

## Exploring Class in the Study of Esotericism

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While “class” has never disappeared as a category of analysis within academia, it has remained relatively marginalized within recent decades and subordinate to other categories of social analysis, such as gender and race. Increasingly, however, there are indications that attention is once again being given to social class as a critical category within the humanities and social sciences. While there are many factors that might account for this renewed interest, the main reasons should arguably be sought within the greater socio-economic and political trends of recent years within liberal democratic societies: the continuing erosion of liberal capitalism’s self-legitimation, stemming from its failure to deliver on its various promises;<sup>1</sup> the recognition that rising inequality and the extreme concentration of wealth tend to undermine democracy; the concomitant realization that these developments are linked to the surge of the far right; and the reinvigoration of left-wing populist politics in the years following the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>2</sup>

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1. For instance, the promise that liberal capitalism supposedly provides equal opportunities for personal enrichment, or that the pursuit of private wealth will automatically translate into public benefit. Regarding the question of legitimacy, see Wolfgang Streeck’s argument of liberal capitalism’s increasing inability to generate the normative legitimacy it requires to sustain itself, especially after continuous periods of economic crisis; Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?*, 47–94.

2. We employ the term “populism” here in a descriptive and not pejorative manner. For approaches to populism as a political logic and the rhetorical construction of a “people,” among other things, see Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 117–23.

Discourses and theories of inequality have become increasingly vocal as well, attested to by the popularity of movements such as Occupy, the Bernie Sanders 2016 presidential campaign, and the publication of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014).<sup>3</sup> The international launch of online magazines and journals such as *Jacobin* (2010) and *Catalyst* (2017) are further indicative of this greater trend toward recentering class-related issues in public discourse. In Anglophone academia, class analysis has witnessed a steady rise as well, with Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (2022) perhaps representing one of its more paradigmatic outcomes.

What, however, constitutes the concept of class? Is it a sociological analytic tool that helps scholars organize a chaotic set of empirical data into an intelligible framework? Or a constitutive aspect of social reality itself? Is it a discursive and cultural signifier around which identities coalesce? Or a set of socio-economic relations that objectively structure, constrain, and compel people to act in certain ways over others? All these questions remain contested, with various schools of thought pursuing different and sometimes competing modes of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever theoretical vantage point one chooses to adopt, we believe it is important to join these conversations, and, with this special issue, we hope to inspire further research at the nexus between esotericism and class. While understudied, we want to acknowledge that others have ventured into this terrain before, even if not always under the rubric of "esotericism." Some of the examples that follow below emerged from paradigms and research programs that predate or otherwise diverge from the study of esotericism as it developed in the late twentieth century, when many of the mentioned figures and movements were incorporated into its early "canon." The articles that are included in this special issue all engage with modern historical contexts, but some pioneering studies that combine class with topics we now classify as esoteric are concerned with much earlier source material as well.

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3. The title obviously being an allusion to Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. As of 2017, over 2.5 million copies of Piketty's work have been sold.

4. See, for instance, Wright, *Approaches to Class Analysis*.

While the thematic combination of class and esotericism, then, isn't entirely *terra incognita*, we maintain that more work needs to be done in this domain. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that esotericism studies, as a field, lacks a focused and systematic engagement with issues of class. Given that esoteric movements, ideas, and practices have long been involved in reproducing, challenging, symbolizing, and ritualizing class relations, we believe that it is important for the field to enter into a deeper dialogue with theories and discussions of class, as well as with the existing literature in the study of esotericism that already engages these aspects.

The second set of reasons is of a more critical and perhaps ethical nature and relates to the field more generally and indirectly. We hold that 1) scholars need to be reflective about their own positionalities within and outside of academia, and of how their knowledge-production practices relate to existing forms of inequality, exploitation, or marginalization within society at large; and 2) that it is incumbent on scholars to continue to reflect on the ways in which class relations and dynamics within their own societies affect intellectual trends, material resources, and academic freedoms themselves. The latter is of particular importance in a world where the reactionary backlash against the humanities is sadly gaining momentum.

The question of positionalities, on the other hand, is somewhat trickier, as there is no general recipe for how to implement such reflexivity within one's scholarly practice. Moreover, since we maintain that universities are essentially conservative institutions that function as sites for upward social mobility, expressing positionalities per se is not immune from primarily serving this function, as opposed to generally emancipatory aims. Without claiming to have any easy solutions to such issues, we hope that a greater engagement with class as a category or object of analysis will at least create a deeper awareness of one's actual place within academia and society at large. We also believe that this will, by extension, benefit the study of esotericism.

