classificatory processes that delimit an “us” and “our,” of the narratives suited to unpacking nation-building, and of the acceptable logics and limits of criticism? The lesser-knowns, silences, and delays, around James’ work thus suggest something of their appropriateness for a historical retrieval and allude to the epistemological structures that must have initially buried them.

**REAPPROACHING JAMES: HORIZON OF ENACTMENT,
THE CONTOURS OF COLONIAL AUTHORITY,
AND THE POLITICAL**

Looking through the window of, and springboarding from, the figure of William James deals with a most immediate dilemma of quantity, rupture, and swirl. It requires engaging with published writing that spans a high-profile,

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twenty-five-plus-year career and a corpus of commentaries on his varied works that extends unevenly from the 1870s across a continuing present. While the breadth of topics that James traversed is not surprising relative to the preoccupation of mid-nineteenth-century mind theory enthusiasts, approaching his works confronts, almost by default, the specific problems he engaged. Simply put, is there one single William James and is he really dead?

The provocation of such questions foreshadows the moves that this book makes across James' work, ranging from the processes of individuation debated in psychology and education to questions about a life/death border and the issue of spirit return. I concentrate here on the less-visited texts in the oeuvre, alluded to earlier, and through re-encountering them I strategically trace a particularly potent horizon of enactment that can be seen forming, in operation and in contestation, through the window that such texts provide.

The horizon of enactment that James helps bring into view, and which takes shape more fully at the turn of the twentieth century, involves the interpenetration of new logics of perception with the rationalities of the social sciences with the fabulation of nation and West, crystallizing across the decades of James' career. It can be thought of as a religion-science-nation-West horizon of enactment, an action-shaping nexus whose coagulation (including lines of flight or seepage) was both in play and already out of joint with and in excess of itself. James uses the terms *religion*, *science*, *nation*, and *Western* in his writing but in ways that often shift such terminologies out of their more traditional or historic institutional settings and into more complex relations. Sensibilities and elements that might have been previously associated with, for example, a specific strand of religious doxology can circulate in opposition to, then next to, then even under the term *science*, depending on the text. The horizon of enactment that coagulates and leaks does not concern simply the spatialization of such terminologies but the intensifying, (re)aligning, and mutating effects that their historic elements had for achieving new regionalisms and new kinds of slippage.

Crucially, then, the horizon of enactment brought into view here invites not a sense of an a priori and static line but of shifting and creative enactments that continuously offer new possibilities for claiming authority by drawing previously unaligned elements, sensibilities, "data sets," and/or normativities into and out of relation with each other. As such, a religion-science-nation-West horizon of enactment, when read via *modalities of operation*, allows glimpses into the constitution and reconstitution of that which helps "it" gain and/or resecure its legitimating effects: "Political theory has to attend to the emergence of political rationality in terms not of its rationality, or claims to reason, but in terms of modalities of operation. Behind political rationality

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02695-7 - William James, *Sciences of Mind*, and Anti-Imperial Discourse

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does not stand reason, or rather, reason is not the alibi of political rationality; instead, political rationality has to do with the horizon of its enactment."¹²

The chicken-egg circularity inherent in such a nontotalizable horizon of enactment is important. It is not that there is a clearly marked and fixed horizon that then provides the context for what gets enacted and/or counted as legitimate, as expertise, as authority in social science disciplines. Rather, the horizon-in-the-making is glimpsed through the enactments-in-motion that (re)constitute the value-laden but temporary placemarkers for scales of discernment and judgment. The horizon of enactment that Jamesian texts expose thus helps sustain and/or order value systems and preferences and suggest (im)possibilities. The authority and legitimacy-giving function of a religion-science-nation-West horizon of enactment is not easily made or undermined, however, revealing the productive tensions between a simultaneous fixity and unfixing, and pointing toward how this interplay has perhaps helped sustain such a horizon's (temporary) longevity.

A religion-science-nation-West horizon of enactment was, as such, one whose presence had to be forged, whose impact had to be asserted, and whose effects had to be dealt with in various ways, then and now. It was a horizon of enactment that refused totalization, that blurred conjoined edges in the distance, that moved with the perspective of the observer, and that nonetheless came into being as a temporary and arbitrary placemaker for the different microphysical pictures projected in the foreground. It was a horizon of enactment that could be recalibrated through various combinations of the elements, activities, and rituals that circulated under the labels of religion, science, nation, and West, that could assist in claims made to authority and legitimacy, as well as to superiority and expertise, and that enabled particular actions on that basis, from invasion to the formation of scientific objects to social criticism.

