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Sleep at the Thresholds: Boundary-work in Henri Piéron's sleep research

This paper is an examination of the French psychologist Henri Piéron's (1881 – 1964) doctoral thesis in scientific psychology, *Le problème physiologique du sommeil* (1912). In this thesis Piéron set out to study sleep experimentally, and to develop a complete theory of the origin, function and mechanism of normal sleep. By conducting several experiments on dogs, he arrived at the conclusion that sleep is connected to a chemical substance in the cerebrospinal fluid. I examine *Le problème physiologique du sommeil* by identifying “boundary-work”, defined by the American sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn as “ideological efforts *by scientists* to distinguish their work and its products from non-scientific intellectual activities”. I argue that in *Le problème physiologique du sommeil*, there can be found both explicit and implicit critiques aimed at *spiritualism*, a philosophic doctrine that for several years had exercised great influence over the French educational system, and *spiritism*, a broad, cultural movement where belief in spirits, the immortality of the soul and telepathy were central. Both spiritualism and spiritism represent views that Piéron wants to expel from the definition of science, based on their allegedly metaphysical assumptions. *Le problème physiologique du sommeil*, a psychological thesis on sleep, is in this way informed by broader currents in the ideological debate around science, philosophy and society in France during the period from the late 19th century up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Keywords: Sleep research, early scientific psychology, boundary-work, spiritism, eclectic spiritualism