One dimension that could be explored further—and where such a focus could yield valuable insights—is how class is indeed implicated in the *study* of esotericism itself. Are existing scholarly paradigms informed by class concerns, and if so, how? What is the role of financial patronage in the institutionalization of esotericism studies? What function does one’s class habitus as a scholar—or economic means, pure and simple—have in one’s access to specific source materials, institutions, figures, or groups? What role does class, in its intersectional dimensions, play in the kinds of phenomena that are deemed worthy of study—or even seen—by scholars in the first place? There are many more questions in this vein that could be pursued to interrogate the links between esotericism and class in a reflexive way within the academic study of esotericism itself.

In 1979—the same year that Antoine Faivre assumed the chair of the History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe at the Sorbonne in Paris, often seen as the earnest start of the study of esotericism<sup>5</sup>—a sociological work on occultism by Danny Jorgensen appeared, with a focus on tarot.<sup>6</sup> At the end of his study, Jorgensen wrote that “approached from the perspective of a sociology of knowledge, an analysis of esotericism and class interests can be expected to produce a powerful explanation of particular manifestations of esoteric beliefs, practices, and lifestyles.”<sup>7</sup> While Jorgensen wasn’t the first scholar to draw attention to the intersections of esotericism and class, what is significant here is the historical moment in which he wrote these lines. The year 1979 is, namely, also the year in which neoliberal policies were established in the global North for the first time, after Margaret Thatcher

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5. See Hanegraaff, Brach, and Pasi, “Antoine Faivre,” 186–87.

6. See Jorgensen, “Tarot Divination in the Valley of the Sun,” 238. The 1970s were also a period in which the sociology of the occult began to burgeon.

7. Jorgensen, “Tarot Divination in the Valley of the Sun,” 238. Jorgensen’s more concrete language of “class interests” contrasts with other contemporary sociologists of the occult, such as Colin Campbell, who spoke more vaguely in terms of the “educated classes”; see Campbell, “The Secret Religion of the Educated Classes.” Egil Asprem has recently re-evaluated the sociology of the occult and how it can inform current methods in the study of esotericism. See Asprem, “On the Social Organization of Rejected Knowledge,” especially 48–49 for issues around class.

won the British elections. Thatcherism and Reaganomics represented unbridled “free markets,” privatization, and tax cuts justified by a “there is no alternative” attitude, which, together with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Francis Fukuyama would famously herald as the “end of history.”<sup>8</sup>

This climate indirectly eroded the explanatory credibility of class—especially within academia—where it is often associated with socio-teleological thinking. It is thus unsurprising that Jorgensen’s optimistic belief in the explanatory potential of class in the study of esotericism didn’t fall on fertile ground in the decades to come. As mentioned before, however, investigations (however few) into esotericism and class already existed before—and continued to exist after—Jorgensen wrote these lines. In the following pages, we will provide a roughly chronological overview of how class has been implicated in the history of esoteric movements, traditions, and figures, as well as their academic study. While one could go back further in time, in this brief overview we will begin in the sixteenth century and move toward more contemporary times.

We begin with George Rosen’s introduction to *Von der Bergsucht und anderen Bergrkrankheiten* (*On Miner’s Sickness and Other Mining Diseases*, mid-1530s) by the Swiss medical alchemist and lay theologian Paracelsus (c. 1493–1541), published exactly four centuries after the alchemist’s death (1941). Paracelsus sympathized with “commoners” such as peasants, miners and cunning folk, and there is inchoate—but noticeable—social criticism to be found in *Von der Bergsucht*. Rosen believed it to be the first treatise to deal with occupational diseases in European history, specifically those associated with mining and smelting that come about through subterranean vapors.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, it responds to the social question of labor hazards in the feudal Holy Roman Empire through medical and cosmological speculation.<sup>10</sup> Rosen writes that “such diseases are the result of

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8. See Fukuyama, *The End of History*. Fukuyama would renounce this position in the 2010s.

9. Not all historians are convinced that Paracelsus wrote the first European text on occupational diseases. See Crossgrove, *Die deutsche Sachliteratur des Mittelalters*, 140–41.