Rather than being a catchall or a universal explanatory device, Jamesian texts provide a rich window onto such a horizon of enactment's nontotal formation where social sciences are concerned, and they do so through illustrating how the recombinatorial potential of elements circulating under the signs of religion, science, nation, and West carved a space for further classificatory projects. I thus examine here several objects-disciplines-in-the-making and their allied strategies-tactics. James' work was directly and intricately embroiled in the quest to produce at least three scientific objects: the child's mind, the exceptional mental state, and the ghost. In the ruminations about the validity of these, a fourth object – the social scientist – is indirectly produced, or at least conjured, and his rigorous analyses provide tremendous insight into its operation. James gave full air to all four (potentially scientific)

objects across his career but not just for the sake of it. A synergy between apparent interior/domestic and exterior/transnational effects emerges in the effort to weigh the scientificity of such objects, informing his diagnosis of nineteenth-century United States and his prescriptions for a new, twentieth-century nation.

The complexities of such a new horizon for enactment are grounded here, then, in the debates over the three potential scientific objects, their emergent social scientist, and across the four nascent disciplines of education, psychology, abnormal psychology, and psychical research (terminologies drawn from Jamesian texts). The four disciplines or at least areas of study were then (and now) considered to contribute to sciences of mind, including all that this implied in regard to the positioning and deployment of body. In *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Lorraine Daston notes how the enduring Aristotelian belief that insists that “science ought to be about regularities – be they qualitative or quantitative, manifest to the senses or hidden beneath appearances, causal or statistical, taken from commonplace experience or created by specialized instruments in laboratories – has persisted long after the demise of Aristotelianism. Yet regularity alone seldom suffices to pick out scientific objects from the ordinary objects of quotidian experience.” As Daston further notes, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century studies, such as those of Francis Bacon, focused on anomalies yet still claimed to be science.¹³ Jamesian texts highlight the full range of these possibilities: between the child’s mind and the ghost, the presumed regular and the presumed anomalous, the presumably extant and the presumably questionable, the stakes are raised and the questions multiply. If both “objects”-in-the-making were considered literally invisible to the naked eye, unable to be held in the hand or photographed, then the processes that “highlight some phenomena and occlude others”¹⁴ require deeper investigation.

Within this overarching frame of objects-disciplines-in-the-making, then, I focus at key moments on differences in strategies-tactics – in conditions of proof, conceptions of rationality, and the nature of what gets to be called ethical. Together, the objects-disciplines and the strategies-tactics expose the (re)shaping of contours of colonial authority, a version of authority whose legitimating functions are important to elaborate.

As has already been debated in postcolonial studies literature, *if* “colonialism” is viewed as a combination of discrete and identifiable acts altogether, as marked by the unwanted dominion of one society over another, then “it” may be seen as having taken many different forms, and not just in the last few centuries. *If* it is seen as a fairly common trait in human-to-human relations, a widespread historical practice, then newer versions of colonialism can be

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taken as a moment in the formation of “the West,” with “modern colonialism” being a more recent and hyperbolic incarnation.

In that line of argument, the newer versions of colony-formation and empire-building could also be seen as an instance of specific dividing practices whose horizons are much broader and deeper than simply the recirculation of goods and services through the domination of territory and bodies under the auspices of nation-building. In this more panoramic view, the colonial authority used to legitimate acts of empire-building would no longer be seen as only a particular cultural moment that alters distributions, modifies concepts of cultural identity and difference, or transfigures Western history. Instead, as Philip Leonard has argued, “colonialism would embody a mode of thought and a form of cultural power that both precedes it and continues after the decline of Europe’s high colonial period. The problem here is that the task of theory would no longer be to examine colonial rule and its consequences. Rather, theory should presumably shift its concerns away from a restricted focus on colonialism, and it should instead begin to interrogate the general structure that surrounds and produces colonial authority.”¹⁵

The contemporary task of decoupling cultural understanding from colonial authority has become difficult to sort through in the social sciences as they have emerged in Europe and the United States. This is in part because the question of fixed, nonleaky borders around cultures have already been contested for decades, in part because the question of why things called understanding and authority matter is rarely posed directly or frankly (what is at stake – and why?), and in part because from about the 1600s onward, what constitutes understanding and authority becomes continuously re-posed. The re-posing particularly occurs in forms of a presumptive link between knowledge, language, and rationality that secures a speciesist line and a special location and role for the human and especially mind.¹⁶ This has tended to divide philosophical commentary, especially along two classical vectors that are not so divided, to reinforce largely either a more empiricist-materialist or more rationalist-ideational bent, either way underscoring the limitations in what Jacques Derrida elaborates as a metaphysics of presence.¹⁷

In reapproaching sciences of mind and anti-imperial discourse through engagement with less-visited Jamesian texts, my concern is thus not with an assumed philosophical canon, nor with formal disciplinary organizations and associations, their dates of founding and founding fathers, top or key journals that marked each emergent field, the establishment of university professorships, and so forth – significant and indexical as such events are in histories of science. I am interested here in the discursive matrices marshaled to, and elided from, what became the matters of concern¹⁸ marking education,

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psychology, abnormal psychology, and psychical research's objects, at least as Jamesian texts provide windows onto and challenge such matrices, the attempted scientization within such emergent disciplines, and the implications this might have for debates over anti-imperial discourse formed at the heart of empire-making. This undoubtedly includes the identification, and it is not so simplistic, of what would count as "colonial authority" and recognition of the anti-imperial.