10. For a social history of alchemy, a discipline associated with mining during early modernity, see Nummedal, *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire*.

the noxious aspects of industry, which impinge upon the worker in the course of his activities.”<sup>11</sup>

While Rosen thus sought to foreground the class implications of Paracelsus’s *Von der Bergsucht*, other contemporaneous observations of the 400th anniversary of Paracelsus’s death attempted to render issues around class invisible and instead absorb the alchemist into an ultra-nationalist project. In 1942, Georg Pabst’s film *Paracelsus* (1943) came into production in Nazi Germany. It premiered in Salzburg—where Paracelsus had died—in March 1943, a month after the pivotal Battle of Stalingrad had ended. The film concludes with Paracelsus refusing to become a court physician so that he can dedicate his life to curing ordinary people.<sup>12</sup> In the film, we mainly find a *völkisch* representation of “the people,” undergirded by racial homogeneity at the expense of the social category of

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11. Rosen, “Introduction,” 45; also see 50–51. He explicitly uses the terms “labouring classes” and “working classes.” We also find a discussion of Paracelsus and class in Clifford Conner’s *A People’s History of Science* (2005). Conner documents the historical dynamics of natural philosophy and science from the perspective of labor, examples being midwives, blacksmiths, miners, sailors and their contributions to knowledge production. In doing so, it runs counter to historiographical currents that overemphasize “individual genius.” Although Paracelsus was—and still is—often invoked precisely as such a paragon of epistemic individualism, Conner flips the script and states that his “impact on history would have been minimal without the sustained collective efforts of those who took up his cause following his death.” *Ibid.*, 304. While emphasizing that Paracelsus depended on others for both the construction and posterity of his worldview, Conner considers him an important representative case for the construction of a people’s history of science. Conner highlighted his involvement in the German Peasants’ War (1524–25), during which he aligned himself with the rebellious peasants against the nobility, and, like Rosen, Conner also devotes space to discussing *Von der Bergsucht* and its significance from a class perspective. See *ibid.*, 303–8.

12. Pabst, *Paracelsus*, 1:37:35–1:39:15. On Pabst’s *Paracelsus*, see Drewniak, *Der Deutsche Film*, 92, 204; the Nazi electoral victory in Germany reverberated through the history of medicine. George Rosen found a fellow progressive voice in his mentor Henry Sigerist (who edited the volume in which Rosen’s introduction was included), but Sigerist’s tutor Karl Sudhoff had joined Hitler’s NSDAP in 1933. See Gross and Kümmel, “Karl Sudhoff (1853–1938) und der Nationalsozialismus,” 2–22; Nutton, “In the Shadow of Sudhoff,” 521–24. Nevertheless, scholars involved in Paracelsus studies (both before and shortly after the Second World War) included notable leftist and Jewish voices: in addition to Rosen and Sigerist, the Jewish historian Walter Pagel and the Marxist Henry Pachter.

class.<sup>13</sup> This example should remind us how making class invisible in favor of other social categories—or, if you prefer, social myths—is an important subject matter for analyzing the ways in which esoteric ideas, figures, and histories have been (and still are) recruited to legitimate or enforce social “harmony” within societies which are, in fact, constitutively antagonistic.

Turning to Enlightenment France, from the 1770s onwards, Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) proposed a theory of subtle fluids coursing through humans, animals, and plants. This fluid could supposedly be manipulated by a *magnetiseur* in order to cure ailments of all kinds, both physical and mental. In 1778, he left Vienna and came to Paris, where his practice skyrocketed in popularity but was also scrutinized by the medical establishment as a result. His ideas were also adopted by others, who often tweaked them for their own flavor of animal magnetism. Robert Darnton, in his *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (1968), analyzed these intellectual developments in their social and cultural contexts, and also devoted attention to the radical politics and class elements often attached to these practices in the volatile cauldron that was France prior to the Revolution.<sup>14</sup>

For many of the figures discussed, Mesmerism provided a vehicle through which to articulate various grievances with the *ancien régime*, as its rigid stratification of society became increasingly untenable in the waning years of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> One of the prominent examples provided by Darnton is the future Girondin, abolitionist pamphleteer, and journalist Jacques-Pierre Brissot (1754–1793), who championed Mesmerist ideas through the lens

13. Bruce Moran has claimed that the film does not *overtly* espouse national-socialist ideals and instead focuses on a more general sympathy for the dispossessed. Moran, *Paracelsus*, 188–89. This may be so, but the cultural context in which it came to be is rooted in those ideals all the same.

14. Incidentally, the French political context at the time of the publication of Darnton’s book was rife with unrest itself. In May 1968, massive strikes and student protests erupted. On these protests, see, for instance Mercer, *Student Revolt in 1968*; Pagis, *May ’68*.

15. On the class dimensions of the French Revolution, see, for example Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*; Higonnet, “Cultural Upheaval and Class Formation During the French Revolution,” 69–102.

of Rousseauian moral philosophy and believed these could help resolve the antagonistic social relations between the classes and estates.<sup>16</sup> Several years after the publication of Darnton's book, the French philosopher Jacques Rancière further discussed the emancipatory dimensions and class character of nineteenth-century Mesmerism, a movement that "had struck root in the popular masses where its vitalist doctrine had strongly welded with belief in socialism."<sup>17</sup>

For now, we skip over the tumultuous era around the French Revolution and make our way to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to look at the Spiritualist movement through the eyes of Logie Barrow. As is well known, Spiritualism had its canonical beginnings in the "Rochester rappings," when Margaret (1833–1893) and Kate Fox (1837–1892) allegedly made contact with the spirit of a deceased vendor in Hydesville, upstate New York. Barrow argues that a "plebeian" strain of Spiritualism emerged in the wake of social millenarianisms such as those based on the ideas of utopian socialist Robert Owen, both in opposition and in relation to it. It was constituted on a dynamic foundation of "independence," which simultaneously espoused both individualism and collectivism. Something plebeian Spiritualism espoused in particular, according to Barrow, was a "democratic epistemology," meaning the attitude that knowledge was, in principle, accessible to everyone. This pitted it in opposition to both orthodox religious denominations and the scientific establishment, and simultaneously rendered it, according to Barrow, somewhat susceptible to the pitfalls of anti-intellectualism.<sup>18</sup> The notion of democratic epistemology stands in interesting tension with elitist epistemologies within esoteric currents, a topic that could fruitfully be explored further, both historically and comparatively.

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16. Darnton, *Mesmerism*, 91–98. Conner also touches on radical figures interested in Mesmerism, like Brissot and Nicolas Bergasse (1750–1832). See Conner, *A People's History of Science*, 400–407; on Mesmerism and politics in the 1790s, see Fulford, "Conducting the Vital Fluid," 57–78. Nineteenth-century Mesmerism retained a degree of class awareness through the attempt to control "natural and social determinants." See Quinlan, *Morbid Undercurrents*, 176–216.

17. Rancière, *Staging the People*, 53.

18. Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, 146–60.

Plebeian Spiritualism may thus be said to constitute an early example of socially and epistemologically non-elitist esotericism, with later ones arguably represented by Discordianism and chaos magick.

Barrow further points to the confluence of plebeian Spiritualism and socialist organizations in Britain. He remarks how readers “may feel surprised that any SDF-ers [Social Democrat Federation, the first British socialist party]—marxist and ‘materialist’—should have any trace of sympathy with spiritualism.”<sup>19</sup> Barrow stresses the bifurcation between plebeian and middle-class forms of Spiritualism, but also states that the distaste of the former for the latter’s desire for respectability did not stop the plebeians from seeing their middle-class counterparts as fellow “sisters and brothers.”<sup>20</sup> However, in her study on women and Spiritualism in late-Victorian England, Alex Owen nonetheless contends that Barrow “tends to underestimate the extent to which spiritualist concerns blurred class definitions,” and goes further than Barrow in claiming that Spiritualism “had the effect of uniting believers across the class divide.”<sup>21</sup>

Owen’s nuanced analyses of the dynamics between gender and class in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* moreover highlight the importance of interrogating class in all its complex intersections. Concerned with female Spiritualist practice as a site where female power and authority were negotiated, Owen discusses how nineteenth-century Spiritualism took women seriously and provided opportunities for social mobility and status acquisition within otherwise “rigid nineteenth-century class and gender norms.”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, these norms couldn’t be ignored, and working-class women, for instance, found themselves compelled to identify with dominant notions of prescriptive femininity in order to gain respectability. Owen argues that female

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19. Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, 115.

20. Barrow, *Independent Spirits*, 140; the thematic combination of Spiritualism and class proved fertile ground, as it has led to more recent research as well. See Bruce, *British Gods*, 204–27.

21. Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 250n27.

22. Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 4.

Spiritualists, who mainly belonged to the upper working and middle class, identified with dominant notions of femininity precisely because “‘the feminine’ was one of the places where class and gender most crucially intersected”<sup>23</sup>—thus offering opportunities for subverting the various power differences enshrined therein.