The position taken here is that the formation of social sciences dedicated in particular to something called mind was not simply about somewhat discrete epistemological domains or a small group of professionals talking to each other. They were intimately bound to the project of nation-building and *claims* to Western formation, with such entanglements being neither entirely predictable nor innocuous. Social science logics were brought to the critique of foreign policy as well as shared discursive features embedded in policy-formation to the point that "a case can even be made to the effect that the rise of modern social theory... is intimately connected to the development of the nation-state and in some ways has been helpful to it."¹⁹

Jamesian texts alert us to how this blending of nation-building projects with onto-epistemo-moral ones occurs – and also in some instances can be exceeded – leaving the nation-frame behind for something greater or broader. As such, the interplay of his less-visited texts underscores that moment when, in contemporary theoretical terms, the redefinition and relocation of the political becomes more obvious. James rarely uses the term political or allied concepts such as power. The latter refers more usually in his work to a capacity to act – the power to – and does not translate easily or readily into contemporary sociological categories. When discussing classroom life, though, James implicitly buys into the nation as authentic sovereign of educational systems. This implies a somewhat standard and static conception of power in the sociological sense and taps into extant theories of governance as ultimately bureaucratic. Such nation-building projects as evinced through mass compulsory schooling, however, do not remain disarticulated in his work from ontological hierarchies and epistemological spatializations that generate subjects/objects. Here, one might say through a contemporary rereading that "the political" is expanded to how things are scientifically made up as things, including people. James describes people in *Talks* as "partly fated, partly free," while calling himself more definitively a free-willist, reembedding "power" into the person via a historically Christian and more specifically Protestant concept of will. In a way, however, this relocation and expansion of the political out of sociologically oriented nation-state and historically sovereign theories of power into an analytics of power-as-effects, in which shaping takes

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place through the foundation of academic disciplines, their philosophical assumptions, their scientifically generated norms, and technologies of self-responsibilization is itself by now a mundane narrative.

Other Jamesian texts, including his work on exceptional mental states and psychical research, exceed the reach of sociology and political philosophy in the everyday or obvious sense, moving out of the project of material and profane regionalism that would project and demarcate a West and a nation and even a subject and an object. Such texts move into imaginal domains that lie beyond geographied and geopolitical conceptions of earth, unHINGING the human, mind, and Being from their usual surrounds. While such imaginal domains still bear the mark of their site of production and certain value systems, James remained open to considering the plausibility of cosmic reservoirs and the like in ways that many of his contemporaries were not. He offers indirectly at least the release of “the human” from humanism, decoupling nationalism-humanism in the process, distancing the pull of the family, questioning the veridicality of a single life, and honoring forms of consciousness beyond linguistically based awareness. Although James may not go to the logical extremes available when traveling down such roads and appears consistently cautious, simply by virtue of dipping his foot in the pond, taking seriously other possibilities, and even researching them beyond a dipping, he offers the reader a way of considering “rationalities” that exceed reason and science, heaven and earth, and nation and self.

As such, the redefinition and relocation of what can count as the political is not only made available through a contemporary reapproaching of his less-visited texts but also the loss of analytical leverage that ensues when everything is considered a function of politics or of power also becomes available to reflection. The apparent shift evident through James’ work, from a statist conception of politics to how the making of scientific objects becomes a new site of the political, raises the question of the worth of the analytics of politics and of power – their possibilities and their limits. Where “the political” indexes power relations, whether power is inscribed as sovereign, possessed and/or public; or as a struggle-submission framework; or as religious and then psychological will; or as an economic functionalist approach to production; or as discursive effects in continuous circulation, matrices, and networks, it also raises the question of what is *not* political, what is *not* explained through reference to power relations, and hence what is the analytical leverage assumed? Jamesian texts, especially when encountered as dialogic and palimpsestic contestations of each other, point up the quandaries that the new horizon of enactment bequeaths for identifying and mobilizing fixed and “purist” positions, such as anti-imperial discourse. They speak back from a different angle