In addition to analyses of how Spiritualist practitioners co-merged in some of their spiritual and social pursuits—sometimes regardless of class—Owen demonstrates how class differences could also, on the other hand, be instrumental in determining distinct “spheres of operation” within Spiritualism, for instance in the context of career mediumship. While women who didn’t depend on earning livelihoods could restrict their mediumship practices to the domestic, *private* sphere, women with working- or lower middle-class backgrounds were often compelled to become *public* mediums and give public séances for payment.<sup>24</sup>

This circumstance, however, also generated middle-class prejudice with respect to “lower-class morality.” A widespread assumption, for instance, maintained that since working-class women needed to earn a living, they might also be tempted toward fraud if their mediumistic capabilities should diminish. Public mediumship was thus often seen as inherently suspect, with the effect that lower-class women would (understandably) attempt to cling to the label of “private” mediumship, should they have acquired this more respectable social and spiritual status in the first place.<sup>25</sup> Spiritualist fraud, Owen reminds us, was, however, an aspect of both public *and* private mediumship, and thus not necessarily associated with any particular class.<sup>26</sup>

Staying with the topic of class and its complex intersections, in *Secrecy: Silence, Power and Religion* (2021), Hugh Urban demonstrates how differences in class, gender, and race were, for instance, recoded and masked in American Freemasonry in the nineteenth century. Urban interprets a text written by the Confederate

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23. Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 8.

24. See Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 49–50.

25. See Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 51.

26. See Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 67.

military general Albert Pike (1809–1891)—*The Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (1871)—as more than a mere gateway into late nineteenth-century American esoteric thought. He also employs a theory of *adornment*: the means by which someone elevates or safeguards their status in what they reveal—like Masonic garments and regalia—through the secrets supposedly concealed and symbolically encrypted by these appearances. The same can be said for the Masonic degrees themselves, with their ever-unfolding layers of “wisdom” which likewise bestow symbolic capital.<sup>27</sup>

A strong tension Urban detects is the purported egalitarianism that was often considered central to Masonic doctrine on the one hand, and the deeply racist sentiments shared by many white Masons on the other. Pike, who proclaimed his white-supremacist views in print and fought to uphold slavery as a Confederate general during the Civil War, is a case in point. The existence of all-women and Black lodges notwithstanding, Freemasonry could have a classist, racist, and misogynist gatekeeping function, naturalizing the dominant social position of white middle- and upper-class men, while at the same time some Christian institutions attempted to appeal across the fault lines of class, gender, and race.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Urban asserts that on a material level, the membership fees, as well as the price of all the regalia and clothing needed to ascend the thirty-three degrees of the Scottish Rite, already excluded virtually all the American working class. These outward signs of Masonic affiliation were more than just symbolic extensions of an occult organization. Modeled after the garb of European nobility, such instances of “material esotericism” were instruments for business

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27. Urban, *Secrecy*, 23–26, 35, 38–41; Urban’s use of the term “adornment” is inspired by an essay on secrecy by Georg Simmel. On adornment and secrecy, see Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 338–44. See also Hedenborg White, “Double Toil and Gender Trouble?,” for the intersectional dimensions of adornment practices within esotericism.

28. Urban, *Secrecy*, 29–34. This strategy of broader attraction was mostly to (re)gain influence over a broader demographic. Many Christian churches, organizations, and individuals were themselves heavily implicated in the contexts of classism, racism, and slavery. On Christianity, race, and class in the Civil War era, see, for example the classic study Genovese, *A Consuming Fire*.

opportunities and bolstering one's social status.<sup>29</sup> Urban writes that “while theoretically open to all men irrespective of class, the lodge exaggerated social hierarchy and its own kind of esoteric aristocracy, embodied in the equally exaggerated costumes of European royalty.”<sup>30</sup>

Another recent example of studying the intersections of esotericism and class is Susannah Crockford's work on the commodification of spirituality and the category of “esotericism.”<sup>31</sup> In her article, “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category of ‘Esotericism?’” Crockford discusses “jade eggs,” which were briefly sold by lifestyle company Goop. The latter claimed that inserting these expensive objects into the vagina would cultivate sexual vitality, enhancing one's “life force,” and reinforcing *qi* circulation, thus making public what was before then supposedly a guarded secret within the private quarters of Chinese royalty since ancient times. Its success was short-lived, as the company had to withdraw the product and incurred a fine for false advertising and spreading medical misinformation.

Crockford analyzes these spiritual claims of self-improvement within their socio-economic context, and points to the classism and elitism inherent in them.<sup>32</sup> The economic factor also explains why people latch on to such spiritual commodities in the first place. Crockford argues that, as the middle class has continued to shrink since the 1980s, people who nevertheless manage to cling to it “have much to be anxious about, and material reasons to desire power and control over their lives. Spirituality then becomes a way out of one status, perceived as slipping or failing, through claiming a different status.”<sup>33</sup> She suggests that the explanatory power of investigating spiritual commodities from an ethnographic and sociological perspective—while critically appraising the

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29. Urban, *Secrecy*, 32–33, 38–41.

30. Urban, *Secrecy*, 41.

31. See Crockford, “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category of ‘Esotericism?’”; see also Crockford, *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*, and “How to manifest abundance: money and the rematerialization of exchange in Sedona, Arizona, USA.”

32. See Crockford, “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category of ‘Esotericism?’,” 201–3.

33. Crockford, “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category of ‘Esotericism?’,” 211.

socio-economic context and issues around class mobility—has the potential to finetune our understanding of “esotericism,” rendering it a more critical term in the process. Within these socio-economic dynamics, Crockford sees esotericism as inherently elitist, meant to promote the (material) interests of a select few.<sup>34</sup>

While we can already detect a rising interest in class-related approaches in the study of esotericism—see also, for instance, Kateryna Zorya’s conceptual distinction between “intellectual class esotericists” and “working class esotericists” in her investigations of contemporary esotericism in Ukraine<sup>35</sup>—this special issue aims to inspire further such inquiry and modestly hopes to have contributed in this regard itself. In our overview, which should not be understood as exhaustive by any means, we have engaged with various iterations of “class” in the study of esotericism. We have seen it grounded in various (sub)disciplines, different theoretical frameworks, and to varying degrees of explanatory focus. We believe the above examples aptly illustrate the aforementioned functions of esotericism in reproducing, challenging, symbolizing, and ritualizing class relations, and also how class can simultaneously be an *object* of analysis and part of an analytical *lens* itself.

We saw how class conflict, for instance, informed the historical backdrop of eighteenth-century Mesmerism, and how its proponents employed Mesmerist ideas to challenge but also attempt to harmonize antagonistic social relations of the highly stratified *ancien régime* in pre-revolutionary France. We encountered “plebeian” strains of nineteenth-century Spiritualism and their confluence with socialist organizations, and how female mediumship harbored potentials for social mobility as well as challenging dominant norms at the intersections of gender and class in late Victorian England. In the example of nineteenth-century American Freemasonry, moreover, we saw how esoteric “adornment” was employed for symbolizing and ritualizing class relations in intersectionally

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34. See Crockford, “What do Jade Eggs Tell Us about the Category of ‘Esotericism’?,” 211–13. These theoretical points can, of course, be fed back into more text-centered and diachronic research in the study of esotericism as well, to inform their respective frameworks with these insights in mind.

35. Zorya, “Contemporary Esotericism in Ukraine 1986–2014,” 22.

relevant ways. Relatedly, we saw how commodified spirituality in neoliberal societies—such as with the example of “jade eggs”—is entangled with middle-class anxieties around downward social mobility, as well as the need to compensate for a perceived loss in social status.

The five articles assembled in this special issue are likewise grounded in multiple approaches and exemplify different expressions of esotericism in relation to class in unique ways. In his contribution, Milan Reith analyzes the anti-Masonic discourse found in several texts written by Marxist author Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970), in which he expressed the opinion—widely shared among other Italian communists—that Freemasonry was a deeply, categorically conservative movement. Bordiga believed it was a counter-revolutionary threat to social progress and weakened class struggle, and his polemics at times even took on a conspiratorial flavor. Reith also engages with the social context in which these articles were composed, such as the broader Marxist and socialist milieu in which Bordiga was embedded, as well as his confluence over this issue with Benito Mussolini—before the latter’s interventionist stance in the First World War and establishment of fascist ideology, which soured their relationship. Reith’s article also features a historiographical intervention in the selective treatment of Bordiga’s biography that emerged in the 1970s. Reith rectifies the arbitrary minimization of Bordiga’s anti-Masonic campaigns, as well as attempts at downplaying his—by the second half of the twentieth century, highly uncomfortable—connection to Mussolini in that regard.

Ansgar Martins, in his piece, traces the philosopher Siegfried Kracauer’s intellectual development from neo-religious spiritual seeker to left-wing cultural critic in interwar Germany, and contrasts his analyses of the German middle classes with its more *völkisch* equivalents emerging from the journal *Die Tat* (The Deed), as well as the neo-romantic Diederichs publishing house more generally. Martins illustrates how both Kracauer and figures associated with the *Tat* Circle initially shared similar concerns regarding the esoteric climate of Weimar

Germany following the First World War. While they differed substantially in certain respects, they partly converged in their assessments of contemporaneous movements such as Anthroposophy, whose figurehead, Rudolf Steiner, Kracauer would go so far as to deem a “false prophet.”

Martins demonstrates how Kracauer’s and *Die Tat*’s analyses of the spiritual and social conditions of Germany would, however, diverge further down the line; Kracauer would diagnose the “salaried masses” of Germany with a lack of class solidarity and a concomitant susceptibility to ideologies predicated on religious and racial superiority, while *Die Tat* would opt for a more mythicized notion of the “middle” of society that would lead Germany to its glorious destiny of spiritual and political renewal. While Martins assumes a broader frame than “esotericism” in his contribution by focusing on the neo-religious climate of the interwar period more generally, his analyses of Kracauer’s efforts at “de-mythologizing” the *Tat* Circle’s increasingly right-wing attempt at assimilating the middle classes to a “*völkisch*-socialist” agenda should compel esotericism scholars, in Martins’ words, “to take the dialectical approach of Critical Theory on board, not least in order to comprehend the authoritarian tendencies currently pervading their own objects of study” (see Martins in this issue).

In her article, Mariam Elashmawy traces the entangled histories of the Egyptian *shaykh* (religious scholar) Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī—the “father of Egyptian Spiritualism”—and the modern-educated *efendi* ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Islambūli in their common, anti-colonial search for Egyptian national identity around the early twentieth century. While the former originated from the rural peasantry and the latter from the class of merchants, it is the virtual absence of socio-economic class that is of paradoxical interest here, as the article illustrates how potential social divisions gave way to the search for the imagined community of what Elashmawy calls “spiritual Easternism.” Elashmawy situates the latter within the greater context of anti-colonial nation-building efforts in fin-de-siècle Egypt, such as around notions of Pharaonist or Mediterranean-based identities exemplified by figures

like Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal or Taha Husayn. The “spiritual Easternism” of Jawharī and Al-Islāmbūlī’s, on the other hand, was an attempt to “re-orient the Orient,” and was premised on the notion of solidarity between “Eastern” nations as a necessary counterweight to Western colonial hegemony.

In particular, Elashmawy discusses the role of print media in providing a space and platform for forging this international-spiritual “mentality”—a term she prefers to “ideology” in line with the *Annales* school of history—and shows how even short-lived periodicals like *Al-Ma’rifā* (Knowledge/Gnosis), of which Al-Islāmbūlī was editor, could become sites for reclaiming and disseminating ideas within the field of tension of Western esoteric and (anti-)Orientalist narratives and ideas. Fundamentally, Elashmawy portrays the lives and works of Jawharī and Al-Islāmbūlī as invested in “fostering a collective identity that transcended class boundaries”—a circumstance one might judge variously depending on one’s political preferences.

Moving on to the Thelemic films of Kenneth Anger, Nicholas Laccetti demonstrates the importance of remaining attentive to the “class matrix” of mid-twentieth-century America from which the occult filmmaker drew symbolic and aesthetic inspiration. Such a perspective allows us to see how Anger employed socio-cultural codes associated with the working class, and how such codes, linked to specific historical realities, were aligned by Anger with the more esoteric concerns of dramatizing the “Thelemic New Aeon of Horus” inaugurated by the English occultist Aleister Crowley. Laccetti contends that ignoring the objective reality of class in relation to Anger’s body of work comes at the cost of failing to appreciate the social structures from which the work’s imagery emerged, and illustrates how working-class rebelliousness consistently permeates the otherwise pluralistic landscape of bikers, homoerotic sailors, and various countercultural tropes, figures, and milieux that saturate Anger’s films. By exploring the class-coded dimensions of works such as *Fireworks* (1947), *Scorpio Rising* (1963), and *Lucifer Rising* (1972), Laccetti aims to do justice to the

“working-class character of Anger’s new Aeon” and offers novel readings of the historical and socio-economic contexts of the emergence of Anger’s films.

Finally, Bob Cluness explores the complex intersections of class, politics, and occultism in the comics series *John Constantine: Hellblazer*, and presents the series’ main protagonist, John Constantine, as an “occultural spokesperson for exploring the imposed horrors of the neoliberal economic programs” in (post-)Thatcherite UK. Besides demonstrating the ways in which *Hellblazer* was informed by the historical and socio-economic contexts of the 1980s–90s, Cluness analyzes the working-class habitus of the (meta-)fictional character John Constantine in relation to the class backgrounds and commitments of some of the series’ creators, Alan Moore and Jamie Delano. Cluness demonstrates the centrality and self-conscious fashioning of working-class identity in *Hellblazer*, not least by integrating the creators’ stated intentions of creating an “almost blue-collar warlock” in the comics series.

In addition to the series’ main character (Constantine), Cluness argues that the representations of magical practice in *Hellblazer*—themselves an intricate combination of chaos magic and older “cunning folk” traditions—should be read as aesthetic allegories of anti-neoliberal critique of the late twentieth-century UK and US. Furthermore, Cluness draws attention to the metafictional affordances of Constantine by illustrating how the latter is invoked as a “working-class tulpa” within contemporary magical practice, thus demonstrating the continued relevance of approaching popular culture as a potential site of and resource for esoteric practice, where the lines between play and seriousness frequently blur.

As we can see, these articles cover a range of historical, cultural, and geographical terrain and subject matter, and engage with class to differing degrees and through various lenses. As in our earlier overview of class in the study of esotericism, the contributions here too illustrate esotericism’s various functions in relation to class and highlight some important trends and potentials.

One trend that seems promising is the further investigation of symbolic, aesthetic, and material *representations* of class in esoteric currents, as well as

their social and political aims and uses. In addition to occultural films and comics as explored by Laccetti and Cluness in this issue, we see a range of possibilities such as analyses of class aesthetics and signifiers at the junctures of esotericism and visual art more broadly, literature, fashion, social media, and marketing, just to name a few areas. Besides allowing us to grasp and appreciate particular cultural expressions as such, attention to representations of class in these domains can help us to better understand the ways in which esoteric traditions are employed for social critique or status-quo legitimation, the cultivation of individual and group identities, and the forging of different (and often opposing) values and ideological commitments. Class, explored in this fashion, is primarily understood as something that is socially cultivated and “made,” rather than innate or naturally found.<sup>36</sup>

Another trend that we can discern is the investigation of class in its embeddedness within greater *discourses on esotericism*, especially as it concerns questions around esotericism’s emancipatory or reactionary role in society at large. A focus on class, as Martins and Reith have shown, can shed light on the political stakes involved in contested discourses on esotericism, and lay bare surprising connections across ideological divides that often fall under the scholarly radar.<sup>37</sup> Regardless of how scholars may judge, for instance, claims of esotericism’s role in generating “false consciousness” or thwarting “class struggle,” we maintain that, at the very least, such claims and discourses constitute valid subject matter for esotericism research. Moreover, a theme that often emerges within such discourses is the *invisibilization* of class within esoteric currents—a theme one may keep in mind when encountering such examples as the esoteric nation-building efforts portrayed by Elashmawy, or “organic”

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36. A classic example of this scholarly tradition is E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

37. See also, for instance, Kakabadze, “Sympathy for the Occult,” for a reassessment of Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s relationship with “the occult,” whose polemics against and class-based analyses of early twentieth-century occultism betray greater affinities than previously assumed.

notions of a spiritual *Volk* as discussed by Martins. Whether one decides to analyze such discourses on a purely emic level or lift these onto an etic terrain depends on the epistemic interests, questions, and aims of the scholar.

While there are various benefits that a focus on class can offer the study of esotericism, there are things that it probably cannot. Moreover, the question arises, for instance, whether social-theoretical approaches to class might be tempting of reductionistic explanations, and whether they can adequately account for historical contingency and individual agency. We believe that they can, and even structural analyses of class—as in the case of Alex Owen’s study of female Spiritualism—demonstrate how socio-economic constraints and compulsions can go hand-in-hand with manifestations of individual agency. Nevertheless, an approach that employs class within a framework (rather than treating it as an object) of analysis entails the risk of mono-causal explanations with regard to people’s motivations, beliefs, and practices. On the other hand, considering people’s class positions provides an important counterweight to so-called “culturalist” explanations of social phenomena that often overestimate the roles of contingency and individual agency.<sup>38</sup>

The goal, then, is to find the right balance when determining the significance of social class in analyses of esoteric currents and phenomena for each individual case. These are only a few issues that one can keep in mind when investigating the imbrications of esotericism and class, and we would like scholars to formulate questions and identify theoretical and practical challenges of their own when moving forward.

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38. See Chibber, *The Class Matrix*, 25–29.

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